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WIRED

THE FUTURE OF REALITY

DEC 2021 / JAN 2022 ▪ ENTER THE MATRIX

CREATE. CONNECT. CONDÉ NAST

THE REALITY

FROM *THE MATRIX* TO THE METAVERSE

THE FIRST MATRIX MOVIE INTRODUCED A GENERATION OF SCI-FI FANS TO AN ANCIENT philosopher's saw: What if your entire reality were a deceit? Two decades on, the film's plot—free-thinking renegades attempt to expose the lies behind an oppressive system—is as timely as ever, but its conceptual premise feels almost quaint. The technologies that have emerged since then do indeed raise the question of what is real, but now they do it in ways that are stranger than even the movie predicted, if rarely quite as sinister. ¶ Your day-to-day reality is an increasingly synthetic experience: Computerized voices inhabit your smart speakers, deepfakes bring dead movie actors back to life, and AI-generated artworks go for eye-watering prices at auction. The simulacrum is extending into food too: Supermarket shelves already contain countless vegan substitutes for meat and other animal products, and before long "real" meat, grown in a lab, will join them. You can inhabit virtual realities and augment your physical one with virtual characters (*Pokémon Go*), street signs (Google Live View), or furni-

UTURE OF

AND BEYOND.

ture (Ikea Studio). All your social media profiles may be real, but does any of them reflect "the real you"? The same question goes for the profiles you can't even see—those stitched out of data held by credit card companies, shopping sites, or search engines. Each one is a virtual version of you that influences your physical life and, if there are errors in the data, makes you out to be someone you're not. And now, everyone is suddenly talking about building this thing called "the metaverse." ¶ In short, things are already weird, and they're going to get a whole lot weirder really fast. So we decided to use the release of *The Matrix Resurrections* as a springboard for a special issue of WIRED exploring the future of reality—one in which the question is not "What if we're all living in a simulation and don't know it?" but "What happens when we're living in a simulation and in reality simultaneously, and we know it, but we have trouble telling them apart?" In which case, it doesn't matter whether you take the red pill or the blue one: We're all going down the rabbit hole either way. —The Editors

MATRIX

THE FUTURE OF REALITY

REVOLU-TIONARY

Yahya Abdul-Mateen II isn't just the new Morpheus. He's the future of Hollywood.

/ BY JASON PARHAM

/ PHOTOGRAPHS BY TSE

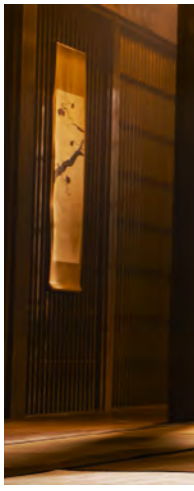
RARE IS THE

SEER OF TOMORROWS. YET MORPHEUS EMBODIES THE ROLE DEFTLY. IN THE Matrix films, starved for salvation, he is the Black prophet of Zion's freedom quest. A defender of humanity's legacy. A judicious captain with the disposition of a Buddhist monk. He oozes sophisticated cool—thanks, in large part, to Laurence Fishburne's textured portrayal of him in the original trilogy. Named for the Greek god of dreams, Morpheus is the messenger of better days, of a more imaginative future. Without him, escape from the Wachowskis' world of code and chaos looks hopeless. The machines ultimately win; the Matrix rewrites itself. But through Morpheus' eyes, deliverance is possible.

Yahya Abdul-Mateen II is the ideal actor to take up Fishburne's mantle in *The Matrix Resurrections*: He's a scene-stealer with an uncanny knack for stirring something deep inside the viewer. Born in New Orleans, the 35-year-old ditched a career in architecture to pursue Hollywood, graduating from the Yale School of Drama. Since then, he has played a 1970s Bronx gangster (*The Get Down*), the supervillain Black Manta (*Aquaman*), the genius god-being Doctor Manhattan (*Watchmen*)—for which he won an Emmy in 2020—and Black revolutionary Bobby Seale (*The Trial of the Chicago 7*). Earlier this year, he transformed into Candyman for Nia DaCosta's slasher remake, a horror flick that doubled as a savvy social commentary on the ways cultural theft can make monsters out of us. Abdul-Mateen infused each of those characters, many of whom were well ingrained in the pop-cultural canon already, with a profound, mesmerizing depth.

But it's never just about the role, Abdul-Mateen says. Every part is a chance to present an uncompromising vision. Because no Black actor is their character alone. When an actor—especially a Black one—is able to bring the kind of full-scale humanness to a role that opens a door into the soul, it becomes a gateway to something even more extraordinary. It becomes a gateway to a future for Hollywood that reflects Black stories and Black storytellers as they should be reflected.

