

# The Film/Game: Narrative Form and Network Conditioning

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## Abstract

*This paper explores three specific questions: How have networked practices transformed our understanding of narrative? What cultural constructions of network have our narratives advanced? Most importantly, what is the relationship between the two? I focus on three recent films, The Matrix, Johnny Mnemonic, and Tomb Raider, and consider whether gaming experience, particularly the networked game environments offered by MMPORGs (Massively Multi-Player Online Role-Playing Games), has begun to change our perception of narrative form. I conclude that the narratives are thematically and structurally affected from the interplay of the media (film and game), and as such, have become radically irresolvable. They straddle the technophilia/technophobia divide, split between the glorification of control afforded by the networked environment and the hero's role in that environment and a simultaneous need to defeat or erase the network as villain.*

KEYWORDS: video game; adaptation; cyberpunk; ludology; aesthetics; narrative; interactivity

An increasing number of chart-topping film/game crossovers, including *Johnny Mnemonic*, *Super Mario Brothers*, *Tomb Raider*, the *Matrix* series, and more recently, *Final Fantasy VII*, *Doom*, and *Silent Hill*,<sup>1</sup> suggests just how porous the boundary between the two media has become. Film styling in videogames and gaming style in film have contributed substantially to this “leaky distinction”<sup>2</sup> and signal the fact that we are witnessing a profound revolution in aesthetics, not solely, or even primarily, an issue in marketing. In the context of cultural reception, it seems fair to say that videogaming and film have become linked as a condition of our expanding experience of interactivity through computing and information networks. As Ralph Baer points out in *Videogames: In the Beginning*, “if it hadn’t been for videogames and the absolute commercial need for ever-

better graphics requiring ever-higher processor speeds, complex computer graphics would now be found only in the high-priced domains of the business and scientific world” (2). The story of videogames thus intersects not only the evolution of the CPU and microchip technologies, but also the industry of computer-generated effects in film; and as Baer argues, it was the videogame that drove the development of both. Interestingly, *Tron*, the 1982 film heralded as a ground-breaking masterpiece in computer-generated special effects, not only drew on videogame graphics design and technology, but also took the game-like simulated environment as its narrative raison d’être, embedding its characters in a computer-generated environment, offering them as narrative obstacles a series of puzzles, and presenting a story trajectory defined by various permutations of human/computer cooperation and competition. What I want to suggest is that the pervasion of videogaming has fundamentally changed the perception of narrative—slowly at first, with the TV- and console-based arcade style games, and then mushrooming with the advent of Massively Multi-Player Online Role-Playing Games (MMPORGs).<sup>3</sup> Specifically, this pervasion has fuelled new modes of interaction for story elements, or narrative units, and conditioned their mode of reception by viewers and users.

This paper explores the simulatory, game-like aesthetics of three representative films—*Johnny Mnemonic* (1995), *The Matrix* (1999), and *Tomb Raider* (2001). While I may at times refer to the films’ game counterparts, my focus is primarily the general effect of the gaming style in and on the cinematic narrative. A number of questions should be asked, and these fall roughly into two categories: de-coding (reception) and encoding (construction). What elements in fact constitute that “gaming style”? How do we understand this style as part of the narrative structure, and do we see it as extraneous, or as integral to that structure? Could our reception be conditioned by previous videogaming experience? At the same time, how are games and computing networks represented in the films? Does the style effect the shape of the narrative itself, so that style comes to direct form? Do representations of network increase the rhizomatic or cascading qualities of narrative structure? I hope that the following observations will make some contribution to the study of what I see as a substantial and important stage of development in the history of how humans make stories.

## 1. The Look

Perhaps unsurprisingly given the still-raging debate about violence in videogaming amongst parents, educators, social scientists, and cultural theorists, the extended combat sequences are one of the most instantly recognizable hallmarks of gaming style in cinema. Cult followings for martial arts choreographers and stunt coordinators like Woo-ping Yuen of *The Matrix* and *Kill Bill* and Simon Crane of *Tomb Raider*, *Troy*, *X-Men* and *The Terminator 3* attest to the importance fans have placed on these sequences. Further, though, the violence in the films has come to function not merely gratuitously but as completely integral to and enmeshed with the narrative. The centrality of the combat scenes is an accepted and unexamined underlying assumption even in academic criticism. Tim Blackmore, for instance, argues that the wielding of guns in *The Matrix* signals subtle shifts in hierarchies of power (12-13), while A. Samuel Kimball interprets *The Matrix*'s "fight scenes" as a mixture of "religious trial" and "Darwinian evolutionary theory" (175-6). Indeed, the film's narrative rhythm is interestingly at odds with the formulations of classical cinema theory in which storyline and character development alternate with action, a rhythm popularly referred to as "well-paced" and revealing the expectation that quieter moments in which we come to know a character and the motivations for their actions will be juxtaposed with the more intense scenes displaying said action(s). It may seem somewhat ironic, but in this formulation "narrative" and "action" take up opposite and separate roles in the fiction as a whole. Plot synopses have traditionally included character type, motivation, and background story as primary constituents, while glossing over combat sequences as non-narrative punctuation. To carry this point with a certain amount of graphic bluntness, the detailed descriptions of who shot/punched/kicked/sliced who with what and in what posture have seemed irrelevant to summarization in the terms of classical narrative cinema.

