from the present moment to the era of machine rule that opens the first *Matrix* movie. The animated short is framed as a documentary produced by a machine intelligence to explain the events leading to machines' triumph over the humans. "The Second Renaissance" provides the timeline for the *Matrix* universe, giving a context for events such as the trial of B116ER, the first machine to kill a human, the Million Machine March, and the "darkening of the skies" that are mentioned in other *Matrix* texts. As Maeda explains,

> In Part One, we see humans treat robots as objects, while in Part Two the relationship between human being and robot switches, as humans are studied by the machines. I enjoyed examining how the two sides changed. . . . I wanted to show the broadness of the society, and how the robots were such a part of the background of life that they were treated as mere objects by human beings. . . . In exploring the history of *The Matrix*, I wanted to show the audi-

To shape our response to the images of human authorities crushing the machines, Maeda tapped the image bank of twentieth-century civil unrest, showing the machines throwing themselves under the treads of tanks in a reference to Tiananmen Square or depicting bulldozers rolling over mass graves of crashed robots in a nod toward Auschwitz.

"The Second Renaissance" provides much of the historical background view-

happened in previous episodes. By the 1990s, many of these battles had been fought and won, helped perhaps by the presence of the VCR that allowed people to review favorite series and the Internet that could provide summaries for people who did miss key plot points. The push on series such as *Babylon 5* (1994) or *The X-Files* (1993) was toward season-long story arcs (and plot information that unfolded gradually across multiple seasons). Today, even many sitcoms depend heavily on audience familiarity with program history. And shows such as *24* (2001) assume an audience will be able to remember events that occurred weeks before on television but only a few hours earlier in the story.

As a television series, *Dawson's Creek* was not a radical departure from network norms, but what it did on the Web was more innovative. The device of the desktop allowed the producers to take viewers deeper inside the heads of the characters, to see other dimensions of their social interactions. Because they coordinated with the series writers, the Web team could provide back story for upcoming events. As Pike explained, "If Aunt Jenny is sending e-mail out of the blue, there's a reason, and you had better keep an eye on it, because in three or four or five episodes, when Aunt Jenny arrives, you are going to feel good because you already know this character was from the 60s and drinks too much. You know the complete back story so that when the character walks on screen, you know who they are and your relationship to the series has been enriched. We've done our job."

From the start, the Dawson's Desktop team collaborated with the program's active fans. Its producers said they were inspired to expand the story from reading all of the fan fiction that sprang up around the characters. They

closely monitored the five hundred or so *Dawson's Creek* fan sites and created an advisory board of twenty-five creators who they felt had developed the best amateur content. As Andrew Schneider, a leader of the project, explained, "We're in touch with them all the time. We wanted to make sure the fans were getting what they wanted. They helped us design the interface and they told us what they liked and did not like."[1] As the site continued, the fans were encouraged to send their own e-mails to Dawson as if they were fellow Capeside High students, and he would respond to their fictional personas on the site. In that way, the producers integrated the creative energy of the fan community into developing new content, which, in turn, would sustain fan interest.

[1] Darren Crosdale, *Dawson's Creek: The Official Companion* (London: Ebury, 1999), pp. 145–147.

ers need as they watch Neo return to 01, the machine city, to plead with its inhabitants for assistance in overthrowing the agents. Without learning about the many times the machines had pursued diplomatic relations with the humans and been rejected, it is hard to understand why his approach yielded such transforming results. Similarly, the images showing the humans' efforts to block off the Earth from solar rays resurfaces when we see Neo's craft go above the cloud level and into the blue skies that humans have not seen for generations. "Second Renaissance" introduces many of the weapons deployed during the final assault on Zion, including the massive "mecha" suits the humans wear as they fight off the invaders.

At the same time, "The Second Renaissance" builds upon "Bits and Pieces of Information," one of the *Matrix* comics drawn by Geof Darrow from a script by the Wachowski brothers.[38] The comic introduced the pivotal figure of B116ER, the robot who kills his masters when he is about to be junked and whose trial first asserted the concept of machine rights within human culture. Much like "The Second Renaissance," "Bits and Pieces of Information" draws on the existing iconography of human-rights struggles, quoting directly from the Dred Scott decision and naming the robot after Bigger Thomas, the protagonist of Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940). If the first feature film started with a simple opposition between man and machines, the Wachowski brothers used these intertexts to create a much more emotionally nuanced and morally complicated story. In the end, man and machines can still find common interests despite centuries of conflict and oppression.

