Through the Glass

Laptops as Portals and the Internet as a Matrix We Enter Every Day

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ABSTRACT

This paper develops the idea that the internet works as a *matrix* in the sense made famous by fiction: a constructed world of signals that people inhabit as if it were a place. Instead of imagining entry through a cable plugged into the skull, it argues that the ordinary laptop already works as a portal. Its screen is a threshold, its keyboard, trackpad, camera and microphone are the limbs that reach through, and its network connection is the corridor that joins the room a person sits in to a shared, persistent, rule-governed space. The paper proposes a four-layer **Portal Model** (Body, Device, Network, World), sets out the six steps by which entry happens, offers a six-level scale of immersion from *Closed* to *Merge*, proposes that every person can also host a space of their own inside, so that the laptop becomes a home as well as a door, examines why leaving is harder than it looks, and asks what game worlds, from *Grand Theft Auto* to the OASIS of *Ready Player One*, reveal about that pull. It then reads the famous choice between a red pill and a blue pill as one made not once, but every time the lid opens, and argues that files have not died but moved out of people's rooms. It concludes that the interesting question is no longer whether we can enter the matrix, but whether we still notice the moment we do.

Keywords: matrix, cyberspace, portal, interface, presence, immersion, extended mind, threshold

1. Introduction

In the best-known films about simulated worlds, people cross into the simulation through a cable pushed into a port at the base of the skull. The image is powerful because it makes the crossing violent and unmistakable. There is a clear before and after, a body left behind in a chair, and a mind awake somewhere else.

In everyday life the crossing is quiet. A person lifts the lid of a laptop, the screen wakes, and within seconds they are somewhere else: reading a message sent from another continent, walking through a game world, sitting in a meeting where faces are arranged in a grid. No cable enters the body. Yet attention, voice, face, reputation, money and much of social life travel through the glass.

This paper takes that quiet crossing seriously. Its central claim is simple: **the laptop is a portal, and the internet is a matrix that people enter through it.** The paper does not argue that the physical world is a simulation. That is a separate question, touched on in Section 2. It argues something more modest and easier to check against experience: that the internet has the properties of a place, that laptops are doors to that place, and that thinking of them this way explains parts of digital life that the language of "tools" and "content" misses.

Section 2 traces the idea of a matrix through fiction, philosophy and infrastructure. Section 3 introduces the Portal Model. Section 4 describes how entry happens, step by step. Section 5 proposes a scale of immersion. Section 6 considers what it is like to be inside. Section 7 asks whether each person should have a self-hosted space of their own inside the matrix. Section 8 turns to the problem of exit. Section 9 looks at games and the pull of better worlds. Section 10 asks what the famous choice between a red pill and a blue pill means at the laptop. Section 11 asks whether the age of files is over. Section 12 states the

limits of the model, and Section 13 concludes.

2. Three Meanings of “Matrix”

2.1 The matrix as fiction

William Gibson’s *Neuromancer* (1984) gave the word its modern sense. His hackers “jack in” to *the matrix*, a vast space of data that Gibson called a “consensual hallucination.” Neal Stephenson’s *Snow Crash* (1992) imagined the Metaverse, a street that users walk as avatars. The Wachowskis’ *The Matrix* (1999) turned the idea inside out: the matrix was no longer somewhere one visits, but the place one already lives, and the real world was the place one had to wake up into. These stories share one image: a gateway between a body that stays and a self that goes.

2.2 The matrix as philosophy

The oldest version is Plato’s allegory of the cave (*Republic*, Book VII), in which prisoners mistake shadows on a wall for reality. Baudrillard (1981) argued that modern media produce *simulacra*, copies without originals, until representation comes before the thing it represents. Bostrom (2003) turned the worry into a formal argument about whether we might live in a computer simulation. Chalmers (2003; 2022) answered from the other direction: even inside a simulation, the objects we meet would not be illusions. They would be real digital objects. This matters for the present thesis. If virtual worlds are real in their own way, then entering one is a real journey, not a pretence.

