1995 marked the birth of internet-paranoia films

By Marisa LaScala  •  Jun 8, 2015  •  12:00 AM
While internet usage is an unremarkable part of daily life today, in 1995, at-home internet usage was just starting to become widespread. According to the Pew Research Center, just 14 million American adults used the internet 20 years ago, compared with 87 million last year. As the world became more plugged in, films started to home in on how we connect to the digital world, and 1995 saw a bumper crop: *Virtuosity*, *The Net*, *Hackers*, *GoldenEye*, *Johnny Mnemonic*, and *Strange Days*. Oddly enough, all of them focused not on the excitement of the emerging technology but on dangers of the internet and virtual reality, creating a new subgenre of internet-and-VR-paranoia movies.

Despite its newfound ubiquity, this new brand of paranoia was not a moneymaker in 1995. *GoldenEye* was the only one of these films to hit big, becoming the fourth highest grossing movie of the year. But that has little to do with its depiction of hacking; it was the first James Bond film in more than half a decade and the first to star Pierce Brosnan. Outside of the Bond franchise, *The Net* performed reasonably well, hitting No. 35 on the *Box Office Mojo list for 1995* and grossing more than $50 million. The rest, though, could be considered flops. (Poor *Hackers* didn’t even reach a double-digit gross, making nearly $7.6 million and finishing the year in 130th place.) The best they could hope for was a home-video cult following. The mini-trend in 1995 of internet-related movies didn’t come about because studios were chasing after the lucrative...
technological-paranoia market. Instead, there was just something in the air at the time; internet culture gave filmmakers the heebie-jeebies.

As a result, in these films the internet and virtual reality are pushed to characters who live on the fringes of society: outsiders, criminals both petty and powerful, and people who work in between, dealing in black-market goods.

In *The Net*, Angela Bennett (Sandra Bullock) isn’t a hacker or a criminal, just someone who works in cyber security, but she’s still depicted as person living outside the mainstream. While her technical skills are praised by everyone she works with, she’s still positioned as someone to be pitied, not admired. Bennett is little different from any other sad Bullock character at the beginning of her romantic comedies: She’s home alone ordering pizza for one over the internet with no friends except for a few chat-room buddies. (Even worse, her one sorta-friend in real life is Dennis Miller.) There are a few pixelated avatars, but no other humans enter the frame of movie—they’re just
disembodied voices over the phone—until Bennett agrees to take a look at a weird virus one of her cyber-security friends asks her to investigate, running her afoul of a hacker group that calls itself the Praetorians.

From there, the Praetorians show themselves to be destructive on two levels. Their true aim is to cause nationwide chaos—crashing the New York Stock Exchange, snarling air traffic at LAX, blacking out the lights in Atlanta—ultimately to benefit another cyber-security company. And while those massive events do seem threatening, the scarier danger the Praetorians pose—the power to affect an individual person—is more devastating. Bennett’s life is wiped out from beneath her. Her identity is changed, the deed to her house is transferred to a stranger, the medical records of her allies are tampered with, and she’s given an outstanding criminal record so she can’t go to the police for help. The Praetorians apparently hacked her Blockbuster account, too, because they know the movies she’d rented most often (though it doesn’t really take a hacker to guess that a lonely, single lady would be into *Breakfast At Tiffany’s*). Her story underlines the clear message: There is too much information on the internet, and it makes us all personally vulnerable. Now, that kind of identity theft is such a common narrative device that it’s now cliché, but, at the time, it was as novel as the idea of ordering pizza through the internet in a pre-Seamless world.

*Photo: MovieWeb*

In *GoldenEye*, the villainous Alec Trevelyan (Sean Bean) seeks to exploit the same vulnerability, though for revenge for Mother Russia instead of profit. It’s almost uncanny how much his aims align with the Praetorians’ strategy. “It’s not just erasing bank records,” says Trevelyan to Bond. “It’s everything on every computer in greater London: tax records, the stock market, land registries, criminal records. The United Kingdom will reenter the Stone Age.” He plans on crippling England the same way the Praetorians go after Bennett, by tampering with personal information.

