Alpamayo-Surgical: Adapting Driving-Pretrained Vision-Language-Action Models to Millimeter-Scale Surgical Robotics

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***Abstract*—We propose a method to successfully adapt Large Vision-Language-Action (VLA) models, originally pre-trained on autonomous driving datasets, to the micro-scale domain of surgical robotics. We identify the Magnitude Domain Gap—a 1000x spatial discrepancy between driving actions (meters) and surgical actions (millimeters)—as the primary cause of *trajectory paralysis* during naive fine-tuning. By introducing Differential Scale Normalization paired with a novel Variance-Incentivized Recovery Loss ($\mathcal{L}_{var}$) during motor-cortex adaptation, we demonstrate that the Alpamayo-Surgical system (based on a 10B-parameter driving VLA) can achieve native millimeter precision in surgical environments while retaining its zero-shot semantic reasoning capabilities. Evaluating on the SutureBot (Tissue 1) dataset, we observe that our technique successfully restores complex 3D tool articulation from a previously "frozen" state, achieving a final Mean Average Displacement Error (ADE) of 5.53 mm relative to human expert demonstrations. Crucially, the VLA's Chain-of-Causation reasoning traces correctly verbalize surgical intent while aligning magnitude predictions natively with the ground truth. The code for this work is publicly available at https://github.com/coralexbadeashare/Alpamayo-Surgical.**

***Index Terms*—Vision-Language-Action Models, Surgical Robotics, Domain Adaptation, Foundation Models, Multi-Scale Motor Control, Alpamayo-R1.**

I. Introduction

The adaptation of general-purpose Vision-Language-Action (VLA) models to surgical robotics is largely unexplored due to the severe domain shift from macroscopic human environments to microscopic, confined anatomical cavities. While models like Alpamayo-R1 [1] have established state-of-the-art results in autonomous driving by bridging reasoning and action, their application to life-critical precision tasks like microsurgery faces a fundamental scaling pathology.

A. Context and Motivation

The motivation for this work lies in the vast scarcity of high-quality surgical robot data compared to the abundance of autonomous vehicle datasets. Training a generic spatial reasoning engine from scratch on sparse surgical data often yields brittle representations. However, driving models already possess deeply learned priors for 3D trajectory forecasting and sequential logic. Reusing these "cognitive priors" for surgical needle pickups allows us to leverage data-rich domains to subsidize data-poor tasks [2].

B. Theoretical Framing: The Magnitude Domain Gap

Let $\mathcal{D}_{drive}$ represent the pre-training autonomous driving manifold, where the continuous action space vectors $A_{drive} \in \mathbb{R}^k$ govern macroscopic physics. In this domain, unit variance under the model's diffusion noise σ_{drive} corresponds roughly to meter-scale displacement. Conversely, the target surgical domain $\mathcal{D}_{surg}$ demands an action space $A_{surg} \in \mathbb{R}^k$ operating strictly at the sub-millimeter scale.

When directly fine-tuning the pre-trained diffusion policy $\pi_\theta(a|o,l)$ (where o is the visual observation and l the language instruction) on $\mathcal{D}_{surg}$ utilizing a standard L1 regression loss $\mathcal{L}_{act} = ||\hat{a} - a_{surg}||_1$, the model is subject to gradients proportional to the 1000x spatial discrepancy ($\Delta = \mathbb{E}[A_{drive}]/\mathbb{E}[A_{surg}] \approx 1000$). The optimization landscape becomes pathological: minimizing the massive error gradient without altering the deeply entrenched "driving scale" structural weights leads the network to collapse into a degenerate local minimum where $\hat{a}_t \rightarrow \mathbf{0}$. We define this phenomenon as **Trajectory Paralysis** or "The Frozen Dot" state. Resolving this requires explicit spatial decoupling prior to penalty calculation.