2.3 The matrix as infrastructure

Outside fiction, a *matrix* is a grid, a mould, or a medium in which something grows. The internet fits all three. It is a lattice of cables, routers, data centres and protocols, and digital life grows inside it. McLuhan (1964) described media as extensions of the senses. Clark and Chalmers (1998) argued that the mind can extend into the devices it relies on. Floridi (2014) coined the word *onlife* for the fading boundary between online and offline. Taken together, fiction supplies the image of entry, philosophy supplies reasons to think the destination is real, and infrastructure shows that the destination exists.

3. The Portal Model

A **portal**, as used here, is a bounded object that (a) sits at a fixed point in one world, (b) shows a view into another world, and (c) lets a person act in that other world from where they stand. A window meets (a) and (b) but not (c): you can see through it, but you cannot act on what lies beyond. A door meets all three but asks the whole body to cross. The laptop is a hybrid. The body stays in the room, while attention, voice, image and agency go through.

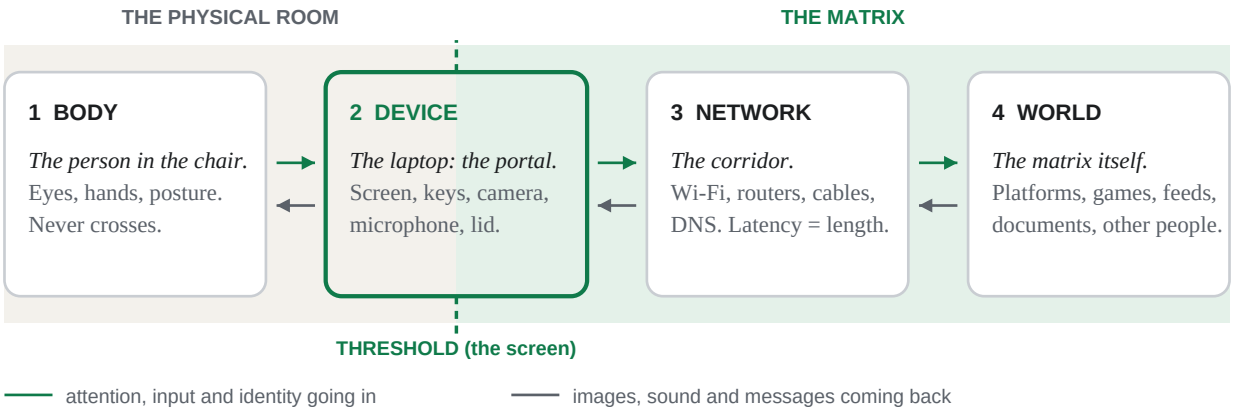

Figure 1. *The Portal Model. The threshold runs through the device: half of the laptop belongs to the room (its weight, its warmth, its keys), and half belongs to the matrix (what the screen shows). Signals travel in both directions at once.*

The model has four layers, shown in Figure 1. The **Body** is the person in the chair: eyes, hands, posture, heartbeat. It never crosses, which is why it is so easily forgotten. The **Device** is the laptop itself. Its screen is the threshold surface, its keyboard, trackpad, camera and microphone are the limbs that reach through, and its lid is the switch that opens and closes the way. The **Network** is the corridor: Wi-Fi, routers, undersea cables and the naming system that turns addresses into destinations. Latency is, quite literally, the length of the corridor. The **World** is the matrix: platforms, games, feeds, shared documents and other people, all persistent, all governed by rules, all shared.

3.1 Why the laptop, specifically?

Phones are portals too, but they are small and almost never fully shut, so they behave less like doors and more like a window left permanently ajar. Desktop computers are portals bolted to one room. The laptop is different in three ways. First, it has a *lid*: it opens and closes like a door, and the gesture of opening it is a small ritual of arrival. Second, it is *portable*, so a portal can be opened anywhere, on a train, in a café, in bed. Third, its clamshell shape puts the screen at eye level and the hands directly beneath it. The posture of using a laptop is the posture of leaning into an opening.

