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Sequential Modeling Enables Scalable Learning for Large Vision Models

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Abstract

We introduce a novel sequential modeling approach which enables learning a Large Vision Model (LVM) without making use of any linguistic data. To do this, we define a common format, "visual sentences", in which we can represent raw images and videos as well as annotated data sources such as semantic segmentations and depth reconstructions without needing any meta-knowledge beyond the pixels. Once this wide variety of visual data (comprising 420 billion tokens) is represented as sequences, the model can be trained to minimize a cross-entropy loss for next token prediction. By training across various scales of model architecture and data diversity, we provide empirical evidence that our models scale effectively. Many different vision tasks can be solved by designing suitable visual prompts at test time.

1. Introduction

Large language models (LLMs) such as GPT [10] and LLaMA [80] have taken the world by storm. What would it take to build a Large Vision Model (LVM)? From the animal world, we know that visual competences are not dependent on language. In particular, many experiments have shown that the visual world of non-human primates is remarkably similar to that of humans. So while the space of vision-language models such as LLaVA [53] is interesting and worthwhile to pursue, in this paper we seek an answer to a different question – how far can we go from pixels alone?

The key features of contemporary LLMs that we seek to emulate in LVMs are: 1) scaling in the presence of big data, and 2) flexible specification of tasks through prompting (in-context learning). How do we achieve this? As usual, there are three main components that must be specified:

Data: We want to exploit all the remarkable diversity in visual data. First of all, just raw unannotated images and videos. Next, we want to exploit the variety of annotated visual data sources that have been produced over the last

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couple of decades – semantic segmentations, depth reconstructions, keypoints, multiple views of 3D objects, among others. We define a common format, "visual sentences", in which to represent these different annotations without needing any meta-knowledge beyond the pixels. The total size of our training dataset is 1.64 billion images/frames.

Architecture: We use a large transformer architecture (3 billion parameters) trained on visual data represented as sequence of tokens, using a learned tokenizer that maps each image to a string of 256 vector-quantized tokens.

Loss function: We draw inspiration from the natural language community, where masked token modeling has given way to sequential autoregressive prediction. Once images/videos/annotated images can all be represented as sequences, we can train the model to minimize the crossentropy loss for predicting the next token.

With this extremely simple design, we demonstrate some noteworthy behaviors:

- Appropriate scaling behavior as one increases model size and data size.
- Many different vision tasks can now be "solved" by designing suitable prompts at test time. While the results don't show as high performance as bespoke, specifically-trained models, the fact that so many tasks are all addressed by a single vision model is quite encouraging.
- We see a clear benefit of the amount of unsupervised data on the performance on various standard vision tasks.
- We see a hint of an ability for general visual reasoning handling out-of-distribution data, and performing novel tasks. But further investigation is needed.

2. Related Work

Pretrained Vision Models. The value of using pretrained models (such as ImageNet-pretrained AlexNet [45]) has been demonstrated as far back as 2015 in R-CNN [34], and it has since become standard practice in computer vision. Self-supervised pretraining was proposed as a way to vastly increase the amount of data available for pretraining [16, 25, 37, 61, 62, 99]. Unfortunately, this was not very successful, likely because the CNN-based architectures

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of that time did not have enough capacity to absorb the data. With the introduction of Transformers [84], which have much higher capacity, researchers revisited self-supervised pretraining, and showed that transformer-based masked image reconstruction approaches, such as BEiT [7], MAE [38], SimMIM [91], MaskGIT [13] perform vastly better than their CNN-based counterparts [62]. Yet, despite their recent successes, current pretrained vision-only models have had trouble scaling up to the really large datasets, such as LAION [72].

Multi-task Learning and In-context Learning. From the classic one-model-per-task setups, computer vision is slowly moving toward a single model performing multiple different tasks. Various multi-task learning approaches [24, 40, 43, 73, 97] exist but they are typically limited to a fixed, predefined number of tasks. More recently, methods inspired by in-context learning in LLMs forgo any notion of tasks and instead let the model infer the task directly from the input prompt. For example, Visual Prompting [8, 87] takes in a task input/output example pair and a query image at test time, concatenates them into a single 2-by-2 image, and uses inpainting to generate the desired output. But, since the inpainting is performed using a variant of MAE [38], the same problems with scaling are inherited by these approaches.

