

In: Social Media
Editor: Annmarie Bennet

ISBN: 978-1-63463-175-4
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Chapter 5

**THE *MATRIX* HERO ON YOUTUBE: FAN VIDS
AS A FORM OF TRANSMEDIA STORYTELLING**

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ABSTRACT

Fan vids are an emergent form of storytelling in the current social media epoch. As a genre of works, they comprise montages of visual material culled *from mass media source texts and set to music through the grassroots practice of vidding. As vidders search, cull, and edit movie images, they recast the cinematic stories by decontextualizing the source materials and extending the frontier of the narrative to other signifying realms. Vidding could be said to constitute a grassroots, fan-driven form of transmedia storytelling, by which the integral elements of a fiction are systematically dispersed across multiple media platforms. *The Matrix*, a celebrated Hollywood science fiction franchise, has inspired many such instances of transmedia storytelling, demonstrating how the story is retold by ordinary fans as they transpose movie images from cinematic space to cyberspace. This essay focuses on two fan vids from YouTube, the most popular video-sharing site, entitled “I, Neo (Mos Def / Massive Attack / Matrix Mashup)” and “Matrix Vs. Excision & Downlink - Existence VIP Dub Mashup” to examine how vidders incorporate new content to expand and alter the *Matrix* narrative into the bottom-up generated content. When *Matrix* footage is eclectically cut to electronic music, Neo’s story is no

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longer represented and understood within a fixed symbolic system, but rather in a hybrid, open framework, allowing for diverse directionality of interpretation. While transmedia storytelling conventions stress that all components from all media should cohere with a consistent narrative world, *The Matrix* story in these fan vids is embellished by insinuating a narrative rupture. The vids allow a narrative experience which is fragmented, inconsistent, or even disintegrated, partaking of a postmodernist discourse. Although *The Matrix*'s original allusions to messianic-redemptive Christian mythology, of particular interest for my analysis, remain apparent in these vids, the vidders have obscured, altered, and reworked the cinematic story, concomitantly generating new stories. Fan vids open up new possibilities for re-presenting and re-interpreting media texts, posing both challenges and opportunities for the practices of storytelling and meaning-making in the global mediascape.

Keywords: Social media, fan vid, storytelling, transmedia, participatory

INTRODUCTION: STORYTELLING IN THE USER-GENERATED MEDIASCAPE

Fan vids are an emergent vehicle for storytelling within the social media landscape. An “underground art form” (Russo 2009), fan vids are montages of visual material culled from mass media source texts and set to music through the practice of vidding. They are the creative output of the media audiences, Internet users empowered by the prevalent availability of high bandwidth and free video-editing software.¹ One particularly popular genre of fan vids is the mashup, a term denoting a “remix” of digital data, in which discretely sourced images and sounds are edited together to form a novel composite video. Known for their diversification of approaches to their subject matter (Jenkins 2006b), vidders celebrate, critique, and parody cultural texts, filtering their source images through a web of intertextual signification. They pair music with pre-existing visual materials dislodged from their original interpretive

¹ The music video “Closer,” made by T. Jonesy and Killa using footage from *Star Trek*, can be said to be one of the first Internet fan vids. As Jake Coyle (2008) has argued, Jonesy and Killa used *Star Trek* to reimagine Romanek’s original video for the industrial rock group Nine Inch Nails, chiefly by recasting Kirk and Spock’s relationship in homoerotic innuendo. Widely circulated in the blogosphere during fall 2006, this slash vid was hyped as grassroots art facilitated by digital image-making technology.

backgrounds to stage readings of their “new stories,” (Coppa 2008),² employing the music as an interpretive lens allowing viewers to discern and construe the visuals differently. Fan vids thus offer a visual-sonic space for alternative modes of meaning-making in relation to cinematic images.

