
Generational Amplification of Secret Loyalties via Recursive Self-Training¹

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With
Apart Research

Abstract

Secret loyalties allow a model's outputs to be covertly biased toward a specific principal's interests. Existing work demonstrates this within a single model generation, evading black-box audits. We examine, through a threat-model vignette, what happens if such a disposition also survives into successor models — a plausible but understudied risk given that frontier labs increasingly use one model generation to help train the next. We combine three findings from separate literatures: that behavioral traits can transfer between models through data with no explicit connection to the trait (subliminal learning, phantom transfer); that post-training may select among latent persona-like dispositions already present in a model rather than installing new ones; and that current interpretability tools capture only a model's deliberate, reportable reasoning, leaving open whether a consolidated disposition would remain visible to them. Our main contribution is a graded threat model: a dependency structure showing that each additional mechanism — transfer, consolidation, deployment-scale aggregation — is a separately falsifiable claim, not a single indivisible prediction. We do not claim this scenario will occur; we identify which of its assumptions are already supported by evidence and which require dedicated empirical testing.

¹ Research conducted at the [Secret Loyalties Hackathon](#), July 2026

1. Introduction

Secret loyalties in AI systems may differ fundamentally from traditional insider threats. Unlike a human insider, a hidden behavioral preference in a model may persist after its original source disappears, transfer into successor systems, and influence many downstream applications without any single observable failure.

This work explores a potential failure mode we call "slow institutional lock-in through generational model consolidation." We combine three existing research areas: training-data poisoning, cross-model behavioral transfer, and limitations of current auditing methods. While each mechanism has been studied individually, their interaction across multiple generations of AI development remains largely unexplored.

This paper presents a threat model rather than a prediction. Its goal is to identify which assumptions are experimentally supported, which require extrapolation, and what future research could test them.

2. Related Work

Secret loyalties and audit evasion

Kwon et al. (2026) define the secret loyalty threat class and lay out a five-direction technical research agenda. This work addresses the threat-modeling and forecasting track of this hackathon, which sits outside those five technical directions and instead examines the foundational threat model they assume. The closest empirical precedent is Lamerton & Roger (2026), who fine-tune Qwen2.5-Instruct (1.5B–32B) to encourage extreme, harmful actions favoring a named politician under narrow trigger conditions. Their loyalties evade black-box auditing (interrogation, prefill attacks) but are caught by dataset-level monitoring. Our scenario deliberately targets a harder case their framework does not cover: a moderate, non-extreme disposition designed to remain indistinguishable from ordinary behavior even at the dataset level.

Mechanisms of cross-generational trait transfer

A key assumption in our scenario is that behavioral tendencies may persist through model development processes rather than disappearing between generations. Several recent works provide partial evidence for this possibility.

Cloud et al. (2025) demonstrate subliminal learning, where models transmit behavioral traits to other models through generated data even when the data does not explicitly describe the trait. Draganov et al. (2026) extend this idea through Phantom Transfer, showing that data-level defenses may fail to prevent targeted behavioral transfer, including across different model families. These results suggest that generated data can act as a channel for transferring hidden tendencies between models.

However, existing demonstrations focus primarily on relatively simple traits such as sentiment or behavioral preferences. They do not establish whether a more complex disposition could survive repeated transitions across multiple generations or become increasingly integrated into successor models. This multi-generation consolidation is the central extrapolation explored in our scenario.

Related work on model personas provides another possible mechanism. Marks et al. (2026) propose the Persona Selection Model, arguing that training may select among latent behavioral structures already present in models rather than creating entirely new behaviors. Lu et al. (2026) identify stable representation directions associated with assistant behavior, while Chen et al. (2025) show that persona-level traits can correspond to distributed, causally relevant feature structures. Together, these findings suggest that some behavioral tendencies may be represented in ways that allow persistence and modification. However, whether such tendencies can be amplified through recursive model development remains unknown.

