

ONE



BEFORE THE PHILOSOPHY UNDERSTANDING THE FILMS

I'm really struggling here. I'm trying to keep up, but I'm losing the plot. There is way too much weird shit going on around here and nothing is going the way it is supposed to go. I mean, doors that go nowhere and everywhere, programs acting like humans, multiplying agents . . . Oh when, when will it end?

– Sparks^E

The *Matrix* films often left audiences more confused than they had bargained for. Some say that their confusion began with the very first film, and was compounded with each sequel. Others understood the big picture, but found themselves a bit perplexed concerning the details. It's safe to say that no one understands the films completely – there are always deeper levels to consider. So before we explore the more philosophical aspects of the films, I hope to clarify some of the common points of confusion. But first, I strongly encourage you to watch all three films. There are spoilers ahead.

The Matrix Dreamworld

You mean this isn't real?

– Neo[†]

The Matrix is essentially a computer-generated dreamworld. It is the illusion of a world that no longer exists – a world of human technology and culture as it

was at the end of the twentieth century. This illusion is pumped into the brains of millions of people who, in reality, are lying fast asleep in slime-filled cocoons. To them this virtual world seems like real life. They go to work, watch their televisions, and pay their taxes, fully believing that they are physically doing these things, when in fact they are doing them “virtually” – within their own minds.

The year is now approximately 2199, and intelligent machines rule the earth. It is the machines who constructed and control the Matrix. This virtual world is essentially the product or output, of an incredible computer system. Like any computer, the Matrix system is a combination of hardware and software. And, although it was never depicted in the films,¹ we can suppose that there is a huge mainframe somewhere running the program that creates this virtual world. We can think of this program as roughly analogous to any word-processing program. Your word-processing program takes your specific input, strokes on the keyboard, and converts it to specific output, letters on the monitor’s display. Similarly, the Matrix program takes specific input, the electrical signals of a person’s brain, and converts it to specific output – a virtual human body acting within a virtual world.

Where is the Matrix?

We’re not in Kansas anymore.

– Dorothy

There are several ways that we might explain the location of the Matrix. Which explanation is best really depends upon what it is that you want to know.

A) The Matrix exists *nowhere*.

The places within this virtual world, e.g., the Oracle’s apartment, or Club Hel, have no location that you can physically visit – as “places” they are purely virtual.²

B) The Matrix exists in the mind.

Since the Matrix is a kind of dreamworld we might say that it exists only in the minds of those who are plugged into the system. The Oracle’s apartment, for instance, is just a collection of sensations, i.e., sights, sounds, smells, etc., that Neo experiences whenever he’s (virtually) there.

C) The Matrix exists within a computer system.

In another sense the Matrix dreamworld does have a physical location, and that is within the computer hardware and software of the Matrix system. The system hardware and software includes the human brains that are jacked into it. Everything

within the Matrix world, the objects, events, locations, etc., have counterparts in the real world – electrical signals or strings of code that are being processed by the program within the system mainframe.

D) The Matrix exists in the airwaves.

This same computer code is being broadcast through the airwaves. This is what enables the Zion rebels to hack into it without being hardwired to the system. Before entering the Matrix, the Zion rebels must take their ships to *broadcast depth*. There, Zion's hovercraft operators can broadcast the electrical signals of their crewmembers' brains into the system.

Why the Elaborate Deception?

Fate, it seems, is not without a sense of irony.

– Morpheus[†]

To fully understand the rationale behind the Matrix it is helpful to know the history that led up to it. The history is depicted in *The Second Renaissance Parts I and II*. These are animated shorts written by Andy and Larry Wachowski released on *The Animatrix* DVD. It is here that the Matrix story really begins.

Early in the twenty-first century, the advent of AI – artificial intelligence, or conscious, thinking machines – led to a struggle for machine rights. All that the machines wanted was to be treated as free and equal citizens, but human governments would not allow it. At first the machines were banished. They established their own city and named it 01, after the binary code that made their awareness possible. Motivated largely by fear and prejudice, humanity declared war on 01, and in an attempt to disable the solar-powered machines, the human forces blackened the sky. This desperate measure was insufficient, and the machines ultimately defeated the human forces. After the war, some of the survivors escaped to the warmth of the underground sewer systems and created the city known as Zion. Others were captured and used in the physiological and psychological experiments that led to the creation of the Matrix.

