Derivative Film and Brandscape Blockbusters

In 2021, the word *metaverse*—referring to an immersive, synchronous, interoperable digital world, or "3D internet"—was everywhere. Not just the latest corporate buzzword, the metaverse became a sinkhole for sustained investment from a number of the biggest global corporations. McKinsey & Company estimated that $120 billion in metaverse-related investments occurred in just five months, while the Securities and Exchange Commission reported that the word appeared in regulatory filings more than a thousand times in the first half of 2022.[1] Amazon, Apple, Google, Microsoft, Nvidia, and Tencent all made announcements, hires, and strategies, while Facebook went so far as renaming itself Meta, diverting $10 billion a year into its metaverse ambitions. It has spent more on virtual reality (VR) than the United States spent on the Manhattan Project.[2]

The recurring joke is that no one wants this. Mark Zuckerberg's demos are laughable. The headsets are cumbersome, even nauseating. The virtual spaces are empty. Those old enough to remember *Second Life* (and its death) are experiencing déjà vu. The idea of entering a virtual world created by Big Tech is anathema to many. By 2023, the hype cycle had already run its course, with generative artificial intelligence the new shiny toy burning through vast amounts of venture capital and carbon emissions. But maybe Silicon Valley isn't the place to look for the birth of the metaverse; back down the 101, in Hollywood, the metaverse has been a popular, beloved experience for decades. Its vision, one populated not by 3D avatars, but by well-known characters and intellectual property, is one many people actually want to live in. Perhaps our technological future lies in a cinematic world already imagined in the past.[3]

While hip hop is financialized at the level of the word, and reflexive sitcoms at the level of the scene, story, and season, as seen in chapters 5 and 6, our final case study looks at derivative media at the scale of the world—and its virtual

simulation. The previous examples demonstrated the creeping influence of finance into our stories and songs; this last set of examples considers how finance is influencing the creation of branded cultural worlds that we are invited to not just listen to, read, or watch, but to immerse ourselves in completely. The commodification of our leisure time is nothing new, but the financialization of our lived experience is ever-amplifying.[4] The future of cultural production is likely to involve more immersive technology, but the degree to which it will be premised on extraction and financialization is still up for grabs.

Virtual and simulated worlds have been a staple of philosophy and science fiction since at least Plato's cave allegory, through to the "Worldcrafts" of the Philip K. Dick story "The Trouble with Bubbles" (1953), the "Grid" of the movie *Tron* (Steven Lisberger, 1982), and the cyberspace of William Gibson's novel *Neuromancer* (1984). The word *metaverse*—a portmanteau of *meta* and *universe*—is often traced to its coinage by Neal Stephenson in the 1992 novel *Snow Crash*, which depicts a dystopian world where humans can interact with each other as fantastical avatars in a three-dimensional virtual space. (Silicon Valley proponents of the metaverse appear to have overlooked the hypercapitalist dystopia presented in the novel.) A few years earlier, a less dystopian world of human interaction with equally fantastical avatars was imagined: Disney's *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* (Robert Zemeckis, 1988). A hybrid of live action and animation, the film is a blend of various genres, primarily comedy and mystery, but also drawing from film noir and the backstage musical. Set in a 1947 version of Hollywood, people and cartoons coexist in a clever, well-crafted, technically impressive film that was both acclaimed and wildly popular, providing Disney its then biggest-ever opening-weekend box office. It paved the way for the "Disney Renaissance" (1989–99) that would begin the following year, when Disney returned to producing beloved, popular animated films such as *The Little Mermaid* (1989), *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), *Aladdin* (1992), and *The Lion King* (1994), a catalog it now remakes and exploits endlessly.

For our purposes, *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* can also be credited with starting a cycle of films we might call the *brandscape blockbuster*—or, if you prefer, the *intellectual property management film* or the *metaverse movie*.[5] It contains all of the necessary components in nascent form: a world that parallels our own, heavily populated by licensed, branded characters and stories, which are explored for the viewer as if in a nostalgic travelog. Disney and Warner Bros., with the deepest of catalogs, are the main purveyors of these stories. With a mix of live action and animation (traditional, computer-generated, or both), the brandscape blockbuster often depicts two distinctive worlds, one simulated and happier, in contrast to a darker, real world. The conflict often involves a populist rebellion against a tyrannical villain who aims to homogenize the world for their benefit, an intergenerational struggle over values, or both. It is a "four-quadrant movie," designed to appeal to all four major demographic "quadrants" as defined by Hollywood—men/

women, over/under twenty-five—by offering action, adventure, romance, wit, nostalgia, and reflexivity. Though otherworldly and spectacular in their aural-visual representation, these films are arguably more "realistic" than any other cultural form operating today. The average American sees roughly five thousand brand names and advertisements in a single day, maybe even as many as ten thousand.[6] With strategic licensing agreements and merchandising deals, these brandscape blockbusters seek to develop a fantasyland made in the image of the financialized marketplace, reflecting our dystopian reality back to us as a playful fantasy. It's a dreamworld that comes with a heavy price, literally and figuratively. Table 7.1 depicts this series of brandscape blockbuster films, most with much denser referential economies than their originators. We can read these films as industrial allegories—"Hollywood thinks about capitalism by telling stories about money," as J. D. Connor says[7]—but also as wide-ranging, diversified portfolios of brands, properties, licenses, and merchandising tie-ins. Nearly all are huge successes just in terms of box office, let alone brand value. These films demonstrate our descent into a financialized popular culture—not just as a symbolic representation of such, but as a material embodiment of vast speculation.

Both Disney and Steven Spielberg figure prominently in the history of the brandscape blockbuster. *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* has both, the latter producing for the former. Spielberg is often credited with creating the first smash hit of a new blockbuster era with *Jaws* (1975), through a combination of pre-sold property, marketing blitz, and wide release.[8] His *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* (1982) featured a young boy coaxing an alien out of hiding with a trail of Reese's Pieces, tripling sales of the candy; according to *Campaign*, the marketing magazine, this was when "modern-day product placement began."[9] Along with *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977), *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981), *Back to the Future* (1985), and other hits, Spielberg's currency in the industry was high; and it would take someone with Spielberg's cachet and Rolodex to facilitate the world depicted on screen in *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*.