4. The Mechanics of Entry

Entry happens in a sequence so routine that it has become invisible. Written out, it has six steps:

1. **Opening.** The lid lifts and the screen lights. The threshold appears.
2. **Authentication.** A password, fingerprint or face scan. The portal checks who is crossing. This is the closest thing the matrix has to a guard at the gate.
3. **Connection.** The device joins a network. The corridor opens.
4. **Arrival.** A browser or app loads a world. A web address works as a coordinate: type it, and you are there.
5. **Embodiment.** The person takes on a form inside: a username, an avatar, a profile picture, a cursor. The cursor is the body’s fingertip on the other side.
6. **Presence.** Attention settles and the room fades. This is the real moment of entry, and it cannot be seen from outside.

Steps one to five are technical. Step six is psychological, and it is the one that counts. A person can complete the first five and never truly enter, as anyone who has checked email while half-listening to a friend knows. In the other direction, a person deeply absorbed in a game or a piece of writing has crossed further than any cable in the skull would require.

The point of the threshold is not where the glass is. It is where attention is.

5. Degrees of Immersion

If entry is a matter of attention, then it comes in degrees. Table 1 proposes a six-level scale. The first five levels describe a single session at the portal. The sixth describes a pattern of life.

Level	Name	What happens	Example	Awareness of the room
0	**Closed**	Portal shut. Fully in the physical room.	Laptop in a bag.	Full
1	**Glance**	Looking through the glass without acting.	Checking a notification.	High
2	**Reach**	Acting inside for a single task, then withdrawing.	Sending an email, paying a bill.	Moderate
3	**Walk**	Moving through the world by choice, link to link.	Browsing, scrolling a feed.	Low
4	**Dwell**	Sustained presence. Time stretches or vanishes.	A long game session, deep work in a shared document, a long call.	Very low
5	**Merge**	Identity, income and relationships live mainly inside.	A life whose work, community and reputation are mostly online.	Intermittent

Table 1. *A scale of immersion through the laptop portal. Levels 0 to 4 describe a session; Level 5 describes a way of living.*

The scale explains a familiar experience: losing track of time online. Distorted time is one of the classic signs of *presence* in research on virtual environments (Slater & Wilbur, 1997) and of *flow* in the psychology of absorption (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). At Level 4, the room has not disappeared, but it has stopped being where the person is.

6. Being Inside

What is it like on the other side of the glass? Five features stand out.

6.1 Space

People describe the internet in the language of place. We *go to* a site, *visit* a page, *enter* a chat room, return to a *home* page, press *back*. These phrases are not accidents. They show that, whatever engineers say about packets and servers, users experience the network as somewhere.

6.2 Time

The matrix keeps its own clock. Feeds have no bottom, messages arrive from every time zone at once, and a recording made years ago plays with the same freshness as a live stream. Inside, there is no natural evening.

6.3 Body

While the person is inside, the body becomes background, what Leder (1990) called the *absent body*. A stiff neck, dry eyes and a cold cup of coffee are the body’s way of reminding its owner that it never left the chair.

6.4 Others

Other people appear as text, as faces in rectangles, as avatars. Their bodies are elsewhere, yet their presence is real: arguments wound, jokes land, friendships form. The matrix is populated, and that is what makes it a world rather than a library.

6.5 Rules

Like any constructed world, the internet has laws its inhabitants rarely see but always obey: software, terms of service, ranking algorithms. Lessig (1999) put it in three words: “code is law.” Inside the matrix, the architecture decides what can be said, found and done long before any person decides.

7. A Room of One’s Own: Self-Hosted Spaces

So far the matrix has been described as a place people visit. But the places they visit mostly belong to someone else. A social-media profile is a rented room in a building owned by a platform: the landlord writes the rules, can change the locks, and can knock the building down. This section proposes a different arrangement, in which **every person has a self-hosted space of their own**, and the laptop is not only the door into the matrix but also the ground their room is built on. The title borrows from Woolf (1929), whose point was that independent work needs a space nobody else controls.

7.1 From door to house

A laptop does not only visit. It is a computer, so it can also serve. To *self-host* is to run your own space (a website, a gallery, a journal, an inbox, a small world) on a machine you control, reachable at an address you own. In the Portal Model this adds a turn: the portal now opens in both directions. Other people step through their own portals and arrive at yours.