Ultimately, it's about foresight. The need for "images of tomorrow," as sci-fi author Samuel Delany put it in 1978, remains paramount. At the time, Delany was calling for a Blacker future in fiction. A queerer future. One such image arrived 21 years later, with *The Matrix*. Now, in Abdul-Mateen, we have another. He's helping to usher in a prosperous new era for Black actors that affords them more autonomy, power, and ownership in Hollywood. When we chat—first by Zoom and then, after the connection inevitably glitches out, by phone—he is zipping through the mid-afternoon streets of London in the back seat of a taxi. It's early fall. He's on the move, dashing from one place to the next. But he's eager to talk. He connects. He plugs in. Yahya Abdul-Mateen II is ready to offer the truth, nothing more.



→ In *The Matrix Resurrections*, Abdul-Mateen steps into Laurence Fishburne's role as Morpheus. Previously he starred in *Candyman*.

Styling by Jan-Michael Quammie. Styling assistance by Kevin Lanoy. Grooming by Giselle Ali using Pat McGrath. Previous spread: Clothes by Full Vetements; boots by Alexander McQueen. Photograph courtesy of Warner Bros. Pictures.

WIRED: What's your first memory of the original *Matrix*?

YAHYA ABDUL-MATEEN II: I might have been 14. I remember trying to lean back, trying to do that move where I'm dodging bullets—trying to grow a hundred arms and move so fast and so slow that I turned into multiple people.

Bullet time. Easily one of the coolest moments in the film.

For me, it was about what could be possible in my own imagination, the different ways I could now go outside and fight, the different superpowers I could imagine I had.

Neo could only do that because he was in a virtual world, of course—a "neural interactive simulation," as Morpheus puts it. Does reality ever feel unreal to you?

[*Laughs.*] Yeah, man. We just came out of a goddamn pandemic. One of the things that makes reality seem a bit strange—like there's a shift in the universe—is change.

What's an example?

One is the way we relate to technology, the way we communicate with other people, the feeling that we can be in multiple places at one time. It opened up this other conversation that people are having about what is real and what is not real, what is necessary in order to experience reality. The more that we have those conversations, the more susceptible we become to the possibility that it might all be a dream or that it might all be a simulation or an alternate reality.

Do you think it's possible to make things meaningful, to live a meaningful life, if the world doesn't feel all that real?

Absolutely. It's not only possible but important to find meaning in everything. You know, a lot of times it takes something, a dream world or a different type of experience, in order to propel you forward into your own quote-unquote "real world." As long as the mind and heart are open, then you'll find meaning in whatever world your mind allows you to be in.

Sounds like you have complicated views about technology.

I'm a hypocrite. I love it when it helps me, and I hate it when it doesn't. Social media, that's an ultimate reality all on its own. It's a real universe. People spend as much time there—it's funny I say "there," because it turns it into a real location—as they do in the real world.

Is that healthy?

You have to respect that reality. One doesn't want to be left behind, but one also doesn't want to be so consumed by that other

world, by the world of technology, that you become stagnant in this one. A lot of things still matter in this world—touch and relationships and real conversation and discomfort. Technology is designed toward convenience. It's designed to make things easier, to make life a bit more comfortable. But we need discomfort. We need discomfort in order to grow.

In some ways, that's the message of the original Matrix trilogy. The Wachowskis showed us a largely non-white world of people who, despite being oppressed, are fighting for a better tomorrow. People who don't want to be defined by how the status quo defines them. What's your interpretation of the future they were trying to envision?
I do understand those allegories. For myself, I saw messages about working-class people. I saw messages about people who don't exercise the autonomy they actually have in life. People who are unknowingly stuck on the conveyor belt, whose lives are being lived for them rather than truly being free.

You mention autonomy. What does that word mean to you, as a Black artist?
It means the whole idea of crossover goes out the window. There's an idea—and it's not accepted by everybody—that to really be successful in Hollywood, you need to appease a non-Black market. When you do that, you compromise some of your cultural practices and beliefs. You compromise a part of yourself. When the artist is completely autonomous—when the Black artist is autonomous—then the Black artist is free from that need of acceptance, and what we bring to the table, what we desire, who we are culturally, the way we speak, the music that we listen to, the way we dress, our clothes, our style, the stories that we decide to tell in the way that we decide to tell them—they're automatically the norm. They're automatically accepted. It's only about quality. It's not about finding a large audience to relate to. It's not about making people comfortable. It's not about sitting inside of a box. It's not about conforming. That's what autonomy looks like.

"TECHNOLOGY OPENED UP THIS CONVERSATION ABOUT WHAT IS REAL AND WHAT IS NOT REAL."

Is that the ultimate goal for you?
From the beginning of my career, I've focused on freedom—freedom of expression and artistic freedom. It takes courage. It takes a rebellious spirit. It takes some fortitude, but it also takes the support of people around you to uphold and to trust that vision.

→
Abdul-Mateen has infused each character he's played, from *Watchmen*'s Doctor Manhattan to *Aquaman*'s Black Manta, with profound and mesmerizing depth.

