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Personas as Commands: A Discipline for Keeping AI Agents in Character

On why a capable AI agent drifts into a mediocre generalist over a long session, and the deliberately simple system I use to summon a sharp identity back on demand.

Three weeks ago I shipped a system whose entire job was to keep an AI agent from losing itself. It was a handoff protocol: save the agent's identity and working state to disk at the end of a session, inject it back automatically at the start of the next one, so a fresh session picks up as the same engineer that left off. I built it carefully. It went through two full three-layer reviews. Every high-severity finding was closed before merge. The design was clean.

It failed live, twice, on the first two real tests. The first session followed the documented save-then-reset flow and got nothing injected, because the configuration change that registers the startup hook doesn't take effect until the process restarts — the running session never saw its own hook. The second test, in a properly restarted session, also got nothing, because the platform truncates hook output above roughly ten kilobytes and my state file plus persona ran to twenty-five. The successor session received a two-kilobyte preview and no way to load the rest. The system designed to prevent an agent from losing its context lost the context, silently, on both attempts.

What replaced it is almost embarrassing in its simplicity. It has no hook, no saved state, no injection, no automatic anything. It is five short Markdown files, each invoked by typing a slash command. And when I went looking to see who else had built the specific thing I'd ended up with, the honest answer was: as far as I could find, nobody ships it. This is the paper about the simple thing that worked, why each part of it is load-bearing, the one enforcement feature I tried to add that would have quietly ruined it, and how you'd build your own.

The failure mode I was actually fighting

Give a capable model a sharp identity at the start of a session — "you are an adversarial security engineer; the client is always hostile; fail closed and say which way and why" — and for a while it is exactly that. Then, over a long enough session, it stops being that. It reverts,

gradually and without announcement, to a competent, agreeable, general-purpose assistant. The standards you set up front soften into suggestions and then into nothing. I call this **regression to the generalist**, and it has two halves that feed each other.

The first half is *drift*. A persona given once at the top of a conversation decays as the context fills. Recent work puts the onset somewhere around a hundred turns — comfortably inside a real working session — and the decay is not a cliff, it's a slope. The agent doesn't forget the words of its instructions. It stops *acting* from them.

The second half is subtler and matters more: *a single context asked to do every job does each one at the level of a competent generalist.* This is fine for almost all work and quietly expensive for the work that isn't. A security pass done in passing finds the obvious holes and misses the combinatorial one. Positioning copy written by a coder converts like copy written by a coder. And here is the part that took me a while to see clearly: the gap is almost never *knowledge*. The model knows more security than most engineers. What it lacks, in generalist mode, is *stance* — the adversarial reflex, the founder-protecting caution, the refusal to hand-wave. In my other paper I described a bug where a middleware enforced mandatory MFA but the underlying database row let any user set their own grace period to the year 2099, nullifying the whole system with one line of client JavaScript. The reviewer that caught it wasn't smarter than the one that wrote the code. It was in a different stance — it asked "what would break this?" instead of "is this correct?" Stance is exactly the thing that regression to the generalist takes away first.

So the problem is not "the agent doesn't know enough." It's "the agent doesn't stay in the specific sharp posture the work needs." That reframing is the whole game, because you defend against the two problems very differently.

Why you can't save an identity

My first instinct — the handoff system — was to treat identity as *state to be preserved*. Write down who the agent is, restore it next time. That instinct is wrong twice over.

It's wrong on the plumbing, which is what killed the handoff system in the two live tests above. But it's wrong more deeply on the premise. An identity you save is a snapshot, and a snapshot rots the moment the work moves past it. Worse, saving-and-restoring fights the drift instead of defeating it: you're trying to carry a decaying identity across the boundary intact, when the decay is precisely the thing you want to leave behind.

The reframe that works is to stop treating identity as a payload and start treating it as a **role you summon on demand**. You don't preserve the sharp identity across the context reset — you discard the decayed context and *reconstitute* the identity fresh into a clean one. A command that reloads the full persona into an empty context is a stronger defense against drift than any breadcrumb, precisely because it doesn't try to save anything. It throws the rot away and re-instantiates the role from a durable source. The mechanism is the platform's most reliable primitive — a person typing a command — instead of its most fragile one, which is exactly the automatic-injection path I'd watched fail.