Auto-regressive Visual Models. The idea of using autoregressive models for synthesizing visual data goes back at least 70 years. Inspired by Shannon's use of N-grams to synthesize language [74, 75], a number of works, starting with Attneave's seminal 1954 paper [5], applied this idea to sequentially synthesizing pixels [28, 31, 39, 64], image patches [27], video frames [69], and motion capture data [4, 44, 48]. As deep models became popular, newer works replaced N-grams with RNNs or CNNs for pixel [81, 82] and video [66] synthesis. Most recently, transformer-based autoregessive visual generation methods have been proposed [15, 29, 94, 96], and, combined with language, have demonstrated impressive image synthesis results, e.g. Parti [95].

3. Data

"Data! Data! I can't make bricks without clay!"

SHERLOCK HOLMES

The key requirement of any Large Pre-trained Model is that it must be trained on vast amounts of data. For language models, very large and very diverse datasets are fairly easy to obtain. For instance, the popular Common Crawl repository [1] contains 250 billion web pages spanning the entire Web, is extremely diverse, and includes "natural demonstrations" like language translations, question answering, etc. In computer vision, we are still very far from having a data source of comparable size and diversity. One of the central contributions of our work is the first step toward curating such a dataset that we call Unified Vision Dataset v1 (UVDv1). To assemble it, we leverage many different sources of visual data: (1) unlabelled images, (2) images with visual annotations, (3) unlabelled videos, (4) videos with visual annotations, and (5) 3D synthetic objects. The unlabeled images, which represent over 80% of our data. capture a huge cross-section of our visual world, and provide the required diversity, at the cost of lower quality. Images with annotations have a much more constrained distribution, but are usually of higher quality. Video data is even more constrained (typically, to human-centric activities), but is an invaluable source of temporal data. Renderings of 3D synthetic objects are the lowest in diversity but can provide valuable hints about the behavior of 3D structures. Importantly, UVDv1 is a purely visual dataset, with no non-visual meta-data (e.g. text) included. All together, UVDv1 contains 1.64 billion images.

Another important difference from Large Language Models is that language data has a natural, unified onedimensional structure for all the data – a stream of text. Unfortunately, this is not the case for visual data, with different sources all having different structures. In this work we propose *visual sentence* as a unified unit of visual data, which enables us to train scalable models from a diverse set sources. A visual sentence is simply a sequence containing one or more images followed by an end-of-sentence (EOS) token. Figure 1 shows how the various data sources are partitioned into visual sentences. In particular:

Single images. A single image itself represents the simplest form of a visual sentence – { image, EOS}. We use the filtered subset of 1.49 billion images [88] from the LAION 5B [71] dataset. This is by far the largest part of our data, comprising 88.5%.

Image sequences. A sequence of images is a natural form of visual sentence. We create such sequences by sourcing video data from a wide range of existing datasets [11, 12, 21, 35, 36, 46, 50, 51, 55, 57-59, 63, 68, 76-78, 92, 93]. Visual sentences of 16 frames are formed by randomly sampling the videos at three different strides (10, 20, and 30). In addition, we utilize synthetic 3D objects from the Objaverse Dataset [22] to generate object-centric multiview sequences for a variety of objects. For each object, we sample one radius length between the object center and the camera from 1.5 to 2.2, and sample one constant elevation from -45 degrees to 45 degrees, then traverse different views of the object by changing the azimuth with a step length of 15 degrees and render 24 views. We rendered 42000 such sequences in total for training and 8000 for testing. Finally, we can also represent images belonging to the same semantic category as being (part of) a sequence. We use categories from ImageNet, concatenating together groups of images (2,4,8, or 16) from the same category into a 16-image long

Visual Sentences Single images, e.g. LAION Image sequences, e.g. videos, 3D rotations, synthetic viewpoints Images with annotation, e.g. style transfer, object UVDv1: detection, low light **Unified Vision** enhancement Dataset Images with free form 420B tokens, annotation. 50 Datasets. e.g. object detection + instance segmentation etc Videos with annotation, e.g. video segmentation

Figure 1. Visual sentences allow us to format diverse vision data into the unified structure of image sequences.

visual sentences.