Your biggest roles have all been in genre—Black Manta, Doctor Manhattan, Candyman. These are characters we know, characters who have history and backstories. How were you able to make them your own?
You have to relate to the character in a meaningful way. You have to have a reason to say yes to going on that journey that's deeper than the popularity of the character. You can't just do it because it's Morpheus or because it's Doctor Manhattan or Black Manta. That's not going to get you far enough. You find your way in, and you make it your own by having a perspective.

So how do you measure the success of a role, then?
By the time I see or hear anything, I already know how I feel about my work. That's more than enough for me.

Clothes by Full Vetements; sunglasses by Prada.

Do you feel any responsibility as a Black actor?
My responsibility is to myself. One thing about where I'm at right now is that I want to have the freedom to do what I want to do, in the way I want to do it. It's interesting, you know, the idea of how Lana [Wachowski] works. That's really the dream—to be able to work how she works.

Talk to me about working with Lana on the new film.
Lana's dope. She's very family-oriented. I probably heard that word more than anything over the course of the film.

What did she mean by it?
She's talking about the family—that includes the actors, that includes the crew, everybody from the top down. She was really all about making sure that this was a family experience. Also, she has a strong sense of vision. She's the only director I've ever worked with who will grab the camera from the DP or from the camera operator and film something herself. She was right there, damn near inside of the movie. She really put her muscle and sweat into it. And talk about somebody who is just whip-smart. To be able to create the world of *The Matrix*, but then to come back 20 years later and make it relevant to her personal story and her journey, and to allow that to be universal, is something that I appreciated. To me, it seems as though she makes her art for an audience of one, which is herself, and then trusts that there will be an appetite for it.

That seems like the purest form of creative expression.
She's not a conformist. Especially with big studio films, a lot of times there's a lot of asks and places to compromise. But her approach was really, really inspiring in terms of seeing an artist take their destiny into their own hands, so to speak.

↑
On the set of *The Matrix Resurrections*, director Lana Wachowski [top] was "very family-oriented," says Abdul-Mateen [below].

Photographs by Murray Close

"THERE'S AN IDEA THAT TO BE SUCCESSFUL IN HOLLYWOOD, YOU NEED TO APPEASE A NON-BLACK MARKET. WHEN YOU DO THAT, YOU COMPROMISE A PART OF YOURSELF."

Do you believe we are in charge of our destinies? In one sense, the whole premise of *The Matrix* suggests otherwise.
We have to be. But at the same time, it's important to know you can't control everything. My acting teacher, Evan Yionoulis, said, "Hold on tightly, let go lightly." It's a balance of controlling what you can control and then gracefully allowing the universe to do its job. It takes a bit of self-reflection and education and belief in oneself. That's a little bit of where I am—probably holding onto the reins very tightly right now. Not really trusting the "let go" part. [*Laughs.*] But I think that's youth and stubbornness. I believe I'm on my way.

Another takeaway from the *Matrix* franchise is that all worlds are not as fixed as we think. What might a more perfect world look like for Black actors?
The groundwork has been done. It's been laid for many years, and now it's being financially rewarded. We just have to keep doing that. Keep on creating those spaces. And then it'll branch outside of acting, and you'll see opportunities in writing and directing. You'll start to see it in the wardrobe department, in the hair and makeup department. Accessibility won't be such an issue. Relatability on large projects won't be such an issue. We need more people to continue to be bold and to stick to their guns.

What do you see as your role in this transformation?
It's all about honesty. That's really what I'm after right now: creating honest moments, honest storytelling. I don't think much about legacy. I mean, I do. For sure, I do. But what's going to get me to a place where I'm satisfied with my legacy—with what my legacy says—is if I stay true to myself. If I work with people who I want to go and have a drink with. If I tell stories about people who look like me, stories about people who might have stopped by at my house when I was growing up. If I bring my full self to my work, then I think my work will speak for itself.

You mentioned grace earlier. Do you think the way you approach your craft is a matter of understanding where to allow for grace?
You have to. Otherwise you drive yourself crazy. An artist has to learn to be both brutal and kind. The brutal is what's going to keep you up at night and what's going to introduce you to honest self-critique. Grace is going to tell you, "OK, you did a good job, it's time to get some rest." You need a bit of both. And if you want to do anything that's worth watching—if you want to have some real humanity in your work—then you need grace. It won't always be my responsibility to play someone who was kind and did great things in life. Sometimes onscreen, you have to do things that you wouldn't do in your own life. To do that well, you have to have a sense of grace for that character, an understanding and an idea that hopefully—if the page or the script leans that way—you're not just playing pure evil.

Did playing Morpheus reveal anything to you about yourself as an actor, or as a Black man, that surprised you?
No.

Why's that?
I don't even want to bullshit you. It was a good experience to go in and to play this character, to breathe life into him. To pick up the reins and step into something that is seen as iconic. But in terms of my identity as a Black man, it tends to be rooted in other things. And that wasn't really one of the ways that I was inspired on this project. It was cool as fuck, though.

