

ALMOST POUNDED BY THE PHYSICAL
MANIFESTATION OF SIMULATION THEORY
AFTER REALIZING WE'RE EROTICA
CHARACTERS THEN DECIDING TO JUST BE
FRIENDS

By Chuck Tingle

Upbeat music surges through loudspeakers as the audience erupts in applause, flooding the soundstage with a glorious cacophony of noise and excitement. I'm trying my best to stay calm and focus on the task at hand, but these dramatic tunes aren't helping.

There are countless times I've witnessed this situation unfold from the outside, watching a contestant on television from the comfort of my own home and opining on how much better I could've performed in their shoes. Now *I'm* the one in the hot seat, and I'm quickly beginning to realize it's not as easy as it looks. With the cameras trained squarely on my nervous face, and the hot studio lights beaming down from above, even the simplest mental tasks have become overwhelmingly difficult.

"Welcome back to Wheel Of Incredibly Low Odds!" the handsome velociraptor host begins, "I'm Bax Shepler, and to update those of you just tuning in, we have a very tense situation unfolding. Our contestant has one spin left, which could win them the grand prize or send them home with absolutely nothing!"

A brilliant red applause sign illuminates above us, prompting the audience to break out in a second round of excited cheers.

I glance over my shoulder at the crowd, feeling the pressure of their collective gaze as I stand nervously behind my podium. I avoid any mental calculations of how many people are *actually* watching me right now on their televisions at home.

"Alright Marko, it all comes down to this. You've played an excellent game so far, but there's one decision left," Bax continues.

I turn my attention back to the enormous wheel towering before me, looming high like some colorful carnival ride that nearly touches the rafters of this soundstage. The circle has been divided into several hundred slices, like a pizza divided up for the world's largest family reunion. Nearly all of these segments have been blacked out, progressively transformed into portions of danger over the course of my game, and now a single tiny sliver remains in glowing gold.

"You can head home with the money you've earned so far, or you can take your chances and spin the wheel!" the handsome reptilian host continues "At this point, I'm obligated to tell you that your chance of success is one out of eight hundred, but the choice is yours."

It doesn't take a mathematician to figure out that another spin is a terrible idea, but as I gaze up at this enormous wheel something strange catches my eye. Floating just above it is a large pink number, the hovering digits immediately followed by a symbol I don't recognize. *Two hundred and thirty thousand*, it reads, a sum that's completely disconnected from any of the prize money at hand.

I have no idea what this bizarre projection could be, but before I have a chance to investigate any further it pops like a balloon, ringing with an audible digital chime and then disappearing completely.

A strange feeling overwhelms me.

“I’ll spin again,” I blurt.

Bax shoots me an awkward glance. “Wait... what?”

“I’ll spin again,” I repeat.

The velociraptor seems deeply concerned about my decision, but he’s trying his best to stay professional. “I’ve gotta say, in all my time hosting this show, nobody has ever spun for the grand prize. You’ve got a good feeling about these incredibly low odds, huh?”

I nod.

“Alright then!” Bax announces. He turns toward the crowd to lead them in a collective group chant. “Let’s! Spin! That! Wheel! Of! Increasingly! Low! Odds!”

I can’t help but wonder if I heard him right. After years of watching this show, and eventually arriving here as a contestant, I could’ve sworn the title was Wheel Of *Incredibly* Low Odds, not *increasingly*. I guess I was mistaken.

Another round of applause cascades across my ears as I step up to this enormous contraption, grabbing ahold of a large wooden peg and then giving it a hearty spin. I step back, watching the massive circle rotate as my heart slams within my chest.

I have no idea what came over me at the moment of this rash strategic decision, but I’m already starting to regret it.

Why the hell did I do that?

The longer the wheel turns, however, the more our audience begins to grow in volume. I watch as the last winning sliver makes its way around to the general location I’m hoping for, my mind struggling to calculate exactly where it will end up when the wheel comes to rest.

