The popular culture of computer scientists, hackers and programmers. Part II.

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Abstract

More of *The X-Files*, *The Matrix* and co. (including *Sense8*).

1 *The X-Files* (1993-2002)

1.1 Selected episodes

S07E13	When virtual reality and gaming goes wrong.
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1.2 Selected excerpts

S07E13

Figure 1: The modernist architecture preferred by tech companies.

FPS employee - I need to scan your ID. Retina scan, please.

Mulder - Cool.

(...)

FPS employee - I'll need you to look over those non-disclosure agreements.

Scully - "To protect all proprietary or intellectual property owned by FPS, a private California corporation, under the harshest penalty of law."

(...)

Scully - I can get in the Pentagon easier than this.

(...)

Langly - Welcome to the land where silicon meets silicone.

Frohike - Can I get you a latte from the bar, or perhaps a bottle of designer H2O?

(...)

Langly - Take a moment just to feel the pulse of the new American gold rush.

Byers - You're standing on the launch pad of a rocket headed for the stars.

Scully - OK.
 Frohike - There's been a little accident.
 Scully - What kind of accident?
 Langly - Like uh... an industrial accident.
 Scully - How did the victim die?
 Byers - Uh...
 Frohike - Uh : It's not exactly clear.
 Byers - Right.
 Langly - Mm-mm.
 Scully - Was their equipment involved?
 Byers - No.
 Frohike - Yes.
 Langly - Yes... and no.
 Scully - What's your business here?
 Langly - Our business?
 Frohike - We're, we're consultants to FPS.
 Byers - Langly did some programming for them. He created all of the bad guys.
 (...)
 Frohike - We don't want to give you the idea we're major profit participants.
 Mulder - Cash or stock options?

Figure 2: The non-separation of “the political” and “technical”.

Langly - [Options] Vested immediately with a short-term exercise against venture collateral
 to bypass SEC regs.
 Byers - The IPO's in a week.
 Frohike - Game ships on Friday. 50 malls across the United States and Japan.
 (...)
 FPS CEO - Total bleeding-edge technology.

1.3 Note

In this particular episode of the seventh season of X-Files, which covered the years from 1999 to 2000, a good representation of attitudes at the time is conveyed, where the general excitement and naivety with which new technologies were welcomed by the public also met some skepticism (attitudes roughly represented by Mulder and Scully here respectively); meanwhile those behind these technologies (i.e. members of the Lone Gunmen) could only explain with discomfort the reasons for their shortcomings and failures – and their own involvement in them.

FPS Corporation and their main product seem to be inspired by iconic game studio *id Software* and some mixture of their games *Wolfenstein 3D* (1992) and *Doom* (1993).

Figure 3: An advertisement for their main product.

Meanwhile the staff of this fictional company prefigure contemporary technology CEO's and personnel : a general disconnect with reality – financial optimization schemes, grandiloquent speeches, and great lack of empathy included.

The realities and tropes of this world continue with Darryl Musashi, a “rock star” or “10X” programmer.

Figure 4: Programmer Phoebe : *“I was just gonna take a nap. I’ve been up for 70 hours straight, analyzing code, trying to fix the game.”*

Phoebe, a programmer at this company, seems to be the only person there to have some non-commercial interest in solving the problem.

You don’t know what it’s like. Day in and day out choking in a haze of rampant testosterone. (...) She was all that kept me sane.

2 *The Matrix trilogy* (1999;2003)

2.1 Referenced by

— Jamie Zawinski (jwz)

I re-watched all three (...) on the occasion of its 20th anniversary. The first one is still a fantastic piece of filmmaking. That first scene, where we see Trinity performing the most incredible ass-kicking we’ve ever seen, and then she learns that Agents are inbound and she just turns tail and runs. She’s afraid of someone? That’s how you set the stakes. Also the dojo scene: “Do you think that’s air you’re breathing?”

The second two... can confirm: they are still an incoherent, babbling mess, and they make you like the first one less in retrospect. The freeway chase is pretty good. The Merovingian has a nice suit. That’s about it.

And it reconfirms something I thought about Sense8: “Did they love that ‘Burning Man rave in Zion’ scene so much they had to expand it to 12 episodes? Yeah, I think they did.”¹

¹ “Recent movies” (2019). <https://www.jwz.org/blog/2019/02/recent-movies-24/>

And, in another blog entry (among many others) :

There are only 4 essential movies about VR: Brainstorm, Videodrome, Strange Days and The Matrix. (...)

*Another thing about Brainstorm that I don't see mentioned often is how real the corporate environment felt. As someone who spent the late 80s in and around university-adjacent tech startups (...)*²

Figure 5: Jamie Zawinski in *Code Rush* (2000).

“One of the best programmers I ever hired had only a High School degree; he’s produced a lot of great software, has his own news group, and made enough in stock options to buy his own nightclub.” says Peter Norvig of Jamie Zawinski, referring to his pioneering work at Netscape / Mozilla among others³.

3 *Sense8* (2015-2018)

3.1 Referenced by

— Jamie Zawinski (a.k.a. jwz)

² “Brainstorm” (2019). <https://www.jwz.org/blog/2019/01/brainstorm/>

³ In his essay “Teach Yourself Programming in Ten Years” (Copyright 2001-2014). <https://norvig.com/21-days.html>

It wasn't bad – though I feel like nearly every idea in it had already been exploited, better (...). Sense8 has a much bigger travel budget, though. It's also just loaded with pandering and cliches, and every sub-plot eventually trudges toward the most obvious-possible happy ending.

(...) it left me wanting to scream “You incurious motherfuckers!” at the TV multiple times. (...) ⁴

3.2 Selected episodes

S01E02	Nomi Marks, a ‘hactivist’ and trans woman, writes a blog entry telling her story on the occasion of Pride.
S01E07	Bug, Nomi’s old friend and fellow hacker, re-unites with her. (his first appearance)
S01E011	More of Bug.

3.3 Selected excerpts

S01E02

For a long time, I was afraid to be who I am
because I was taught by my parents
that there’s something wrong with someone like me.

Something offensive,
something you would avoid,
maybe even pity.

S01E07

⁴ “Sense8” (2015). <https://www.jwz.org/blog/2015/06/sense8/>

Bug - OK. Let's start you off with some switch hooks.
 Nomi - I need a candygram and a feedthrough
 that'll burrow through any firewall ever built. (...)
 And how about a waterwitch?
 Bug - No, but I do have...
 Nomi - A Ragemaster? That's NSA grade.

3.4 Note

While it is unclear to us what “switch hooks” or even “feedthrough(s)” are supposed to be, the **candygram**, **waterwitch** and **ragemaster** are all real, existing devices used by the NSA and its so-called ‘Tailored Access Operations’ (TAO) – among many others of likewise denomination.

The Candygram for instance “[m]imics GSM cell tower of a target network.” according to a leaked NSA catalog. “Unit Cost: approx \$40K”.⁵⁶⁷

Figure 6: Chaos Computer Club’s 2013 Congress, presentation J. Applebaum.

4 Misc.

Serial Experiments Lain (1998), *Cowboy Bebop* (1998-1999)⁸ ...

⁵ “NSA ANT catalog”. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/NSA_ANT_catalog

⁶ Schneier, Bruce. 2014. “CANDYGRAM: NSA Exploit of the Day”. 20/02. https://www.schneier.com/blog/archives/2014/02/candygram_nsa_e.html

⁷ Applebaum, Jacob. 2013. “To Protect and Infect”. 30C3, 30/12. b0w36GAyZIA

⁸ Source front illustration : Ed (he/she/they/*).