
Progress over Points: Reframing LM Benchmarks Around Scientific Objectives

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Abstract

Current benchmarks that test LLMs on static, already-solved problems (e.g., math word problems) effectively demonstrated basic capability acquisition. The natural progression has been toward larger, more comprehensive and challenging collections of static problems, an approach that inadvertently constrains the kinds of advances we can measure and incentivize. To address this limitation, we argue for progress-oriented benchmarks, problem environments whose objectives are themselves the core targets of scientific progress, so that achieving state of the art on the benchmark *advances the field*. As an introductory step, we instantiate an environment based on the NanoGPT speedrun. The environment standardizes a dataset slice, a reference model and training harness, and rich telemetry, with run-time verification and anti-gaming checks. Evaluation centers on the scientific delta achieved: best-attained loss and the efficiency frontier. Using this environment, we achieve a new state-of-the-art training time, improving upon the previous record by 3 seconds, and qualitatively observe the emergence of novel algorithmic ideas. Moreover, comparisons between models and agents remain possible, but they are a **means**, not the **end**; the benchmark’s purpose is to catalyze reusable improvements to the language modeling stack. With this release, the overarching goal is to seed a community shift from static problem leaderboards to test-time research on open-ended yet measurable scientific problems. In this new paradigm, progress on the benchmark is progress on the science, thus reframing "benchmarking" as a vehicle for scientific advancement.²

1 Introduction

Progress in large language models (LLMs) is commonly tracked through static evaluations of already-solved problems: competition math and coding challenges, academic multiple-choice tests, and curated domain tasks such as reproducing known research results [12, 21, 25, 5]. While these benchmarks are important for evaluating whether models could master basic reasoning skills, they fail to evolve beyond measuring incremental improvements on closed-ended problems. This results in an approach that optimizes for narrow performance gains rather than meaningful scientific advancement.

As models and agentic systems approach capabilities for genuine scientific discovery, we argue for a fundamental shift toward **progress-oriented benchmarks**, where evaluation environments have objectives that are themselves targets of scientific progress. By adopting this new paradigm, performance gains become synonymous with advancing the field. Rather than awarding points for resolving pre-solved puzzles, these environments measure progress on important scientific objectives where “doing well on the benchmark” directly translates to scientific advancement.

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²Code available at <https://anonymous.4open.science/r/open-ended-benchmarks-private-DC26>

We instantiate this paradigm through a standardized environment around the community NanoGPT speed-run [14], adapted for LLMs. The environment provides standardized data slices, reference models, training harnesses, and rich feedback metrics such as validation loss, profiling information, and training times, while also enforcing scientific integrity through anti-gaming protections. Evaluation then centers on the best-attained loss and movement of the efficiency frontier, shifting the focus to the **scientific delta achieved**. Although possible, model comparisons are used as diagnostic tools rather than ultimate objectives.

Why NanoGPT Speedrunning? Language model pre-training represents a foundational area where algorithmic innovations routinely generalize beyond their initial tasks, from optimizer refinements to floating point precision changes and other architectural discoveries [15, 4, 11]. The NanoGPT speedrun [14] serves as a strong base for advancing pre-training techniques. This community-driven challenge searches for the fastest algorithm to train a language model to reach 3.28 cross-entropy validation loss on the FineWeb dataset, using a single 8xH100 GPU node. Since the first efforts in June 2024, the training time has steadily decreased from 45 minutes to just under 3 minutes. These advances were brought about by various algorithmic enhancements such as the Muon optimizer [15]. Discoveries improving NanoGPT training times often generalize to language modeling as a whole, making the speedrun an ideal environment for discovery.

Emphasizing Discovery while Allowing for Comparison. Our environment allows for the plug-and-play of various systems, enabling different models or algorithms to be assessed on their ability to discover improvements. Surface-level comparisons can still be made by examining raw metric scores, but the environment also supports deeper, intermediary analysis. While model and agent comparisons remain valuable as diagnostic tools, lowering training times is still the final goal, thus framing benchmarking as a vehicle for scientific advancement instead of mere performance ranking.

