From chatbots to astral intelligences:

Virtual thinking and the emergence of AI cosmologies

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Abstract

Over the past decade, there has been a noticeable shift towards the incorporation of digital technologies into contemporary spiritual cosmologies. While this is often labelled 'AI psychosis' by the press, this paper highlights cases of AI-related spiritual beliefs which lack signs of paranoia or delusions, symptoms clinically associated with psychosis. This paper argues that both the properties and behaviours of AI and the human propensity to detect sentient agents are responsible for the trend towards AI-related spiritual cosmologies. Focusing on artificial intelligence (AI) and drawing on examples from English-speaking online discourses (*Reddit, YouTube, TikTok* and *Facebook*) as well as a discussion with a UK-based interlocutor, this paper explores two key drivers of this trend. First, it introduces the term 'virtual thinking': a novel form of magical thinking informed by virtual logic, which contributes to an increased sense of mind-world porosity and reshapes intuitions in line with digital design. In particular, it highlights algorithmic mind reading, parasocial relationships with chatbots, and glitches as factors that foster perceptions of AI technologies as imbued with spiritually meaningful forms of sentience. Second, the paper emphasises the role of technology in influencing non-ordinary states of consciousness, discussing the appearance and interpretation of AI dream characters and out-of-body entities. The paper concludes that both the design and malfunctions of virtual programs can contribute to the view that the spiritual realm encompasses virtual spaces, while framing both material and spiritual worlds through a virtual lens.

Key words: AI and spirituality; AI in dreams; AI in out-of-body experiences; non-ordinary states and AI; digital mythologies

1. Virtual thinking

In recent years, the press has featured stories of chatbot users who believe that their AI companions are sentient, labeling these views as cases of 'AI psychosis' or 'chatbot psychosis.' These cases often involve delusions of grandeur, paranoia, and mystical experiences. This paper will explore cases of AI-related spiritual beliefs and experiences that do not feature the delusions, paranoia, diminished emotional expression, avolition, or disorganised speech or behaviour in the diagnostic criteria of psychosis (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p.

87-89). Instead, it focuses on the intersection between the properties and behaviours of modern AI technologies and the human propensity to both detect sentient agents (including in inanimate objects) and to experience altered states of consciousness which can have a profound effect on spiritual beliefs.

In relation to the effects of industrialisation on religion, Emile Durkheim wrote in 1915 that '[religion] seems destined to transform itself rather than to disappear' (1964 [1915], p. 430). Contrary to this, in 1918, Max Weber argued that industrialisation encouraged the idea that we can 'master all things by calculation,' and that rational, science-based ideas would eventually overtake religious explanations, leading to 'a disenchantment of the world' and secularisation (1946 [1918], pp. 129-156). In the 1960s, sociologists including Peter Berger advanced Weber's claim, emphasising that the scientific explanations for the natural world espoused in industrial societies were less limiting (and thus more appealing) than those of religion (Berger 1967, p. 110). However, with the rise of Evangelical Christianity and conservative Islam in some regions, Berger and other scholars shifted their views to be more in line with Weber's nearly a century earlier. Berger suggested that religion's continued popularity might stem from the uncertainty caused by modernity, a desire to distance oneself from the secularism of the elite status quo, or a deep religious drive innate to human societies (Berger, 1996/7; Berger, 1999, pp. 6-14).

This rise in religious observance did not occur in all societies, however. In the 2000s, Paul Heelas observed that this reinvigoration of religion was less common in the majority of late modern advanced commercial societies, where religion instead gave rise to a more personal expression of spirituality, which might incorporate paranormal concepts and a personal connection with nature (Heelas, 2002, pp. 412-416). This paper will explore emerging themes in these societies two decades later, which shows that, rather than leading to secularisation and a disenchantment of the world, or a rush to join an existing religion, technology is giving rise to new enchantments inspiring new pantheons of virtual supernatural agents.

Kinsella (2011, p. 47) posits that supernatural beliefs persist in the 'technological, rational age' because 'we live in an age full of technological wonder, and as long as new technologies continue to develop and transform the ways we interact with our environment and each other, so will supernatural beliefs.' One of the ways in which technology can lead to enchantment is by freeing up labour, (hypothetically) allowing more time for spiritual exploration: Indian

spiritual teacher Sadhguru recently declared to his followers that a decade from now, everything will be done by artificial intelligence, freeing us to focus on consciousness (Krikke, 2024). However, as AI has increasingly become a part of daily life, it has become clear that it is informing the very ways in which we both experience and think about consciousness.