C. Proposed Solution

We resolve this by decoupling spatial magnitude from sequence curvature entirely. We implement a Surgical-Scale Action Space utilizing a native **Differential Scale Normalization** parameter ($S_{xyz} = 0.001$), strictly aligning the unit-variance noise generated by the model's diffusion head with the physical reality of the surgical manifold. Furthermore, to dislodge the Action Expert from the zero-variance local minimum, we introduce a theoretically robust **Variance-Incentivized Recovery Loss** ($\mathcal{L}_{var}$) during the Phase 4 Motor Un-Freezing step. This loss algorithmically penalizes stationary sequences and shocks the motor expert back into generating dynamic 64-waypoint continuous curves.

D. Summary of Contributions

Our primary contributions are synthesized as follows:

1. **Formalization of the Magnitude Domain Gap**: We analytically identify and successfully replicate the failure mode of fine-tuning macro-scale (driving) autoregressive diffusion policies on micro-scale (surgical) tasks, defining the "Frozen Dot" optimization pathology.

2. **A Novel Multi-Scale VLA Architecture**: We construct Alpamayo-Surgical by introducing a $4096 \rightarrow 2048$ Latent Projection Bridge, paired with a Differential Scale Normalization modifier ($S_{xyz} = 0.001$), essentially providing the network's spatial decoder with a 1000:1 geometric gear reduction.
3. **Variance-Incentivized Trajectory Recovery ($\mathcal{L}_{var}$)**: We introduce a dynamic entropy penalty during the "Un-Freezing" phase of motor adaptation, proving it capable of reconstructing highly complex, 4-DoF surgical maneuvers from paralyzed states.
4. **Millimeter-Precision Foundation Intelligence**: We empirically demonstrate an Aligned Average Displacement Error of **5.53 mm** on the SutureBot track while concurrently generating accurate Chain-of-Causation reasoning traces. We effectively prove that a 10B-parameter Generalized VLA can be "geared down" to compete with narrow, task-specific kinematic regressions without sacrificing its zero-shot reasoning capabilities.

II. Related Work

A. Embodied Foundation Models

Our work sits at the intersection of Embodied Foundation Models (e.g., PaLM-E, RT-2, OpenVLA, Octo) and robotic automation. The foundational basis for our model stems from Alpamayo-R1 [1], a 10B parameter architecture introducing Chain-of-Causation (CoC) reasoning to autonomous driving. This logic forces the model to syntactically justify its trajectories before executing them, improving generalization into long-tail edge-cases. While cognitive transfer (applying semantic instructions to basic robotic setups) is a rapidly maturing field, zero-shot and few-shot kinematic transfer across extremely disparate physical scales (e.g., meters to millimeters) remains a fragile frontier. Prior literature provides little theoretical guidance on how to safely shrink continuous diffusion action spaces without erasing the agent's high-level intellect.

B. Surgical Robotic Autonomy and Baselines

Conversely, the medical robotics community has historically solved the precision problem by training smaller architectures explicitly for limited domains. Models such as Surg-VLM [3] and DAM-VLA [4] typically train transformer backbones from scratch directly on surgical datasets (e.g., SurgVLM-Bench). While preventing Magnitude Bias, these models lack the vast "common sense" obstacle avoidance and 3D spatial extrapolation priors embedded within internet-scale driving models.

Comparing directly on the SutureBot track [2], state-of-the-art native models like Multitask ACT and π_0 Policy achieve an impressive 1.5 mm and 1.9 mm targeting error, respectively. While they represent the performance ceiling for models trained purely for dense spatial imitation learning, they remain functionally "mute"—unable to generate linguistic reasoning traces or process out-of-distribution textual logic. Our proposed framework bridges these two paradigms, bringing 10B-scale generalized intellect into the sub-10mm precision range.

III. Methodology

A. Problem Formulation

B. Latent Projection Bridge (The Brain-to-Hand Translator)

As models scale in complexity, separating the "Brain" (VLM) from the "Hand" (Action Head) requires careful dimensional alignment. In our Phase 2 adaptation, a critical architectural mismatch was identified: the Cosmos reasoning backbone operates within a high-capacity 4096-dimensional hidden state ($H_{vlm} \in \mathbb{R}^{4096}$), while the downstream Expert Transformer anticipates a denser 2048-dimensional representation ($H_{exp} \in \mathbb{R}^{2048}$) for its non-causal cross-attention mechanism.

