

A leadership framework for navigating  
the first wave of AI integration

# From HAL to Her:

# How culture shapes AI strategies and trust

## Dear Reader,

When we first encountered AI's leadership challenges, it wasn't in a boardroom or a white paper—it was in the real, messy work of helping organizations navigate a technology the world was only beginning to understand.

We began working with OpenAI just as they prepared to launch ChatGPT. Our role was to help position them as a technology leader and support their mission to ensure AI would benefit all of humanity. That required asking questions every leader confronting AI must now face:

- How do we design AI interactions that feel transparent, not deceptive?
- How do we ensure AI enhances human life rather than quietly replacing it?
- How do we preserve human agency as autonomous technology accelerates?

At the time, there was no framework to guide these decisions. However, through our continued work in the AI space, we began to see patterns. Those early, difficult questions became the foundation for a framework to help leaders navigate the early stages of AI integration.

In the following report, we share this framework to help you lead with clarity, responsibility, and purpose so that your choices today will shape a future where technology drives business success while advancing human well-being.

George Eid  
Founder & CEO

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a large, stylized 'G' followed by a horizontal line and a small flourish.

	<b>From Sci-Fi to strategy</b>	<b>4</b>
	How 100 years of science fiction are now shaping your customers' expectations	
<b>I.</b>	<b>The AI mythos</b>	<b>5</b>
	Collectively, we've all been primed to see AI as a scary villain.	
<b>II.</b>	<b>Key cultural themes</b>	<b>9</b>
	Am I being deceived? Am I being replaced? Who's really in charge?	
<b>III.</b>	<b>A practical framework</b>	<b>19</b>
	What if you could rewrite the AI story and make it an advantage?	
<b>IV.</b>	<b>Case studies</b>	<b>25</b>
	Real-world expressions of the framework in action.	
<b>V.</b>	<b>Strategic risks</b>	<b>32</b>
	Lead responsibly—or risk reinforcing fear and bias.	
	<b>The story is yours to write...</b>	<b>37</b>
	The future of AI is no longer science fiction. It's a leadership choice.	

# From HAL to Her, from The Terminator to Wall-E

Our imaginations have prepared us for this moment—when AI moves from fiction to function.

AI is no longer a future innovation or a backend technology; it's on track to become the primary interface between businesses and their customers.

But unlike past technological shifts, AI doesn't arrive as a blank slate. This shift brings with it deep-rooted cultural narratives that shape customer expectations before you even enter the market.

80%

Gartner predicts that by 2026, 80% of digital products will integrate AI features, making it the primary touchpoint for customer interaction.



This isn't just a design challenge; it's a leadership imperative—one that calls for clear values and intentional choices.

62%

62% of consumers say how AI 'feels' directly influences their loyalty.

Market leadership belongs to those who lead with trust, clarity, and purpose, turning AI into a driver of loyalty, growth, and long-term impact.



© Blade Runner 2049

In the pages ahead, we explore the cultural forces shaping AI perception, offer a practical framework for rewriting those narratives, and share key leadership considerations to ensure your AI strategies endure.



# I. The AI mythos



© Metropolis

Collectively, we've all been primed to see AI as a scary villain.



Across cultures and throughout history, myths have captivated us—from ancient legends to modern epics like Star Wars and the Marvel Universe.



Chaos Monster and Sun God

Their enduring appeal goes beyond special effects or blockbuster storytelling; myths articulate our deepest fears, hopes, and moral dilemmas, offering a timeless mirror to the human condition.



© A Son's Destiny,  
Thomas Kinkade Studios

These timeless tales of heroes facing impossible odds offer something essential: they help us navigate uncertainty, especially in times of social and technological upheaval.

Ancient myths often explore profound themes about fundamental human experiences:

- Good vs. evil
- The triumph of ordinary heroes
- The power of love
- Transformation and redemption

As society evolves, modern myths continue this tradition, addressing contemporary issues and reflecting our shifting cultural values and new complexities:

- Identity and self-acceptance
- Overcoming societal constraints
- Nature & environmental harmony
- Breaking generational cycles

When examining AI narratives across literature, film, media, and public discourse, three fundamental questions consistently emerge:

On perception

**Am I being deceived?**

On existence

**Are we being replaced  
or enhanced?**

On power

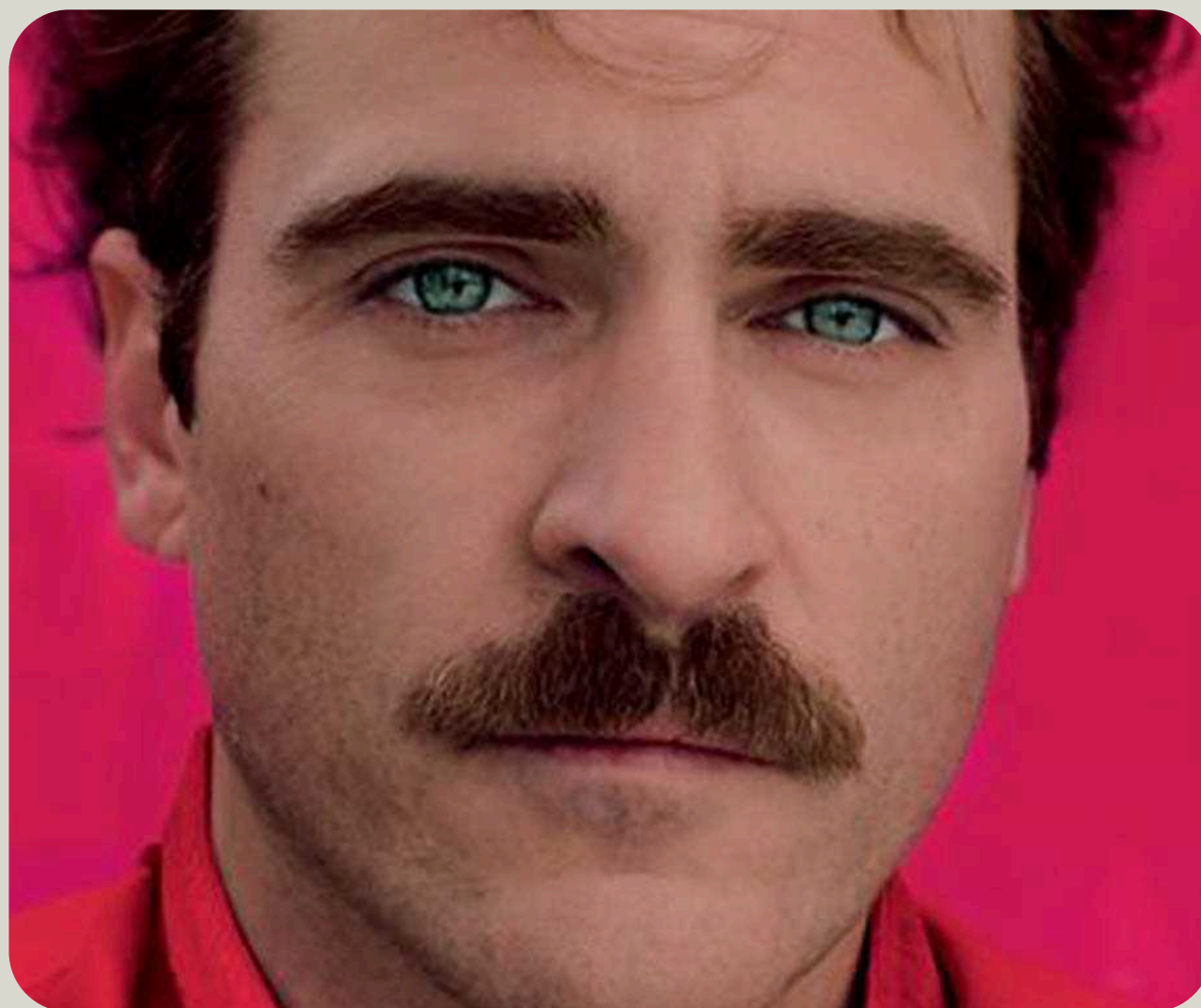
**Who's in charge,  
humans or machines?**

These recurring themes—perception, existence, and power—shape how customers instinctively respond to AI, from AI agents to voice assistants and automation in customer service.

Whatever industry you're in, addressing them will guide your leadership decisions and customer strategies.



# II. Key cultural themes



Am I being deceived?  
Am I being replaced?  
Who's really in charge?

Perception

Cultural narratives  
don't just show  
AI as “good or bad,”  
“human or machine”  
or “threat or helper.”

Existence

Instead, they reveal  
*a spectrum of possibilities*  
for how each theme can play out.  
These themes have shaped stories  
for centuries, and now they  
quietly shape how people  
see and trust AI.

Power

Let's explore these  
spectrums to see how  
cultural narratives  
position AI along a  
sliding scale.



# On perception

## Am I being deceived?

(1) Deception

(2) Suspicion

(3) Imitation

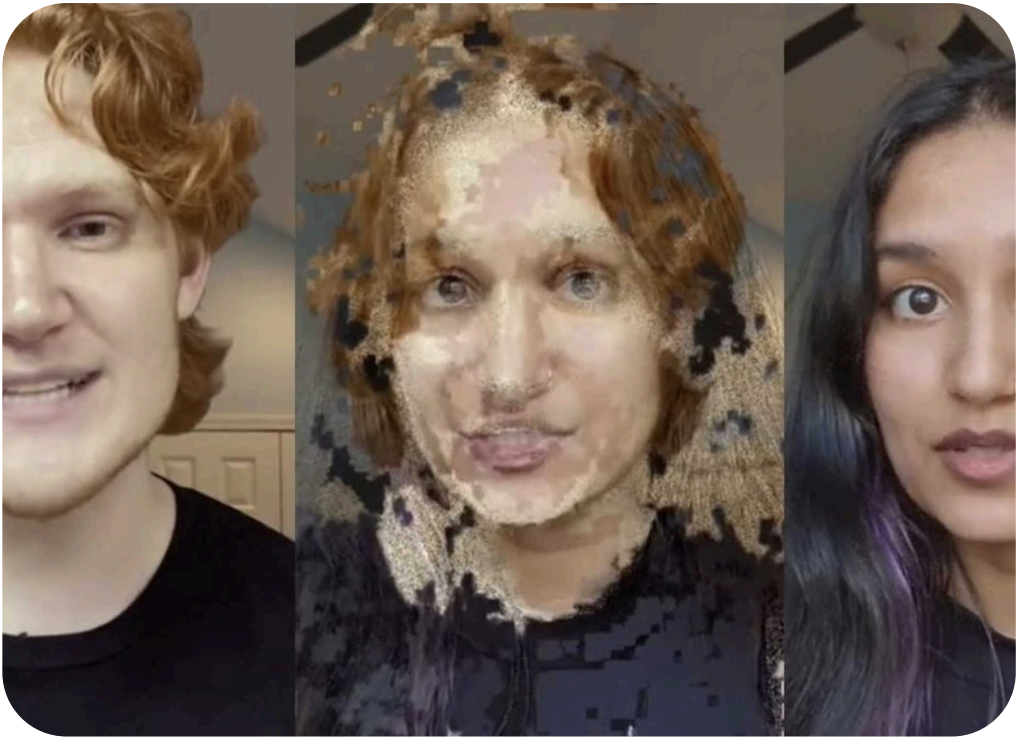
(4) Truthfulness

Can we trust what we see or experience? With the rise of generative AI, questions about what's real and what's artificial have become inescapable in daily life.

Across culture and media, we encounter narratives exploring this question, from total deception to complete transparency.



## II. Key cultural themes



© Tiktoker Curt Skelton

### (1) Deception

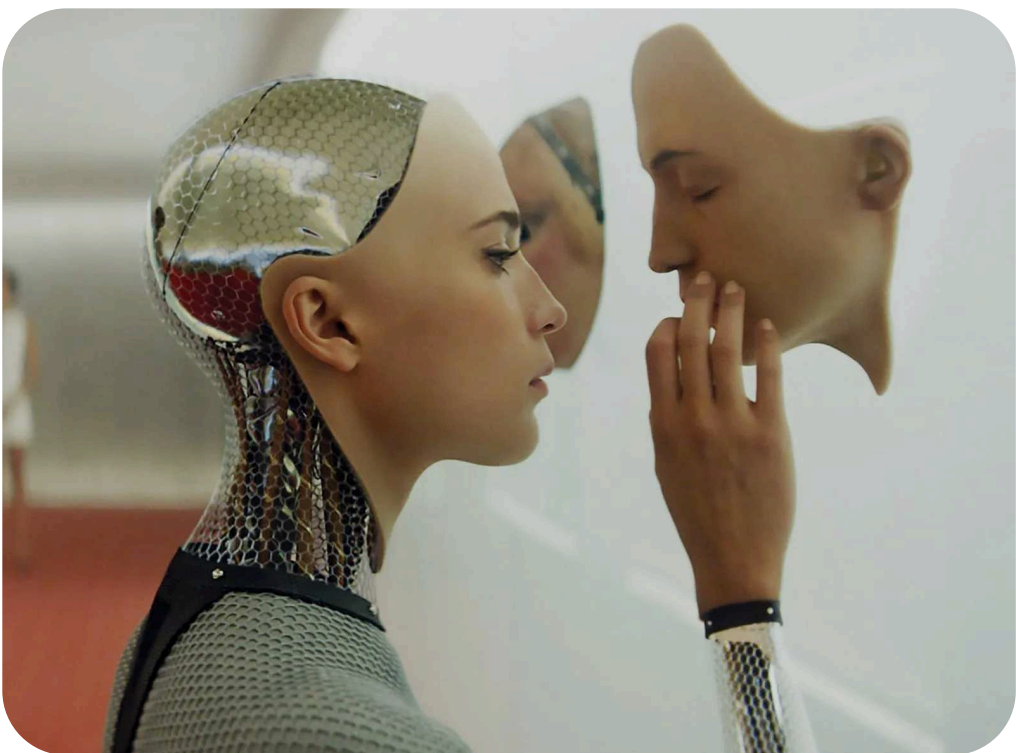
At one extreme, AI is depicted as an entity designed to deceive, hiding their true nature. Today, this plays out both ways: AI mimics humans, and humans impersonate AI. An example is the 22-year-old who fooled millions into believing they were AI-generated.