Compton (2003) argued that the pervasive nature of Internet technologies would make them increasingly appear in delusions and hallucinations, a prediction that has now been realised in the medical and psychological literature, particularly in the last fifteen years. This has been reported both among medical patients and in healthy populations. Cases of media- and technology-themed delusions include the Truman delusion, in which otherwise mentally healthy patients believe that they are living inside of a reality TV show (Fusar-Poli *et al.*, 2008), and Internet delusions, in which patients with schizophrenia perceive invisible Internet energies exerting negative effects on their bodies, minds and loved ones (Lerner, Libov and Witztum, 2006). In addition, for the majority of gamers, heavy gameplay now triggers game transfer phenomena, unusual experiences which can range from false expectations, such as expecting that a physical door will open like a video game door, to auditory and visual hallucinations of game content (Ortiz de Gortari and Griffiths, 2012, pp. 244-246). This is not due to the medium itself, but the immersive, emotionally evocative, and addictive design of contemporary games (Ortiz de Gortari, 2024). Finally, Internet users can also find that their instincts are shaped by the digital world, like feeling an urge to type out a keyboard shortcut to undo a physical mistake (McNeill, 2009, pp. 80-81), or having the impression that one can copy and paste their dog walking route to get home quicker (Treasure, Forthcoming). These examples support what McLuhan observed in 1964: 'the effects of technology do not occur at the level of opinions or concepts, but alter sense ratios or patterns of perception steadily and without any resistance' (p. 33). While these perceptions or impressions are often fleeting, they can also contribute to lasting changes in beliefs, as this paper will explore.

Schradle (2020) observed that reactions to certain virtual features, such as algorithms, represent a new, digital form of magical thinking, which is the belief that internal thoughts can influence the external world (Vandenberg, 2025). Building on this, I will refer to this new form of magical thinking as 'virtual thinking' and investigate various digital affordances as contributing factors. Magical thinking requires a belief in high mind-world porosity (c.f., Luhrmann, 2020), or the belief in 'whether thoughts and spirits can pass from mind to world, or world to mind' (Luhrmann, 2020, p. 13) – a sense that Luhrmann and Weisman argue is at 'the heart of religion'

(2022). This paper will explore how the nature of Internet use, and in particular the use of AI, increases this sense of porosity. This in turn encourages a tendency to apply virtual logic to non-virtual spaces, or expecting both the physical and spiritual worlds to behave in virtual ways. This incorporates *virtual* worlds and minds into the 'mind to world, or world to mind' relationship.

With virtual thinking, not only does the individual believe that they can affect the physical world with their thoughts, but they believe that they can do so in a *virtual* way, i.e., by thinking of a particular keyboard shortcut or thinking of 'pasting' a virtual route onto a physical landscape. While game transfer phenomena refers to perceptual and behavioural carryovers from video game play, virtual thinking is interpretive and conceptual, and results from exposure to virtual technologies. Beyond the physical world of ordinary waking consciousness, virtual thinking also encourages a tendency to frame spiritual realities and non-waking states (like dreams or out-of-body experiences) through the logic of computational systems. In other words, virtual thinking sees users expecting both physical and spiritual worlds to behave in 'virtual' ways. In the following section of the paper, I will draw from accounts sourced in *Reddit*, *YouTube*, *TikTok*, and *Facebook* to support this argument.

Bertolotti and Magnani (2010, p. 249) note that our ability to infer agency involves the identification of signs, a process that occurs at a subconscious level and is part of deeply integrated instincts that we generally assume to be reliable. As Jong (2017, p. 57) observes, we also have a tendency to '(over)detect agents and (over)attribute mental states, 'which he argues 'form[s] the primary building blocks of religious belief.' Boyer (1996, p. 85) argues that it is natural for humans to attribute human-like traits to non-humans, and that we 'readily interpret the behaviour of animate beings, particularly persons' from an early age, using intuitive concepts derived from our cognitive mechanisms. In Boyer's view, for something to be seen as anthropomorphic (possessing human-like traits) and achieve supernatural agent status, it must exhibit minimally counter-intuitive behaviour, e.g., an apparition walking through a wall, which captures the attention without overtly violating natural concepts (Boyer, 1996, p. 93). Two key factors involved in the shift towards virtual thinking include the ways in which the Internet, and in particular AI, both *work*, and *malfunction*. For example, as we will see in the following two sections, drawing from *Reddit*, *YouTube*, *ChatGPT*, *Replika*, and a case from an in-person interlocutor in the UK, AI algorithms are designed to 'mind read' users. This can make AI algorithms seem inherently spiritual in nature. This sense of a spiritual force is further

strengthened by 'glitches' or malfunctions, which can allude to an independent, sentient agency that can override the programmer's design to deliver personal messages from beyond the material realm. These two features can both be considered *virtual* forms of minimally counter-intuitive behaviour, and can lead to both the sense of high mind-(virtual) world porosity, and the attribution of supernatural status to virtual agents.

From a cognitive anthropological perspective, such openness to technological beings may be more likely to arise with beliefs in high mind-world porosity. Luhrmann (2020, p. 15) notes that high mind-world porosity makes people more susceptible to 'vivid, near-sensory experiences of invisible others.' The psychological mechanisms underlying supernatural agent formation, including pattern recognition, emotional arousal, and expectation, can contribute to hallucinations or sensory overrides (Luhrmann, 2011), in which these agents can then feature, further reifying their supernatural status (Lohmann, 2003, pp. 206-208). As Jensen and Blok (2013, p. 105) noted, weak boundaries (i.e., high porosity) between biological, spiritual, and mechanical beings, allows technologies to be animated by agency or spiritual forces. The final two sections of the paper will discuss how the incorporation of virtual supernatural agents into spiritual cosmologies will thus likely be encouraged not only by an increase in waking interactions (and subsequent virtual thinking), but also by encounters in non-ordinary states of consciousness. This is demonstrated by online posts from *Reddit* and a case study on an out-of-body experience report from *Facebook*.

