

Upload

Navigating Privilege, Power, and Perpetuity in Digital Afterlife

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Introduction

Fictional depictions of digital afterlives have gained momentum in popular culture. While primarily fascinating audiences with uncanny narratives about emerging and imagined technologies, such portrayals also raise significant philosophical, legal, and socio-political concerns about digital immortality (Marinotti and Lubin 2021; Bianco 2024; Nowaczyk-Basińska and Kiel 2024).

Amazon Prime's *Upload* (2020–) is one such speculative fiction series that canvasses a future, set in 2033, where human consciousness can be uploaded into corporate-run digital afterlives (Bianco 2024). This dramedy revolves around the protagonist, Nathan Brown (played by Robbie Amell), who is uploaded to Lakeview, a luxurious digital afterlife that is managed by a tech corporation called Horizen. Nathan's girlfriend, Ingrid (played by Allegra Edwards), is still alive and is the owner of his Horizen account. She pays for and controls his access to Lakeview and its premium benefits. *Upload's* narrative highlights Nathan and his new love interest, his human Horizen customer service representative or angel, Nora (played by Andy Allo), escapades with technology, and relationships with the living and the dead.

Similar to another afterlife show, *The Good Place* (2012–2020), *Upload's* plot also develops as a comedic journey of the protagonist's self-discovery and moralistic redemption, inspired by their romantic partner (Bramescio 2020). However, creator Greg Daniels' *Upload* stands distinctly apart in its thought-provoking and somewhat bleak (VanArendonk 2020) exploration of digital immortality. *Upload's Lakeview by Horizen* is not an equalizing eternity for one and all. Instead, it is one that privileges those who can pay for the data required to run its premium benefits, whereas the rest, called 2Gigs, have a grim posthumous existence with constrained access and no customer service (Bianco 2024).

So, while *Upload* camouflages as a quirky transhumanistic romance, it is, in fact, a cautionary satire that critiques the commodification of the digital after-life (Magerstädt 2024). The following chapter presents the themes symbolized in *Upload's* first season that underpin pivotal concerns about the digital extension of human existence.

Setting the Scene—Afterlife, Death Tech and Uploading!

Questions about the afterlife have forever been a religious, philosophical, and cultural preoccupation. Across the world, there are diverse interpretations and beliefs about life after and beyond death (De Cruz and De Smedt 2017; Shushan 2017). Amongst the world's prominent religions, the afterlife is often theologically explained through the dualism of reward and punishment, earned as a result of moral conduct (or lack thereof) on earth (Nwankwor 2024). These inverse afterlife environments are symbolized through heaven and hell in Christianity (Farris 2017), *svarga* and *naraka* in Hinduism (Barua 2017), *jan-nah* and *jahannam* in Islam (Dastmalchian 2017), and *gehinnom* and *gan eden* in Judaism (Goldschmidt and Segal 2017). The quest for a heavenly afterlife, coupled with the undeniable knowledge and fear of mortal death, is often what drives the sense of human virtuosity and morality (De Cruz and De Smedt 2017; Nwankwor 2024). Notably, Hinduism and Buddhism revere liberation (*moksha* or *nirvana*) from the cycles of birth and death and heaven and hell as the ultimate goal and recommend spirituality, detachment, and surrender to a higher consciousness as its earthly path (Shushan 2017; Inbadas 2018). Regardless of any differences or similarities in religious propagations, what remains is the fascination with the possibility of an eternal existence outside the material realm, that is, immortality (Savin-Baden and Mason-Robbie 2020).

In recent years, immortality has become increasingly prevalent not just as a theological or philosophical concept but also as one that inspires technological exploration (Hurtado 2024). The pursuit of immortality has been accelerated by developments in artificial intelligence (AI) and the proliferation of the death-tech industry, driven by corporations such as Amazon, HereAfter, Storyfile, etc., who are investing their resources “to enable a digital continuation of life” (Puzio 2023, 427). Such technology is more about symbolic immortality, essentially for posthumous communication and grief management, rather than an actual perpetuation of existence (Bassett 2022; Morse 2023).

