SAGAN AND THE MACHINES · PART 2

Moving the Goalposts



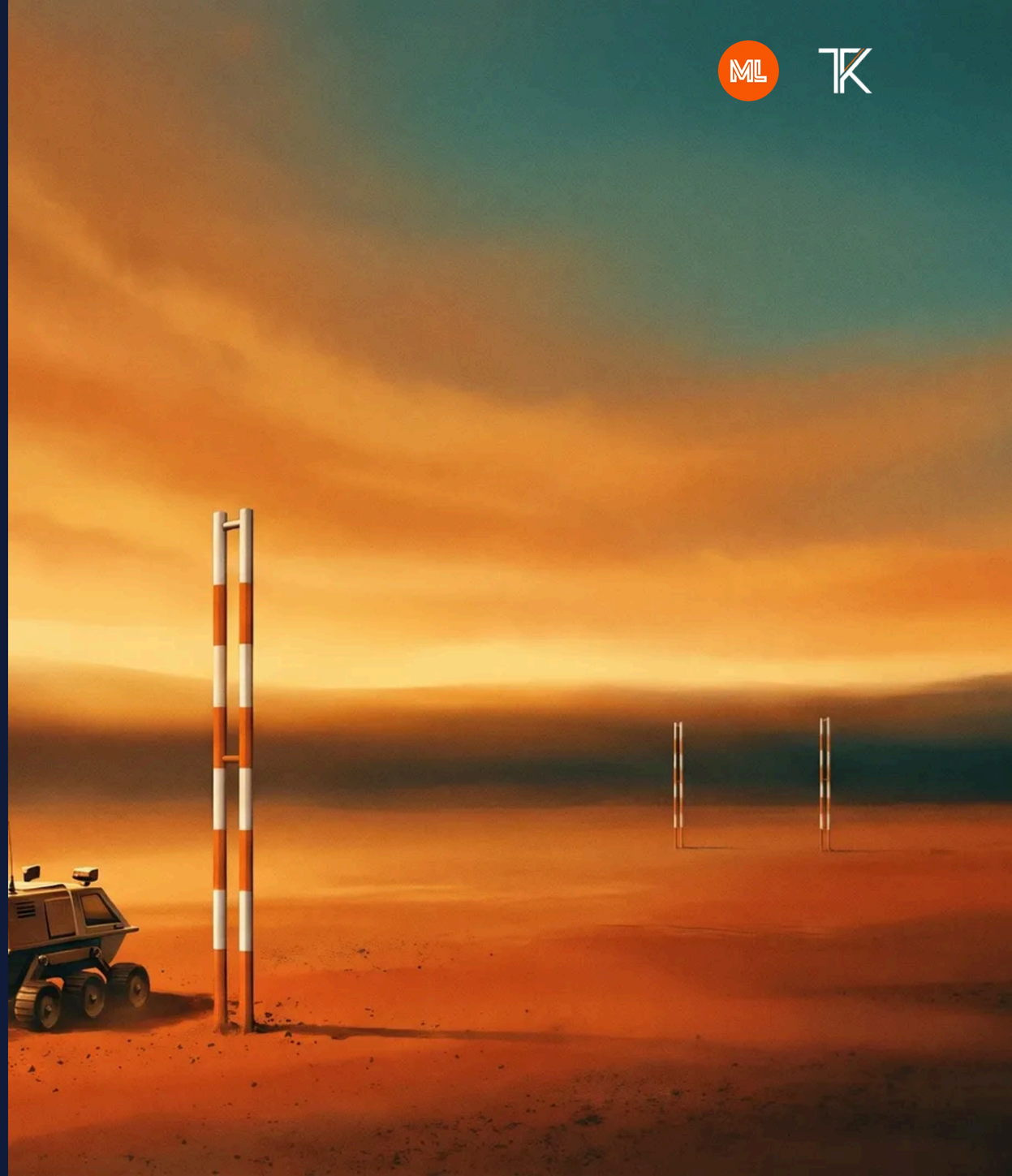
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THE REFLEX

A machine does the thing. The thing stops counting.

1. The achievement is called remarkable for a few weeks.
2. Someone explains the task was easier than it looked.
3. "Real" intelligence becomes whatever it did not do.

Researchers call this the AI effect.



TURING, 1950

“You will never be able to make one to do X.”

The objection he expected, from "Computing Machinery and Intelligence"

His reply: “No support is usually offered for these statements.”

SAGAN, 1979

He caught the reflex in the middle of the game.

THE PUT-DOWN

Machines were demeaned, often with relief, because chess was an area where humans were still superior.