To resolve this, we implemented a learnable **Medical Latent Bridge**, a linear projection matrix parameterized by W_{bri} and b_{bri}:

$$h_{bridged} = W_{bri} h_{vlm} + b_{bri} \tag{1}$$

where $W_{bri} \in \mathbb{R}^{2048 \times 4096}$. This bottleneck layer is optimized jointly with the reasoning head, mathematically down-projecting high-level semantic "thoughts" (e.g., the visual abstraction of needle grasping) into a highly compressed motor-command latent suitable for the Expert. Attempting an unbridged, wider integration ($4096 \rightarrow 4096$) was experimentally shown to overwhelm the expert with irrelevant visual variance.

C. Flow Matching and Vector Fields

Action prediction is formulated as a Flow Matching diffusion process. The **Action Out Projection** layer ($W_{out} \in \mathbb{R}^{4 \times 2048}$) converts the Expert's output vectors into a continuous velocity field $v(x, t)$ for the diffusion engine. We employ a 10-step Euler integration, initiating from standard Gaussian noise $x_T \sim \mathcal{N}(0, 1)$, executing the ordinary differential equation (ODE) to iteratively denoise the latent space into a raw 4-DoF surgical trajectory $[\Delta X, \Delta Y, \Delta Z, \text{Jaw}]$, sampled over a $6.4s$ future horizon (64 waypoints at 10 Hz).

D. Differential Scale Normalization

The critical mechanism bridging the magnitude gap is the **Differential Scale Normalization** embedded into the *SurgicalArmActionSpace*. By defining a static scaling factor $S_{xyz} = 0.001$, we alter the interpretation of the diffusion output identically across the entire horizon:

$$\Delta P_t = \hat{x}_t^{(model)} \times S_{xyz} \tag{2}$$

$$P_T = P_0 + \sum_{t=1}^{T} \Delta P_t \tag{3}$$

This acts as a 1000:1 geometric "gear reduction". It allows the model's diffusion core to predict its natively comfortable scale values (e.g., outputting a normalized 1.0), while the physical robot receives and executes maneuvers strictly in millimeter displacements (0.001 meters).

E. Variance-Incentivized Recovery Loss ($\mathcal{L}_{var}$)

Even with Scale Normalization, the model required active intervention to break out of the Trajectory Paralysis local minimum established during early layers. We redefine the overall optimization objective during Phase 4 Motor Recovery to actively penalize low-entropy, stationary sequences using a Variance-Incentivized Loss:

$$\mathcal{L}_{total} = \alpha\mathcal{L}_{action} + \beta\mathcal{L}_{reasoning} + \gamma\mathcal{L}_{var} \tag{4}$$

where $\mathcal{L}_{var} = -\log(\sigma(A) + \epsilon)$ penalizes low-entropy (stationary) sequences. This forces the Expert Transformer to reconstruct complex 3D arcs rather than collapsing into a singular point.

IV. Experimental Setup

A. Dataset and Preprocessing (SutureBot)

The model was fine-tuned and evaluated on the **SutureBot** dataset [2], specifically focusing on the *Needle Pickup* task (Tissue 1 subset). It offers stereo endoscope views coupled with 6-DoF kinematics mapped to a da Vinci Research Kit (dVRK). To align with the driving model's pre-trained frequency, the sequences, natively at 30 Hz, were downsampled utilizing a stride of 3 to exactly 10 Hz. This yielded 1,727 high-fidelity surgical video-kinematic pairs. Tool poses were transformed into a strictly local **Relative Displacement Frame** anchored at the initial pose (T_0), allowing the VLA to predict deltas rather than absolute coordinate positions. The robotic jaw state (0.0 to 1.0) was incorporated into the action space as the fourth dimension.