We are also confronting a difference in the passage of narrative time, a component of the overall rhythm. Those elements belonging to the story in conventional terms, such as character development, explanations of motivation, and so on, can unfold at widely varying rates, with narrative time relative to the viewer often subject to distortion, expansion, or contraction according to the dictates of the plot. Combat, however, tends to occur in real time, enacting an exact coincidence in the passage of time for the characters and the viewer. The ramifications of this coincidence

threaten to shake the very foundations of the fiction as fiction. Telescoping narrative time marks a border between fiction (which can behave that way) and reality (which cannot). Real time simulations help to make this border more transparent. In real time, the film comes closest to reaching across the representational divide, asserting the contiguity of its fictional world with that of the viewer. Videogaming invites comparison with other forms of visual narrative, like cinema, as its proffered interactivity rests on this same assertion of temporal contiguity.

Citing Peter Brooks on temporality in narrative, Jesper Juul compares the alternations of story and action in film with the rhythmic play of videogaming, suggesting that the succession of cut-scenes and game play in many videogames approximates the cinematic (29-31). While the cut-scenes move the story along, providing an introduction, story context, narrative connections, and conclusion, the game play segments suspend the narrative, providing the extended experience of real time combat. The difference between film and game, though, Juul continues, is that narrative suspension lasts much longer in a game than in a film, and in a game, you can by-pass the cut-scenes, or narrative, altogether (33). The rhythm Juul proposes was definitely a familiar feature of many early games like *Commander Keen*, *Wolfenstein*, *Doom*, *Duke Nukem*, and even the expensively produced *Star Wars*-inspired series that included, most notably, *X-Wing*; it still is in many offerings for lower-end platforms like the Gameboy system. The original *Tomb Raider*'s 1996 appearance, however, created a gaming phenomenon in part because it pushed the envelope, not only in graphic design but also in its sophistication of character, game play, and storyline integration. Lara Croft emerged as a fully developed virtual persona precisely because as an avatar she enacted a more thorough integration of play feats and their adventure story impetus. Anne Balsamo's concern in "The Virtual Body in Cyberspace" is that, with first-person shooter games, the gendered and racialized individual identity is elided in favour of an anonymous game-play experience where only the weapon in a white, male hand appears on-screen to mark the insertion point of player into game environment. To be sure, a growing trend away from the floating-gun viewpoint and towards visual rendering of playable characters within actual game sequences has sparked a torrent of debate in particular about the use of female avatars (a debate to which I shall return in a moment). At the same time, this trend has been fuelled by gamer demand for greater immersion into a story world through character identification, rather than through anonymous and generic game play. Current offerings, including

*The Matrix Online* and the *Final Fantasy* series, have achieved an integration of narrative and game play that has earned the appellation of “interactive fiction.” If the opposition of cut-scene and shooting activity in early games mimicked the rhythm of conventional cinema, it was a mimicry of inversion, with a weighted emphasis on the interactive play segments serving only too well to point up the functional differences between film and gaming, an emphasis that has begun to fall away with the evolution of the videogame as medium.

While not strictly interactive in the same sense as their game counterparts, *The Matrix*, *Tomb Raider*, and *Johnny Mnemonic* make intelligible a relatively fluid transposition from game to film and film to game for users and viewers firstly, then, through the subversion of a conventional cinematic aesthetic that juxtaposes action and narrative, freeze and flow. Secondly, the films underscore this fluidity through their stylized performance of cyborg identities, performances which further disrupt the freeze/flow dialectics by their alignment with a collapse of other binary categories, including gender. Again, the combat sequences are prominent symptoms of suture. Anatomical exaggeration and androgyny offer a specular dynamic that expresses the very essence of the film/game blend, offering a very specific kind of “visual pleasure” through a re-definition of “narrative cinema.”