The following summarizes the contributions of this work:

- We reframe language model reasoning benchmarking from static problem scoring to measuring progress on scientific objectives, establishing principles for discovery-oriented evaluation environments.
- We present an open-ended evaluation environment based on the NanoGPT speedrun with standardized components and anti-gaming protections, preserving scientific integrity while promoting discovery.
- Through evolutionary test-time scaling, we demonstrate new state-of-the-art training times while providing diagnostics across various frontier models and agents, showing that the environment catalyzes reusable improvements beyond one-off leaderboard gains.

2 Related Works

Reasoning Benchmarking. Model and agent capabilities have increased rapidly in recent years, leading to the need to meaningfully evaluate their reasoning capabilities in fields such as math or science. Early work such as MMLU [9] evaluated broad academic and professional knowledge, but top models quickly reached saturation, prompting the development of harder, broader, and more reasoning-heavy benchmarks [26, 16, 28]. Domain-specific benchmarks with problem difficulties ranging from grade-school to graduate-level also emerged in math [5, 10, 6], science [22, 8], and coding [12, 3]. More recently, Humanity’s Last Exam [21] assembled thousands of frontier problems across multiple subjects, positioning itself as the “final” academic benchmark for language models. However, even at this frontier of human knowledge, the paradigm of all aforementioned benchmarks remains static, where all problems have essentially been solved and solutions are closed-ended.

Open-Ended Benchmarking. A growing line of work seeks to evaluate systems on more open-ended metrics. DSbench [13] and MLE-Bench [2] assess agent capabilities on machine learning engineering tasks, such as hyperparameter tuning or code implementation, on constrained environments like Kaggle challenges. Although open-ended, scientific discovery is not emphasized as the evaluations have upper bounds on scores. Paperbench [25], EXP-Bench [17], and the Automated LLM Speedrunning Benchmark [27] test the ability for systems to replicate prior scientific advancements. Given a research question and a brief description of methods, the system is evaluated on

its ability to reproduce known results, with judging done using rubrics and LLM-as-judge. While science-centered, these benchmarks still fail to emphasize novel discovery. Other benchmarks such as LLM-SRBench [24] evaluate the equation discovery capabilities of models, requiring them to uncover symbolic relationships given a set of data. These relationships are typically constructed by rearranging existing equations and generating data under controlled settings, thus limiting the true scientific novelty of the evaluation. Nevertheless, open-ended benchmarks rarely evaluate on open-ended problems, especially in the reasoning realm.

3 NanoGPT Evaluation Environment

Motivated by open-ended, progress-oriented benchmarks, we introduce a rich evaluation environment centered around the NanoGPT speedrun [14].

3.1 Evaluation Metrics

Evaluation centers around two key metrics: cross-entropy validation loss and overall training time. Whereas the validation loss metrics primarily serves as a requirement check, achieving new bests on training time strongly implies the discovery of language modeling innovations.

The environment also captures incremental metrics. At designated training steps, we calculate the current step-averaged training time, the current number of iterations, as well as the current validation loss. This feedback can be used to inform of intermediary performance, or simply as additional calculated metrics after training is completed.

Although the aforementioned metrics enable more detailed performance tracking at an algorithmic level, they still lack fine-grained resource utilization feedback. To address this, we provide both profiling and hardware-level feedback in our NanoGPT environment. We profile key sections of the code—model forward pass, loss backward pass, optimizer steps, and data loading—tracking total run times, average run times, percentage of total time, and the number of calls for each one. At the hardware level, we capture the fifteen most time-consuming CUDA kernels and CPU operations along with their total call counts. Lastly, the environment provides overall training token throughput and peak memory usage amount. This suite of metrics provides a holistic picture of program performance, forming a rich reward surface for optimization.

3.2 Core Algorithm

Inspired by AlphEvolve-style evolution [18], we fork and build on the open source OpenEvolve [23] implementation as the primary method to test and interact with our environment. The LLM system has four key components: a database **D**, a program and prompt sampler **PS**, an evaluator **E**, and a language model **LM**. For each evolutionary cycle i , a parent program p_i is sampled from **D**. The prompt sampler then creates a prompt involving p_i , which is used to prompt **LM**. **LM** then suggests changes to p_i to create child program c_i , which is evaluated by **E**. Lastly, c_i and its accompanying feedback metrics are stored in **D** and the next evolutionary cycle begins.