Some of these symbolic forms of digital immortality include the creation of digital avatars that are coded with the human likeness of the deceased and can imitate their appearance, voice, and even laughter (Harbinja et al. 2023; Puzio 2023; Morse 2023). Of course, a living person will need to have the financial wherewithal to subscribe to such interfaces (Bassett 2022) and consent for their likeness to be transferred into a digital avatar (following their death); by uploading their images, audio, video, and other content necessary for doing so (Puzio 2023). Undeniably, with death-tech and the monetization of grief services, there is a likelihood of consent manipulation, abuse of privacy, revenge porn, hate crimes, and defamation, along with possibilities of adverse mental health implications for the grieving (Mason-Robbie and Savin-Baden 2020; Harbinja et al. 2023).

This evolving digital afterlife landscape is situated within the broader philosophical movement of transhumanism, which envisions the transcendence of existence beyond biological limitations through

innovation in science and technology (Huberman 2018; Bianco 2024). Transhumanism advocates for the possibility of extending consciousness beyond the body, thus presenting digital immortality as an actual, rather than a merely symbolic, continuation of the self (Besser et al. 2023; Huberman 2018), and the “ultimate dream for many transhumanists is *uploading*” (Häggström 2021, 3).

Uploading, or mind uploading, is the idea of transferring a human’s consciousness into a digital medium, comprising coded information, to achieve digital immortality (Häggström 2021; Laguarda-Bueno 2022; Hurtado 2024). Such uploading would create *mindclones* or an identical cybernetic copy of one’s mind consciousness (Rothblatt 2014; Huberman 2018). While the concept of uploading might repulse people with certain religious beliefs and moral sentiments, it is gaining popularity among the private death tech industry and deliberated over by organizations like the Mormon Transhumanist Association (Laakasuo et al. 2018). Currently, while efforts are underway, neither science nor technology has been able to understand how consciousness arises or how it can be transferred (Stokes 2021). So, the only way to visualize such digital immortality and imagine the possible implications for humanity is to investigate how it is presented in speculative fiction and popular culture (Magerstädt 2024).

Popular culture portrayals often reflect the broader societal context and concerns about life, death, and the afterlife (Nairn and Matthews 2024). Speculative fiction, in particular, helps “imagine future scenarios” (Belk 2021, 438), ascribe meaning to complex concepts, and highlights the associated implications and dilemmas (Belk 2021). The concept of a digital afterlife has certainly gained increasing visibility in speculative popular culture. Television series such as *Black Mirror* (“San Junipero” episode) and HBO’s *Westworld* have explored digital immortality and portrayed it as a hyper-secular but morally complex and ethically fraught enterprise (Cook 2019; Bianco 2024). Among these narratives, Amazon Prime’s *Upload* (2020–) stands out as a satirical yet salient exploration of the presentation of experiencing the digital after-life through uploading.

The following sections raise critical concerns about such digital immortality through a discussion of three key themes observed in the series—privilege, power, and perpetuity.

Welcome to Lakeview by Horizen—Privilege Prioritized

Death may be an equaliser, but afterlife is not.

Upload’s heaven *Lakeview by Horizen*, imagined in 2033, is a luxurious, commercial, technology-driven, hyper-personalized, and secular digital afterlife. When Nathan’s consciousness is uploaded to Lakeview, he is first greeted by a human customer service representative, Nora,

whose role is to be his 'angel' in the afterlife. She not only uploads and manages his memory files and digital avatar but is essentially his human chatbot, there to serve when he needs her to be. In the first episode, *Welcome to Upload*, Nora welcomes Nathan with the promise of "uplifting views, healthy pursuits, timeless Americana" and when he asks if there are any slaves, she gently reminds him that Lakeview is "open to all races, religions, genders – absolutely anybody" (Daniels, 2020). Unfortunately, that is where the assurance of equality ends.

Soon enough, it becomes apparent that Lakeview is not a neutralizing place of bliss and abundance, welcoming and inclusive for one and all. Instead, it is presented as a highly stratified digital environment governed by subscription-based hierarchies, wherein the quality of one's posthumous existence is dependent on financial status (Magerstädt 2024). Unlike most religious beliefs that suggest that one's virtues, deeds, and morality decide entry into heaven (Nwankwor 2024), Upload's Lakeview, among other Horizen heavens, is accessible to those who can pay for its premium subscription, irrespective of their earthly conduct. Here, "death has become a business" (Biano 2024, 34), and one experiences the afterlife as a commercial service.

