The popular culture of computer scientists, hackers and programmers. From *Star Trek* to *Buffy* – First research notes.

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Abstract

Research notes: *The Matrix, Star Trek, Buffy, X-Files & co.*

Introduction

In this paper we understand “popular culture of computer scientists...” in the double meaning of: popular culture representations of them; and, on the other hand, their own popular culture. Both reflecting and influencing one another.

We offer these research notes in the hopes of helping others, of helping them not err, and go further and faster than ourselves.

While interesting, we held this particular enterprise – and these sorts of projects in general – to be of the lowest priority, hence pushed it to the very back, or end of our list.

We trust our ‘average intellectuals’ and historians to be able to undertake it one day, as part of some “cultural history”, if nothing else (and perhaps for the best);

Soon these scholar weathercocks will claim to have “felt” the importance of these various topics from the earliest hour; like a certain professor whose eyes were constantly full of dollar signs like in *Donald Duck* comics, so for instance when she raved about having recruited a post-doc whose family member was “very ‘high up’ at Google”, so she told, she saw dollar signs then too;

It is these same who make grandiloquent speeches about open access – speeches that would save the world if speeches could have such an effect; but even the briefest review of their publishing activities shows otherwise. They have no pride, and no decency;

(If they had a role inside this popular culture, they would be either ‘The Wolf, the Ram and the Hart’ or ‘Cancer Man’.)

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and we shiver already at the thought of perhaps having to read their papers one day, when and once even the most average among them will have finally caught on to their own times... Poor profession.
1  The X-Files (1993-2002)

1.1 Referenced by

— David Malan as part of Harvard’s CS50 class: among examples and illustrations of the “enhance” trope (i.e. fictional, unrealistic techniques through which seemingly or technically impossible amounts of (visual, digital) information are recovered).

1.2 Selected episodes

<table>
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<th>Season</th>
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<td>S01E07</td>
<td>(“Ghost in the Machine”)</td>
<td>artificial intelligence (and dangers of); political, moral and philosophical responsibility of creators.</td>
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<td>S02E25</td>
<td>(“Anasazi”)</td>
<td>anarchist computer hacker known as ‘The Thinker’, fourth member of Lone Gunmen.</td>
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<td>S04E09</td>
<td>(“Synchrony”)</td>
<td>takes place at MIT with various researchers of that same institution; time travel was a mistake in hindsight.</td>
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<td>S05E03</td>
<td>(“Unusual Suspects”)</td>
<td>the origins and formation of the ‘The Lone Gunman’ (by two electronics makers-vendors and a FCC employee, at a convention); from inoffensive DnD nerds to JFK and Roswell theorists, upon meeting Susanne Modeski.</td>
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<tr>
<td>S05E11</td>
<td>(“Kill Switch”)</td>
<td>Donald Gelman (‘Silicon Valley pioneer (...) he invented the Internet’); Invisigoth.</td>
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1.3 Selected excerpts

S01E07

Wilczek - If I’m protecting anything, it’s not the machine.
Mulder - Then what?
Wilczek - After the bomb was dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki Robert Oppenheimer spent the rest of his life regretting he’d ever glimpsed an atom.
(....)
Wilczek - He loved the work, Mr Mulder.
Mulder - His mistake was in sharing it with an immoral government.
Wilczek - I won’t make the same mistake.

S02E25

(The Thinker is reading the 50 Greatest Conspiracies Of All Time while his computer is trying to log in passcodes. (....))

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S04E09

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1https://scifi.media/x-files/transcripts/
Jason - Understand what?
Old Jason - What she created. What you - we - helped to create. A world without history, without hope. Where anyone can know everything that will ever happen. I’ve seen that world.

S05E03

Figure 1: “(...) 20. Daddy needs a new Sword of Wounding.”