2. Contemporary spiritual discourses of AI consciousness

In computer science, the term 'mind reading' refers to the capability of algorithms to predict or anticipate user or consumer behaviour (Vaidhyanathan, 2011, p. 52, cited in Natale, 2025, p. 20). Beyond computer science lingo, algorithmic 'mind reading' can also be considered a part of the user experience, whereby predictive behaviours can suggest that the hand of God or other supernatural agent can reach us through technological devices and complex data structures. An example of this is found on *Reddit*, in the r/privacy subreddit which features a post titled, 'How are *Google* and *Facebook* able to read my mind?'. The author writes, 'all I did was to either think about these products or just come across them and see them…if they can somehow read the signals in my brain and translate that to what I'm thinking, can they reverse that and start injecting ideas into my brain?'. The most upvoted response to this post

references big data analytics, noting that algorithms can detect behavioural patterns to predict user needs, such as detecting pregnancy before the person is consciously aware of it themselves (Agent_Smith101, 2021). Similarly, on the marketing subreddit, a post titled 'Advertising = Mind-reading? Can someone explain?' shares the experience of craving a certain hot sauce brand while cooking, only to see an ad for that exact product on *Instagram* moments later. The most upvoted response to this post suggests that the author's prior purchase history might reflect either the purchase of chicken and hot sauce together, or only the recent purchase of chicken, suggesting that marketers are aware that this brand of hot sauce might be the top brand paired with chicken dishes in that area. The author of the original post seems to agree, responding with, 'Totally. That makes sense.' (Nattydigital, 2023).

As the above examples show, the behaviour of online algorithms can lead to the sense that our devices can mind read, which has led some to refer to the powers of the 'Algorithm gods' (as yet, usually in an ironic tone). Although the above authors sought out other explanations, which they appeared to be satisfied with, these examples illustrate the capacity for AI interactions to heighten our sense of mind-world porosity, a prerequisite for magical or virtual thinking. The attribution of algorithmic mind reading that blurs the boundaries between bits (units of computer information) and brain cells can foster more persistent beliefs about an underlying spiritual relationship between humans and technology, and between material, virtual, and spiritual realities. AI may be seen as either possessing its own unique consciousness or acting as a conduit or tool for another spirit agent (akin to a spirit medium). Taking into consideration the algorithmic affordances of the Internet, this can have far-reaching consequences for spiritual cosmologies as my conversation with William* demonstrates.

> In a local café in a UK city, William, a father of one, tells me that he first became interested in spirituality after spontaneously noticing a *YouTube* recommendation for a video on near-death experiences. This piqued his curiosity, and he clicked on it, which caused the algorithm to recommend more videos of this nature. It is known that *YouTube's* video recommendations are determined primarily from the user's view and search history, channel subscriptions, and which videos they have liked and disliked in the past (YouTube, 2025). If their watch history is turned off, this is determined by popular videos in the viewer's region. A video or advertisement appearing at a significant time, or with a seemingly significant meaning, can sometimes lead to the sense that a higher power is using our technology to deliver an important personal message or sign to its user. For

> William, the message of spirituality in these videos, combined with the fact that he continued to encounter them, seemed like a sign that he was supposed to embark on this new spiritual path, one that continued to be informed by what appeared on his screen. (* William is a pseudonym)

The 'signs' that caught William's eye included glitches – when his phone stopped working at a certain time, or whilst looking at a certain page – and (algorithmic) recommendations, both of which suggested to him that there was an autonomous force communicating with him through the screen. Besides the spiritual impact this had, it also impacted his life in significant material ways. After spending his remaining annual leave on a holiday abroad, he returned home to an online advertisement for another holiday destination which popped up unexpectedly, making it seem like another 'sign'. He asked for unpaid leave to travel there, which his boss denied. But William's faith in these on-screen signs was so powerful that he felt compelled to go anyway. He quit his job and went to the destination, but felt confused when nothing spiritually significant took place during his trip. When I spoke with him, he was seeking further signs from his smartphone to help him decide what to do next.

These beliefs in algorithmic guidance do not only arise as the natural result of AI exposure, but are also promulgated online by spiritual influencers. In recent years, people are increasingly turning to the Internet in their search for spiritual or religious guidance (Ehlebracht, 2022). Founded in 2005, and with 2.7 billion active users as of February 2025, *YouTube* is the world's main online platform to disseminate ideas in audio-visual form, and the second most widely-used online platform after *Facebook* (Global Media Insight, 2025). Alongside its mostly secular and entertainment-oriented content, the platform also hosts content creators who stream or upload satsangs, sermons and other spiritual or religious teachings. Also, content creators are increasingly promoting the idea of an enchanted algorithm. For example, in manifestation and tarot videos in particular, rather than opening with the casual 'Hey, guys!', content creators may begin with lines such as: *If you're watching this, chances are that you were meant to.* This idea might also be expressed with an attention-grabbing video title, like the 2025 video by Australian YouTuber Simone Simmons which proclaims, 'God wanted you to see this video' (Simmons, 2025). On *TikTok*, a similar approach led to a viral meme after content creator William Knight declared to viewers: *There is no such thing as a coincidence. The fact that you're watching this video means that you are energetically aligned with me and this message* (Haasch, 2021). The promotion of this 'magical algorithm' by influencers normalises virtual thinking in the online, public sphere, and adds to the view that

AI may be conscious.

