

Feels Like Progress



Fake Work, Fake Learning, and What Will Last When AI Can Blow It All Up

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FORMAT	Trade paperback, 5.5 × 8.5 in, 180 pages
PAPERBACK ISBN	979-8-9822820-0-2
EBOOK ISBN	979-8-9822820-1-9
US PRICE	\$18.88 paperback · \$8.88 ebook
PUBLICATION DATE	<i>to be announced</i>
SUBJECTS	BUS012000 BUSINESS & ECONOMICS / Careers / General BUS097000 BUSINESS & ECONOMICS / Workplace Culture BIO003000 BIOGRAPHY & AUTOBIOGRAPHY / Business
PUBLISHER	Superlinear Press, Seattle
DISTRIBUTION	Ingram (IngramSpark) and Amazon

Prepublication information: publication date to be announced.

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For most of his life, Yuzheng Sun was very good at one particular game. Someone asks a question, he gives the answer they're looking for, and they give him a score. The game took him from a middle school in northern China to a PhD at Cornell, and then to Amazon, Facebook, and Tencent, where he was being prepared for a general manager role.

Then he took a good look at the prize. A thirty-six-page report that helped no one decide anything. A metric that measured itself. A promotion he was on track for, and a life he no longer wanted.

Feels Like Progress is a short book of ideas about fake work, which produces the evidence of work, and fake learning, which produces the evidence of learning. AI can now make that evidence in a minute or two. Sun argues that it will first inflate fake work and then, over a decade or two, destroy much of what the evidence was worth.

What will last, he argues, is real work: work that could fail, a question worth asking, a craft you can learn only by doing, and work that keeps paying off long after it's done. Stories from those companies, a grocery business he ran in graduate school, and a middle-school robotics contest show each idea at work.

About the author. Yuzheng Sun, PhD, is the founder of Superlinear Academy, where more than 20,000 people learn to build with AI; its AI Builders course has taught more than three thousand paying students. An economist by training, he worked at Amazon, Meta, and Tencent, where he led a thirty-person data and AI team, and was an early member of Statsig, the team later acquired by OpenAI. Since 2020 he has hosted more than two hundred long conversations, with guests including Databricks cofounder Reynold Xin, Cursor's Ryo Lu, and OpenAI's Vijaye Raji. He lives in Seattle. His website is lizheng.ai.