S05E11

Byers - Jobs and Wozniak at Apple, Gates and Allen writing BASIC, the Homebrew Computer Club’s first meetings. Gelman was there. Frohike - Now they’re powerbrokers and billionaires. Back then they were just 'inspired nerds'. (...)
Byers - Gelman was a part of the group, but not 'one of them' (...)
Langly - He wrote some of the earliest viruses.
Mulder - And found himself under investigation by the NSA. (...)
Byers - Gelman was a visionary, not a capitalist. A subversive. (...)
Mulder - That may be what got him killed.
Langly - Heavy casualty.
Frohike - A brother goes down.
Scully - We need a name. Your real name.
Invisigoth - Invisigoth. You want my address? It’s t-o-a-s-t.
Figure 2: Invisigoth halts only after a first shot is fired.

(...)  
Invisigoth - 'Automata Theory', MIT, '95. Post doc, the Santa Fe Institute.

Figure 3: Invisigoth’s home: a container.
2 The Matrix trilogy (1999;2003)

2.1 Referenced by

— Nmap website / documentation

Figure 4: Trinity uses Nmap in The Matrix Reloaded (2003) (source : nmap.org).

Commands used, shown are :

# nmap -v -SS -O 10.2.2.2
# sshnuke 10.2.2.2 -rootpw="Z10N0101"
# ssh 10.2.2.2 -l root

References to The Matrix trilogy appear not only in Nmap’s website’s section dedicated to movies featuring it\(^2\), but including inside the official documentation for this software :

\[\text{Emphasis Using Nmap from your work or school computer to attack banks and military targets is a bad idea.}\]

\(\text{(...) Trinity scanned the Matrix with the command nmap -v -sS }\)
\(\text{-O 10.2.2.2.}\)\(^3\)

\(^2\)“Nmap In The Movies”. https://nmap.org/movies/

— Aaron Swartz

Where is the visual integrity of The Matrix? The hyperreal cinematography that made the film such a beauty? Not in The Matrix: Reloaded, which in comparison looked like a bunch of large fight scenes wrapped in some Phantom Menace-class patter.

The fight scenes didn’t even have a purpose most of the time. Agent Smith can endlessly duplicate and Neo can fly away whenever he wants. There’s nothing more that Neo needs, so why does he stand around fighting for twenty minutes? And in the freeway scene, they’re nominally supposed to be looking for an Exit, but after the first ten minutes they forget that and move on to blowing up large trucks.

Sure, it was a fun generic action movie, but it’s not in the same class as the original.4

— Leah Rowe

The Matrix is about transgender people. (...) 
It’s a Friday evening, and I’m watching one of my favourite films of all times. The Matrix, made in 1999 by the Wachowski Sisters.

(...) Both of them came out as transgender several years ago.

(...) 
To most people, the Matrix is a simple science fiction film. It depicts the story of a world which exists inside of virtual reality, with its inhabitants inside unaware of this. The VR simulates the end of the 20th century, in a large city located somewhere in the United States.5

More information on this can be found in The New Yorker’s 2012 “Beyond the Matrix”, in which Lana Wachowski came out to the public:

“I have a formative memory of walking through the girls’ line and hesitating, knowing that my clothes didn’t match,” (...) “But as I continued on I felt I did not belong in the other line, so I just stopped in between them.”

This was an important event as Lana was perhaps the only transgender woman, person altogether to have such mainstream notoriety at the time.


3.1  Referenced by

— Aaron Swartz: known primarily as major fan of Buffy the Vampire Slayer, and other works by Joss Whedon.

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5 https://notabug.org/vimuser/sleepless/src/master/matrix.md
In his very first writing about the series that we know, “Joss Quest” he explains:

“I have a confession to make. On February 21, 2003 on watched my first episode of Buffy the Vampire Slayer (6x09). I’m not sure why I did, or why I chose then, or why I chose that episode, but I do know this: I was blown away. I spent all day thinking about it, unable to get it out of my mind, craving more. Since then, I have watched every aired episode of Buffy, spinoff Angel, and creator Joss Whedon’s other show, Firefly, from the beginning, in order. On May 20, 2003, three months later, the final episode of Buffy aired and my quest is done.”6

Note that this is an example of an entry that cannot be found in the, in fact, incomplete so-called “Full Archives” index of Raw Thought. – as we had already pointed out.