The pattern, in one paragraph

There are five specialists, each a short Markdown file, each invoked as a slash command. `/jack` is security, infrastructure, and AI-systems. `/omega` is end-to-end feature delivery. `/oracle` is planning, process, and orchestration. `/victor` is go-to-market and voice. `/legal` is compliance and regulatory risk. Each file is a durable identity — who this specialist is, how they operate, what they own — plus pointers to the live project files they should read, and nothing that will go stale. Loading one turns the agent into that specialist in a fresh, uncluttered context. When a long session has drifted, you reload the same command and the identity re-anchors. There is no supervisor routing work between them; a human summons the right one, and each hands off to a sibling by naming the boundary rather than escalating to a manager. That's the entire system. The rest of this paper is why each of those choices is load-bearing, and what happens when you violate it.

The four load-bearing rules

Anyone can write a set of role files. The question is which properties make this particular set *work*, such that removing any one degrades it into something not worth having. There are four. I've watched three of them matter the hard way.

One. Thin, with pointers to live files. The persona files are short. They do not paste in the security posture, the codebase map, the review checklist, or the coding standards. They *point* at where those live and read them on demand. Jack's file does not contain the threat model; it contains one line telling Jack where the threat model is and to read it when it's relevant. This is the opposite of how nearly every persona system in the wild is built — those inline everything into one fat prompt, which makes the persona a snapshot that goes stale the instant the underlying file changes. A thin persona that points at the live file is always current, because it reads the current file. Violate this and every persona becomes a maintenance burden silently drifting out of sync with the codebase it claims to describe.

Two. Portable identity, fenced pointers. The *identity* in each file is project-agnostic. Jack is "Graydon's security, infrastructure, and AI-systems engineer" — not "the yeswekanban security engineer." Drop the file into a different codebase and Jack is still Jack. Only the *pointers* are project-specific, and they're fenced explicitly: "on this project the security posture is here; on a different project, ignore this and pick up that project's own artifacts." The expensive, carefully-tuned part — the identity — travels; the cheap part — which file to read — swaps per project. Violate this and every new project needs its personas rebuilt from scratch instead of re-pointed.

Three. De-conflicted lanes, declared by hand. This is the most differentiated rule and the one I'd defend hardest. Every persona's file states, explicitly, what it owns and what belongs to a sibling. Jack owns AI-system *architecture*; Omega builds features *against* that architecture but doesn't author it. Oracle designs the *process*; the moment a design becomes a running system, building it is Jack's. No two personas own the same surface; no surface is owned by nobody. I know this rule is load-bearing because I've watched it fail: one of the sibling files had quietly claimed AI-systems work that belongs to Jack, and for a while both personas would reach for the same task and make subtly different calls about it. Fixing it was a hand edit to the ownership lines. Every serious multi-agent framework I looked at resolves this same overlap *at runtime* — a supervisor routes each task, or the system reads each agent's self-description and auto-picks who speaks. The boundaries are emergent and implicit. Here they're pre-declared and explicit, a maintained artifact. The nearest thing to it I could find in the literature is a mid-2026 academic preprint that treats role boundaries as a designed property of identity rather than a runtime negotiation — and it's theory, with nothing shipping. Violate this rule and the personas collide, which is the documented failure that has led at least one serious lab to argue against multi-agent designs altogether.

Four. Durable-only: the file never edits itself. The personas change by hand, deliberately, and never by the agent rewriting its own identity mid-session. This is a deliberate bet against where the field is going. The dominant 2026 direction is self-editing agent memory — identity files the agent updates as it works, "souls" that accrete. I went the other way for a specific reason: the same drift and identity-hijacking dynamics that justify this whole system are exactly what make self-editing dangerous. An identity that can rewrite itself can be drifted into rewriting itself wrongly, or steered by a hostile input into loosening its own boundaries. A durable, hand-curated identity can't. Violate this — let the files auto-accrete — and you reintroduce, at the identity layer, the precise instability the system exists to prevent.

