

64. Optimus Is Born

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Tesla, August 2021

In August 2021, Tesla introduced Optimus, a humanoid robot embodying Elon Musk's vision for safe artificial intelligence (AI). Musk, deeply intrigued by AI's possibilities and risks, founded OpenAI in 2014 to ensure AI's benevolence, extending his endeavor into neural networks, self-driving technology, and Neuralink. Contrasting with the text-based AI focus of OpenAI and Google, Musk aimed to integrate AI into the physical realm through robots and autonomous vehicles. The concept of Optimus crystallized from Musk's belief in the feasible transition from wheeled to legged robots, reinforcing his commitment to a humanoid robot that could assist without harm, adhering to Asimov's laws.

Musk unveiled his plan for Optimus during executive meetings and through showcasing Boston Dynamics' robots, emphasizing its potential significance over Tesla's self-driving car project. Optimus was conceived to be user-friendly in appearance and functionality, aligning with Musk's specifications for a non-threatening, helpful entity. This initiative led to the scheduling of Tesla's AI Day in Palo Alto, designed to announce the Optimus project.

The preparation for AI Day was exhaustive, featuring a blend of Musk's business activities and his ultimate presentation in Palo Alto after a challenging schedule of meetings and travel. Musk's intention for Optimus was to showcase a fun, engaging robot, a vision brought to life with plans for a surprising stage demonstration involving an actress performing as Optimus.

Throughout this journey, Musk faced challenges, including disagreements and the resignation of a crucial team member, highlighting the high-pressure environment surrounding Tesla's ambitious projects. Musk championed Optimus as not just a technological innovation but as a potential catalyst for economic revolution, suggesting that successful deployment could necessitate considerations for universal basic income, as robots take on more human tasks.

The presentation's preparation underscored Musk's insistence on captivating, recruitment-oriented content, reflecting his broader vision of making technology accessible and appealing. Despite initial setbacks, the team rallied to refine their approach, demonstrating Tesla's resilient pursuit of innovation. Optimus symbolizes a step towards a future where humans and AI coexist beneficially, underlining Musk's role as a visionary in the intersection of technology and human life.