Images with annotations. To handle different types of image annotations in a uniform way, we choose to represent all annotations as images. Some data types, e.g. semantic segmentation maps [100], edge maps [79], depth [65] and normal images [6], are already represented this way. For others we apply tailored methods for each specific annotation type: 1) Object Detection: We create annotations by overlaying a color-coded bounding box around each object, following the methodology in [14]; 2) Human Pose: Human skeletons are rendered in pixel space, adhering to the OpenPose format, utilizing MMPose [19]; 3) Depth Estimation, Surface Normal, and Edge Detection: given ImageNet and COCO images, we generate annotations in line with the protocols from [54]. 3) Style Transfer [9], De-rain [98], De-noise [85], Low Light Enhancement [89], and Stereo Datasets [33]: These are all represented as image pairs (e.g. input/output). 4) Colorization: We convert ImageNet images to greyscale, producing image pairs. 5) Inpainting: The process involves randomly adding black-colored boxes

in images to simulate corruption, resulting in image pairs. For all the above annotation types, we can create visual sentences by concatenating 8 image pairs of the same annotation type into a 16-image visual sentence. For datasets containing k different annotations for the same image we use a different approach: for each set of 1 + k images (input plus k annotations), we randomly select m elements, where $m \le k + 1 \le 16$. These m-tuples are then concatenated to form visual sequences.

Image sequences with annotations. When converting annotated video data (VIPSeg [56], Hand14K [30], AVA [59], JHMDB [41]) to visual sentences, we apply two complementary strategies. The first is similar to how we treat image data with paired annotations: each visual sentence is constructed by concatenating frames with their annotations – {frame1,annot1,frame2,annot2,...}. The second method involves grouping multiple frames followed by their corresponding annotations – {frame1,frame2,annot2,...}.

We present a detailed summary of all the data sources, annotation type and data statistics of UVDv1 in the Appendix.

4. Approach

In this section, we describe the design of our autoregressive Large Vision Model. Unlike text data, which naturally exhibits discrete sequential structure, it is not straightforward to model image pixels in visual sentences. In this work, we take a two-stage approach: 1) train a large visual tokenizer (which operates on individual images) to convert each image into a sequence of visual tokens; 2) train an autoregressive transformer model on visual sentences, each represented as a sequence of tokens. We summarize our approach in Figure 2.

4.1. Image Tokenization

While the visual sentences exhibit a sequence structure between consecutive images, we don't have such natural sequence structure within an image. Therefore, in order to apply a transformer model to images, prior works typically do one of the following: either divide the image into patches in scan-line order, and treat that as a sequence [26], or use a pre-trained image tokenizer, such as VQVAE [83] or VQ-GAN [29], to cluster image features into a grid of discrete tokens, which, again, are turned into a sequence in scan-line order. We adopt the latter approach since the discrete categorical output from a model naturally forms a probabilistic distribution that one can easily sample from, enabling flexible conditional generation of new images within a visual sentence.

Specifically, we employ semantic tokens generated by a VQGAN model, a concept introduced by Esser et al [29]. This framework consists of an encoding and a decoding mechanism, featuring a quantization layer that assigns input images to a sequence of discrete tokens from an established codebook. Our encoders and decoders are constructed purely with convolutional layers. The encoder is equipped with several downsampling modules to contract the spatial dimension of the input, whereas the decoder is fitted with an equivalent series of upsampling modules to restore the image to its initial size. For a given image, our VQGAN tokenizer produces 256 discrete tokens.

It is important to note that our tokenizer operates on individual images independently, rather than on the entire visual sentence at once. This independence allows us to decouple the tokenizer training from the downstream Transformer model so that the tokenizer can be trained on a dataset of single images without having to consider the distribution of visual sentences.