Most film critics are taught to think in terms of very traditional story structures. More and more, they are talking about a collapse of storytelling. We should be suspicious of such claims, since it is hard to imagine that the public has actually lost interest in stories. Stories are basic to all human cultures, the primary means by which we structure, share,

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and make sense of our common experiences. Rather, we are seeing the emergence of new story structures, which create complexity by expanding the range of narrative possibility rather than pursuing a single path with a beginning, middle, and end. *Entertainment Weekly* proclaimed 1999, the year that *The Matrix, Fight Club, The Blair Witch Project, Being John Malkovich, Run Lola Run, Go, American Beauty,* and *The Sixth Sense* hit the market, as "the year that changed the movies." Filmgoers educated on nonlinear media like video games were expecting a different kind of entertainment experience.[39] If you look at such works by old criteria, these movies may seem more fragmented, but the fragments exist so that consumers can make the connections on their own time and in their own ways. Murray notes, for example, that such works are apt to attract three very different kinds of consumers: "the actively engaged real-time viewers who must find suspense and satisfaction in each single episode and the more reflective long-term audience who look for coherent patterns in the story as a whole . . . [and] the navigational viewer who takes pleasure in following the connections between different parts of the story and in discovering multiple arrangements of the same material."[40]

For all of its innovative and experimental qualities, transmedia storytelling is not entirely new. Take, for example, the story of Jesus as told in the Middle Ages. Unless you were literate, Jesus was not rooted in a book but was something you

From Appointment Television to Engagement Television

The transmedia model has been closely linked to larger shifts in the ways that the American television industry thinks about its consumers—away from an appointment-based model towards an engagement-based paradigm. Under the appointment model, sometimes described as "Must See TV" (a phrase from a 1980s advertising campaign for NBC's Thursday night lineup), the networks sought committed viewers who would arrange their lives to be home at a certain time to watch their favorite programs. New mechanisms since then allow consumers to access television content on their own schedules—video cassette recorders and later digital video recorders, digital downloads, video iPods, and boxed sets of DVDs. By 2007, the networks were basing programming decisions on a hybrid model which combined data about those watching as the program was broadcast with those watching at some later point (though the value of this "time-shifting" was measured in terms of its proximity to the scheduled air date). Revenues from these alternative platforms were increasing central to the funding of content production.

These shifts in the context of viewing have pushed both the television and advertising industries to seek alternative mechanisms for measuring audience engagement. One participant at a media industry gathering summarized the challenges of defining engagement: "We're talking to one agency who thinks that loyalty is an important factor, and they measure that by the number of people who have watched three out of four episodes. Another thinks it's persistence, and that's measured by numbers of minutes watched per show. And there's others who want to look at

'persuasiveness.' We actually did a literature review and there are 8 different words and phrases that people have used to get at this concept."[1]

On the creative side, a series of groundbreaking cult programs, including *Alias*, *Lost*, *24*, *Battlestar Galactica*, *The Sopranos*, *The Shield*, *The Wire*, and *Heroes*, defined what engagement television looked like. As writers like Jason Mittell and Stephen Johnson have noted, these series were marked by narrative and formal complexity, often represented through ensemble casts, extended story arcs, and a constant intensification and deferral of narrative enigmas.[2] The reliance on ensemble casts and on the mixing of different entertainment genres means that these series provide multiple points of entry, supporting fans with different perspectives and interests. So, *Lost* balances puzzles (what's the status of the Island? what can we learn from deciphering the map?) with backstory (how did each of these characters get here? what issues do they face back home?) and narrative enigmas (what will happen next as the characters work through interpersonal alliances, struggle with the Others, and undergo a process of personal redemption and corruption?). Whereas complexity in the 1980s might have been defined in terms of the need to provide "quality drama" for a demographically elite consumer, today's "complex" programs typically offer genre entertainment hoping to draw in the younger males who were abandoning television

encountered at multiple levels in your culture. Each representation (a stained-glass window, a tapestry, a psalm, a sermon, a live performance) assumed that you already knew the character and his story from someplace else. More recently, writers such as J. R. R. Tolkien sought to create new fictions that self-consciously imitated the organization of folklore or mythology, creating an interlocking set of stories that together flesh out the world of Middle Earth. Following a similar logic, Maeda explicitly compares "The Second Renaissance" to Homeric epics: "I wanted to make this film as beautiful as a story from ancient Greek myth, and explore what it means to be human, as well as not human, and how the ideas are related to one another. In Greek myths there are moments where the best side of human nature is explored, and others where the protagonists are shown as very cruel. I wanted to bring the same atmosphere to these episodes."[41]

When the Greeks heard stories about Odysseus, they didn't need to be told who he was, where he came from, or what his mission was. Homer was able to create an oral epic by building on "bits and pieces of information" from preexisting myths, counting on a knowledgeable audience to ride over any potential points of confusion. This is why high school students today struggle with *The Odyssey*, because they don't have the same frame of reference as the original audience. Where a native listener might hear a description of a character's helmet and recognize him as the hero of a partic-

[1] See Ivan Askwith, "TV 2.0: Turning Television into an Engagement Medium," Master's thesis, Comparative Media Studies Program, MIT, Cambridge, MA, 2007.