In 1979, Laura Mulvey’s landmark piece, “Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema,” also posited rhythmic alternation as the basis of classical cinema but did so through an elaboration of the image of woman. Mulvey describes extended shots of female characters as interrupting the narrative flow of the film, freezing the forward momentum of plot in tableau-like moments of specularly addressed to an implied male spectator. In 1989, Yvonne Tasker makes a similar argument about the built male body in Hollywood action cinema, suggesting that it, too, provides frozen moments of scopophilic pleasure which interrupt and punctuate the action sequences in which they are embedded. Tasker’s reformulation draws attention to the exaggerated performance of gender as the source of suspension, a reformulation of the built male body which implies that Rambo is a constructed body in visual perspectives quite similar to Robocop or the Terminator. However, both she and Mulvey implicitly oppose the specular to a conflation of action and narrative; in effect, they offer to replace the action-versus-narrative dialectic with that of narrative action versus graphic image. This shift in argument is especially intriguing in the context of playable characters and the cinematic cyborg, for it speaks directly

to gender as simulation and yet in spite of its allusiveness to virtual identities, does not account for the muting or erasure of rhythmic alternation in cyber-themed film or offer to explain the fluidity of the film/game pairing. It still is all about “the look”—perhaps even more so—but through an aesthetics that works insistently to center and specularize the cyborg body, the mating of flesh and steel, to melting effect. Where Mulvey discusses woman’s “to-be-looked-at-ness” (367) as a display of exaggerated femininity, Tasker cites the action hero’s “excessive masculinity” (79-80). The cyborg, though, is paradoxically spectacular, at once explicit and ambiguous in its display of hyper-gendered combinations.

The androgynous look of Carrie Moss as Trinity and Keanu Reeves as both Johnny Mnemonic and Neo is of a piece with Lara Croft’s most prominent dual features (breasts and guns), and if androgynous fashion is not entirely new in and of itself, both the leather-coated twins variety sported by Moss and Reeves and Lara’s signature gun-toting vixen look have emphatically linked, as popular street style, androgyny and technological mediation. The status of Trinity and Neo as cyborgs depends not only on their virtual, jacked-in personae, or the plug-and-play openings at the base of their skulls, but also on the reflective surfaces of vinyl and leather hugging the flesh and echoing the metallic gleam of shotgun and pistol.<sup>4</sup> Lara’s white, spandex body suit and gun-holster garters serve the same purpose in the film, gesturing towards the heroine’s undeniably cyborgian abilities as much as does the opening scene’s gladiator pairing of Lara and the robot, Simon. Such clothing recalls the architecture of lightness, an aesthetic movement fuelled by the dream of “daring cantilevers, walls reduced to reflective skins, openness, light, swiftness of assembly, chromium” (Benedikt 39) and of buildings as glittering cybernetic systems, open to “telephones, television, air conditioning, advertising” (Benedikt 40), except that the dream is no longer of buildings but of the human body, seamlessly fluid and resistless to the pervasion of networked technologies. The fashions, therefore, are both signature and essential. Roland Barthes’s comments on the fashion system are peculiarly apropos of the cyberpunk look. Barthes observes that the interchangeable and generic nature of clothing lines is disguised by the addition of small variations, details that woo buyers with the promise of individuality (46). The game Lara’s designers might have made do with less succulent textures and a more limited wardrobe than Angelina Jolie was fitted with, yet the bust-reduction flop of *Tomb Raider: Legend* suggests that male and female gamers alike understood the breast/gun equation as not (just) sexual but

also fundamentally cyborgian and so, justifiably representative of the serial self.

The “look” and the “fight” would seem not to function as separate elements, a point the films have not missed in privileging the combat sequences with the most careful attention to clothing. The cyborg “look” is demonstrated precisely in and through his/her/its action, through a display of cyborgian ability, a combat-style fusion that feeds media cross-over. Trinity and Neo, as with West’s Lara, are at their most quintessential (and interchangeable) during the extended combat sequences, donning for these the apparel that has become almost iconic of the film texts. (It may not be entirely fair to blame the lukewarm reception of Robert Longo’s *Johnny Mnemonic* on poor wardrobing, but it was a glaring weak spot.) Unlike the tableau images of women in classical cinema, or the frozen moments of beefcake display in conventional action cinema, the specular cyborg does not interrupt the forward flow of the story. Rather, the extended combat enhances display of the cyborg, stretching it like elastic until the pace of “freeze” and “flow” collapses altogether, and in doing so, breaks the thin skin between graphic and action. The dialectic of graphic image and narrative action thus also fails to hold true for these films. It is as if the specular cyborg can bend story time or pace, in the same way that Neo bends the time-space of the Matrix. His assertion of control over the virtual environment is a twinned mastery of appearance and mastery in combat, and this assertion of control is simultaneously the protagonist’s story and his or her style.