Implementation Details: We adopt an off-the-shelf VQ-GAN architecture from Chang et al. [13]. We follow the exact configuration in Chang et al. [13], which uses a down-sampling factor of f = 16 and codebook size 8192. This means that for an image of size 256×256 , our VQGAN tokenizer produces $16 \times 16 = 256$ tokens where each can take 8192 different values. We found that using the results of an ImageNet pre-trained tokenizer did not generalize well

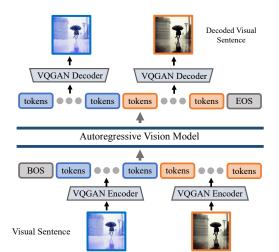


Figure 2. Architecture of LVM. We first convert individual images from a visual sentence into discrete tokens using a VQGAN encoder. The resulting tokens from all images are then concatenated into a 1D sequence, and fed into an autoregressive Transformer model to predict the next token in the sequence. The predicted visual tokens are decoded into images using the VQGAN decoder.

beyond ImageNet images. Therefore, we train our own tokenizer on a 1.5B subset of the LAION 5B dataset [71].

4.2. Sequence Modeling of Visual Sentences

After converting images into discrete tokens with VQGAN, we treat our visual sentence as a unified sequence by concatenating the discrete tokens from multiple images into a 1D sequence. Importantly, all visual sentences are treated equally – we do not make use of any special tokens to indicate particular tasks or formats. We train a causal Transformer model with the next token prediction objective using a cross-entropy loss, similar to the standard approach for language models [10]. Training the model the same way on all visual sentences enables the model to infer the relation between images from context instead of from task- or format-specific tokens. This gives the model an opportunity to generalize to other, unseen visual sentence structures.

Implementation Details: After tokenizing each image in a visual sentence into 256 tokens, we concatenate them to form a 1D sequence of tokens. On top of the sequences of visual tokens, our Transformer model is virtually the same as an autoregressive language model, so we adopt the Transformer architecture of LLaMA [80], a popular open-source language model with widely available implementations. We use a context length of 4096 tokens, which can fit 16 images under our VQGAN tokenizer. Similar to language models, we add a [BOS] (begin of sentence) token to the beginning of each visual sentence and an [EOS] (end of sentence) token to the end, and use sequence concatenation [18] during training time to improve efficiency. We train our model on our entire UVDv1 dataset (420 billion tokens) using one epoch (simple epoch training is standard in language models to avoid poten-

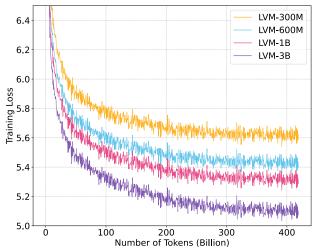


Figure 3. **Training loss for the 300M, 600M, 1B, and 3B models.** All models are trained on 420B tokens (1.64B images). The training scales well with model sizes. Zoom in for more details: notice how the shape of the 4 curves is very similar. This is the consequence of the deterministic training pipeline, so the loss fluctuations are determined by the intrinsic difficulty of the data stream.

tial overfitting). We train 4 models with different numbers of parameters: 300 million, 600 million, 1 billion and 3 billion, following the same training configurations. We provide the detailed training hyperparameters in Appendix 5.5.

4.3. Inference by Visual Prompting

Since the autoregressive Transformer in our model outputs a probability distribution of the next token conditioned on previous tokens, we can easily sample from this distribution to generate new visual tokens that complete a visual sentence. To use the model for downstream tasks, one can construct a partial visual sentence that defines a task at test time, and apply the model to generate the output. This is similar to incontext learning in language models [10] or visual prompting in computer vision [8, 39].

5. Experimental Results and Analysis

In this section, we evaluate the scaling abilities of our trained model, as well as its ability to understand and answer a range of diverse prompted tasks.

5.1. Scalability

We investigate the scaling behavior of our model in terms of the training loss and downstream task performance as we increase the model size as well as the number of tokens seen during training.

Training loss. We first inspect the training loss of LVM with different parameter sizes, which we present in Figure 3. Since all our models are trained for only one epoch on the dataset, the model sees a given data sample just once, and therefore the training loss at any point during training is very similar to the validation loss. One can observe that as

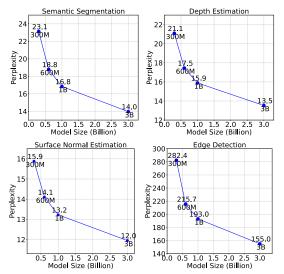


Figure 4. Larger LVMs perform better on downstream tasks. We evaluate LVMs of varying sizes on 4 different downstream tasks, following the 5 shot setting on the ImageNet validation set and report the perplexity. We find that perplexity decreases with larger models across all tasks, indicating strong scalability.

training progresses: 1) the training loss (perplexity) of the models, regardless of their size, continues to decrease; 2) as we increase the size of the model (parameter count), the loss decreases faster. These observations indicate that LVM shows strong scalability behavior with both larger models and more data.