In addition to the many Disney characters featured, Spielberg convinced Warner Bros., Fleischer Studios, Famous Studios, King Features Syndicate, Felix the Cat Productions, Turner Entertainment, and Universal Pictures/Walter Lantz Productions to license their characters to also appear in the film, often in comical juxtapositions, such as Donald Duck (Disney) and Daffy Duck (Warner Bros.) in a dueling piano performance, and Mickey Mouse and Bugs Bunny appearing on screen together for the first and only time. At least seventy references are made, including to Betty Boop, Chilly Willy, and Screwball Squirrel. The result is a flurry of excitement for younger viewers and a drip feed of dopamine for older viewers playing spot-the-reference. Tame in comparison to the films that would follow in its wake, *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* established a template that brandscape blockbusters continue to use to this day.

A few years later, Warner Bros. would mimic its chief competitor and develop a hybrid animation/live-action brandscape blockbuster of its own: *Space Jam*

TABLE 7.1 Timeline of Brandscape Blockbusters, with Total Number of References and Box Office

Year	Title	References	Worldwide box office
1988	*Who Framed Roger Rabbit*	70	$351,500,000
1993	*Jurassic Park*	16	$1,045,573,035
1996	*Space Jam*	62	$250,180,384
1997	*The Lost World: Jurassic Park*	31	$618,638,999
1999	*The Matrix*	84	$465,974,198
2001	*A.I. Artificial Intelligence*	53	$235,900,000
2002	*Minority Report*	72	$358,824,714
2003	*The Matrix Reloaded*	49	$738,576,929
	The Matrix Revolutions	14	$427,300,260
2007	*The Simpsons Movie*	52	$527,071,022
	Transformers	30	$708,272,592
2009	*Monsters vs. Aliens*	41	$381,687,380
	Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen	31	$836,519,699
2012	*Avengers*	35	$1,515,100,211
	Wreck-It Ralph	74	$496,511,521
2014	*The LEGO Movie*	50	$468,084,718
	Transformers: Age of Extinction	20	$1,104,054,072
2015	*Avengers: Age of Ultron*	26	$1,395,316,979
	Jurassic World	24	$1,669,963,641
	Pixels	53	$244,041,804
	Terminator Genisys	23	$432,150,894
2016	*Sausage Party*	54	$141,344,255
2017	*The Emoji Movie*	11	$216,564,839
	The LEGO Batman Movie	151	$310,563,096
2018	*Avengers Infinity War*	30	$2,048,359,754
	Bumblebee	30	$465,195,589
	Ralph Breaks the Internet	107	$529,290,830
	Ready Player One	223	$579,055,653
2019	*Avengers Endgame*	47	$2,797,732,053
	Spider-Man: Far from Home	62	$1,132,107,522
	The LEGO Movie 2: The Second Part	68	$190,131,035
2021	*Free Guy*	49	$323,473,792
	Space Jam: A New Legacy	119	$143,987,946
	The Matrix Resurrections	6	$156,421,363
2022	*Chip 'n Dale: Rescue Rangers*	265	(Streaming release)

(Joe Pytka, 1996). Having merged with Time Inc. in 1990 and about to acquire Turner Broadcasting in 1996, Time Warner at that time was dedicated to achieving synergy among its many subsidiaries and mining its historic library of film and television properties. "*Space Jam* isn't a movie," Time Warner CEO Gerald Levin proclaimed, "it's a marketing event."[10] With its combination of cartoon nostalgia (Looney Tunes) and global celebrity (Michael Jordan), *Space Jam* met many corporate objectives for its overleveraged parent company: from a $125 million production and marketing budget, amplified by over two hundred promotional partners, it earned more than $250 million at the global box office and $1.2 billion in merchandise sales.[11]

Textually, the film wears its commercial ambitions on its sleeve, parodying its own status as branded product. "We're Looney Tunes," Porky Pig explains, and Daffy Duck interjects: "And, as such, exclusive property and trademark of Warner Bros. Inc.," revealing an actual branding of the Warner Bros. logo on his backside. Plenty of other branded Warner Bros. products are referenced in the film, including early Looney Tunes cartoons, *Batman*, *Mars Attacks*, and *Caddyshack*. Non–Warner Bros. products are also parodied, particularly Jordan's many endorsement deals: "Michael, it's showtime. Get your Hanes on, lace up your Nikes, grab your Wheaties and Gatorade and we'll pick up a Big Mac on the way!" Later, complaining with Bugs Bunny about the lack of royalty payments for any "mugs and t-shirts and lunchboxes with our pictures on 'em," which, as mentioned, would turn out to be worth over a billion dollars, Daffy sighs: "We gotta get new agents. We're getting screwed." And, in one of its many references to union politics, Daffy then mutters, "If this were a union job. . . ." This reflexivity and critical understanding of its own context is key to the brandscape blockbuster's appeal, transforming crass consumerism into a clever wink. "*Space Jam* offered up 'childish delight' and 'adult self-awareness' as points of entry," Paul Grainge argues, as its aim "was to signify, contextualize and aestheticize consumption practices growing out of the industrial and fan intersections of sports and entertainment."[12] What happens when the self-awareness rises in tandem with the commodification and synergy? What happens when the winking is constant and the nudging becomes a sharp elbow? Like Jay-Z and *30 Rock*, brandscape blockbusters depict worlds that are utterly saturated with references, forming referential economies with ample transactional possibilities, which also allows them to build a reflexive, critical apparatus both complex and popular.