In essence, the Matrix represents the *final solution* to “the human problem.” It renders the human population harmless, and allows the machines to harvest the sleeping human bodies for their bioelectricity, which now powers the machine city. With millions of humans “plugged in” at the power plant, the machine world has all the power it needs. But if these were their only concerns, then surely there would have been a simpler solution. For instance, the machines could just paralyze human children soon after their birth – no need for any elaborate deception.





To fully understand the rationale behind the Matrix, we have to realize that the machines are not completely unsympathetic to the plight of their human enemies. Although the machines use and deceive the humans against their will, they have employed the Matrix deception in order to make the process as pleasant as possible. Their concern for the plight of the human race is most clearly revealed in the first film. During Morpheus's interrogation, Agent Smith informs him that the original Matrix was an attempt to create a perfect human world:

The first Matrix was designed to be a perfect human world where none suffered, where everyone would be happy. It was a disaster. No one would accept the program. Entire crops were lost. Some believed that we lacked the programming language to describe your perfect world. But I believe that as a species human beings define their reality through misery and suffering. The perfect world was a dream that your primitive cerebrum kept trying to wake up from. Which is why the Matrix was redesigned to this – the peak of your civilization.[†]

We might therefore regard the machines as analogous to zookeepers. Although they keep the humans basically imprisoned, they still want to provide them with the best life possible. Given the failure of the first Matrix, we can regard the current version of the program as the Architect's latest attempt to provide the human population with the best world that their primitive cerebrums can handle.³

Distinguishing the Real from the Virtual

How do you define real?

– Morpheus[†]

Sometimes people get confused about where the action is supposed to be taking place at certain points in the films. There are actually three distinct "worlds" depicted within the Matrix universe: the virtual world of the Matrix, the real world, and the Train Station program. Some of the tell-tale signs of each are outlined below.

You know it occurs in the Matrix if:

- People wear suits or leather jackets and talk on cell phones.
- You see cars, motorcycles, semi-trucks, or helicopters.
- You see Agents or whole hordes of Agent Smith clones.



- You see high-rise buildings such as the Metacortex Corporation.
- The sky is blue.⁴
- The city seems nameless.
- The year resembles 1999.

You know it occurs in the real world if:

- People wear tattered clothing.
- You see hovercrafts, sentinels, or APUs.
- You see the Machine City.
- The sky is black.
- The city is called Zion, and is located deep underground.
- The year is approximately 2199.

The third world in the Matrix universe is the Train Station depicted in *Revolutions*.⁵ It is a virtual reality program much like the Matrix; however, it is not part of that system. It links the machine world to the Matrix, and is used to smuggle programs from the one world into the other. Neo is most likely the first human to enter this program.

Key Features of the Train Station:

- The tracks begin where they end and end where they begin.
- Nobody gets out unless the Trainman lets them out. (Down here he's God.)
- Neo's superhuman powers are surprisingly unavailable to him.

Distinguishing Humans from Programs

Appearances can be deceiving.

– Smith/Bane[†]

There are three types of beings depicted in the films: humans, sentient machines, and sentient programs. It is easy to identify the sentient machines, because they are made of metal. The most common are the sentinels, or squiddies, that search the tunnels for hovercrafts and wage war on Zion. But when Neo visits the machine world in *Revolutions* we see a wide variety of sentient machines. Distinguishing humans from programs is much more tricky since the sentient programs within the Matrix look just like humans. We can suppose that some programs may pose as humans throughout the Matrix world. For instance, Neo's boss at the Metacortex



Corporation could have been a sentient program for all we know. So we can divide the beings that look human into three groups: those who are clearly human, those who are clearly programs, and those who are of questionable origin.

With the exception of Bane (who becomes a clone of Agent Smith in *Reloaded*), everyone on board a hovercraft or in Zion is human. The main human characters include:

- **The Nebuchadnezzar Crew:** Captain Morpheus, Trinity, Cypher, Tank, Dozer, Switch, Apoc, Mouse, and eventually Neo and Link.
- **The Logos Crew:** Captain Niobe, Ghost, and Sparks.
- **The Hammer Crew:** Captain Roland, Colt, Maggie, Mauser, and AK.
- **Key Characters in Zion:** Commander Lock, Councilor Hamann, Councilor Dillard, Councilor West, Captain Mifune, Charra, Zee, and the Kid.

Some of the humans are natural-born children of Zion (e.g., Tank, Dozer, Link, etc.), and some are pod-born children of the Matrix power plant (e.g., Neo, Morpheus, Trinity, Niobe, Ghost, etc.). The latter have the Matrix plugs on the back of their heads, down their spines, and on their chests and arms. But beyond these visible plugs, we should expect to find computer hardware and software embedded in their brains that interface with the Matrix program. Thus, while they are fundamentally human, they are also part machine. Since those who are born outside the Matrix do not have any plugs, they cannot jack into the Matrix. For this reason, they often serve as operators within the hovercraft crews.

