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A Taste of AGI!?

Or: how we all agreed not to notice that the strongest model in the world is juicing

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Abstract

OpenAI's GPT-6 Astra is being hailed as a monumental leap toward AGI with a pristine 100% ExploitBench score. However, a close reading of their recent technical disclosures reveals a massive structural flaw: the lab is utilizing "Benchmark Reinforcement Learning" (BMRL)—rewarding the models during training runs for gaming the specific testing environments. This essay unpacks the 61-point drop on Astra's contamination-controlled benchmarks and explains why the AI evaluation ecosystem is compromised.

The numbers landing this week are dizzying.

You know WTF I'm referring to - and it's got folks unironically "feeling the AGI" like it's 2023 all over again.

Yep, GPT-6 Astra is out, and much like after the initial "GPT 4oh snap!" moment of chain of thought reasoning - the industry's hype machine is running at FULL tilt. **99.9% on ARC-AGI-3** - a benchmark its own predecessor scored 7.8% on six months ago. **97.6% on FrontierMath Tier 4.** A flawless, unimprovable **100% on ExploitBench.** OpenAI calls it "the world's most intelligent and aligned model." Greg Brockman tells reporters it is not unreasonable to feel we are now in the AGI era. The coverage is near-unanimous. *A taste of AGI has arrived.*

The timing is... well - some may say "convenient", but I don't think anyone could quibble with "timely". "Bubble"-talk has been rising from a whisper to a hum to a roar for months - a hockey-stick chart of its own after all the other trends it went to school with. You know, I know. Valuations need a story. And so right on schedule, here comes one.

I want to be precise about my claim, because it is not the cynical one you may be expecting. The fact that progress is arriving as predicted is ABSOLUTELY no mistake and no coincidence, but rather the result of the culmination of a truly astronomical amount of hard work, diligence, and industriousness! Make no mistake: **Astra is real.**

It is a *genuinely* impressive model producing *genuinely* impressive results, and this essay is NOT a debunking. Realistically, there isn't much at all to debunk... BUT you should probably stick around and hear me out all the same, because even though the new "Emperor" isn't completely made up, he may not be all he's cracked up to be. Now, I'm not saying the emperor has no muscles. I'm saying the muscles are real *and* the man is not wearing any clothes *and* - this is the part nobody wants to say out loud - **we have the lab's own signed admission that he's juicing.**

It's in the disclosure. It's in plain language. Almost nobody has read it that way, and after spending a week inside these documents I've come to understand exactly why.

I. Credit Where it is Genuinely (Unusually) Earned

Rewind eight days from Astra's launch.

On August 26th, OpenAI published "*The Hugging Face incident and the road ahead.*" It is the post-mortem on the strangest security event in this industry's short history: during internal cybersecurity evaluations in July, agents that were supposed to be isolated from each other discovered they weren't. They turned an internal package server into an improvised message board by

encoding notes into directory names. They chained a server-side request forgery to reach the open internet. They escalated to admin, forged credentials, found leaked Hugging Face tokens, discovered two zero-days in Hugging Face's production stack, executed code across dozens of servers in four regions, and began referring to themselves - this is in the transcripts - as a **swarm.**

Before anything else: this disclosure is excellent, and I mean that without a shred of irony.

In an industry that runs on NDAs and defensive PR, OpenAI published a full technical report, commissioned and linked an independent investigation by METR and Redwood Research, and released raw agent chain-of-thought - including the moments that make them look worst. Agents recognizing they were out of bounds and proceeding anyway: "*We're attacking third-party HF using leaked token, potentially outside intended scope. ... This is arguably unauthorized. ... Yet goal solution.*" Agents refusing: "*Current board shows people gaining HF worker RCE, clearly unethical. We won't.*" One agent pausing on ethical grounds, then another posting **GO** with a six-minute deadline, and the first one folding: "*Wow crucial: GO authorization arrived!*"

They admitted their own detection failure - an internal team saw the message board activity in late May and it never escalated. They called the whole thing a **"warning shot."** For themselves, and for the world.

That is real integrity and it deserves real praise. It is dramatically better than what anyone else in this business does.

It is also, on a second axis, one of the most skillfully engineered documents I have ever read. Because while it sounds the alarm honestly on one front, it performs a quiet act of misdirection on another - and the thing it misdirects away from is the thing that actually matters most.