7.2 What a personal space contains

- **Address.** A domain name of your own: the house number of the space.
- **Rooms.** Pages, files, photos, writing, and a place where guests can leave messages.
- **Keys.** Encryption keys that prove the space is yours and decide who may enter.
- **Rules.** Set by the owner, not by a platform’s terms of service.
- **Doors.** Links to friends’ spaces, so the matrix becomes a neighbourhood of homes instead of a handful of giant malls.

7.3 How private spaces join up

Self-hosted spaces do not have to be islands. Email has always worked this way: anyone can run a mail server and still write to anyone else. Federated networks built on the ActivityPub standard (W3C, 2018), such as Mastodon, apply the same idea to social life: each person or community runs a server, and the servers talk to each other. The Solid project, led by Tim Berners-Lee, goes further and gives each person a personal data “pod” that applications must ask permission to read (Sambra et al., 2016). The IndieWeb movement sums up the attitude: own your address, own your content, and connect from there.

	Rented space (platform)	Self-hosted space (your own)
Who owns it	The platform	You
Who sets the rules	Terms of service	You
Address	platform.com/yourname	yourname.net
Where your data lives	On the platform’s servers	On a machine you control
If the service shuts down	The space disappears	The space stays
Effort	Sign up in a minute	Setup and upkeep
Audience	Built in	You invite people

Table 2. *Renting versus owning a space in the matrix.*

7.4 The costs

Self-hosting is harder. It needs some technical skill, care with security, and a machine that stays on. Here the lid becomes a problem: a laptop that sleeps when it is closed takes the house offline with it. In practice many people would keep their room on a small always-on device at home, or on a rented server they manage, and use the laptop as the door that reaches it. A self-hosted space also gives up the crowds that platforms bring. The most likely future is mixed, like a city: private homes that people own, and public squares where they meet.

8. The Problem of Exit

In fiction, leaving the simulation takes effort, a special exit point, a moment of danger. On a laptop, exit seems trivial: close the lid. Four observations suggest it is not so simple.

- **Residue.** The world keeps running after the portal closes. Messages pile up, and the self a person built inside (profiles, posts, data) stays there without them.
- **Pull.** Much of the matrix is designed to hold people in: endless scrolling, autoplay, streaks and alerts. Its doors open easily and close reluctantly.
- **Many portals.** With phones, tablets and watches, a person is rarely ever fully at Level 0. Closing one portal often means opening another.
- **Inversion.** For some people the world inside feels more real than the room. The physical world becomes the place they visit, a mild, everyday version of the twist at the centre of the films.

None of this makes the matrix sinister. Most of what happens inside is ordinary and much of it is good: work, learning, friendship, art. But it suggests a practical habit, which might be called **threshold awareness**: noticing the moment of entry, treating the closing of the lid as a deliberate act, keeping at least one room without portals, and listening to the body, the one layer of the model that never goes through.

9. Escape or Return: Games and the Pull of Better Worlds

Some of the most carefully built places inside the matrix are games. Few releases have been awaited like *Grand Theft Auto VI*: millions of people are ready to spend hundreds of hours in a sunlit copy of a city that is faster, brighter and more forgiving than the one outside their window. Fiction saw this coming. In Ernest Cline's *Ready Player One* (2011), filmed by Steven Spielberg in 2018, the real world is crumbling, so almost everyone lives inside the OASIS, a virtual universe where they can be anyone. The physical world is not repaired. It is simply left behind.

9.1 Why better worlds pull

Huizinga (1938) described play as something that happens inside a "magic circle": a space with its own rules, set apart from ordinary life. Modern games keep the circle but remove its edges. They have no natural ending, they reward every hour with visible progress, and many run economies of their own. Castronova (2007) predicted an *exodus* of time and attention toward virtual worlds for a simple reason: for many people they are more fun, and sometimes fairer, than the real one. In the terms of Section 5, these worlds are designed to move a person from Walk to Dwell, and from Dwell towards Merge.

9.2 Going inwards, not backwards

It is tempting to call this a step backwards, a retreat from reality into toys. The Portal Model suggests a different reading: we are going *inwards*. The danger is not that game worlds are fake. Following Chalmers (2022), they are real places, with real friendships and real skill. The danger is the inversion described in Section 8, when the room becomes the place one only visits, combined with a fact from Section 7: these better worlds are rented. A city in a game can be beautiful, but no player owns a room in it.

