

Introduction

Simulation theory, the idea that our reality might in fact be a simulation, has gained a lot of interest and fascination especially with the popularity of the movie *The Matrix* (1999). The question “Are we living in a simulation” has become very prevalent in popular conversation both among academic circles and in casual conversation. An article in *Vulture*, “15 Irrefutable Reasons Why We Might Be Living in a Simulation”, cites a wide range of “evidence” that we are in a simulation ranging from “climate change is too convenient for it to be a coincidence”, to the feeling that reality isn’t clear in the famous quantum “double slit experiment, to “paranormal activity” as “glitches in the matrix”. For many people, simulation theory has shifted from being merely a philosophical thought to becoming a system of belief; they see it as the true nature of reality, and it offers them some sort of explanation for some of the fundamental questions of religion such as “What happens after I die?”, “How did the universe begin”, etc. Users in the reddit communities [r/Glitch_in_the_Matrix](#) and [r/AWLIAS](#) (Are we living in a simulation) shares experiences and stories about moments where they felt an unnerving sense that reality had been altered or glitched or debate the implications and meaning of “life” when your universe is a simulation. In this way, similar to ufologists and singularitarians, they form a technology centered modern system of belief to discuss fundamental questions of purpose, creation, life, and death.

Why a “Simulation”?

Discussions about “living in a simulation” are very prevalent especially as this idea has been only becoming less and less strange and unfamiliar. Computers have only been around for less than a century and yet there has already been tremendous growth in their capabilities and computational powers. Many things which are possible now, and extremely commonplace, might’ve been considered totally impossible a century ago. In the r/AWLIAS community, many users emphasize that “there’s no predicting” what will be possible. Many say that with our rapid progress, it may be possible for us to create a simulation powerful to simulate everything in the universe, making it not seem so unlikely that our reality itself could be created perhaps by some even more intelligent society. Many users. Likewise, life-simulation video games like The Sims also make the simulation theory feel less strange since one can imagine themselves to be like a character in a video game which are also becoming increasingly more realistic and “lifelike”, especially with the emergence of VR. In r/AWLIAS, users often use the language of video games to describe “reality”; they make references to NPC’s (Non-playing characters) and references games like Grand Theft Auto and The Sims. Finally, the laws of modern physics have become much less concrete, especially with quantum physics. In response to a question “What’s your best evidence that we are in a simulation?” asked in r/AWLIAS, many cited various well-understood quantum phenomena (especially those that were integral to the development of quantum physics like the famous double-slit experiment), as evidence that certain features of our universe are only “rendered” when we observe them (along with some other explanations). Along with other quantum phenomenon such as the discretization of length and the Heisenberg uncertainty principle, the interpretations of quantum physics (even among physicists/philosophers) is fuzzy so it’s not very hard to shape it into meaning a variety of things.

Questioning Purpose and Origins

Just as most with religion, people who believe that the world is simulation seek to use it to understand their purpose and meaning. One person asks that if this world is a simulation, who created the simulation and for what purpose. The figure who created the simulation could be interpreted as “God”, the creator of our universe. One says “The purpose of the simulation is to learn love, tolerance, acceptance, forgiveness, happiness, kindness and co operation with others. You have to unlearn hatred, racism, anger, jealousy, materialism, narcissism, intolerance, vengeance, violence and aggression. When you do this, you stop reincarnating and the simulation ends.” This particular interpretation reflects Hindu/Buddhist cosmology ideas like “reincarnation “until you have you have reached some sort of ultimate ideal person. Others says that the purpose is to “harvest art/creativity”, another says the simulation was created to understand how our world works, or how our mind works, etc. While there doesn’t seem to be a commonly accepted purpose, many try to understand what the purpose might be and correspondingly how they should behave given that they are members of a simulation created for a purpose. These viewpoints also center humanity and the conscious mind as the central purpose of the simulation, (i.e. humans are in the simulation to reveal something to the creators). This is very similar to the Singulatarians described by Farman. Like how the Singulatarians believe the human purpose is to give rise to “better” or a higher intelligence, many people who believe in the simulation theory see the purpose of our existence as serving some higher intelligence which created the simulation. Similar to what Farman describes, the simulation theory and questions about the simulations purpose have, become a way of reenchating the world, except through a modern technological lens.

“Glitches in the Matrix” and UFO Sightings

In r/Glitch_in_the_Matrix users share experiences about strange moments in their lives where reality seems to be messed up or glitched in some way. The titles of posts read “I didn't need my glasses/contacts this morning until I realized I wasn't wearing them”, “Weird moment on Chicago Train”, “Pixels didn't line up”, and “Sock Teleported”, etc. In many ways, these posts share features with the stories of people who report UFO sightings. For many people reporting these glitches in the matrix, these experiences were “something I'll never forget”, or “something that I just can't explain”, something unnerving and strange that's keeps them thinking about it long after the event. They often describe things “feeling like a dream” or a sense of surrealness. Sometimes, people preface their story with things such as “I am a teacher. My husband is an electrical engineer, we are not crazy people” or “I was completely sober and awake” similar to the ufologists trying to manage stigma; they want to try to dispel the stereotypes or assumptions other people might make about them when they share their story, like how people who reported UFO experiences had “an awareness that other would likely doubt the veracity of that experience” (Eghihan 2017). These users are in many ways very similar to the people Pasulka describes in “American Cosmic: UFO's Religion, Technology”, who were forming new forms of religious belief centered around the mystery of the UFO's; likewise, in r/Glitch_in_the_Matrix and r/AWLIAS, users are creating new forms of religious belief centered around the simulation narrative. Activity which might've been previously interpreted as evidence of ghosts, spirits etc., are being perceived rather as “glitches” in the matrix, giving a more “techy” interpretation of these events. This compares with how Pasulka describes how new television programs encourage viewers to see “religious visions of the past through the modern UFO narrative, turning medieval angels into aliens”. These experiences make the simulation