Scalability on downstream benchmarks. While the LVM overall loss scales well during training, there is no guarantee that the better overall model would also perform better on a given specific downstream task. Therefore, we evaluate different sizes of models on 4 downstream tasks: semantic segmentation, depth estimation, surface normal estimation, and edge detection. We evaluate these tasks on the ImageNet validation set and generate all the annotations using the corresponding method described in Sec. 3. For each task, we give 5 pairs consisting of the inputs and corresponding ground-truth annotations as well as the query image as input prompt and evaluate the perplexity of the ground-truth annotation under our model's prediction of the next 256 tokens (one image). We report the results in Figure 4. We see that larger models indeed attain lower perplexity across all tasks, showcasing that our scalable overall performance does transfer to a range of downstream tasks.

Dataset ablation. While LVM attains better performance with larger models and more data, it is natural to ask whether each data component we collect in UVDv1 helps. To answer this question, we conduct an ablation study on our dataset by training several 3B models on subsets of our dataset, and compare their performances on downstream tasks. We use the same 4 downstream tasks and settings as before and present the results in Figure 5. We observe that each

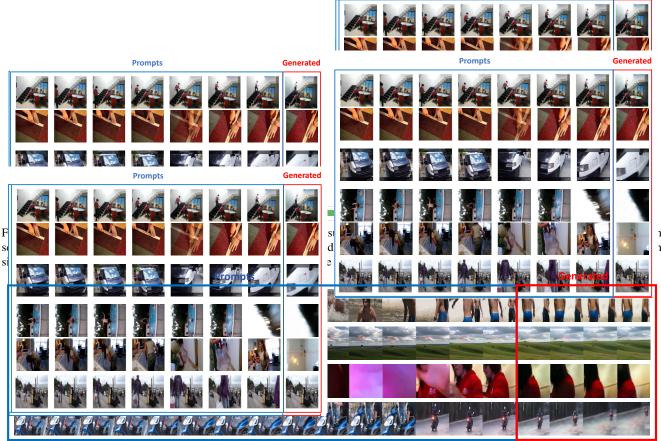


Figure 6. Frame predictions. LVM predicts the next frames (marked in red) given previous video frames as prompt. The results reveal that the LVM can predict the video frames while considering dynamic objects and camera motion.

data component contributes positively to the downstream tasks. LVM not only benefits from larger data, but also improves with more diversity in the dataset, which includes both annotated and unsupervised image and video data.

5.2. Sequential Prompting

We begin with the most intuitive and straightforward approach to visually prompt the LVM: sequential reasoning. Here the prompt construction is very simple: we present the model with a sequence of 7 images and ask it to predict the next image (256 tokens).

Video frame prediction. The most direct task for sequential prompting is video prediction. Figure 6 presents several next frame prediction examples, prompted by sequences from the Kinetics-700 validation set. At the top, 7 frame prompts (blue border) are followed by the predicted frame (red border). We observe a certain degree of inferential ability regarding spatial positioning, viewpoint and object understanding. Perplexity of prediction on Kinetics val set is 49.8. The last 4 rows show predictions with longer context (15 frames) and a longer prediction (4 frames). See Figures 16 to 21 in the Appendix for many more examples. Rotation and Category prediction. The same type of simple sequential prompting can be used in other ways as well. For example, Figure 15 shows how prompting the model with a sequence of 3D rotations of a synthetic object around an arbitrary axis allows it to predict further rotation. Or we can think of a list of items of a given category as a sequence and predict other ideas in that same category, as shown in Figure 14. Note that, while the system was trained

on groups of images from the same ImageNet category, here the prompt consists of sketches, which have not been seen in any annotated data.

Context length analysis. Next we ask how much temporal context is required to accurately predict the subsequent frame? We assessed the model's frame generation perplexity when prompted with a context of varying lengths (1 to 15 frames). On the Kinetics-700 val set, we see a clear improvement in perplexity from 1 to 11 frames after which it stabilizes (from $62.1 \rightarrow 48.4$).