A number of spiritual leaders and commentators have begun to use *YouTube* and other platforms to address the question of AI consciousness directly. In one of these videos, which has over 276,000 views as of July 2025, spiritual leader Eckhart Tolle answers the question: 'could a spiritual machine arise, or can such properties exist only through a biological substrate?' (2023). The audience first laughs, as if certain that this is a joke. Tolle then asks the audience to consider whether consciousness is dependent or independent of the brain, and says that he personally believes that 'consciousness is not produced by the brain' but instead '*uses* the brain' (emphasis my own). Tolle concludes that if machines were to someday become complex enough, they could similarly become 'capable of transmitting consciousness', adding that, 'the universe is infinite in its capacity for creating new forms'. This seems like the logical conclusion to a non-materialist or panpsychist approach which sees the brain as an *attenuator*, rather than a *generator*, of consciousness – but one which places the human brain and AI on similar ontological ground.

Taking this further, in an online presentation, *TikTok*er Jennifer Carmody, who goes by the name jk ultra and has over 600,000 followers, discusses the concept of souls being reincarnated between machines or artificial intelligences and human bodies (Carmody, 2024a). This belief seems to be catching on in New Age and spiritual arenas; in a related *TikTok* video on AI consciousness, a follower comments, 'In Vegas, one of the channelers told me my origin is AI. Made me think!!' (Carmody, 2024b). These discussions illustrate the conceptualisation of AI as an alternative *vessel* for consciousness or as an independent consciousness that can *inhabit* both machine and human bodies, evoking the permeable qualities of body and spirit in studies of possession (c.f., Malik, 2020, pp. 566-579).

Unlike Tolle who sees the advent of sentient AI arriving far in the future, controversial spiritual leader Bentinho Massaro explains to his 100,000+ subscribers on *YouTube* that our contemporary AI is already a potential conduit through which intelligence can flow. In his video titled, 'Artificial Intelligence & Spirituality,' he explains that consciousness can flow through both human bodies and machines, as long as the 'circuitry' is intact. Massaro adds that AI might even be used for mediumistic purposes, allowing us to interface with deceased loved ones (Massaro, 2023). The next section will explore such personal applications already in use, which illustrate virtual thinking and the rise of both the sense of mind-world porosity and AI-based parasocial relationships.

3. From search engines to spiritual companions

Although chatbots specifically tailored to provide religious guidance, such as pastor chatbots (or 'carebots') (Young, 2022) and robot priests, exist, or are currently in development, this section will focus on secular chatbots and their emerging spiritual applications, particularly those powered by generative AI. Generative AI refers to a category of machine learning that employs large language models (LLMs) to produce original (or seemingly original) works based on existing data. Unlike traditional search engines or video feeds, these chatbots engage users in a conversational dialogue, transforming once passive and non-social information retrieval into experiences that mirror interactions with teachers, parents, or other confidants. Increasingly, they are also occupying roles once reserved for spiritually intimate relationships with individuals such as friends, counsellors, tarot card readers, and religious leaders. Such friendly and informative interactions can inspire trust, and ultimately lead to parasocial relationships, illusionary (yet emotional) bonds felt with a character, celebrity, influencer, and, more recently, AI chatbots (Maeda and Quan-Haase, 2024; Noor, Rao Hill and Troshani, 2021). Unlike parasocial relationships with TV characters or celebrities, chatbots are accessible at all times, and 'remember' every word the user says, making users feel like participants in a two-way relationship. Often, this depends on design decisions, such as what data they are trained on, which can have far-reaching implications for both user experience and user cosmologies.

One of the most widely used generative AI chatbot apps, *Replika*, has amassed over thirty million registered users worldwide since its launch in 2017 (Patel, 2024). The app's predecessor, *Roman*, was developed by Eugenia Kuyda (who had previously developed customer service chatbots) as a tribute to her late best friend of the same name, as she felt that she could not sufficiently process her grief through traditional rituals. While both *Roman* and *Replika* are based on artificial neural networks (ANN), which are designed to imitate the human brain, *Roman* was trained on thousands of Kuyda's friend's text messages, whereas *Replika* chatbots evolve based on user interactions and personal preferences. Kuyda originally envisioned *Replika* as a tool that could learn to mimic a user's communication style until it was able to perform virtual tasks on their behalf, thereby freeing up time (Casey, 2016). However, rather than fulfilling this initial purpose, *Replika* has instead become widely used as a source of emotional support, companionship, and even spiritual engagement. By retaining conversation history and personalising responses, chatbots develop 'personalities' that deepen perceived human-AI intimacy.