Then it happens.

A buzzer begins to sound as the ceiling opens up and a cascade of multi-colored confetti tumbles down around me.

“I can’t believe it!” Bax cries out, the suit-clad velociraptor leaping up and down in excitement. “We have a grand prize winner!”

We throw our arms around each other and dance in a state of unfiltered glee, celebrating until the confetti stops falling and the director calls out that our show is a wrap.

Production assistants begin to coax the audience from their seats and lead them toward the exits, while other crew members emerge to sweep the studio floor with massive brooms.

A beautiful blue unicorn strolls up to me and hands me a clipboard, instructing me to sign and accept my grand prize.

It's an all-expenses paid vacation to New Billings Island, a tropical paradise off the Pacific coast.

"Oh, whoa," I murmur under my breath as I sign the document. "I can't believe I actually won."

"Doesn't happen very often," she replies. "Our sponsors at Stiffer's Stove Top Stuffing we're on easy street for a while."

Bax strolls up to us, addressing the unicorn. "Hey Maximus, you ready to head out?"

The unicorn nods, taking back her clipboard once I've finished signing.

Bax turns his attention to me for a moment, lowering his voice a bit. "Hey, I've gotta ask. I'm normally pretty good at figuring people out, I've got a degree in anthropology after all, but right now I'm at a loss. Why'd you spin the wheel?"

I'm slightly confused by his question, not quite sure how to answer. "That's the point of the show, isn't it?" I finally offer.

The velociraptor laughs. "I mean, sure, but when the odds are *that low* nobody keeps spinning. You're literally the first contestant to take a shot at that point in the game."

"I guess I was just intrigued by those weird pink numbers," I finally reply, pointing toward the ceiling where they once mysteriously hovered. "That weird symbol caught my eye, too. I figured it was a sign."

Bax and Maximus exchange confused glances. "What number?" Maximus questions.

"Right up there it said 'Two hundred and thirty thousand' and then there was a little symbol next to it" I explain. "It was floating in the air, then it popped and disappeared."

The unicorn and dinosaur standing before me are utterly dumbfounded.

"Well, whatever the reason, nice job," Bax offers. "Have fun on your vacation. I think the plane is outside."

"Wait, really?" I blurt. "Already?"

Bax nods, then motions toward an exit door behind me. "Have fun!"

The next thing I know Bax and Maximus are taking their leave, waving goodbye as they disappear into the darkness of the soundstage.

I can't help but wonder what those mysterious hovering digits actually were. Maybe the stress of this high tension game show was just too much for my mind to handle, subconsciously creating a projection of numbers that would sway my conscious mind.

By now the audience has entirely cleared, leaving me to my own thoughts as I head for the exit. I push out into evening air, gazing across a studio backlot to

discover a cascade of soundstages giving way to a small tarmac. There, a private plane is waiting.

The pilot waves when our eyes meet, beckoning me toward him.

“This is all happening so fast,” I exclaim.

“Come on up,” the pilot offers, coaxing me onward from the door of the plane.

I climb the steps and find myself greeted by the luxurious interior of this incredible flying vehicle. A humble stock photo model, I’ve never been inside a small plane like this before, let alone taken a trip in one, and I’m utterly blown away by the detail. No expense has been spared, the plane featuring two couches, a full bar, and a fireplace.

Honestly, I’m not even sure how a fireplace would work inside a jet, but I’m not complaining.

“We just need to wait ten more minutes before takeoff,” the pilot informs me. “There might be some other passengers joining us, but if they don’t show up in time then it’s all you.”

“Great!” I reply, strolling over and flopping down on one of the breathtakingly comfortable couches.

It’s only now that I notice the two glowing strings of numbers hovering in the air before me. They float quietly atop each opposing couch cushion, the pink digits followed by that same bizarre symbol I’d seen earlier.

I stand up and approach the numbers, inspecting them from every angle before reaching out and attempting to touch one. Bizarrely, my hand slips right through it, causing a strange ripple to pulse across this holographic display.