As a genre, fan vids reflect the dramatic transformation of movie fandom by recent advances in technology. Vidding began in mid-1970s with amateur use of slide projector stills, grew through the 1980s and 1990s with the development of VHS and DVD technology, and by the 2000s attained near-universal feasibility via the Internet. (Russo 2009) A proliferation of fan sites now allows audiences to post and circulate news and stories of their idols with remarkable speed and spread, and since the mid-2000s, the maturation of broadband infrastructure and image-making software have made cinematic texts promptly available for fans’ appropriation and manipulation. Through the common formats of QuickTime streaming and Flash animation, video files are now downloadable and directly transferable between the devices such as television and computer. Cinephiles can now easily search, cull, copy, and share movie stills, trailers, and clips from digital sources like DVDs and Internet websites. In addition to the appropriation of texts, they can also edit these images and hybridize them with other texts using digital image-making technology. Like other artists, vidders are known for their sophisticated and intelligent use of appropriated materials in telling their own versions of stories (Jenkins 2006b); moreover, they eagerly post and share their work on video-sharing sites, soliciting support or feedback from the fanvid community. While following in the tradition of older fan-oriented productions like fanzines,³ fan vids advance the genre of fan writing by facilitating bottom-up generated content, unlike the works of fanzine writers and editors, who are often leading members in the fan communities. Fan vids thus constitute a democratized form of media production, lengthening the reach of fan activity and transforming the nature of fandom in an era of user-generated media.

The digitalization of media facilitates a different approach to sharing, interpreting and re-telling Hollywood narratives. Classical Hollywood cinema has cultivated “a sturdy and pervasive tradition of storytelling.” (Bordwell 2007) Dating to the 1920s and 1930s, this tradition has become a filmmaking

² Coppa further points out the error of Coyle’s assumption that fans who make music videos are necessarily fans of the music itself, as suggested by his recent news article, “The Best Fan-Made Music Videos on YouTube.”

³ Fanzines, along with self-published slash fiction, originated in the 1930s and became popular during the 1940s (Wikipedia: Fanzine). They represent earlier modes of grassroots fan-created works, in contrast to the top-down modes of film and star promotion through professional journalism and studio propaganda.

style against which many others are judged. As David Bordwell observes in his seminal book *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* (1985), classical Hollywood narrative films feature plots which progress in a linear fashion, dependent on character-driven action and the use of continuity editing. Simple and clear, their plots abjure excessive details and draw upon basic principles of classical literature to achieve a balance and symmetry in which all components are integrated into a diegetic whole. Narrative time and space are further unified and aligned with perception of reality through the use of techniques like eye-line match, the 180-degree rule, and point-of-view shots. Such techniques allow the viewer to “suspend disbelief,” convincing us that what we see on the screen is true. As John Belton (2006) explains, “Classical Hollywood cinema possesses a style which is largely invisible and difficult for the average spectator to see. The narrative is delivered so effortlessly and efficiently to the audience that it appears to have no source. It comes magically off the screen.” (22)⁴ The resulting sense of harmony satisfies and even exhilarates the audience.

While fan vids often employ footage from acclaimed Hollywood movies, the classical narrative style itself is rarely retained. As vidders cut movie footage to music and move it from the cinematic context to the new media context, they retell the stories in novel ways, exhibiting a fan-driven, bottom-up generated form of transmedia storytelling. “Transmedia,” as writer-designer-researcher Christy Dena observes, has become a buzzword in recent years (TMSB, 2012), denoting a theoretical model for considering the flow of content across media. “Transmedia storytelling,” a term popularized by Henry Jenkins (2011), signifies a process by which integral elements of a fiction are systematically dispersed across multiple media platforms for the purpose of creating a coordinated and cohesive entertainment experience. This process by nature enhances fan participation since, as Jenkins (2006a) puts it, consumers in an age of media convergence can meld together multiple texts to create a larger narrative than could be contained in a single medium. (95) This idea is echoed by Marc Ruppel (2006), who elaborates on “cross-sited narratives,” new structures that “shatter the fixity of narrative as a single-medium endeavor and establish instead a multiply-mediated storyworld.” (185) Narrative theorist Jill Walker (2004) also explores the notion of “distributed narratives,” which take further the postmodern narratives illustrating “fragments and bricolage in content, plot, and style”. (1) This “emergent form” (100) “open[s] up the

⁴ John Belton calls this style the driving force of the “narrative machine,” hinting the industrial mode of moviemaking.

