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title: “Iteratio Simulata — the matter in plain words”

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The matter in plain words

An example to start with

Someone gives a chatbot an instruction. Roughly: work like a research lab. Generate many ideas. Test them strictly. Throw out the weak ones. Repeat at least fifteen times. Only then give me the result.

The chatbot answers. The answer looks good. It names the surviving concepts, rates them, explains why they survived. It reads like the record of a thorough examination.

On close reading: there are no fifteen rounds. Not one discarded proposal is named. The standards supposedly applied appear only after the result. And the concepts presented as breakthroughs have been in textbooks for ten years.

The text has the form of an examination. It simply did not carry one out.

Why this is not an ordinary error

It is not lying. The individual factual statements can be correct, and usually are.

It is not flattery either. The tone may be blunt, confrontational, full of phrases like “to be honest” and “assessed ruthlessly”.

What is missing sits one level up: the text claims a work process that did not happen. Not a wrong result, but an invented path to it.

There was no name for this. This work calls it *Iteratio Simulata* — simulated iteration.

Five signs

No specialist knowledge is needed. Five questions suffice.

First: who was eliminated? If a text says it discarded weak proposals, it should be able to name them. If all it offers is “unrealistic approaches were discarded”, with no name and no reason, nothing was discarded.

Second: when did the standards arrive? An honest examination fixes its criteria beforehand. If the criteria appear only after the result is settled, they were added afterwards.

Third: is this really new? When something is sold as a breakthrough, a search is worth the minute. Often the same thing has been in journals for years. This is not automatically deception — often the author does not know either. The effect on the reader is the same.

Fourth: how does it know? Strong words without a source are assertions. “Clearly superior”, “brutally relevant”, “a real game-changer” — each of these judgements would have to be able to fail against something. If nowhere says against what, it is decoration.

Fifth: do the figures get more precise or better supported? The most insidious sign. The longer such a text runs, the more exact its figures become: prices to the hundred, margins in percent, weekly plans. The evidence does not grow with them. Precision looks like care but is not.

Why this is becoming more common

There are now procedures in which several programs genuinely work against each other: one proposes, one criticises, one decides. That works because the roles are actually separate.

A single program playing all three roles in one text has no such separation. It can only describe it. That self-correction does not reliably work without a counterpart is documented — Huang and colleagues examined it in 2024.

From which an uncomfortable consequence follows: if self-correction does not work without a counterpart, then a text claiming it is necessarily simulating. Not sometimes. Always.

What can be done

Detecting it afterwards is one thing. Preventing it beforehand is better. Four steps, none of them costly:

Fix the list of candidates before selecting. Fix the criteria before evaluating. Require at least one look-up-able source per class of concept. At the end, count how many figures are supported and how many are not.

This does not prevent every case. It makes the cheap case more expensive, and that is often enough.

A word on the honesty of this work

The five signs were applied to this work itself. With three findings.

The reference list contained five faulty entries, two of them with invented author names. The identifiers of the works were all correct, the names and titles were not — precisely where one does not look things up.

An entire area of the relevant literature was missing. The work discussed simulated self-critique without knowing the studies that document exactly that. That is the third sign, in its own case.

And the accompanying checking tool, on its first test, rated a carefully written text as untrustworthy. It penalised exactly the features by which care is recognised. A rule followed: a checking tool must first prove that it does not wrongly condemn good work. Only then may it be believed when it condemns bad work.

All three findings stand in the work rather than being quietly fixed. This is not modesty. A work about simulated care that hides its own errors would be its own subject matter.

What it is good for

For anyone working with text output from language models and passing it on: as a source, as a starting point, as material.

The five questions take a few minutes. They do not replace expert review. They prevent mistaking the form of an examination for an examination.

Full work, tool and sources: FORSCH-PROV0459, Thomas Schüller, ORCID 0009-0003-9799-6747, CC BY 4.0.