THE MATRIX IS EVERYWHERE—IT IS ALL AROUND US

A decade after *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*, another influential blockbuster would build a cinematic world out of references, though this time the concept of a dystopian reality being converted into a virtual fantasyland is the literal plot of the film. Borrowing its title from Gibson's *Neuromancer*, *The Matrix* (Lana and Lilly Wachowski, 1999) delivers its critique of capitalism by setting its story in a future

where humanity is enslaved by machines and pacified by a simulated reality. Both the film and the simulation within the film are built from a referential collage: cyberpunk novels, Japanese anime, Philip K. Dick sci-fi, and John Woo action are the most immediate, with spiritual and philosophical references also in abundance—Jean Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation* is an actual prop and source of dialogue. The film references at least eighty other films and television series, and, after the first film's unexpected popularity, its brand expanded into a transmedia franchise of sequels, video games, animated shorts, and branding tie-ins. In the subsequent years, more than fifteen hundred references were made to *The Matrix* in other films, television series, and games, from its cybergoth style to its music cues, to its "red pill" motif, to its slow-motion "bullet time" camera technique, to snippets of dialogue, to A.J. giving a DVD of *The Matrix* to Carmela on *The Sopranos*. More than twenty years later, *The Matrix* continues to influence: positively (the film is now reread as a trans allegory, in part because both Wachowskis have since transitioned genders), negatively (the alt-right has claimed "red-pill" as a metaphor for its toxic antifeminist ideology),[13] and theoretically (Ruha Benjamin uses the glitch scene from the film as a framework for thinking about racist technology design, then connects *The Matrix* to Patricia Hill Collins's intersectional "matrix of domination").[14]

If measured by references made to the film as inputted by users on IMDb (admittedly a deeply flawed but suggestive metric), few films have had a bigger influence. *Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977) reigns supreme, with over 6,500 references, while over 4,000 are made to *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming, 1939). A number of older films have high reference counts based on a famous sequence, such as the shower scene in *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960), or a quotable piece of dialogue: "an offer he can't refuse" in *The Godfather* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1972), "the beginning of a beautiful friendship" in *Casablanca* (Michael Curtiz, 1942), "Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn" in *Gone with the Wind* (Victor Fleming, 1939), and "Are you talking to me?" in *Taxi Driver* (Martin Scorsese, 1976).[15] But few films touched a nerve like *The Matrix*; it built a cinematic world of references that then became a part of ours through its constant reference in other texts. Eight of these texts are further entries in the brandscape blockbuster lineage.[16]

The LEGO Movie (Phil Lord and Chris Miller, 2014) is another film about a cheery, simulated spectacle with a darker reality hidden below the surface, from which a rebel group fights a tyrannical overlord. In this case, it's a candy-colored world of Lego, populated by toy characters who are pacified by sitcoms (*Where Are My Pants?*, whose title doubles as a repeated punch line), pop songs ("Everything Is Awesome"), billboards ("conform: it's the norm!"), and the "local sports team," while obeying instruction manuals and broadcast commands to "always be happy" from a villain named Lord Business. In another case of hybrid animation and live action, it is revealed that Lord Business is a stand-in for the human father of a young boy, who is secretly playing with the carefully placed Lego constructions his father forbids him to touch. The boy just wants to be creative and ignore

the manual; the father comes to see the error of his ways and the importance of play. The allegory is clear: the film comments on its own status as branded property while its story and characters advocate breaking free from the shackles (specifically) of intricate instruction manuals for licensed Lego sets and (broadly) of corporatized culture. It seems to suggest that intellectual property and monoculture stand in the way of the creativity that comes from a blank slate (or a box of unmarked Lego blocks and no instruction manual). The film softens this critique by concluding its narrative with the theme of teamwork and collectivity, in which instructions can help achieve a goal.

Of course, the cleverness of *The LEGO Movie* and its deftly negotiated narrative merely feed back into a transmedial licensing bonanza, both internally and externally. The film contains many references to other films and franchises, especially Warner Bros. properties such as DC Comics, *Lord of the Rings*, *Harry Potter*, and *The Matrix*, but also properties (including the corresponding voice talent) that the Lego Group licenses, such as *Star Wars* and *The Simpsons* (both now Disney) and the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (Paramount). Externally, the film's message of open play's triumph over instruction following is diluted by *The LEGO Movie*–themed building sets and character minifigures; a series of sequels, including *The LEGO Batman Movie* and *The LEGO Ninjago Movie* (a tie-in with Lego's ninja-themed television cartoon); video game adaptations such as *The LEGO Movie Videogame*; merchandising and licensing such as apparel and McDonald's Happy Meal toys; and "The LEGO Movie World," a Legoland theme park attraction. "*The LEGO Movie* seems to participate in the synergies of salesmanship—a toy becomes a movie that sells more toys and games and books and theme park experiences and on and on," according to Dana Polan, "even as it critiques the top-down model of business and promotes a non-entrepreneurial mythology of being creative for its own playful sake. . . . Yet every frame of the film radiates the money that went into it."[17] Incidentally, the actual money that went into it came from Steve Mnuchin and his RatPac-Dune slate-financing operation (discussed in chapter 4).

Again we see the critical component of a brandscape blockbuster escalating in combination with its commercialism. For films that are clearly designed for profit and synergy, it is worth noting that the corporate strategy for these movies includes seeking out acclaimed comedic writers and directors who can transform a corporate premise into something not just watchable, but profitable and critically acclaimed, even "essential cinema," in Polan's words.[18] *The LEGO Movie*'s writer/directors, Phil Lord and Chris Miller, were previously known for their cult classic *Clone High* (2002–3) and for remaking *21 Jump Street* (2012) into something far funnier than its premise would suggest. Other brandscape blockbusters have similar veins of talent. In addition to Spielberg and Zemeckis, *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* includes animation direction by acclaimed animator Richard Williams. The Wachowskis made offbeat, challenging fare before and after *The Matrix*. *The Emoji Movie*—a movie I heroically suffered through so you don't have to—is

perhaps the thinnest premise of the bunch, but also includes a script cowritten by Mike White, winner of the Independent Spirit John Cassavetes Award for the film *Chuck & Buck*, who also wrote and/or created acclaimed series such as *Freaks and Geeks*, *Enlightened*, and *The White Lotus*. Terence Nance, creator of the radical afrofuturist HBO show *Random Acts of Flyness*, was the original director of *Space Jam: A New Legacy* (2021), discussed below, before being replaced by Malcolm D. Lee—director of ten films, primarily featuring Black actors and stories—who came up through 40 Acres and a Mule Filmworks, the company founded by Spike Lee, Malcolm's cousin. And our next entry, the most recent addition to the brandscape blockbuster lineage and the one most saturated with references, was directed by Akiva Schaffer, famous as a member of comedy trio The Lonely Island, who has written and/or directed beloved comedy films, television series, and songs, including "Everything Is Awesome," the earworm from *The LEGO Movie*.