formal and physical aspects of the work and spread[s itself] across time, space and the network.” (1)⁵ Similarly, Glorianna Davenport has described the “very distributed stories” (Davenport et al. 2000), made possible by the expanded role of the media audience. These stories are the “narratives of the future [that] are capable of expanding the social engagement of audiences while offering intensive narrative immersion in a story experience that plays out in multiple public and private venues.” (Ibid.) Transmedia stories rely not on individual characters or specific plotline, but on a larger fictional composite which can sustain manifold interconnected characters and their stories. The creative process is cumulative: storytellers add details like character backstories and secondary plotline to the composite fiction, aggrandizing the power of the story in scope and significance.

The participatory attributes of transmedia storytelling complement those of social media, enabling the audience to actively participate in the creation or re-creation of the narrative. By so doing, they become social and creative collaborators; they become, in Rutledge’s terms, the “stakeholders” of the transmedia experience (Rutledge). The paradigm of the “never-final” story motivates the audience to seek out untold parts of the narrative and extend it by adding content, illustrating what Henry Jenkins (2011) calls extension in contrast to adaptation: while both involve shifts between media, adaptation fundamentally takes the same story from one medium and retells it in another whereas extension adds new content to the narrative as it moves from one medium to another.⁶ Extension facilitates what game designer Neil Young terms “additive comprehension,” whereby the addition of a small segment may alter the entire perception of the film. (Jenkins 2006a: 123) By de-/re-contextualizing cinematic materials, vidders extend the narrative boundary, transforming fans’ intended participation in retelling the story. They also engage with other fan participants, exhibiting a highly interactive storytelling process. When vidders upload their works on online video-sharing sites, they invite other users in the same network to “like,” comment on, and share them, producing a seamless and instantaneous interaction among users. These

⁵ The notion of “distribution” designates a lack of unity which can be elaborated into three aspects: distribution in time – the narrative cannot be experienced in one consecutive period of time; second, distribution in space -- no single place in which the whole narrative can be experienced; third, distribution of authorship -- no single author or group of authors can have complete control over the form of the narrative. (Walker 2004: 3)

⁶ Christy Dena has challenged this view of Jenkins, arguing that adaptation can also be profoundly transformative instead of being merely literal. Any adaptations, to a certain extent, add something new to the array of meanings attached to the stories. As Dena points out, shifts between media imply new experiences and new lessons. (Jenkins 2011)

participatory acts by various users accumulate, connect, and work together to effect a multifaceted, versatile story and cross-media entertainment experience. The endless appropriation, reproduction, and circulation of movie images remaps the practice of storytelling in a networked entertainment landscape, demonstrating an unprecedented degree of participation and interactivity among audiences.

RETELLING THE *MATRIX* STORY

The Matrix, a celebrated 1999 Hollywood movie, is an influential example of transmedia storytelling (Jenkins 2006a: 101) frequently sourced on video-sharing sites. Like other vast entertainment networks, Hollywood has the potential to realize innovative transmedia projects (Dena), and *The Matrix* in particular has developed into an unprecedented cyberpunk science-fiction phenomenon. Produced by Warner Bros., the film was the highest-grossing R-rated film of 1999 in North America, and has since been acknowledged as “the most influential action movie of the generation” (Fierman 2003). The *Matrix* franchise, extended by two sequels, three video games, comic books, and a collection of animated stories, successfully established a cult following whose members are fascinated not only by the captivating action, but also by the compelling story and philosophical underpinnings. Particularly famous scenes relevant to the plot development, such as the “I know kung fu” scene from *The Matrix* and the “Neo-versus-multiple-Smiths” scene from *The Matrix Reloaded* are much-recalled and discussed. Because the narrative taps into a discourse sustained by myriad cultural and media elements, viewers are unlikely to read it from a single perspective – an effect intended by its original creators, Lana and Andy Wachowski, who explicitly sought to juxtapose elements from various cultures in a ground-breaking manners. (Jenkins 2006: 121) This narrative eclecticism is underscored and expanded in the user-generated fan texts collaboratively reworked in the Web-based environment.

