



## “The Matrix” (1999): From A to Z

By Dr. John L. Flynn

The world of the Matrix is really not as complicated or layered as it appears, and is clearly not as original as would-be Neo’s would like to believe. It is really a conglomeration of many different ideas from the realm of science fiction (and fantasy) to the dominion of philosophy and religion, with some really cool special effects and kung-fu thrown in for good measure.

**A is for Alice** – *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1862) and *Through the Looking Glass* (1863) by Lewis Carroll (Charles Lutwidge Dodgson) are two whimsical stories about a little girl named Alice who leaves the “real” world behind for adventures in an imaginary world. Many esteemed critics argue that Alice’s adventures are either a political allegory, a psychological study of human dreams (à la Freud), or a revealing diary of the author’s alleged neuroses. Like little Alice, Neo follows a white rabbit down a deep rabbit hole to another world.

**B is for Baudrillard, Jean** – Jean Baudrillard’s *Simulacra and Simulations* (1983) may appear in “The Matrix” as a nothing more than a hollowed-out book that Neo hides his digital smack for the customers who first knock on his door, but the influence of his work is seen all throughout the trilogy. When Morpheus’ first introduces Neo to reality, he says, “Welcome to the desert of the real,” and this famous line recalls Baudrillard’s astute

analysis of postmodern America. He claims that "Disneyland is there to conceal the fact that it is the 'real' country, all of 'real' America, which *is* Disneyland.... It is no longer a question of a false representation of reality (ideology), but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real, and thus of saving the reality principle." The proliferation of images in advanced capitalism, with the expansion of commodities and the relentless advance of technologies of visualization and simulation, suggests that we lose the connection, once presumed to exist, between sign or image and the reality to which both were thought to refer. The people "living" within the Matrix have no idea that they are living in a copy of reality, and not reality itself.

**C is for Cogito Ergo Sum** – "I think, therefore I am." René Descartes (1596-1650). By focusing on the problem of true and certain knowledge, Descartes raised the question of the relationship between mind and world. Can we trust our senses to provide us with an accurate accounting of the world in which we live? Morpheus asks Neo in the first film whether he can trust what he sees and feels, and indeed the strength of the Matrix is that it fools the senses of those who are trapped in it.

**D is for Dick, Philip K.** Philip K. Dick was a famous science fiction author whose work has been made into noteworthy science fiction films, including "Blade Runner" (1982), "Minority Report" (2002) and "Imposter" (2002). Many of his stories and novels raise metaphysical questions about the nature of reality and the stability of perception. The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch, Ubik, The Penultimate Truth, and "Imposter," among many others, took place in derelict worlds ravaged by wars or great environmental upheavals where the last humans are trapped in difficult existential circumstances beyond their control. Much like Neo in "The Matrix," his characters are confronted with two levels of reality—one objectively determined, and the other a world of appearances that has been imposed upon them by outside forces—and they struggle against all odds to defeat the illusion and regain their own objective reality. Morpheus and his rebel faction know that the only way they can win against the machines is to smash the Matrix and reclaim their war-ravaged world. In many of Dick's stories, including "The Electric Ant" and Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?, the line between human and mechanical simulacra is blurred, and thus, the character of Agent Smith represents a figure trapped between the two realities. Many believe "The Matrix" was a cinematic pastiche which cleverly and affectionately imitated the style and conventions of Philip K. Dick's short stories and novels.

**E is for Existentialism** – Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, Martin Heidegger, and others advanced a philosophy that centered on individual existence in a world that did not make sense to them and the plight of the individual who must accept responsibility for his acts of free will without any certainty of what is right or wrong, good or evil. Does Neo have choice or merely the illusion of choice? Should Neo choose the blue pill, which he ultimately does choose, and enter the desert of the real, where he may be miserable, or the red pill where his existence will continue to be inauthentic?

**F is for Fiction** – Fiction is an art form invented by the imagination that conveys some element of truth about the real world. (Science fiction is an art form that poses questions

about the nature of man and his place in the universe, not in small, every day symbols but in bigger ones of space and time.) The Matrix is a fiction, created to enslave the minds of humans by making them think they are living in the real world.