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ARGUMENT

THE MATRIX IS THE BEST HACKER MOVIE

How the Wachowskis invented the ultimate cyber superhero.

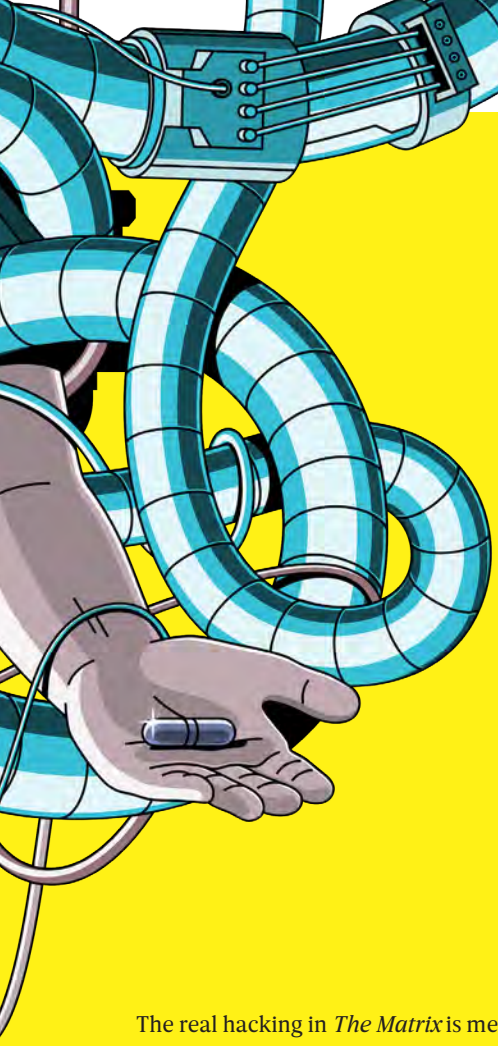
/ BY ANDY GREENBERG

IN THE SPRING OF 1999, a 20-year-old hacker named Eva Galperin and her boyfriend walked into a screening of *The Matrix* at a theater in San Francisco, and walked out with a sense that they had just seen themselves—or, at least, who they could be. Galperin, at the time a Unix-focused systems administrator with black and blue dreadlocks, promptly bought herself a long, black, flared coat. Her boyfriend purchased a pair of Oakleys.

But it wasn't just the movie's fashion sense that spoke to them. Galperin felt it represented the experience of hacking in a way she'd never seen before. Neo seemed chosen to undertake his superheroic journey because he understood that "by interfacing with this black screen with glowing green writing on it, he could change the world in ways that it was not necessarily meant to be changed," says Galperin, who works today as the director of cybersecurity at the Electronic Frontier Foundation. "I definitely came out with the feeling: Our people made a film."

For years the generally accepted canon of classic hacker movies has been a kind of holy trinity: 1983's *WarGames*, with its digital delinquent caught up in Cold War geopolitics; the 1992 computers-and-cryptography heist film *Sneakers*; and 1995's teen cyber-hijinks thriller *Hackers*. With a couple of decades of hindsight, however, it's well past time to recognize that *The Matrix* has in some ways eclipsed that triumvirate. As other hacker films ossify, turning into computer cat-and-mouse-game time capsules, *The Matrix* has become the most abiding, popular, and relevant portrayal of hacking—a brain-plug jacked so deeply into our cultural conception of the genre that we've almost forgotten it's there.

Fans of those other films will point out that *The Matrix*'s goth-garbed flying kung fu fighters don't hack much in the literal sense. Yes, Neo starts the film selling digital intrusion tools stored on MiniDiscs, and in the sequel Trinity realistically uses the scanning program Nmap to breach an electric utility server. But those moments are only brief winks at the real world of cybersecurity.



The real hacking in *The Matrix* is metaphorical. The red-pill lesson Morpheus gives Neo is that a user in a digital system doesn't have to abide by its terms of service. For those who understand the underlying truth of a virtual environment—its technical reality, not the illusions described in the user manual—rules like gravity are not immutable laws but polite conventions. "Some of them can be bent," Morpheus tells Neo. "Others can be broken."

In most real-world hacking, that rule-breaking plays out within the uncinematic frame of a computer screen. *The Matrix* expands that computer to envelop reality itself; the virtuosic bending and breaking of digital rules naturally becomes a kind of physics-defying wushu.

"*The Matrix* shows the universe that software can create," says Dino Dai Zovi, a well-known hacker and security researcher who cofounded the security firms Trail of Bits and Capsule8. "And the more that software controls everything in our lives, the more awe-inspiring it becomes to have power over that software."