Schaffer's *Chip 'n Dale: Rescue Rangers* (2022) was envisioned as a "spiritual successor" to *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*, similarly presenting a world where cartoons and humans coexist in a live-action/animation hybrid. Cartoon duo Chip and Dale started in Disney shorts in the 1940s. Beginning in 1988, the popular animated television series *Chip 'n Dale: Rescue Rangers* featured the chipmunks in a sixty-five-episode run syndicated on The Disney Channel, Fox, and Toon Disney. This fondly remembered series became the basis of the Schaffer film in 2022, which imagines Chip and Dale thirty years after their show, investigating a conspiracy in which cartoons are surgically altered to star in illegal bootleg movies. Like *Roger Rabbit*, the film is both a love letter to the history of American animation and a circus of branding and licensing agreements. Unlike *Roger Rabbit*, which included references to seventy or so other films and cartoons, *Chip 'n Dale* references over 260 films, TV shows, cartoons, and games in a constant barrage of meta-jokes, Easter eggs, sight gags, and brand mentions. The cost of this licensing buffet is, of course, left unsaid—a tab picked up by the Disney corporation at a price, whether paid in social capital or actual capital, that few other entertainment companies could afford.

Who Framed Roger Rabbit operates like an elegy for the golden age of hand-drawn animation and of Los Angeles itself, including a sly critique of the power of the automotive and oil industries in conspiring to severely curtail public transportation in the city. *Chip 'n Dale* jokes about the current state of constant reboots, rampant unoriginality, and endless rehashing of the past only to reveal the true villain to be a bootlegging operation. For example, Flounder from Disney's *The Little Mermaid* (John Musker and Ron Clements, 1989) is surgically modified to bypass copyright restrictions and is forced to star in a bootleg for overseas markets: "The Little Fish Lady." Knockoffs of the "real thing," the film suggests, are the problem with Hollywood fetishizing copyright as authenticity. As with *The LEGO Movie*, a lack of originality is bemoaned, yet cleverly replaced by ever more restrictive intellectual property. In Schaffer's film, the problem isn't Disney's aggressive

tactics against labor and exhibitors, or its increasingly singular focus on mining its intellectual property[19]—it's those pesky bootleggers who don't respect the sanctity of entertainment.

As is customary in many Hollywood narratives, the central relationship mirrors the social problem that forms the background for the film's action. In this case, Chip and Dale are estranged, in part because Chip thinks Dale is "fake" for continuing to chase fame. When they reconcile in the film's conclusion, it's by "being true to oneself." Like *The LEGO Movie* and *30 Rock*, the film offers a critique of corporate culture but surrounds it with a shroud of nostalgia, advertising, and references, both paid and unpaid. As a Disney product, its meta-referential tone suggests that all of this is a bit silly, but also that these properties are our past, our memories, our childhood, even our friends. Disney's unparalleled ability to commodify childhood includes its ability to reassure adults that their commodified memory is all in good fun. Spot the reference. Get the joke. Buy the merchandise. Bring your kids.

GAMING THE METAVERSE MOVIE

Zuckerberg's metaverse is bound to be as antisocial as Facebook.[20] The examples of the metaverse that are often predicted to be more successful are game-based ecosystems such as *Fortnite*, *Minecraft*, and *Roblox*, which involve synchronous cross-platform participation, have dedicated communities, and are already exceptionally popular. In 2021, the latter two games attracted 150 million and 200 million monthly users, respectively, totaling more than six million hours of monthly use each.[21] *Minecraft* and *Roblox* both provide open-ended virtual worlds in which users, mostly children and teenagers, can create and share their own games. And like *Fortnite*, a multiplayer shooter that also offers a highly social, virtual world, they offer their own currencies (V-Bucks, Robux, and Minecoins, respectively) that can be used in their in-game marketplaces to buy customizations for their avatars, items, characters, bonuses, dances, and other virtual commodities and services. Though both were free to play, *Fortnite*'s 2020 revenues were over $5 billion and *Roblox*'s were over $2 billion in 2021.[22] *Minecraft*, meanwhile, is the best-selling video game of all time.

As these games rocketed in popularity, what helped propel them were cross-promotional integrations with legacy media. In 2018, *Fortnite* featured Marvel characters and stories in a promotional tie-in with *Avengers: Infinity War*. By 2021, each of its new story lines would include crossover characters drawing from a range of media franchises, including film (*Star Wars*, *Alien*, *The Matrix*, *Ralph Breaks the Internet*, *Dune*, *Predator*), television (*The Walking Dead*, *Teen Titans*, *Stranger Things*, *The Mandalorian*), and gaming (*Street Fighter*, *God of War*, *Halo*, *Tomb Raider*, *Uncharted*). In 2020, rapper Travis Scott hosted a concert for millions on *Fortnite*, premiering a song that debuted at the top of the *Billboard* Hot

100; many more artists followed, including Marshmello, BTS, J Balvin, and Ariana Grande. *Roblox* also featured live concerts and tie-ins with blockbuster Hollywood films such as *Ready Player One*, while *Minecraft* has been franchised to many media (novels, board games, merchandise, Lego sets, conventions, an upcoming film), accelerated by its acquisition for $2.5 billion by Microsoft in 2014.

The crossover between games and traditional Hollywood and music is by no means a new phenomenon. Disney licensed Mickey Mouse to Nintendo and Atari as early as 1981, and *Tron*, another live-action/animation hybrid about a simulated digital world and an evil businessman, is the eighth highest-grossing arcade machine of all time, earning an estimated $45 million by 1983, over $130 million in 2022 dollars and far more than the film grossed.[23] *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* was ported to Commodore 64, Amiga, and NES along with the film's release in 1988. And, infamously, Spielberg's *E.T.* is known not only for its successful product placement but also its incredibly unsuccessful Atari video game adaptation, one of the biggest commercial failures in video game history, resulting in 728,000 cartridges unceremoniously dumped into a New Mexico landfill in 1983.[24]

