

The Matrix: is this really happening?

by Brian Raftery

- 1 It was early 1999, and people were freaking out about the future. A new millennium was on the way, carrying with it the promise – or threat – of massive change. Would the next century guide us toward a tech-enabled utopia? Or, as some feared, would it plunge the world into a full-on apocalypse? These were strange days, marked by equal parts anxiety and anticipation. Which made it the perfect moment for a sleek, cerebral movie called The Matrix.
- 2 Created by a pair of mostly unknown filmmakers (Lana and Lilly Wachowski), and headlined by a commercially iffy star (Keanu Reeves), the \$60m cyber-thriller became an instant hit. Some viewers were sucked in by the film's mind-melting storyline – about a hacker named Neo who discovers that mankind is enslaved in a computer-made simulation. Others were simply turned on by the film's *whoa*-inducing fight scenes. By the end of 1999, it was clear that The Matrix was The One: the first true digital-era blockbuster, one that foretold the ways technology would reshape not only filmmaking, but also our daily lives, both for better and for worse.
- 3 The pop-cultural impact of the film was clear within months of its release. The Wachowskis had incorporated new digital effects that let characters freeze in mid-air, or dodge hails of gunfire, while cameras circled the action in a near-360-degree swirl. As a result, The Matrix didn't quite look like any movie that had come before, and its slowed-down, hyper-detailed visual style was soon being satirised and adapted by other filmmakers. Not since 1977, when Star Wars was released, had a movie so quickly rebooted the look and feel of mainstream moviemaking.
- 4 But these were all surface-level aftershocks. The deeper legacy of The Matrix wouldn't be revealed for years. A DVD release broke sales records at the time, allowing for multiple repeat viewings. But it was the internet that really let Matrix fans go down the rabbit hole. The Wachowskis' script had been kicking around since the mid-90s, a time when the mainstream web was in its infancy. But by 1999, millions of Americans were chatting, ranting, and shopping online. At the same time, the spectre of a possibly destructive "millennium bug" hung over everything.

- 5 It was a tense, transformative period – one that was encapsulated by The Matrix. If you were suspicious of all this new technology, the film served as a cautionary tale about our devices overpowering our lives. But if you were already very online, The Matrix was proof that the internet was full of possibility – and that if things went bad, people had the power to rise up and reclaim their own humanity.
- 6 These were big ideas and they led to big conversations, many of which percolated online, where debates and deep-dives carried on day and night, and around the globe. Some of the questions moviegoers were asking at the time: “Are we being controlled by our computers?” “If The Matrix is real, what can you do about it?” Also, “where can I get some of those cool Matrix sunglasses?” The Wachowskis had made a film that seemed to speak directly to the internet, and the internet couldn’t stop speaking back.
- 7 Neo and his partner, Trinity (played by Carrie-Anne Moss), treat each other with a level of mutual respect that’s rarely seen in male-female big-screen relationships, even to this day. And they work alongside a multi-gender, multi-racial team of rebels. 21 its grim shoot-’em-up scenes and killer machines, The Matrix is a deeply hopeful film: one that pushes the value of caring for one another, and the freedom that comes from defining who you really are.
- 8 Still, the ultimate sign of The Matrix’s ongoing importance, as well as its predictive powers, is the fact that, more than two decades after its release, it’s becoming harder to tell if we’re living with The Matrix, or within it. The internet has become so overloaded with 22, it’s now possible for everyone to generate their own immersive reality (or realities). You can now opt in to whatever set of facts you like, knowing your beliefs – no matter how damaged, or even dangerous – will be supported by a vast digital machine, one more terrifying than anything the Wachowskis could have imagined.
- 9 It’s a grim situation, one that undercuts the message of hope that was hardwired into The Matrix. Perhaps we’ll get a brighter glimpse of our next future this month, when The Matrix Resurrections arrives in cinemas. But no matter where Neo and Trinity go next, the message of the original landmark film will continue to ring truer than ever: we’re all increasingly stuck in our own versions of The Matrix – but we still have the power to rage against the machines and free ourselves.

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