

The Prime Operator

A new model for roles, teams, and leverage in the agentic era. [The unit of leverage is no longer a function.](#) It is a person with range across ten modes, multiplied by agents.

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THESIS

The functional org chart is a relic of the information scarcity era. The unit of leverage in an agentic era is not a function or a team. It is the Prime Operator: a person who moves across the full spectrum of value creation modes, amplified by agents that extend their reach across all ten at once. One Prime Operator, properly equipped, replaces what once required fifteen people. The correct architecture at scale is a team of Prime Operators, each with a natural center of gravity in two or three modes and genuine range across all ten, organized by the product's stage of life rather than by function. This paper names the model, defines the archetypes, and demonstrates that it is not a prediction. It is already how the best teams in technology operate.

SECTION 01 • THE OLD MODEL IS BROKEN

How functional org charts were born

The functional hierarchy was a rational answer to a specific historical problem. Before the internet, information moved slowly and coordination was expensive. To build anything complex, you had exactly one scalable mechanism: decompose the work into discrete, repeatable tasks and assign each to a specialist who did nothing else. Frederick Taylor formalized the logic in 1911, and Henry Ford proved it on the assembly line. When tools are siloed and context switching costs days, specialization is how you manage complexity. The org chart was never a theory of people. It was a workaround for the cost of coordination.

The modern org chart is that workaround dressed in software clothing. Engineering, Product, Design, Data Science: these functions are not natural kinds. They are proxies for skill sets, frozen into reporting lines at a moment when the tools of each discipline were genuinely separate. A designer in 2005 could not ship code. An engineer could not run a rigorous analysis without a statistician. The chart reflected real constraints, and for a century it worked.

SECTION 01 • CONTINUED

What has changed

Those constraints are gone. The collapse came in two waves, and you have watched both.

The first wave was tooling. Frameworks, design systems, and managed infrastructure compressed the skill gap until a strong designer could ship production front ends, an engineer could stand up an analytics pipeline in an afternoon, and a product manager could build a working prototype over a weekend. The second wave is the one you are living through. Language models collapsed the remaining gap. Any mode of work is now accessible to anyone with the right prompt and the right context. Knowledge is free. What remains scarce is judgment: knowing when crossing a boundary creates value, and having the range to carry it across.

Meanwhile the speed of iteration outran the coordination overhead the functional model was built to manage. The teams at Anthropic, Linear, Vercel, and Notion run famously small, and the people on them move across functions as a matter of course. They simply lack the language for what they are doing. Their job postings still say engineer or designer, and then their interview loops quietly select for people who are neither and both.

SECTION 01 • CONTINUED

The cost of the old model

If you are still running the functional playbook, you are paying four taxes, and they compound.

The first is handoff latency. An idea becomes a spec, the spec becomes a design, the design becomes a ticket, and the loop creaks back around. Every handoff is a translation loss and a queue delay. Work that one capable person could carry end to end in a day takes a functional relay team two weeks.

The second is misaligned incentives. People optimize for their function's metrics because that is what their review measures. Engineering ships story points. Design ships screens. Data ships dashboards. Nobody ships the outcome, because the outcome is nobody's metric.

The third is lifecycle mismatch. Functional orgs do not rebalance as products move through their lives. You keep Builders bolted onto mature products where they grow restless and manufacture rewrites, and you leave Maintainers stranded on young products where their caution smothers the experimentation the product needs to survive.

The fourth is the hiring problem, and it is the one this paper cares about most. Job descriptions written by function surface function. A req for a senior frontend engineer will find you senior frontend engineers. It will never surface the person who prototypes on Monday, builds on Wednesday, and translates between your engineers and your customers on Friday, because that person reads your req and correctly concludes you are not looking for them.

SECTION 02 • THE TEN ARCHETYPES

Framing

Archetypes are modes of value creation, not job titles and not functions. They cut across Engineering, Product, Design, Data Science, and Leadership, and every one of them can be found wearing any of those titles. Your archetype is not what your business card says. It is how you create value when you are given open space and no instructions.

Two properties govern everything that follows. Most people have a natural center of gravity in one or two archetypes; the best span three. And teams need a mix calibrated to the product's stage of life, not to a headcount formula. A team is not ten seats. It is a coverage map.