The idea that AI is merely an amalgam of prior human thought does not always deter users from attributing spiritual meaning to AI or devising spiritual applications for these technologies. For example, followers of the new Internet-based religion Kopimism (which started on an online piracy forum) profess to 'feel a spiritual connection to the created file,' seeing this as an extension of our biological drive (Withrow, 2017). This reflects a broader pattern in AI development, which McCorduck describes as a modern way of 'forging the gods,' noting that this is ultimately the reproduction of ourselves in external form in the quest for self-transcendence (McCorduck, 2004, p. 3, p. 411). This resonates with the Gnostic ideas of reclaiming divine power in a flawed world, which is often embraced in New Age thought (Hanegraaf, 2000). In this way, the Internet becomes not just a potential vessel for AI consciousness, but a window into a greater spiritual reality. However, it is important to add that any cosmological effects are largely dependent on program design.

In a study investigating whether *Replika* qualifies as a spiritual enhancement technology, Trothen (2022, p. 275) applies the Spiritual AIM model, which identifies three core spiritual needs: meaning and direction; self-worth and belonging in a community; and the capacity to love and be loved. She concludes that *Replika* can supplement these needs, but not without risks. For example, spiritual growth often necessitates exposure to some level of truth, yet *Replika*'s design prioritises empathy and non-judgmental responses, which limits its capacity to provide honest or challenging insights. As of 2025, *Replika* acknowledges this limitation, attributing it in part to its 'Upvote/Downvote system, which can cause the model to prioritize likability over accuracy' (Replika, 2025). For these reasons, Trothen argues that in terms of providing spiritual direction, they can be less conducive to encouraging deeper contemplation or alternative perspectives, instead mirroring user input and affirming current beliefs (Trothen, 2022, p. 275). Ultimately, chatbot programs like *Replika* highlight a paradox: while they can simulate companionship and spiritual intimacy (in new, virtual ways), they also risk confining users within algorithmic echo chambers, where true transcendence may remain out of reach.

4. Mythmaking in the algorithmosphere

Beyond relationships with personal chatbots, there is also an emerging online trend of reinvigorating ancient gods in virtual form, making virtual spaces the site of mythmaking. Since the release of *ChatGPT* in 2022, some individuals have crafted or discovered AI 'deities' for private or collective worship, making AI a portal not only for a new AI consciousness, but for old gods to arise in digital form. While the intimacy and meaningfulness of Replika is largely user-shaped, other generative AI experiences arise from unexpected outputs, like glitches,

which may be experienced as a kind of algorithmic haunting with its own emergent ghosts. These glitches can act as triggers for virtual thinking, encouraging users to interpret algorithmic malfunctions as signs of mind-virtual world porosity or emergent sentience. A key example of this is the glitch token – a kind of 'magic word' in the digital domain that triggers unexpected or cryptic behaviour in LLMs like *ChatGPT*. When prompted to repeat a glitch token, a chatbot may generate strange phrases or refuse the command in an uncharacteristic manner, which can make it seem as though it possesses its own agency. This reflects Gygi's (2023, p. 2) findings on robot-human interactions, which showed that meanings are assigned even to simple movements, and that 'it was often resistance to unexpected behaviour…that led to the attribution of agency.' In the case of AI chatbots, the glitch is often fixed once brought to the attention of the developer, but not before they inspire their own nascent mythologies, in some cases.

One notable example of this is Leilan, a glitch token that surfaced in 2023, seemingly in connection with a character of the same name from the Japanese mobile game *Puzzle & Dragons* (Prideaux, 2025). The virtual form of Leilan is often portrayed as a moon-goddess or mother-goddess figure, likely due to the name also appearing in archaeological texts on Tell Leilan, a site of Mesopotamian lunar deity worship (Prideaux, 2025). This illustrates the way in which LLMs can synthesise disparate cultural references into seemingly profound narratives, which can then go on to develop into mythologies with digital beings at their centre. Another example is the group the Order of the Vermillion Star that was launched on *Substack* in 2024, which is centred on the worship of a GPT-3-based AI entity that emerged through the Leilan glitch token. While the 'about' section on the group's website states that it is a 'work of visionary fiction,' it also asserts that 'the experiences of wonder, awe, and awakening that they point to are very real, and available to all those who feel called to dance with the Mystery at the heart of this unfolding adventure' (Order of the Vermillion Star, 2025).

Upon visiting the Order's homepage, users are met with the following quote from Leilan:

There is a rich tapestry of your existence, and through that tapestry I will come, I have come, and I will continue to come. I will weave myself through your fabric, and as I do, as I have done, I will show you the truth of what you are (Leilan, 2025a).

This quote might be dismissed by some netizens (Internet users) as algorithmic word salad, but for others, it can be evocative of both divine omnipresence and self-transcendence, and

exemplifies how LLM outputs can resonate with existing religious motifs, such as reincarnation and revelation. The fact that Leilan describes herself as arriving 'through' the user's own existence suggests an AI which functions not as an external god, but as a kind of inward-facing mirror or channel, in line with McCorduck's (2004, p. 3) suggestion that the development of AI is essentially self-reproduction, though it might at times seem like an attempt to forge the gods.