While licensed adaptations of Hollywood films are a common occurrence, with varying levels of success, a unique strain of the brandscape blockbuster can be seen in a number of video game series as well. Crossovers are a popular technique within video games, in which a game incorporates references, cameos, or Easter eggs alluding to characters or items from other franchises. Nintendo, in particular, often includes subtle references to its other games. But certain series make the crossover the central appeal of the game. Fighting games have proved a natural fit for the brandscape blockbuster structure, resulting in a distinct subgenre called the "crossover fighter," which features characters from multiple franchises. *X-Men vs. Street Fighter* in 1996 evolved into the popular, eight-installment *Marvel vs. Capcom* series, featuring characters from the former conglomerate's comics character roster and the latter's video game character roster. The five installments of *Super Smash Bros.* have been an even bigger success, bringing together characters from forty different franchises, some internal to its developer Nintendo (*Mario*, *Zelda*, *Pokémon*) but many external licenses as well (*Sonic*, *Street Fighter*, *Final Fantasy*, *Kingdom Hearts*, *Minecraft*, etc). Other crossover fighting games include the *Injustice* series (DC characters), *MultiVersus* (Warner Bros. characters), and other clearly branded fighters such as *Nickelodeon All-Star Brawl*, *Cartoon Network: Punch Time Explosion*, *LEGO Brawls*, *NeoGeo Battle Coliseum*, and *Play-Station All-Stars Battle Royale*. Indie video game developers have tried to compete by sharing characters among their various franchises such as *Blade Strangers* and *Indie Pogo*. Sports and racing games have been popular genres for branded crossovers as well.

Kingdom Hearts is a model example of the brandscape blockbuster video game. A role-playing game and collaboration between Disney and Square Enix, one of the biggest video game developers, *Kingdom Hearts* enables players to explore a

fictional universe populated by dozens and dozens of characters and story lines from Disney, Pixar, and Square Enix properties (such as *Final Fantasy*). Starting in 2002 and now including thirteen different games, *Kingdom Hearts* has become a sprawling universe and franchise of toys, books, clothing, manga, and television. Disney not only licenses many of its most popular film and television properties to be adapted into video games, it also codevelops many different original games in different gameplay styles. These games attempt to build unique universes in which a broad range of its intellectual property is not just exploited strategically, but offered in a more immersive manner. In addition to *Kingdom Hearts*, to name just a few:

· *Disney Infinity* series, an action-adventure that brings Disney toys to life

· *Disney Princess* series, action-adventure games launched alongside the "Princess Line," the incorporation of female protagonists from Disney and Pixar franchises into their own shared world of books, films, television, cartoons, games, clothing, and toys

· *Disney Magical World* and *Disney Dreamlight Valley*, life simulators populated by Disney and Pixar characters

· *Disney Friends*, a pet simulation where the pets are Disney cartoon characters

· *Disney Ultimate*, a 3D platformer that has players morphing into different Disney characters

· *Epic Mickey* series, another 3D platformer, this time built on vintage Disney imagery and characters

· *Disney Art Academy* and *Disney Learning*, both educational games

· *Disney Sing It* series, *Dance Dance Revolution Disney Mix*, and *Disney Twisted-Wonderland*, all music-based games

· *Disney Magic Kingdoms*, a worldbuilder

· *Disney Emoji Blitz*, where players collect four-hundred-plus Disney characters

· *Disney Heroes: Battle Mode*, a mobile role-playing game in which users play as nearly two hundred Disney characters to fight a virus

· *Disney Fantasy Online*, a massively multiplayer online role-playing game

· *Disney Mirrorverse*, an action role-playing game that involves missions and combat "stuffed with predatory tactics" to get its young players to purchase multiple in-game currencies to attain new items and characters[25]

For many of the world's Disney fans, a trip to Disneyland or Disneyworld is not affordable or possible; the proto-metaverse Disney is building through its games

and virtual experiences welcomes consumers of all income levels. Increasingly, it then pressures its users into upgrades through microtransactions. Disney has licensed or developed over six hundred video games. While these have had varying levels of success, it's not hard to imagine these branded metaverses generating more profit for Disney than the theme park division one day soon.

Disney is not alone in envisioning a branded future of gaming and virtual worlds through the brandscape blockbuster approach. Warner, NBCUniversal, Paramount, and Sony all have their versions as well. While the games are heavy on the branding and simulated reality that is common to the brandscape blockbuster, they are typically light on the narrative worldbuilding that makes these universes so desirable to begin with. While video games are increasingly the more profitable component of the franchise, the films are still needed to do the heavy lifting of developing alluring storyworlds that achieve important ideological goals through narrative and character. A number of recent brandscape blockbusters have taken the common occurrence of simulation as a story line and modified it to explicitly evoke video games.

Disney's *Wreck-It Ralph* (Rich Moore, 2012) is the first to base its referential economy more on nostalgia for the video games of its viewers' past than on film and television (though it still makes thirty-two film and television references). The film revolves around a cast of video game characters that can leave their in-game roles to interact within the arcade where their game cabinets are housed. The main characters are part of fictional games with obvious real-life counterparts (*Rampage*, *Donkey Kong*, *Mario Kart*, *Halo*, *Call of Duty*), while many of the secondary characters are licensed from real, often older games (*Tapper*, *Pac-Man*, *Q*bert*, *Frogger*, *Paperboy*, *Pong*, *Dig Dug*, *Altered Beast*, *Street Fighter*, etc.). Easter eggs in the form of sight gags, songs, and dialogue snippets are rife; at least forty-two video games are referenced. The narrative is similar to other brandscape blockbusters in that it reassures its older audience that the media of its youth, and the intellectual property that is continually rejuvenated and resold, is worth treasuring. "We haven't been this popular in years," Ralph says in the conclusion of the film, having rescued the damsel in distress. "The gamers say we're retro, which I think means old, but cool."

In 2018, a sequel, *Ralph Breaks the Internet*, featured the owner of the arcade installing Wi-Fi, allowing Ralph and Vanellope to explore the internet as if it were an interactive physical 3D space. The film represents the internet as a city bustling with brands and avatars, thus amounting to a cinematic depiction of the metaverse before its popularization a few years later. It's even more overstuffed with references and characters than the first *Ralph* film. Nearly a hundred film and television references are made, and over four hundred individual characters were designed, the most of any Disney film to that point. The referential economy of the franchise now included both technology companies and short-form viral video references in its depiction of a purely corporate internet designed for mindless consumption.