narrative more personal and help keep the fascination. These also help promote the idea that “reality is not as it seems”, and there must be something hidden from us.

Life is Illusion

In the r/AWLIAS, users discuss simulation theory: its consequences, its purpose, and the evidence for it. In many ways this community has begun to create a religion of sorts with its own cosmology which also parallels many themes in Hindu/Buddhist cosmology. Although the exact “form” of the simulation is not very united among this community, nearly all of the people in the community feel that “reality is not as it seems”, and in some cases they describe life as having a dreamlike feeling as if they were in a movie or events were “scripted”. For example, one user “Does anyone else kinda feel like the simulation is starting to drop the facade and expose itself?” saying that things “... feel scripted, like something from a videogame, happening right in front of you...things mysteriously appearing out of nowhere in your pocket... drivers straight outta GTA, people feeling like NPCs.... just a more dreamy, video game feel in general”. This user describes similar “mysterious” phenomenon as some r/Glitch_in_the_matrix users and also shares a similar sentiment as many others in the r/AWLIAS community; that the world feels dreamlike and unreal. In discussion, many repeat the sentiment that everything you observe is simulated reality created by the brain”, or that “nothing is truly real”, etc. This relates to the concept of *maya* in Buddhist and Hindu philosophies, the illusion that the ordinary world is the “true” world. For example, in response to a question about evidence for simulation theory, one user says “For me is that, dreams feel the same way as “real” life, when I dream, I can feel fear, joy and even touch like if I dream I’m hugging someone I literally can feel their body and my arms.” Another person says “Let’s say you die and wake up outside of this simulation. How to know that you do not dream or are stuck in an illusion.” This idea that the world we perceive to be real might still be

illusion is persistent in discussions in r/AWLIAS. This concept isn't new; philosophers have discussed it for centuries, and it is very present in Hindu and Buddhist philosophies, although the word "simulation" seems to have become a modern technology centered way of expressing this same concept.

Death and Leaving the Simulation

One of the most common questions asks in these reddit communities is the question of whether or not "you exist outside of the simulation". In *The Matrix*, the humans living in the matrix have an actual existence outside of the simulated one that they perceive (the matrix). Among r/AWLIAS users, they question whether such an independent reality exists, and how they could leave the matrix and go to the "real life". They often refer to "Non-Playing Characters" (NPC) as people who do not exist in the "real world" and exist only in the simulation and "Playing-Characters" (PC's) as people who have an external existence. While some argue that nobody exists outside the simulation (just as no characters in *The Sims* have no real existence in this world), many believe that they have an existence outside of this simulation, which is just a sort of "virtual reality". Many of these people express that they feel like they know the "true reality", and they want to escape the illusion and live the true world. For example, one user says "I need to escape the simulation. But I am too grounded to this 'reality'". Another user responds "Family is holding me down. I can accept everything and everyone as being simulated, but them. I wish they'd disappear so I could realize the truth without distractions." These people speak as if they want to find the "true reality" and leave behind attachments to the material world, similar to people searching for enlightenment. Many argue that there may be many iterations of simulation. If we have simulations in our simulated reality, the world that created our simulation, might in fact be a simulation itself, etc. So leaving one

simulated world simply takes you to a “higher” simulated world. For example, one user says “We live in a self-sustaining russian doll. Every time we generate a universal simulation, a smaller level is created... We're in a massive game of ‘The Sims: Making Sims’” These viewpoints suggest an endless cycle of “rebirth” in higher and higher simulations until you reach the ultimate truth. These examples illustrate how people use simulation theory to grapple with questions about death, and what exists “outside of our perceived reality”, and even find similar answers as in religion.

Conclusion

Although “Simulation Theory” has come to mean very different things for different people, it is in many ways similar to old systems of belief that are now being translated into modern discussions of technology, computational power, and video games. Users in the reddit communities’ [r/Glitch_in_the_Matrix](#) share strange experiences that would typically be regarded as “paranormal activity” under the new name of “glitches in the matrix”. In [r/AWLIAS](#), users discuss the implications of living in a simulation for fundamental human questions of purpose and meaning. Through discussion, these users are beginning to form their own religion with its own story of cosmology, answers about purpose of life, and afterlife. In this way, the simulation theory can be seen as at least the beginnings of a system of belief that takes old concepts and translates them into modern technology centered forms.

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