This concept of hacking transcends the technology of any particular era, which explains why hackers, years later, still resort to the movie's analogies to explain their work. When University of Michigan researchers exploited a chip's electric leakage to hide a backdoor in it in 2016, they described it as "outside the Matrix." When security researcher Joanna Rutkowska showed she could trap a victim computer inside an invisible layer of software under her control, she dubbed it a "blue pill" attack.

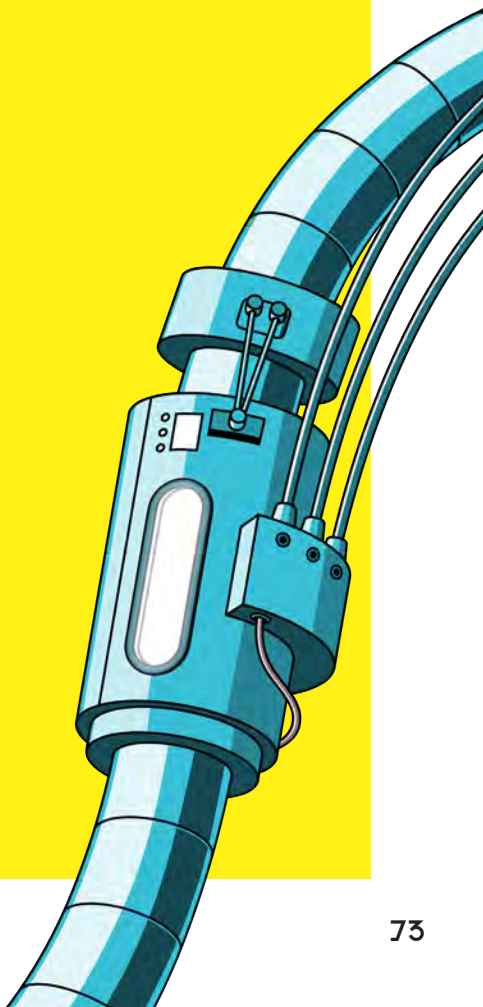
"I can use *The Matrix* to explain, well, that's the woman in the red dress that everybody sees, but a hacker can see the code that renders that woman and change the color of her dress," says Katie Moussouris, a renowned security researcher and CEO of Luta Security. "And even though you, the programmer, didn't mean to allow that, it's possible because I can inspect what's really going on under the surface."

Most of all, *The Matrix* captures the *feeling* of hacking, says Dai Zovi, who first saw the film when he was a 19-year-old college student. A year later, he was working as a systems administrator for an ultra-early social media company called SuperFamilies.com, which had a few extra Sun Microsystems workstations lying around. One Friday he asked if he could take one home to mess with it—and found a memory corruption vulnerability in its software that he spent an entire spring break learning to exploit.

When he had finally succeeded, Dai Zovi experienced for the first time what it felt like to fully take over a piece of code with a technique he'd invented, making it do whatever he wished. He compares it to when Neo leaps into Agent Smith's body, explodes him, and then stands silently in his place while the world subtly bends around him. "He does this flex, and the screen sort of bubbles, like he warps spacetime," Dai Zovi says. "When you write your first exploit—or your hundredth or thousandth—you feel that flex. You want to run it a million times once you perfect it, to get that feeling of power and capability."

Hackers don't quite wield superpowers in our reality just yet. But as networked computers permeate even more physical objects—our cars, home devices, and even critical infrastructure like electric grids, water supply systems, and manufacturing—modern life is becoming more Matrix-like all the time. The ability to control those computer systems becomes a skill that can alter the real world.

Unplugging from that pervasive computing is, for most of us, already no longer an option. Better, perhaps, to don your flared coat, dive into the digital world, and start bending some spoons.



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/ ILLUSTRATION BY OLEG BUYEVSKY

THE MATRIX OF MATRICES

They interpenetrate our existence and warp our realities.
From physical to spiritual, some matrices
are more escapable than others. Enter here.

_MATRIX, THE MOVIE _MATRIX, THE REALITY

PLANES OF EXISTENCE

Physical

Virtual

3-hour phone call with the IRS to untangle a six-year-old overpayment error

Shibari

Pokémon Go

Apple ecosystem

Superfun everything is awesome

TED

Yayoi Kusama's Infinity Mirror rooms

3-hour Connect Four game with a 6-year-old

The Panopticon

Google ecosystem

Inescapable

Escapable

Burning Man

Still flattening the curve

Chuck E. Cheese ball pit

Ikea

Chicken farm [if you are a chicken]