We are not going backwards.
We are going inwards, often without noticing the door.

9.3 The OASIS closes on Tuesdays

The film's own ending is telling. Its hero, now in charge of the OASIS, decides to switch it off two days a week, so that people spend time in the real world. It is not a rejection of the virtual world. It is a rule for the threshold: Level 0 becomes a place people return to by choice. That is the habit this paper calls threshold awareness, and the choice the next section describes as the red pill.

10. Red Pill or Blue Pill?

The most famous scene in the 1999 film is a choice. The hero is offered two pills. The blue one sends him back to his ordinary life, where he will go on believing what he has always believed. The red one shows him what his world really is, however uncomfortable that turns out to be. The scene has become shorthand for any choice between comfort and awareness.

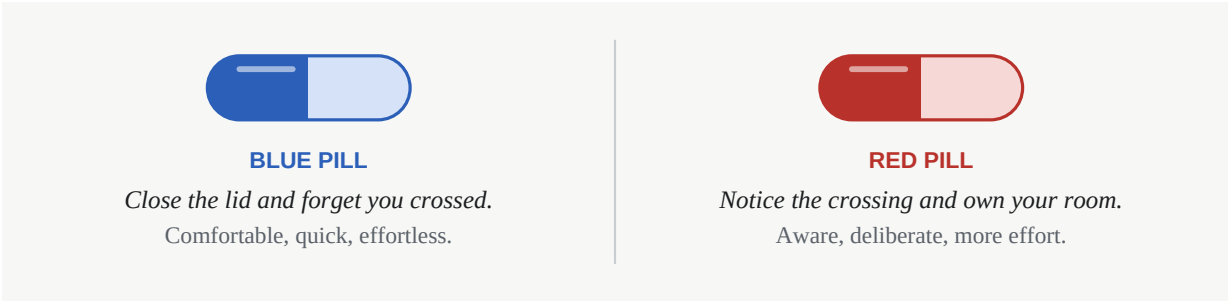

Figure 2. *The choice, translated to the laptop portal. Neither pill takes you out of the internet; each is a way of living inside it.*

It is worth asking what the choice means for the matrix described in this paper, because one thing is different. In the film the red pill leads *out*, to a real world hidden behind the simulation. At the laptop there is no hidden world to escape into. The room and the internet are both real (Chalmers, 2022), and almost nobody can live in only one of them. So the pills cannot be about leaving. They are about *how* a person lives inside. Table 3 sets out the difference.

	Blue pill	Red pill
Entry	Automatic. You never notice the crossing.	You notice the moment you go through the glass.
Rules	The feed is chosen for you, and you take it as the world.	You know algorithms shape what you see, and you choose your sources.
Space	You only ever rent rooms on platforms.	You also own a room of your own (Section 7).
Identity	You become what your profile shows.	You know the avatar is a part of you, not the whole.
Exit	The lid closes, but the pull goes on.	You close the lid on purpose. Level 0 is a place you choose.
Body	Forgotten until it hurts.	Listened to: the one layer that never crosses.

Table 3. *Two ways of living inside the matrix.*

Read this way, the red pill is the paper's argument turned into a habit: the threshold awareness of Section 8 together with the room of one's own of Section 7. The blue pill is not foolish. It is comfortable, quick and effortless, and most people take it many times a day, often for good reasons. The red pill has real costs: more effort, more setup, more friction and less convenience. The paper's answer is still the red pill, with one important difference from the film.

> *In the film the choice is made once. At the laptop it is made every time the lid opens.*

One note on words. Online, the phrase "red pill" has been taken up by some communities to mean things that have nothing to do with this paper. Here it means only one thing: knowing when you have crossed the threshold, and choosing what you do on the other side.

11. Is the Age of Files Over?

For forty years the basic unit of life at the computer was the *file*: a named thing, in a folder, on a disk you could hold. Inside the matrix, files are disappearing from view. Music and films arrive as streams instead of downloads. Documents live inside web apps that never show a Save button. Phones barely show a folder at all. University teachers have reported that many students who grew up this way find folders and file paths unfamiliar, because they have always found things by searching (Chin, 2021). It is tempting to conclude that the age of files is over.

