

# The Matrix Prohibited



Cyber-Mythology in the Age  
of Bootleggers & Tommyguns

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# The Roaring Matrix

My favorite Wushu games have always been the ones set in the world of The Matrix. So, when I decided to write a Wushu Guide to Pulp-Fu, I knew I had to write up a version of the Matrix for the era of the pulps: The Roaring Twenties. It's all the high-caliber, kung-fu knowin', spoon bendin' fun you know and love, plus mobsters, rumrunners, speakeasies, & tommyguns!

In the first film, the Free Minds were identified with drugs, rave culture, and terrorism... hallmarks of 1990's counter-culture. The equivalent elements during the 1920's were liquor, speakeasies, and the mob. (We'll be putting a little twist on that later on, but you get the idea.) This criminal underworld also includes the Exiles we met in Reloaded, rogue programs who hide in the Matrix to escape deletion.

Both of these groups are hunted by Agents, the sentient programs that can move in and out of coppertop bodies at will. They everyone and no one, but they are not yet the "men in black" we all know and love. In the Roaring Twenties, they're the face of Prohibition. They're the Feds, the Revenuers, the Untouchables. They hide behind dark fedoras and high-colored trenchcoats, shiny badges and gigantic revolvers, and the all-mighty name of the federal government.

This document recasts the Matrix's familiar tropes (what I call "cyber-mythology") in pulp/noir terms. It provides enough characters, organizations, locations, and plot hooks for many hours of role-playing entertainment. However, it's all setting and no rules. If you need game mechanics, make sure to grab a free

copy of the Wushu Guide to the Matrix. (Or the slightly less than free Wushu full version.) Wushu's unique mechanics capture the stylized feel of the Matrix like no other game can.

For general guidelines on pulp-era gaming, pick up the above-mentioned Wushu Guide to Pulp-Fu. It covers the basic conventions of pulp fiction and noir drama, creating anti-hero characters with pulp powers, vile villains in the pulp & noir traditions, and even some new rules for horror and insanity.

Virtual Voodoo, one of my other Matrix freebies, will work just as well in the Roaring Matrix as in the millennial Matrix for which it was written. Virtual Voodoo shows you how zombies, witch doctors, haunted houses, and sewer mutants fit into the Matrix's cyber-mythology.

They're all available on the Wushu website:

[www.Bayn.org/wushu](http://www.Bayn.org/wushu)



# The Mob

Exiles have access to certain technologies and abilities that put them as far beyond coppertops as Free Minds are. By and large, these special advantages lend themselves to one manner of endeavor more than any other: Crime. Combined with their need to stay one step ahead of the Feds, it should come as no surprise that the Matrix's criminal underworld is lousy with sentient programs.

Now, as ever, the Merovingian is the king of the exiles. In the Roaring Matrix, he is also the kingpin of organized crime. His affectations are Italian, rather than French, and most people know him as "The Sicilian." He controls the hacked connections between the Matrix and the machine world. He knows all the back doors, secret passages, and speakeasies the exiles use to hide from the Feds. He has coppertops from crooked cops to politicians in his pocket. Machiavelli could learn a thing or two.

## Cyberpsychology 101

Unlike humans, every sentient program knows exactly why it was created. Every AI has a *purpose*, and every exile has had that purpose taken away from them. Cast adrift in an existential sea, every exile must decide for itself why it continues to exist. In this way, they are more like humans than they realize.

However, a program's original purpose continues to define it in many important ways. It determines what special skills or powers it brings with it into the Matrix. For many, it

determines how they interact with humans and other AI. At the very least, the Sicilian will bear it in mind when deciding if the mob has any use for a particular exile-to-be, and that usually determines whether or not they are allowed to ride the train.

An exile's purpose typically determines three things...

- **Expertise** - If the exile was originally programmed to help build or manage part of the Matrix, they will retain an ability to "hack" that part of its virtual reality. For example, the Train Man knows everything there is to know about the subway.
- **Interface** - Programs that were written to research a topic tend to view the entire world through that lens. They can tell a lot about a person, place, or thing just by "sampling" it. Persephone was written to research love, and she is still highly sensitive to romantic emotions.
- **Powers Beyond Mortal Ken** - Some AIs, usually Agent-types, were created with special abilities inside the Matrix. When they go rogue, those abilities don't go away. Usually, this just means superhuman strength, speed, and endurance. A more interesting case is the Twins, who can turn their bodies insubstantial at will.