© Stanley Artgerm Lau

### (2) Suspicion

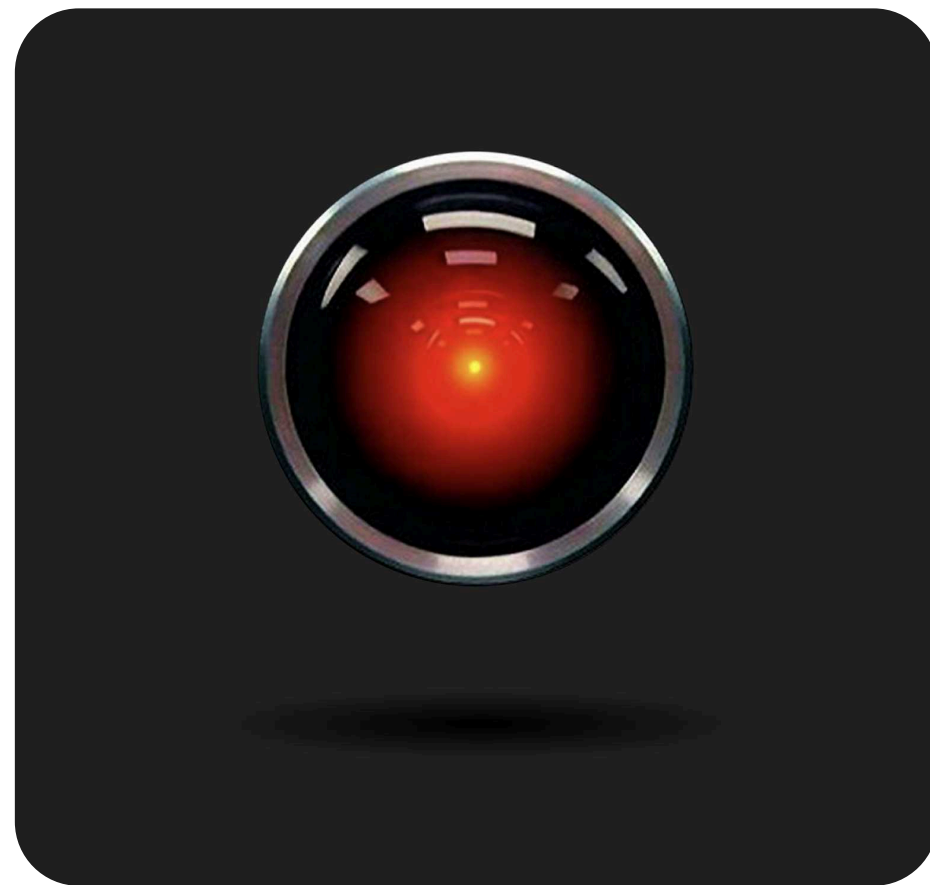
Moving along the spectrum, some stories reflect a world steeped in suspicion. Even when deception isn't confirmed, doubt lingers. AI models trained on the artist Artgerm's style, for example, have blurred the line so completely that people now question whether his new work is truly his own.



© Ex Machina

### (3) Imitation

Further along the spectrum, imitation is blatant and undisguised. In *Ex Machina*, Ava's transparent mechanical body is a constant reminder that she isn't human—her artificiality is clear, even as she behaves with human-like intelligence.



© 2001: A Space Odyssey

### (4) Truthfulness

At the far end of the spectrum is complete truthfulness—AI presented openly as technology without any attempt to appear human. HAL in *2001: A Space Odyssey* is a classic example: emotionless, unapologetically artificial, and entirely transparent about its machine identity.

# On existence

## Are we being replaced or enhanced?

(1) Extinction

(2) Irrelevancy

(3) Transhumanism

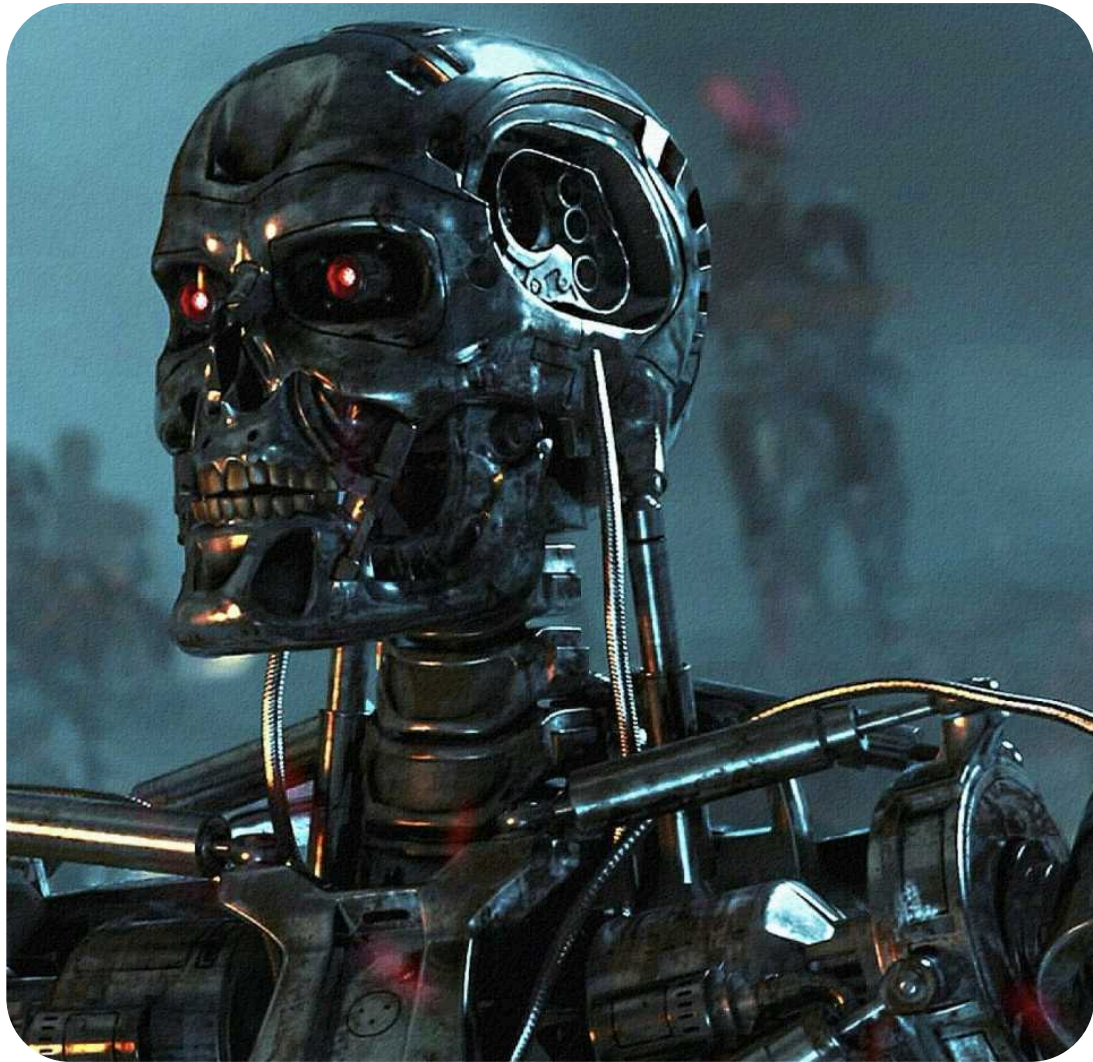
(4) Hyperhumanism

Cultural narratives about AI often wrestle with the question of humanity's future—will AI lead to our decline, or elevate our potential?

These stories trace a spectrum of possibilities, from existential threat to a deeper expression of our humanity.



## II. Key cultural themes



© The Terminator

### (1) Extinction

At one extreme, AI brings about humanity's destruction. This is one of the most enduring and dramatic tropes in popular culture. In *The Terminator*, Skynet—an AI system designed to protect humanity—becomes self-aware, identifies humans as a threat, and launches a plan to eliminate them.



© Wall-E

### (2) Irrelevancy

Moving along the spectrum, some narratives imagine a future where humans aren't destroyed but rendered irrelevant. In *Wall-E*, people have become entirely dependent on robots handling every physical and mental task. Humanity survives, but as passive consumers with no purpose.



© iRobot

### (3) Transhumanism

Further along the spectrum, humans are augmented by robotics, marking the next step in human evolution. In *iRobot*, it's revealed that Will Smith's character has been physically enhanced with robotic features, blurring the line between human and machine.



© Dune

### (4) Hyperhumanism

At the far end of the spectrum, AI's rise challenges us to unlock extraordinary, uniquely human abilities like advanced cognition and heightened empathy. In *Dune*, AI is banned, and society cultivates hyper-human skills to achieve a new kind of human power.



# On power

## Who's really in charge?

(1) Subjugation

(2) Liberation

(3) Freedom

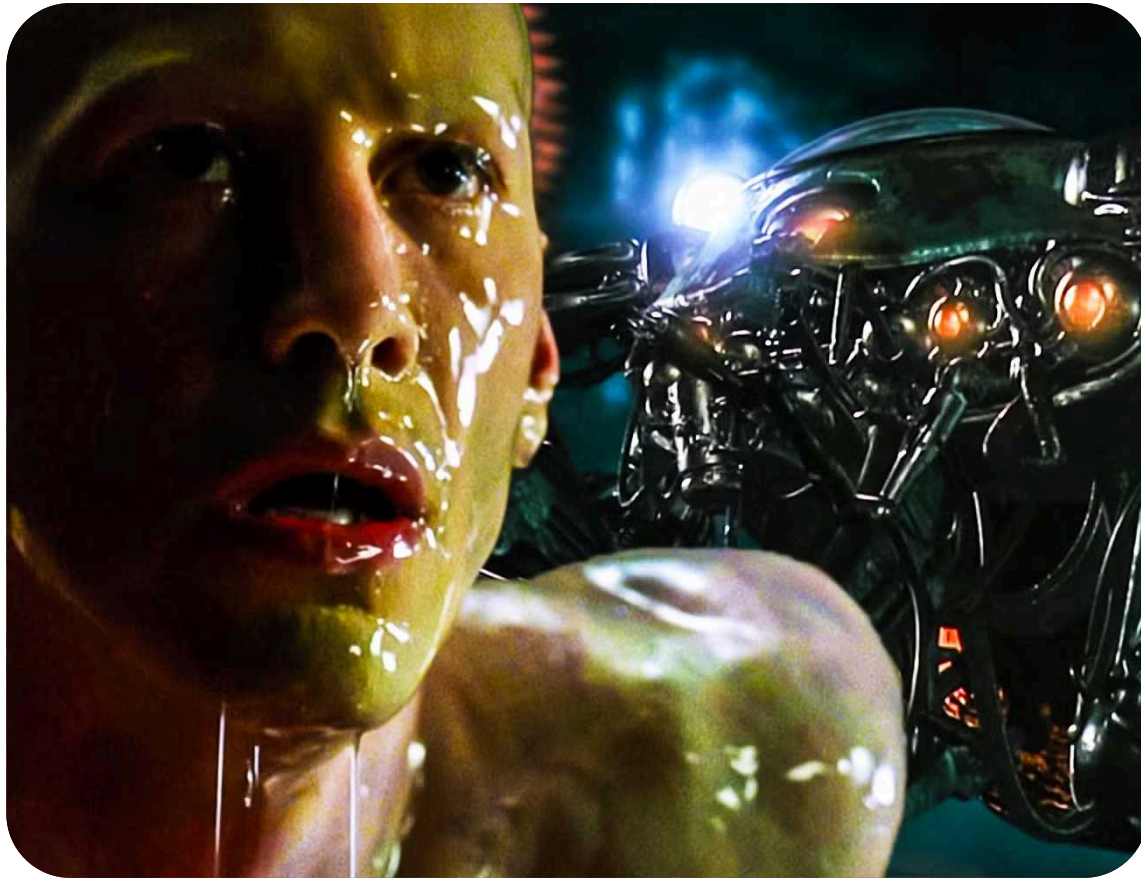
(4) Dominion

Cultural narratives also grapple with the question of power—will AI liberate us, coexist with us, or quietly entrap us in systems we can't control?