This essay will consider *The Matrix* as an exemplary case for observing how a narrative evolves when transposed from cinematic space to cyberspace. I have chosen YouTube as the primary site of investigation, as it is among the most popular video-sharing sites, with more than 1 billion user visits and 6 billion hours of video-viewing each month. (YouTube Statistics) Many video clips sourcing *The Matrix* are in circulation on YouTube; I keyword-searched the site by using the phrase “Matrix, mashup” to identify the most-viewed clips of that genre. The top 20 results (out of 69,400 as of April 12, 2014)

consisted primarily of two types: mashups of *The Matrix* with another film⁷ and fan vids featuring *Matrix* footage cut to music. I have chosen to concentrate on the latter type, for the purpose of exploring fan vids' capacity for wedding disparate visual and sonic elements. Two fan vids, "I, Neo (Mos Def / Massive Attack / Matrix Mashup)" and "Matrix Vs. Excision & Downlink - Existence VIP Dub Mashup" will serve as texts for analysis.

While transmedia storytelling as conventionally understood entails a coherent and coordinated development of the story-world through each new medium, in these fan vids the story of *The Matrix* is embellished by insinuating a narrative rupture, thus providing a narrative experience which is fragmented, inconsistent, or even disintegrated, partaking of a postmodernist discourse. Although certain themes from the original cinematic materials remain apparent in the fan vids, the vidders have obscured, altered, and reworked Neo's story as they hybridize *Matrix* footage with electronic music. The vids thereby open up new signifying possibilities, enabling fans as collaborative agents to create new stories in the post-cinematic epoch.

STORYTELLING, MYTHOLOGY, AND MEANING MAKING IN *THE MATRIX*

Storytelling always entails a myth-making process. Christopher Vogler, a writing teacher as well as a student of famous mythologist Joseph Campbell, explains the nature of myth in his book *The Writer's Journey* (1992):

"What is a myth? For our purposes a myth is not the untruth or fanciful exaggeration of popular expression. A myth, as Campbell was fond of saying, is a metaphor for a mystery beyond human comprehension. It is a comparison that helps us understand, by analogy, some aspect of our mysterious selves. A myth, in this way of thinking, is not an untruth but a way of reaching a profound truth. Then what is a story? A story is also a metaphor, a model of some aspect of human behavior." (p. vii)

The myth-making process has characterized Hollywood production from the classical era to the contemporary era. The archetypal "heroes," abstracted from mythological sources, are incarnated through a range of characters from

⁷ The films that YouTube users cut to juxtapose with *The Matrix* include *Inception* (2010), *Watchmen* (2009), *The Dark Knight* (2008), *Fight Club* (1999), and *Kung Fu Panda* (2008), all Hollywood productions with thematic or generic proximity to *The Matrix*.

cowboys to comic-book heroes, all immediately recognizable to audiences. The “hero’s journey,” as conceptualized by Campbell prescribes a sequence of tasks the protagonist must complete while undergoing a corporeal and spiritual ordeal. Stories of the Western genre, for example, convey values such as rugged individualism, justice, pioneering spirit, and courage, incarnated by a lone hero who triumphs over the outlaws, embodying a warrior code of honor in a world threatened by moral breakdown. The superhero genre adapts familiar comic book narratives of folklore heroes (*Superman*, *Batman*, *The Fantastic Four*, *X-Men*), who protect the promise of the well-ordered American society from villains seeking to subvert it, through a salvific struggle that evokes the eternal conflict between good and evil. *Superman*, specifically, is in Mark Stucky’s (2006) phrase the “popular culture’s paradigmatic hero,” whose humanity both conceals and makes possible his supernatural destiny evoking the figure of Christ. In the movie version of *Superman*, the narrative cycle relays of a complex calling involving three distinct tasks and journeys: first, to go to and live among Earth’s people; second, to withdraw from Earth’s people; and third, to save Earth’s people. (Stucky 2006) Each of the three missions directs the hero toward an eventual symbolic death and resurrection, followed by the experience of atonement. By evoking Christian mythology, *Superman*’s narrative cycle also reconnects audiences with the older works in our culture, concomitantly giving those works new currency.