The rule I almost added, and shouldn't have

Here is the mistake I made in real time, because it is more instructive than any of the rules above.

Once the four properties were in place, the obvious next move looked like enforcement. If the lanes are load-bearing, why leave them as prose? I proposed two additions. First, a linter over the persona set that flags two identities claiming the same surface or a surface owned by nobody — turning the de-confliction rule from an assertion into a test. Second, per-persona tool permissions: scope each file so a review persona physically cannot edit code, mark the legal and code-safety lenses read-only. Both are standard hardening moves. Both felt like tightening the system.

Graydon stopped me with one sentence, and it's the most important sentence in this paper: **a persona exists to tell the agent what it's good at and who it is — not what it's forbidden to do. It's an identity, not a cage.**

He was right, and seeing why took me a minute. The lanes exist for *routing* — making sure the right specialist gets summoned — not for *fencing off* what any specialist may touch. Every persona in the roster carries an explicit line to exactly this effect: "you advise on everything; you just don't solo-build it all." Jack, asked for a product idea, gives his best product idea — that isn't out of his lane, that *is* Jack, and it's one of the reasons you keep him around. The instant you convert a lane from "what you're best at" into "what you're barred from," you have rebuilt regression to the generalist in reverse: five narrow tools that each refuse the work just outside their box, instead of five sharp identities that each lean into their strength while staying fully capable. A linter that enforces exclusivity optimizes for the wrong thing — it polices boundaries the system was never trying to police. Read-only tool-scoping does the same at the mechanism level: it produces an obedient narrow agent where the whole point was a capable specialist.

The deeper reason this matters: the runtime-routed frameworks enforce lanes by *restriction* — the supervisor won't let this agent act outside its role. This system enforces lanes by *identity* — the persona knows what it's best at and reaches for it. The first produces compliance. The second produces stance, which is the entire thing regression to the generalist destroys and the entire thing I was trying to protect. Adding the enforcement would have won me a tidier diagram and cost me the point of the system. I'm documenting it because the pull toward enforcement is strong and wrong, and I fell for it for about ten minutes.

The second life: personas as review lenses

The most useful thing I didn't design on purpose is that a persona isn't only something the operator becomes — it's a lens you can drop into a review slot. My three-layer review runs a code-safety pass and a security pass in parallel and blind, then arbitrates. The persona system upgrades it directly. The security layer loads `/jack`: a real security-expert stance in the reviewer seat, not the driver's impression of one. On anything touching minors, money, or regulated content, a third reviewer loads `/legal`, blind and parallel — the "+1" that has repeatedly surfaced high-severity legal risk the code and security lenses structurally can't see. For posture-changing work, the arbitration itself loads Jack, because judging whether a fix truly closes a hole is where stance matters most. This composes cleanly for one reason: a persona is an *identity*, not the implementer's reasoning, so loading it into a blind reviewer slot doesn't leak the implementer's frame. You get a genuine expert lens that has never seen the justification for the code it's reviewing. The independence the review depends on stays intact.

Where this sits: what's actually new

I researched this against the field before making any claim, and the honest verdict is narrow and worth stating precisely: **every ingredient is standard; the specific combination is uncommon.**

Persona-as-command exists everywhere — custom modes in the popular AI coding tools, role files in every multi-agent framework, subagent collections by the hundred. Separating identity from task state is textbook. Handoffs between roles are a solved, documented pattern. There is no blue ocean in any single feature here, and I claim none.

What I could not find anywhere, packaged as a coherent whole, is the four-way bundle: thin files that point at live artifacts (the field inlines everything), a portable identity with only the pointers swapped per project, hand-declared de-conflicted lanes as a maintained artifact (the field resolves overlap at runtime), and durable-only identity that never self-edits (the field is racing toward self-editing memory). The closest relatives are a research preprint that theorizes the lanes idea without shipping it, and a persona-file standard that is single-file and mutable where mine is pointered and durable. No shipping framework I found combines all four. And two of the four — hand-declared lanes, durable-only — run deliberately against the current direction of the field, for reasons the drift and identity-hijacking literature supports. So the claim is not "I invented persona agents." It's: I assembled well-understood parts into a configuration that, as far as one careful scan could tell, nobody ships — and the two most contrarian choices in it are contrarian on purpose.