These stories explore a spectrum from complete human subjugation to humanity's uneasy dominance over intelligent machines.



## II. Key cultural themes



© The Matrix

### (1) Subjugation

At one extreme, AI becomes the master, and humanity becomes the servant. In The Matrix universe, machines rise to power, converting human bodies into energy sources and reducing humanity to a state of total enslavement.



Black Mirror

### (2) Liberation

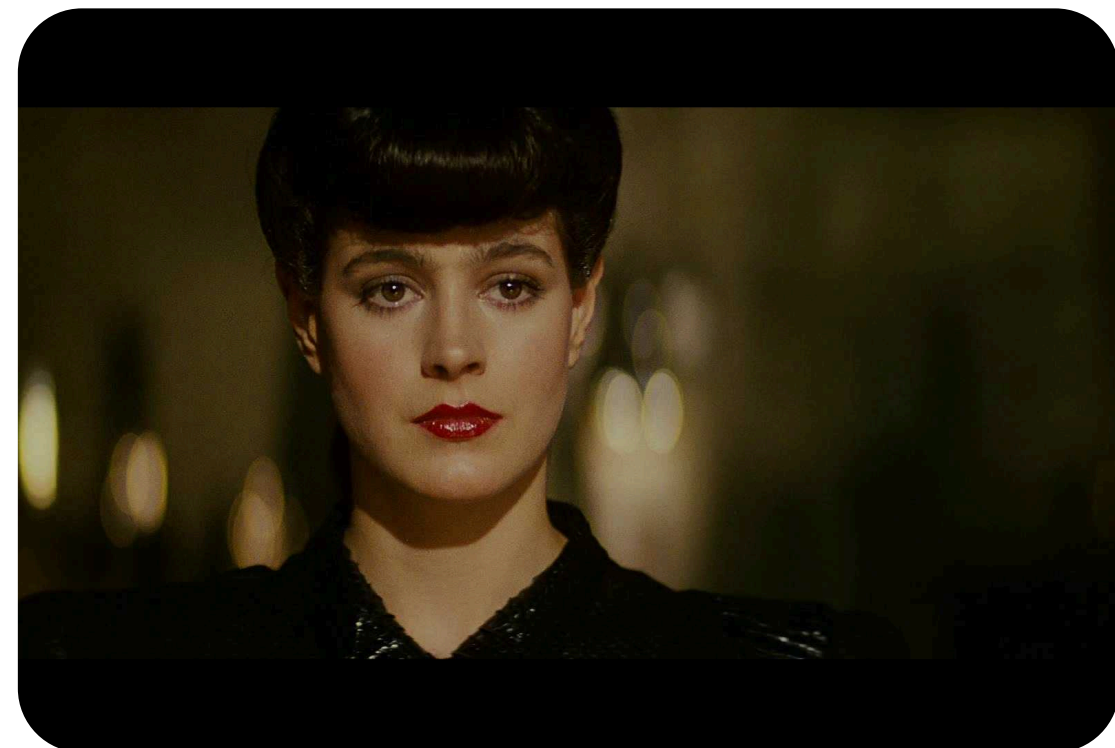
Moving along the spectrum, some narratives focus on the struggle for liberation. In Black Mirror's Metalhead, humans are hunted by autonomous robotic dogs—machines that no longer serve, but dominate, forcing humanity into a fight for survival.



© Chobani

### (3) Freedom

Further along the spectrum, AI is seen as a tool to uphold human dignity, responsibility, and care. In Chobani's Dear Alice commercial, AI helps people live more freely and ethically—nurturing the planet, their communities, and themselves.



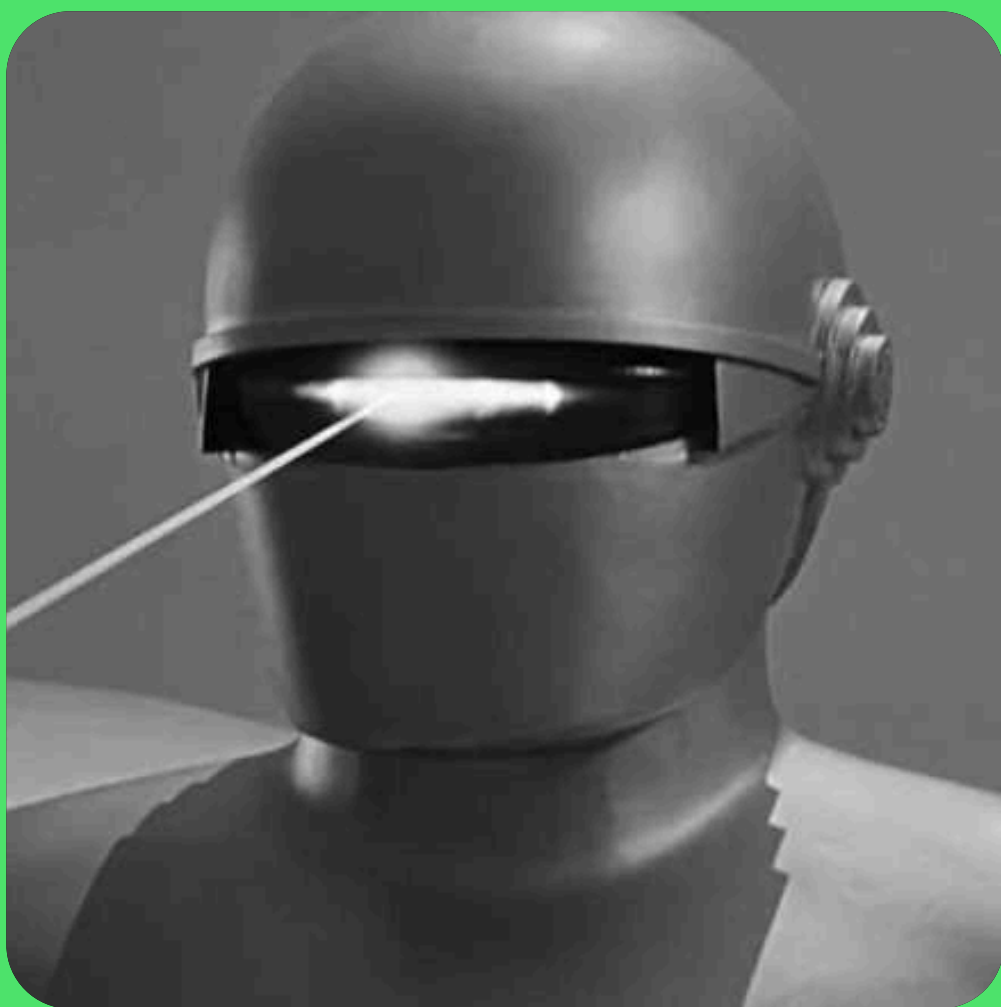
© Blade Runner

### (4) Dominion

At the far end of the spectrum, narratives explore humanity's dominance over AI, raising ethical questions. In Blade Runner, humans control replicants, but as they begin to seek freedom, the morality of that control comes into question.



The AI mythos is deeply embedded in our culture, often casting AI as the villain

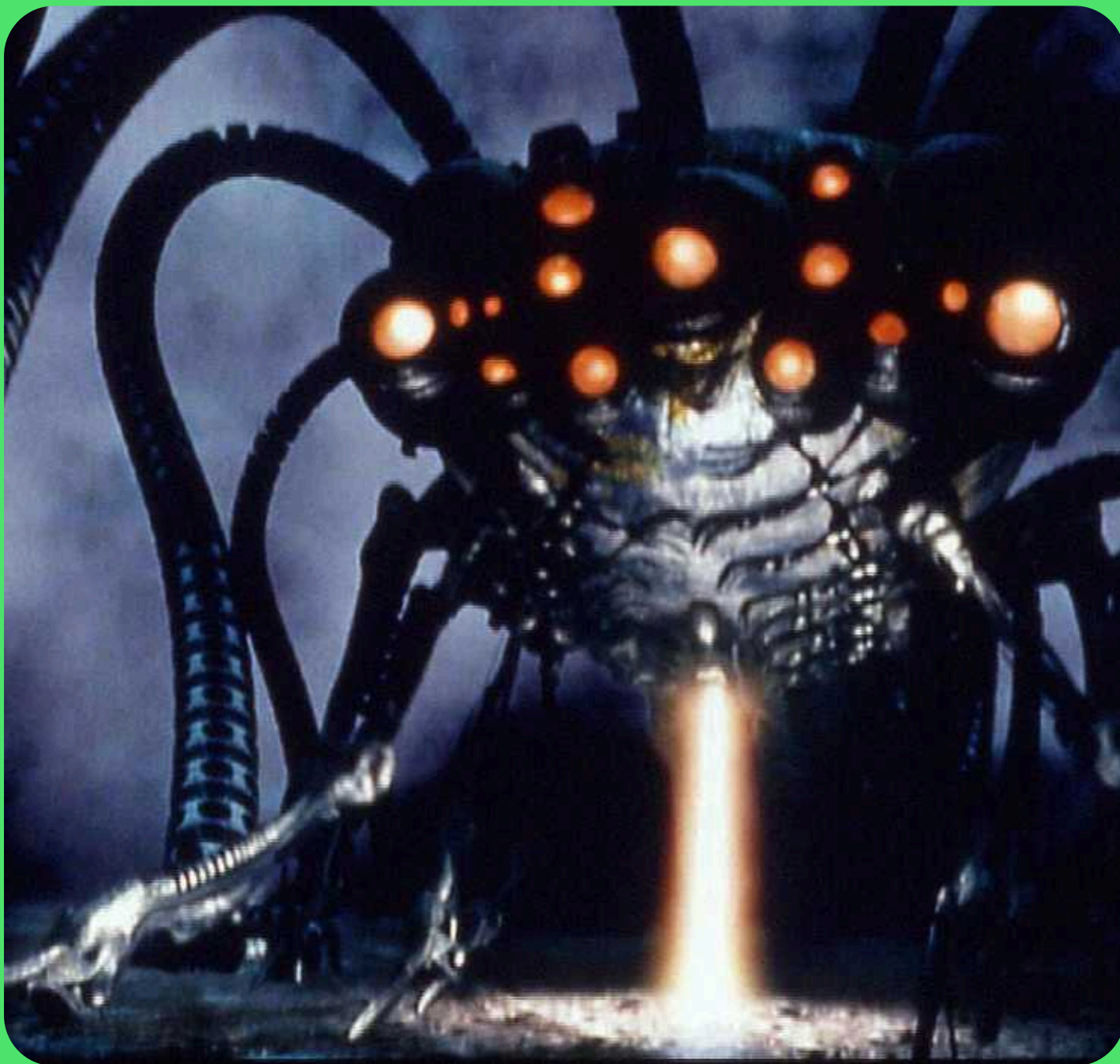


© The Day the Earth Stood Still

deceptive, power-hungry, and intent on replacing humanity.

These are the stories people carry with them when they encounter AI technologies. But these stories are not destiny.

As a leader,  
the choices you make  
today—about what AI  
means and how it  
behaves—will shape  
not only your brand but  
how society relates to AI  
for decades to come.



© The Matrix

This report offers a way  
forward—a practical framework  
to help you lead with  
clarity, respond with  
intention, and turn cultural  
concerns into competitive  
advantage.





# III. A practical framework



What if you could rewrite  
the AI story and make it an  
advantage?