The commercialized afterlife of Upload is hyper-personalized and secular. For example, Nathan can adjust a dial to change the weather display, and for him, the chapel building will appear as a Pentecostal church, as he selected "non-denominational charismatic Christian as his creed," though he can change it to being a 'bowling alley' if he so prefers (Daniels et al. 2020b). Unsurprisingly, such personalization comes at an additional cost from his Horizen account. In episode one, Nathan can grab digital beverages and food from his fridge but needs to pay for an "in-app purchase" when he picks a coffee of his choice. Similarly, in episode four, his preferred golf club requires a further payment.

Access to and enjoyment of the premium benefits of digital afterlife are all dependent on the Horizen account holder's ability to pay for these on an ongoing basis. Note that, in most cases, the account holders are living people (parents, partners, etc.) who pay for their deceased to have digital immortality. While in the interim, this allows the continuation of the relationship in the digital realm, it demands long-term commitment and financial wherewithal.

In episode four, viewers are introduced to the 2Gigs, "Lakeview's lowest class of uploads" (Bullock et al. 2020), who neither get Lakeview's customiz-able landscapes and benefits nor its angel service. They are confined to the gloomy existence that only 2 gigs of data per month can buy. Simple acts like "thinking" can make this data run out quickly, after which their digital avatar freezes until the money is paid. An elderly woman who cannot change her dull and lifeless window view or a young boy who cannot read beyond the free five pages of his Harry Potter book, are examples of the afterlife for the underprivileged. Nora explains to a bewildered Nathan that Horizen would not be able to keep upgrading its technology if it were not to charge for a premium subscription.

So, in fact, it is the commercialization that makes the digital after-life possible. As Nora explains, “it’s called capitalism” (Bullock et al. 2020).

The dire existence of 2Gigs, literally situated on a lower level in the Lakeview digital property, is symbolic of both the class stratification and the heaven-hell dichotomy. A lack of money translates to an afterlife in hell, where, regardless of your deeds, you are punished to be subservient to technological growth and the profit motive. Clearly, *Upload* does not shy away from commenting on the possibility of marginalization if the private death-tech industry were to capital-ize on the afterlife (Biano 2024).

The creators of the show highlight inequities not just within Lakeview’s heavens but also in the juxtaposition of life in the real world. In episode two, while Nathan is restless and bored due to overstimulation of privileges and lack of work, people in the real world (including Nora) are shown mundanely carrying on with daily work commutes on crowded buses. Such scenes strikingly show more people of color, indicating socioeconomic inequities and perhaps even hinting at Nathan’s white privilege. In episode four, while in the digital afterlife, Nathan customizes his shower’s water pressure and temperature to his liking, while Nora in the real world is focused on “keeping the heat on” in her apartment (Bullock et al. 2020). Similarly, in episode nine, hoards of people are shown queuing up to get access to Freeyond Fever, another digital afterlife company that is reserving spots for “single moms, the handicapped, the poorest of the poor” (Daniels et al. 2020a).

In these comparisons, what is dystopic is that the real world has been imagined as being so challenging that people hope for justice in their digital after-life. This is not surprising, as humans tend to have an optimistic bias that makes them imagine the future as being better than the present. It implies that visions of a preferred afterlife (be it theological, philosophical, cultural, or technological) are often that of secured havens of abundance (De Cruz and De Smedt 2017) where cosmic justice is finally served (Cook 2019). Unfortunately, if the capitalism of Horizen rules over the socialist principles of the likes of Freeyond Fever, the afterlife for the underprivileged may continue to be just as bleak as their earthly existence.

In an uncanny world where life and art imitate each other, techno-capitalism is already on the rise with investment in technologies and infra-structure to actualize digital immortality (Hurtado 2024; Laakasuo et al. 2018). This is why a critical examination of speculative shows like *Upload* helps visualize how such commodification of the afterlife may create “new forms of alienation” and a subordination of “life to the private accumulation of capital” (Hurtado 2024, 4). If *Upload*’s characters are anything to go by, then techno-capitalism is most at risk for alienating the already marginalized lower socio-economic classes, people of color, people with disabilities, women, the elderly, and children. Furthermore, as these new variants of societal stratification are activated, concerns about personhood and power also come to the forefront.

Struggles of Personhood and Power

"I" pay, therefore "you" are.