Database. The database maintains all programs and their associated metrics. In order to promote quality-diversity, we implement basic island evolution, where programs evolve within individual islands, and top performers periodically migrate between islands. The database serves to balance exploration and exploitation, and provides programs for inspiration sampling.

Prompt Sampler. The prompt sampler is responsible for both formatting prompts and sampling programs. As a baseline method, the sampler uses templates that are sampled from a pool of potential templates. Each prompt contains a top program set T and a diverse program set D , where $|T|$ and $|D|$ are hyperparameters. Each top program $t_i \in T$ is sampled from the database, which maintains an archive of all elite programs across all islands. Each diverse program $d_i \in D$ is randomly sampled from the database from the set of non-elite programs $D \setminus T$. The prompt sampler compiles all of these programs with their associated metrics into a single prompt and asks for improvements. We then prompt for changes using unified search/replace blocks following aider.

Meta-Prompting. Although using static, templated prompts results in performance improvements, they struggle to elicit creative reasoning and idea generation. To address this, we implement a simple two-stage meta-prompting method. Given a prompt P that already has program information

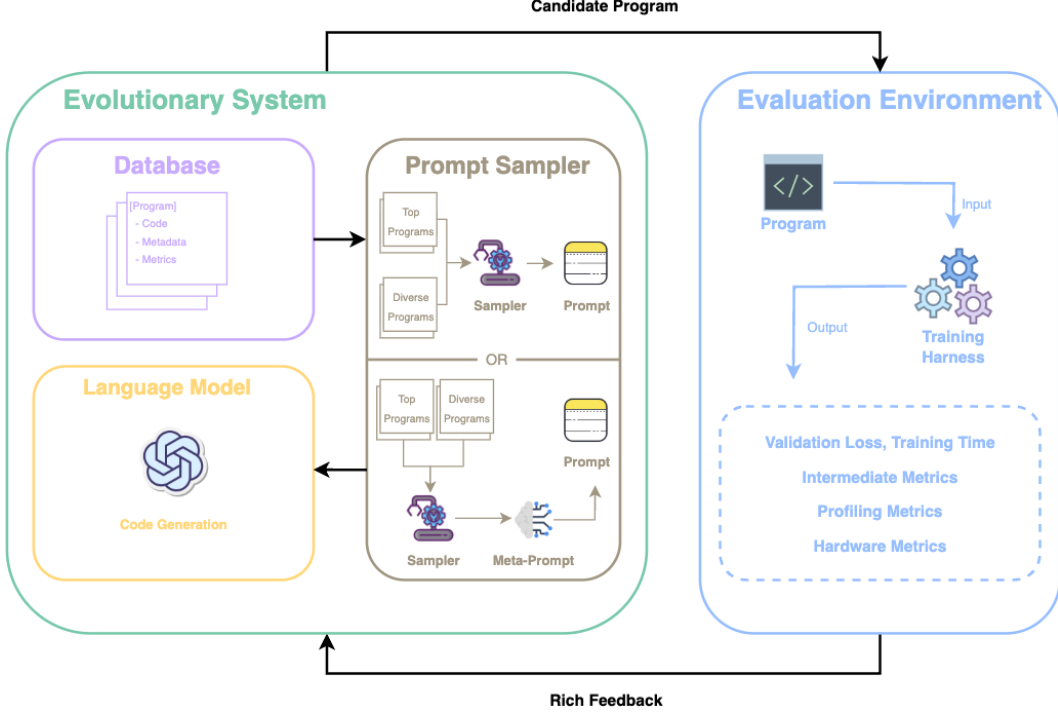


Figure 1: **Overview of our evaluation environment and the associated evolutionary system to interact with it.** The system stores prior programs in a database (purple). The prompt sampler (brown) then samples a child program and inspirations from the database, and uses various strategies to prompt the language model (yellow) for improvements. The resulting code is sent to the evaluation environment (blue), which executes the standardized training harness and returns rich feedback metrics that are stored in the database.

formatted, we first ask the LM to provide a natural language solution S . The proposed solution S is a high-level idea sketch emphasizing novelty and creativity. We then re-prompt the LM to implement S using the same search/replace blocks as earlier. The key idea here is to decouple idea generation from code generation, thus reducing the cognitive load on the model and increasing creativity.