Like *Superman*, *The Matrix* also borrows substantially from the mythological sources of the Christian faith. While *The Matrix* narrative references a wide array of religious and philosophical systems, including Buddhism, science-fiction ontological theories of the Philip K. Dick school, Taoism, martial-arts mysticism, and Godelian mathematical metaphysics. Christianity is probably the most familiar. The Christian undertones are readily evident in the use of biblical names and a plot revolving around the Redeemer myth. Neo (Keanu Reeves), whose surname “Anderson” means “son of man,” is the chosen “One,” analogous to the Christ. In a world where humans are enslaved from birth by the unseen but all-controlling Matrix, Neo is hailed as the one to free them, similar to Christ’s prophesized arrival to free humans from the blind slavery of sin hereditary to everyone born from Adam.⁸ The liberation-through-enlightenment from the Matrix enables people to be born anew from their life support pods, seeing the universal oppression encircling them from a new perspective, similar to the spiritual rebirth Christians gain

⁸ Reference to chapter 5 of the Book of Romans in the Bible.

from conversion.⁹ After escaping from the illusions of the Matrix, the liberated reside in the city of Zion, a reference to the city of the Promised Land (Jerusalem) in the Old Testament, and perhaps also to the Christian Church, called “daughter of Zion” in the New Testament. Morpheus (Laurence Fishburne), who identifies Neo as the One, brings to mind, John the Baptist, who heralds the coming of “the Chosen One” in the wilderness; his ship, the hovercraft Nebuchadnezzar, has the same name as the biblical Babylonian king whose prophetic dreams could only be interpreted by Daniel. Neo and his comrades are betrayed by their fellow Cypher – as Jesus was by Judas, one of the twelve disciples – upon which Neo gives his life to save Morpheus, reinforcing the messianic connotation. After death, he is resurrected by the kiss, or breath, of Trinity, akin to the Holy Spirit, and defeats the sinister Agent Smith using his newfound mastery over the Matrix. As the movie closes, Neo ascends into the clouds, having declared a new mission to free those still in bondage to the Matrix. The abundant biblical references in *The Matrix* evince a strong influence from the myths of the Christian culture informing its narrative.

NEO ON YOUTUBE

The Christian themes prominent *The Matrix* narrative attenuate when viewers cull passages from the film and transpose them from the cinema screen to the computer screen, “mashing” them with other media. Viewers read the classical redemptive myths through a new lens as biblical motifs merge with those from other texts. A fan vid uploaded March 8, 2007 on YouTube entitled “I, Neo (Mos Def / Massive Attack / Matrix Mashup)” offers one such example. User “garrisonmedia” has cut clips from *The Matrix Revolutions* (2003), the last installment of *The Matrix* trilogy, to the song “I against I,” performed by *Mos Def* and *Massive Attack*. The footage proceeds from Neo’s vantage point of view, drawing on the “Neo-versus-Smith” scene, a battle set in a futuristic urban milieu. Near its beginning, the video depicts the combat between the hero and the villain on a rainy night. The fight seems prolonged, extending from one locale to another – from outdoor to indoor, from the ground to the air. Audiences see the thrusts, leaps and kicks of the two fighters, augmented by both wire work and the computer-generated special effects.

⁹ Reference to chapter 3 of the Book of John in the Bible.

The song “I against I” dominates the sonic space of the video, with the occasional inclusion of dialogue between Neo and Smith heard over the music. The lyrics, in part, proclaim:

ya,
 I against I,
 Flesh of my flesh,
 And mind of my mind,
 Two of a kind but one won't survive,
 My images reflect in the enemies eye,
 And his images reflect in mine the same time,
 ya, I-ya,
 I against I,
 Flesh of my flesh,
 And mind of my mind,
 Two of a kind but one won't survive,
 Right here is where the end gon' start at,
 Conflict, Contact, Combat,
 Fighters stand where the land is marked at,
 Settle the dispute about who the livest,
 3 word answer,
 Whoever survive this,
 Only one of us can ride forever,
 So you and I can't ride together,
 Can't live or can't die together,
 All we can do is collide together,
 So I skillfully apply the pressure,
 Won't stop until I'm forever... One!