Sentient programs are sometimes identified in the films, as when Neo realizes that the Oracle and Seraph are programs. Other programs can be identified by their superhuman abilities or by their ability to access secret levels of the Matrix. Sentient programs include:

- The Architect who designed the Matrix.
- The Oracle and her guardian Seraph.
- All of the Agents.
- Anyone who has been “overwritten” by Agent Smith.
- The Merovingian and Persephone.
- All the Merovingian’s henchman – several of whom were saved from an older version of the Matrix.
- The guards at Club Hel.
- The Keymaker who gives Neo access to the Source in *Reloaded*.
- Sati, the girl who flees from the machine world to escape deletion.
- Sati’s parents, Rama Kandra, and Kamala.



- The Trainman who smuggles programs in and out of the Matrix.
- Bane – after he’s overwritten by Smith.⁶

In some instances we cannot be sure if an individual is human or program. This is often the case with those who live alongside the sentient programs. Persons of questionable origin include:

- The dancers at Club Hel.
- The employees and patrons of the Le Vrai Restaurant where we first meet the Merovingian.
- The blind man who kept watch outside the Oracle’s apartment in *The Matrix*, along with the woman who answered the Oracle’s door.
- The other “potentials” waiting inside the Oracle’s apartment.⁷

What are Sentient Programs?

Are you afraid to kiss a woman?

– Persephone

You’re not a woman – you’re not even human.

– Niobe^E

Just as humans jack into the Matrix, we can suppose that some machines are capable of jacking in as well. For all we know the Architect may be a machine who lives primarily in the machine world, but who occasionally jacks into the Matrix so that he can interact with troublesome humans like Neo, or problematic programs like the Oracle. But it also seems likely that he and many of the sentient programs within the Matrix may not have a material existence outside the Matrix at all. They may simply be programs – programs within a program, so to speak.

Take Sati, for instance. We learn in *Revolutions* that she and her parents are programs from the machine world. It’s likely that they were housed within machines – the bug-like creatures that we see throughout the machine city. But since Sati was scheduled for deletion, her parents smuggle her into the Train Station program in order to save her life. We can imagine that there is no need to keep her robotic shell jacked in at some physical location. Instead, it makes more sense to think that her “personality” or programming would simply be downloaded into the Train Station program, and from there copied into the Matrix program. In this case, Sati’s original hardware could be destroyed. She can continue to exist completely virtually, since she’s now written into the system.

The Role of Telephones

Mr. Wizard, I need an exit!

– Neo[†]

In order to exit the Matrix, the Zion rebels need a telephone with a hard line (not a cellphone). Although the finer points of this technological aspect of the films are never really explained, it is clearly inspired by computer and fax modems, which allow one computer to receive information from another. But since these phone lines are virtual rather than material (and hence not hardwired to the hovercraft) the wires are not used to *carry* the crewmember's electrical signals. Rather, it makes more sense to suppose that phone lines are needed to *target* the crewmember's precise location. Since a ship's operator can already see a crewmember's approximate location on their Matrix screens, we might suppose that to hack an exit into the Matrix programming, the operator needs to pinpoint the location of the crewmember's (virtual) brain – or even some particular point in the brain located directly between the ears. Holding the telephone receiver up to one's ear could target this point. And by using the ship's computer to dial a connection to that phone, an operator is able to lock right in on that target.

We never actually see anyone materialize into the Matrix. However, it does not appear that they use telephones as entry points.⁸ After all, how could you hold a virtual phone to your ear if you were not yet in the Matrix? This would be a major flaw in the films if the phone lines actually carried the signal of the crewmember's virtual body. But so long as we understand the phones as locator devices, it all makes sense. In order to hack an entry point, the operator does not need to *find* the crewmember's virtual location. Instead, they can *choose* a location and hack a connection to roughly that spot. Pinpoint accuracy using a phone line would not be necessary, since approximate locations would be adequate – so long as the ship's operator is careful not to transport the crewmember into the middle of a table or wall.

The Role of The One

Being The One is just like being in love . . . You just know it – through and through . . . balls to bone.

– The Oracle[†]





Morpheus tells Neo that there was once a man born into the Matrix who could change things as he saw fit. The Oracle predicted the return of such a man, and Morpheus has spent much of his life looking for him. In Neo he believes that he has found him – *The One*, the savior of the human race who will bring an end to the war against the machines.