**G is for Gibson, William** – William Gibson, another famous science fiction writer, was at the forefront of the cyberpunk movement with his novel *Neuromancer* (1984). Its influence on “The Matrix” and other films like “Johnny Mnemonic,” “The Thirteenth Floor,” and “eXistence” is inestimable. He described Cyberspace as “A consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators.... A graphical representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system. Unthinkable complexity. Lines of light ranged in the non-space of the mind, clusters and constellations of data. Like city lights, receding...” His description sounds very much like those green characters, numbers and symbols that make up the Matrix.

**H is for Hero** – Joseph Campbell’s Journey of the Hero from *The Hero With A Thousand Faces* (1948) figures prominently in the journey that Neo takes as the One who can save the people of Zion. The heroic figure hears the call to adventure (and sometimes refuses call): he is called to restore order to the universe; he receives aid from a wizard, an elder, or supernatural force (usually in form of a magical weapon), and undergoes first trial by fire. As part of his initiation into the new realm, the hero undergoes more trials; he falls for a goddess and is tempted by a temptress; he meets his dark father and is wounded; he finds great riches. Ultimately, the hero returns to the source, and restores order and balance to the universe by defeating the evil king and saving the kingdom. In “The Matrix,” Neo receives his wake-up call to adventure, but initially refuses the call, not willing to walk out onto the ledge. Later, Morpheus, his elder, gives him a blue pill that frees his mind from the Matrix; he also teaches him the weapons that he will need to defeat Smith and the other agents. Neo undergoes many trials, including betrayal, and falls for beautiful Trinity while being tempted by Persephone. Ultimately, Neo returns to the source, and restores balance to the universe.

**I is for Immanuel Kant** – The great philosopher Immanuel Kant argued that the only thing of value in and of itself is the ability to make rational choices. He believed that we must free ourselves of our own experiences, which might deceive us, so that make choices based on "the Highest Good." Neo believes that he must sacrifice himself by facing Smith, once and for all, in order to make a choice that will be rational and meet the role of the highest good.

**J is for Jesus, the Son of God** – For Christians, Jesus of Nazareth is the One who brings salvation by sacrificing himself for mankind. His coming was long since prophesied by the oracles of the Old Testament, and his strength of purpose lay in freeing mankind of its sinful burdens and death. Jesus came to free the people of Zion, or Israel. The character of Neo, who was prophesied by the Oracle, also functions like a savior of the people of Zion, right on down to the crucifixion pose at his death.

**K is for Kung Fu** – Kung fu is the Chinese art of self-defense that requires the practitioner to follow a strict code of physical and mental discipline, unparalleled in

Western pursuits. To be adept, one must follow the Tao, the way, the essence of the philosophy and life of the originators of the arts. One must have a desire to learn, the will to discipline one's self, and the devotion to practice. Neo learns the art of kung fu from Morpheus on a simulation.

**L is for Literary Movement-Cyberpunk** – Cyberpunk was a literary movement from the 1980's in which the lines between man and machine became blurred. Those lines were first blurred in the 1982 film adaptation of Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (made as "Blade Runner"), and further exploited by Hollywood in films like "Tron" and "Videodrome." The term *Cyberpunk* was first coined by Bruce Bethke in his 1983 short story, and was popularized in the writings of William Gibson. Cyberpunk literature makes five basic assumptions: 1.) a future in which industrial and political blocs are global rather than national, and the world is controlled by information systems; 2.) a future in which machine augmentations of the human body are commonplace; 3.) human's mind and body changes are brought about by drugs and biological engineering; 4.) the world's data networks form a kind of machine environment into which human's can project a kind of "disembodied consciousness"; and 5.) punk, aggressive, alienated and disillusioned youth run anti-establishment worlds. All of these basic notions actually date back to a study conducted by Norbert Wiener in 1947 for the US military. Wiener proposed "cybernetics"--a way in which computer, war games, industrial management and the working of the brain could all be linked.