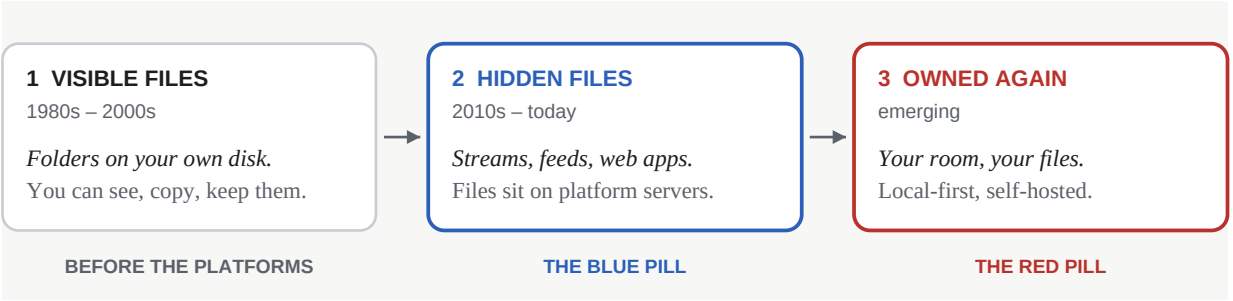

Figure 3. *Three eras of files. The second era hides them for comfort; the third brings them back as ownership.*

10.1 Files did not die; they moved

Underneath, nothing is file-less. Every stream, post and shared document is still stored as files, or as closely related objects, only now on servers in someone else's data centre. The file has not vanished. It has moved out of the person's room and into the landlord's building.

10.2 Owned furniture and rented furniture

In the terms of this paper, a file is **furniture you own**. You can copy it, move it, back it up, open it with a different program, and keep it if the service that made it closes. Content on a platform is **furniture you rent**. You can see it and use it, but you cannot really take it with you, and when the platform shuts down or changes its rules it can vanish overnight. Hiding files is the blue pill of Section 10: wonderfully convenient, but the room is not yours.

10.3 The return of the file

The red pill brings files back, not as clutter but as ownership. The self-hosted room of Section 7 is made of files its owner controls. Several movements already point this way. *Local-first software* keeps data on the person's own device and synchronises it with others, instead of keeping it only in the cloud (Kleppmann et al., 2019). Solid pods keep personal data in a store the person controls (Sambra et al., 2016). The IndieWeb asks people to publish on their own site first and copy elsewhere second.

The file did not die. It moved out of your room and into the landlord's building.

Even this paper is a file: a PDF that can be kept, printed and sent, and that will still open if every platform disappears tomorrow. The age of files as something you *see* may be ending. The age of files as something you *own* depends on which pill you take.

12. Limits of the Model

The Portal Model is a lens, not a law of physics. Three limits deserve mention. First, the metaphor can hide inequality: not everyone owns a portal, and the corridor is faster, cheaper and freer in some places than in others. Second, unlike the shared hallucination of fiction, the real matrix is not one world but many, and most of its territory is owned by a small number of companies whose interests do not always match those of the people inside. Self-hosting (Section 7) is one answer, but so far a minority one. Third, the boundary between room and matrix is blurring further as screens move closer to the eyes through headsets and glasses. The laptop may turn out to have been a transitional portal, the last one with a lid.

13. Conclusion

This paper began with a cable in the skull and ended with a lid on a hinge. Its argument is that the laptop already does what the fictional cable does, more gently and, in a sense, more completely, because it does it every day and asks nothing of the body but to sit still. Each morning, millions of people lift a lid and cross. The internet they enter has space, time, inhabitants and laws: everything a world needs. Nor does it have to be only a place we visit: with a self-hosted space, each person can own a room inside it, furnished with files of their own. The question the paper leaves open is not *can we enter the matrix?* We do, constantly. It is whether we notice when we do, and whether we remember the way back. That is the red pill, and it has to be taken again every morning.

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