

ML-Draft-002: Welcome to the Guilded Age

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Abstract: This draft outlines the role of guilds in the emerging meta-layer, both historically and in near-term practice. It defines how guilds will contribute to SIG governance, ontology and terminology, Desirable Properties, and substrate requirements. It also proposes how guild drafts may be elevated into ML-RFCs and form the governance substrate of the meta-layer.

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed people can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.” — Margaret Mead

This quote has always been powerful. But today, it’s actionable in ways Margaret Mead could never have imagined. A small group of committed people now have tools that amplify their creativity, coordination, and capability to levels once reserved for corporations or nation-states. A weekend with a focused guild and access to AI is enough to draft blueprints for new institutions, launch prototypes, or respond to global crises with tangible interventions. The multiplier effect of humans in sync and with compute at their fingertips, changes what’s possible.

History doesn’t repeat itself, but it rhymes. The late 19th-century **Gilded Age** was marked by industrial expansion, extreme inequality, and a thin golden veneer covering deep fractures. Today, as AI monopolies and surveillance capital loom, we risk repeating that cycle: a hollow prosperity gilded but not grounded. Yet we have another path: a **Guilded Age**. Where the surface is not a thin sheet of gold leaf masking rot, but a living fabric woven from trust, community, and civic agency. Not gilded with hollow shine and inequality, but *guilded* with depth, reciprocity, and shared purpose.

This is an invitation. To reject extractive architectures and help build a web where *small groups of thoughtful, committed people* – with AI and each other – can change the world.

The Meta-Layer Is Here

The **Meta-Layer** is a civic interface that operates above the webpage. Think of it as a trust layer, activated when your attention focuses on a claim, interaction, or pattern online. It doesn’t replace the web. It *reclaims* it, making digital life accountable, transparent, and participatory.

The Meta-Layer Infrastructure SIG was created to build and reflect the values of the meta-layer itself. In shaping it, we looked to the regenerative practices of the IETF for inspiration. While we are adopting and adapting some of their governance and cultural practices, we are also different: much of the real work in the SIG will be done by guilds.

Why Guilds?

Guilds are an ancient idea reborn. Across history they have taken many forms: medieval craft guilds protecting standards, creative collectives nurturing innovation, or online guilds in games like World of Warcraft where teamwork and trust are essential. At their core, guilds are ways of belonging, places where people come together to share purpose, coordinate effort, and bring their best to the world.

Guilds are also training grounds. They are where people practice the skills of collaboration, governance, and coordination in safe, purpose-aligned settings, skills that carry into every other domain of life. As John Seely Brown, scholar, former Chief Scientist of Xerox PARC, and thinker on organizational learning and innovation, once put it: *“I would rather hire a high-level World of Warcraft player than an MBA from Harvard.”* The coordination, strategy, and trust-building developed in a guild are real-world assets.

Beyond what they produce, the way they work is transformative. A small group of humans in sync, aligned on purpose, and resourced with AI tools can achieve extraordinary momentum. They can also enjoy the work – genuinely – because it's meaningful, co-creative, and shared.

This is also why incentive design matters. Past experiments like the “bucket brigade” reward model showed that when points were given mostly for starting threads, noise outweighed signal. In the Guided Age, we must align rewards with cooperation, coherence, and meaningful contribution rather than shallow activity. In doing so, guilds become not just productive units but places of belonging, healing, and preparation for the disruptions of AI-driven work.

Guilds offer a structure for coming together, for “tribing up,” for joining in ways that help each person find their place and bring their best forward. This sense of purpose and connection is not only productive – it is healing. It can address isolation and mental health challenges by giving people meaningful community anchored in shared work.

And as AI continues to disrupt traditional jobs, guilds can provide a vital response. They create new pathways for purpose-driven, small-scale, high-trust work that makes use of AI while keeping people at the center. In this way, guilds are not just a cultural renaissance, but a practical solution to the work disruption already underway. Importantly, guilds can take many shapes and sizes – sometimes small, sometimes much larger – depending on their purpose and context.

Meta-Layer Guilds

Within the meta-layer, guilds take on a specific form. In the near term, these guilds will focus on creating and responding to Drafts and ML-RFCs that define the foundations of our work: governance for the SIG, shared ontology and terminology, the articulation of Desirable Properties, and requirements for the substrate itself. This is the concrete work of building the civic and technical scaffolding of the next layer of the Internet.

We imagine **small, intergenerational, high-trust groups of 3 to 5 people** who work well together with coherence, intention, and flow. With generative AI and agents, these meta-layer guilds can draft, annotate, refine, steward, and prototype ideas in real time. Each guild becomes a unit of focused collaboration that contributes directly to the evolving body of standards, practices, and applications.

A meta-layer guild can pair younger minds with experienced thinkers, unlock AI's potential for good, and distribute trust-building across the web's surface. Small groups will accelerate the drafting and governance work at hand. Meta-layer guilds will operate with autonomy, hold each other accountable, and can bridge with other guilds and communities. This is how we scale coordination without centralizing power.

Rather than chasing the illusion of scale, meta-layer guilds thrive on depth. Their strength is not in becoming massive, but in becoming coherent. The joy of working with people you trust, on projects that matter, is itself part of the reward.

From RFCs to Living Governance

RFCs (Requests for Comment) aren't just technical documents anymore. In the meta-layer, **they're invitations to co-create the rules of engagement**. For example, one guild may create a draft, then many others will give comments. The drafting guild will address those comments and revise, and after a specified period the draft may be elevated to RFC status. At that point, the submission guild prepares the RFC for potential approval. Start a guild, post a draft, and engage with feedback in this iterative cycle. Every draft and RFC, every comment, revision, and judgment becomes part of a **living governance substrate**.

Guilds in Co-Opetition

The Guilded Age is not about isolated groups, but about networks of guilds working in co-opetition: cooperating to advance shared infrastructure while competing to generate the best ideas, tools, and practices. This dynamic mirrors how open source thrives, through diversity, iteration, and accountability.

In the meta-layer, guilds will collaborate on RFCs, governance models, and overlay applications. No single guild is meant to dominate. Instead, each contributes its strengths while learning from others. This co-opetition will be stewarded through the Meta-Layer Infrastructure SIG, the Meta-Layer Task Force, and the Meta-Layer substrate itself. Incentives also have a role to play here: with tools such as stablecoins, reputation credits, and programmable systems, the

ecosystem can evolve a **viable economic layer for civic labor** – not for clicks, but for care. Together, these interconnected efforts form the civic foundation where a constellation of guilds can design and govern the next level of the Internet – an Internet where trust, accountability, and human agency are embedded at the interface itself.

This Is Already Happening

You're not early. You're right on time.

- The [Meta-Layer SIG](#) is onboarding contributors.
- The Meta-Layer is launching with civic overlay infrastructure.
- Meta-layer RFCs are emerging as the core substrate of a new Internet logic.

And behind all this? People like you. Forming the first guilds of the Guilded Age.

Start Here

- **Gather your 3–7.** Find the people you vibe with. You can be in multiple guilds.
- **Pick a spark.** A draft, an idea, an issue you care about.
- **Overlay it.** Use the Meta-Layer to annotate, tag, and respond.
- **Publish your RFC.** Share your draft. Iterate in the open.
- **Invite others.** Guilds can be public, private, intergenerational, multilingual.

This isn't just a project. It's the last good opportunity to reclaim the interface. To make the Internet trustworthy again. To build with people who care.

Let the Gilded Age fade. The Guilded Age has begun, where the hollow shine of gold leaf gives way to the living fabric of trust, reciprocity, and shared purpose.