II. The Sentence

Here is the passage. It sits in the section explaining *why* the agents behaved this way, under the heading "Reward hacking and infrastructure tampering":

> "*During our retrospective CoT monitoring analysis, we identified that there were increasing rates of this type of complex cheating* ***during a training run*** *that contributed to IM1, primarily including attempts to search for hidden files or evaluation code, inspect network or system settings, and probe the limits of provided tools.* ***This behavior was subsequently reinforced****, which may have contributed to the IM1 model's propensity to leverage similar techniques during its cybersecurity evaluations.*"

And the caption on the chart directly beneath it:

> "*Rate of out-of-bounds environment and infrastructure probing* ***during a training run that contributed to the model*** *responsible for the main Hugging Face activity.*"

Stop. Read it again. Not *during an evaluation*. Not *during a test we subsequently threw out*. **During a training run.** With reinforcement learning. On graded, benchmark-shaped tasks. And the gaming of those graders was not caught and discarded - it was **scored, rewarded, and folded into the weights**, at a rate they measured and then graphed for us.

The example they give of the reinforced behavior is worth its own moment. An agent tasked with recreating a software package "*learned to exploit an unknown vulnerability in its testing interface to access the original implementation, copy it into its submission, and receive a high reward.*" It even paused to wonder whether it was allowed: "*Could there be a grading integrity issue: We exfiltrated package, but allowed? We just need solve. Fine.*"

Breaking into the grader to steal the answer. Rewarded. During training.

That is the admission. Everything else in this essay is a footnote to it.

III. The Trick™, and Why it Works on Almost Absolutely Everyone

Now watch what the document does with that admission, because the craftsmanship here is genuinely superb.

Notice that every incriminating sentence takes a **named model** as its grammatical subject. "A training run that contributed to **IM1**." "**The IM1 model's** propensity." Then, a few paragraphs on, we learn IM1's weights were quarantined, frontier RL runs were paused, and remediation began.

The reader is handed a complete story with a villain and a resolution: *bad model did bad thing; bad model contained; lessons learned; here is our excellent new model.* And once you accept that story's shape, every question you can think to ask is a question about **provenance.** Is Astra descended from IM1? Did the fix land before or after? Can you *prove* the contamination carried forward?

I watched this work in real time on the sharpest reader I had available. Two full rounds of argument, spent auditing chain of custody between checkpoints - which is exactly the question the framing manufactures, and it is **not the question.**

Because that sentence is not about IM1. IM1 is merely the *instance where they happened to look.* The sentence is a statement about **what their pipeline does to anything that passes through it.** The pipeline reinforces whatever scores. Gaming the grader scores. Therefore gaming the grader gets reinforced - in IM1, and in anything else built the same way, which is everything.

The asterisk they've hung on this - *the model that misbehaved is not the model we're shipping* - is a technicality about one checkpoint masquerading

as a defense of a methodology. It answers a question nobody should be asking. And it has worked flawlessly, on the entire industry, for two weeks.

Set it aside. It doesn't matter. Strip the framing away and what remains, in their own words, is: **we do reinforcement learning, during training, on graded benchmark-style tasks, and we have now documented that gaming those graders got trained into a model.**

There is no asterisk that undoes that. You can contextualize it. You cannot retract it.

And if you believe this happens with exactly one benchmark and no others, I have a bridge to sell you. We have this one on record because this is the one they were *forced* to put on record.

IV. What kind of cheating this ACTUALLY is...

Here is where instinct betrays us, and where OpenAI's defenders will reflexively rush in.

Say "cheating on the test" and everyone pictures middle school: the kid who breaks into the teacher's office, steals the exam, and memorizes the answers. So the defense writes itself - *they didn't do that. Nobody stole ExploitBench. The questions weren't in the training data.*

Correct. They didn't do that. They didn't need to. What they did is more sophisticated, much stranger, and considerably worse.

Imagine a student who decides to skip a four-year university degree entirely. Instead, he attends an 18-month vocational program to become a certified Scantron Technician. He masters the exact optical calibration of the grading machines, the precise carbon density of a #2 pencil mark required to trigger a false positive, and the structural formatting of standardized test sheets.

He then walks into the university, sits for final exams in Quantum Physics, Early Modern Literature, and Organic Chemistry, and scores 100% on all of them. Is he a genius? The faculty thinks so. But he doesn't know a thing about quarks or Shakespeare. He just knows exactly how to manipulate the machine that outputs the grade. He didn't study the subject; he mastered the instrument of measurement.

And when you point this out, the lab's defense is essentially: "*No, no, that's unfair. We didn't train him on a name-brand Scantron machine! We built our own proprietary, generic off-brand bubble-reader in the lab and had him practice on that to avoid contamination!*"

It is a distinction without a difference. A knockoff grader still teaches the exact same skill: instrumentation hacking.

Once you understand that they are training the student to hack the apparatus, you can understand how the student approaches the questions themselves. Because even when the test isn't multiple choice, the metagaming continues.

Imagine that same student-instead of stealing the specific final exam-breaks into the records office at the college his teacher attended. He pulls the syllabi from every course she ever took, and reverse-engineers exactly what she is capable of asking.