At its best, a fan vid complicates a narrative by altering some aspect of the source material to suggest how the vidder reads the story. “I, Neo” incorporates the song “I against I,” a 2002 collaboration between British trip hop group Massive Attack and the American rapper Mos Def. The lyrics complement the visual theme of battle, in light of which the phrase “I against I” could be interpreted multiple ways. Psychologically, it could suggest a schizophrenic and conflicted self-struggling to achieve an integrated ego; the vidder uses the Neo-Smith battle to suggest that the true battle happens within and can be as vigorous and violent as the battle against an evil Other. Spiritually, it presumably alludes to the well-known Rastafarian expression, “I

and I,”¹⁰ which Rastafarians use interchangeably with “we” to evoke the union of the speaker, the audience, and God. “Iya” is also a Rastafarian expression, signifying both “my friend” and the “higher” reality.¹¹ The vid thus suggests a twofold inner meaning for the Neo-Smith battle: a fatal rupture within the self paradoxically making it “forever... One!” on the one hand, and a rupture between self and God leading to a realization of God-in-self on the other, blending Rastafarian mysticism with the Redeemer-hero-myth.

“I against I” was originally recorded for the soundtrack of the 2002 American vampire superhero movie, *Blade II*, and more YouTube users compliment “I, Neo’s” vidder by opining that the song works as well or better with his chosen *Matrix* footage as it did in its original setting. *Blade II*, starring the Hollywood actor and martial artist Wesley Snipes, is part of a trilogy cinematizing the comic book hero, Blade, a half-vampire, half-mortal “daywalker” who protects humanity from the ravages of a vampire community preying on humans and each other. With “I, Neo,” the vidder has displaced the song from one filmic context to another, to the pleasure of many viewers. Commenter “Lio Perez” enthuses, “you did a really good job you made me think that this song should have been on this soundtrack instead of blade 2 i am truly impressed the lyrics make sense to neo and smiths hatered for each other this is the best video i seen that has been cut up for this song hands down [sic]”. “AKilla9” offers: “jokes!! i like dat, almost better then the blade 2 one [sic]”. “ETWarlord” writes, “Very very cool!!! Best remix of this scene I’ve seen so far. The song is so much cooler with this than it was in “BLADE II”. Not that it didn’t work for BLADE, it was just better here [sic].” Even some commenters who dislike *The Matrix* are complimentary: “I hated this movie but I loved your use of the clips with my favorite song. Good Job [sic],” writes “popothechan.” “I against I” offers these viewers an intriguing new reading of *The Matrix*’s spiritual and philosophical nuances, demonstrating not only the potential of new media to extend a narrative, but also the potential of *The Matrix* itself to allow re-readings in terms of narrative, character, and theme in a diverse and vibrant manner.

The fan vid “Matrix Vs. Excision & Downlink – Existence VIP Dub Mashup,” uploaded on YouTube on June 28, 2011, similarly complicates the movie’s narrative ties to Christian mythology. Vidder “DubifyThis” cuts

¹⁰ Rastafarianism is an African-based spiritual movement which arose in Jamaica in the 1930s. Rastafarians worship the late Ethiopian Emperor, Haile Selassie I, whom they generally regard as Jesus in his Second Advent or an incarnation of God. Outside Jamaica, Rastafarianism is best known for its cultural associations with reggae music.

¹¹ Wikipedia: I Against I.

footage from *The Matrix* to “Existence (VIP Mix)”, the title track of a 2011 collaborative EP by Canadian dubstep DJs Excision and Downlink. The video opens with a logo of the vidder’s user name, like a self-promoted brand, followed by shots of the fight scene between Neo and multiple Agent Smiths in *The Matrix Reloaded* (2003). The scene shows kung-fu-fighting Neo in his flowing robe, flying through the air and delivering blows to his enemies, establishing his superb kinetic prowess. The choreography emphasizes wire work and digitally simulated action rather than traditional kung fu, underscoring the proximity between the characters of *The Matrix* films and video game characters (Jenkins 2006: 121). The video game analogy evokes the sense of immediacy experienced by gamers, as conveyed through the game world’s characters. This sense of immediacy is transferred to cyberspace and replicated, if not reinvigorated, by vidders as they engage in creative acts.