[2] Jason Mittell, "Narrative Complexity in Contemporary American Television," *The Velvet Light Trap* 58, no. 1 (2006): 29–40; Stephen Johnson, *Everything Bad Is Good for You* (New York: Riverhead, 2006).

ular city-state and, from there, know something of his character and importance, the contemporary high school student runs into a brick wall, with some of the information that once made these characters seem so real buried in some arcane tome. Their parents may confront a similar barrier to fully engaging with the film franchises so valued by their children—walking into an *X-Men* movie with no background in comics might leave you confused about some of the minor characters who have much deeper significance to long-term comics readers. Often, characters in transmedia stories do not need to be introduced so much as reintroduced, because they are known from other sources. Just as Homer's audience identified with different characters depending on their city-state, today's children enter the movie with preexisting identifications because they have played with the action figures or game avatars.

The idea that contemporary Hollywood draws on ancient myth structures has become common wisdom among the current generation of filmmakers. Joseph Campbell, the author of *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949), praised *Star Wars* for embodying what he has described as the "monomyth," a conceptual structure abstracted from a cross-cultural analysis of the world's great religions.[42] Today, many screenwriting guides speak about the "hero's journey," popularizing ideas from Campbell, and game designers have similarly been advised to sequence the tasks their protagonists must perform into a similar physical and spiritual

for games and other interactive entertainment. Once such fans were drawn into a program, they demanded more in-depth and intensive relationships with the content.

By 2006–2007, the networks were announcing transmedia strategies for all of their programs. NBC called it 360 entertainment; ABC, EnhancedTV. Among the more common strategies were the development of short additional scenes for consumption via mobile platforms (such as a series of "mobisodes" developed around secondary characters in *The Office*, or a highly compressed storyline for *24*), the deployment of alternative reality games by shows like *Lost* or *Torchwood*, spinoff books that were embedded in the fiction (such as *Lost*'s *Bad Twin* or *the Guiding Light*'s *Oakdale Confidential*), podcasts which offered fans a more intimate glimpse into the thinking processes of producers (including those centering around *Battlestar Galactica*), and social network site profiles allowing fans to express their affiliations with particular characters (such as those created around *Veronica Mars* or *Gossip Girl*).

For the superhero drama *Heroes*, a series of Web comics, released each week in coordination with the aired content, provided an ideal vehicle for providing backstory on the expanding cast of characters: "We had so many stories to tell and there was only so much room in the TV show—so we decided that we could tell these alternative stories in the comics. The stories could be deeper, broader and reveal more secrets about our characters. It was also a way to tell stories that would be otherwise unproduceable on our show."[3] Having learned from earlier

[3] Jeph Loeb, *The Heroes Interview, Heroes Volume One* (La Jolla, CA: Wildstorm, 2007), pp. 233–235.

experiments such as Dawson's Desktop or *The Animatrix*, the producers sought to respect and reward different modes of viewing: "We have to service the broadcast audience first and make sure they understand what the hell is going on, that they can tune into the broadcast episodes and get it. But we want to add value for the core fans who are interested in going deeper into the show. Often we are struggling with what do we reveal online, what do we reveal on the show. That's an interesting challenge that we have because we have the transmedia outlet to be able to expand our stories" (*Heroes* executive producer Jesse Alexander).[4]

In another experiment in transmedia storytelling, the producers of *CSI:NY* collaborated with Linden Lab, the creators of *Second Life*, a popular virtual world, and with Electric Sheep, an advertising company closely associated with strategies of transmedia branding. Viewers could enter a digital re-creation of the crime scene introduced in one episode and work through clues together before the solution to the mystery was announced on a subsequent episode. Electric Sheep's Damon Taylor outlined the multiple goals behind this highly publicized initiative:

> Potential new users who are fans of *CSI: NY* will care about this crossover because it will give them the opportunity to wrestle with *CSI* content in a way that has never been made available to them before. . . . In the meantime, we give new users who have never been in a virtual world a closed universe experience where they can come into *Second Life*, familiarize themselves with this world and what it means to be in a vir-

[4] Jesse Alexander, "NBC's *Heroes*: 'Appointment TV' to 'Engagement TV'?", MIT Communications Forum, November 15, 2007, http://web.mit.edu/comm-forum/forums/heroes.html.

ordeal.[43] Audience familiarity with this basic plot structure allows script writers to skip over transitional or expository sequences, throwing us directly into the heart of the action.