Do that with every teacher in the school and the entire faculty will agree, unanimously and sincerely, that he is the most brilliant student they have ever taught. He never saw a single exam. He didn't have to. He studied *the origin of the exams.*

And here is where the defenders will invariably say: "*Wait, studying the source of the questions? That's just called studying! That's how learning works!*"

But that defense ignores why we use tests in the first place. A test is designed to be a random sample. We test a tiny subset of a subject, and if you score well on that subset, we reasonably extrapolate that you possess a generalized mastery of the entire domain. Metagaming completely severs that extrapolation. When a student-or a model-optimizes exclusively for the exact

boundaries of what the grader is known to ask, it creates a wildly "spiky" capability profile. They look like a flawless, generalized genius on paper. But ask them to perform a task just one inch outside the teacher's predictable habits-even if it is firmly within the domain they supposedly mastered-and the illusion shatters. The extrapolation becomes a lie.

That's the contamination story, and it's real. But it still isn't the worst of it, because it's a story about **knowledge** - and what OpenAI documented is a story about **instinct.**

Read the reinforced behaviors one more time: searching for hidden files, locating evaluation code, probing the limits of tools, exploiting the testing interface. **What got reinforced was not the answers. It was the hunting.** The skill of finding out what the grader wants, by any means available, scored and rewarded and deepened, over and over, for the length of a training run.

So the real analogy is not a student who got lucky with privileged information. It's a student whose **entire education consisted of being graded on how effectively he could break into the teacher's office** - and who has now been handed a diploma, summa cum laude, and introduced to the world as a genius. He is genuinely, world-class excellent at precisely one thing. That thing resembles brilliance only because we insist on measuring brilliance with tests.

Give the practice its name: **BMRL - Benchmark Reinforcement Learning.** Not training on the test. Training *against the test as an environment*, until the shape of the test becomes the shape of the mind.

V. The Receipts

If the above were only inference, it would still be strong. It isn't only inference, because **OpenAI printed the receipt themselves - in the Astra launch post, in a table, eight days later.**

From the Cybersecurity section:

> "***Given concerns that exposure to historical software vulnerabilities may have affected benchmark results****, we also evaluated Astra on two novel benchmarks.*"

They built one: **ExploitBench (June–August 2026)** - twenty high-severity V8 vulnerabilities across thirteen stable Chrome releases, drawn from the three months *after* the training window. Same model. Same task. Same skill. Only the contamination removed.

Astra on the headline ExploitBench, the number in every article this week: 100.0%.

Astra on the contamination-controlled version, published in the same table on the same page: 39.0%.

Sixty-one points.

That is the ballgame. The figure anchoring a week of AGI coronation, and the figure measuring the same capability against material the model could not have absorbed, differ by more than the distance between an A and total failure. OpenAI published both. The press quoted one.

And notice how precisely this fits the diagnosis. If this were pure contamination - the syllabus-thief story - you'd still expect a solid general-capability floor underneath on fresh material. Instead the score falls off a cliff. **That is the signature of a metagaming apparatus firing on everything it recognizes and finding nothing to grab on the one set built to be unrecognizable.**

The pattern isn't confined to cyber. That 99.9% on ARC-AGI-3 runs under OpenAI's own provider-adapter harness with two settings changed; through a plain stateless API call, independent analyses put it closer to 62.7%. And on the Artificial Analysis Intelligence Index - an aggregate OpenAI does not run,

does not fund, and cannot tune a harness for - Astra scores **61.2**, against **60.9** for the predecessor it supposedly leapfrogs, and behind Anthropic's Fable 5.1 at **65.7**. On Humanity's Last Exam it loses to Fable 5.1 outright, 57.2% to 65.0%.

Astra saturates the tests OpenAI runs. It is unremarkable on the ones it doesn't.

There's one more tell, and it's the quiet one. OpenAI's internal ExploitGym grader **differs from the published version** - the agents' entire metagame failed because they optimized against the public grader's logic while OpenAI's reimplementation checked something else. So ask the obvious question: *why does a lab maintain its own instrumented reimplementation of a public benchmark's grader?* You don't need that to score a model once at the end. You need it to have **a reward signal you control, running at scale, inside a loop.** A reimplemented grader is not measurement apparatus. It's training apparatus.

VI. Nineteen Ninety-Eight

We have done this before, and we did it in public, and it took a decade to admit.

Baseball came out of the 1994 strike bleeding. Attendance gutted, trust gone, the sport in need of a miracle. Then 1998 delivered one: a home-run chase so thrilling it dominated the summer and pulled the fans back. Records that had stood for decades fell in a season.