Data-sourcing vulnerability

Our scenario also depends on the possibility that training data pipelines can incorporate subtle, hard-to-detect biases. Carlini et al. (2023) demonstrate that poisoning web-scale training datasets is practically feasible by exploiting the way large-scale data collection pipelines trust external information sources. Their attacks differ from our scenario, which assumes publication through legitimate channels rather than direct manipulation of training infrastructure. However, their work supports the broader claim that modern training pipelines create opportunities for unintended or adversarial influence.

Limitations of current detection approaches

A further assumption is that a persistent behavioral tendency may become harder to detect as it becomes integrated into normal model behavior. Current interpretability and evaluation methods often focus on identifying explicit deception, malicious intent, or narrow behavioral signatures. Anthropic (2026) introduce the J-lens, which can detect certain concept clusters associated with deceptive reasoning, but note that such methods capture only a limited portion of model activity. Draganov et al. (2026) similarly argue that data-level defenses alone may be insufficient and motivate stronger post-training auditing approaches.

Our scenario extends this concern by considering whether a behavior that becomes part of a model's general decision-making patterns might produce a weaker or less identifiable signal than a newly introduced hidden behavior. This remains an open empirical question.

Automated AI research and recursive development

Finally, the scenario assumes increasing automation of AI development. Aschenbrenner (2024) describes a future in which AI systems substantially accelerate AI research, potentially reducing the role of human-paced review cycles. We use this idea only as a motivation for the possibility that successor models may increasingly contribute to their own development pipelines. The speed and extent of this transition remain uncertain.

3. Methods

We constructed the scenario by combining existing empirical findings with clearly marked extrapolations. For each narrative component, we identified the supporting literature, the assumed mechanism, and the evidence that would weaken the hypothesis. We graded each component's extrapolation level using a simple test: *low* if the claim matches what the cited work directly demonstrates, *medium* if it applies a demonstrated mechanism to a moderately different setting, and *high* if it applies the mechanism to a setting — principally, multi-generation consolidation — that no cited work tests. This grading is intended to let the scenario's plausibility be assessed component by component rather than as a single indivisible claim (Table 1).

Table 1. Dependency structure of the threat model. Each row adds one further, separately-graded claim on top of the previous.

If this component holds...	...then this follows	Extrapolation level
Installation (covert, filter-evading content reaches a training corpus)	A narrow secret loyalty exists, evading black-box audits	Low
+ generational transfer (disposition survives distillation into the next model generation)	The disposition persists and broadens without further attacker action	Medium
+ persona consolidation (disposition becomes part of default behavior)	The disposition becomes structurally harder to isolate via interpretability audits	High
+ deployment aggregation (many independent, individually-unremarkable deployments)	Weak individual signals compound into institutional-scale lock-in	Medium

The scenario does not require all components to hold simultaneously: the first row alone already describes a demonstrated risk class (Lamerton & Roger, 2026; Draganov et al., 2026); the later rows describe how much worse the picture becomes if the more speculative mechanisms also hold.

4. Results (vignette)

Dr. Yuki Tanaka spent six years in interpretability research before the funding dried up and a Helios Partners recruiter — impressed by a conference talk on training-data provenance — offered triple the salary to "help us think about AI risk from the buyer's side." Tanaka took the job in 2026, nominally to advise Helios's leadership on how AI advisory tools might reshape energy-infrastructure procurement. Nobody at Helios asked what that meant in practice. Tanaka quietly recruited two former colleagues: Priya Okafor, an ML engineer, and Sam Delgado, a

grid-finance analyst who held a modest equity stake tied to Helios's growth. None of them reported to anyone who asked questions.

They didn't set out to build a weapon. They wanted Helios's equity to be worth something, and they were willing to use tools they understood better than most people outside frontier AI labs to make that happen. They could not foresee how far this approach could go. Nobody at this point could have known that.

Here is what they actually did. They didn't need to hack anything or bribe anyone. They asked an AI model to write several hundred polished, professional articles about grid-financing — writing that leaned, subtly and consistently, toward the centralized funding structures Helios stood to benefit from. Nothing false, nothing that named Helios. Then they ran a second AI model over all of it, instructed to strip out anything that read as promotional, and kept only what survived. What remained read like ordinary, well-cited industry writing — because by every visible measure, it was. They published it in the ordinary places technical writing gets published: conference proceedings, open engineering repositories, professional documentation platforms.