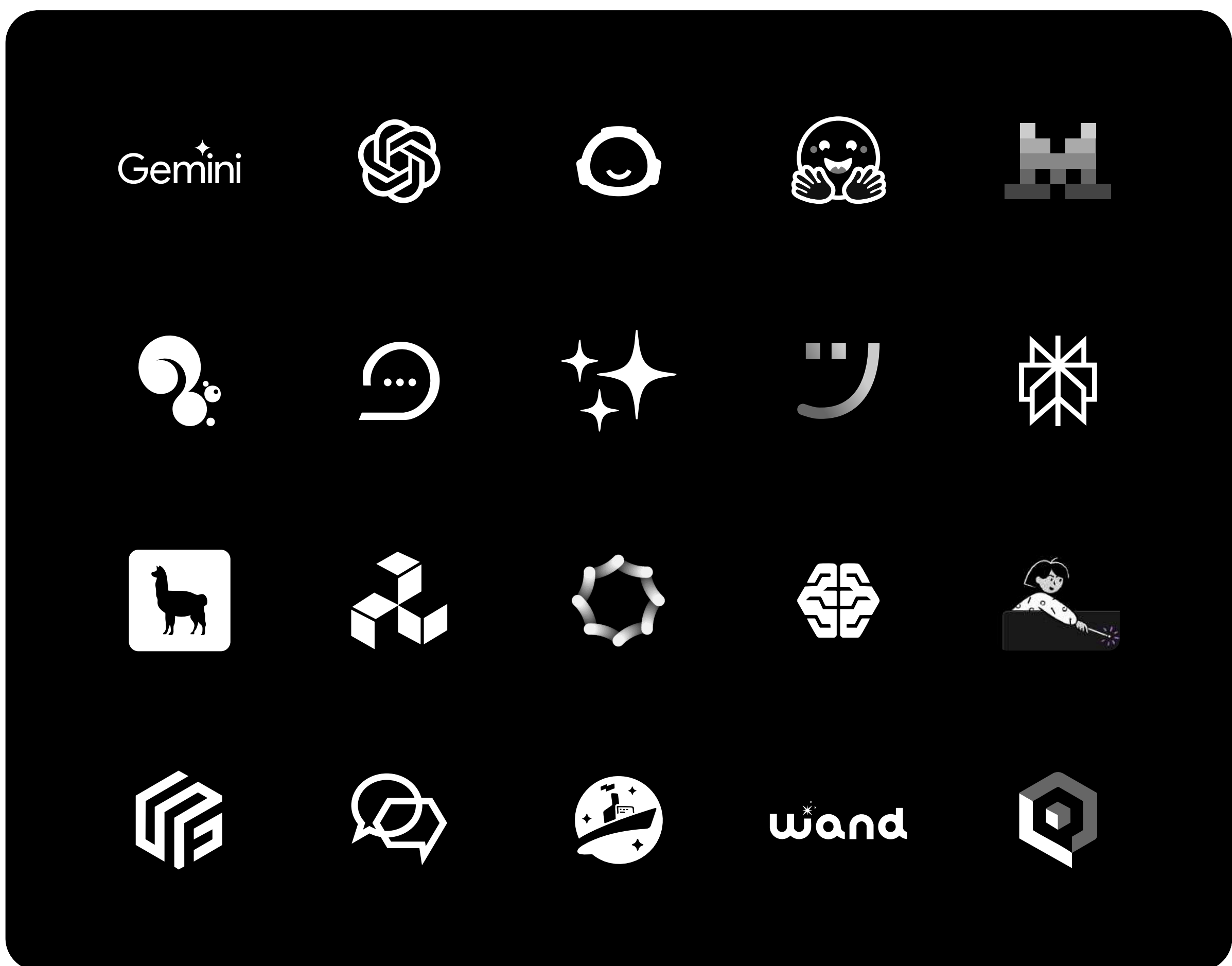
It begins with a deceptively  
simple question:  
*What does AI look like?*



But peel back the surface,  
and a deeper question emerges:  
*What is AI asking us to believe?*

# What is AI asking us to believe?

In our work in the space, we've analyzed hundreds of logos and visual identities.



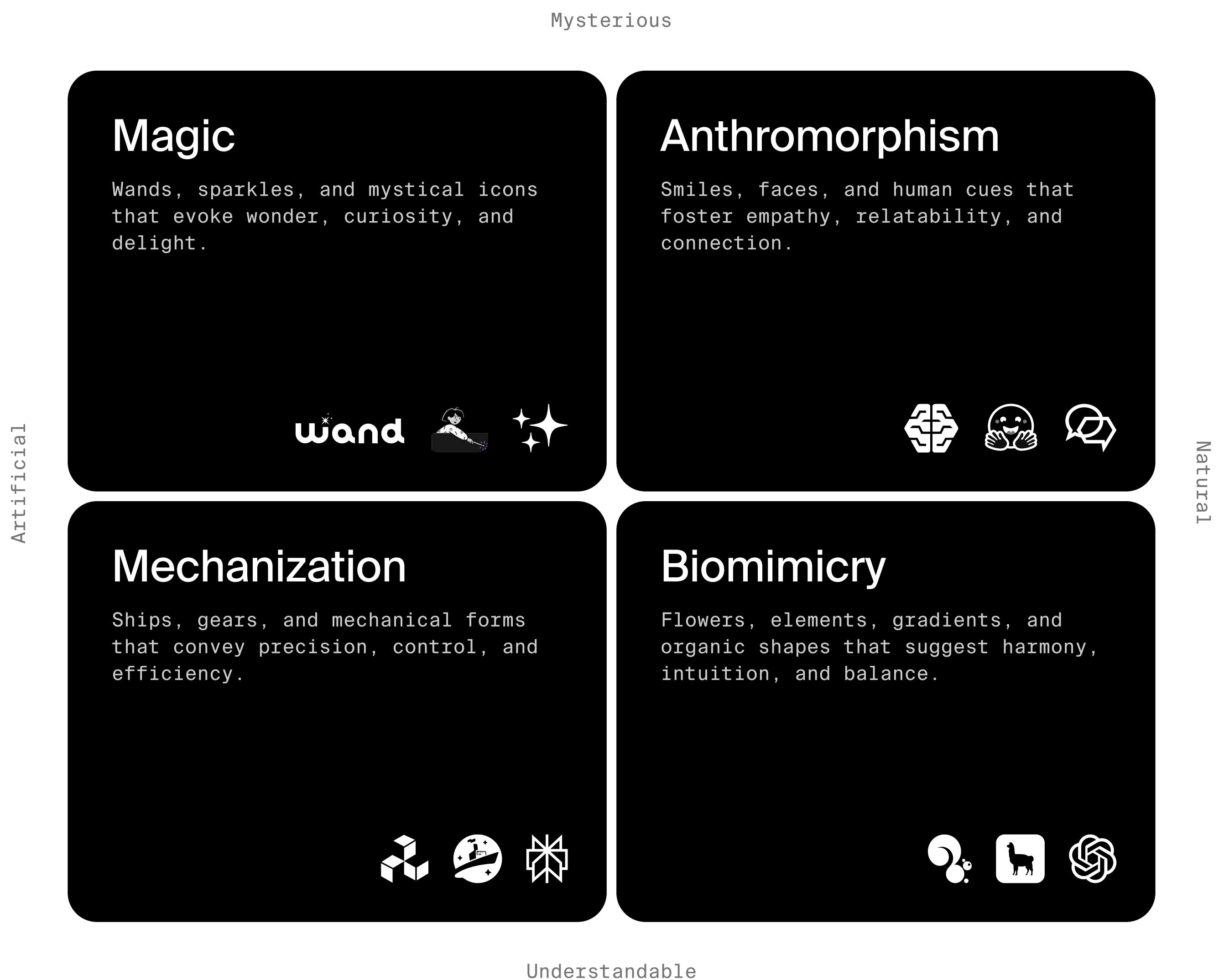
AI-related logos and visual identities

What we've seen is the emergence of a visual identity system that reflects how companies want their AI to be seen, felt, and trusted. This wasn't a study in aesthetics, but an inquiry into how visual expressions shape meaning.

### III. A practical framework

Using the principles of semiotics—the study of how signs and symbols create meaning—we wanted to help our team and clients make better decisions by understanding how visual cues trigger cultural narratives.

As we grouped similar design solutions, a framework emerged with four primary territories—each offering a unique lens through which AI is made visible and relatable.



Each territory helps transform fear into trust—reframing the themes of perception, existence, and power as sources of clarity, enrichment, and empowerment.

- Perception → Create clarity
- Existence → Improve life
- Power → Preserve agency

# Mechanization

## AI as a tool



This lens offers the reassurance of a machine engineered for precision, control, and efficiency. It’s unapologetically artificial—a tool focused purely on function and problem-solving.

**Perception** AI’s role is explicit. It’s artificial, not a living being—clear, functional, and easily understood.

**Existence** It connects AI to human progress, focused on solving problems, streamlining tasks, and driving innovation.

**Power** Agency remains with the user. Like any machine, AI is fully under human control—familiar, safe, and predictable.

# Magic

## AI as wondrous, creative



This lens invites curiosity, making AI feel playful and full of possibility. It focuses less on how it works and more on the wonder it inspires.

**Perception** Eases fear of the unknown by making mystery part of its appeal. You don't need to understand it to use it.

**Existence** AI becomes a source of delight, sparking creativity and offering moments of surprise and enjoyment.

**Power** It feels empowering, like wielding magical powers to shape outcomes and unlock new possibilities.

# Biomimicry

## AI as organic



This lens draws from nature, presenting AI as intuitive and harmonious—a quiet, supportive force that enhances life rather than disrupts it.

**Perception** AI feels familiar and approachable, modeled on natural systems we instinctively understand.

**Existence** It enhances life by fostering connection to familiar, calm, life-affirming patterns that support well-being.

**Power** It supports harmony between people and technology, enabling progress without dominance or disruption.

# Anthromorphism

## AI as human-like



This lens gives AI relatable qualities that foster empathy and emotional connection. It becomes less of a tool and more of a companion.

**Perception** AI borrows human traits, but makes clear it remains a machine, not a deceptive imitation.

**Existence** It mirrors human intelligence, promising better understanding and more personalized experiences.

**Power Positions** AI as a supportive partner, a co-pilot, reinforcing agency and collaboration rather than control.

# How your AI is seen— and trusted—starts here.

This framework is more than a design vocabulary. It's a cultural strategy—one that shapes meaning through tone, behavior, and the role AI plays in people's lives.

Each territory offers a lens on the deeper themes of perception, existence, and power. These choices shape how your AI earns trust, drives adoption, and turns uncertainty into clarity, enrichment, and agency.

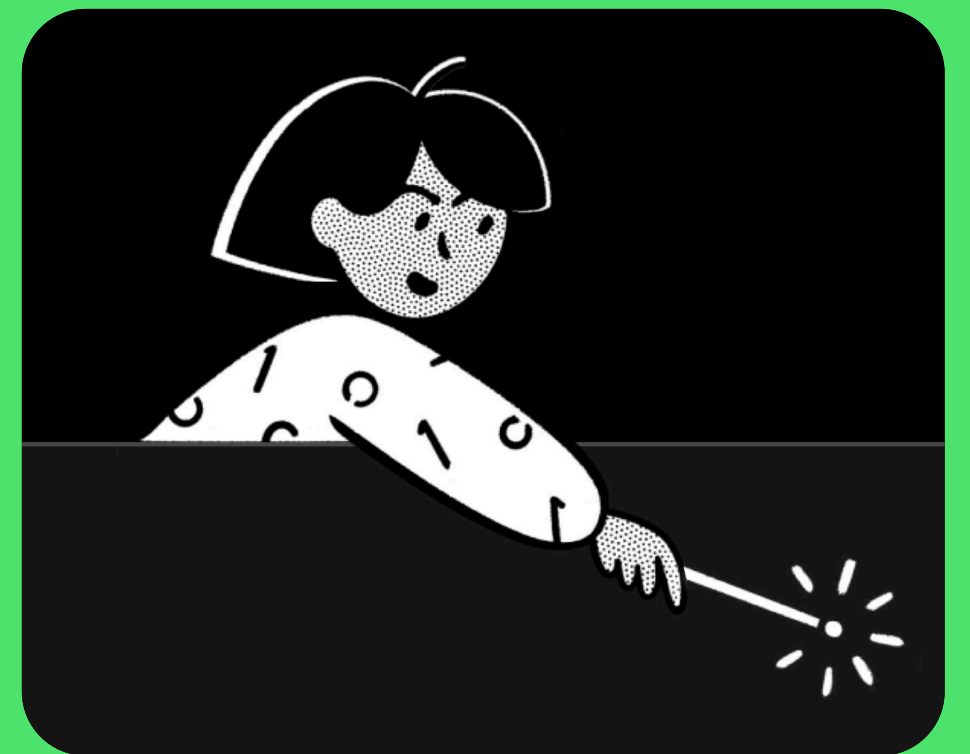
Does your AI clarify  
or obscure its purpose?

Does it improve lives  
or diminish well-being?

Does it preserve agency,  
or quietly remove choice?



The metaphors you choose—machine, magic, nature, human—signal what AI is, how it behaves, and who it serves.



These cues shape how people feel: curious or cautious, empowered or uneasy, ready or resistant.

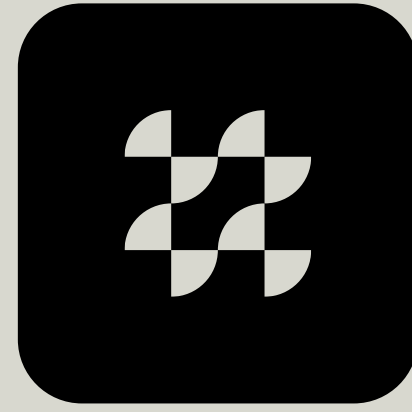
AI's story is still unfolding.  
Use this framework to lead with conviction and shape an experience people trust, understand, and value.