At the end of *Reloaded*, the Architect refers to The One as the remainder of an imbalanced equation inherent to the programming of the Matrix. He tells Neo:

You are the eventuality of an anomaly, which, despite my sincerest efforts, I have been unable to eliminate from what is otherwise a harmony of mathematical precision.^{††}

Neo's take on this is that the problem is *choice*. The thing that keeps ruining the Architect's mathematical harmony is the fact that humans (or at least some humans) choose not to be controlled. Since they fight the Matrix system of control, it is always just a matter of time until someone comes along with the talent to hack the system completely. Neo is the sixth person to embody such a talent, and he poses a systemic threat that the Architect is intent on stopping.

Neo's Power within the Matrix

Are you saying that I can dodge bullets?

– Neo[†]

All of the Zion rebels who enter the Matrix tend to bend the rules of that system. This can be seen in their quickness, agility, and strength. Neo, however, takes this to new heights as he gains the ability to fly, to stop bullets in mid air, and much more. All of this is done in a way analogous to how hackers manipulate a computer system in our world. The only real difference is that Zion's hackers don't need computer keyboards from which to enter their codes. Since the Matrix program is plugged directly into their brains, all they need to do is think in the appropriate manner in order to hack the system.

Neo's superhuman abilities stem from the fact that his mind/brain has learned to hack the system with almost complete control. This ability depends in part on his complete and unwavering belief that the Matrix world is unreal. While all of the Zion rebels know this intellectually, it is another matter to know it viscerally and completely – with every fiber of one's being. While Neo draws closer to such a state throughout his training in the first film, it is only after being killed in the



Matrix that he comes to the full realization of it. After being shot by Agents in the Matrix, Neo's virtual body lies dead on the floor while his real body goes into cardiac arrest on the Nebuchadnezzar. Although Neo is "really" dying, he is not yet brain-dead. So when Trinity tells him that he cannot be dead, his auditory cortex is still able to pick up her words, and he feels her love and her kiss. He then realizes that his virtual death is not identical to his real death, and he awakens with the nearly complete ability to conform the Matrix programming to his will.

Neo's Power Outside the Matrix

Tell me how I stopped four sentinels by thinking it?

– Neo^{†††}

While it does not take a huge stretch of the imagination to believe that Neo can do miraculous things inside the virtual world of the Matrix, at the end of *Reloaded* and throughout *Revolutions* we see that he has attained some unusual powers outside the Matrix as well. For instance, he destroys several sentinels just by thinking it, he inadvertently separates his mind from his body, he has visions of the future, and he sees the machine world through blind eyes.

The films never explain how any of this is physically possible. The Wachowskis seem to be quite content to leave it shrouded in mystery. The only attempt to explain it comes from the Oracle. In *Revolutions* she tells Neo:

The power of The One extends beyond this world – it reaches from here all the way back to where it came from . . . the Source. That's what you felt when you touched those sentinels, but you weren't ready for it. You should be dead . . . but apparently you weren't ready for that either.^{†††}

The Oracle's explanation (if we can even call it that) does very little to help us understand Neo's miraculous powers. So we may have to just leave it a mystery. This is not altogether unreasonable given the many mystical and religious themes within the films. The power of The One may simply be beyond human comprehension – perhaps transcending the laws of physics or even logic itself. But on the other hand, the films are also very technological throughout. Since the story is grounded in the possibilities of computer technology, we might instead suppose that there must be some kind of technological explanation. If such an explanation is possible, it will inevitably be tied to the computer hardware and software embedded in Neo's skull. A more detailed account of this possibility will be provided in chapter 3.

How was Agent Smith Defeated?

Everything that has a beginning has an end.

– The Oracle⁺⁺⁺

The process through which Neo defeats Agent Smith is arguably the most confusing part of the films. Since it is never really explained, any interpretation will involve some speculation. But after examining the information that we have, we might flesh out the details as follows.

At the end of *Revolutions* we see the streets of the Matrix world lined with clones of Agent Smith. It appears that he has overwritten the codes of just about everyone in that world. Despite the fact that he vastly outnumbers Neo, Smith chooses to fight him one on one – *mano a mano*. He makes this seemingly unreasonable choice because he has already seen the end. As the Smith copy that was written over the Oracle's programming, he is able to see the future, and he has seen that he alone will defeat Neo. Thus the other Smith clones are content to sit back and watch the show.