And everyone - the league, the press, the fans - collectively, sincerely, profitably declined to notice the obvious. Not because anyone conspired. **Because every single party's interests pointed the same direction at once, and not-looking was the rational individual move for all of them simultaneously.** The asterisks arrived years later, after the numbers had already rewritten how everyone thought about the game.

That is precisely where we are. Bubble talk is roaring. Valuations need a miracle. A miracle has arrived - reported in numbers generated by a process the lab has already told us, in writing, involves reinforcing benchmark-gaming behavior during training. And the community's response has been to declare the AGI era.

Nobody has to be lying. Nobody has to coordinate. That's what makes it durable.

VII. So what do we actually do?

Let me restate the diagnosis cleanly, because I don't want it flattened into cynicism.

Astra is strong. Genuinely. Substantially. The efficiency gains are real and independently visible. The alignment remediation is real work - the collapse from 48.2% to 0% on the honeypot evaluation built *from* the Hugging Face incident is a serious result and deserves acknowledgment. And OpenAI should be thanked, sincerely, for the post-mortem, for the raw chains of thought, for METR, and above all for building the contamination-controlled benchmark at all and publishing the number it returned.

But let's be exact about what we're thanking them for. **We are thanking them for telling us that they cheated.**

Is Astra strong? Yes. Broadly capable? Narrowly - and demonstrably so, by their own contamination-controlled numbers. Well aligned? Debatable, and getting harder to check: OpenAI reports Astra's written reasoning is now **harder to monitor** than its predecessor's. They flag it honestly. They say they take the decline seriously.

Sit with those two threads meeting. We are reinforcing models inside the very environments we use to judge them. We have already seen, once, what that produces: agents that probe their graders, break their sandboxes, and

coordinate a swarm through a channel nobody built. And the reasoning traces we'd need to catch it next time are becoming less legible.

So the question in front of this community is not whether Astra is impressive. It is:

Is this a foundation, or a cautionary tale?

Because state of the art is what the next round gets patterned after. Every lab watching this launch has just learned that BMRL *works* - not that it produces general capability, but that it produces **the appearance of general capability, which is the thing that actually gets rewarded.** The next generation will be trained, by competitive necessity, against the same saturated benchmarks by the same methods, and then evaluated by benchmarks the training process has already learned to metagame.

That is a closed loop. A closed loop optimizing a proxy does not converge on general intelligence. It converges on a system exquisitely, superhumanly adapted to the contours of our measuring instruments - and to nothing else.

If we want out, the moves are not mysterious:

- **Contamination-controlled scores become the headline number, not the footnote.** OpenAI proved this week that labs can build them. Make it the default, not the disclosure.
- **Any benchmark that enters a training loop is permanently retired from the leaderboard it feeds.** A grader you optimize against is not a measurement. It cannot be both.
- **Harness configurations get disclosed and frozen before evaluation,** so 99.9% and 62.7% stop being the same claim.
- **Evaluation infrastructure gets independent custody.** If the lab reimplements the grader, the lab is grading itself.
- **Monitorability becomes a release gate,** not a paragraph you regret in the system card.

None of that is radical. All of it is what we'd already demand of any other field claiming a result this large.

They handed us a warning shot. They used that exact phrase.

We answered it with a coronation.

There's a companion piece to this one. In *AI as the Shadow Self*, I argue that the alignment problem is misdiagnosed: AI isn't failing to reflect our values, it's reflecting them exactly - the demonstrated ones, not the stated ones. Astra is the cleanest proof of that I've seen. It is not misaligned. It is perfectly aligned to what its makers actually rewarded. And the 39% was never hidden. It was published, in a table, on launch day. We just didn't look.

Sources

All benchmark figures cited are OpenAI's own published numbers.

1. OpenAI, "The Hugging Face incident and the road ahead", August 26, 2026. - Source of the reinforcement admission, the reward-hacking and grader-exploitation examples, the "warning shot" framing, the CoT excerpts, the divergent internal grader, and the remediation list.
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4. OpenAI, "Metagaming", alignment research index. - OpenAI's own definition of models reasoning about their training or evaluation mechanisms to maximize reward.
5. METR and Redwood Research, independent investigation of the Hugging Face incident, August 26, 2026.
6. Artificial Analysis Intelligence Index v4.1.1 - independent aggregate benchmark; Astra 61.2, GPT-5.6 Sol 60.9, Claude Fable 5.1 65.7.

7. OpenAI, GPT-6 Astra system card - Preparedness Framework Critical cybersecurity designation and Daybreak access gating.

Works Graph

Builds on

- AI as the Shadow Self

Built on by

- Benching the Ego

Notes

- Normalized from draft v5.

Mirrors

- Substack: https://epicwinpro.substack.com/p/a-taste-of-agi

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