Similarly, if protagonists and antagonists are broad archetypes rather than individualistic, novelistic, and rounded characters, they are immediately recognizable. We can see *The Matrix* as borrowing these archetypes both from popular entertainment genres (the hacker protagonist, the underground resistance movement, the mysterious men in black) as well as from mythological sources (Morpheus, Persephone, The Oracle). This reliance on stock characters is especially important in the case of games, where players frequently skip through the instruction books and past early cut scenes, allowing little time for exposition before grabbing the controller and trying to navigate the world. Film critics often compared the characters in the *Matrix* films to video game characters. Roger Ebert, for example, suggests that he measured his concern for Neo in *Revolutions* less in terms of affection for the character and "more like the score in a video game."[44] *Slate*'s David Edelstein suggests that a spectacular opening stunt by Trinity in *The Matrix Reloaded* "has the disposable feel of a video game. You can imagine the program resetting itself, and then all of those little zeros and ones reassembling to play again."[45] In both cases, the writers use the video game analogy to imply a disinterest in the characters, yet, for gamers, the experience is

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one of immediacy: the character becomes a vehicle for their direct experience of the game world. By tapping video game iconography, the *Matrix* movies create a more intense, more immediate engagement for viewers who come into the theater knowing who these characters are and what they can do. As the film continues, we flesh out the stick figures, adding more back story and motivation, and we continue to search for additional insights across other media as we exit the theater.

When I suggest parallels between *The Odyssey* and the *Matrix*, I anticipate a certain degree of skepticism. I do not claim that these modern works have the same depth of incrusted meanings. These new "mythologies," if we can call them that, are emerging in the context of an increasingly fragmented and multicultural society. While the *Matrix* films have been the subject of several books linking them to core philosophical debates, and while many fans see these films as enacting religious myths, articulating spirituality is not their primary function, the perspective they take is not likely to be read literally by their audience, and their expressed beliefs are not necessarily central to our everyday lives. Homer wrote within a culture of relative consensus and stability, whereas the *Matrix* emerges from a time of rapid change and cultural diversity. Its goals are not so much to preserve cultural traditions as to put together the pieces of the culture in innovative ways. *The Matrix* is a work very much of the moment, speaking to contemporary anxieties about technology and bureaucracy, feeding on current notions of multiculturalism, and tapping recent models of resistance. The story may reference a range of different belief sys-

tual world, and play and interact with mystery game experiences that interest them. This crossover gives fans of *CSI: NY* a reason and an excuse to come into a virtual world and do something that is functional, exciting, interesting, and engaging.[5]

This close collaboration between program producers, brand gurus, and new media companies suggests rapid growth of industry interest in transmedia entertainment over just a few short years. By late 2007, these transmedia strategies had become so fully integrated into the way American network television operates that they became one of the focal points for an extended writers' strike. Network executives and production companies sought to define transmedia content as "promotional," whereas the creative workers argued that such content was now integral to the program's creative development (not to mention its own source of revenue). Advertisers demanded deals which extended their brand campaigns into this transmedia space. Writers were not being compensated for this content in the same way as they would be for broadcast material. All of this points back to the complex interweaving of creative and economic goals behind these new cross-platform strategies.

[5] Sam Ford, "Producing The *CSI:NY*/Second Life Crossover: An Interview with Electric Sheep's Taylor and Krueger," Confessions of an Aca-Fan, October 24, 2007, http://henryjenkins.org/2007/10/producing_the_csinysecond_life .html

tems, such as the Judeo-Christian Messiah myth, to speak about these present-day concerns with some visionary force. At the same time, by evoking these earlier narratives, *The Matrix* invites us to read more deeply in the Western tradition and bring what we find there to bear on contemporary media.[46]

Consider, for example, this reading of the tribal celebration in *The Matrix Reloaded* through the lens of biblical interpretation:

> The feet [stamping] on the ground means that Zion is on Earth. Plain and simple. This parallels the Architect scene, and gets to the main thesis. We are cast out of the "perfection" of Heaven and living in the Real World. Symbolically, the Matrix is Heaven. Cypher makes this point in the first movie. The Real World is hard, dirty, and uncomfortable. The Matrix is, well, paradise. This point is made again in the first movie by Agent Smith, who calls the Matrix "the perfect human world" [paraphrased]. Recall that the Architect scene happens in utterly clean, utterly white perfection. The Biblical reference is clear enough. Neo, Trinity, Morpheus, and the rest of Zion have rejected God's Garden of Eden where all their needs are taken care of in favor of a hard, scrabbling existence where at least they have free will.[47]

So, even if you see classical myths as more valuable than their contemporary counterpart, works such as *The Matrix* draw consumers back to those older works, giving them new currency.