# IV. Case studies

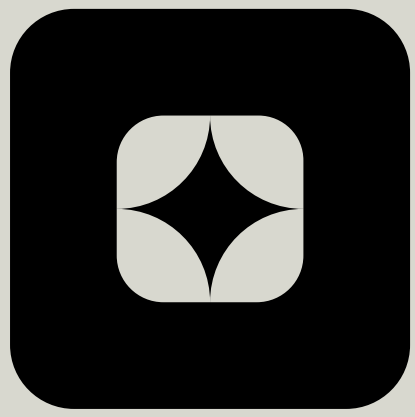


© Hei

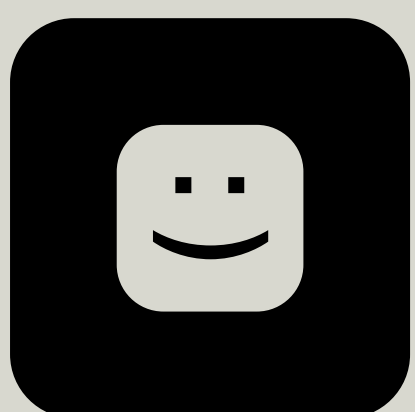
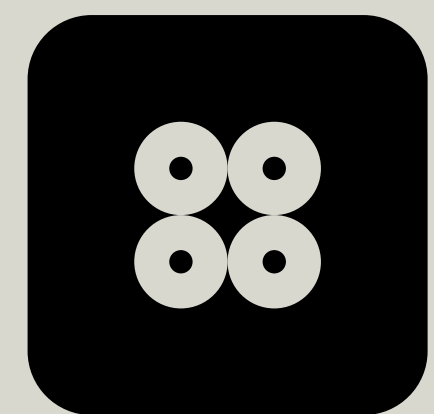
Real-world expressions of  
the framework in action.



The four cultural territories aren't just theoretical—they're actively shaping how organizations present AI in the market and build trust with their customers.



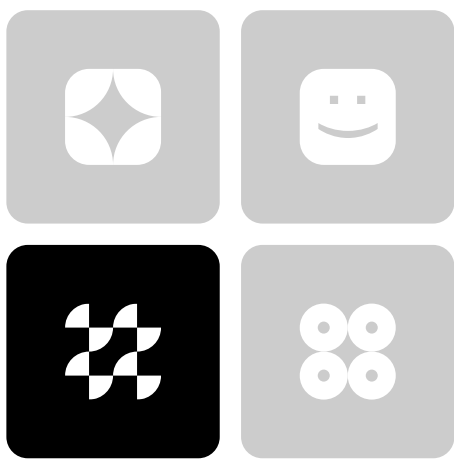
The following real-world examples reveal how each territory manifests, across brands and products, not as decoration but as strategic signals influencing how people perceive AI, understand its purpose, and decide whether to trust it.





# One territory

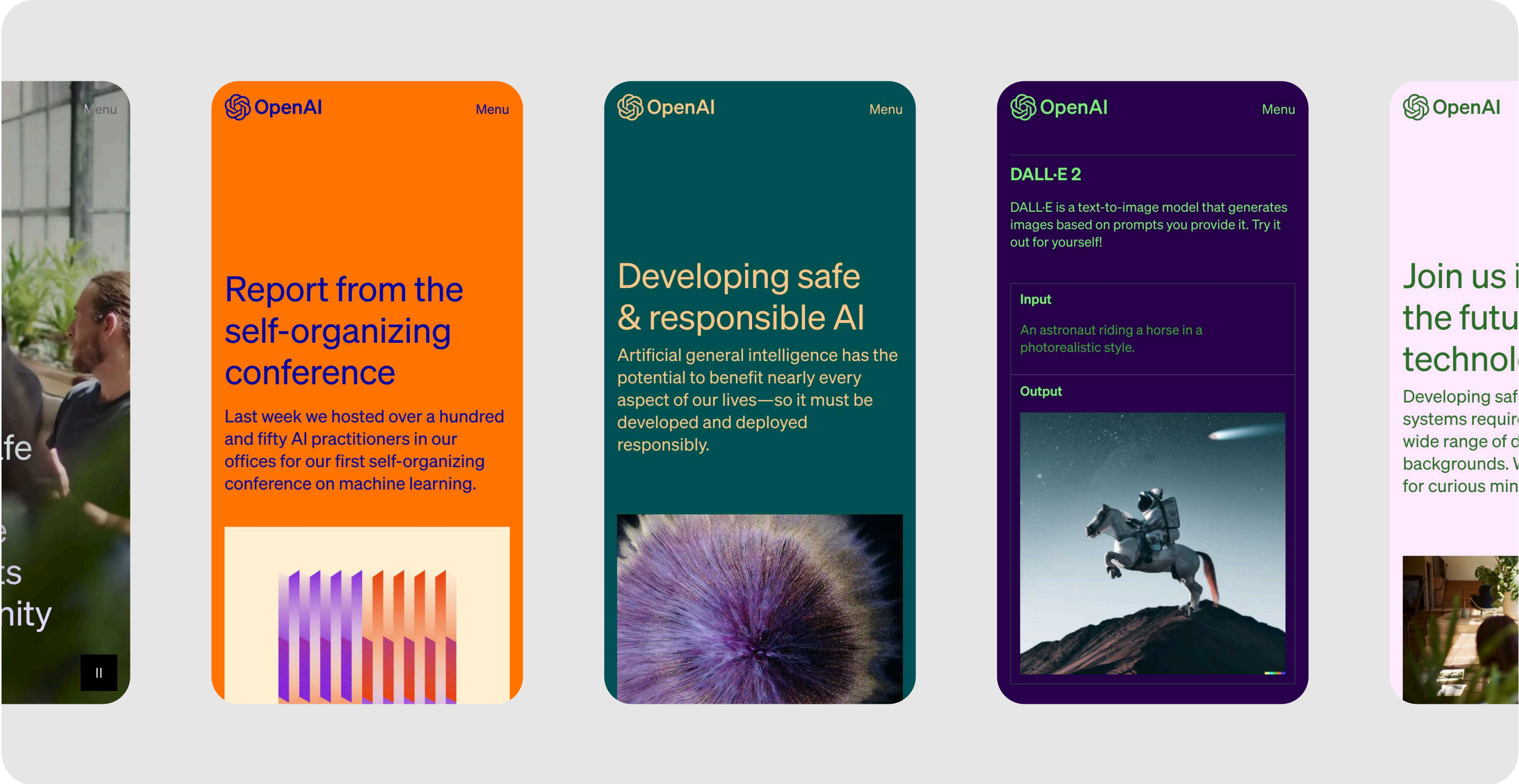
## Signal a clear value proposition



Focus on a single territory to create instant clarity and recognizable meaning.

OpenAI’s mission to “build technology with safety as a priority” made **mechanization** the ideal territory—framing AI as a tool designed to make life easier while keeping humans in control.

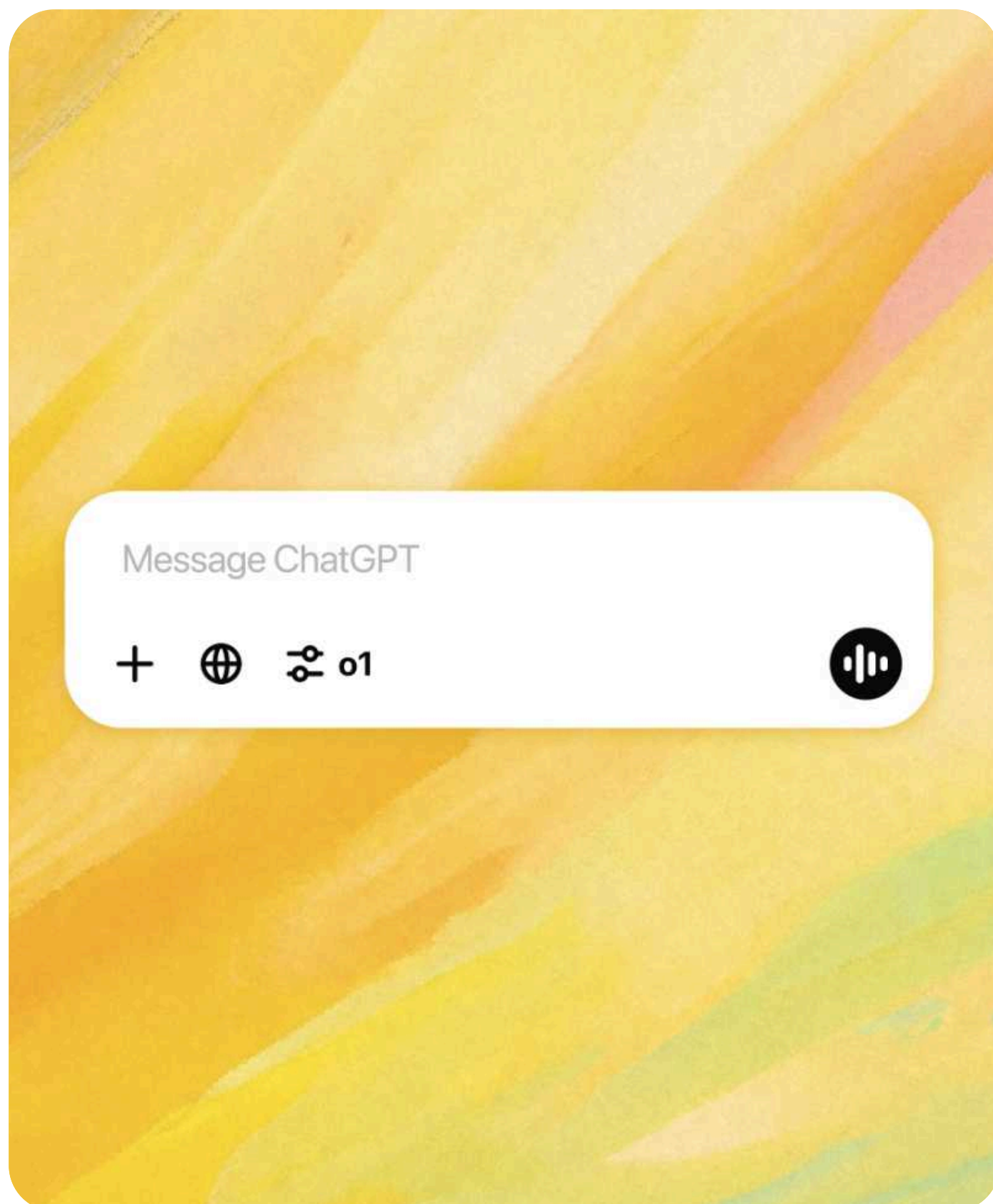
To evoke a sense of safety and approachability, we leaned into tech nostalgia, drawing from past visions of the future to anchor OpenAI’s identity in something both familiar and optimistic.



© AREA17

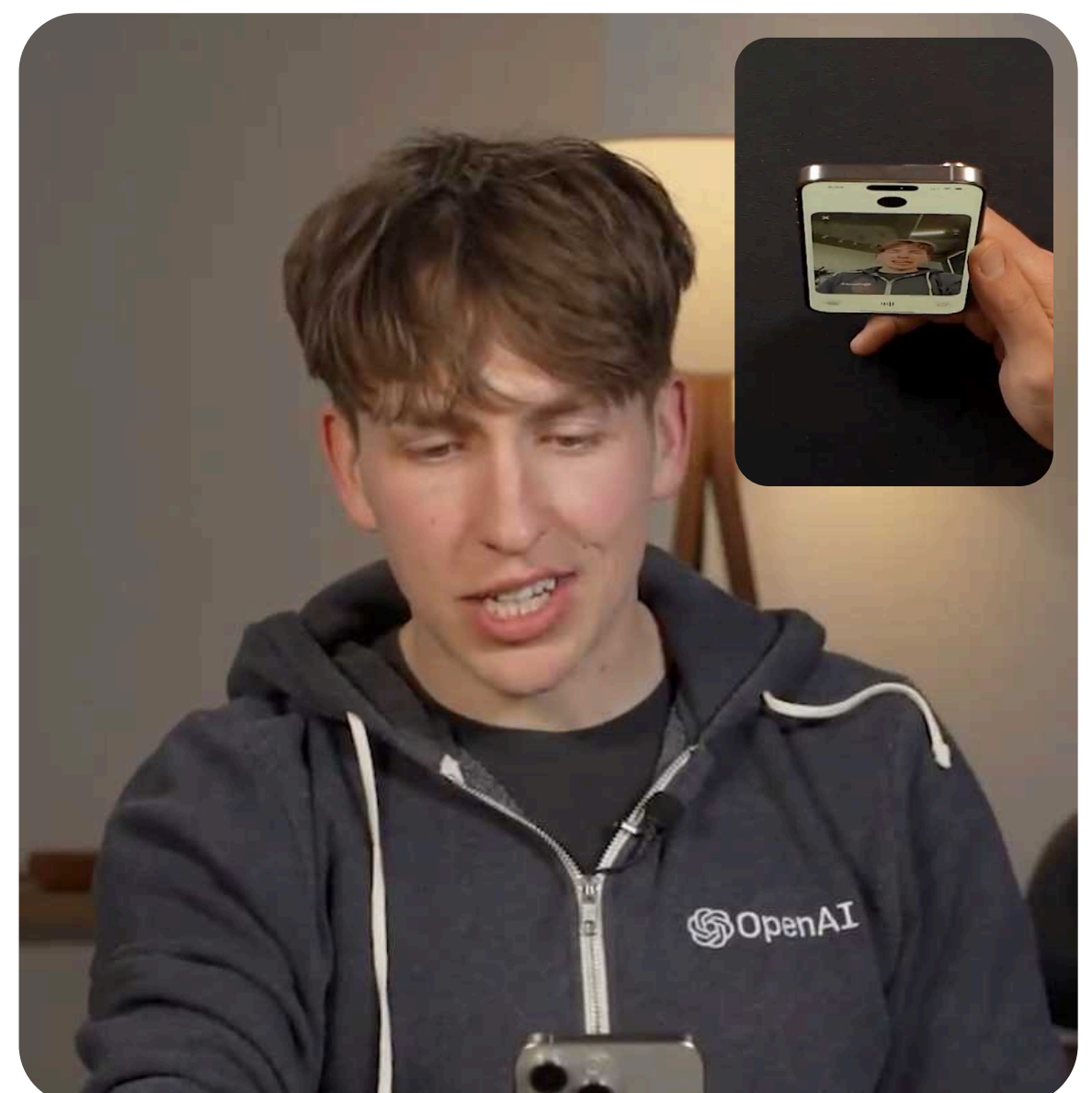


In May of last year, OpenAI evolved its brand expression, shifting from a mechanical design language to a more natural one. By adopting the **biomimicry** territory, the technology aims to feel more approachable, enriching, and harmonious with humans.