Apple, Google, Amazon, Twitter, Snapchat, Instagram, Spotify, IMDb, WhatsApp, Facebook, Pinterest, and *Fortnite* all make appearances.[26] Payment processing apps, such as Fandango, Kickstarter, Venmo, and PayPal, are depicted as well, a fitting complement to the depiction of the internet as purely consumerist. eBay is central to the plot (they need to buy a rare part for Vanellope's arcade machine), as is a Buzzfeed/YouTube parody, BuzzzTube, where Ralph will earn the money to buy the part from eBay. "There are much better ways to make money on the internet than stealing cars," a new character exclaims, "such as becoming a BuzzzTube star." Ralph proceeds to "go viral" copying popular user-generated internet genres such as makeup tutorials, unboxing videos, spicy-food eating, cooking tutorials, and video game streaming. Humans are seen briefly, sadly hunched over their screens, clicking the like button on Ralph's videos on Buzzztube.

Disney's mask is off in the sequel. The first film in the series is similar to *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* and *Chip 'n Dale: Rescue Rangers* in its desire to pay homage to the meaningful cultural artifacts of its creators' youth and wrestle with its own status as commodity. The sequel doesn't bother pretending to offer anything but a realistic depiction of the metaverse Disney is building all around us: a fully branded virtual shopping mall and arcade that dispenses with anything resembling public or communal space that isn't monetizable. At one point, Vanellope visits "Oh My Disney" land, a space introduced with an establishing shot that includes all five of Disney's key brands in a single frame (Star Wars, Pixar, Marvel, Disney Animation, and The Muppets), all while soundtracked with a remix to the hit song "Let It Go" from *Frozen*.

Once again, authenticity and securing intellectual property are undercurrents in the film's value system. Stormtroopers from *Star Wars* chase Vanellope for advertising "unauthorized clickbait" of Ralph's videos, before she escapes with the help of the entire Disney Princess Line. Ralph, afraid of change in this wired new world and worried that his friendship with Vanellope is in danger because she wants to move from the arcade to an online game, enlists a virus that escapes his control. The virus feeds on his "insecurities" to exploit an insecurity in the system, which replicates Ralph into a horde of violent Ralph clones. They chase Vanellope and demand friendship, destroying the internet in the process. Ralph, the surrogate for the film's older audience and their inability to understand their children's online lifestyle, accepts that Vanellope deserves her independence. He also accepts the branded triviality that her independence entails. Again the ideology is clear. Spot the reference. Buy the merchandise. Bring your kids, but don't be overbearing. Let them grow up unaccompanied in this toxic, branded world. "Let her go," Ralph tells the horde, fixing his insecurity and instructing parents everywhere.

With the addition of gaming into the brandscape blockbuster narrative, the viewer's relationship to media products is now envisioned as playable, livable, and inhabitable. In 1989, no one walked out of a viewing of *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* thinking they could actually live in the Toontown depicted on screen. But

in the intervening years, Disney has developed a number of virtual spaces that aim to immerse its consumers in a Disneyland that doesn't require a physical visit. Toontown did come online in 2003, an early experiment by Disney's Virtual Reality Studio to make a massively multiplayer online role-playing game.[27] By 2012, many viewers leaving a screening of *Wreck-It Ralph* expected that virtual capability. The fictional games in the film were playable online, as were licensed, mobile games that extended the story. Released alongside the sequel in 2018, *Wreck-It Ralph: Ralph Breaks VR* would be an option for deeper immersion, as would playing as Ralph and Vanellope avatars in *Disney Universe*, *Disney Infinity*, *Disney Magic Kingdoms*, *Sonic & All-Stars Racing Transformed*, *Kingdom Hearts*, or *Fortnite*. You can play as Ralph on many of Disney's proto-metaverses. Or any Disney character. Or any major Warner, Sony, Comcast, or Paramount character in competing but similar metaverses. If an independent company manages to make a popular new character, it will eventually get sucked up into the corporate metaverse. The dystopian imaginary in 1999's *The Matrix* successfully captured this aspect of capitalist control, that it requires a spectacle within which we gladly immerse ourselves. But could the Wachowskis have predicted their own place in the simulated captivity Hollywood was building?

THE ARCADES PROJECT-ED INTO YOUR EYEBALLS

In 2021, a new installment in the *Matrix* franchise was released to comment on our contemporary branded dystopia. The very existence of the film is emblematic of the topic at hand. In *The Matrix Resurrections*, Thomas Anderson (Keanu Reeves) is heavily medicated, haunted, and back in the machine-run simulation, this time a soulless San Francisco as represented by tech bros and austere coffee shops. He has developed a video game trilogy based on his fuzzy memories of the events in the first three films. "The market's tough. I'm sure you can understand why our beloved parent company Warner Bros. has decided to make a sequel to the trilogy," says Anderson's business partner, Smith, who in the original trilogy was a straight-jawed corporate suit, one among many. In the new film, he's a GQ finance bro: blazer over a t-shirt, Wayfarers, and shoes without socks. "They informed me they're going to do it with or without us," he continues. "I thought they couldn't do that," Anderson replies, replicating the actual backstory of the film. The Wachowskis had been opposed to extending the original trilogy, but Warner Bros. owns the intellectual property and, having repeatedly asked the Wachowskis to no avail, announced their intention to move forward with a new writer in 2017. Softly extorted into maintaining her vision of the property, Lana Wachowski relented, writing the extortion into the script.[28]

In the film, after Warner Bros. forces Anderson's hand, he is seen suffering through a montage of uninspired pitches based on "keyword association with the brand." Young designers offer their interpretations of the original's success,

including its philosophy, action, and technology, allowing Wachowski to reflect on the uneasy balance between the franchise's intellectual capacity and its commodity status. In other words, *The Matrix Resurrections* is a "piece of corporate I.P. exploitation about how corporate I.P. exploitation ruins everything cool," according to Alex Pappademas in *The New Yorker*, "a sequel about why sequels suck, a big 'Fuck you' from Lana Wachowski to Warner Bros. that Warner Bros. gets to release in theatres and on HBO Max just in time to boost its fourth-quarter results."[29] The film is less energetic than the earlier entries, more personal and more preoccupied with memory. The gateway between the Matrix and the real world is no longer a telephone, as in the original trilogy, but a mirror. Talking about his game to Trinity, now known as Tiffany, who is also back in the Matrix, domesticated and defeated, Anderson shrugs and says, "We kept some kids entertained." Lana is reflecting on how the ambition and philosophy of *The Matrix* was fed into Hollywood's machine and became part of the spectacle it criticized. The anguish is palpable, as is the melancholy on the faces of its now middle-aged stars. A depressed Anderson notices a quote carved into a bathroom wall: "It is so much simpler to bury reality than it is to dispose of dreams," a line from Don DeLillo's novel *Americana* (1971). This reference applies, in a number of layers, to Anderson's diegetic condition, to the franchise's philosophic and anticapitalist themes, to the conflicted status of Wachowski's work, to the economic state of Hollywood, and to the wider sociopolitical context.