The God's Eye you made at camp

Absolutely no fun at all

Slack

Superfun everything is awesome

The App Store

Decentraland

CryptoPunks

TikTok rabbit hole

Horizon Workrooms

Teams, Hangouts, Webex

Pokémon Go

Netflix

Inescapable

Escapable

Apple ecosystem

Zoom

The dark web

Twitter

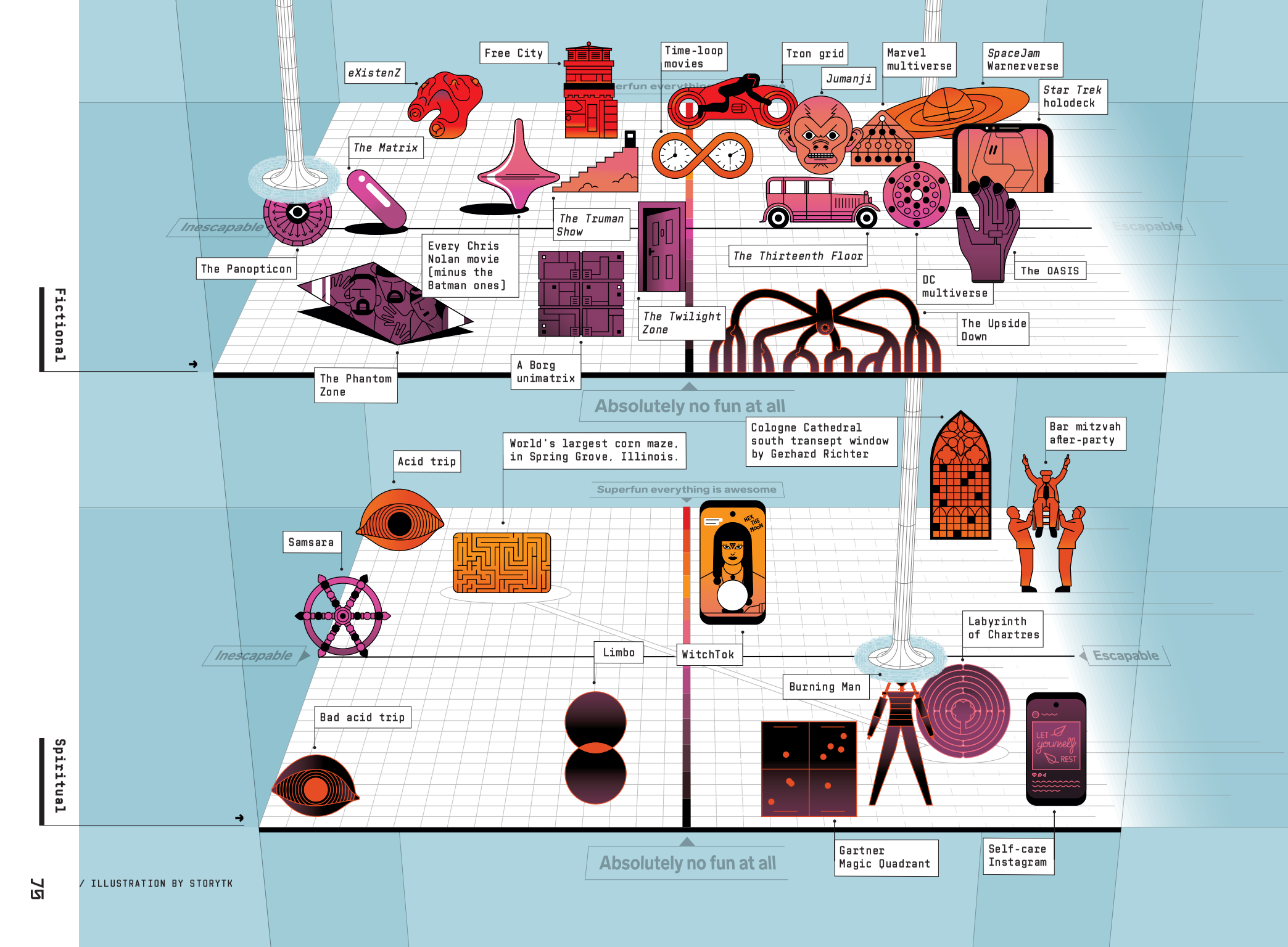
YouTube rabbit hole

Minecraft, Roblox

Google ecosystem

~~Facebook~~ Meta

Absolutely no fun at all



/ ILLUSTRATION BY STORYTK

/ BY MADELINE ASHBY

ARGUMENT

THE FUTURE OF CYBERPUNK

In the 20th century, the genre imagined the body modifications and protective streetwear that could save us from our own future. Now it needs to envision humanity anew.