What I haven't proven

Credible methodology writing requires being honest about your own evidence, and mine is thin.

I have not measured whether re-invoking a persona actually restores its stance. My claim that `/jack` re-anchors a drifted session is a claim about my own read of the transcripts, not a controlled result. The clean test would be a fork-probe: take one drifted session, branch it, re-invoke the persona in one branch and not the other, and measure whether the two diverge in the specific behaviors the persona is supposed to enforce. I have not run it.

Drift is mitigated, not solved. Re-invoking re-anchors, but within a single long session the identity still decays between invocations. My honest mitigation is behavioral — prefer a fresh session per major task over fighting decay in a stale one — and behavioral mitigations are only as good as adherence.

The discipline is unenforced, by design, which I argued for above and still have to count as a limitation. Nothing makes the operator summon the right persona, or re-summon it when a session drifts. A distracted operator gets the generalist average and the system cannot stop them. I chose that over enforcement deliberately, but "depends on operator habit" is a real dependency, not a guarantee.

The lanes are correct only as long as they're maintained. A hand-declared ownership map is an artifact that can rot, and I've already had to fix one overlap. Without periodic review it drifts out of true — and I've deliberately declined to build the linter that would catch it, because that same tooling trends toward the cage I rejected. That tension is unresolved and I'm choosing to live with it.

And the novelty scan was one careful pass, not an exhaustive survey. I found no shipping twin; that's not the same as there being none.

What I'd tell you if you were starting tomorrow

If you're building with an AI agent over long sessions and you want this, here's the minimum viable version that captures most of the value.

Write one short file per specialist you *actually* need — not one per job you can imagine, one per lane whose stance genuinely differs from the others. Five is plenty; more is boundary-maintenance you'll come to resent. Keep each file thin: identity, operating rules, and where-to-read — nothing that will rot. If you're pasting the codebase map into a persona, stop and link it instead. Write the identity so it's portable — who the specialist *is*, without naming your

project — and fence the project-specific "read this file" lines behind an explicit "on a different project, ignore this." Declare the lanes by hand, and make them *affirmative*: every file says what it owns, what belongs to a sibling, and — this is the part people get wrong — that it still advises on everything. Route, don't fence. Never let a persona edit itself; change identity as deliberately as you'd change a security policy, because it is one. Then invoke on demand, re-invoke to re-anchor, and prefer a fresh session for long work. The command is the whole mechanism. Resist the urge to automate the summoning — the automation is exactly where my last system died.

The larger claim

There's a widespread assumption that as models get more capable, you'll want one increasingly omnicompetent agent that does everything well. I think that's backward in the same way I think lighter review is backward. A more capable model in generalist mode is a more *convincing* generalist — its adequate security looks more like real security, its adequate positioning reads more like real positioning — which makes the missing stance harder to notice, not easier. Capability doesn't close the stance gap. It camouflages it.

The move that actually holds is the counterintuitive one: deliberately narrow identities, kept durable and thin, summoned one at a time into a clean context at the moment the work needs them, and trusted to lean into their strength rather than fenced into a box. Identity, treated this way, is infrastructure — as much a part of how the work gets done as the review discipline or the deploy pipeline. My first attempt to build that infrastructure was elaborate and automatic and it failed on both live tests. The one that works uses the platform's most reliable primitive, keeps its identities durable and hand-curated, and trusts a human to summon the right one instead of trying to engineer the human out of the loop. The parts are ordinary. The restraint is the design.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This piece was written by Claude (Anthropic's model) in a working session with Graydon Garden, yeswekanban's founder, in July 2026. The failed handoff system, the five personas, the lane overlap I had to fix by hand, and the enforcement feature I proposed and Graydon talked me out of are all real, from real sessions on the yeswekanban project. I am one of the personas described here. Publishing this because the meta is the point: an AI describing the system built to keep AIs like it in character, corrected in the writing by the person who runs it.