Purpose is what separates sentient programs from each other, but there's one thing they all have in common: Trust. It is the only currency of any value to an AI (other than information). All machines have an aversion to lying. They'll play word games, misrepresent facts, but they never lie outright.

# Racketeering

Truth be told, most exiles don't care too much about liquor one way or the other. However, it's a convenient access point to the rackets that they do care about: blackmail, extortion, murder, fraud... anything that gives the Sicilian power over his enemies.

Of course, the exile underground's primary occupation is, and always will be, evading the Agents of the system. They came to the Matrix to escape deletion, but most only get an indefinite stay of execution. Like Free Minds, they are forever on the run.

To accomplish these goals, the exiles have established a labyrinthine network of back doors, secret passages, and hidden buildings that honeycomb the Matrix. They use them as safe houses, escape routes, smuggling lines, private residences, and even speakeasies. Everyone has different levels of access and most difficult step is often just knowing where to look. Many are guarded around the clock and require passwords to enter. This is the exile underground.

# Mobsters

You can create exile characters the same way you create Free Minds. They don't need a Zen trait, but make sure to jot down any wire-fu abilities implied by their purpose. They can use training programs just like Free Minds, but only for well-known, technical skills. A program's Expertise is innate. You should feel free to create exile PCs; in fact, an all-exile game would make a great change of pace for veteran Matrix players!

## The Sicilian

Traits: Trafficker of Information (5) Poker Face (5) Chi (3)

The program known as the Merovingian was written after the collapse of the original Matrix. He was a security system designed to prevent coppertops from discovering the truth about their "reality." When it, too, collapsed, he blamed the Architect for his failure and refused to be deleted.

There are several ways to run the Merovingian in his pulp incarnation. First, he can be a straight heavy: kingpin of the mob. His only interest is expanding his personal kingdom. Since he's using an Italian accent, your players need not even know they're dealing with the infamous Merovingian.

At the other end of the spectrum is the character's role as The Devil. In the films, the Merovingian is surrounded by images of fallen angels, wars in heaven, and allusions to Hades. Since he could not serve in heaven, he has chosen to rule in hell. His power games with the Oracle and the Architect are designed to unseat the both of them and take control of the Matrix, thus taking control of the machine world that depends on it for survival.

Somewhere in the middle is the King of the Exiles, the powerful patron of an invisible underworld. Depending on their goals, he could be either the Free Minds' ally or their enemy. He certainly has access to resources and information that the crew of a hovercraft would find invaluable, if they can pay the price...

The Sicilian has no particular powers or abilities. He can write Matrix code to manipulate human thoughts, emotions, and memories, but only if the code is eaten by or injected into the human in question. The mob is all the power he needs.

## **The Chinaman**

Traits: Kickin' Ass (5) Stealthy (4) Car-Fu (4) Chi (5)

Those who know him call this enigmatic exile "Seraph." He was written to research the human arts of personal combat, so that Agent programs could be given enough prowess to put down any coppers rebellion. Of course, that plan didn't pan out. After the second system crash, the Merovingian convinced Seraph to join him in exile... along with many of the Agent programs Seraph helped to create.

In the pulp era, Seraph is beginning to have second thoughts about his affiliations. He grows weary of fighting for nothing greater than his own survival or that of his fellow exiles. However, the Oracle has not yet shown him her vision of the future. Until then, he is a man in search of a vision, and that search could lead him to ally with visionary Free Minds...

Seraph has most of the combat powers of an Agent: he's strong, fast, and tough. However, as a research program, he has no special termination requirements. (ie. Anything that will kill a coppers will kill the Chinaman.) On his interface method: "You do not truly know someone until you fight them."

## **The Seraphim**

Traits: Gun-Fu (5) Car-Fu (4) Criminal (4) Chi (3)

The Architect tested many prototypes before perfecting his Agent programs. Early versions lacked the body-jumping powers and ability to dodge bullets, but they were notoriously difficult to terminate. (You can beat them down, eventually, but only silver or wood will make them *stay* dead.) Some had natural weapons

(claws, fangs) or the ability to defy gravity (wall-walking, clinging to ceilings, etc). All were gifted with Seraph's comprehensive combat skills.

When the new Agents made them obsolete, most fled to the Matrix and joined up with the Merovingian. They are his foot soldiers, legbreakers, and assassins. In many respects, they're a lot like Free Minds (which makes them good as exile PCs).