CYBERPUNK IS LIKE CYBERSPACE: INSTANTLY RECOGNIZABLE, BUT so ubiquitous as to be intangible. An aesthetic movement and a commentary on capitalism, it can be a genre, a subjectivity, an adjective, a political approach, a time period. (Though the same could be said of the words *Renaissance* or *Victorian*.) It can tackle artificial intelligence, embodied identity, digital immortality, or simply, in the case of Pat Cadigan's *Synners*, whether a marriage can survive electronic pornography addiction. Like the best fiction, cyberpunk still slips on like a pair of fingerless gloves, even if—in the 21st century, partially situated in the future it imagined—it's hard to see where fiction ends and reality begins. ¶ Despite all of this, cyberpunk often gets reduced to an aesthetic: black leather, mirror shades, implants—pieces of flare that look cool when lit by neon and computer screens. But to define cyberpunk by its look is to do it a disservice, especially since those sartorial choices are the whole point in the first place: armor against a world in collapse. In a future so hostile that no one is fit to survive, those who *do* have been fitted for something new—new brain, new heart, new nerves—perhaps in exchange for a lifetime of indentured servitude. Cyberpunk

→

/ ILLUSTRATION BY DEBORA CHEYENNE

foretold a desperate world of unlicensed physicians doing back-alley body modifications, and while so far all they do is perform illegal butt lifts, with Crispr, who knows?

Perhaps the genre gets pigeonholed by its look because, going back to old testaments like *Neuromancer* or *Snow Crash*, it seemed allergic to any talk of feelings. Ideas, sure; sentiment, no. Like the noir fiction with which it so frequently overlaps, cyberpunk is full of wounded characters whose pursuit of physical invulnerability keeps them emotionally unavailable to everyone but the audience. It's telling that people turned against the Matrix films when they had the audacity to be lushly, erotically romantic—when climaxes hinged on a hero knowing how to reach inside his partner and touch her just right. Viewers weren't ready for a Wife Guy who wanted to walk away from his messianic power; it was like watching an entire trilogy of *The Last Temptation of Christ*'s final 15 minutes, right down to the long hair and linen.

Still, 40-ish years since its incept date, cyberpunk maintains a vast claim on the aesthetic landscape—one often ironically divorced from the dark, anti-capitalist messages those visuals sought to convey. It has inspired video games like *Cyberpunk 2077* (naturally starring Neo himself, Keanu Reeves), an Urban Decay eye shadow palette characterized by deeply '90s duo chromes, a collaboration between Yohji Yamamoto and Adidas, and roughly 4 million posts on Instagram. For everyone who watched *Stand Alone Complex* on Adult Swim (or, let's be real, a DivX player), there's now a bespoke keyboard aglow with bisexual lighting, a liquid meal plan, or a "smart" vibrator. For everyone else, there's cottagecore.

Here's a fun game: First, check out *Mondo 2000*'s tongue-in-cheek 1993 piece "R.U. a Cyberpunk?" Note the abundance of straps, holsters, and handheld cameras. Then, go look at photos from January 6, 2021, or the bow-and-arrow-wielding protesters who took to Hong Kong's streets in 2019, or MRAPs rolling through Portland. Ask yourself: If a specific future has already happened, what happens to stories about that future? Now that time has caught up with them, are these visions simply contemporary literature, no more speculative than stories about donated kidneys and grown men dating high schoolers?

"Above culture, clothing, and genre, cyberpunk is a lifestyle that blends a combination of 'low-key living' with a deep understanding of social fabric backdoors and full access to high-tech gadgets," fashion writer Mandy Meyer wrote in *The Vou*. Yossy, the founder of Japanese cyberpunk fashion brand Helvetica, has stressed that the clothing should use innovative materials yet be functional, telling Shell Zine it "should strengthen the wearer, like an exoskeleton, and at the same time be comfortable and not too stuffy or formal." Mostly this means dressing like you live in Seattle, because in cyberpunk it's always raining.

In this regard it's difficult to discern the line between the influence of a genre on design aesthetics and the grudging march of time (and brands) into the endless fires and floods of the 21st century—a context wherein the tactical is practical. Dreams of jetpacks have been replaced by designs for bulletproof backpacks. From a genre perspective, the future resembles science fiction less than it does a murder mystery: A whole planet is dying while its inhabitants argue about who stuck which knife in.

Before cyberpunk was reduced to an aesthetic, it was a philosophy. Whereas earlier generations of science fiction located conflict outside the body, on the battlefield or in the stars, the post-Watergate, post–*Roe v. Wade*, post-Vietnam generation of mostly American sci-fi writers imagined that the next theater of combat would be the human body and mind. Today, when it seems like every Facebook group is a Potemkin village and Texans can put bounties on abortion providers, that suspicion seems well warranted.

The most prescient aspect of cyberpunk was not any one particular innovation, like razor fingernails or brain-machine interfaces or even a ubiquitous metaverse awash in pornography, advertising, and the viruses endemic to both. Instead, it was the genre's focus on the ongoing commoditization of human workers by a narrowing field of multinational corporations. Instead of creating same-jackboot-different-day dystopias like *Logan's Run* or *Make Room! Make Room!*, cyberpunk writers asked, "What if capitalism is the dystopia?"