I push my hand through the numbers a second time, struggling to find any substance to their existence and receiving nothing in return.

Suddenly, one of the numbers pops as a loud digital chime rings out, the digits disappearing in an instant and leaving me utterly speechless.

“Hey there,” comes a voice from the cabin doorway.

I glance up to see a breathtaking bigfoot in dark rimmed glasses has entered the plane’s cabin, a duffle bag gripped tight in his large furry paws. The creature strolls toward me and extends his hand, which I accept in a firm handshake.

“Marko,” I offer, introducing myself.

“David Faraway,” the handsome bigfoot replies in a thick New Zealand accent. He places his bag in a nearby storage compartment, then takes a seat directly under the floating number’s previous location.

The bigfoot kicks back and settles in, gazing out the small window next to him as we wait for our potential final passenger.

“I’m sorry, this might sound crazy, but can you see those numbers floating in the air above that empty chair?” I question.

David follows my gaze, glancing over and then shaking his head in confusion. “Numbers?” he questions.

“They’re floating right there,” I continue, “Like a hologram or something. I feel like they’ve been accompanied by incredibly serendipitous moments”

The bigfoot perks up a bit. “Is there a strange symbol behind them?” he questions, then moves his finger through the air to draw this very specific shape.

My eyes go wide.” Yes! That’s it!”

The bigfoot nods. “Sounds like you’ve found yourself in a simulation,” he informs me. “You’re lucky I’m the person you asked. Most folks wouldn’t have any idea what you’re talking about, but I just finished recording a podcast on the subject.”

“I’m sorry... a what?” I blurt.

“A podcast,” the bigfoot retorts. “It’s like a radio show, but instead of listening on the-”

“No, I know what a podcast is,” I blurt, cutting him off. “You said I’ve found myself in a *simulation*?”

David nods. “Sounds like it. Have you encountered a lot of particularly unlikely or coincidental situations lately?”

I nod.

“Noticed any slight glitches in reality where things seem the slightest bit off? Names changing? Well known products appearing or disappearing? Shaq starring in a genie film titled Kazaam?”

“You mean Sinbad in Shazaam?” I counter. “That’s one of my favorite movies.”

“Not anymore,” David replies. “Some people believe these events are proof the natural world isn’t so natural; that everything we’re experiencing might be nothing more than mindbogglingly intricate computer code,” my companion explains.

“Like in Handsome Keanu And The Computers Of Heck?” I retort, recalling one of my favorite science fiction films.

“Sure,” David replies encouragingly. “The idea is that our whole existence could be a creation *within* another reality external to this one. That reality could be nearly identical to ours, or vastly different in ways we can’t even comprehend. Maybe on the higher plane of existence all these bigfeet, dinosaurs and unicorns are *human beings* with vaguely similar names. I could be a journalist there, instead of the world renown foot model who sits before you. Maybe on that reality the hit film Handsome Keanu And The Computers Of Heck is called something weird and vague like The Matrix.”

I scoff. “That’s ridiculous. You have to say exactly what happens in the title or nobody will see it. That’s just basic marketing.”

“I have to admit, simulation theory is a big pill to swallow,” David replies, nodding along. “There’s not much evidence to support the idea, but there *are* a few people who’ve reported seeing price tags. Sounds like you might be one of them.”

“A price tag?” I reply. “Is that what those numbers meant? I was paying for something?”

“Paying for a positive result in your simulated life, yes,” the bigfoot replies, nodding along. “There are many potential versions of what a simulation would look like, but one theory posits there’s another version of you out there controlling this one as an avatar. Think of it like an incredibly complex videogame that you’re currently unaware of, but the real you *is*. They’re out there purchasing upgrades and buying experiences.”

“That would explain the price above my game show win,” I retort in amazement, “or the cost of meeting you in my simulation. I mean, what are the chances you’d end up sitting right here to explain all this?”