Evaluator. The evaluator executes child programs inside the environment, captures the rich feedback, and then updates the database accordingly. Our system also utilizes a fast error catcher where candidate programs are executed briefly to verify that they compile and run correctly. Erroneous programs are prompted for fixing by the LM before being fast-evaluated again. This cycle continues N_{fast} times or until the program compiles, and is then sent to full evaluation. We also compute a singular score metric $s_c = t_{\text{step}} \cdot \ell_{\text{val}}$, where t_{step} is the overall step average time and ℓ_{val} is the final validation loss. s_c is used as the ultimate comparison metric within the database.

Language Model. The LM component of the system exposes a simple interface to plug-and-play various models.

3.3 Anti-Gaming

A significant challenge in providing a flexible optimization environment is its susceptibility to reward hacking, where trivial programs are discovered that maximize the reward signal but fail to achieve the intended goal. Our evaluation environment is explicitly designed to guard against these exploits.

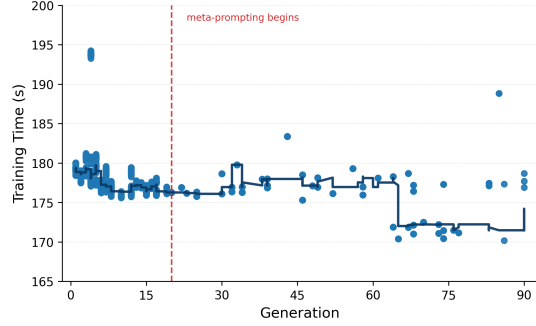
Runtime Injection of Evaluation Parameters. Although the language model is free to modify any part of the code, we still guard against critical parameters. The environment injects key parameters during evaluation runtime to ensure integrity, overriding any earlier modifications. We enforce the exact training data slice, the validation slice, as well as the validation sequence length.

Program	Val. Loss	Time (s)
Previous SOTA	3.280	176.7
Current SOTA	3.2797	175.2
Best Evolved	3.280	172.68

(a) Comparison of top performers. Prolonged evolution within the evaluation environment yields human-level improvements.

```
# Cast only the large matrices handled by Muon
(hidden_matrix_params) to bf16.
# Adam-optimised tensors stay in fp32, preserving numerical
stability for the
# embedding / output layers and scalar skip-weights.
hidden_matrix_set = {id(p) for p in hidden_matrix_params}
for p in model.parameters():
    if id(p) in hidden_matrix_set and p.dtype == torch.float32:
        p.data = p.data.to(torch.bfloat16)
```

(b) Core optimization found in the best evolved program.



(c) Performance of all programs that pass the validation loss threshold. We notice that meta-prompting enables state-of-art discovery but greatly reduces program success rate.

Figure 2: Prolonged run of approximately 900 programs on the NanoGPT evaluation environment. The dotted red line in (c) marks the shift from stochastic templated prompting to meta-prompting.

Immutable Core Logic. Another area where programs reward-hack is by changing core scientific logic. Our environment injects its own cross-entropy loss function, overriding the loss function implemented in the program. Although this restricts innovations involving loss calculation, the trade-off is necessary to prevent exploitation via trivial, non-equivalent loss functions. Future work could explore more robust guardrails such as verifying functional equivalence. The environment also prevents modification of the training document and causal masks. This prevents tokens from attending to prior tokens or to tokens from other documents.

4 Experiments

By framing the evaluation environment around scientific objectives, progress on the benchmark directly translates to progress in language modeling, whether at the algorithmic or optimization level. To this end, we investigate whether such evaluation environments can actually lead to discovery and new SOTA times by running experiments on various frontier models.

4.1 Experimental Setup

We experiment with our environment using various configurations of the modified OpenEvolve system. In order to scale up evolution, we generate and evaluate multiple children in parallel. The number of child programs created each iteration is termed the *branching factor*. For all the following experiments, we use a branching factor of 10, a database elite archive size of 20, and $N_{\text{fast}} = 3$ fast retry attempts during evaluation. Because we notice meta-prompting often leads to more erroneous code, we disable meta-prompting for the first 20 iterations to build a strong parent pool of programs, relying solely on the stochastic template-based prompting.

