

## /dev/random Simulation Station

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I was planning to discuss SRE this time, but as I was looking up that abbreviation I realized I don't actually know anything about it. In my day, "site reliability engineering" meant you used four empty heavily caffeinated soda cans to support the particle board shelf with the server on it instead of the customary three. Fortunately for the admittedly tiny segment of my audience who labor under the misapprehension that I'm an authority on anything outside the realm of sarcastic goblin detectives, I stumbled across the Joe Rogan interview with the Muskmeister and fell headlong into his metaphysical rabbit hole of cosmological solipsism.

The idea that we are all in a simulation is hardly novel. It was around long before the Wachowskis spun it into great glittering mounds of platinum. Descartes' 1641 brain-in-a-vat idea, for example. Most science fiction writers worth their salt have taken a crack at it over the past five or six decades, William Gibson's matrix in *Neuromancer* and Neal Stephenson's metaverse from *Snow Crash* being perhaps the most famous examples, although technically neither of those were fully immersive worlds that constitute a separate reality. Since *The Matrix*, two of my favorites have been the Framework (*Agents of SHIELD*) and virtual *Eureka* ([http://eureka.wikia.com/wiki/Season\\_5](http://eureka.wikia.com/wiki/Season_5)). There are no doubt others I have yet to discover because I'm about 10 to 15 years behind everyone else in my media consumption. I mean, I just recently finished my first time all the way through both *Smallville* and *Buffy*.

As a science fiction and fantasy author, I've noticed that the immersive simulation concept is one that carries my imagination along like Class 5 philosophical rapids. The versions I've seen in fiction assume that some higher life form is pulling the strings that keep some other life form(s) trapped in a simulated reality, but that reality is always limited in geographic scope to, at most, a single city. They also usually predicate their narratives on the idea that, given the right circumstances, the victims can break free and return to the "real" world.

In video gaming, there is a concept called "clipping." It means that objects have no inherent persistence: the game's engine only needs to render whatever is in the players' current fields of vision. It tracks where they are looking and calculates what they can observe from a given perspective. Similarly, our own simulation engine only has to render what we can see right now. When we look away from something, it just disappears. In the "real world," objects are effectively only photons bouncing off a surface and impinging on our optic nerve via the retina. Whether or not they have mass and occupy space when we aren't looking is a moot point.

If the universe has been in existence for over 13 billion years, there's been plenty of time for a civilization to arise and reach the point where it can create simulations powerful enough to be indistinguishable from reality. But it doesn't have to create an entire objective universe, with all the pieces in place—not by a very long shot. It only needs to plant an illusion of this in our putatively sentient brains. The objective perception of this shared universe doesn't even have to be truly identical: all that matters is that those brains believe the consensus exists. Solipsism is the ultimate restriction on external truth. So long as we perceive shared

consistency in the application of universal “constants,” we will believe ourselves to comprehend them, no matter how far from fact that belief may stray.

This consistency of perception is trivial for an extremely advanced civilization to engineer. The evidence we can see suggests that the universe is 13.8 billion years old, yes, but that evidence—or the perception thereof—might just be another part of the simulation. Perhaps after all this time there is only one sentient species left in the entire multiverse, and just for grins it controls a large number of simulations full of simulated people who only think they exist in objective reality. The motivation for this might be some far-reaching sinister purpose involving harvesting us or thriving on our triggered endocrine secretions, or it could be as simple as entertainment. I mean, once you’ve mastered fabricating then enslaving another entire species by manipulating their very perception, you might be tempted to allow others to tune in and watch the show, for a fee. This of course takes “reality programming” to an entirely new level.

Or we could just remove the overseer from the picture completely and envision a scenario where the species that designed and built the simulations has long since gone extinct, leaving the self-perpetuating virtual multiverse ticking away all on its own. The existential question then becomes, does it matter? If instead of being a collection of cells producing proteins, splitting ATP into ADP to generate energy, and transporting various ions back and forth across membranes, I am nothing more than a parent process with a bunch of subroutines running on some vast CPU, does that really make any difference? I require petaflops; therefore, I am.

Whether a “red pill” could even exist depends, then, upon whether there is any existence outside the simulation to which to exit. If we’re all floating in some tank with electrodes taped to our foreheads that’s one thing, but if we’re merely computational avatars, that’s quite another. Maybe we already destroyed our planet utterly in a nuclear holocaust, or by abusing the environment to its breaking point, and an alien species came across our dead civilization. They analyzed our culture from the archives we left behind and reconstructed it as a simulation with vari-

ables they control in order to learn about our society in a laboratory setting. They’re watching to see where we went wrong so they can warn other similar civilizations, again perhaps for a fee. Maybe we keep getting reset to some point in the past to play out the same doomed self-destructive track as a cautionary tale for each new class that comes though an alien social psych course.

Being in a cosmic simulation also raises interesting questions about death. I mean, is the end just “kill -9,” or is our thread diverted to another core and we continue in a new program fork? Would we even be aware of this change? If every aspect of our existence is hard-coded, that means predestination is real. On the other hand, if our code is heuristic and adaptive, maybe we can determine our own destiny, at least within the greater programming context. Are we closed loops or fractal sub-threads? Is our will truly free, or are we prisoners of our mallocs? If we could read our own header files, what would they tell us? Would they be like lines on a palm, laying out our futures? Is a massive heart attack merely a divide-by-zero error? Maybe in searching for the meaning of life, the universe, and everything, 101010 is just what you get when you de-reference the pointer to human existence.

Personally, I suspect that rather than some high and noble pragma, human society is nothing more than a streaming event for an interstellar entertainment network, like watching *Civilization VI* on Twitch. Trillions of beings across the local cluster are laughing right now as I type this. “The monkey figured it out!” a viewer howls between bites of whatever snack food appeals to hyper-intelligent liquid methane-based squamoids.

“Hey,” interjects another, “this is boring. Change the channel to that white hole cluster cam. I love scoping the bizarre crap that slides out of those things.” Because, you know, that’s how hipster superior beings talk.

If I am just the result of compiled code running on some processor, all I ask is that there be decent garbage collection. Corrupted memory does not lead to sexy fun times.

Homo barada nikto, y’all.