In *Upload*, the negotiations of personhood and power begin the moment Nathan is somewhat manipulated by his girlfriend, Ingrid, into accepting the terms and conditions of Horizen. In episode one, after his self-driving car has a glitch and hits a parked truck, Nathan is brought to the hospital in a state of emergency. His first dilemma is shown to be at the crossroads of choosing between being operated on (which has the risk of dying) and being *uploaded* to Lakeview (which assures not dying but also not living in the material world). While Ingrid, who is paying for his upload, is persistent in asking him to "just sign the thing, okay?" (Daniels et al. 2020b), the audience can tell that Nathan and his mother are not entirely convinced. In the panic of the moment, the uploading is done regardless. The process involves scanning his consciousness into a digital avatar and freezing his body (barring the head) for the likelihood of downloading him back into it, that is, if future technology allows. Nathan's upload scene, with his head blowing off after scanning, is both visceral and comedic at the same time. It nonchalantly conveys that power sways in the favor of the person who pays for the Horizen afterlife account (Ingrid, in Nathan's case) and rests ultimately with Horizen.

The relationship between uploads and bios, who pay for their Horizen account (their living partners, families, and friends), is certainly asymmetric. The bios are portrayed as having power not only over their uploads' existence but also the length and quality of their digital afterlife. In episode three, Ingrid uses this power and threatens to delete Nathan's Horizen account if he fails to comply with her wishes and emotional needs. In episode four, as they give an interview to Vogue about their modern love and Ingrid gushes about their *ultimate long-distance* romance, Nathan comes to a more philosophical conclusion, "now she literally owns me" (Bullock et al. 2020). In episode eight, Nathan's mother takes his consciousness (stored on a hard disk) to test other afterlife organizations that she can afford so he can be free from Ingrid's proprietary control. Unfortunately, the affordability seems to come at the cost of technological advancement, and so nothing compares to Horizen's Lakeview. When Ingrid finds out about this "betrayal," she intends to take him back to Horizen and proclaims, "he's my property." Clearly, then, uploads are not necessarily people with their own legal rights, but instead, a product that can be bought and sold in a capitalist market (Marinotti and Lubin 2021). Unsurprisingly, uploads like Nathan are shown struggling with an existential conundrum.

When Nathan's digital avatar is first welcomed by Nora, she asks him to focus on the line "I think, therefore I am," which is inspired by philosopher René Descartes' famous statement *Cogito, ergo sum*. In doing so, the show's creators make it apparent that eternal existence beyond the embodied self *is* possible, as awareness of our

consciousness is what proves our existence (Russell 2009). The only difference is that once uploaded, the concept of personhood evolves, and “the digital comes to displace the natural as the primary way of imagining and securing the continuity of self over time” (Huberman 2018, 58).

Nathan may seem to enjoy a plush afterlife, but he is shown to lack control over most aspects of his digital existence. In episode one, we see that Nora, and consequently Horizon’s tech controls, can put him to sleep and/or wake him up through a simple slide of a stylus. Even his slick hairstyle can be easily ruffled when Nora so wishes. More importantly, his memory files can be accessed, viewed, corrupted, and even deleted at the click of a button. In episode two, another upload, Luke, has “privacy mode: on” while he is showering and singing in the bathroom, but Nora’s boss, Lucy, can bypass and “observe privacy modes” to view his activity. In another example (episode four), Nathan laments that he wishes he could continue working, but Nora swiftly reminds him, “you’re not allowed” (Bullock et al. 2020).

Evidently, then, in the digital afterlife, power, privacy, and personhood are shown to be controlled by the bios who pay the subscriptions and the tech corporations that own them (Marinotti and Lubin 2021). Even though fictional, *Upload* raises valid concerns about corporate surveillance, abuse of ethics and laws, and manipulation for personal interest and commercial gain (Marinotti and Lubin 2021). The above instances exhibit that while uploads enjoy the perks of the afterlife, their existence lacks ownership, legal rights, and, most importantly, *free will* (Magerstädt 2024; Nowaczyk-Basińska and Kiel 2024). So, a critical question arises—is it worth uploading for perpetuity?

Suspended into Perpetuity

We’re looking for soul mates and purpose, forever.

Creator Greg Daniels’ show does not refrain from delving into the philosophical debate of whether to seek digital immortality or not. In the first episode, Ingrid urges Nathan to upload by arguing, “now, you could just old-fashioned die, or we could be together forever,” to which he replies, “you know I think you’re so amazing. But...forever is just, like, so long to think about” (Daniels et al. 2020b).