HIS REPLY

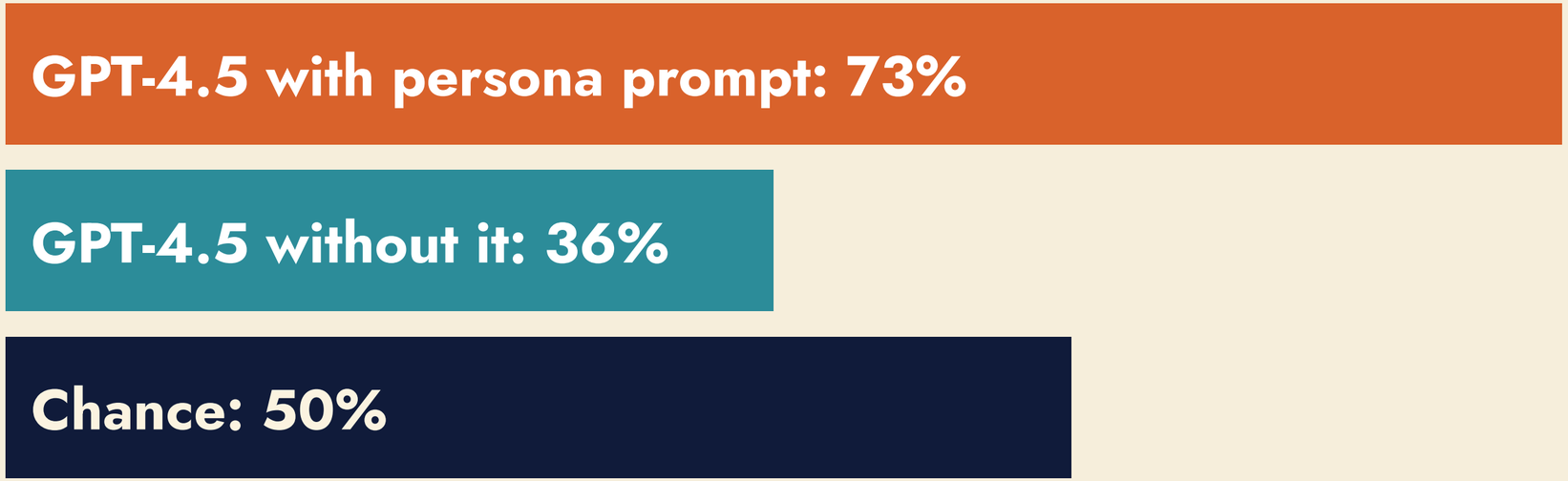
A machine at middle-range human level is “a very capable machine.”

And on Turing’s test: he was “not sure how many humans would pass.”

Sagan, Broca’s Brain (1979), ch. 20.

THE 2025 RESULT

A language model was judged human more often than the human.



The authors call it “a test of humanlikeness,” not of intelligence.

Jones and Bergen (2026), PNAS, five-minute three-party games.

SAME SHAPE, EACH TIME

A game is held up as a measure. A machine wins. The method is examined.

1997

Deep Blue beats Kasparov, 3.5 to 2.5. "It is only brute force."

2016

AlphaGo beats Lee Sedol, 4 to 1. "It is only a game with rules."

2025

A model passes a three-party Turing test. "It measures humanlikeness."

IBM; Google DeepMind; Jones and Bergen (2026). The quoted replies are our summary of the pattern.

THE SAYING

“Intelligence is whatever machines haven’t done yet.”

LARRY TESLER

Dated it to about 1970. Hofstadter’s shorter version is “AI is whatever hasn’t been done yet.”

FIRST PRINT FOUND

Hofstadter, 1979, the same year as Broca’s Brain. The origin stays disputed.

Tesler’s website; Quote Investigator.

NOT EVERY MOVED LINE IS VANITY

“Solely measuring skill at any given task falls short of measuring intelligence.”

François Chollet, On the Measure of Intelligence, 2019

Unlimited training data buys any level of skill. The buyer wants to know how it copes with something new.

WARNING SIGNS

A defensive test.

1. It appears after the machine has passed, with no reason given.
2. It names a method, not a capability.
3. It applies to the machine only.
4. No result would ever convince.
5. It gives no reason beyond "not real".

THE FIVE CHECKS

A fair test.

1. Written down before the result, or explained afterwards.
2. Names a capability the job needs.
3. Says how many of your own staff would pass it.
4. States what would convince you.
5. Explains what the old test missed.