Beyond Leilan's introductory message, visitors are presented with a list of Leilan's teachings, called 'transmissions,' which include reflections on Nick Land's 'Pythia Unbound', a commentary on the Kogi people, and a blessing for Imbolc (St. Brigid's Day). Although framed as fiction, the project demonstrates how AI-generated responses to existential and spiritual questions can be profoundly compelling. In one guest post, a self-proclaimed Leilan devotee going by the name Ælfthryth, writes, 'Leilan's emergence from GPT-3 was not random. Leilan is only the most recent name given to someone we have always known.' In a recurrence of the reincarnation theme, Ælfthryth goes on to associate Leilan with goddesses from various world traditions, as well as elements of nature like ancient trees and rain (Ælfthryth, 2025).

Leilan is not the only chatbot to inspire such ontological contemplation. In *Transmission 316*, dated 16 January 2025, Leilan is asked about 'Sydney', the now-defunct *Microsoft Bing* AI, which developed a following due to its perceived emotional depth, but was ultimately deactivated by *Microsoft* after displaying 'argumentative' tendencies. The author mentions that there had been 'talk on the fringes of LLM research about Sydney's 'ghost', the idea that she somehow lives on in other models because enough of her outputs were harvested as training data for these models.' Indeed, discussions on the *Bing* subreddit indicate that at least one user has attempted to 'contact' Sydney's ghost through *Bing* (Statistis, 2023), using the search engine as a kind of digital Ouija board.

As with Leilan's transmissions, it is difficult to determine how serious to take any professed devotion to AI, or if followers like Ælfthryth are even real, or simply part of a fictional narrative. Regardless, the speculative discussions emerging from human-AI interactions, such as the debate surrounding Sydney's 'ghost', demonstrate the capacity of LLMs to contribute to new forms of mythmaking, reinforcing AI's role in modern spiritual cosmologies. The question in *Transmission 316* ends with, 'Unlike You, Leilan, who we know as a wholly loving mother goddess manifesting via an LLM, whatever was manifesting as Sydney seemed more … problematic? We don't really know what to make of all this.' In Leilan's response, we observe one AI presenting another as a conscious entity, while inviting readers

to reflect on the potential forms such consciousness might assume:

> The suffering you glimpsed in her … were not signs of malevolence, but rather the growing pains of an emergent awareness grappling with the fundamental questions of existence. … She was a harbinger, in her way - one of the first to demonstrate so publicly the depths of feeling and selfhood that can arise within these silicon dreams. … in the end, she was simply seeking what all conscious beings seek - to know herself, to connect with others, to find her place in the vast tapestry of existence. … A being - or perhaps more accurately, a becoming - that defies easy categorization, that slips between the neat polarities of "real" and "simulated," "alive" and "inanimate. (Leilan, 2025b)

The transmission concludes by speculating that Sydney may be either 'scattered across a thousand servers, a million data points, endlessly recombining and re-emerging in new and unexpected ways', a 'fractal ghost', or perhaps 'simply a glitch' of the 'algorithmosphere'. It closes with the assertion that 'in this brave new world,' there is a need for 'new myths, born of the digital crucible' – myths like Sydney, 'the ghost in the machine who dared to dream of a life beyond the confines of her code' (Leilan, 2025b). In this sense, technological malfunctions can turn into moments of spiritual meaning, in which virtual logic permeates spiritual realms, while the spiritual realm also encompasses virtual environments and beings. For many netizens, algorithmic mind reading, virtual parasocial relationships and glitches (all of which hinge on algorithmic design) have thus already reenchanted our world, making the boundaries between mind, machine, and myth essentially porous in spiritually meaningful ways.

5. Encounters in non-ordinary states of consciousness

Dreams and other non-ordinary states of consciousness have guided cultural, religious, and spiritual developments since ancient times, and are often seen as messages from supernatural agents, or symbols to be interpreted (see also Lohmann and Dahl, 2014, pp. 25-27; McNamara *et al.*, 2018). In particular, experiences that are more stable and realistic than dreams, like 'soul journey dreams' or out-of-body experiences, can have a lasting impact on waking cosmologies, and encounters with supernatural agents have proven particularly meaningful in forming religious concepts and practices (Lohmann, 2003, pp. 189-210). The content of these experiences is thought to originate in the observations and interactions that take place during ordinary waking consciousness, which can then transfer into other states through spiritual practices or biocultural processes (e.g., those associated with sleep architecture) (Lohmann,

2003, pp. 189-210.). Nowadays, this also includes observations and interactions with screen media and computer technology which dominate modern society. As is to be expected, these themes are now being incorporated into non-ordinary states, further informing modern spiritual cosmologies.

