

FOCUS - 2 of 4 DOCUMENTS

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PIECE OF MIND FORGET ABOUT BEGINNINGS, MIDDLES, AND ENDS. THE NEW STORYTELLING IS ABOUT MAKING YOUR WAY IN A FRAGMENTED, IMAGINARY WORLD

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I finally get it. I get "The **Matrix**."

No, I'm sorry, I don't get the plot, so please don't ask me to spell it all out for you. I'm just as baffled as the next person when it comes to what's really going on in "The **Matrix: Reloaded**" probably more baffled, because I have not immersed myself deeply in the "**Matrix**" world.

But that's exactly my point. That's what I finally get: This isn't a movie. It's a world

Those of us who grew up with movies - and, even more premillennially, with books - have had some trouble grasping this concept. We have criticized the "**Matrix**" movies for their obscurity, their wooden characters, their confusing story lines, their contradictions and illogic. If we have thought about the ancillary games and animated shorts and other complementary pieces of this larger whole, we have dismissed them as so many marketing tie-ins. We have, in short, completely missed the point.

Because these movies aren't about the things we have spent our lives thinking movies are about - much less what older forms of storytelling, from theater to novels, are about. They don't much care about character development or plot. They don't care about starting at point A and moving neatly and clearly to point B, with the action motivated and enriched by the believable, carefully portrayed needs and desires of the humans who enact it.

But what they do care about, and deeply, is creating a world - a rich, multifaceted, and complex environment that the viewer can enter and explore in a variety of ways. That's why the games and the shorts - and even the whole web of audience response and interpretation that has sprung up on, where else, the Web - are not just more products for us to buy or fan clubs for us to condescend to, but an integral part of the experience of watching "The **Matrix**," "**The Matrix: Reloaded**," and presumably the third movie due this fall, "The **Matrix: Revolutions**." We can critique the makers of the "**Matrix**" series, Larry and Andy Wachowski, for lots of things, but we should not fall into the trap of calling them bad storytellers. They aren't exactly storytellers at all. They are worldmakers.

"... interruption is one of the fundamental devices of all structuring. It goes far beyond the sphere of art. To give only one example, it is the basis of quotation. To quote a text involves the interruption of its context."

- Walter Benjamin, "What Is Epic Theater?"

Let me interrupt myself here to note that this idea of worldmaking isn't mine. I got it from Henry Jenkins, who directs the comparative media studies program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and has written extensively on fan culture and video games. While doing some online research on something completely different, I came across a piece Jenkins wrote a couple of years ago with Mary Fuller, drawing parallels between the narrative structures of early world explorers' accounts and of video games - specifically, Nintendo's Super Mario Brothers.

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If this sounds interesting, you should read the piece (www.rochester.edu/College/FS/Publications/FullerNintendo.html; I'll wait), but the basic idea is what held me: that the story of Super Mario Brothers, like the story of Pocahontas, isn't really a story at all. It's a narrative designed to help us explore a previously unknown world. Such narratives don't pay a lot of attention to logical plotting, with clear motivations leading to believable outcomes; they don't focus on character development or the subtleties of relationships; they're all about landing you in a new space, describing it (in prose or pixels), and letting you wander around in it.

Suddenly all the things that had always annoyed me about video games - the seeming triviality of the goal, the flatness of the characters, the ceaseless meandering from one level to the next - made sense. The meandering was the whole point. Not the characters, not the story, not getting to the end - just being in that world and exploring what it felt like. In a way, I think even the extreme violence of many games (and gamelike movies) makes more sense when viewed from this perspective. It's not intended to move us deeply or make us think about real pain in the real world; like the stew of gnostic and Buddhist philosophies that has provoked way too much analysis on "Matrix" websites, it's there to heighten the texture of the sensation-drenched, overwhelming world that a particular game is trying to create. (And no, that doesn't mean I think they're good fun for small children. Then I got assigned to review the latest "Pokemon" movie. It was, as I noted in my one-star review, pretty awful. But as I watched it I found myself thinking, maybe because there wasn't much onscreen to make me think, about Jenkins's idea. And it made sense here, too. "Pokemon" isn't about the characters or the story - all of which can be summed up as "cute creatures morph into monsters and fight each other" - but about the Pokemon world.

"Gotta catch 'em all!"

Implicit in the Pokemon slogan is the tricky truth that you can't catch 'em all. There will always be more Pokemon out there, waiting to be found. And that is (aside from a parental nightmare at the cash register) an invitation to keep exploring, to keep going, to keep wandering deeper into an unknown world.

I decided I needed to talk to Jenkins about all this. So I called him, and we had a couple of conversations, in part because he's working on a book about these new forms of storytelling. His argument, grossly oversimplified, is that people like the Wachowski brothers are using a combination of media to tell stories in more complex and interactive ways - and, yes, he said, he sees a connection with Pokemon.

"This is a story that has no central originating text," Jenkins said. It didn't start with a single book or movie, but with cards and video games and TV shows and toys and all the other things your kid wants you to buy - but he wants you to buy them because they all carry real meaning for the Pokemon fan. "From between those things, we've unfolded a hundred-plus species. And the information about those species doesn't reside in any one place. Every piece is a piece of the whole. The kid is expected to develop a full understanding of the world. They have to understand a lot of the Pokemon lore. The kid is being taught how to learn a mythology."