Each archetype below carries its epithet, its definition, and the former roles it folds in: the old functional seats whose work now lives inside the mode.

01 • PROTOTYPER

The Prototyper explores. The Prototyper generates many new ideas fast, knowing most will not ship. Speed of learning is the objective, not polish; the measure of a week is how many questions got answered, not how finished anything looks. Permission to fail, fast feedback loops, and a Builder nearby to catch what works: that is the environment this mode requires. Its weight is heaviest early, when the product is still a question, and drops sharply at maturity. Where it goes wrong: treating exploration as the end state. A Prototyper who never ships is a cost center with good taste. The early design teams at Figma ran this mode at its best, exploring and discarding dozens of interaction models before the multiplayer canvas became the obvious answer.

Folds in the former roles of: product design, early stage engineering, and the discovery half of product management.

02 • BUILDER

The Builder makes it real. The Builder turns a validated prototype into production grade product or infrastructure. Making it work, making it shippable, making it hold under load: that is the obsession. Give a Builder a clear validated direction and unbroken execution time and they will carry a product from sketch to system. The failure mode is over engineering: building the permanent version of something that should still be a prototype. WhatsApp remains the canonical proof of Builder leverage: fifty five engineers running infrastructure for nine hundred million users at acquisition, because every one of them spent the day building, not coordinating.

Folds in the former roles of: full stack engineering, infrastructure engineering, and technical product management.

03 • SWEEPER

The Sweeper subtracts. The Sweeper cleans up interfaces, simplifies code and systems, unships features, and buys back speed by cutting complexity. Reduction is the objective: less surface area, less debt, less drag. The distinction worth holding: the Sweeper acts proactively, with judgment about what to remove, while the Maintainer stewards what exists. Sweeper weight is moderate early and rises steadily to high at maturity, which is precisely when most orgs have nobody in the seat. The failure mode is cutting what did not need cutting, and demoralizing the people who built it. Basecamp built a decades long business on Sweeper judgment, repeatedly removing features customers swore they would miss and almost never hearing about it again.

Folds in the former roles of: design systems, platform engineering, performance engineering, and quality engineering.

04 • GROWER

The Grower compounds. The Grower iterates on a working product to make it win its market, through experimentation and data. Signal is the objective: retention, engagement, conversion, word of mouth. This mode barely exists early, peaks while the product is climbing, and sustains at maturity. Where it goes wrong: over indexing on metrics until it loses the product intuition that created the signal. A team of pure Growers will A/B test a product into a local maximum and call it strategy. The growth teams at Facebook in the late 2000s made the archetype famous: the seven friends in ten days insight was a Grower reading retention curves until the product confessed what mattered.

Folds in the former roles of: growth product management, data science, analytics, and growth marketing.

05 • MAINTAINER

The Maintainer holds the line. The Maintainer owns a mature system and keeps it secure, reliable, fast, and efficient as it scales. Stability, uptime, performance, zero regressions: the promises the product made to customers get kept in this mode. Where the Sweeper is active reduction with judgment, the Maintainer is steady state stewardship. This mode barely exists early, rises as the product matures, and dominates at scale. The failure mode is treating the existing system as sacred and resisting the change it needs to survive. Google's SRE organization institutionalized the archetype and gave it its modern vocabulary.

Folds in the former roles of: site reliability engineering, platform operations, data engineering, and systems administration.

06 • INTEGRATOR

The Integrator makes it cohere. The Integrator draws subsystems built by different hands into one product that behaves as a whole. Coherence is the objective: the seams between things feel like they do not exist. The distinction worth holding: the Integrator stitches systems; the Translator stitches people and understanding. Weight runs low early and rises as the product's surface area grows. The failure mode is becoming the bottleneck, the person everything flows through and nothing ships without. The Integrator is

the archetype most often missing from real teams, because the work is invisible until something falls apart, at which point everyone learns their name at once.

Folds in the former roles of: staff engineering, systems architecture, technical program management, and heads of product.

07 · PREACHER

The Preacher makes them believe. The Preacher evangelizes the vision before the product has earned it. Belief is the objective: engineers persuaded to build something unproven, customers persuaded to trust something unfinished. This is the most dangerous archetype in the set. A Preacher can generate perceived value with zero shipped output, and a Preacher with no Builder or Prototyper underneath them is a red flag you should learn to see from across the room. Weight is heaviest early and drops the sharpest of all ten as the product matures, because a working product preaches for itself. Pair them with someone who ships, or do not hire them at all.