Balsamo notes that VR works like the comic book or graphic novel in postulating each user as a super-hero with extraordinary powers of control within the game environment (495). I think that she is dead on with the comic book analogy, as it brings together the conflicted patterns of user/viewer identification with characters as constructs, patterns highlighted by virtuality and network as thematics in cyberfiction, with the bleeding of graphic into action. The crossover between film, game, and manga or anime has not only been a lucrative opportunity both to pre-sell and then to extend the popularity of blockbuster films, but also offered interesting possibilities for narrative extension. The stories of *The Animatrix* (2003), a set of nine animated shorts described by director Yoshiyuki Kawajiri as “back story” for the film series, were well received by reviewers—in fact, better received than the initial game release based on the film, *Enter the Matrix*. User objections to Atari’s *Enter the Matrix* centered on a limited set of characters and combat moves and the lack of additional story detail to

“fill in gaps from the movie.”<sup>5</sup> Warner Brothers Interactive did not make the same mistake with *The Matrix Online*, instead providing additional narrative, including seven long cut-scenes (termed “movies”) in the *Ani-matrix* style, and mining the potential of MMPORG gaming to allow users increased variety of character. Eidos, too, looked to manga styling to add appeal to its seventh in the game series, *Tomb Raider: Legend*, described by IGN.com staff reviewer, Douglass Perry, as a blend resembling “one-third manga, one-third cinema, one-third game.” It may also be that the failure of Imagesoft’s *Johnny Mnemonic: The Interactive Action Movie*, released a few weeks before the film, is owed to the fact that it did not provide users with the fluidity of narrative transfer that they had expected. Indeed, *Wired* magazine’s Eric Labrecque suggests that “fans of William Gibson [...] are in for [...] a disappointment” because the game bears little relation to either the original short story or the film (6). At stake here is the way audiences understand picture stories.

The notion of narrative continuity between media as “filling in the gaps” is particularly resonant inasmuch as both *Johnny Mnemonic* and *Tomb Raider* self-consciously reference the graphic-action blend as a form of code. The retrieval code for Johnny’s mnemonic unit consists of three images, snapped randomly from the television scene of a customer. Near the film’s conclusion, Johnny retrieves the final image of the code in a scene that portrays hacking as combat; Johnny twins himself virtually in order to provide a decoy for the attack of security viruses while he searches for the final piece of the code. Once retrieved, all three images are displayed comic-strip style against a metal background, and perfectly represent in picture format the plot of *Johnny Mnemonic* itself. The first image is that of a comic-book super-hero, mirroring Johnny’s central role as the cyberpunk Hacker and suggesting the equation of super-user and super-hero. The second image defines the background against which he will fulfill his trajectory as hero in this plot. And as is characteristic of the cyberpunk genre, the field of combat is, at bottom, a battle against technology; a yellow banner with the words “No N.A.S” printed on it symbolizes social unrest and the ravages of a plague, Nerve Attenuation Syndrome, caused by communication technologies’ electromagnetic radiations. The third image also represents a kind of ghost or double for Johnny while at the same time, signalling the fate from which he must save humanity. The image is of Anna Kallman, the founder of Pharmakom, who was neurally implanted at the moment of death into the company’s mainframe and now exists as a virtual persona—literally, a ghost in the machine. Anna thus



evokes both Johnny's virtual twin in the retrieval sequence and alludes to a supercession and extinction of the human by the machine. As Anna tells Johnny just before her face fades from the screen, "they [Pharmakom] try to forget me, try to burn me out of the mainframe." In releasing the Pharmakom formula as an antidote to NAS, Johnny reverses the effects of the machine, reversing its electromagnetic imprint on the human body.

Likewise, Lara must solve a coded set of instructions involving two metallic "eyes," one true and one false (doubles), and the assembly of an ancient clock-machine with the power to freeze time. During the most referentially VR sequence in the film, Lara enters a dimension which is both outside of linear narrative time and game-like in structure. She must race to the top of a pyramid to reach the last piece of the clock before her competitor, a virtual Atlantean mage (a boss). Her reward is a brief narrative addition or extension in the manner of the *Animatrix* stories; she unlocks a scene which fills in background information about her relationship with her father. Further, she is able upon her emergence from this realm to reverse the flow of narrative events, saving her love interest, Alex West—or rather, undoing his death—in a stop-action sequence with no dialogue. The phenomenon of persistence of vision, of course, enables cinema to work as a moving image sequence, so in some sense, the relationship between comic book and film had always intimated the movement from graphic to action. That cyberpunk film should insist on "filling in the gaps" as dependent upon a code or its translation, however, reminds us that the brain is engaged in problem-solving when involved in this activity and that optical illusion consequently corresponds with psychological illusion. When Cipher tells Neo that he does not even see the Matrix code anymore, only "blonde, brunette, redhead" he indicates a kind of persistence of simulation in which his brain's facility with translation allows it to rapidly "fill in." Neo develops a hyper-persistence by film's end, out-coding the Matrix or "filling in" the data streams at super speed. Pioneer VR designer Jaron Lanier observes that the human brain is already wired to be consummately receptive to simulation:

the reason that the whole thing works is that your brain spends a great deal of its efforts on making you believe that you're in a consistent reality in the first place. What you are able to perceive of the physical world is actually very fragmentary. A lot of what your nervous system accomplishes is covering up the gaps in your perception.

In Virtual Reality, this natural tendency of the brain works  
in our favour. (qtd. in Levery 2)

Physiologically, then, an opposition between freeze and flow, graphic and action, never accurately described how audiences make sense of texts. Nor could the opposition of either graphic or action with narrative, for the persistence phenomena suggests that the perception of narrative in fact emerges as the ability to translate, access through code, and “fill in” the motion as the one blurs into the other.

## 2. The Loop

In their hyper-awareness of simulation as pervasive, cyberpunk fictions foreground the activity of perceiving total systems or whole entities from fragments in motion.<sup>6</sup> In fact, it is not the opposition between fragment and system but rather the inability to distinguish between them at all that structures these plots and propels the protagonists. Often, small clues—fragments—urge a character towards an understanding of far larger constructs as also illusive and simulatory, an apprehension of cogs in moving machines grinding away at the production of illusion. Morpheus’s knowledge of the physical layout of the office and the exact time delay needed for Neo to make his escape, for instance, is a small, not-quite-right something that signals for Neo a larger order network of simulation, as does Lara’s sudden glance at a peculiarly dustless patch of engraving when she realizes, during the Cambodian tomb scene, that the entire floor-level display is an elaborate decoy, designed to look whole in and of itself, and yet part of a larger strategy of camouflage.

Unit operations (fragments working together in groups to accomplish specific tasks and forming sub-groups of the whole) make scale an issue, and often necessitate roulette-like guesswork. Characters cannot always be sure if they are confronting a seemingly autonomous sub-group or the system as a whole; how does one know when one has reached the limit of the machine? How does one know, to take up Morpheus’s phrasing, when one has reached the bottom of the rabbit hole? As Ian Bogost explains in *Unit Operations: An Approach to Videogame Criticism*, the mesh of unit operations with total system processes in videogaming has evolved from an early emphasis on the system or entire game, with one, major game-ending goal, to an emphasis on sub-groups working in inter-related ways to accomplish a series of goals which may or may not contrib-

ute to completion of the game, if a clear completion criterion is available (3-4; 57-61). Clearly, this shift in emphasis is a response to the growth of online or networked gaming and the need to accommodate multiple players and their multiply-staged entrances and exits into and out of the game fiction. Even as players work their way through various game levels, completing sub-sets of tasks on each, there is often no indication of how many levels ultimately remain. Higher-order knowledge of the system as simulation is required for such recognition; like the voice on the phone issuing Neo remote instructions, players who have completed the game tell friends what to expect when/if they reach the outermost level of the superstructure. Cyberfictions and videogames thus simultaneously thematize and narratively rely on recursive structures, a nexus brilliantly parodied in *Men in Black II* (2002) as Agent K and Agent J open the door of a small locker to find a miniature alien civilization engaged in a lottery game and then, a short while later in the film, open a large door to find that it is the door of their own locker-world, leading out into another, larger one. Moreover, recursiveness encourages a ready interplay of viewer/user identification between media. If the experience of additional story information culled from game counterparts increases viewers' identification with film protagonists, then the film protagonists' experience of being in a game strikes a reciprocal resonance. It would seem an easy conclusion, then, to say that viewers have the experience of their avatar selves confirmed as the film characters progress through the story's recursive simulations. Yet at the same time, the bonds between viewers, gamers, and protagonists as avatars and characters are fraught with contradictions generated by the very fact of network. This brings me to my second main concern: the representation of networks as entities in the fictions and the effect of this representation on the shape of the narrative.