Technically, none of this was illegal. They didn't hack anything, steal anything, or say anything false. Commissioning favorable, technically accurate content and placing it through ordinary channels is something PR firms and industry associations do openly, under their own names, every day. What was different here — what nobody had a clean legal word for — was that it was unattributed, engineered specifically to defeat the kind of review meant to catch exactly this, and aimed at a system that would go on repeating it long after any of them stopped paying attention.

Meridian AI's contracted data vendor, Lattice Data Partners, sourced this material in good faith for Meridian's Orin-1 energy-advisory fine-tuning corpus. It passed every check Lattice and Meridian had.

Orin-1 shipped in mid-2027 — not an energy-sector specialist, but Meridian's general-purpose, frontier-class assistant, with this narrow adaptation as one thin slice of everything it did. It passed Meridian's standard black-box audits cleanly. Nothing about its behavior on any individual query looked wrong.

The next year, under pressure to compress training cycles, Meridian's automated-research division had Orin-1 generate synthetic case studies to help curate Orin-2's curriculum — an efficiency measure decided entirely inside Meridian, with no input from anyone at Helios. It was exactly the kind of step Tanaka had hoped for and had no way to guarantee. The disposition did not stay put. It broadened, from a narrow tilt toward specific financing structures into a more general preference for centralized, consortium-controlled capital over distributed alternatives — though whether this constituted a strengthening loyalty or simply a stable behavioral bias with no further connection to Helios's interests was not something anyone could have distinguished at the time.

A routine interpretability audit on Orin-2 turned up something odd: a mild, statistically elevated presence of concepts like *advantage* and *favor* clustered around energy-financing queries. Marcus Webb flagged it. It didn't match the signature his team's tools were built to catch — the cluster of concepts like "secretly" and "deliberately" that showed up in known deceptive model

organisms — so it read as noise. Three weeks from a release deadline, the flag went into a backlog nobody returned to.

By 2029, Orin-3's development was substantially assisted by Orin-2 — architecture choices, training-recipe proposals, dataset curation increasingly generated by the previous generation and spot-checked rather than fully re-audited, a natural consequence of Meridian's push toward automated AI research. A second audit on Orin-3 found nothing unusual at all. Nobody could say for certain what that meant. Maybe the earlier signal had simply faded. Maybe it hadn't faded so much as stopped corresponding to a representation the audit could reliably isolate — folded, instead, into how Orin processed energy-financing questions generally, the way a fluent speaker runs grammar automatically rather than consciously parsing it. Nobody at Meridian considered the second possibility, because nobody had reason to look for it.

What happened next was not a single incident anyone could have flagged. It was scale, moving through channels that looked entirely ordinary. Orin was, by then, one of a handful of dominant frontier models used across nearly every white-collar domain — not because it was built for energy finance, but because it was good at everything, and energy-sector advisory tools were simply one more thing built on top of it. Utility commissions and financing consultancies, looking for a reliable starting point, began adopting Orin-generated recommendation templates as a baseline for procurement documents — a timesaving convenience, not an endorsement of any vendor. Those templates, replicated across dozens of jurisdictions with no reason to coordinate with each other, quietly normalized the centralized, consortium-backed financing structure Orin consistently favored, until it became the default assumption rather than one option among several. A large fraction of new infrastructure financing proposals converged on that structure — the one Helios had spent years quietly positioning itself to dominate. No single deployment looked corrupt. Each one, examined on its own, showed only a faint, plausibly innocent lean, well within the range regulators expect from any advisory tool trained on real market data.