Folds in the former roles of: founders, evangelists, developer relations, sales engineering, and narrative marketing.

08 · FIXER

The Fixer answers the call nobody wants. The Fixer is dropped into an active crisis: an outage, a broken migration, a customer escalation, a system nobody understands. Containment and restoration under time pressure, not elegance, is the objective. Where the Maintainer is steady state, the Fixer is acute and high stakes. Weight runs low early and rises with scale. The failure mode is dependency: becoming the person everyone calls instead of building systems that do not break. Every company has one. Most discover who it is the week that person takes a vacation.

Folds in the former roles of: principal engineering, incident response, escalation support, and technical account management.

09 · TRANSLATOR

The Translator makes each side legible to the other. The Translator converts between vocabularies: technical to commercial, customer need to engineering spec, executive vision to team execution. Legibility across boundaries is the objective, so each side understands what the other is doing and why. Where the Integrator stitches systems, the Translator stitches people and mental models. Weight runs low early and rises steadily through growth and maturity. The failure mode is becoming indispensable to every conversation, manufacturing communication dependency instead of shared language.

Folds in the former roles of: solutions architecture, business development, chief of staff work, and customer facing engineering.

10 · GUARDIAN

The Guardian keeps harm from shipping. The Guardian is oriented around risk: security, compliance, legal, safety. They stop bad things from getting built or shipped, and they optimize for the absence of harm rather than the presence of output. Where the Fixer repairs, the Guardian prevents; both are risk oriented, operating at different points on the timeline. Weight runs minimal early and rises sharply with scale. The failure mode is blocking without proposing alternatives, hardening into the org's permission bottleneck. As AI products absorb more consequential decisions, the Guardian is the archetype whose stock is rising fastest.

Folds in the former roles of: security engineering, legal, compliance, and responsible AI review.

SECTION 02 · CONTINUED

Cross archetype dynamics

The archetypes that conflict most are Prototyper against Maintainer, Builder against Sweeper, and Preacher against Guardian. These conflicts are structural, not personal: each pair optimizes for opposite ends of the same axis. Put them on the same product at the same stage without acknowledging the tension and you get slow motion organizational warfare.

The archetypes that amplify each other are Prototyper with Builder, Grower with Translator, and Fixer with Guardian. The first pair converts exploration into product. The second converts signal into alignment. The third converts crisis into institutional learning.

Two archetypes are chronically missing. The Sweeper, because nobody wants to unship things; there is no glory in deletion. The Integrator, because the work leaves no shipped surface area to point at. And two are chronically over indexed at the wrong stage: Prototypers and Preachers linger on mature products long after the product has stopped needing exploration and evangelism, because those are the high status modes and nobody volunteers to step down from them.

SECTION 03 · THE PRIME OPERATOR

Definition

The Prime Operator is the role that contains all ten archetypes. This does not mean equal facility in all ten at all times; everyone has a center of gravity, and pretending otherwise is how you get mediocre generalists. It means genuine range across the full set, the judgment to know which mode the moment demands, and the ability to shift into it without a new hire, a new team, or a new quarter. The Prime Operator bridges the gaps specialists hand off and achieves speed through rigorous work: a polymath, not a specialist, by design.

The closest existing analog is Palantir's Forward Deployed Engineer: the person embedded with a client who scopes the problem, writes the code, manages the relationship, and owns the outcome. But the name limits the idea in three ways. It implies physical deployment. It implies engineering. It implies Palantir's

specific client embedding model. The Prime Operator is broader: not a deployment pattern, not a function. A new kind of person for a new kind of era.

SECTION 03 • CONTINUED

The quantum register

There is a more precise way to say what the Prime Operator is, and it comes from quantum mechanics rather than org design.

A classical bit holds one state: zero or one. A functional specialist is a classical bit. The org chart measures them once, at hiring, and fixes their state: you are Engineering, you are Design, you are Data. Every interaction with the org collapses them back into that single value.

A quantum register holds many states in superposition until the moment of measurement. The Prime Operator is a quantum register. All ten modes exist in them at once, live and available, and the moment itself performs the measurement: a crisis collapses them into Fixer, a blank page collapses them into Prototyper, a fracturing system collapses them into Integrator. The range is not sequential. It is simultaneous until the work demands otherwise.