Networks overwhelmingly fulfill the role of the villain. In both *Johnny Mnemonic* and *Tomb Raider*, human networks become synonymous with the hi-tech information networks they use to accomplish their sinister goals. Johnny discovers that Pharmakom and the Yakuza are allied partners in the purveyance of body enhancement technologies ostensibly offered to offset physical weakness caused by the electromagnetic plague but in reality, hastening its corrosive effects. Similarly, Lara learns that a centuries-old secret order, the Illuminati, is not only well armed with the latest surveillance and weapons technologies but is also in search of an ancient machine that generates illimitable energy. *The Matrix* takes the equation of human villainy and the network one step further by predicat-

ing the insurgence of the machines on the fact that it was humans who “scorched the sky” and removed the option of solar power. At its most bald, the equation is syllogistic: villains use technology to seize and maintain power; therefore, technology is villainous because it is used this way; technology is fundamentally villainous. The narrative logic is not perfect, but it is at least navigable. PCs and network computers take on the role of sprites and bosses in the vast majority of videogames, including the *Tomb Raider* series, *Johnny Mnemonic: The Interactive Movie*, and *The Matrix Online*, although the latter allows human players to become AI sympathizers. Villainy is Borg-ian and hive-like, with battles against fragments or individual sprites conceived of as a battle against “the computer.”

Consider, however, that the battle against network is waged in each of the three films by the specular cyborg, literally or analogously a piece of technology (Johnny is described as “the ultimate hard-drive,” Neo begins as a human battery, and Lara is visually linked with Simon) whose control over the virtual environment and consequent ability to defeat his or her enemy is granted precisely through that technology. Johnny Mnemonic’s skills as a hacker allow him the retrieval of Pharmakom data, a cure for the plague, while the Lo-Teks who harbour him turn the data against the company, hacking into communications network signals and “looping” them from the cyborg dolphin, Jones, in order to make the cure public. Indeed, although Johnny prides himself on his state-of-the-art status as a mnemonic courier, he breaks into the most sophisticated network systems with a simple credit card. Lara is just as classically cyberpunk in her approach, in spite of the fact that her low-tech solutions initially appear to contrast with those of her resident technology expert, Bryce.<sup>7</sup> Rather than wait for Bryce’s fiber optic cameras to finish a search of the interior of the antique clock, Lara smashes it open with a hammer. Likewise, she defeats assassins armed with state-of-the-art laser-sighted rifles by firing screwdrivers at them with an electric drill. Her improvisations do not mark her as non-proficient with technology, but suggest rather the opposite; they confirm her mastery of the environment around her, and underscore the difference between low- and high-tech as a difference of degree, not kind. In the final scenes, she defeats the villains because she is the only one able to master and fully enter into the advanced, alien technology of the Atlanteans and re-emerge to turn the knife on the head of the Illuminati. Neo’s most valuable resource in his battle against Agent Smith is even more simple than the credit card, hammer, or screwdriver: it is belief—belief in his destiny as “the One,” from which his super-powers in the Matrix derive. At the

same time, his belief-fuelled super-powers derive precisely *in* the Matrix. Outside the Matrix, Neo and the crew of the Nebuchadnezzar are relatively impotent. Their only defense against the machines outside the virtual environment is to “run and hide.” Their success, power, and control all derive from the very technology these characters are driven to defeat, and only in defeating the villain technology can the cyborg protagonists prove their status as heroes. They inhabit a conundrum, as Frankenstein-like, Lara, Neo and Johnny seem bound to erase their own means to glory and themselves along with it. It would seem that the films reach a narrative impasse.

In fact, it was never a question of technology or no technology, in spite of the films’ gestures towards an Edenic, wholly organic past, including *Tomb Raider*’s Cambodian temple scenes and the little girl who approaches Lara amidst the jasmine flowers in the jungle and the dog sleds in Siberia, *Johnny Mnemonic*’s opening shots of the television channel, “The Nostalgia Network,” and its scenes of natural landscapes, or *The Matrix* references to the organic cereal, Tasty Wheat.<sup>8</sup> It was really only a question of how much technology and who is in control of it, revealing a definite technophilia lurking beneath the technophobic portrayal of machines gone mad. The films neatly sidestep the impasse the characters have been written into by assuming the bent shape of a circular narrative. As such, they take a page from the work of Mary Shelley, but what their precursor accomplishes by shifting narrative focus away from Victor and the creature with the frame of Walton’s quest, the films accomplish through direct reference to their gaming context. Understood as games, the films’ narratives dissolve distinctions between progressive seriality and circularity, offer to resolve the problem of recursion, by bringing two ends together, just as the head of the Illuminati announces his intention to bring together the two ends of time, past and future, in joining the two halves of the Atlantean puzzle.