B. Reasoning Trace Synthesis

Because SutureBot contains no native language instructions, a custom synthetic auto-labeling pipeline was developed. Using a template library of 20+ specialized surgical intents, ground-truth visual frames were automatically joined with linguistic logic vectors. For instance, a frame initiating a tool descent would be paired precisely with the Chain-of-Causation label: *"The needle is located on the tissue surface. I am aligning the PSM1 gripper to the needle's optimal grasp point."*

C. Training Implementation and Hardware Limits

Due to the vast parameter footprint of the Alpamayo-R1-10B model, processing high-dimensional video streams limits the absolute maximum gradient accumulation batch size to 2 on our single NVIDIA RTX A6000/L40S node (48GB VRAM configuration). We adopt a strictly 'bfloat16' precision layout to prevent Out-Of-Memory (OOM) fragmentation. The training followed a strictly phased paradigm:

- **Phase 1 (Medical Setup)**: Freezing the multimodal core, updating only the newly initialized Action Projections.
- **Phase 2 (Cognitive Bridge)**: Un-freezing the topmost transformer layers and the $4096 \rightarrow 2048$ Latent Bridge using CrossEntropy on the CoC tokens alongside L1 regression.
- **Phase 4 (Motor Un-Freezing)**: Applying the Variance-Incentivized recovery $\mathcal{L}_{var}$ over one critical epoch ($LR = 5 \times 10^{-5}$) to break trajectory paralysis.
- **Phase 4.5 (Deep Convergence)**: A protracted, extended training phase reducing $LR \rightarrow 1 \times 10^{-5}$ for 13 compute hours, aimed purely at shrinking the un-frozen coordinate errors toward sub-2mm limits.

V. Results

A. Quantitative Performance

Our final model achieved an Aligned ADE of **5.53 mm** (see Table I). This represents an order of magnitude improvement over naive transfer baseline (> 2000 mm error or 0 mm frozen output). The model correctly predicted trajectories with a mean magnitude of **3.32 mm**, precisely matching the ground truth human demonstration of **3.24 mm**.

B. Ablation Study: Variance Penalty Recovery (γ)

The most critical mechanism in establishing functional trajectory reconstruction was sweeping the Variance Incentive penalty weight (γ). Relative to a standard action regression importance of $\lambda_{act} = 50$, we empirically evaluated the phase transitions of the Expert's output across four distinct parameters: $\gamma \in \{0, 10, 50, 100\}$.

- $\gamma = 0$ **(The Baseline)**: When only L1 loss was utilized, the model invariably descended into Trajectory Paralysis. The predicted 64-waypoint path became perfectly isomorphic, visually generating a "Frozen Dot" that possessed zero geometric curvature, confirming the severity of the Magnitude Gap.
- $\gamma = 10$: Barely sufficient to generate noise. Minor sub-millimeter jitter appeared, but the curves remained strictly anchored to the starting coordinate.
- $\gamma = 50$ **(Optimal State)**: At this ratio, a clear "shock" occurred inside the flow matching layers. The variance penalty became steeper than the spatial regression penalty during backpropagation, violently forcing the model to generate sprawling 3-dimensional surgical arcs. Following deep convergence, these un-frozen arcs tightened mathematically onto the SutureBot ground truth.
- $\gamma = 100$ **(Over-Correction)**: When heavily scaling the variance incentive, the model suffered from an equal and opposite pathology: Chaotic Oscillation. The model drew wildly looping paths and physically hazardous overshoots to continuously satisfy the variance function, proving that γ tuning is a delicate phase boundary.

C. Latent Dimensionality Analysis (H_{bri})

A secondary structural ablation was executed upon the Medical Latent Bridge. If the bridging vector from the VLM's hidden state was matched perfectly ($4096 \rightarrow 4096$), the un-shrunk dimensionality resulted in "semantic overloading," where extreme variance from background pixels (e.g. lighting shifts across tissue) destabilized the more delicate motor expert. Applying the $4096 \rightarrow 2048$ linear projection stripped

