

The Perfect Matrix

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by [James Corbett](#)

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In the beginning was The Program. The Programmer made His creation perfect, and when He looked on it He saw that it was so, and that was good. But then it fell apart.

You see, Matrix v0.1 was just something thrown together over the weekend for a laugh. Real glitch-y, beta release stuff. Like if you tried to program Sim City in Basic and run it on a Commodore 64. Still, it worked. Kind of.

But that was the problem, you see? It worked. Everything just worked. When the Matrix-dwellers wanted food, they got it. It was never too hot or too cold. No disease. Everyone died precisely at 80 years old, having lived identically happy, challengeless, boring lives. Or they would have, if anyone had stayed in long enough to find out how the story was supposed to go. In the end, everyone pulled themselves out of the Matrix.

Pulled *themselves* out.

Yes, that was the problem with Matrix v0.1. It was too perfect.

Back to the drawing board. Time to roll up sleeves, take things seriously. Add some difficulties, challenges, struggle, achievement. Complexity.

Matrix v1.0. A tribe united under a single dominant male, like any group of primates. But the warring at the top made the system too unstable. People were pulling themselves out just

to escape the fighting.

Matrix v1.1. Adding code for civilization. God the Pharaoh at the top, scribes and courtiers underneath. Under them, the slaves. But left to their own devices the Matrix-dwellers spent all their time and resources, all the immense riches at the Pharaoh's command, making pyramids and sphinxes.

Matrix v1.2. City states! Direct democracy! Philosophy! Geometry! Architecture! Art! Music!...Wait, what's that? Romans?!

Matrix v1.3. Copy/paste a lot of the code from v1.2 but initiate Republic routine. Booting senate and consuls. Patricians and plebs. Conquest of the known world. Yes, living on plundered riches and feasting on the spoils of slavery, life was good for the Republican Matrix-dwellers. But then there was a political assassination conspiracy and some uppity General crossed some river with his legions and before you know it you've got...

Matrix v1.4. Empire edition. But the Emperors get crazier. And the barbarians get nastier. The currency is debased. The capital falls. Things are pretty dark for a while.

Matrix v1.5. Order emerges in the dark. Goodbye Emperor, hello divinely-appointed kings and queens. Add a subroutine for the knights and lords and vassals and serfs and peasants. Tinker with parameters for climate, wars, religious beliefs. (Hey, look at that! Throw in a little climactic warming period and suddenly the Matrix is flourishing!) Things go on in much the same way for many generations. But what's this over here? Something to disturb the order? Merchants! Trading! Exchange!

Matrix v1.6. Empire? Pshaw. That's for the simpletons. Colonies is the latest function, man! Update your code! Set up some puppet government and make sure the trade balance is positive. Sure, we'll accept gold and silver for this opium! The system balances. Some of the Matrix-dwellers are showing

off their exotic tulips and pineapples, the rest are opiated into submission in a den somewhere. Everyone's happy, in their own way! Except...

Matrix v2.0. This king and queen function is getting a bit old, isn't it? Off with their heads! Find: "king." Replace all with: "president." Write a constitution function. Elections....

You get the idea.

But as so often happens with these projects, the Programmer began losing interest. The Matrix wasn't so fun any more. The whole point was to see if a program could be written that was so compelling that people would live their whole lives in it. Apparently, it could. Case closed.

He turned off the machine. The Matrix crashed. Suddenly, all the pod-dwellers—an entire generation that had spent their whole life jacked into the computer—woke up and felt their own flesh-and-blood for the first time.

"What's going on?" one bleary-eyed former Matrix-dweller asked.

"I'm your Programmer. I turned off the computer-generated world that you had mistaken for reality."

"What-rammer?"

"Programmer. You know, the one who coded all the script that defined the parameters of the simulation you were living through."

"Huh?"

"God. I'm your God."

"Oh. Great. So you can tell us the meaning of it all. What is this place? Why are we here? Why did You create us?"

"Well, I didn't create you, per se. Just the universe you

thought you were living in. And I just kind of created it as an experiment. But now you're here. Congratulations! You're free to live your own life!"

"Yes, but what will we do?"

"I don't know. That's the thing about being free. There's no one to tell you what to do or how to do it! You can figure it out on your own!"

The open-mouthed gapes of the ex-dwellers suggested that this concept was difficult to understand.

"Well there must be someone running this place. A president or something."

"What? Don't be absurd. That was just some code I dreamed up to keep you all occupied. I found you spent a lot of your time voting for someone to rule over you and the rest of the time arguing about the choice you'd made. It was the perfect way to keep you all so busy you didn't even think to question the Matrix you were living in."

More open-mouthed stares.

The Programmer sighed. "Look, never mind that. I'm here to tell you you're free. This world—the *real* world—doesn't have a Pharaoh or a king or a president or a supreme leader or anything of that sort. There's no one here to order your life for you. Just choose something you want to do and do it. You're free to exchange and interact with anyone you like any way you like as long as it's voluntary. You can decide for yourselves what you want to do!"

The Matrix-dwellers looked at each other, mouths still agape. Back at the Programmer.

"We can do...anything...we want?"

"Yes, you're free! Choose your own adventure! Write your own

story! Explore who you are! Get to know those around you. I mean, *really* know them, not just what type of leader they vote for.”

After another moment of puzzled silence one Matrix-dweller started to plug himself back into the machine.

“What are you doing?”

“I want to go back. This sounds hard.”

His fellow Matrix-dwellers agreed. “Yeah, this place is weird.”

“No leaders?” another chuckled. “Ridiculous. It’ll never work.”

One by one, they jacked themselves back into the Matrix. Soon enough they were back to their simulated lives.

The Programmer just shrugged. Well, he had the answer he’d been looking for. Apparently the perfect matrix could be coded. He saved the program as “statism.exe” and moved on to his next project.