**M is for Merovingian** – The Merovingian Gnostic Church teaches spirituality, and provides answers concerning life and death, God, Angels, life of Jesus, and the truth about the crucifixion. Apparently, in 54 A.D., Joseph of Arimathea wrote the answers to these and other questions down in a book of wisdom, known as *The Book of the Holy Grail* or *Merovingian Bible*. Joseph of Arimathea also took the Holy Grail to Rheddae (Rennes le Chateau) France, and for hundreds of years, the protectorate of the Merovingian families (known as the Knights Templar) have guarded the Grail. In 1776, under the leadership of Thomas Jefferson, the Order of Illuminati was founded to carry on the traditions of the Merovingian protectorate.

**N is Nebuchadnezzar** – Nebuchadnezzar is the name of two Babylonian kings, of whom only Nebuchadnezzar II played a role in Biblical history. He is especially known for his conquest of Jerusalem, destroying the Temple, and for rebuilding the fabled city of Babylon. In later years, according to Daniel's Biblical account, Nebuchadnezzar went mad, trying to recall a dream he can't remember but searching nonetheless for an answer to the dream. (Roughly translated from the ancient Babylonian, Nebuchadnezzar means, "May the god Nabu protect the Son.") *Nebuchadnezzar* is the name of Morpheus' ship, and his mission is to protect the One, which is Neo. Morpheus also works to free those who are living the dream of the Matrix.

**O is for Oracle** – In Greek mythology, the Oracle at Delphi, also known as Pythia, was renowned for her ability to predict the future. She would often ingest hallucinogenic leaves, and in an altered state of consciousness, she would contact the god Apollo for answers to questions about the future. In the most famous of her prognostications, she

told the parents of Oedipus that the future king would eventually kill his father and sleep with his mother. At the entrance to the Oracle's temple at Delphi, a sign reads "Know Thyself" in Greek. Neo consults with the Oracle inhabiting the Matrix on several occasions in order to find out his destiny; in "The Matrix," she has a sign in her small kitchen that reads "Know Thyself."

**P is for Plato** – In his famous "Allegory of the Cave," Plato suggested that we often mistake our own reality for the highest level of reality; because we experience reality through our five senses, which are always fallible, this is a perceived reality, and not the truest of all realities. The "reality" of the Matrix is perceived reality, and not the desert of the real world, as Morpheus explains to Neo.

**Q is for Quintessence** – The "fifth element," the highest element in ancient and medieval philosophy that permeates all nature and natural surroundings, is the essence of a thing in its purest and original form. The Matrix is merely a copy of the original, while the desert of the real world is the purest and most original form, no matter how flawed it might be. So when Neo first learns the truth about the Matrix, his 25 years of life experience are called into question, and he has to re-examine every belief he's ever held about what is original and what is pure.

**R is for Rekal, Incorporated** – In Philip K. Dick's short story "We Can Remember It for You Wholesale" (1966) (made as "Total Recall"), Rekal, Incorporated is a company that uses virtual reality and memory implants to give clients the vacation of a lifetime without the hassle of traveling. Douglas Quail (Quaid in the movie version) goes to Rekal to purchase the memory of a trip to Mars as an undercover agent, and discovers that he has actually been to Mars as a secret agent and that he has since been brainwashed to forget everything. The boundaries between the real world and the virtual world in Dick's story are blurred, as is the memory of the main character. In "The Matrix," it would appear the machines have exploited Rekal's technology to lull everyone into a false sense of security and reality.

**S is for Simulacron-3** – *Simulacron-3* (also known as *Counterfeit World*, 1964) by Daniel Galouye suggested a virtual world within the "real" world, which in turn was another virtual world within the real world. When the creator of the virtual world, stumbles upon a secret, he is killed, and his successor becomes the primary suspect. Thanks to a giant computer that allows people to "download" into the virtual world, the successor journeys to the virtual world to clear himself; but he quickly discovers that the world he lives in is itself a simulation, and that he is nothing more than a computer program within someone else's simulation. *Simulacron-3* was made into the highly underrated "The Thirteenth Floor," which came out just a few months after "The Matrix" in 1999. Daniel Galouye's story anticipates the layers of deception that make up the world of the Matrix, more than thirty-five years earlier.