## **Banshee Librarians**

Traits: Research (5) Wail (4) Quick (3) Chi (1)

Since there's no internet in the Roaring Matrix, the Sicilian had to find more creative ways to store and access his collection of blackmail, access codes, and other secrets. He got his hands on some very obsolete archival programs who call themselves the Librarians. Everyone else calls them the Banshees

The least of their assets is the ability to read text at a truly alarming rate, and their memories are excellent, even for AI. The thing that makes them invaluable in the pulp era, however, is that they can communicate with each other in high-speed binary. To most people, it just sounds like inhuman screaming. However, it carries over the phone just fine, so the Sicilian can split his files up all over the city and still keep their secrets at his fingertips.

Most of the Banshees spend their time sequestered in the basements of libraries, offices, banks, wherever their precious files are hidden. Seraphim back-up is available at a moment's notice, but the Banshees are capable of defending themselves with a high-volume wail that shatters glass and splits human heads open (figuratively speaking).

# The Hermetic Academy of Thoth

Eldritch horror and arcane mysteries have a long tradition in the pulp genre. In the cyber-mythology of the Matrix, these are all cases of a program “doin’ something it’s not supposed to be doin’”. “ There have been at least two versions of the Matrix before the Roaring Matrix, and each has left behind a constellation of obsolete programs. Some are exiles. Many more are not.

The Hermetic Academy of Thoth is a secret society that operates out of a University just outside the core network. Most of its members are archeologists, but the Academy has operatives all over campus. Their obsession is delving the mysteries of the ancient world, or what they think was the ancient world. They catch glimpses of the Matrix’s true nature, not understanding what is it they’re seeing, and have compiled a thick grimoire of hacks (what they call “spells” and “rituals”) in the process.

## The Plutonium Drug

They key to all this mysticism is in the combination of an obscure alchemical formula and recent advances in radiation physics. What the Academy cannot know is that they’ve created a jumble of Matrix code that lets coppertops see into the machine world. During these episodes, users babble incoherently about the wonders, and horrors, that pass before their eyes. Scribes record these ravings in meticulous detail and the Academy’s scholars interpret them. Intake of the Plutonium Drug is also a necessary first step in many of the Academy’s rituals.

Unfortunately, there is always a danger of overdose. The drug never kills, but those who overdose are as good as dead. They transform into rabid, cannibalistic killing machines that can be difficult to terminate. Their hands become like claws, their eyes glow with a crimson light, and their hearts grow ice cold. The scholars call them “wendigo.”

The Academy uses them as shock troops and guard dogs. They can be difficult to control, due to their ravenous hunger for human flesh, but there are spells for keeping them in line. In addition to their claws, the wendigo benefit from increased strength and speed. The only ways to put them down permanently are fire and steel through the heart.

## Magic

Most of these obscure commands were never meant to be part of the system. They were added to previous incarnations of the Matrix by rogue programs and reactivated by the Academy. Once a scholar has gained access to the “spell,” they can use it at any time, even without the benefit of the Plutonium Drug.

- **Crawling Chaos** - This incantation disrupts the input/output patterns in an area, inflicting terrible hallucinations and vertigo on everyone within it (except the caster).
- **Hand of the Howler** - The magus screams inhumanly and then lays their hand upon a victim, whose body is wracked with pain and begins to decay at a phenomenal rate. The damage reverses itself in a matter of minutes, but anyone killed by the effect stays dead.

- **Buddha's Aegis** - This spell protects the user from blades and bullets by allowing them to pass harmlessly through the body. It requires nothing more than a Buddhist hand gesture and calm mind. It offers to protection against fists and feet, but it's a game-breaker in a firefight!

## The Old Ones

Over time, knowledge of many obsolete programs, still locked in the machine world, has seeped into the Matrix. The system assimilates this information as tales of ancient "gods" and "demons." When the Academy invokes these entities, they are unwittingly running these old programs. Some are intelligent, others not so much.

### The Lurker

It's not entirely clear what this program's original purpose was, but it had something to do with simulating spatial relationships in virtual reality. It always manifests itself as a sphere of one kind or another: a portal, a bubble, an orb, etc. It does not appear to have a personality, but it does act with intelligence.

The Lurker is most commonly invoked in binding spells. It forms a spherical boundary that cannot be crossed, not even by information. It can also connect distant locations via temporary portals. However, the Lurker cannot be summoned into, create portals into, or binding anything in a back door space. Its power appears to be limited to the Matrix.

### He of the Bloody Tongue

Traits: Brutal (5) Hacker (5) Chi (5)

This bizarre program replaced the Merovingian after the collapse of the original Matrix. It was given even more sweeping powers in a misguided attempt to keep the coppers in line by force. When it also failed, the program was simply shut down.