Some of the most influential texts in the genre are about labor and bodily autonomy. *Blade Runner* is a story about runaway slaves, and *Blade Runner: 2049* is about the reproduction of slaves. *Neuromancer* is about a man selling his hacker skills to earn back the full function of his body's nervous system. *Akira* features government experimentation on children's bodies so they can better perform militarized work. *Snow Crash* presupposes a Los Angeles populated with precarious gig workers delivering pizza. *Ghost in the Shell* wonders who truly "owns" a cyborg body if an employer pays for its upkeep. *The Matrix* operates on the premise that all human bodies can be "grown" into batteries whose primary purpose is to keep artificial intelligence functioning.

Writing for Slate, Kelsey D. Atherton summed up cyberpunk's present-day parallels thusly: "Replace the Tyrell Corporation with Amazon and reframe the replicants as 'essential services,' and suddenly you have a world of workers terrified that their jobs are inherently a death sentence—moving straight from fiction to reality." Technology studies scholar Damien P. Williams agrees: "I think cyberpunk is still relevant, but in a different way; rather than a warning about where we're headed, it's a mirror about where we managed to end up."

Not everyone concurs. In the face of a burning planet, the idea of using technology to achieve immortality seems naive at best. Young people in China are "lying flat" instead of working, and refugee children in Sweden have "resignation syndrome"; in a

THE MOST PRESCIENT ASPECT OF CYBERPUNK WAS NOT RAZOR FINGERNAILS OR METAVERSES, BUT THE GENRE'S FOCUS ON THE COMMODITIZATION OF HUMAN WORKERS.

world where despair is a #mood, the desire to extend life indefinitely is a little vampiric, if not simply gauche. "Cyberpunk was relevant and important to boomers obsessed with questions of law and order, and who were determined to avoid the realities of human aging and embodiment. In 2021, we have new and different mass obsessions, making cyberpunk seem quaint," says Hugo nominee and Nebula Award winner Kelly Robson. "In conclusion, fuck cyberpunk."

Considering the world has caught up with, if not surpassed, the genre's imagination, its place in fiction might be limited, or limiting, in the way that rehashing Tolkien might be limiting for a fantasy writer. This is one of the challenges of telling a future-set story: Eventually time catches up, like a rubber band snapping back into shape. And sometimes it stings. Readers often assume that authors are happy when they "predict" future events "correctly," but rarely are we asked about the queasy feeling of watching one's worst vision come to pass. Describing his debut novel for CrimeReads, Lincoln Michel says, "*The Body Scout* is an attempt to replace the 'cyber' in cyberpunk with flesh and look at what happens when the human body becomes the major realm of technological innovation and corporate control … These days, the greatest dystopian novel might be the evening news."

Just because cyberpunk's history looks like the present doesn't mean it can't point toward the future. Ten years after Bruce Bethke published his 1983 short story "Cyberpunk," Octavia E. Butler released what is arguably one of the most influential novels in science fiction, *Parable of the Sower*. It tells the story of a young Black woman named Lauren Olamina living outside Los Angeles in 2024, watching as an authoritarian president is elected, human rights eviscerated, company towns built, and old neighborhoods destroyed. Lauren does what heroes do: She prepares. She gathers her wits and her seeds and leads her community toward freedom and, ultimately in the book's sequel, the stars. Like most of Butler's novels, it shifted the narrative focus from individual rebellion and success to communal liberation and legacy. If cyberpunk warned about capitalism's cancerous late stages, *Parable* asked, "So what are you doing about it?" And while cyberpunk as a genre took on metaphors for slavery and autonomy, Butler's books examined the actual transatlantic slave trade.

Butler's fiction focused on, among other things, genetic engineering, the embodied experience of aliens and posthumans, what an individual owes to her family and community, power and its uses, terrible sacrifices in the name of survival. Recalling a dinner with her in *Essence*, author and scholar Tananarive Due says Butler expressed the central question of her work as "How can we make ourselves a more survivable species?" Although she is considered the mother of Afrofuturism, her narrative patterns also repeat across all of cyberpunk's genre successors: hopepunk, biopunk, solapunk, and more. She echoes in Nalo Hopkinson's *Midnight Robber*, Premee Mohamed's *The Annual Migration of Clouds*, Louise Erdrich's *Future Home of the Living God*, Nnedi Okorafor's *Lagoon*, Becky Chambers' *The Long Way to a Small, Angry Planet*, Tade Thompson's *Rosewater*, L. X. Beckett's *Gamechanger*, and more. In Toronto, Black Lives Matter activists just purchased a 10,000-square-foot community hub for Black artists and activists and named it the Wildseed Centre after one of Butler's books. Whether or not any of this qualifies as cyberpunk activity, it's still exemplary of what the movement could look like.

In her notes, Butler said: "The struggle is to hold it together, keep it alive, and teach it to be and do its very best." She was summarizing Mother Olamina's ongoing mission, but she was also describing the 21st century in searing detail. This is the work of forward-looking science fiction. For better or worse, so much of cyberpunk's android dreams have come true. Now we have to imagine how to build ourselves anew.

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