**T is for Trinity** – The belief that God exists in a trinity as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit is known in theological terms as Trinitarianism. The three persons of God each have their own unique function, with God the Father creating, God the Son

redeeming, and God the Holy Spirit as sanctifying. The notion of three films that make up the “Matrix” trilogy could be a form of trinity. Also, the character of Trinity certainly redeems Neo at one point in the trilogy, and presumably, if they had lived, she would have created new life as their offspring. Did Trinity’s death also serve a function as sanctifying the mission that Neo had to undertake on his own?

**U is for Underworld** – In Greek mythology, the Underworld is not an place for evil spirits like Christian depiction of hell, but rather a world unto itself that exists parallel to the real world. Hades is the ruler of the Underworld with his beautiful wife Persephone. Persephone was once a young goddess, daughter of Demeter, who was enamored by flowers and having thoughtless fun, but was later transformed into the wife of the stern and imperious Hades when he offered her pomegranate seeds. Part of the year, she spends in the Underworld, and the rest of the time she spends above ground. In “The Matrix Reloaded,” Neo and his friends meet Persephone, the wife of the Merovingian, in a dark underworld of the Matrix. She has forgotten the pleasures of youth, including love, and asks to sample the lost feeling with a kiss.

**V is for Virtual Reality** – The “reality” (or perception of reality) that is created within the computer world, or cyberspace, is virtual reality. In 1947, Norbert Weiner first proposed “cybernetics” or basically a system in which computer, war games, industrial management and the working of the brain could all be linked. That system, we have come to accept as virtual reality. From “Tron” to “Lawnmower Man” to “Johnny Mnemonic” and “The Thirteenth Floor,” modern science fiction films have made a fortune in exploiting virtual reality, which is also known in Cyberpunk literature as “jacking in” or “plugging in” to the Matrix. In fiction, virtual "cowboys" navigate the massive towers of data in cyberspace, always on the alert for the "black ice" that will throw them out of the virtual world and possibly even kill them.

**W is for Wake Up!** – In “The Matrix,” the first message Neo receives from Morpheus and his band of rebels is the command to “wake up.” In Greek mythology, Morpheus is the god of sleep who has the ability to transform dreams into a kind of virtual reality with its own unique shapes and forms. The narcotic morphine, which acts as an analgesic and sedative, comes from the Greek “morpheus.” In the film, the character of Morpheus plays a different kind of role; instead of putting mortals to sleep with dreams, he works to free them from the unreality of the Matrix that holds them captive. Both Neo and Trinity confess that they knew before Morpheus came to them that something wasn’t quite right with the world, and felt that they were in a dream-like state.

**X is for The X-Files** – Chris Carter’s groundbreaking television series “The X-Files” focused on two FBI agents, Fox Mulder and Dana Scully, who were confronted with aliens, werewolves, vampires, and other unusual phenomenon each week, and their efforts to penetrate the conspiracy behind the thinly-layered veil of reality. In many ways, they are the models for the agents who try to keep order within the Matrix, and the strange phenomenon that they investigate are no more than, as the Oracle tells us in “The Matrix Reloaded,” programs doing what they are not supposed to be doing. Similarly,

they both know that the reality of the world is just an illusion, and that the truth everyone seeks is in the desert of the real world.

**Y is for Yagyu Munenori** – Yagyu Munenori was a renowned Japanese swordsman who learned from a Zen Buddhist monk how to free his mind from battle so that ultimate victory was merely a state of mind, and not necessarily prowess with a sword. Neo receives a similar kind of instruction from Morpheus: "Do you believe that my being stronger or faster has anything to do with my muscles in this place? You think that's air you're breathing now?"

**Z is for Zen** – Zen is a Japanese sect of Mahayana Buddhism that aims at enlightenment by direct intuition through meditation. The Zen Buddhist spends many hours meditating on the nature of reality and reflection. Neo is reminded, more than once, that he must free his mind through a form of reflection and meditation in order to see the true nature of the real world. For instance, the small child in the Oracle's waiting room has little difficulty in bending the spoon; when Neo tries to do the same and fails, the child instructs him, "Do not try to bend the spoon. That's impossible. Instead, only try to realize the truth.... There is no spoon.... Then you'll see that it is not the spoon that bends, it is only yourself."

Copyright 2003 by John L. Flynn, Ph.D.