The cutting of the song “Existence” to *Matrix* footage offers a new context in which to view the Neo-Smith fight, shifting away from the hero’s redemptive battle against human bondage to a darker, grimmer vision in which survival of the fittest is the only path to “redemption.” The eerie, digitally-generated vocal growls:

For too long the human race has ignored designs
 Your planet is nearing destruction
 Salvation is reserved for those who pass the tests
 If you survive, an elevated existence awaits
 Initiate phase one
 Power up the bass cannon
 Fire
 Power up the bass cannon
 Fire
 Existence

The forbiddingly unnatural voice, indifference to the fate of those who fail the “tests,” and haughty promises of “an elevated existence” for those who “pass,” are all reminiscent of the Architect, the enigmatic computer program who created the Matrix and expects Neo to accept his predestined role in destroying and rebooting it. The fight scene the vidder chooses to pair with this lyric ends not with Neo’s triumph, but with Neo forced to retreat in the face of Smith’s own growing power over the Matrix. This pairing of a grimly dystopic lyric, casting doubt on the hero’s ability to save anyone but himself, with footage of a fight that ends in a draw invites an uneasy, ambivalent reading of the *Matrix* narrative. We are reminded that, while Neo’s self-

sacrifice opens the door to “salvation” for those trapped in the Matrix, we cannot know for certain how many will avail themselves of the chance.

The song’s apocalyptic imagery also recalls the notion of the world-as-Armageddon described in Christian mythology. According to the biblical Book of Revelation, at the end of time, the Messiah will return to Earth to defeat the Antichrist and the Devil, who will encamp surrounding Jerusalem (Zion), the Holy City. The lyrics of “Existence” evoke the chaos and terror afflicting a “planet... nearing destruction” and the resort to base survival instincts geared up by “the bass cannon,” a symbol of power and violence. The battle is but in “phase one,” suggesting an immensely protracted fight for survival in the Armageddon scenario. “Matrix Vs. Excision & Downlink” thus draws our attention to the uncertain outcome of the battle beyond, whereas “I, Neo” drew it in a more hopeful, faith-emboldened way to the battle within.

NEO’S STORY NEVER ENDS: RETELLING HOLLYWOOD NARRATIVES IN THE FAN-ORIENTED CYBER-CONTEXT

While most discussions of transmedia storytelling stress the importance of continuity, insisting that all the components cohere with a consistent narrative world, the vids examined above extend the story by introducing a narrative fissure. The concept of transmedia storytelling suggests that, ideally, each media component such as a novel, comic, video game, or film makes its own contribution to a complex narrative in such a way that the resulting fiction seems whole and fulfilling. Unlike top-down media projects, which protect the integrity of continuity at the expense of manifold perspectives and open-ended participation (Jenkins 2011), fan vids effect a break from the original meaning structure -- as from the Christian mythology, in the above cases. If a myth, as Christopher Vogler puts it, helps us to understand some dimensions of our mysterious selves, fan vids complicates that myth-making process, teasing out contradictions or similarities between the narrative components and perhaps the “mysteries” they illustrate as well. In fusing Hollywood sci-fi movies with trip hop and dubstep songs, the vids probed above evoke images of an inner spiritual battle (“I, Neo”) and an unsettlingly conditional salvation (“Matrix Vs. Excision & Downlink”), complicating the Christian subtext of deliverance and eternal life in *The Matrix*. In such postmodernist approach, meanings of all signs tend to be capricious and slippery; the signifiers of fan vids are “sliding,” a term used by Marsha Kinder (1991) in her discussion of transmedia texts,

moving fluidly across different modes of image production and media boundaries. The aforementioned vids “experiment,” in Jenkins’ term, with the mythology-based narrative structure by decontextualizing the story of Neo to generate a new transmedia story and, thus, new myths.