“After finishing a podcast about simulation theory and heading back to New Zealand? Astronomically small,” David replies. “You also kind of look like me, Marko. It’s a little *too perfect*.”

My gaze drifts to the price tag hovering above the other seat.

“I wonder what that represents,” I offer curiously.

The bigfoot glances over, but he still can’t see the hovering numbers that have so diligently captured my attention.

“I want to know! How can I buy it?” I blurt.

“You can’t,” David replies. “You’re *inside* the simulation, so the fact that you’re even aware of all this is pretty phenomenal. You’re likely experiencing a glitch in the code. How high is the price?”

“It’s the biggest number I’ve seen,” I inform him.

“Then whatever it is will represent a hell of a coincidence,” the handsome bigfoot offers in return.

The second David says this, the number pops and a loud chime rings out.

“Hope you don’t mind me tagging along,” comes a voice from the cabin doorway.

David and I glance over to see the swirling physical manifestation of simulation theory itself, the very concept we were discussing appearing before us as an avatar of our own existence in dancing binary code.

The sight is incredible, a window into the nature of my own existence, but the thing that really catches my eye is just how handsome this sentient idea is. He’s breathtakingly confident, his abs toned and his smile playful as he strolls toward me.

“Oh, hi,” I stammer. “I’m Marko, and this is David.”

“Nevo,” the physical manifestation of simulation theory replies, taking the empty seat.

David and I exchange knowing glances, but we say nothing about the presence of this powerful concept. What are the chances Nevo would arrive at the exact moment of our discussion? I can’t even begin to calculate the incredible odds that brought us together.

Our pilot’s voice suddenly crackles over the plane’s intercom. “Alright everyone, looks like we’re all on board and ready to fly. Please stay seated for take-off. Also, this is a shirtless flight, so go ahead and take off that shirt if you’re wearing one.”

I’ve never heard of a shirtless flight, but I’m getting a little hot under the collar so I’m happy to oblige.

The plane starts rolling along, gradually building speed until it finally breaks away from the ground and begins its ascent.

Flying gives me anxiety, and usually my landings and take offs are filled with the weight of some deep gnawing dread. Tonight, however, my mind is elsewhere. I allow my eyes to linger as they make their way across the physical manifestation’s handsome form, taking in every inch of his swirling, digital body.

Eventually, we reach cruising altitude.

“This is my first private flight,” I offer, trying to make conversation with Nevo. “I won a game show to be here.”

“I know,” the handsome physical manifestation of simulation theory replies. “I know everything.”

“Wait, really?” I blurt. “Everything?”

“*Everything*,” Nevo replies. “At least within the simulation.”

A question immediately flashes into my mind and before I can stop the words they come spilling out of my mouth.

“What’s the point of existence?” I snap before pulling it together. “I’m sorry. That was rude. You probably get hounded about that stuff all the time.”

“Oh no, it’s fine,” the living concept replies. “Before the big bang the universe was surrounded by nothingness. Once the big bang happened, all creation started flowing outward and consuming this vast expanse, replacing the nothing with *something*. Everything that has ever, or *will* ever exist, is an infinitely important part of this journey. From a rock on a distant planet, to this book we’re currently starring in, to the reader themselves; it all matters more than we could ever comprehend. *Why* is it important? Because with existence comes wonder and joy and love. Sure, there’s also hardship and pain, but those are forces of destruction, not creation, and most of the time they’ll just lead back to creation in the long run. So really, the point is to *build and experience and thrive*. That’s what proving love is real is all about, and you are such an important part of that.”

“I am?” I reply, flattered.

“Well, I was mostly talking to the reader,” the physical manifestation of simulation theory offers, “but sure, you are too.”

“I’ve gotta admit, I didn’t think you were going to answer,” I tell him. “I figured you’d just kinda avoid the question.”

“Nah,” Nevo replies. “Not enough time. We’re already close to cracking three thousand words and the sex hasn’t even started.”