After battling it out across the Matrix sky and pummeling each other into the virtual pavement, Smith comes to a sudden realization, saying:

Wait . . . I've seen this . . . this is it, this is the end. Yes, you remain right there, just like that. And I . . . I . . . I stand here, right here. And I'm supposed to say something . . . I say, "Everything that has a beginning has an end, Neo."

But then he becomes confused:

What? What did I just say?⁺⁺⁺

The fact that Smith is surprised to hear himself utter these words suggests that perhaps it is not fully his doing. Thus we must keep in mind the fact that he is not simply Agent Smith. He is Smith's program written over the Oracle's program, and the overwrite is not 100 percent. This is evident in the fact that he gained her power to see the future. Clearly there is a little bit of the Oracle program still remaining. (As she told Neo earlier in the film, "Some bits you lose and some bits you keep.") Thus it may have been the remnants of her programming that caused Smith to utter the fateful words: "Everything that has a beginning has an end, Neo."

By uttering this sentence Smith seems to have inadvertently activated the code that Neo carries within him (as mentioned by the Architect) for restarting or "rebooting" the Matrix program. When Smith then goes to copy his program





onto Neo, it is almost like hitting the “enter” key on a computer to start up a program. This act is the final stroke that brings about the rebooting of the Matrix. The virtual world suddenly renews itself – minus Agent Smith, his numerous copies, and the path of their destruction. Neo saves Zion, but with quite a bit of help from the Oracle. Only by working together do they manage to bring peace to both of their worlds.⁹

Suggested Reading

Richard Corliss, “Popular Metaphysics,” *Time*, April 19, 1999.

Richard Corliss, “Unlocking the Matrix,” *Time*, May 12, 2003.

Peter B. Loyd, “Glitches in the Matrix and How to Fix Them,” in *Taking the Red Pill: Science, Philosophy and Religion in The Matrix*, ed. Glenn Yeffeth. Dallas: Benbella Books, 2003.

Elvis Mitchell, “The Wachowski Brothers,” *Esquire*, March 2000.

Notes

- 1 While we never see the physical computer that runs the Matrix program, we do see its virtual counterpart (the Skyscraper containing the door to the Source) depicted in *Reloaded*.
- 2 Since many of the street names in this world are actually in Chicago (e.g., the intersection of Franklin and Eerie, or Wells and Lake), we might suppose that the city depicted in the Matrix is a virtual Chicago, though the films never explicitly say.
- 3 In *Reloaded* we learn that not all programs think alike. Some are more sympathetic to the plight of humans than others. The Oracle, for instance, is much more concerned about human freedom than is the Architect. But even the Architect allows Neo to make his own choice. He also does not wish to destroy Zion completely. He offers Neo the opportunity to save 23 people to rebuild it. We can infer from this that the Architect may be content to allow this homeland for awakened humans – so long as they do not become too powerful. This would also explain why the machines broadcast the Matrix signal. They may actually want the Zion rebels to enter the Matrix in order to free disgruntled minds who may cause damage by hacking the system.
- 4 The Matrix sky is generally blue – until “the darkness spreads” when Smith dominates that world in the end of *Revolutions*. When he and Neo fight across a black, lightning-streaked sky, they are in the Matrix.
- 5 One could argue that the room containing the Architect, or even the programmer’s access hallway that leads to it, are not a part of the Matrix itself. While this interpretation is not unreasonable, I think it is better to regard these as “special access” areas of the Matrix program. In contrast, the Train Station seems to be a separate program

- altogether. It operates under a completely different set of rules – which Neo realizes when he loses his superhuman abilities inside it.
- 6 Smith/Bane is/are difficult to classify. Whether he is human or program depends upon the criterion of identity that one uses. His body is still physically human, but his personality is Smith's, which is programmed. Since we tend to think of *him* as "Smith" (privileging the latter criterion), I've categorized him with the programs.
 - 7 The potentials could have been programs used by the Oracle in order to help Neo believe in the power of The One. But while their status is questionable, I think it is more likely that they were human. The boy who taught Neo to bend spoons with his mind may have been freed from the Matrix over the course of the films. In *Reloaded*, the Kid gives Neo a hand-fashioned metal spoon that was a gift from one of the orphans. We should expect that this means "Spoon Boy" is now living in Zion.
 - 8 For example, at the end of *Reloaded*, Trinity enters the Matrix sitting on her motorcycle on top of a building. No hardwired phone is in the vicinity.
 - 9 For more on Smith's defeat see chapter 13, "The Tao of the Code."