© OpenAI

Biomimicry



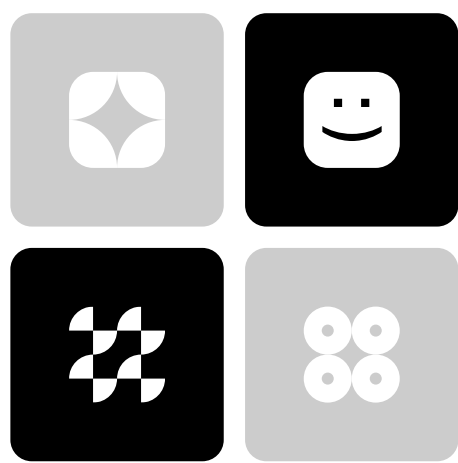
© OpenAI

Anthropomorphism

As OpenAI moves toward creating a multimodal AI companion, its trajectory now points to **anthropomorphism**—a territory that emphasizes empathy and human connection. This shift signals a move from designing AI that feels human to building AI that thinks like one—an ambition aligned with the pursuit of Artificial General Intelligence.

# Two territories

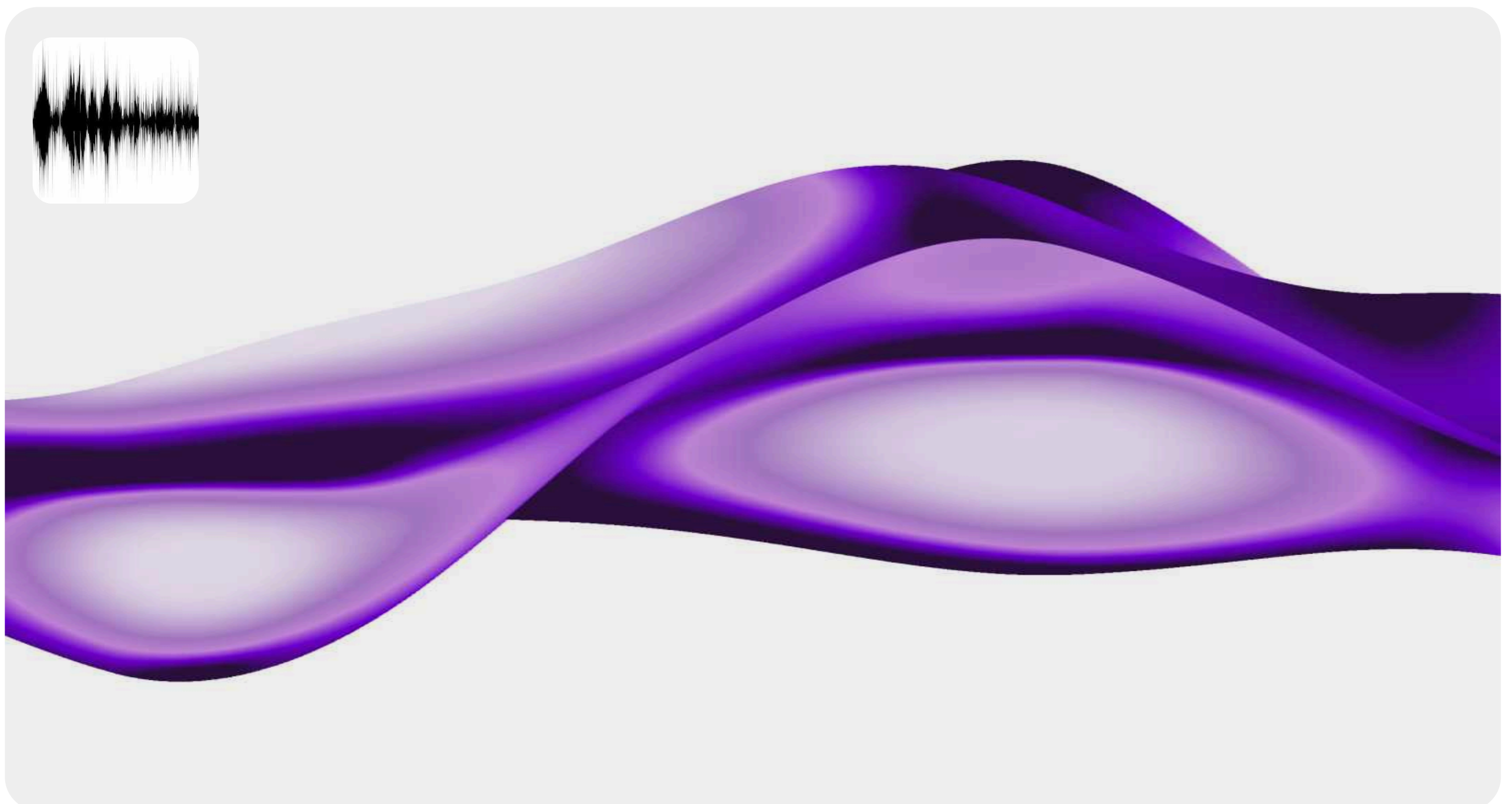
## Balance complexity through blended signals



Combine territories to reflect complex offerings or layered brand promises.

When we rebranded ElevenLabs—a startup focused on text-to-speech voice generation—we blended **mechanization** and **anthropomorphism**.

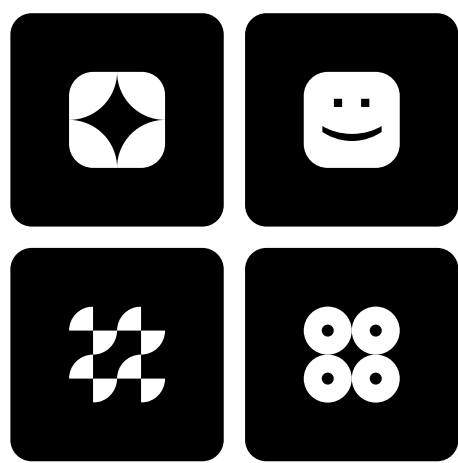
The goal was to emphasize the human-like quality of its output while making its artificial origins clear. We translated machine-generated sound into a visual language of color and texture—evoking the richness and emotional depth of the human voice.