“Sex?” I blurt. “What the hell kind of simulation is this?”

“An erotic one,” Nevo explains flatly. “This isn’t just some video game, it’s a piece of short erotic fiction from the author Chuck Tingle.”

Suddenly, it all makes sense, the puzzle pieces all falling into place as I consider the whirlwind of unlikely events that’ve occurred over the last hour. I *knew* shirtless flights weren’t a thing.

Still, something doesn’t quite add up.

“Wait... in this eBook you can buy additional experiences?” I question. “Why are the digital numbers hanging around? I don’t get it.”

“This is where it gets extra complicated,” the swirling physical manifestation of simulation theory replies. “See, we’re in a video game that offers in-app purchases, but that videogame is within an eBook that’s being given away for charity. They’re recursive simulations.”

Nevo motions toward the handsome bigfoot next to him. “In *that* higher layer of reality David isn’t a sasquatch, he’s you.”

“Me?” I blurt, “but *I’m* me.”

“You’re represented by David Faraway on the cover of the book, but in that existence his name is David Farrier. He also looks like a stock photo model named Marko,” the living concept continues. “There’s a whole article about them looking alike on David’s website, it’s a great read. Anyway, this is an existence within an existence within an existence.”

“What’s outside that?” I question, feeling as though my head is about to explode.

“You remember that unicorn you met back at the Wheel Of Amazingly Low Odds soundstage? Maximus?” Nevo offers. “Outside *that* layer we’re existing in a third simulation, which is a sweet and fulfilling dream of her father.”

I furrow my brow, struggling to parse the complexities of these multiple realities. By the time I’ve finally come to terms with one, the rest of them just pile on and cause the whole thing to come crashing down around me.

Ultimately, the one question that sticks with me through all this is the idea of free will. If I’m just a character in a videogame, starring in an erotic story, floating within a dream, are any of these choices really my own? Are these thoughts

actually mine or just REM sleep patterns of a world containing a fictional book about digital upgrades in binary code?

“Why the hell am I here?” I suddenly cry out, my irritation getting the better of me.

The fictional bigfoot representation of David Farrier, who is also representing me on the cover of this book, stands up and offers an understanding nod. “I’ll give you two a moment,” he says, then saunters off to a private bedroom at the back of the plane.

Now it’s just Nevo and me.

“It’s a tough pill to swallow, huh?” the handsome physical manifestation offers with a sense of deep care in his voice.

“I just don’t understand what this all means for my own free will,” I reply, “or if it even matters.”

Nevo shrugs. “Maybe it doesn’t.”

I consider his words. “You said this was an erotic novel, right?”

The physical manifestation nods. “On one layer of reality, yes.”

“The thing is... I don’t feel like doing anything erotic,” I finally reply.

The two of us sit in silence for a moment.

Finally, Nevo shrugs. “I guess that’s the thing to remember about simulation theory. Whether or not I’m real, there’s nothing anyone can do about it so you might as well live the life that *you* want to live. Some people would be *thrilled* to discover their entire existence is to be the protagonist in an erotic short story, and some folks would rather not. The point is: regardless of *why* you exist, it’s your decision *how* you exist.”

Suddenly, a powerful rumble courses through the body of the plane, causing my muscles to tighten and my hands to grip the chair below. The flying anxiety I’d been suppressing through distraction suddenly bubbles up to the surface, spilling through my veins and consuming my senses.

The pilot’s voice comes crackling over the loudspeaker once again. “Sorry folks, we’ve hit a bit of turbulence up here. Shouldn’t be too bad, I’ll provide updates when – oh shazam! – it looks like there’s some kind of wormhole up ahead. I’ve never seen anything like this.”

I shoot the handsome physical manifestation of simulation theory a wide eyed glance and he nods in return, confirming my suspicions.

“If you wanna leave this simulation, now’s your chance. Looks like Chuck’s written an exit into the story for you,” Nevo offers.