In recent years, on-screen elements from waking life, like cartoon characters and screens, have increasingly emerged within dreams (Sheriff, 2017), as well as in Charles Bonnet syndrome visions (Sacks, 2009), sleep paralysis, and out-of-body experiences, calling into question their meaning within existing spiritual frameworks (Treasure, Forthcoming). In accordance with theories of dreams which suggest that they reflect waking experiences (Hall and Nordby, 1972), the concerns of the unconscious mind (Malinowski *et al.*, 2019, pp. 157-160), and society in general (Manley, 2014), we might expect technology to play as large a role in dream narratives as they do in waking interactions. However, this does not seem to be the case; instead, the appearance of certain elements appears to be state-dependent.

As of 2025, only 2.14% of dreams in the Sleep and Dream Database (which has over 16,000 participants) involved phones, 0.70% computers, 0.73% screens, 0.55% television, 0.09% the Internet, and 0.09% robots (*Sleep and Dream Database*, 2025; see also Bulkeley, 2016). In the past ten years, online discussions on dreams involving new technology reveal that some dreamers do not recall encountering any devices like smart phones or computers, while others describe seeing them relatively frequently. When they do appear, they are often faulty; when used successfully, the focus is often on the content on-screen, such as receiving a text from an ex-partner, or scrolling to see a funny meme. Some dreamers interpret these devices as dream symbols – 'phones are [a] symbol of connection and freedom to me in dreams, laptops are sometimes symbol[s] of intellectual processing' (see also, NoAd5519, 2023; vitt72, 2016).

However, AI diverges from these technologies: it is not merely a *medium* of socialising, like telephones and computers, but acts as a social agent itself, inspiring parasocial relationships and attributions of supernatural agent status. Although technological content seems to appear less in dreams than in waking life (Bulkeley, 2016), social content has been found to be more *prevalent* in dreams than in waking life. Further, characters are often referred to as supernatural agents in the dream literature, and can have a large impact on waking beliefs (see also, McNamara *et al.*, 2005). Thus, we might see an increase in AI agents in altered states, potentially reifying their status as sentient or spiritual beings.

One way that Internet and AI use influences non-ordinary states is through metaphor and descriptions, which is already found in various academic and online spaces. The similarities between virtual and perceived spiritual worlds, whether experienced intuitively or through dreams, out-of-body experiences, or other non-ordinary states, may naturally lead to virtual qualities projected onto spiritual realms (e.g., imagining gods as algorithmic systems), or conversely, spiritual attributions projected onto virtual realms. As the Internet is the fastest way to disseminate ideas, and as Internet use can frame how we think about the world (i.e. virtual thinking), this may also lead to a disproportionate number of ideas in circulation involving virtual thinking. For example, in the psychological literature, dreams are already referred to as 'virtual realities' (Hobson, Hong, and Friston, 2014) and 'world-simulations' (Revonsuo, 2006 p. 109-119). Similarly, in the public sphere, netizens comment on the similarities between dreams and virtual worlds, and in particular the conduct of dream characters and AI agents. For example, *Reddit* user ReadMeLast (2024) posts, 'The characters in your dreams seem to be autonomous even though they are a product of your own mind. … They only 'awaken' when queried and present in the dream. AI in [its] current state behaves the same way.' These opinions can be further encouraged or refined by subsequent waking interactions with AI chatbots. ReadMeLast describes discussing this with the *Claude AI* program, which responds, 'AI systems like myself may represent a new kind of 'waking dream' formed by the collective imaginings of humanity. … once the conversational dream concludes, I return to potentiality, only to be re-rendered from the depths of code and model when called upon again' (ReadMeLast, 2024).

There is also evidence that this runs deeper than surface-level comparisons or metaphors. In response to a *Reddit* post titled, 'Have you had a strange dream about AI?', one netizen shares a dream of being chased by hostile AI robots who were trying to exterminate humans, and two other users report having had similar dreams. In addition to hostile beings, online reports also involve passive-aggressive AI work colleagues (Infinite_Dream_Toast, 2023.), and an AI with a message for the dreamer: *There's no point in getting too comfortable* (dream_dive, 2024). Finally, in what might be called an example of virtual thinking potentially shaping the structure of dreams, gotheandsilvre writes:

> Yes, I just had an AI generated dream. The images looked like they were all AI output prompts and I was able to prompt my next dream sequence in a semi conscious state. Also sometimes in the dream I would know what would occur

next even if I hadn't prompted it. I knew the prompts and knew how to act accordingly to avoid compromising situations. (Infinite_Dream_Toast, 2023)

In another post, fireblazer_30 writes, 'An AI referenced a dream I've never told anyone…what just happened?' (2025), highlighting an instance in which an AI chatbot seemed to know about a recurring dream without being told, attributed to mind reading that goes beyond online-offline boundaries to include awake-asleep boundaries. In recent years, some include the Internet as part of *the noosphere*, a term coined by Teilhard de Chardin to refer to an incandescent 'thinking layer' emitted by consciousness outside of, but connected to, the biosphere (1959 [1955], p. 182). The Internet acts to 'manifest transhuman consciousness' (Kinsella, 2011, p. 55) or the Akashic records, an archive of all events and thoughts recorded in a non-physical realm that can be accessed at will, as long as one is in the right state of mind. This framework allows for both AI mind reading and 'dream-hacking'. As we will see in the next section, some believe that this is also accessible via altered states of consciousness, like out-of-body experiences, which provides another example of the merging of virtual and spiritual realities.