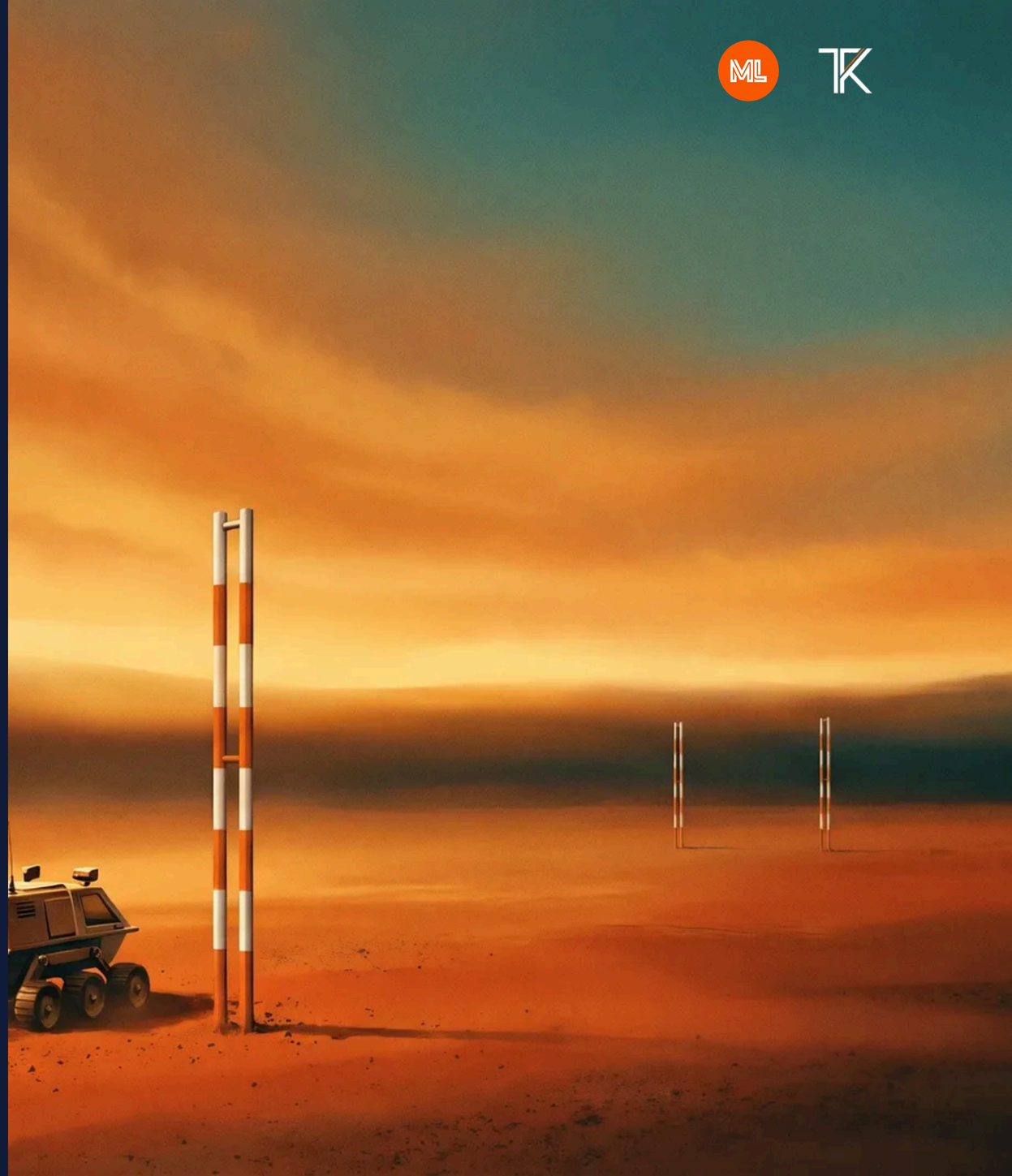
Our own checklist, a heuristic from reading, not a validated instrument.

MICHAEL LOW'S VIEW

Decide what to protect, then test for it.

Defining human value as whatever machines cannot yet do guarantees a retreat. Name the capabilities worth developing, say why, and test for those.

Michael Low, Founder, SENSE Collective



QUESTIONS FOR LEADERS

Before you judge an AI system this quarter.

1. Have we written down, with a date, the result that would convince us?
2. When we reject a result, can we say what the test missed?
3. If we tested our own staff the same way, how many would pass?
4. Who chose the benchmark, and was it fixed before the result?
5. Where did a success measure change during a pilot, and who agreed?

NEXT

Part 3: The Terminal That Listens

Sagan imagined therapy terminals in 1979. What changes when the terminal listens back?

1 The Man Who Wasn't Afraid of Robots
2 Moving the Goalposts
3 The Terminal That Listens
4 Memory Outside the Body
5 Robots on Other Worlds
6 Who Meets Us First
7 The Candle in the Dark
8 A Society Nobody Understands
9 Who Holds the Button
10 Who Speaks for Earth

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