

Marketing The Nothing

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The Nothing was a clever prop in The NeverEnding Story. The real-world version is way scarier.

Do you use AI? Is it making you smarter? Giving you an advantage? Putting you ahead of the crowd? Helping you compete almost instantly with folks who've put in many years of study in some topic?

You may want to think about that a bit. And no, I don't mean you should ask your AI to figure it out.

The defining characteristic of a highly effective con artist is their ability to persuade their mark that *they* are the ones doing all the thinking. This belief is critical to a good con since the mark is unlikely to sign over some valuable asset if they feel the con artist is trying to steal it from them. The con artist must instead guide the mark to believe they made the decision entirely on their own, rationally, and for reasons that make perfectly good sense. The “con” in con artist is, after all, just an abbreviation for “confidence” — the ability to instill confidence not justified by the reality of the mark's situation.

There was a time — remarkably, only a couple of years ago — when many folks believed that since Large Language Model (LLM) AIs had passed something called the Turing Test, such AIs would soon deliver intelligence far beyond that of humans. The dominant fear at that time was not of AIs taking over jobs but of AIs taking over the world.

What happened next, though, is more like the plot of the delightful 1984 children's movie *The NeverEnding Story*, in which something called The Nothing began to destroy the world of fantasy and imagination. Instead of enriching its users with deep insights into topics beyond their imagination, LLM AI began embarrassing and humiliating them. Trusting users tried to post their new insights into the deepest, most complex topics imaginable, only (this is a true story) to find that an AI that was supposed to replicate a silicon electronics chip foundry — one of the most complicated feats in human history — had instead confidently and without warning foisted on them a mutilated image of Rhode Island's state vehicle maintenance plan. The story was the same at every level and intersection, sometimes subtly and sometimes in-your-face blatantly: A terrifying new force, one much like The Nothing of The NeverEnding Story, was destroying everyone's hopes and dreams for AI.

In response, AI producers began releasing new versions that pushed *The Nothing* farther away from everyday users. The new releases gave casual AI users a feeling of relative safety, provided they never asked questions requiring more than a slight rewording of answers already in Wikipedia.

But *The Nothing* remains. It eats at the edges of even the simplest queries, adding a bit of noise and chaos to even the simplest and safest queries. You can push it farther away, but you can never banish it. Banishment is impossible because — shh, this is a dark secret, don't let anyone know I told you! — *The Nothing* is the deepest core of the LLM model: Parrot what you know, fake what you don't — and never, ever create anything truly new.

Thus began a new game: Marketing *The Nothing*.

It was, in many ways, a match made in Heaven — or perhaps Hell, depending on your perspective. Marketers may claim for image purposes that they want informed consumers, but the truth is that most want customers who never think about anything except a deep obligation to send their company money. And what better way to instill a mindless obligation to send money than by persuading their customers that *The Nothing* is not only fully acceptable but their best defense against naysayers — their only path into a warm and cheerful future?

Let's now revisit my original question: Do you use AI? Is it making you smarter?

Noise is not insight, even if the noise has loads of pretty facts mixed in to make the batter tastier. The true test for whether you are getting smarter or getting conned is simple enough: How well do you do when your seller of *Nothing* is not there to persuade you down its path on every response?

Don't fall for *The Nothing*. As in *The NeverEnding Story*, it leads only to the end of all things good.