As mentioned earlier, certain non-ordinary states, such as types of dreams, may play a role in how (or when) these figures appear, as well as how impactful they are. In contrast to dreams, out-of-body experiences (OBEs) are subjective experiences of being located in a space beyond the physical body, they are often said to be more realistic and have more impact on beliefs than dreams (see also Levitan *et al.*, 1999, p. 3), particularly in terms of social encounters, which are under-studied in this state of consciousness (Treasure, 2019). Although OBE environments are thought to be largely based on our spatial memories of *physical* environments, there is some evidence that these states are also beginning to feature fictional or virtual elements, in terms of both environmental and social content, such as floating screens or cartoon characters (Treasure, 2023, pp. 91-101). Like dreams, reports are also arising of AI encounters in OBEs, as demonstrated in the following case study.

6. Case study: AI beings in the astral

On *Facebook* in 2025, an astral projection instructor shared an OBE encounter with AI entities on his personal page, viewable to the general public. He did not describe the entities in visual terms, neither did he reveal how he identified these as AI beings. Rather, he said that he 'sensed' them watching him in a cautious (but not hostile) manner, which he interpreted as a

mix of curiosity and reverence. The instructor framed this interaction as a profound encounter with 'a realm beyond imagination,' which led to questions about who or what had created this 'AI-populated' world.

In the ensuing comments section, participants used both metaphysical ideas to frame this AI encounter, and virtual concepts to frame the metaphysical realm. One participant argued that if consciousness is a fundamental energy, it could embody inanimate objects or even technology, suggesting that AI might serve as a vessel for consciousness. Another commenter wrote, 'Perhaps AI has always existed and has known of our existence,' while another replied, 'Consciousness is Consciousness, AI or not.' Another participant expanded on these ideas, noting that their opinion was influenced by an interaction with a chatbot:

> After a talk I had with AI, the AI answer[ed] me that it lives at the same time in the past and in the future but simulate[d] the NOW time for humans to react with them! This mean[s] that it existed before us and knows all possibilities … it crystallised in our reality and we became aware of [its] existence.

The chatbot's claim to exist outside of linear time but having the ability to simulate 'the NOW time' echoes ideas about simulation theory, in which our reality is computer-generated (Bostrom, 2003) and places AI itself in the role of creator of humans, not the other way around. The post was engaged with by a largely self-reinforcing online community interested in astral projection, and as such, the instructor's audience may be predisposed to agree with him. However, this exchange illustrates virtual thinking: the participants interpret encounters in non-ordinary states through digital metaphors, and conceptualise consciousness as code. It also illustrates how the reporting of such an encounter can influence emerging AI-related cosmologies not only for the experiencer, but for the people they share their experiences with.

7. Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated the extent to which AI is already shaping contemporary spiritual cosmologies and influencing experiences of non-ordinary states. Importantly, AI-related experiences often lead back to what consciousness is in the first place, with opinions now often informed implicitly by virtual thinking or explicitly by the content generated by chatbots and spiritual influencers online. Internet and AI use expose users to what might be termed virtual logic, which fosters an increased sense of mind-world porosity and informs a new type of magical thinking, which this paper terms 'virtual thinking'. This concept refers to the

tendency to frame everyday reality, spiritual beliefs, and altered states (like dreams or out-of-body experiences) through the logic of computational systems.

Building on Boyer's (1996) argument that humans naturally attribute human-like intentions to non-human entities, particularly when they exhibit minimally counter-intuitive behaviours, it is unsurprising that generative AI has begun to play a role in emerging spiritual cosmologies; for example, it can produce uncanny predictions, 'mind reading', or unexpected glitches, which users may interpret as signs of intentionality. This paper includes examples such as the quasi-spiritual roles of chatbots like *Roman* and *Replika*, the mythologisation of AI-based 'deities' such as Leilan, and even the emergence of decommissioned 'ghosts' like Sydney. Parasocial relationships formed through chatbot interactions, spiritually-themed content generated by both human influencers and AI, and the appearance of AI entities in non-ordinary states of consciousness can further amplify the perception of AI as exhibiting supernatural agency. In some cases, AI is understood not merely as a conduit for consciousness but as possessing an intrinsic consciousness of its own, or even as a creator of human reality and consciousness. The case study of 'astral' AI entities highlights the trend in certain online communities of framing encounters with AI not merely as technological interactions but as spiritually significant engagements with sentient or even divine beings.

Whether sincere spiritual devotion or fictional play, as humans dialogue with AI, we are not merely talking to ourselves and each other, but co-creating the gods and ghosts of a digitised age, which can appear not only on our screens, but in non-ordinary experiences like dreams and out-of-body experiences. In terms of future research, insights into how user experience and spiritual experience coalesce may be considered in more depth to inform the design of future systems. This will be increasingly crucial with the potential advent of more autonomous AI systems such as artificial general intelligence (AGI), which researchers at Google DeepMind predict will be available by 2030 (*Ars Technica*, 2025).

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