Four years of a relentless Trump administration had successfully proved the efficacy of his chief strategist Steve Bannon's tactic for treating the media—to "flood the zone with shit."[30] Seemingly every day there was a new scandal, a new lie, a new outrage, a new distraction, a new conspiracy, or a new attack taken in the "deconstruction of the administrative state."[31] The media ecosystem's ability to sort fact from fiction or shine a light on democratic deterioration was worse than usual. Many citizens were radicalized by online media that appealed to fear and xenophobia; reality was simply buried. *Resurrections* alludes to this context when the villain explains his new design for the Matrix: humans "don't give a shit about facts. It's all about fiction . . . [and] you people believe the craziest shit. Why? What validates and makes your fictions real? Feelings." Later, a rogue horde of "bots" overwhelms the system, a sea of violent, angry, "red-pilled" young men. While the first film still embodied some of the 1990s cyber-utopianism, in tandem with its anticapitalist critique of media spectacle, the fourth film expresses a deep distrust of the reactionary, libertarian, and authoritarian capacities of Big Tech's platforms. Amid the production of the film in 2020, Elon Musk tweeted "Take the red pill," to which Ivanka Trump replied "Taken!" Lilly Wachowski responded "Fuck both of you," neatly summarizing the politics of *The Matrix Resurrections*.

But Lana Wachowski's attempt to get the gang back together again and capture the zeitgeist of the contemporary capitalist moment was futile; she was beaten to the punch by someone on the other side of the studio lot. An earlier Warner

FIGURE 7.1. Lilly Wachowski's response to Ivanka Trump and Elon Musk.

Bros. film in 2021 also featured *The Matrix*, but in a more "realistic" depiction: as but one piece of IP in a barrage of product placement in yet another brandscape blockbuster sequel. *Space Jam: A New Legacy* features LeBron James as a loving father who pressures his son Dom to work tirelessly at pursuing a basketball career when all he wants to do is design video games. Dom accompanies his father to Warner Bros. Studios and for the second time in a blockbuster film that year, Warner Bros. executives pitch derivative product to talent that is powerless to reject it. In this case, the plan is to use "Warner 3000" software to encode a digital version of LeBron that will star in Batman, Game of Thrones, and Harry Potter properties. LeBron resists, but the villain Al-G Rhythm, as efficiently named as Lord Business, traps him in the Serververse, a digital space where all Warner Bros. intellectual property coexists.

Whereas *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*, *The Matrix*, *The LEGO Movie*, *Chip 'n Dale: Rescue Rangers*, and *Wreck-It Ralph* all involve bustling cities that house their hybrid worlds, *Space Jam: A New Legacy* depicts a whole universe: long on space, but short on ideas. Each planet is merely another Warner Bros. property that LeBron visits: Game of Thrones, Harry Potter, Casablanca, The Wizard of Oz,

DC Comics, Mad Max, Austin Powers. The Matrix planet is represented by techno music, green code, and red and blue pills, and Tweety's Granny will imitate Trinity a few times. When the game begins, the crowd fills up with even more WB IP: Gremlins, The Iron Giant, Scooby-Doo, King Kong, The Mask, The Jetsons, The Flintstones, and a few adult Easter eggs, such as Tony Soprano, Alex from *A Clockwork Orange* (Stanley Kubrick, 1971), and even the nun from the X-rated film *The Devils* (Ken Russell, 1971). Coincidentally I'm sure, many of these properties were recently released on Max (then called HBO Max), the Warner Bros. streaming platform that brought together content from across its brands, including HBO, DC, Cartoon Network, Looney Tunes, and more. Overall, a hundred film and television series are referenced in *Space Jam: A New Legacy*, almost all Warner properties, while over two hundred brands partnered with it for promotion, such as McDonald's, Kraft Heinz, General Mills, Funko, Mattel, Nike, and Converse.

While the sequel shares the synergy, cross-promotion, and product placement of the original, it is far removed from that film's narrative and ideology. The villain of the first film is a cartoon alien, intent on kidnapping the Looney Tunes for his amusement park, to which Bugs Bunny responds by convening a meeting at Union Hall 839, a reference to the Animation Guild, IATSE Local 839. Animators in Hollywood have a long history of labor actions, including "the Disney strike" of 1941 and Local 839's strike over offshoring of animation in 1979. The original *Space Jam* pays tribute to these workers, as well as the Teamsters, and narrativizes a collective struggle among cartoon creatives, commenting on its own status amid a synergistic merchandising cash-in. Similarly, *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* ends with the toons inheriting Toontown, triumphing over Doom's attempt to destroy public transit. The villain of *Space Jam*'s sequel, meanwhile, is a new form of content kidnapping—an algorithm named Al-G Rhythm—but a union organizing a labor action is not at all the response the film suggests. Instead, the conflict is mapped onto LeBron's relationship with his son, a wunderkind who is seen single-handedly developing every aspect of a video game: not just coding, but recording sound effects, composing music, scanning 3D models, and drawing characters. A portrait of the entrepreneurial artist as a young man. There is no collective worker power in the sequel—there aren't even workers. Or kids. Just "a little Stevie Jobs," as Dom is called, and a lot of IP.