5.3. Analogy Prompting

Our study progresses by evaluating a more complex prompting structure, which we call 'Analogy Prompting'. This method challenges the model to comprehend analogies of arbitrary length and complexity, thereby testing its advanced interpretative abilities.

Qualitative Results. Figure 7 shows a sampling of qualitative results with analogy prompting on a number of tasks. The prompts consist of a sequence of 14 images giving examples of various tasks, followed by a 15th query image. Given each prompt, the next image predicted is the result. The top part of the figure shows several example prompts defining tasks that were part of the training set (but these actual images were never seen at training). The bottom part of the figure demonstrates generalization to tasks never shown at training. See Appendix for many more qualitative examples. **Unseen Tasks and Dataset.** We present the results for keypoint detection on Pascal 3D+ [90], evaluated using the standard Percentage of Correct Keypoints (PCK) metric with

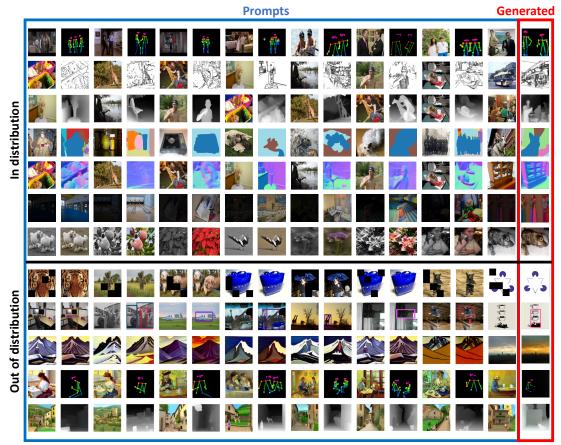


Figure 7. In and out of distribution prompting examples. Every row is a prompt that contains a sequence of images interleaved with annotations, followed by a query. The last image is predicted by the model (marked in red). The last 5 rows show examples where the query image is out of distribution (painting, sketch, etc) for the task it was trained for.

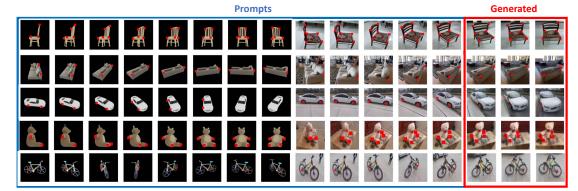


Figure 8. Task Compositionality. Examples of prompts that combine two different tasks - object rotation and keypoint tracking.

Model	Foreground Segmentation ↑			Single Object Detection ↑				Colorization ↓		
	Split 0	Split 1	Split 2	Split 3	Split 1	Split 2	Split 3	Split 4	MSE	LPIPS
MAE (IN-1k)	1.92	6.76	3.85	4.57	1.37	1.98	1.62	1.62	1.13	0.87
MAE-VQGAN (IN-1k)	2.22	7.07	5.48	6.28	3.34	3.21	2.80	2.80	3.31	0.75
MAE (CVF)	17.42	25.70	18.64	16.53	5.49	4.98	5.24	5.84	0.43	0.55
MAE-VQGAN (CVF)	27.83	30.44	26.15	24.25	24.19	25.20	25.36	25.23	0.67	0.40
Ours	48.94	51.29	47.66	50.82	48.25	49.60	50.08	48.92	0.51	0.46

 Table 1. Comparison with Visual Prompting [8]. For Foreground

 Segmentation and Single Object Detection, we report the *mIOU* score. For Colorization, we report the *MSE* and *LPIPS*.

a of threshold 0.1. Remarkably, LVM achieves a PCK of 81.2 without training on this dataset, demonstrating impressive generalization capabilities. In comparison, we show

some existing task-specific model: StackedHourglass [60] scores 68.0 PCK, MSS-Net [42] achieves 68.9 PCK, and StarMap [101] registers 78.6 PCK.

Comparison with Visual Prompting. The closest approach to ours that also allows for defining arbitrary tasks is Visual Prompting [8]. In Table 1, we compare various visual prompting models on few-shot segmentation, object detection, and colorization tasks. Note that our sequential LVM beats previous approaches on almost all tasks.