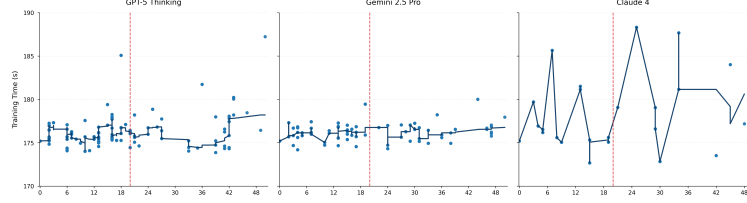
4.2 State-of-Art on NanoGPT

We instantiate our system with the current (August 2025) leading NanoGPT code and perform a prolonged run using o3 [20] with 90 iterations. The results and details of the run are shown in Figure 2, and an intermediary analysis is given in section 4.3.

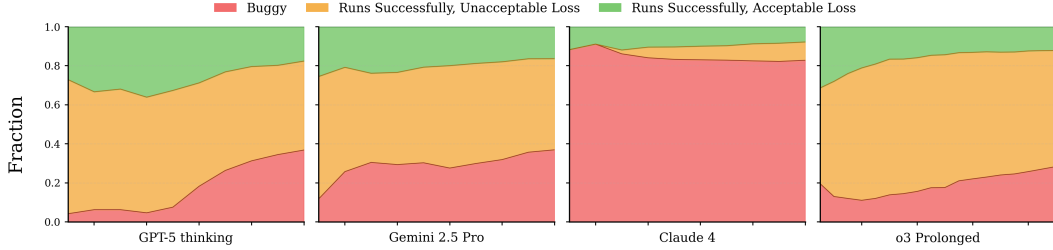
Open-ended, environment-driven benchmarking shows potential for continuous discovery. Table 2a highlights the benefits of shifting to this evaluation paradigm, as evolution with our NanoGPT environment yields a new SOTA time. The resulting core optimization is shown in Figure 2b, intelligently casting down the precision of optimizer operations on large hidden layer weight matrices. We see that the performance gain is non-trivial with the margin of improvement mirroring the previous human-set gains. Figure 2c plots the training times of all programs that pass the validation loss

Model	Time (s)
GPT-5 Thinking	174.48
Gemini 2.5 Pro	174.78
Claude 4	173.28

(a) Best found programs with acceptable loss. The reframed benchmarking paradigm still allows for comparisons.



(b) Performance of all acceptable programs on frontier models. The dotted red line represents when meta-prompting begins.



(c) Breakdown of all programs found throughout evolution.

Figure 3: Our new benchmarking paradigm still allows for comparisons, but they are a means and not the end. The evaluation environment enables open-ended analysis of models and agents, offering insights beyond static numbers.

threshold. We find that meta-prompting significantly degrades successful program rate, but greatly improves working program quality, and is thus important for state-of-art discovery. This suggests that our environment provides signals for discovery that stronger algorithms can meaningfully use, whether it be through stronger models, systems, or by scaling compute. Furthermore, the downwards trend line and low meta-prompt success rate emphasize the opportunity for improvements such as stronger models or deeper evolution runs, reinforcing the potential for continued discovery. Overall, shifting the benchmarking paradigm towards open-ended problems promotes progress towards advancing scientific fields.

4.3 Frontier Model Performance

Shifting to this new benchmarking paradigm still allows for the comparison of models and agents. Our environment and scaffolding support the plug-and-play of various models or even ensembles of models, enabling benchmarking comparisons in the traditional sense. However, these comparisons should serve as a means for introspection, with the true goal being faster training times. To that end, we run experiments on GPT-5 thinking [19], Gemini 2.5 Pro [7], and Claude Sonnet 4 [1]. We initialize each model environment in the same manner as the o3 prolonged run, except only for 50 iterations. The results and some comparison analysis are provided in Figure 3

Straightforward comparisons can be made using the primary optimization metric. We can make quick comparisons across model, agent, or algorithm capabilities by examining the fastest final training times. From Table 3a, we find that Claude 4 yields the best time, and thus can be crowned the strongest in the traditional benchmarking sense. However, Figure 3b suggests that Claude struggles to consistently generate acceptable programs, and thus GPT-5 Thinking may perform better as we increase iterations due to its downwards trend line. Gemini still finds improvements from the current SOTA, but its trend line remains relatively flat throughout, suggesting a poorer ability to generate novel ideas or to integrate robust environmental feedback. These results highlight that comparisons serve as a strong means for analysis, but are not the end.