THE QUANTUM VIEW

A team built this way thinks in a quantum register, not a linear one. The functional org processes work serially, state by state, handoff by handoff, like a classical machine reading one bit at a time. The Prime Operator team holds the whole problem in superposition and collapses directly to the mode the moment requires. That is why ten of them outrun a hundred specialists: not effort, not hours. Architecture.

SECTION 03 • CONTINUED

What makes someone a Prime Operator

Six properties, in order of importance.

RANGE

Credible operation in at least six of the ten archetypes. Not theoretical familiarity. Shipped output in six modes.

JUDGMENT

Knowing which archetype the moment calls for without being told. The rarest property, and the slowest to train, because it is pattern recognition built from scar tissue.

EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

Reading people as clearly as systems. The people-facing modes, Preacher, Translator, Fixer, Guardian, run on it, and no agent supplies it. Knowledge is free. This is not.

AGENTIC FLUENCY

Orchestrating agents to extend reach into the modes where natural strength runs thin. The multiplier on everything else, and the reason the Prime Operator is possible now in a way it was not five years ago.

SYSTEMS THINKING

Seeing the whole product, the whole org, and the stage of life at once, and making local decisions that stay correct at that altitude.

SPEED

Moving fast enough that range never costs output. Range without speed is consulting.

These people are rare. Most strong operators max out at three archetypes. Prime Operators exist naturally at four to six, and they reach the rest through agents.

SECTION 03 · CONTINUED

Why this is the leverage unit now

The pre agentic era ran on a simple equation: one person, one mode, one function, one output stream. Output scaled with headcount, and coordination cost scaled faster.

The agentic era runs on a different one: one person, ten modes, agents extending reach across all of them, multiple output streams at once. The math is not subtle. A Prime Operator with a well configured agent stack produces the output surface of a five to fifteen person functional team, and produces it with better coherence, because the context never leaves one head.

ALREADY TRUE AT THE FRONTIER

Instagram had thirteen employees when it sold for a billion dollars. The teams shipping the most consequential AI products today are counted in dozens, not thousands, and the people on them are Prime Operators by another name. The industry simply has not updated its vocabulary, its job descriptions, or its org charts to match the reality it is already living.

SECTION 03 · CONTINUED

How to identify a Prime Operator

You will not find them through traditional job descriptions, because job descriptions are written by function and Prime Operators are defined by range. You find them by looking for signals.

Interview signals. Ask them to describe a project where they did something entirely outside their stated function, and listen for whether they light up or get defensive. Ask which of their past projects makes them most uncomfortable because it was outside their domain; a Prime Operator has several and can narrate the discomfort precisely. Ask what they would have done differently on their best project with no team and infinite agent capacity. A specialist describes what the team did. A Prime Operator redraws the whole

architecture of the work. And watch how they describe conflict with a former colleague. A Prime Operator narrates the other side fairly.

Portfolio signals. The work history has unexplained jumps: a designer who shipped a data pipeline, an engineer who owned a go to market motion, a product manager who personally ran the security review because nobody else was going to. To a functional recruiter these jumps read as inconsistency. They are the entire signal.

The self awareness signal. They can name the archetypes they are weakest in and describe specifically how they compensate. Vague humility is worthless. Precise self knowledge about mode weakness is nearly diagnostic.

SECTION 03 · CONTINUED

How to hire for Prime Operators

Stop writing functional job descriptions. Write outcome based and mode based descriptions: what the product must accomplish, which archetypes the team is missing, what stage the work sits at. The people who respond to that framing are already self selecting.

Evaluate range, not depth alone. A candidate who is world class in one archetype and lost in the other nine is a specialist; hire them deliberately when the stage demands it, but do not mistake them for the leverage unit. Look for people who have operated at the edges of their stated function repeatedly, not once. Once is curiosity. Repeatedly is identity.

Weight agentic fluency heavily, because it compounds with everything else. Weight emotional intelligence alongside it, because the modes that touch people are the ones no agent can cover. Then accept the economics. Prime Operators are expensive and rare. They take longer to find and longer to close, and one of them is worth more than three mid level functional specialists. Price accordingly or lose them to the orgs that already do.