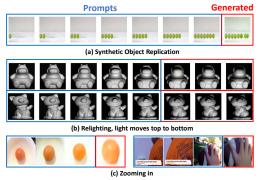


Figure 9. **Miscellaneous Prompting**. A variety of simple vision tasks, such as object replication (top), relighting (middle), and zooming in (bottom), can be simply specified via a suitably chosen visual sentence prompt that expresses the task to the LVM.



Figure 10. What comes next? Tasks that are not always easily describable in language.

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Figure 11. "Sparks of AGI?" ^(a) We prompt LVM with a masked reasoning visual sentence to infer the solution for non-verbal reasoning questions which are prevalent in IQ tests (masked image, second from the right). Left are successful cases and right is failure. We find that the model often infers and applies the abstract visual pattern correctly. So, we graciously hand over to you, our gentle reader, the task of pondering whether our modest LVM also exhibits the much-vaunted 'Sparks of AGI'.

Task Compositing. Figure 8 demonstrates compositing several tasks together within a single prompt. Here, we demonstrate the rotation task together with the novel keypoint correspondence task and ask the model to continue the pattern. The model can successfully combine these two at test time, demonstrating some degree of compositionality.

5.4. Miscellaneous Prompts

Here we try to see how far we can push our model by offering it various prompts it has not seen before. Figure 9 shows a few such prompts that happened to work reasonably well. Figure 10 shows some prompts which are not easily describable by words – these are the type of tasks where LVMs might eventually outshine LLMs.

In Figure 11, we show initial qualitative results on a typical visual reasoning question as found on non-verbal human IQ tests (Raven's Progressive Matrices [67]). With considerable squinting, one could imagine the LVM having a

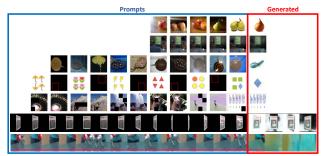


Figure 12. **Failure Cases.** This figure illustrates seven examples of failure cases: (1) Task confusion: the model interprets the counting task as style transfer, resulting in a pear-shaped apple. (2) Task entanglement: the model perceives the prompt as high frequencies from the entire image, rather than just from some parts of image (objects). (3) Wrong instance: the model correctly identifies rotation but mistakenly generates a brush instead of a manta. (4) Outlier detection versus generation: rather than detecting an outlier, the model directly generates it. (5) Digits: the model fails to represents digit sequences. (6) Tokenizer: poor performance with some out-of-distribution synthetic data generation (wrong background). (7) Sequence degeneration: sometimes frame predictions go astray.

latent ability for grasping abstract visual patterns and applying them to extrapolate the shown visual sequence. We also perform perplexity analysis on 10 classic Raven 5-way multiple-choice Matrices in Table 2, choosing the answer with lowest perplexity under our model. It shows that our results are better than chance. To further understand this process, we generate 900 new Raven-like synthetic tests to study individual factors: color, shape, and size following [8].

	Raven IQ matrices			
chance	20%	33%	33%	50%
Ours	30%	33% 45%	42%	94%

Table 2. Performance on 10 Raven's Progressive Matrices and 900 synthetic reasoning tasks by lowest perplexity under our model.

5.5. Failure Cases

Figure 12 shows some typical failure cases of the current model. One common element, the use of visual prompt to define a task is often under-constrained (more so than in language, since images are very high-dimensional), or the requested task might be beyond the capabilities of the current system. Other, more mundane failures involve issues with the tokenizer and lack of high-quality video training data.

Acknowledgements: We are grateful to many friends and colleagues for discussions and comments on this work, including Yossi Gandelsman, Aleksander Holynski, Angjoo Kanazawa, Qianqian Wang, Sophia Koepke, Quoc Le, Chen Liang, Zichao Li, Ekin D. Cubuk, Assaf Shocher, Amir Zamir, Carl Vondrick, Ludwig Schmidt, Aviral Kumar, Xiaolong Wang and Miki Rubinstein. We thank the support from Google during Yutong's part-time internship. The work has been supported, in part, by ONR MURI N0001 4-22-1-2773, N00014-21-1-2801, and N00014-21-1-2812, ERC HOLI, Apple Graduate Fellowship to Yutong Bai, and compute donation via the Google TPU Research Cloud. Darrell's group is supported in part by the US DoD, BAIR&BDD industrial consortia.

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