Film critic Roger Ebert ridicules this attempt to insert traditional myth into a pop science fiction/kung fu epic:

> These speeches provide not meaning, but the effect of meaning: it sure sounds like those guys are saying some profound things. This will not prevent fanboys from analyzing the philosophy of *The Matrix Reloaded* in endless web postings. Part of the fun is becoming an expert in the deep meaning of shallow pop mythology; there is something refreshingly ironic about becoming an authority on the transient extrusions of mass culture, and Morpheus (Laurence Fishburne) now joins Obi-Wan Kenobi as the Plato of our age.[48]

This criticism looks different if you accept that value arises here from the process of looking for meaning (and the elaboration of the story by the audience) and not purely from the intentionality of the Wachowski brothers. What the Wachowski brothers did was trigger a search for

meaning; they did not determine where the audience would go to find their answers.

Additive Comprehension

If creators do not ultimately control what we take from their transmedia stories, this does not prevent them from trying to shape our interpretations. Neil Young talks about "additive comprehension." He cites the example of the director's cut of *Blade Runner,* where adding a small segment showing Deckard discovering an origami unicorn invited viewers to question whether Deckard might be a replicant: "That changes your whole perception of the film, your perception of the ending. . . . The challenge for us, especially with *The Lord of the Rings,* is how do we deliver the origami unicorn, how do we deliver that one piece of information that makes you look at the films differently." Young ex-plained how that moment inspired his team: "In the case of *The Lord of the Rings: Return of the King* the added comprehension is the fact that Gandalf is the architect of this plan and has been the architect of this plan for some time. . . . Our hope is that you would play the game and that would motivate you to watch the films with this new piece of knowledge which would shift your perception of what has happened in the previous films." Here, Young points toward a possibility suggested by the books but not directly referenced in the films themselves.

Like his colleague Danny Bilson, Young sees transmedia storytelling as the terrain he wants to explore with his future work. His first experiment, *Majestic,* created a transmedia experience from scratch with bits of information coming at the player

The Cloudmakers and the "Beast"

They called it the "Beast." The name started with the Puppetmasters, the Microsoft team hired to put together what was perhaps the world's most complex puzzle, but soon the name was also being used by the Cloudmakers, a self-selected team of more than five hundred players who were working together to solve it. The "Beast" was created to help promote the Steven Spielberg film *Artificial Intelligence: A.I.* (2001), but most people who lived through it would laugh in your face if you thought the film was in any sense more important or more interesting than the game it spawned.[1]

[1] Charles Herold, "Game Theory: Tracking an Elusive Film Game Online," *New York Times,* May 3, 2001; Keith Boswell, "Artificial Intelligence—Viral Marketing and the Web," *Marketleap Report,* April 16, 2001, http://www.marketleap.com/report/ml_report_05.htm; Pamela Parker, "Who Killed Evan Chan? The Intelligence behind an AI Marketing Effort," *Ad Insight,* May 8, 2001, http://www.channelseven.com/adinsight/commentary/2001comm/comm20010508.shtml; Christopher Saunders, "The All-Encompassing Media Experience," *Internet Advertising Report,* June 27, 2001, http://www.turoads.com/richmedia_news/2001rmn/rmn20010627.shtml.

Here's how one of the game's Puppetmasters, Sean Stewart, described the initial concept:

> Create an entire self-contained world on the web, say a thousand pages deep, and then tell a story through it, advancing the plot with weekly updates, concealing each new piece of narrative in such a way that it would take clever teamwork to dig it out. Create a vast array of assets —custom photos, movies, audio recordings, scripts, corporate blurbage, logos, graphic treatments, web sites, flash movies—and deploy them through a net of (untraceable) web sites, phone calls, fax systems, leaks, press releases, phony newspaper ads, and so on ad infinitum.[2]

The threshold (or what designers call "the rabbit hole") into this vast universe of interconnecting Web sites was the mystery surrounding the death of Evan Chan and the question of what Jeanine Salla, the "sentient machine therapist," knew about it. But Chan's death was simply the device that set the plot into motion. Before the game was over, the players would have explored the entire universe where Spielberg's film was set, and the authors would have drawn upon pretty much everything they had ever thought about.

From the start, the puzzles were too complex, the knowledge too esoteric, the universe too vast to be solved by any single player. As one player told CNN, "To date, puzzles have had us reading *Gödel, Escher and Bach*, translating from German and Japanese, even an obscure language called Kannada, decrypting Morse code and Enigma, and performing an unbelievable range of operations on sound and image files."[3]

[2] Sean Stewart, "The A.I. Web Game," http://www.seanstewart.org/beast/intro/.

[3] Daniel Sieberg, "Reality Blurs, Hype Builds with Web A.I. Game," http://www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/2001/coming.attractions/stories/aibuzz.html.

via faxes, cell-phone calls, e-mail, and Web sites. With *The Lord of the Rings* games, he worked within the constraints of a well-established world and a major movie franchise. Next, he is turning his attention toward creating new properties that can be built from the ground up as cross-media collaborations. His thinking races far ahead: "I want to understand the kinds of story comprehension which are unique to transmedia storytelling. I've got my world, I've got my arcs, some of those arcs can be expressed in the video game space, some of them can be expressed in the film space, the television space, the literary space, and you are getting to the true transmedia storytelling."