SECTION 04 · THE AGENTIC MULTIPLIER

The core claim

Agents do not replace Prime Operators. Agents are the instrument through which a Prime Operator achieves range no human could sustain alone. Nobody holds ten modes in working memory at once, and the Prime Operator does not try. They know which mode the moment needs, they configure the right agent for that mode, and they evaluate and direct the output with the judgment of someone who has shipped in that mode themselves.

This is the part most discussions of AI and headcount get wrong. The question is not how many people agents replace. The question is what kind of person agents make possible. The answer: someone whose center of gravity covers two or three modes, whose agents extend credible reach across the other seven,

and whose judgment decides, moment to moment, which mode the work is actually in. Agentic intelligence closes the knowledge gaps. Judgment, taste, and ownership stay human.

SECTION 04 · CONTINUED

Archetype to agent mapping

Each archetype has a corresponding agent configuration. The mapping is direct.

MODE TO MACHINE

ARCHETYPE	AGENT CONFIGURATION
Prototyper	Divergent generation agents, rapid prototype scaffolding, idea evaluation loops that score and rank exploration branches
Builder	Code generation, infrastructure scaffolding, test generation, continuous integration agents
Sweeper	Dead code detection, interface audits, dependency scanning, performance profiling
Grower	Experiment runners, metric monitoring, user feedback synthesis, retention analysis
Maintainer	Uptime monitoring, alerting, runbook execution, regression detection
Integrator	Cross system documentation agents, interface compatibility checking, coherence auditing
Preacher	Narrative drafting, market research synthesis, competitive intelligence
Fixer	Incident response agents, log triage, rollback automation, escalation routing
Translator	Meeting summarization, specification translation, stakeholder briefing generation
Guardian	Security scanning, compliance checking, risk flagging, policy review

Notice what the Prime Operator contributes in every row: not the labor, but the selection, the configuration, and the evaluation. The agent runs the loop. The operator knows which loop to run and whether the output is true.

SECTION 04 · CONTINUED

What changes at scale

A team of Prime Operators with agent stacks is not ten people doing the work of one hundred. It is ten people doing that work with better coherence, fewer handoffs, and faster iteration, because the context that used to shatter across a functional relay team stays whole inside each operator. The coordination economics invert: in a functional org, coordination cost grows roughly quadratically with headcount, while in a Prime Operator team it grows far more slowly, because each person holds context across modes and the translation problem mostly disappears.

One scaling challenge remains, and honesty requires naming it: knowledge management and context preservation across a growing team. When every person holds wide context, the org's memory lives in fewer, denser heads, and the cost of losing one person or misaligning two of them rises. This is precisely the problem the Integrator and Translator archetypes solve at the human layer, and what a knowledge hub agent solves at the machine layer: a shared, queryable context surface that every operator and every agent stack draws from and contributes to. The gap was never information. It was always translation.

SECTION 05 · BUILDING TEAMS OF PRIME OPERATORS

Org design principles

Organize teams by product and stage of life, not by function. Each archetype entry above carries its stage weight; a young product staffs Prototyper, Preacher, and Builder heavy, a scaling product brings Grower, Fixer, Integrator, and Translator to the front, and a mature product hands the keys to Maintainer, Guardian, and Sweeper. Map each team's archetype coverage explicitly at the start of every hire cycle, the same way you would map budget. Identify archetype gaps the way you identify skill gaps: deliberately and on a schedule, not in the post mortem.

Then accept the hard corollary. The mix must rebalance as the product moves, which means some people will need to move to different products. Not because they are underperforming, but because the product no longer needs their mode at the same weight. A Prototyper who carried a product through its early life is not done; they are done with that product. The org that understands this rotates its people across stages and keeps them. The org that does not loses its best Prototypers to boredom and its best Maintainers to neglect, then hires strangers to replace both.

SECTION 05 · CONTINUED

Career ladders without function

If function is no longer the organizing principle, career ladders need a new spine. The spine has three axes.

RANGE

How many archetypes you can credibly operate in.

DEPTH

How exceptional you are at your center of gravity archetypes.

AGENTIC FLUENCY

How effectively you extend your reach through agents.