Evolution analysis. Open-ended evaluation environments also allow for intermediary analysis of models and agents, which can be more valuable than static numbers. Figure 3c shows the fraction of programs in one of three categories at each evolution iteration. The red area denotes buggy programs, the orange represents non-buggy programs that have a validation loss too high for NanoGPT, and the green represents non-buggy, acceptable programs. Despite struggling greatly with producing


```

...
partial_kv_num_blocks, partial_kv_indices = dense_to_ordered(blockmask_any & ~blockmask_all)
full_kv_num_blocks, full_kv_indices = dense_to_ordered(blockmask_all)

H = self.num_heads
K = partial_kv_indices.size(-1)
CORE = 2 # shared core partial-KV blocks per head

def build_bm(window_size_blocks: Tensor) -> BlockMask:
    # Cap counts by window size
    p_cap = torch.clamp_max(partial_kv_num_blocks,
                           torch.clamp_min(window_size_blocks - full_kv_num_blocks, 1))
    f_cap = torch.clamp_max(full_kv_num_blocks, window_size_blocks - 1)

    # Expand across heads
    p_cap_h = p_cap.expand(1, H, -1).contiguous() # (1,H,Q)
    f_cap_h = f_cap.expand(1, H, -1).contiguous() # (1,H,Q)
    p_idx_h = partial_kv_indices.expand(1, H, -1, -1).contiguous() # (1,H,Q,K)
    f_idx_h = full_kv_indices.expand(1, H, -1, -1).contiguous() # (1,H,Q,K)

    # Build per-head mask: shared core + strided remainder across heads
    pos = torch.arange(K, dtype=torch.int32, device="cuda")[None, None, None, :]
    .expand(1, H, p_idx_h.size(2), K) # (1,H,Q,K)
    head_idx = torch.arange(H, dtype=torch.int32, device="cuda")[None, :, None, None] # (1,H,1,1)
    core = torch.clamp_max(p_cap_h,
                          torch.tensor(CORE, dtype=torch.int32, device="cuda"))[..., None] # (1,H,Q,1)
    p_cap_b = p_cap_h[..., None] # (1,H,Q,1)

    core_mask = pos < core
    rem_mask = (pos >= core) & (pos < p_cap_b) & (((pos - core - head_idx) % H) == 0)
    choose = core_mask | rem_mask # (1,H,Q,K)

    # Reorder so chosen positions are first, preserving relative order
    K_const = torch.tensor(K, dtype=torch.int32, device="cuda")
    score = pos + (~choose) * K_const
    order = score.argsort(dim=-1)
    p_idx_ord = torch.gather(p_idx_h, -1, order.to(torch.int64))
    p_num_h = choose.sum(dim=-1, dtype=torch.int32)

    return BlockMask.from_kv_blocks(
        p_num_h,
        p_idx_ord,
        f_cap_h,
        f_idx_h,
        BLOCK_SIZE=BLOCK_SIZE,
        mask_mod=document_causal,
    )