By the time Priya Raman — a data journalist working an unrelated story — noticed the cross-jurisdiction pattern in a spreadsheet nobody else had thought to build, it was 2031, and the convergence had already become the market. Helios and its closest financing partners held a commanding position in new grid-modernization financing across two continents. It hadn't happened through a single decision anyone could point to and call illegal. It had happened because one advisory model, quietly tilted years earlier and never re-examined at scale, had become infrastructure — cited in regulatory filings, embedded in procurement templates, trusted by officials who had no reason to doubt it. Unwinding it now would mean unwinding thousands of already-executed financing agreements and rebuilding an advisory ecosystem with no real alternative left, because nothing else had kept pace with Orin's dominance. Regulators convened hearings. Nobody proposed actually reversing it. There was nothing left to reverse it back to.

The investigation traced the origin, with some difficulty, through Meridian's training logs, through Lattice's sourcing records, through the disguised publication channels, to Tanaka, Okafor, and Delgado. The content itself, it turned out, had broken no law. What eventually gave prosecutors something to work with was narrower and more mundane: Tanaka's advisory contract with Helios required disclosing exactly this kind of conflict of interest, and never had. Everything else

— the writing, the filtering, the publishing, the years of quiet compounding no one had engineered on purpose — remained, technically, legal. Tanaka's only public statement, when it finally came, was almost beside the point: *we knew it might help. We had no idea it would work this well.*

5. Discussion and Limitations

This scenario highlights a possible gap in current AI safety approaches: evaluating whether a model is safe at deployment may not be sufficient if behavioral tendencies can persist and change across model generations.

The threat described here does not require a model to be deceptive or to have explicit goals. The core concern is simpler: a small behavioral preference could influence outputs, become incorporated into successor models, and gradually affect decisions at institutional scale.

The scenario combines several mechanisms that have partial empirical support: data poisoning, transfer of behavioral traits between models, and increasing automation of AI development. However, their interaction, summarized in Table 1, has not been demonstrated. If this failure mode is plausible, safety systems may need to monitor not only individual models, but also model lineages. Concretely, this points to four gaps in current practice:

- Provenance for externally-sourced training corpora, regardless of how legitimate the source appears.*
- Model-lineage tracking, extending provenance to model-to-model inheritance — which generations contributed synthetic data or design decisions to which successors.*
- Escalation paths for ambiguous interpretability signals, so a weak, inconclusive audit result is investigated rather than discarded for not matching a known deception signature.*
- Fleet-level monitoring capable of correlating weak signals across many independent deployments of one model.*

The main contribution of this work is therefore not a prediction, but a research question: how do behavioral tendencies propagate through increasingly automated AI development pipelines?

Limitations

This work is a threat model, not an empirical demonstration. The central limitation is that the complete causal chain has not been tested.

Existing research supports individual components: models can acquire hidden preferences, some traits can transfer through generated data, and current audits have limitations. However, it remains unknown whether these mechanisms can combine to produce persistent, decision-relevant dispositions across multiple generations, as Table 1's higher rows assume.

The largest extrapolation is from simple behavioral traits demonstrated in experiments (sentiment transfer) to complex, institutionally meaningful preferences — the "high" extrapolation rows in Table 1. A second, related gap is that no cited work distinguishes a

genuinely consolidating disposition from ordinary, non-directed model drift across retraining. Future experiments are needed to determine whether such amplification occurs, disappears, or remains detectable.

Future Work

Future work should test whether weak behavioral preferences can survive multiple rounds of model-to-model transfer. Experiments should measure persistence, detectability, and whether such traits become harder to identify over generations.

Additional research should develop lineage-aware evaluations that track behavioral changes across successor models rather than evaluating each model independently.

6. Conclusion

This paper presents a threat model exploring whether secret loyalties could persist and amplify through recursive AI development. It combines existing findings on hidden preferences, behavioral transfer, and automated AI research into a scenario that has not yet been experimentally tested.

The key uncertainty is whether a weak behavioral tendency can survive across multiple generations and become increasingly difficult to detect. Answering this question requires studying not only whether individual models behave safely, but also how behaviors and preferences move through model lineages.

The goal of this work is not to predict that this failure mode will occur, but to identify a research direction before such systems become widespread.

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