With *Enter the Matrix*, the "origami unicorn" takes several forms, most notably refocusing of the narrative around Niobe and Ghost. As the game's designer, David Perry, explains, every element of the game went toward helping us understand who these people are: "If you play as Ghost, who's a Zen Buddhist Apache assassin, you'll automatically ride shotgun in the driving levels, which allow you to fire out the window at agents hunting you down. Niobe is known in Zion as being one of the fastest, craziest drivers in the *Matrix* universe, so when you play the game as her, you'll get to drive through a complex *Matrix* world filled with real traffic and pedestrians, while a computer-controlled Ghost takes out the enemies."[49] Cut scenes (those moments in the game which are prerecorded and not subject to player intervention) give us more insight into the romantic

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triangle among Niobe, Morpheus, and Locke, which helps to explain, in part, Locke's hostility to Morpheus throughout the film. Having played through the game, you can read the longing and tension within their on-screen relationship. As for Ghost, he remains a background figure in the movie, having only a handful of spoken lines, but his screen appearances reward those who have made the effort to play the game. Some film critics complained about the degree to which Niobe's character displaces Morpheus from the center of *The Matrix Revolutions,* as if a minor character were upstaging a well-established protagonist. Yet, how we felt about Niobe would depend on whether we had played *Enter the Matrix.* Someone who had played the games would have spent, perhaps, a hundred hours controlling Niobe's character, compared to less than four hours watching Morpheus; struggling to keep the character alive and to complete the missions would have resulted in an intense bond that would not be experienced by viewers who saw her on screen only for a handful of scenes.

Perhaps the most spectacular example of "additive comprehension" occurred after the film trilogy had been completed. With little fanfare or warning, on May 26, 2005, Morpheus, Neo's mentor, was killed off in *The Matrix Online,* while trying to reclaim Neo's body that had been carried away by the machines at the end of *Revolutions.* As Chadwick explained, "They wanted to start with something significant and meaningful and shock-

To confront the "beast" required players to work together, seeking out friends, tapping Web communities, drawing in anyone you could find. Before long, smaller teams joined forces, until there was an army of scavengers and puzzle-solvers, putting in hours and hours a day trying to find their way to the bottom of the conspiracies.

Both the Puppetmasters and the Cloudmakers have conceded that this was a game everyone was making up as they went along. The team at Microsoft had no idea that the Beast would spark this level of fan commitment and interest, and the fans had no idea how far the producers would be willing to go in order to keep them engaged with the mystery. Tom, one of the Cloudmakers, explained, "As we got better and better at solving their puzzles, they had to come up with harder puzzles. They were responding to stuff we were saying or doing. When we cracked a puzzle too fast, they would change the type of puzzles. There was one point that we found things in their source code that they didn't intend to be there. And they had to write some story to cover this. They were writing just a little ahead of players."[4] Writing the game proved to be every bit as challenging. Stewart explained, "At our best—like the players—we were scary good and scary fast. . . . It was street theater and a con game and a pennant drive rolled into one."[5]

The Beast was a new form of immersive entertainment or encyclopedic storytelling, which was unfolding at the points of contact between authors and consumers. Jane McGonigal, who worked with some of the Puppet-

[4] Tom, interview with author, April 2003.

[5] Stewart, "The A.I. Web Game."

masters to develop the follow-up game ilovebees, calls the genre alternate reality gaming (ARG). She defines ARGs as "an interactive drama played out online and in real world spaces, taking place over several weeks or months, in which dozens, hundreds, thousands of players come together online, form collaborative social networks, and work together to solve a mystery or problem that would be absolutely impossible to solve alone."[6] True to the logic of affective economics, 4orty2wo Entertainment, the company that Stewart and others created to advance alternate reality games, explains that such activities generate product and brand awareness: "Our aim is to carve the client's world into today's cultural landscape, so that, like Middle Earth or Hogwarts, it becomes a priority destination for the American imagination. . . . We create communities passionately committed to spending not just their money but their imaginations in the worlds we represent."[7] That's what they must have told the funders.

For the most hard-core players, these games can be so much more. ARGs teach participants how to navigate complex information environments and how to pool their knowledge and work together in teams to solve problems. McGonigal argues that ARGs are generating "players who feel more capable, more confident, more expressive, more engaged and more connected in their everyday lives."[8] A well-designed ARG reshapes the way participants think about their real and

[6] Jane McGonigal, "Alternate Reality Gaming," presentation to MacArthur Foundation, November 2004, http://avantgame.com/McGonigal%20ARG%20MacArthur%20Foundation%20Nov%2004.pdf.