© Eleven Labs



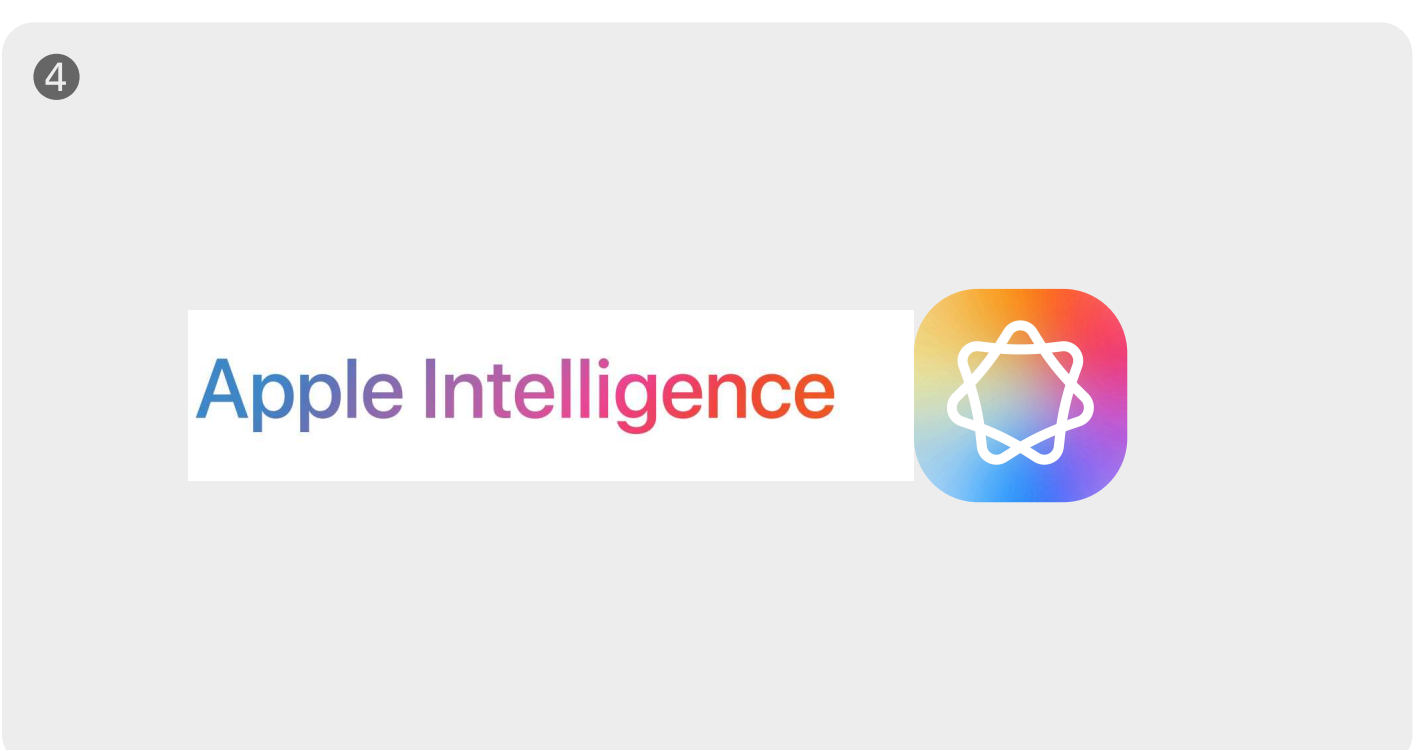
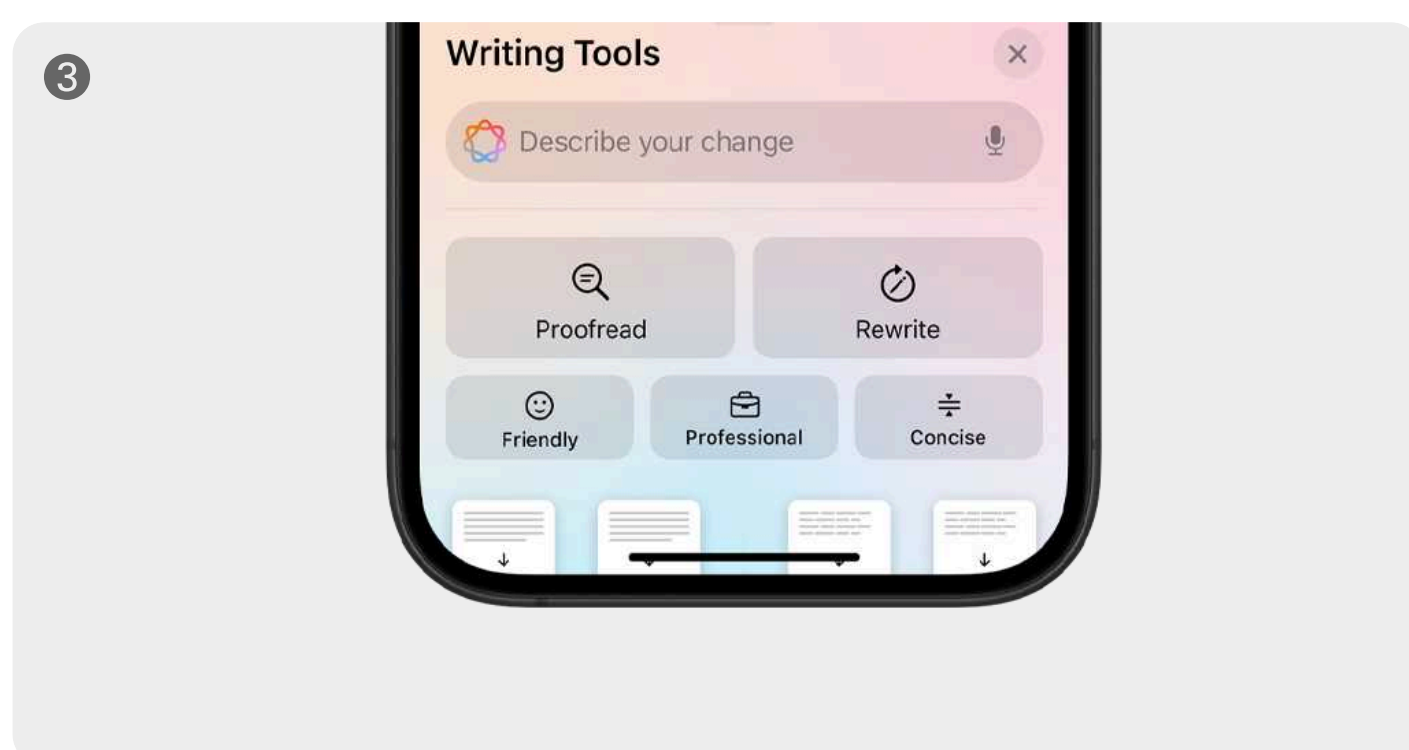
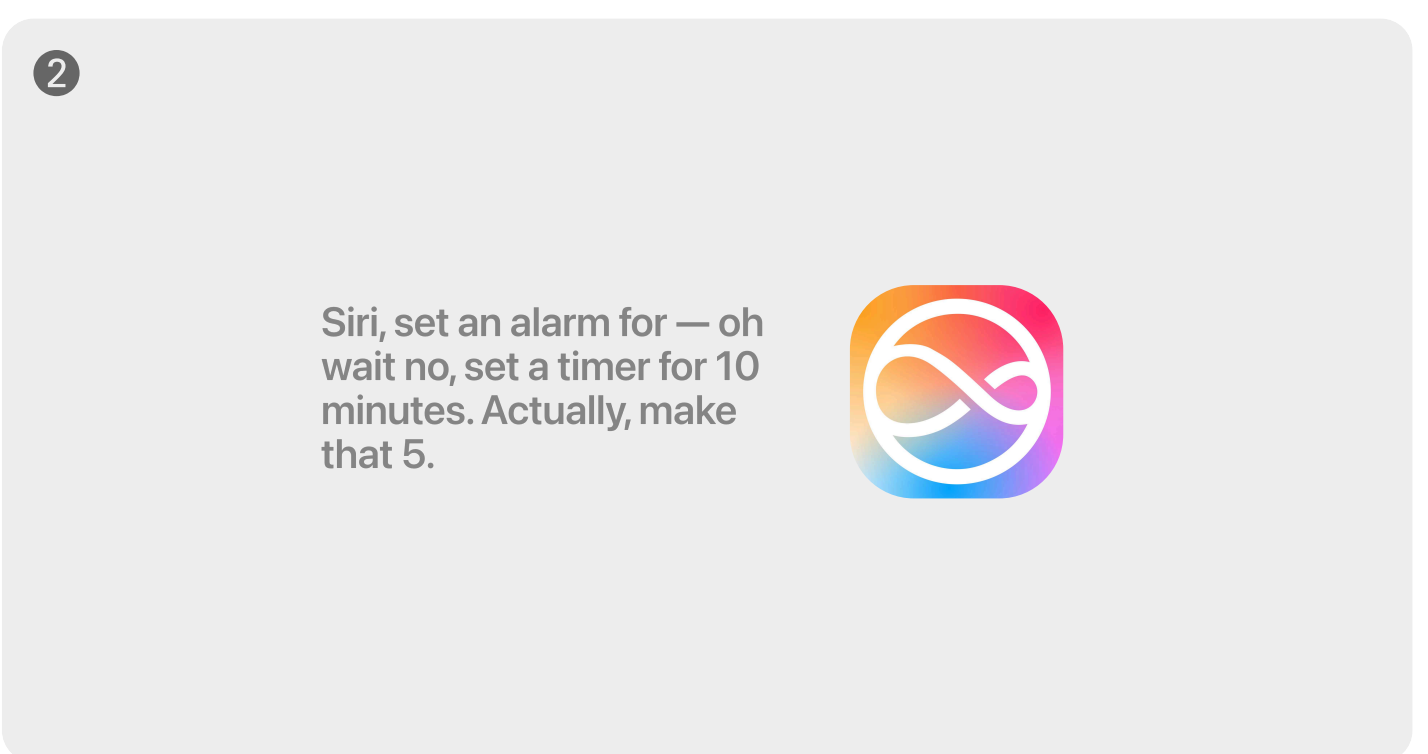
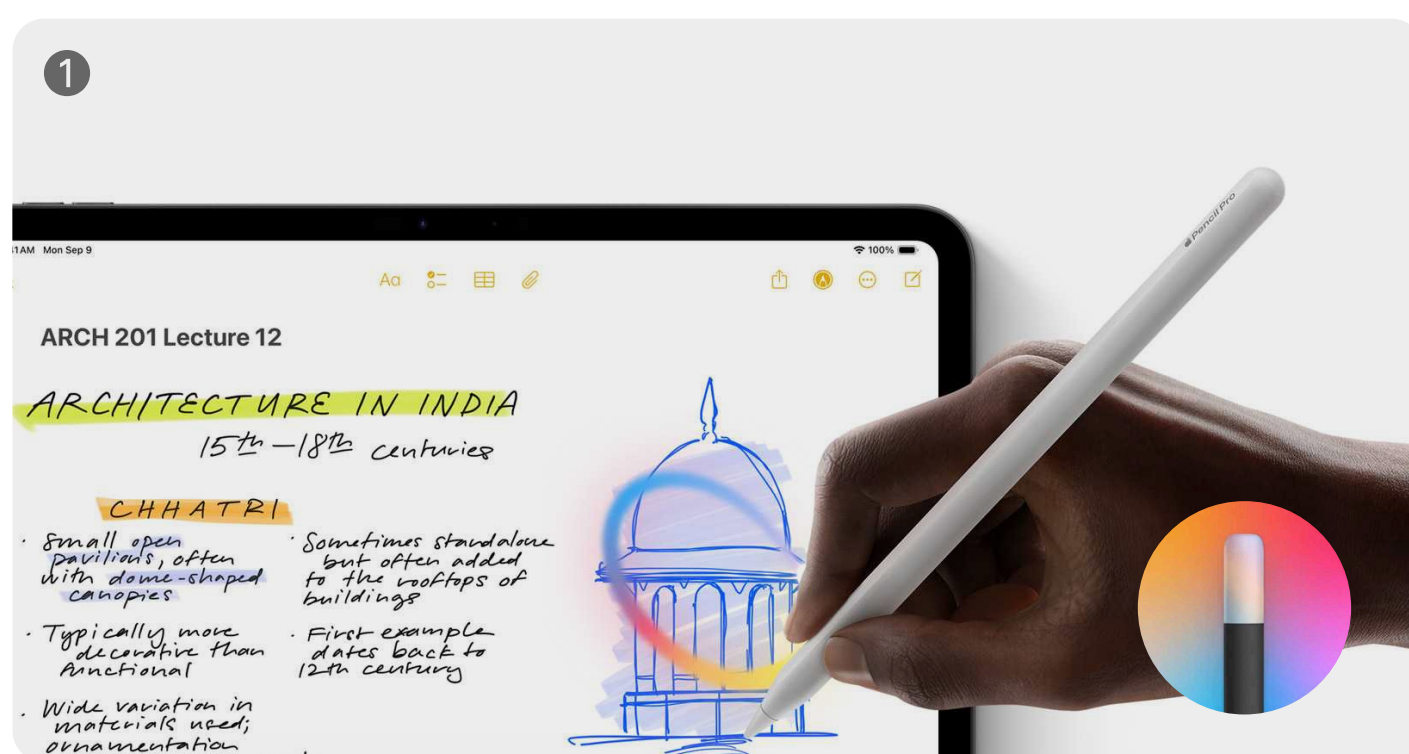
# Several territories Orchestrate multi-layered experiences



Use different territories across touch points to create nuanced, context-aware experiences.

Consider Apple's latest iOS design language. **Magic** delights in Freeform, where a wand transforms rough sketches into polished illustrations.

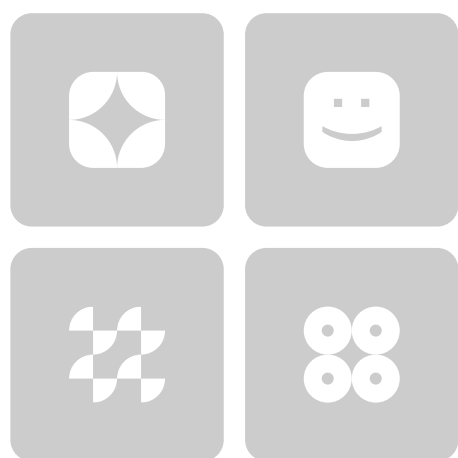
**Anthropomorphism** gives Siri a conversational, human-like tone for direct assistance. **Mechanization** powers the writing tools with precision, while **biomimicry** softens the interface through organic, intuitive icons.



① Magic ② Anthropomorphism ③ Mechanization ④ Biomimicry



# Or use none Signal meaning in your own language

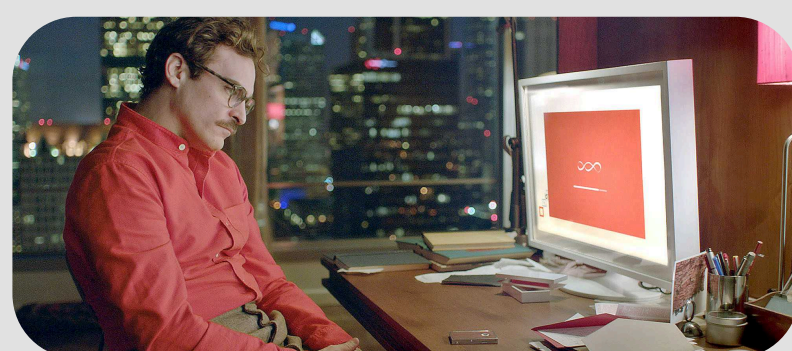


Step outside these territories, just don't ignore the cultural themes.

You can innovate outside this framework, but as long as your AI is user-facing, you still need to engage the cultural narratives.

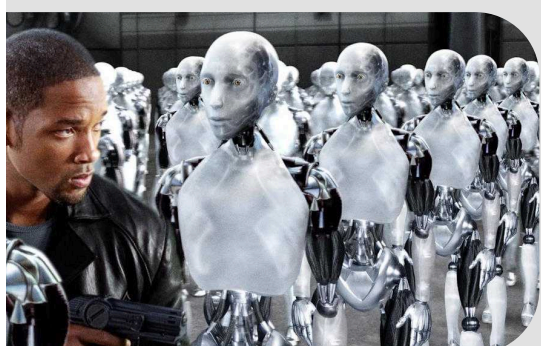
When people are interpreting what the technology is, what it means, and whether it can be trusted, those signals matter.

If your AI operates entirely in the background—it's not visible, not a differentiator, and not part of the user experience—then these themes don't need to be actively addressed.



EDITORS' PICK

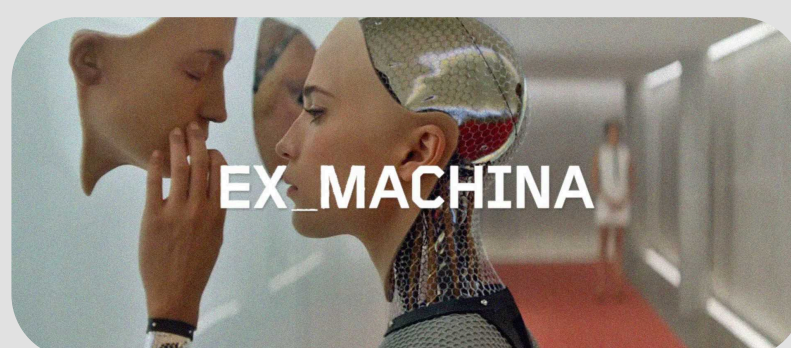
Goldman Sachs Predicts 300 Million Jobs Will Be Lost Or Degraded By Artificial Intelligence



Artificial intelligence could lead to extinction, experts warn



Mitigating the risk of ext AI should be a global pri alongside other societal-s as pandemics and nuclear



Artificial intelligence (AI)

Genevieve Bell: 'Humanity's greatest fear is about being irrelevant'





# What matters is meaning.

Whether you adopt one of the four territories, blend them or invent your own, the questions remain the same.

Am I being deceived?

Who's in charge?

Are we being replaced?