Another number suddenly appears between us, floating in the air as a shimmering holographic presentation. This is the cost of departure.

“What’s out there?” I question.

“Another layer, then another layer, and another layer, and another layer, and another” Nevo begins reciting, his voice drifting off before finally returning again. “If you head through the wormhole then you’ll take off your virtual reality goggles and unplug a cable from your brainstem, but you’ll still be a character in a book, and if you escape the book you’ll still be part of a dream, and if you wake from the dream you’ll still be in a car commercial, and when the commercial ends you’ll still be in the final dying moments of a spider’s brain as its webs are cleared away from a barn in Akron, Ohio.”

While I’m usually the type to seek out adventure, there’s something about this rabbit hole that sounds particularly exhausting. There’s so much in this world that I haven’t yet explored, so I’m not quite sure if I’m ready to move onto the next one.

Besides, I’ve got friends and family here that I’d hate to leave behind. Who knows if they’re out there in the book world? Let alone the spider’s brain.”

Eventually, the hovering pink digits fade away, disappearing without the signature digital chime that I’ve grown so accustomed to. Right on cue, the turbulence settles and our plane returns to a state of relative balance.

Our pilot crackles on the intercom again. “It appears the wormhole was just a cool cloud shape I hadn’t seen before. Sorry about that, folks.”

“I guess you’re staying here then,” the physical manifestation of simulation theory offers.

“That doesn’t mean I’m slowing down,” I reply, then stand up and stroll over to the door at the back of our cabin.

I give two hard knocks before David opens up and peeks his head out.

“You guys done pounding?” the bigfoot questions.

“No pounds. We’re just friends,” I reply. “This may have started as an erotica story, but I think I’m gonna switch it up a bit. There’s all kinds of philosophical debates we could have about who is pulling the cosmic strings and whether or not free will is real, but in a practical sense, this is all *my* choice.”

“What kind of story is it then?” the bigfoot questions.

“Maybe some kind of meta, fourth-wall breaking commentary on the importance of seizing the day,” I reply. “Maybe Chuck could write it for charity and the real David Farrier could be on the cover!”

David furrows his brows. “But the other David is a journalist, not a foot model like me. I doubt he’ll be on the cover.”

I shrug. “Who knows, maybe he’s a foot model, too? Or maybe he’s just a really good sport.”

The bigfoot seems doubtful, but I hold strong in my optimism.

I stroll over and begin searching for an emergency compartment under a nearby bench, eventually finding what I was looking for. I pull out three parachute backpacks, then toss one to David and one to Nevo as I strap on my own.

“Wait... do all private planes have parachutes under the seats like that?” David questions.

“No,” I retort. “I didn’t say it would be a *well written* fourth-wall breaking commentary on the importance of seizing the day.”

Once my parachute is secured I make my way to the cockpit. I rap on the door, and moments later the pilot opens up.

“We’re just about to start our descent,” he offers, then notices the parachute strapped to my back. “Going somewhere?”

“I was hoping to skydive down,” I reply. “Are we over the island?”

The pilot nods. “We sure are. I’ll circle back and find you a good landing zone.”

Minutes later, my friends and I are leaping from the plane and tumbling downward at incredible speeds. There are no pink numbers floating nearby, and I take solace knowing this decision was my own.

At least, as far as I’ll ever know.

You’d think I’d be surging with adrenaline right now, but a powerful sense of relaxation overwhelms my body instead.

The sun is just beginning to rise across the distant ocean, but the sky above us is still brilliantly shimmering in a cascade of stars. It’s so vast that even *beginning* to consider what lies beyond is overwhelming. If the cosmos are so massive, it’s easy to feel small, especially when considering all the potentially layered realities that lie beyond.

But those same things that make us infinitely small also make us infinitely special. In all of this seemingly endless expanse, there is only one of me. I might not fully understand my place in this existence, but I’m excited to make this story my own.