Mini-games, puzzles, and riddles within the films and videogames function as mock-combat. Protagonists and players are not engaged in radically different activities when solving puzzles or fighting villains and sprites—again, the difference is one of degree, not kind. The relative ease with which the puzzle-oriented, role-playing videogames have merged with the first-person-shooter style is a testament to this fact. Fundamentally, argues David Barash in *The Survival Game*, both types involve the problem-solving and competition instincts crucial to human (and animal) evolution (6-23). West’s *Tomb Raider* is reasonably direct in its transposi-

tion of tasks from the videogame versions as Lara races to find and retain possession of the puzzle pieces. Similarly, Johnny's acquisition of hackerware and firearms in the film is so generally analogous to the collection of gems, crystals, keys, and other game objects that it is readily incorporated this way into the interactive movie. *The Matrix's* use of games, riddles, puzzles—and of course, oracles, aligning divination games thematically with evolution and the element of chance—has prompted several critical articles, including G. Christopher Williams's reading of Trinity as the film's "real" Alice in Wonderland, a reading which nicely evokes the potential of Trinity as female avatar. Moreover, the specifically imagistic nature of the puzzles to be solved in each of the films underscores the merging of graphic and action, image and activity: in *Tomb Raider*, an "all-seeing eye" that is also a key camouflaged as a clock; in *Johnny Mnemonic*, the television sets and computer screens from which Anna's haloed head prompts Johnny with secret information about Pharmakom, or the final image of the access code; in *The Matrix*, Neo's observation of the little boy bending the silver spoon as a key answer to the oracle's riddle, or the rendering of Matrix code as pictographic, green lines.

Progressing in ability and expertise with each puzzle, the characters' serial completion of these gaming tasks is crucially entwined with the ontological component of their quests. Johnny, Lara, and Neo may be the most technologically proficient characters in their respective films, yet each nonetheless is without critical knowledge about his or her own identity and origins. Johnny, his mnemonic unit overloaded with information he cannot access, has traded his childhood memories for the implant and does not know his own past. Lara defines herself in relation to her famous father, but does not know his true identity as a member of the Illuminati. Neo's ignorance smacks of both, as he is not only initially naive to the nature of the Matrix, but also without a past, without true childhood memories, and defines himself in relation to Morpheus's paternalist belief in him as "the One." Like Alice, the cyborg does not know precisely who she or he is. The naif's crisis is inevitable, for in these narratives the personal stands for the general. MMPORG players' experience is not unlike that of viewers' identification with film protagonists in its impossible combination of singular and multiple address. However, the mechanics of network connection, depending on program limits to number and arrangement of characters in the game, can render the paradox more palpable, reducing the transparency of this address in their cinematic counterparts. Anyone can be "the One;" everyone can be "the One." Sin Drome, the villain of

Disney's animated feature, *The Incredibles* (2004), puts the paradox succinctly in his war against super-heroes. He plans to market manufactured super-power to the general public, and exults, "when everyone is Super, no one will be." (Perhaps designers at Eidos, Sega, or Infogrames have not thought of their jobs in quite this way.)

Knowledge concerning the exact nature of his or her own identity is thus held out to the films' protagonists as the ultimate reward upon completion of the puzzle tasks and defeat of the villains. Lara's quest is initiated by the ticking of the miniature clock left by her father, and the mystery of his death is a prime impetus in her search. Johnny originally agrees to take the Pharmakom data only as a last commission providing enough cash to retrieve his missing memories, while Neo's hacker alias and Matrix name, Mr. Anderson, come into conflict at the beginning of the story, prompting the first in a series of identity crises. According to the narrative logic of the dual address, the knowledge they gain in the context of personal ontologies also functions as the key to human survival as a species, for their individual quests result in the salvation of all humanity. The reward, though, proves to be a strangely bent and distorted one. Salvation, equated with human development in these films, is figured as a necessary step backwards from our technology. Evolution and nostalgia become essentially the same impulse. In a world where nineteenth-century poetry leads to a virtual Atlantis, in a world where group history can no longer be separated from consensual hallucination, in a world where prosthetic memory and downloadable instant knowledge act as personal history ("I know kung fu!"), points of origin serve inevitably as points of return. The narrative motion is both progressive and regressive at the same time, forcing the story into a circular shape. Johnny's nostalgic position at the conclusion of the film, the promised reward of his returned memories, follows the purge of his mnemonic unit. Images of a childhood birthday party, his first bike, and his mother's face flood back to him. And yet the flood does not precisely answer the question of his identity; he is no longer the child he was then. Likewise, Lara dons a little-girl dress and straw hat with ribbons to visit her father's grave at the conclusion of *Tomb Raider*, yet she too is no longer that little girl, and her father's ultimate culpability remains at issue. The concluding shots of *The Matrix* place Neo in tableau against a moving crowd of office workers, a crowd like the one Neo was once part of, hurrying along the street of a computer-approximated twenty-first century Chicago. Yet the city Neo re-enters never actually existed, it is only an extrapolated compilation of the *Matrix*'s devising. Neo's triumph

in the first film, like Deckard's dream of the unicorn in *Blade Runner: The Director's Cut* (1992), is the dream of a past that never was.