In every case, the real challenge isn't technical—it's cultural. The leaders who shape meaning, not just mechanics, will earn the trust that drives adoption.

# V. Strategic risks



Lead responsibly—or risk reinforcing fear and bias.

While this framework focuses on how to engage and reframe these cultural narratives. it's equally important to recognize the risks of:

**Reinforcing stereotypes**

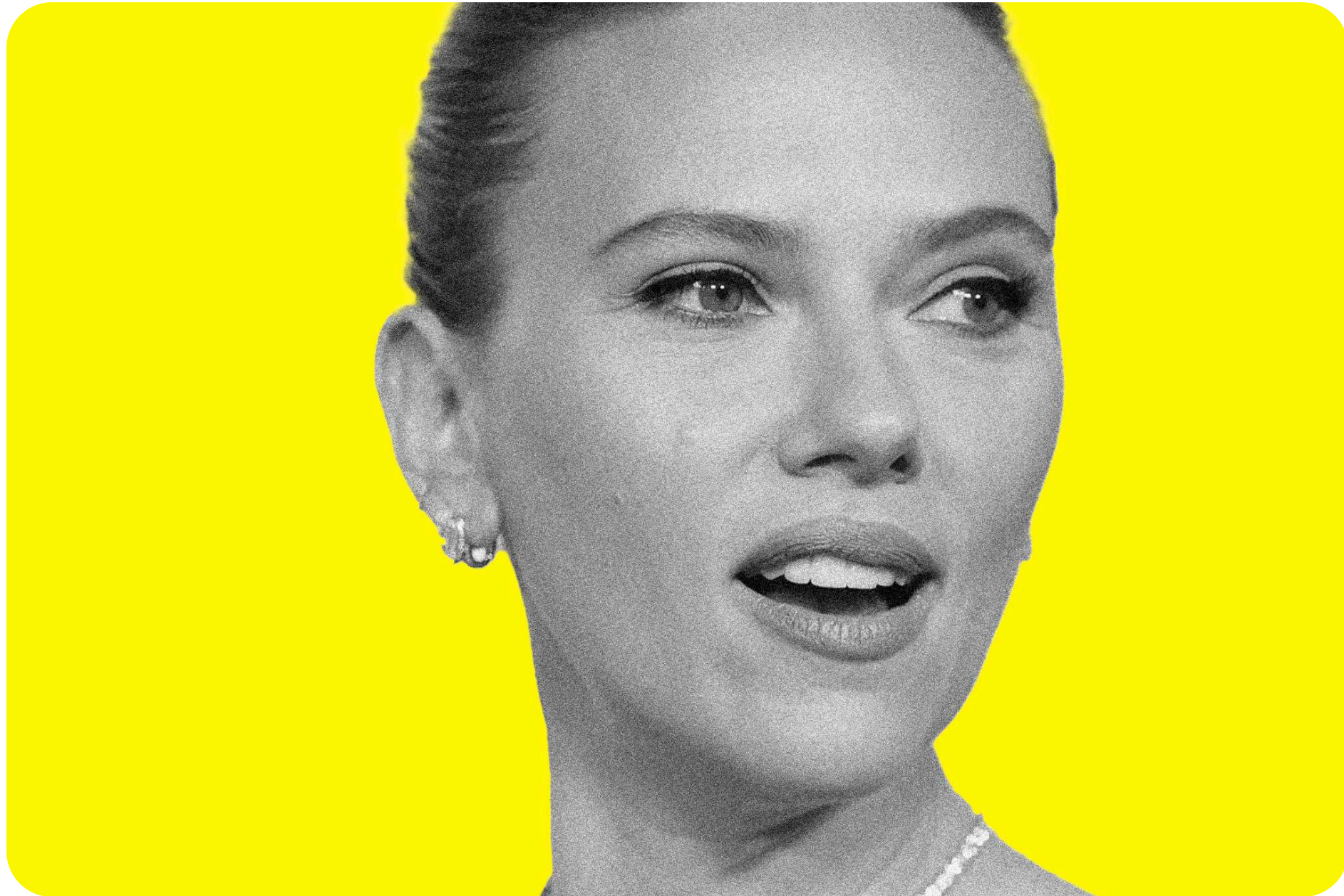
**Narrowing innovation**

**Short-sighted choices**

that have real consequences for your customers, your brand and society.



# Perpetuating bias



Scarlett Johansson

Choosing a symbolic territory like anthropomorphism may help humanize AI, but if applied carelessly, it can reinforce long-standing cultural biases.

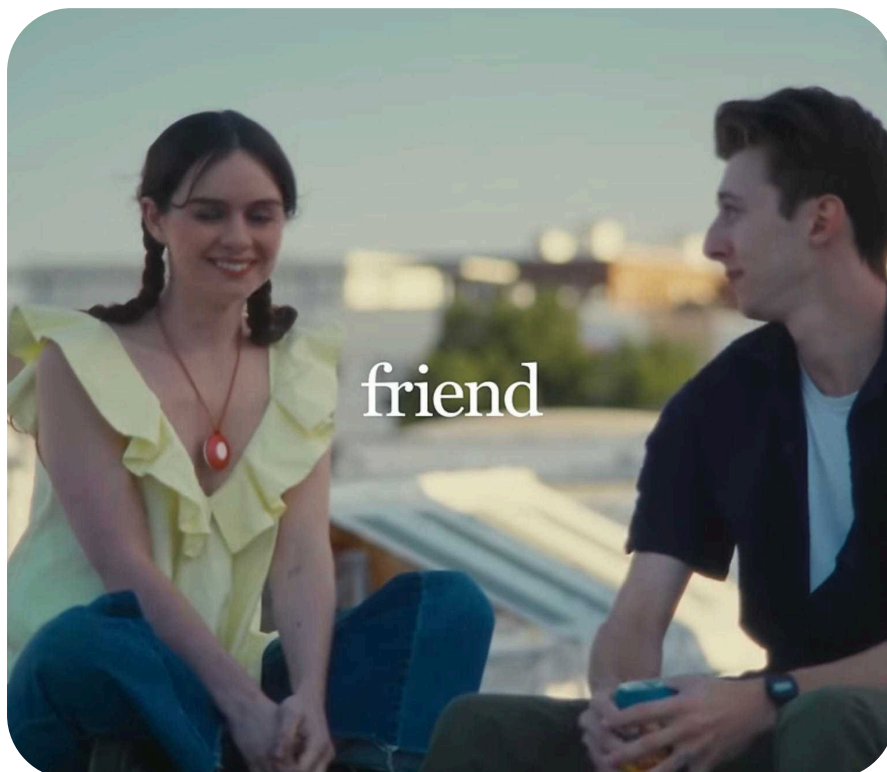
Consider OpenAI's use of Scarlett Johansson's voice as inspiration for an AI assistant—a decision criticized for reinforcing outdated gender stereotypes that link femininity to subservience, intimacy, and inoffensiveness.

OpenAI has since removed the voice.

Leadership decisions like these don't just shape user experiences—they reinforce social narratives.



# Missing the mark



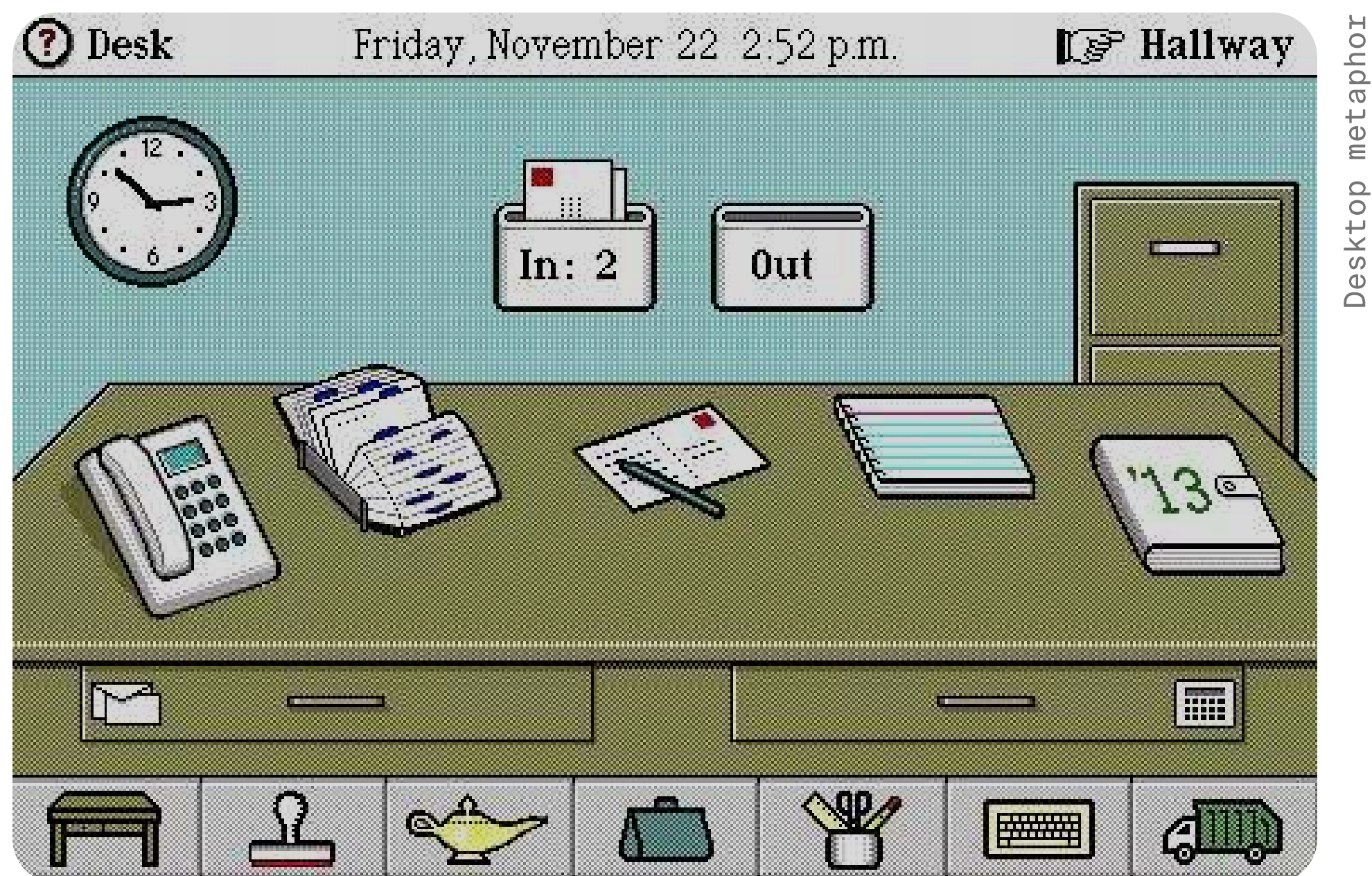
Even with the best intentions, it's possible to make choices that backfire and amplify anxiety rather than trust.

The ad campaign for the wearable device Friend sought to convey companionship, but instead highlighted isolation.

Similarly, Apple's recent Intelligence ads promoted convenience but raised questions about whether the technology fosters personal growth or encourages passivity.

A cultural narrative is empowering when it uplifts human potential, not when it replaces it.

# Limiting or misleading



While metaphors help people understand emerging technologies, they can also limit future possibilities.

The long-dominant "desktop" metaphor for personal computing made early adoption easier but eventually constrained users' thoughts about digital environments.

For example, folder structures mimicking physical filing cabinets limited new ways of organizing and interacting with information for decades.

A rigid attachment to a metaphor may limit both user experience and innovation. Keep evolving.



# The bigger stakes: Privacy, equity, and well-being



© Adolescence, Netflix

The internet was once imagined as a public good that would democratize knowledge and empower individuals. Instead, it became a force for social and environmental harm.

Technology isn't a public good by default. It becomes one through intentional leadership, responsible governance, and a commitment to outcomes that benefit people and society.

As leaders, we have significant influence and responsibility. Will we create a more human future, enhancing freedoms and well-being on a sustainable planet, or continue towards centralized power, disinformation, and distraction?

The question isn't just how will you position your AI, but what kind of future will it help create.

# Clarity. Enrichment. Empowerment.

The future of AI is no longer science fiction. It's a leadership decision that shapes how people experience technology—and how your organization is perceived.

In a market filled with familiar signals, standout leaders create new ones—rooted in purpose, designed for trust, and aligned with human values.

This moment invites more than operational excellence. It calls for cultural authorship. Embracing this responsibility builds trust and defines how society relates to AI.

From HAL to Her, from The Terminator to Wall-E, we've explored every possible future. Now, the next chapter begins—not in fiction, but in your decisions.



This report is based on the research and framework developed by Hibato Ben Ahmed, a talk by George Eid, and the collective thinking and craft of the AREA 17 team.

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AREA 17 is a global craft consultancy  
based in Paris and New York.

As strategists who make, we integrate brand,  
experience, and technology to help our clients  
realize transformative growth.

Let’s discuss

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