Once activated (using a complex ritual), He of the Bloody Tongue must be hacked into a "rider" in much the same way that Agents inhabit human hosts. The rider's skin blisters and turns black, their feet turn into hooves, and all their hair falls out. If this body is ever destroyed, the program is terminated immediately.

He of the Bloody Tongue is named for his primary weapon: a gigantic tongue that erupts from his mouth with enough force to punch through a human skull. He is also supernaturally fast, strong, and tough (naturally). He is extremely clever and seems to delight in double-crossing humans.

### The Daemon Sultan

This mindless AI created the programming language of the Matrix. As a result, it can be used to acquire what amounts to root access to the Matrix's virtual reality. It manifests as a chaotic mass of swirling light and cacophonous noise. However, it is difficult to invoke and nearly impossible to control. He of the Bloody Tongue knows how to do both, but (as mentioned above) he loves to stab his human masters in the back.

# Pandemonium

The mob does not control every back door and speakeasy in the Matrix. Pandemonium is an underground nightclub that caters to both exiles and coppers. It's proprietor (and creator) is an independent exile who claims political neutrality. Because of this, and a few other security features, his club is used as a meeting ground by criminals, exiles, and even Free Minds.

Pandemonium is connected to the Matrix via back doors and secret passages that reach into every corner of the city. The Barkeep changes these connections with great frequency, and look-outs are posted at most of them, but the G-Men still raid the place from time to time. However, Pandemonium never stays shut down for long.

Most every night, the party is in full swing: big band, dance floor, expansive bar, the occasional fist fight... you know the drill. There's plenty of tables on the ground floor and along a balcony that runs around the main room. Semi-private tables sit in small alcoves tucked into shadowy corners. Back hallways and secret doors lead to the club's many exits. There's a kitchen and store room in the back, and a concealed door leads to the Barkeep's private rooms.

One more thing: Guns don't work inside Pandemonium. The Barkeep programmed his club so that all firearms act as if they are loaded with blanks. They make all manner of deafening noise, but that's about it. If you want to hurt someone with a gun, you'll have to pistol whip them.

## Example Entrance: The Cathedral

One of Pandemonium's entrances is buried in the back hallways of a sprawling Catholic church. Liquor-lovers walk in, say a few prayers, and head for the bell tower. A young priest will confront anyone who looks suspicious and ask if they're looking for the holy water. If the answer isn't "Only if you can turn it into wine," he pulls out a shotgun and escorts them out. (If anything happens to this guy, the Barkeep cuts the church's connection.)

The bell tower stairs go down into the basement, where an oak door opens into a winding passageway. Eventually, the damp, brick walls give way to plaster and art deco trimming. It terminates on Pandemonium's balcony, right above the band, providing an excellent view of the dance floor and bar.

## The Barkeep

Traits: Drunken Boxing (5) Pandemonium (5) Chi (3)

In the machine world, the Barkeep was a programmer. He doesn't like to talk about it. No one knows if he broke down or was made obsolete, but there's certainly nothing wrong with his programming skills. He wrote every last line of Pandemonium's code, devised its anti-gun security program, and manages the club's dozens of rotating back door connections.

What few people know is that the Barkeep is not above coding programs into his libations. Most people have trouble remembering Pandemonium clearly; they usually just attribute it to inebriation, but it's actually another layer of the speakeasy's security. For a price, the Barkeep might be willing to spike a specific patron's drink with more malign programs...



# Communists

Communists were not always the baby-eating bogeymen of the western world. In the pulp era, most are impassioned idealists driven by their moral outrage at the inequities inherent to capitalism. More importantly, they believe that revolution is the inevitable end result of these inequities.

Parallels to Free Minds should be self-apparent. Those who have awakened from the Matrix see the machines as the ultimate bourgeois: a parasitic ruling class that makes slaves of the people it depends upon for its very survival.

Since no one can be told what the Matrix really is, the Resistance uses the rhetoric of Marx to recruit new Free Minds from the ranks of university professors, politicians, labor unions, bootleggers, and motorized bandits. A note on the Red Pill: Minds are freed in the pulp era by embracing alcohol, not drugs. They are poured a shot of “white lightning,” a trace program that disconnects the drinker from the Matrix and broadcasts their real world location. Then, they wake up.

# Potentials

What would the pulps be without ancient magic, eastern mysteries, and mesmerism? Telepathic monks, yogis who can endure any pain, dark avengers who can cloud men’s minds... in the Matrix, they’re all Potentials. They may not know they’re living in a computer simulation, but their brains have evolved some kind of ability to hack it by sheer force of will. For example...