In episode 9 of season 6, entitled “Smashed” (a likely play on this word’s many meanings), Buffy has careless sex with Spike, Willow who has just broken up with Tara loses control over her magic powers, herself; a scene features homophobia.

He then goes into great detail about downloading (parts of) the show and the ethics of downloading:

“It’s arguable whether (...) downloading is illegal, but it’s almost certainly moral.”8

wrote then 16 years old Aaron.

He followed this up with a critic of Hillary Rosen and Jack Valenti (RIAA and MPAA heads respectively):

“But this logic is too complex for Jack Valenti (...). In a Guardian article he’s quoted as saying “There is no business model on this Earth that can compete with free.” Um, hello? Did you ever notice that these shows are available for free already, Mr. Valenti?9

In another such post, he explained his attitudes towards television more generally, all the while re-iterating his love for Buffy:

“For many years I proudly avoided TV. Everything I saw on it was, to a greater or lesser extent, boring and anti-intellectual. This was so pervasive that I became convinced it was a flaw of the medium itself: television (I figured), with its constant commercial breaks and 44 minute cap, had nothing to teach us and was incapable of communicating emotion. Then I discovered Buffy.”

6“Joss Quest” (May 20, 2003).
8Ibid.
9Ibid.
Here was a show that communicated drama, emotion, life lessons, and facts, while doing it with beauty, grace, and humor. I was hooked.  

In another one, Aaron mentioned the wider Buffyverse, in which he includes Miracles (2003-present), executive produced by David Greenwalt (co-creator of Angel with Jess Whedon), and influenced by X-Files.

all three Buffyverse shows (Buffy, Angel, and Miracles) (...) What’s that you say? Miracles doesn’t take place in the Buffyverse? I beg to differ.

He also referenced Joss Whedon’s follow-up show Firefly (2002-2003) and accompanying film Serenity (2005) in a related blog post:

So Buffy ran its course, Angel got canceled, and Firefly saw its untimely demise. But all is not over for Joss Whedon – Firefly is back, this time in the for of the feature film Serenity. Along with the rest of the diehard Joss Whedon fans, I’m on the edge of my seat. By all accounts the film is going to be amazing.

Followed by a review a few days later (as he got to see the movie before everyone else).

Other ‘lost’ early posts dedicated to Buffy and connected shows include:

– “Comments on the Buffy Series Finale (7x22)” (2002)

among others, presumably.

In a memorable closing scene, the heroine Buffy, who had just previously recognized that “we hurt the ones we love the most”, realized – now having gone through her journey and being on the brink of adulthood – that “a couple of things are actually starting to make sense.” (‘Cookie dough’ speech.) Willow is a hacker while Fred is a physicist (Angel).


4.1 General notes

The ‘diplomatic’ turn in this series, breaking with the more action-oriented space adventures of pasts. Led by a memorable intellectual captain (Jean-Luc Picard).
In the 24th century, human pains and needs are gone and mankind has left behind its petty traits of the 20th and 21st centuries.

4.2 Referenced by

David Malan in Harvard’s CS50 ‘Introduction to Computer Science’ : the “enhance” trope, still.

5 Others


![Figure 5: The loneliness of Motoko Kusanagi (he/she/they/*).](image)

As I wandered the various networks
I became self-aware.
My programmers considered it a bug
(...)
I called myself a life-form
References


Description Contrary to uninformed opinions of columnists, Buffy did not mark ‘the birth of TV as art’, but Lynch’s Twin Peaks (1990-1991) did (and TNG before it).


Description Infinitely better, and better informed articles.

mogsam. 2015. “A Philosophical Analysis of Ghost in the Shell (1995)”. The Vault (McMaster University), 20/01.