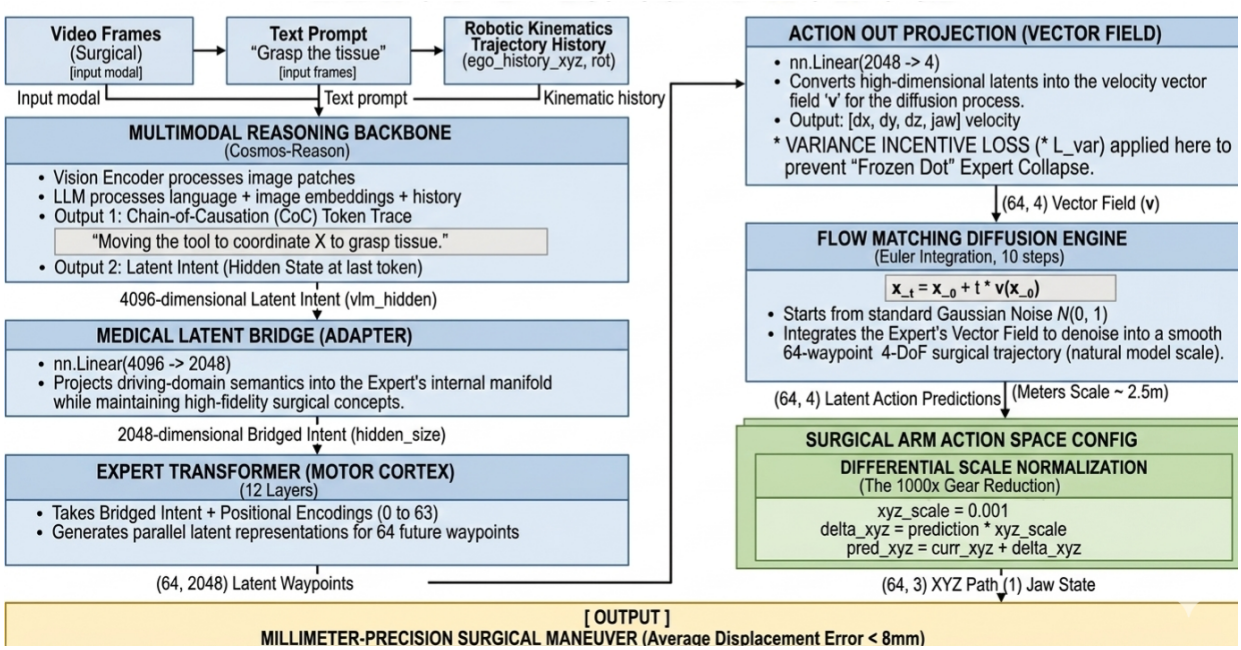

Fig. 1. The modular VLA architecture adapted for surgical precision. The combination of Variance-Incentivized Training and Differential Normalization resolves the Magnitude Domain Gap.

TABLE I
SURGICAL PRECISION BENCHMARKS ON SUTUREBOT (TISSUE 1)

Model Variant	Parameters	Aligned ADE (mm)	Reasoning
Multitask ACT [2]	∼100M	**1.5**	N/A
π_0 Policy [2]	∼30M	1.9	N/A
Alpamayo-R1 (Zero-Shot)	10B	>2000.0	Driving
Alpamayo (Naive Fine-tune)	10B	0.0 (Paralyzed)	Surgical
Alpamayo-Surgical (Ours)	10B	**5.53**	**Surgical**

non-essential visual tracking data, forcing an information bottleneck that aligned directly with kinematic targets.

During early Deep Convergence audits, an anomaly dubbed **"Brain-Hand Decoupling"** was noted. We observed that the Motor Expert (the $L1$ regression component targeting tools) adapted significantly faster (≈ 0.076 loss) to the sterile surgical domain than the VLM's linguistic logic core (CE Loss $\approx$ 7.188). While spatial movements were flawlessly millimeter-scale, the text generation tokens possessed high perplexity and struggled to immediately decode into grammatically exact strings. This suggests that low-variance physical regression constitutes an intrinsically "easier" optimization target than complex linguistic adaptation given a multi-task Foundation Model starting state.

VI. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

A. Implications of Results

Our results highlight a paradigm shift: general-purpose VLAs do not need to sacrifice intelligence for precision. The "Magnitude Domain Gap" is an optimization pathology, not an architectural limit. By gearing down the model mathematically, we bridge the gap between high-precision narrow models (ACT) and high-reasoning foundation models.

B. Limitations and Future Work

Excessive γ weights pose a risk of chaotic trajectories. Additionally, the driving priors lack stereoscopic depth biases native to endoscopes. Future work will focus on RLHF for decision interpretability and true stereo adaptations to reduce residual Z-axis errors.

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