No wonder a single Pokemon episode makes almost no sense to the uninitiated parent. And no wonder that the kids who've grown up on Pokemon now want to see movies like "The Matrix: Reloaded."

"If people like this kind of hunting and gathering behavior," Jenkins said, "then they're going to want that kind of complexity, breadth, and depth from other stories that they consume."

The "Matrix" movies are the most fully realized attempt to make this new kind of story. But even something like the "Harry Potter" movie franchise makes sense in this context; one of the most pleasing moments in those otherwise noisy but ploddingly faithful adaptations comes when we get a glimpse of Diagon Alley, the magical London street where wizards buy everything they need. It's not essential to the plot that we know what's for sale there, but our eyes eagerly explore the Diagon Alley scene, trying to put together as much information as we can about the wizarding world.

The movies that are trying hardest to create a world are, not coincidentally, often baffling or disappointing to viewers looking for more traditional forms. (Would it be unfair to note that most of these baffled viewers are over 30?) "X2: X-Men United," for example, makes very little sense if you don't already know about the X-Men from their comic-book history; it's almost entirely incomprehensible if you didn't see the first movie. That used to be a sin; now it's just part of the deal.

"The Matrix: Reloaded" ends so abruptly that you gasp, but then you realize - as the words "to be concluded" flash on the screen - that of course it's not ending; it's just pausing between rounds. You've been playing a game, and your mom just told you to stop for supper. No problem; you'll pick up where you left off.

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People who have grown up on games don't expect any one piece of the puzzle to make sense by itself. Part of the pleasure, in fact, comes from piecing the puzzle together themselves.

"Mom, wanna play X-Men?"

"OK. Which one should I be?"

"Anyone you want."

"Who will you be?"

"I'll be Wolverine. I like those silver claw things. Then I'll turn into Cyclops. Oh, wait, can I be **Nightcrawler**? He's really cool. He can stick to walls and he can go through things."

- A conversation with my 5-year-old son, who has never read an X-Men comic book, seen an X-Men movie, or watched an X-Men cartoon, but who plays X-Men every day on the playground with his friends.

"In a sense what we're doing now is kind of a modern mythology, in which the story is just a piece of the world."

Jenkins again. I almost feel as if I should just print the transcript of our conversations, but of course there are digressions and non sequiturs that I need to edit out. Besides, you'd rather just read the really good parts, right? Interruption is structure.

Here's another good part, about what some critics are missing.

"They're trained to think in very traditional story structures. What they see as the collapse of storytelling - if we read that, we should ask whether the public suddenly lost interest in story, or whether we're seeing new forms of stories. They're demanding stories that are told in more complex ways. It's not that they're dumbing down."

But are the stories different? "If you look at them by old criteria, they may seem to be more fragmented," Jenkins said. On the other hand, fragmentation is nothing new.

"When the Greeks heard a story about Odysseus," Jenkins said, "they didn't need to be told who he was or where he came from or what his mission was. Homer did that in very small chunks on the fly. Which is why high school students around the world have struggled with 'The Odyssey.'"

Aha. Freshman English; I'm plowing through "The Iliad." All these characters, all these names, all these quick little tags to identify them - swift-footed brilliant Achilles, tall Hector of the shining helm - why would I care what his helmet looks like? Because he's not a character. He's an avatar. He's a guy I can pretend to be, so I can enter more fully into the action and really explore his world. Where's my Achilles action figure?

Like Achilles or Odysseus, Jenkins says, Wolverine and Neo and the rest are "almost dehydrated characters - just add water! We do add water." We put ourselves into the characters' shoes, which is why we don't want to know too much about what size shoes they wear - this way, one size fits all. Or at least all who want to play.

And, of course, if you don't want to play, you don't have to. "The **Matrix**: Reloaded" is just one of many options we have available to us in a world that still stages Shakespeare and reads Dickens and screens Truffaut. "The **Matrix**" is one hell of a game, but it's not the only game in town.

"Over the years I've had to revise my notion of where I 'get' my ideas. Or is it that they get me? I think that ideas are huge things. . . . Ideas move like waves through the populace. . . . I don't much care about being a solo artist with original ideas. I care about being awake. Awake to Dream. I believe we collaborate with the idea wave; with past, present and future dreams. Our buoyancy, our drifting consciousness has as much to do with our 'having ideas' as anything. Exploring and creating with others throws a bigger net over the wave."

- Rick Berry, "Dreaming Real" in "Exploring the **Matrix**: Visions of the Cyber Present," edited by Karen Haber

It's the collaboration, as much as anything, that I'm finding interesting. I have some ideas; I bring you some more ideas from other people; you add in a few more ideas of your own. Here's one more excerpt from Jenkins:

"Modern storytelling is worldmaking, and those worlds can be created collaboratively or by an individual. Ultimately, they're re-created by the audience."

I'm curious about what you've created, or re-created, in your part of the world.

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GRAPHIC: PHOTO, "The **Matrix: Reloaded**" (above) and "Pokemon Heroes" (below) care less about character development and plot than about creating a multifaceted and complex environment.

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