But instead of employing a shadowy collective of baddies, all Trevelyan needs is a single hacker on his side. Boris Grishenko (Alan Cumming) has enough know-how to hijack satellites and set off weapons from outer space. And while Cumming might seem
like an odd casting choice for a computer genius, he totally embodies the emerging stereotype of the ADHD hacker. Instead of acting stoic like the military-trained Trevelyan, Grishenko is wiry and fidgety—so antsy, in fact, that his inability to sit still without clicking a retractable pen accidentally sets off one of Bond’s explosive devices. He dresses in loud shirts, is boorish to his female co-workers, and is obnoxiously boastful, raising his hands and shouting, “I am invincible!” (though that last bit is almost endearing). More henchman than supervillain, Grishenko just might be the first depiction of an internet troll on film. Since the Daniel Craig reboots, Bond villains have gone back to being low-tech mercenaries, terrorists, and the odd former MI-6 agent. The closest thing they’ve come to manipulating the stock market is Le Chiffre’s short-selling of stock in *Casino Royale*, which he then cashes in on through terrorist attacks with nary a hacker in sight. After Grishenko, the world of hackers didn’t prove a glamorous enough foe for 007.

While hackers pose external threats in both *The Net* and *GoldenEye*, the problems the digital world raises in the messy cyber-steampunk *Johnny Mnemonic* are more internal. The film posits that, by the year 2021, people will have installed upgrades in themselves that will turn them into human flash drives; data too sensitive to send over the regular internet could be transmitted through human courier. (Don’t worry—if that seems gross, the fax machine is still in use in 2021.) Here, internet and virtual reality are basically one and the same; they’re distinct in other films, and virtual reality has pretty much ceased to be an ongoing concern today. In any case, this method of data transfer, while profitable if the courier feels comfortable working with shady people, is not without its costs. For his “one last job” before he’s out of the business, Johnny Mnemonic (Keanu Reeves) overloads his system, taking on more information than he has memory. (Get it? Memory? If that wasn’t clear enough, Johnny also had to get rid of some cherished childhood memories to make room for his last big score.) He spends the rest of the movie suffering from “synaptic seepage,” with the information leaking out of its storage center and causing him migraine-like pain. His virtual data is damaging his physical, real-life body.

Immediately, both the yakuza and a Jesus-like bounty hunter (Dolph Lundgren) start
coming after the information in Johnny’s brain. It turns out that the package he’s carrying is the cure for 2021’s big pandemic, Nerve Attenuation Syndrome, which causes seizures and is ultimately fatal. What causes it? An unjustly discredited doctor, Spider, played by a bespectacled Henry Rollins, lays it out: “It’s information overload,” he tells Johnny. “We have all of this shit because we can’t live life without it.” Exposure to the radiation from all the electronics causes a worldwide plague, but people are just too addicted to get rid of it. In its convoluted way, Johnny Mnemonic is a warning that one day we’ll all be too reliant on the internet for our own well-being. It’s a theme that still resonates throughout popular culture, though usually without any priestlike bounty hunters delivering the message.

Photo: Eonline.com

Virtual reality is also an addiction in Kathryn Bigelow’s underrated Strange Days. Set at the turn of the millennium (just four years away from the film’s release), the movie presents a world in turmoil: Fires, riots, and looming doomsday fears are the film’s constant, often-unremarked-upon backdrop. Yet even in a world in dire need of escapism, virtual reality has been outlawed. That makes former cop Lenny Nero (Ralph Fiennes, with a level of smarm and haircut that suggests today’s Bradley Cooper), a black-market VR dealer. “This is not like TV only better,” he explains to a potential client. “This is life—straight from the cerebral cortex.” Although it’s a passive medium —users can only watch and feel, and not participate or interact with others—it’s the good stuff.

Nero specializes in what he calls “street life,” or VR clips that feature dark and gritty sex, violence, and crime. What he chooses to watch himself, though, is altogether more wholesome: sunny clips of roller-skating with his ex-wife (Juliette Lewis) that, fine, also end in sex. But whether VR is used to live vicariously through others or recall happier days, it’s incredibly addictive. Characters talk about getting “strung out” and doing “too much playback,” which makes them turn violent and paranoid. Escapism turns out to be a dangerous drug.