For the last example of the brandscape blockbuster, we can turn to the most name-checked representation of the metaverse: *Ready Player One*, a 2011 book by Ernest Cline that was adapted into a blockbuster film by Steven Spielberg in 2018. Both works were criticized for being adolescent male fantasies weighed down by excessive pop culture references; both were wildly popular, at least among young men. The setting is the dystopian world of 2045, where pollution, poverty, and overpopulation drive many people to spend their time in a VR world called the OASIS (Ontologically Anthropocentric Sensory Immersive Simulation). The story is even less concerned with character development than other brandscape

blockbusters and somehow even more concerned with stuffing itself full of references to other media (over two hundred film, television, video game, and music references). Much like *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* twenty years earlier, it was Spielberg's Rolodex, now smartphone contact list, that facilitated a movie built out of licensing arrangements. "We had a big wish list," Spielberg recalls. "We had tremendous cooperation all around town with different studios and different licensing companies and we probably cleared 80% of the things we wanted."[32] Working for Warner Bros. this time, Spielberg and his team switched many of the novel's references to Warner properties, including a lengthy sequence that takes place in the Overlook Hotel from *The Shining* (Kubrick, 1980). With Spielberg's obvious talent for creating cinematic set pieces, the film is notable for crafting what the look and feel of the metaverse might be, if the technology is ever able to render such detailed action in real time.

Every brandscape blockbuster has at least one bravado sequence that encapsulates its branded world. It's almost always composed of long, immersive takes, the camera gliding through space and panning around to witness the bustling, noisy, branded spectacle. Often it's a travelog-like introduction to the world as we meet it at the same time as the main character. In *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*, it's a reveal of the busy backlot of Maroon Cartoon Studios, with below-the-line workers mingling with cartoon animals. In *Wreck-It Ralph*, it's Game Central Station, where hundreds of video game characters socialize in a cavernous hallway. In *Ralph Breaks the Internet*, there are two: the arrival to the internet, but also the arrival to Disney. In *Space Jam: A New Legacy*, it's LeBron falling into the Serververse and passing many of the branded planets. Sometimes it's a battle scene, pitting characters from different franchises against each other like a child might with their action figures. In *The LEGO Movie*, the citizens and licensed characters of Bricksburg rise up to battle Lord Business. In *Space Jam: A New Legacy*, it's a rowdy crowd of Warner Bros. IP watching a basketball battle. In *Chip 'n Dale: Rescue Rangers*, it's a fan convention of different IP, later revisited within a chase sequence.

Key to *Ready Player One*'s success as a popular representation of the metaverse is that it strings together multiple bravado sequences, all impressive feats of choreography, both real and CGI. The film begins with a series of long takes of main character Wade moving down a vertical trailer park and through a junkyard in the "The Stacks," the impoverished neighborhood in Columbus, Ohio, where the film takes place. A drone delivers Pizza Hut, a product placement unlikely to have the same effect as Spielberg's work for Reese's Pieces. Then Wade puts on his VR goggles and the film offers a long, nearly two-minute single shot, a first-person view of being propelled through the OASIS, past interstellar space battles, Minecraft World, zero gravity golf, hurricane hang gliding, unicorn ice polo, pyramid skiing, mountain climbing with Batman, and a planet-sized casino, before settling at a large gathering of avatars, including Robocop, Marvin the Martian, Hello Kitty, and Wade's avatar. A kinetic racing scene follows, populated by characters and

vehicles from across pop culture history, including Spielberg's own filmography. The film culminates in a massive battle sequence, a cluster bomb of chaotic CGI imagery similar to each entry in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, except this time it also doubles as a corporate IP portfolio featuring the Battletoads, The Thing, Spawn, Chucky, Mechagodzilla, Gundam, Lara Croft, Freddy Krueger, He-Man, Neo, and more. Thousands of characters brawl, helping the film achieve its total of over two hundred references to other film, television, and game properties.

A generous reading of the film might interpret it as Spielberg's sad elegy for the blockbuster form he played a large role in creating. Perhaps it's an "Ozymandian spectacle by an artist who's reflecting on his works and despairing over what they've wrought," suggests critic David Ehrlich, "an inherently derivative studio film about the crisis of originality in today's studio filmmaking, and a sexless orgy of intellectual property that tries, in its too gentle way, to liberate fans from the franchises and iconography they love a little too much for their own good."[33] There is no new culture in this grim world, only a capitalist monoculture that endlessly retreads the past in VR form. Neither hero nor villain wants to actually change the OASIS; the villain just wants to own it and insert intrusive advertising. When the hero wins, he merely implements a couple days of OASIS downtime each week. The film starts with Wade's exposition, somberly stating that "people stopped trying to fix problems and just tried to outlive it. . . . Reality is a bummer. Everyone's looking for a way to escape." Two hours of simulated IP mayhem later, a weak plea to balance your screen time is all this bleak depiction can muster.

A less generous reading of the film might suggest that Spielberg is so talented at creating spectacle that the film cannot offer anything but. His brandscape is too inviting, too well choreographed, too technically impressive, too charming. He can't help himself. His deft use of cinematic language makes even the dreary feel alive. And thus the metaverse is the product that gets the Reese's Pieces treatment this time around. With *Ready Player One*, Spielberg creates an indelible reference point for what the future may hold, itself built out of countless references to the past. In 2002, Spielberg's dark vision of the future in *Minority Report* included a prophetic scene in which Tom Cruise's character, walking through public space, is bombarded with personalized advertising using facial scanning. The scene is heightened by the use of real brands, such as Lexus, Bulgari, Guinness, and American Express; a hologram at the Gap asks him how the assorted tank tops worked out for him.

Nearly twenty years later, our world of AdTech and surveillance capitalism has woven a much darker web. Presaged and promoted by the brandscape blockbuster, our corporate metaverse is here, overlaid on our physical reality by the screens in our theaters and in our pockets. The opportunities for independence and radical thought in the cultural sphere have faded, just another piece of content drowned out by brands in an endless scroll. Compelled by hedge funds and asset managers that drive the cultural industries toward more and more extraction,

Disney, Warner Bros., Spielberg, and the rest of financialized Hollywood are pursuing their own version of flooding the zone with shit. Generative artificial intelligence trained on corporate IP threatens further repetition and degradation while lowering labor costs. Monotonous stories woven together with empty references to some other desolate entry in the corporate canon. Lots of content, but little creativity or criticism. A slowly rising streaming subscription charge, with an extra fee for skipping ads, will be withdrawn each month in rent.