[7] "Capabilities and Approach," http://www.4orty2wo.com.

[8] McGonigal, "Alternate Reality Gaming."

ing and this was it."[50] A major turning point in the franchise occurred not on screen for a mass audience but in game for a niche public. Even many of those playing the game would not have witnessed the death directly but would have learned about it through rumors from other players or from some other secondary source. Morpheus's death was then used to motivate a variety of player missions within the game world.

EA's Young worried that the Wachowski brothers may have narrowed their audience by making too many demands on them:

> The more layers you put on something, the smaller the market. You are requiring people to intentionally invest more time in what it is you are trying to tell them and that's one of the challenges of transmedia storytelling. . . . If we are going to take a world and express it through multiple media at the same time, you might need to express it sequentially. You may need to lead people into a deep love of the story. Maybe it starts with a game and then a film and then television. You are building a relationship with the world rather than trying to put it all out there at once.

Young may well be right. The Wachowski brothers were so uncompromising in their expectations that consumers would follow the franchise that much of the emotional payoff of *Revolutions* is accessible only to people who have played the game. The film's attempts to close down

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its plot holes disappointed many hard-core fans. Their interest in *The Matrix* peaked in the middle that tantalized them with possibilities. For the casual consumer, *The Matrix* asked too much. For the hard-core fan, it provided too little. Could any film have matched the fan community's escalating expectations and expanding interpretations and still have remained accessible to a mass audience? There has to be a breaking point beyond which franchises cannot be stretched, subplots can't be added, secondary characters can't be identified, and references can't be fully realized. We just don't know where it is yet.

Film critic Richard Corliss raised these concerns when he asked his readers, "Is Joe Popcorn supposed to carry a *Matrix* concordance in his head?"[51] The answer is no, but "Joe Popcorn" can pool his knowledge with other fans and build a collective concordance on the Internet.[52] Across a range of fan sites and discussion lists, the fans were gathering information, tracing allusions, charting chains of command, constructing timelines, assembling reference guides, transcribing dialogue, extending the story through their own fan fiction, and speculating like crazy about what it all meant. The depth and breadth of the *Matrix* universe made it impossible for any one consumer to "get it," but the emergence of knowledge cultures made it possible for the community as a whole to dig deeper into this bottomless text.

Such works also pose new expectations on critics—and this may be part of

virtual environments. As McGonigal explains, "the best pervasive games do make you more suspicious, more inquisitive, of your everyday surroundings. A good immersive game will show you game patterns in non-game places; those patterns reveal opportunities for interaction and intervention."[9] A well-designed ARG also changes the ways participants think about themselves, giving them a taste of what it is like to work together in massive teams, pooling their expertise toward a common cause. They develop an ethic based on sharing rather than hording knowledge; they learn how to decide what knowledge to trust and what to discard. Here's how one of the Cloudmakers, the largest and most influential team on the AI game, described their self-perception: "The 7500+ people in this group . . . we are all one. We have manifested this idea of an unbelievably intricate intelligence. We are one mind, one voice. . . . We have become a part of something greater than ourselves."[10]

For Barry Joseph, one of the Cloudmakers, the game didn't just immerse him in the *A.I.* world. Solving the game together changed what the film meant, offering up an alternative vision of the ways that people would be living and interacting in an era of new information technologies. Against the pessimism many found at the heart of the story, "the image of humans living in fear of technology's ubiquitous eye," they had their own experience of "cooperative behavior that takes advantage of the powers of a group mind." The game's

[9] Jane McGonigal, "A Real Little Game: The Performance of Belief in Pervasive Play," http://avantgame.com/MCGONIGAL%20A%Reak%20Kuttke%20Game%20DIGRA%202003.pdf.

[10] Jane McGonigal, "This Is Not a Game: Immersive Aesthetics and Collective Play," http://www.seanstewart.org/beast/mcgonigal/notagame/paper.pdf.

content taught them to fear the future; the game's play experience to embrace it.[11]

[11] Barry Joseph, "When the Medium Is the Message," May 25, 2001, http://cloudmakers.cloudmakers.org/editorials/bjoseph525.shtml.

what Corliss was reacting against. In writing this chapter, I have had to tap into the collective intelligence of the fan community. Many of the insights I've offered here emerged from my reading of fan critics and the conversations on discussion lists. While I possess some expertise of my own as a longtime science fiction and comics fan (knowing for example the ways that Paul Chadwick's previous work in comics connects to his participation in the *Matrix* franchise), this merely makes me one more member of this knowledge community—someone who knows some things but has to rely on others to access additional information. I may have analytic tools for examining a range of different media, but much of what I suggest here about the links between the game and the films, for example, emerged not from my own game playing but from the conversations about the game online. In the process of writing this chapter, then, I became a participant rather than an expert, and there is much about this franchise which I still do not know. In the future, my ideas may feed back into the conversation, but I also will need to tap the public discussion in search of fresh information and insights. Criticism may have once been a meeting of two minds—the critic and the author—but now there are multiple authors and multiple critics.