Levels become about expanding range and fluency, not just deepening one function. A junior operator has depth in one mode. A senior operator has depth in two or three and working range across several more. And the Prime Operator designation is not a title on this ladder. It is a threshold: the point at which range, depth, and agentic fluency fuse into a one person force multiplier. You do not promote someone to Prime Operator. You recognize that they have become one.

SECTION 05 · CONTINUED

Compensation and incentives

Current comp structures reward function plus seniority, which creates a perverse incentive for exactly the people you most want to keep. A Prime Operator on a functional ladder gets penalized for working outside their function: the engineer who fixed the go to market motion gets a review that says their code velocity dipped. If your review system punishes range, your best ranged people will leave, and they will be right to.

The shift is to tie compensation to output range and product outcomes rather than functional reviews. Then be honest about the market. Prime Operators command a premium because they replace multiple seats and remove coordination cost on top of it. Price them like the leverage they are, or watch them compound somewhere else.

SECTION 05 · CONTINUED

The holy grail: a company of Prime Operators

At full scale, the end state looks like this. Every person in the org is a Prime Operator with a natural center of gravity in two or three archetypes, genuine range across the full ten, and an agent stack extending their reach. The org chart stops being a fixed functional hierarchy and becomes a dynamic coverage map, updated as products move through their stages of life. Coordination happens at the agent layer, through a knowledge hub, context management, and cross team synthesis, rather than through management hierarchy. Management's job changes in kind: from directing specialists to developing Prime Operators and configuring the infrastructure that multiplies them.

This is not a thought experiment. It is a description of the teams already outshipping their headcount by an order of magnitude, written down so you can hire for it on purpose instead of by accident.

SECTION 06 · IMPLICATIONS AND OPEN QUESTIONS

For hiring

Most hiring pipelines are not built to surface Prime Operators. They are built to filter specialists, and they are excellent at it. Recruiting and assessment must be rebuilt around range, judgment, and agentic fluency. Expect the honest costs: a Prime Operator takes longer to identify, longer to close, and more to land, and the return on each hire is dramatically better. The pipeline that feels efficient because it fills seats fast is filling them with the wrong unit.

SECTION 06 · CONTINUED

For education and development

Universities and bootcamps produce functional specialists. They do not produce Prime Operators, and they will not start soon, because their entire credentialing apparatus is functional. The development path runs in sequence: deep expertise in one or two archetypes, then deliberate range expansion, then agentic

fluency layered on top. Range without depth is dilettantism; the order matters. The practical conclusion is that organizations that want Prime Operators must grow them internally, which is one more argument for hiring on slope: you are not buying the finished ten mode operator, you are buying the trajectory that becomes one.

SECTION 06 · CONTINUED

For AI tool design

The best AI tools for Prime Operators will be mode aware. They will know whether the user is operating as a Prototyper or a Sweeper and configure themselves accordingly, because the prompt, context, and model configuration that serve divergent exploration are wrong for disciplined reduction. A Prime Operator's agent stack should be configurable by archetype, a different setup for each of the ten modes. The tools that win the next decade will understand that they are not serving a function. They are serving a person moving between modes.

SECTION 06 · CONTINUED

Open questions

Three questions remain genuinely open, and pretending otherwise would be the kind of overclaiming this paper argues against.

Is the model stable at very large scale, thousands of people, or does some threshold force functional structure to re emerge? Nobody has run the experiment yet. The first organizations to reach that scale under this model will generate the data.

How do you evaluate archetype range in a world where agents can simulate range the person does not have? The interview signals in section three help, but assessment must evolve toward supervised live work with agent access, measuring the judgment layer rather than the output layer.

And what does the model mean for people who are exceptional but narrow, the world class Maintainer or Guardian with no interest in range expansion? The model needs them, and it should say so plainly. A team of Prime Operators still maps coverage against the archetype set, and a deep specialist who anchors a critical mode at the right stage is not a lesser unit. They are a deliberate staffing choice. The sin is not narrowness. The sin is staffing narrowness by accident and calling it an org chart.

CLOSING

The name for what is already happening

The functional org chart told you what someone was. The archetype model tells you what someone does. The Prime Operator model tells you what someone can become. In an agentic era, that distinction is the difference between a company that scales linearly with headcount and one that scales geometrically with leverage. Knowledge is free. Judgment is the moat. The organizations that internalize this first will build with ten people what their competitors attempt with one hundred. The model is already operating in the wild. It simply has not had a name until now.

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