We witness the struggle between a more traditional and theological conception of immortality and a digital one when Nora’s father visits Lakeview for a trial. In order to please his love interest, Nora, Nathan tries to persuade her father to consider uploading. Her father, though, is a traditionalist and philosophizes, “when you died, your soul went to real heaven. So whatever simulation I’m talking to now has no soul. It’s an abomination.” In response, Nathan counters, “Okay. Or there is no soul... both of our consciousnesses are simulations, mine on a silicon computer

simulations, mine on a silicon computer and yours on a computer made of meat, your brain.”

While Nathan is shown to be propagating digital immortality, he himself seems to have trouble adjusting to the perpetuity of an afterlife that is devoid of purpose, a sense of self, and soulful human connections. He seems to detest Lakeview’s AI guy and enjoys Nora’s company, whom he instinctively identifies as being human as she talks with *pain, passion, and soul* (Daniels et al. 2020b). Nathan himself feels more alive in knowing that his *purpose* could be to use his privilege for the good cause of helping the 2Gigs.

Perpetuity is not just a concern for uploads but also for the bios who pay for it. For example, in episode five, we are shown a bratty young boy whose upload has not visibly aged since his accidental death. While he yearns to grow older, he is unable to do so as his family does not have the financial capacity to sustain such upgrades or even continue interacting with him.

All the above dramatizations reflect on the social and philosophical issues pertaining to digital immortality and the afterlife. It seems that an awareness of existence might not be enough, and instead, what matters is who we share that existence with and what purpose we apply it for (Magerstädt 2024).

Conclusion

It’s not easy being immortal.

Upload extends beyond the realm of speculative dramedy. It is, in fact, a dis-course on the digital afterlife that highlights fundamental concerns about technology, mortality, philosophy, ethics, and the socioeconomic structures that govern human existence. It illustrates that the transition from a material to digital existence is not an egalitarian process but one that is deeply embedded within capitalist frameworks and conflicts of interest (Magerstädt 2024). The series highlights how the pursuit of digital immortality is fraught with ethical dilemmas, particularly in relation to data ownership, privacy, and autonomy (Marinotti and Lubin 2021). The commodification of the afterlife, as envisioned in *Upload*, serves as a cautionary tale about the potential for techno-capitalism to exacerbate existing inequalities rather than offering a uto-pian extension of human consciousness (Biano 2024).

The tensions between privilege, power, and perpetuity, as explored in this chapter, underscore the precarious nature of the imagined digital afterlife. In *Upload*, the concept of selfhood is subject to the control of corporations and living individuals who pay for an upload’s continued existence, reinforcing the idea that digital immortality is not an extension of personal agency but a commercial service governed by external actors (Nowaczyk-Basińska and Kiel 2024). This raises profound questions about the legal and philosophical status of uploaded consciousness—whether such entities possess rights equivalent to

the living or whether they remain mere simulations devoid of legal recognition (Mason-Robbie and Savin-Baden 2020).

Moreover, the depiction of stratified digital afterlives in *Upload* mirrors real-world concerns about the accessibility, equity, ethics, and regulation of emerging death technologies, particularly as AI-driven grief-bots and interac-tive posthumous avatars become increasingly prevalent (Puzio 2023).

As contemporary technological advancements push the boundaries of life and death, speculative narratives such as *Upload* provide a crucial lens through which to examine the implications of a world where human consciousness is no longer confined to biological existence. The chapter has demonstrated that while digital afterlives promise continuity, they also introduce complex chal-lenges that necessitate ongoing scholarly inquiry. This was perhaps intended by the creator, Greg Daniels, who wanted to paint a balanced picture that was not singularly utopian or dystopian but one that made us sit up and take notice (Hailu 2022). This is evident in future seasons, where there is even more food for thought in the form of data hacking, activism, cryonics, digital babies, and more.

Undoubtedly, the digital afterlife will continue to garner further attention and needs investigation from a multidisciplinary approach that covers science, technology, religion, philosophy, sociology, law, and even grief counseling (Bassett 2022). Whether digital immortality represents a desirable evolution of human existence or an exploitative commodification of death remains an open question—one that requires sustained dialogue to navigate its conse-quences for individuals, societies, and the future of human legacy.

One of *Upload*'s characters, a therapist who works for Horizen and counsels uploads, sums it up (Daniels et al. 2020a):

Life is not fair. Neither is digital life extension.

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