Inhabiting such a world turns out to be child's play—literally. Transmedia storytelling is perhaps at its most elaborate, so far, in children's media franchises like *Pokémon* or *Yu-Gi-Oh!* As education professors David Buckingham and Julian Sefton-Green explain, "*Pokémon* is something you do, not just something you read or watch or consume."[53] There are several hundred different *Pokémon*, each with multiple evolutionary forms and a complex set of rivalries and attachments. There is no one text where one can go to get the information about these various species; rather, the child assembles what they know about the *Pokémon* from various media with the result that each child knows something his or her friends do not and thus has a chance to share this expertise with others. Buckingham and Sefton-Green explain: "Children may watch the television cartoon, for example, as a way of gathering knowledge that they can later utilize in playing the computer game or in trading cards, and vice versa. . . . The texts of *Pokémon* are not designed merely to be consumed in the passive sense of the word. . . . In order to be part of the *Pokémon*

culture, and to learn what you need to know, you must actively seek out new information and new products and, crucially, engage with others in doing so."[54]

We might see such play with the possibilities of *Pokémon* or *Yu-Gi-Oh!* as part of the process by which young children learn to inhabit the new kinds of social and cultural structures Lévy describes.[55] Children are being prepared to contribute to a more sophisticated knowledge culture. So far, our schools are from others is still classified as cheating. Yet, in our adult lives, we are depending more and more on others to provide information we cannot process ourselves. Our workplaces have become more collaborative; our political process has become more decentered; we are living more and more within knowledge cultures based on collective intelligence. Our schools are not teaching what it means to live and work in such knowledge communities, but popular culture may be doing so. In *The Internet Galaxy* (2001), cybertheorist Manuel Castells claims that while the public has shown limited interest in hypertexts, they have developed a hypertextual relationship to existing media content: "Our minds—not our machines—process culture. . . . If our minds have the material capability to access the whole realm of cultural expressions—select them, recombine them—we do have a hypertext: the hypertext is inside us."[56] Younger consumers have be-come informational hunters and gatherers, taking pleasure in tracking down character backgrounds and plot points and making connections between different texts within the same franchise. And so it is predictable that they are going to be expecting these same kinds of experiences from works that appeal to teens and young adults, resulting in something like *The Matrix*. Soon, we may be seeing these same hypertextual or transmedia principles applied to the quality dramas that appeal to more mature consumers—shows such as *The West Wing* (1999) or *The Sopranos* (1999), for example, would seem to lend themselves readily to such expectations, and soap operas have long depended on elaborate character relationships and serialized plotlines that could easily expand beyond television and into other media. One can certainly imagine mysteries that ask readers to search for clues across a range of different media or historical fictions that depend on the additive comprehension enabled by multiple texts to make the past come alive for their readers. This transmedia impulse is at the heart of what I am calling convergence culture. More experimental artists, such as Peter Greenaway or Matthew Barney, are already experimenting with how they might incorporate transmedia principles into their work.

One can also imagine that kids who grew up in this media-mix culture would produce new kinds of media as transmedia storytelling becomes more intuitive. *The Matrix* may be the next step in that process of cultural evolution—a bridge to a new kind of culture and a new kind of society. In a hunting culture, kids play with bows and arrows. In an information society, they play with information. Now some readers may be shaking their heads in total skepticism. Such approaches work best with younger consumers, they argue, be-cause they have more time on their hands. They demand way too much effort for "Joe Popcorn," for the harried mom or the working stiff who has just snuggled onto the couch after a hard day at the office. As we have seen, media conglomeration creates an economic incentive to move in this direction, but Hollywood can go only so far down that direction if audiences are not ready to shift their mode of consumption. Right now, many older consumers are left confused or uninvolved with such entertainments, though some are also learning to adapt. Not every story will go in this direction—though more and more stories are traveling across media and offering a depth of experience that would have been unanticipated in previous decades. The key point is that going in deep has to remain an option—something readers choose to do—and not the only way to derive pleasure from media franchises. A growing number of consumers may be choosing their popular culture because of the opportunities it offers them to explore complex worlds and compare notes with others. More and more consumers are enjoying participating in online knowledge cultures and discovering what it is like to expand one's comprehension by tapping the combined expertise of these grassroots communities. Yet, sometimes, we simply want to watch. And as long as that remains the case, many franchises may remain big and dumb and noisy. But don't be too surprised if around the edges there are clues that something else is also going on or that the media companies will offer us the chance to buy into new kinds of experiences with those characters and those worlds.