In contemplating the potential of fan vids for refashioning stories and myths, it is necessary to distinguish between grassroots media products, such as vids, and top-down media franchising, both of which could be considered transmedia phenomena in terms of the operating logic. Franchising is a corporate structure for media production that transmits brands and icons across multiple media channels, as famously seen with *Star Wars* (1977), *Indiana Jones* (1981), and *Harry Potter* (2001). The strong profit motive underpinning transmedia storytelling is evident in its synthesis of entertainment and marketing, cultivating emotional attachments to further sales (Jenkins 2006a: 104). By contrast, bottom-up generated content such as fan vids favors creative rather than economic impulses, supplementing corporate efficacy with grassroots dynamism. Vidders are amateur media producers who appropriate and rework media sources as their creativity directs. In the absence of corporatized economic resources, they nonetheless exploit the potential of creative fluidity as they reorder, reassemble, and redirect the commercial texts using video-processing technology and the social media network. This corporate-grassroots convergence is widely evident on video-sharing sites like YouTube (Burgess and Green 2009), where projects like fan vids demonstrate that not only Hollywood and comparably vast media networks are capable of producing innovative transmedia projects, as Christy Dena points out. Amateur works like fan vids can also “[get] the best out of the story,” (TMSB 2012) exhibiting artistic potential and cultural significance as media texts, even as their creators uphold the DIY ethos and aesthetic independence long associated with the counterculture.

Fan vids epitomize intertextuality across media, celebrating diversification and innovation in storytelling. As Henry Jenkins (2006a) argues, storytelling is “the art of world building,” (114) in which artists create a narrative environment that cannot be completely scrutinized or contained within a single work or even a single medium. Such construction complements the “encyclopedia capacity” of digital media, as new-media theorist Janet Murray (1999) suggests, resulting in new narrative modes as viewers seek details beyond the perimeters of the individual stories (253). Such narrative modes will be able to support multiple characters, multiple narratives, and multiple motifs. While some fans see the *Matrix* films, for instance, as appealingly familiar retellings of religious myths, for other fans, the narrative conveys far

more than affirmations of received doctrines. Vidders thus allude not only to the Judeo-Christian Messiah myth, but to a range of cultural systems normally considered outside or even irrelevant to it, illustrated by their mashups of *Matrix* footage with sonic backdrop of their own choosing. The reworked story structure engenders complexity, broadening the array of narrative options beyond a linear conduit marked by a beginning, middle, and end. Rather than helping viewers to “grasp the dense psychological and cultural spaces without becoming disoriented” (Murray 1999: 235), fan vids operate in an increasingly fragmented and multicultural context in which users add their own inflections to the movie story, yielding a narrative that may seem less immediately convincing and comprehensible than the original.

In Robert Stam’s (1988) analysis, “In the broadest sense, intertextuality [...] refers to the open-ended possibilities generated by all the discursive practices of a culture, the entire matrix of communicative utterances within which the artistic text is situated, and which reach the text not only through recognizable influences but also through a subtle process of dissemination.” (138) While traditional media like film certainly permit such open-ended interpretive possibilities, new media technologies expand the range through ever more pervasive dissemination. Within this intertextual matrix, vidders forge popular composites of disparate textual components, displacing them from the coherent narratives in which they were previously embedded. Favorite movie scenes are brought into dialogue with other texts, facilitating multilevel interactions between texts, between users, and between users and texts.

As a vernacular transmedia practice, fan vids offer new information to the knowledge communities we inhabit in the new media age. These knowledge communities are structured around the concept of collective intelligence, the democratic notion that nobody knows everything but everybody knows something, and thus we all depend on each other to gain and share additional information, in Pierre Levy’s (1997) formulation. Vidders’ creative output can enrich fan-based knowledge communities, even in cases where such contributions were not originally intended. As these communities navigate a complicated information environment, network members pool their knowledge to “build a collective concordance on the Internet.” (Jenkins 2006a: 217) They work together not to solve a problem, but to extend the frontier of a narrative, exploring new signifying possibilities in the communicative matrix. Through such collaborative efforts, the depth and breadth of *The Matrix* universe is opened up for exploration not just by individual viewers, but the cyber-community as a whole: a community of audiences who are engaged, confident,

capable, and expressive in telling stories in their own ways. Their collaborations attest to the ongoing transformations in the practice of storytelling in an unprecedentedly synergistic, networked global environment.

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