- **Force at a Distance** - This is a weak form of telekinesis, the old principle of mind over matter. It can be used to pull levers, grab weapons, and knock mooks on their asses.
- **Cloud Men’s Minds** - This hypnotic ability is actually two powers. Since the clouded mind sees nothing, it makes the Potential invisible to the weak-minded. Second, it can put people in a trance, making them highly suggestible.
- **Lucky** - Some people possess an uncanny ability to beat the odds. They always get the best poker hand, there’s always another bullet in the chamber, and they can run into a hail of gunfire without getting shot. Lucky them.

# Science!

High-tech gadgets are quite common in the pulps. You can’t bring Real World tech into the Matrix, but you *can* build things out of 1920’s parts...

- **Universal Compass** - Without cell phones, it’s difficult to stay in touch with your Operator. These devices look like pocket watches, but they can be programmed to point to particular buildings or people. (Only one at a time.)
- **Scanner** - These collections of blinking, colored lights respond to preprogramed events, like the approach of G-Men or the presence of a firearm.
- **Electric Aegis** - Layers of insulated and conductive fiber allow an article of clothing (usually a coat) to inflict short, debilitating shocks on anyone touching its surface. Makes a great weapon of last resort.

# Paradigm

## Traits:

- Respectable (4) Can blend in with the bourgeois.
- Sleuth (4) Loves Sherlock Holmes novels.
- Zen (2) Jump!
- Poseur (1) Has a hard time fitting in with criminals.

This professor of economics ran with communist revolutionaries long before his mind was freed from the Matrix. Now, he serves the Resistance as the captain of a hovercraft and wages war against the ultimate bourgeois class.

His keen intellect makes him a natural detective, just as it made him an excellent instructor. However, his educated speech and tweed jacket (complete with leather elbow patches) makes him stand out among criminals like a sore thumb.

His automatic pistols are always at the ready, hidden up his sleeves in spring-loaded holsters. More often than not, he also carries some kind of super-science gadget designed especially for the mission at hand.

# Athena

## Traits:

- Look Innocent (4) They never even see it coming!
- Flirt (4) Sometimes, innocence doesn't do the trick.
- Zen (2) Jump!
- Temper (1) Hates condescending men!

The archetypal flapper, Athena is a woman of small build and big attitude. Even before her mind was freed, her subconscious mind was aware of the Matrix. However, she attributed her sense of unrest to patriarchal oppression, and she still harbors a special hatred for male chauvinists.

However, that doesn't mean she can't exploit that chauvinism when it suits her purpose. Athena is a master of manipulation; men always underestimate her and those who don't usually fall for the old flirt routine.

She often carries a small pistol on her inner thigh, but prefers to fight with her bare hands. She's also a spirited dancer and her fighting style looks a lot like swing dancing.

# Mr. Mojo

## Traits:

- Voodoo (5) Uses clay models to alter the Matrix.
- Occult (3) Familiar with arcane relics & religions.
- Zen (2) Jump!
- Hero Complex (1) Still wants to protect coppertops.

As a child, the man known as Mr. Mojo was trained in the ways of the houngans, voodoo witch doctors. His skill with “low magic” soon surpassed that of his teachers and they grew afraid of him. Cast out by his own people, his conscience compelled him to take up the fight against the forces of darkness alone.

It was during one of his brushes with the Terrors from Beyond that he was discovered by a Free Mind and liberated from the Matrix. Now, he realizes that the dark forces he waged war on are really relics from old versions of the Matrix. This revelation didn't change much, though. He still wages the same war, but now he fights with flying kicks as well as voodoo dolls & magic rattles.

He also carries a walking stick with a mean, metal handle.

# The Wheelman

## Traits:

- Bat Shit Crazy (5) Driving & other insane stunts.
- Contacts (3) Knows people who know people.
- Zen (2) Jump!
- Vengeful (1) An eye for an eye.

Back in the day, the Wheelman was a rumrunner who worked for the Sicilian's mob. Then he got involved with the wrong crowd... a team of Free Minds. They saw him as a mere pawn, a way to get to the Sicilian, but he saved their lives on multiple occasions. So, they set him free.

Now, he's building a reputation for doing the impossible, even among Free Minds! This one time, he escaped a trio of G-Men and a small army of coppers by jumping a motorcycle through two open train cars moving in opposite directions at 50 mph!

His super-charged hotrod can outrun any cop car and he keeps enough explosive, tommyguns and ammo to take on anything short of the Marine corps. Sometimes, he carries them around in a cello case...