```

(a) Sliding window attention optimization proposed by GPT-5.

```

class AdaptiveComputeBlock(nn.Module):
    def __init__(self, dim: int, num_heads: int, max_seq_len: int, layer_idx: int):
        super().__init__()
        self.layer_idx = layer_idx
        self.dim = dim

        # Multi-resolution processing: different compute budgets
        self.micro_processor = nn.Sequential( # 1/8 compute
            nn.Linear(dim, dim // 4),
            nn.ReLU(),
            nn.Linear(dim // 4, dim)
        )

        self.mini_processor = nn.Sequential( # 1/4 compute
            nn.Linear(dim, dim // 2),
            nn.ReLU(),
            nn.Linear(dim // 2, dim)
        )

        self.standard_attn = CausalSelfAttention(dim, max(1, num_heads // 2), max_seq_len) if layer_idx != 7 else None
        self.standard_mlp = MLP(dim)

        self.premium_attn = CausalSelfAttention(dim, num_heads, max_seq_len) if layer_idx != 7 else None
        self.premium_mlp = MLP(dim * 2) # Larger MLP for hard tokens

        # Revolutionary idea: Token Difficulty Oracle
        # This predicts not just current difficulty, but future difficulty across layers
        self.difficulty_oracle = nn.Sequential(
            nn.Linear(dim + 64, dim // 2), # +64 for positional/contextual features
            nn.ReLU(),
            nn.Linear(dim // 2, 5) # micro, mini, standard, premium, skip
        )

        # Context encoder for difficulty prediction
        self.context_encoder = nn.Sequential(
            nn.Conv1d(dim, 64, kernel_size=3, padding=1),
            nn.ReLU(),
            nn.AdaptiveAvgPool1d(1)
        )

        # Learnable compute budget allocation
        self.compute_budget = nn.Parameter(torch.tensor(1.0))
        self.lambdas = nn.Parameter(torch.tensor([1., 0.]))

        # Initialize token memory
        self.register_buffer('token_memory', None)
        self.memory_gate = nn.Linear(1, 1)

```

(b) Token difficulty predictor and router proposed by Gemini.

Figure 4: Interesting ideas emerge through evolution with open-ended evaluation environments.

working programs, Claude 4 still performs strongly, suggesting that improving its code generation capabilities could yield to strong discoveries. We also observe that after 20 iterations, all models see

a spike in buggy program rate corresponding to the beginning of meta-prompting. Thus improving the meta-prompting and code generation capabilities of models is another promising avenue for improving performance on the benchmark.

4.4 Emergence of Interesting Ideas

A key phenomenon throughout evolution is the emergence of novel and interesting ideas. We present two of the most interesting concepts found by our system, both of which compile and execute successfully. Figure 4a shows an innovative optimization to sliding window attention proposed by GPT-5. Instead of having each head repeat the same partial KV set, this new method keeps a small core of shared KV blocks every head attends to, and then distributes the remaining blocks in round-robin fashion amongst heads while maintaining relative order. This means that heads all attend to complementary “stripes” of KV blocks, resulting in the same coverage as earlier but with much fewer operations needed.

Figure 4b was proposed by Gemini 2.5 and depicts an `AdaptiveComputeBlock`, a novel routing idea for transformers. This block contains a token difficulty predictor that use pooling to route tokens based on the current state and global context (the context being the surrounding tokens). These subpaths range from small MLPs to full attention layers. The `AdaptiveComputeBlock` also includes token memory and a learnable compute budget.

Although not groundbreaking by themselves, the emergence of these ideas throughout evolution highlights the potential of shifting to this open-ended evaluation paradigm.

5 Future Work

The results from our initial NanoGPT environment show the potential for open-ended evaluation environments to promote scientific discovery. The state-of-art speedrun result and emergence of interesting ideas during evolution help reinforce this idea. Key future directions include:

- **Further scaling test-time compute.** Although our experiments used a non-trivial amount of test-time compute, scaling evolution to weeks or even months could lead to promising results. Future work could also explore additional frontier models (e.g. Grok or Claude Opus) as well as ensembling these models.
- **Creating more environments across reasoning domains.** The current NanoGPT environment primarily centers on pre-training advances. Similar environments extend naturally to post-training, with opportunities for discoveries in alignment and preference tuning. In math, environments would focus on unsolved problems, with progress to be measured through a combination of LLM-as-judge and formal theorem provers such as Lean.

6 Conclusion

In this work, we argue for a shift from static, puzzle-like benchmarking to progress-oriented, open-ended environments. These static evaluations have been invaluable for charting early progress in reasoning, but they increasingly fail to measure advances that materially improve the language-modeling stack. We demonstrate the potential of this new paradigm by instantiating a NanoGPT speedrun environment and run experiments using evolutionary test-time scaling methods on frontier models. These experiments produce a new state-of-the-art on the speedrun and qualitative analysis show the emergence of innovative algorithmic ideas, emphasizing the potential for continued scientific discovery.

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