The lure of this limbo is powerful. It underwrites the dissolutions of which the interplay between media is symptomatic, as well as the specular pleasure of a cyborg aesthetic. The repeating loop structure allows viewers to believe that the cyborg's battle against the machines is never either wholly won, nor wholly lost, but available for enjoyment over and over again. Contradictions can be suspended and questions of identity cease to matter very much when narratively, it is GAME OVER, BEGIN AGAIN. *Tomb Raider* displays these words on Simon's screen in the final shot of the film; Lara throws off her straw hat, seizes her guns, and re-enters combat with the robot, exactly as she began. The Buddhist underpinnings of the *Tomb Raider* plot are a nice touch, since they fit perfectly with Lara's videogame origins. What, after all, is the experience of serial death and endless re-animation in gaming but a kind of virtual reincarnation? Nor is it easy to tell ghost from machine. As the preceding pages have been at pains to argue, the relationship between these films and their gaming context defies attempts to fix originary imprint or trace on either. The mirror scene in *The Matrix* also perfectly describes the relationship between narrative and network, and although it has already attracted several readings as an illustration of Baudrillard's the hyper-real, I would like to offer one further variation. As the mirror turns to liquid and pours down Neo's throat, we become powerfully aware of the fact that it was never simply a case of engaging with our machines, of us entering into them, but of them also entering into us. They have, from the beginning, already infused their spirit, already constituted us—from the inside. This, the films suggest, is what it means to be human.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Final Fantasy VII: Advent Children* (film, 2005; game, 2003); *Silent Hill* (film, 2006; game, 1999); *Doom* (film, 2005; game, 1993); *Super Mario Brothers* (film, 1993; game, 1983). *Johnny Mnemonic: The Interactive Movie* (1995); *Tomb Raider I* (1996); *Enter the Matrix* (2003) and *The Matrix Online* (2005).

<sup>2</sup> The phrase, of course, is Donna Haraway's, from the "Manifesto"; in many ways, this paper takes up the idea of the cyborg as border breaker and as having a liberatory potential and is thus a response to a growing trend in cyberculture studies which posits the cyborg's potential as prematurely heralded and as practically non-apparent. Nina Wakeford, for example, suggests that the potential of the Internet was not fully realized as a liberatory of gendered identities but instead,



existed and still exists as a masculinized, “Wild West” frontier; similarly, Anne Balsamo suggests that VR reinforces conventional social hierarchies, rather than liberating gamers to choose new identities. While I agree with many critics on the concrete results of networked practice, it remains true that many cyberpunk fictions envision the cyborg in the same terms as Haraway in her influential 1980s statement.

<sup>3</sup> This paper began as a reception study, culled from student responses to the games and films in three successive years of my second- and third-year courses in Cyberpunk Fictions.

<sup>4</sup> *The Matrix Online* has gamers buy the “coolest” clothing (sunglasses, long jackets, leather pants) with “information currency” gained by playing. Avatars start the game with more common clothing.

<sup>5</sup> For an especially good sample of gamer reviews, see GameSpy.com’s entry on *Enter the Matrix*, <<http://search.gamespy.com/products?query=enter%20matrix>>. The recent film version of *A Scanner Darkly* (2006) is brilliant in its prophylactic use of overlaid manga/comic styling, suggesting the exaggerated yet permeable boundaries of manga as mediated narrative and its similarity to celluloid.

<sup>6</sup> One of several reasons, I think, that *Frankenstein*, dramatizing the construction of a creature not from a homogenous and amorphous substance like clay, as in the animated statue analogues, but from fragments of other human bodies, has been a favourite model for the cyberpunk writers.

<sup>7</sup> Lara qualifies as a “cyberpunk” as much Johnny does, given Timothy Leary’s identification of the ability to improvise with whatever is at hand as a key characteristic of the cyberpunk personality (534).

<sup>8</sup> In an interestingly nostalgic twist, the Johnny Mnemonic pinball game, released in 1995, portrays a stylized cyberspace and torn fragments of comic book code along with Johnny on the board surface.

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