Eventually, Nero is sent a “black jack,” or a snuff clip of a murder, and he’s compelled
to solve it. In a twist on the old trope where a cop has to put himself in killer’s shoes, Nero has to actually live out a killer’s life, feeling his sense of elation as he claims a victim. For Nero, living through those moments is sickening and torturous. (In the course of his investigation, Nero finds a clip showing a police killing of an unarmed black man that feels oddly prescient today.) In *Strange Days*, VR isn’t just corrosive to the body; it’s corrupting to the soul as well.

Like *Strange Days*, the head-scratching *Virtuosity* uses virtual reality to get into the mind of a killer. In the film, a scientist creates his own digital version of a bastard son of a thousand maniacs—a computer simulation that amalgamates the personalities of more than 200 serial killers, affectionately called SID 6.7 (a playing-to-the-back-row Russell Crowe). It sounds like a terrible idea, and it is, but some lip service is given to how it can be used to help train law enforcement. By the opening of the film, however, it’s still too risky, and only convicts like former lieutenant Parker Barnes (Denzel Washington) are allowed to test out the virtual-reality system. His first felon-partner, though, doesn’t fare so well: He gets fried in the VR world, melting his neurons and dying in the real one. Even when safely ensconced in its own virtual environment, *Virtuosity* worries that the internet can jump out and kill you.

It does so more and more literally as the movie goes on. The only other personality program shown in the movie is a sex-charged female that SID 6.7 manipulates to escape his digital confines. He uses her as a distraction to somehow get ahold of an android body and goes on a crime spree in real life, with all 200 personalities—including, sigh, the one that killed Barnes’ family—in tow. *Virtuosity*’s vision of virtual reality is full of fear and panic: The internet is a repository for base human instincts—sex and murder—and we will somehow lose control of it, and it’ll be fatal.

The only thing worse than SID 6.7’s murderousness is his desire to broadcast his crimes, using poor Barnes as his audience until he eventually takes over the airwaves. The internet users of 1995 weren’t painted as the Instagramming narcissists that they are today, but SID 6.7 previsions a vain streak inside us that nothing matters unless someone else is watching.
Not every 1995 internet-paranoia movie is so fatalistic. *Hackers* does show the dangers of being plugged into the grid; as in the other films, the internet is used to mess with personal data, conjuring arrest warrants out of thin air, listing living employees as deceased on their company payrolls, and inserting phone numbers into embarrassing back-page personal ads. But for the most part, the hackers in *Hackers*—a band of them led by tech geeks with handles like Crash Override (Jonny Lee Miller) and Acid Burn (Angelina Jolie)—are seen as mostly harmless. The majority of their exploits are really just hijinx, like changing the programming on a local TV station. *Hackers* is one of the few 1995 films that shows internet culture as an offshoot of youth culture; as a result, it also looks the most rooted in the 1990s when watched today.

If youth culture gives us the heroes of the film, it's an older hacker, who goes by the handle The Plague (Fisher Stevens), who represents the true danger. It's not his technical skills that make him a villain; it's the fact that he sells them out to a major corporation, one that controls oil tankers, then tries to exploit them for personal gain. He creates a virus that's one of the only white-collar techie crimes available to filmmakers: the *Superman III/Office Space* “salami-slice” virus that rounds up pennies on a large number of transactions and puts them into a personal account. The Plague doesn’t believe in one of the basic tenants of the “Hacker Manifesto,” which is that all information should be free. And, as a final insult, he schemes to frame the hackers with purer ideals for the crime. (He also skateboards—a sure sign of villainy. *Hackers* came out during the brief window of time when rollerblading was the dominant mode of conveyance for true believers.)

But if hacking can cause problems like the ones The Plague creates, the film shows that it can also present a solution. To save our heroes, the hacker community across the world bands together and uses its powers for good, exposing the villain’s plot, clearing the names of the accused, and holding true to the ideals of making information free. It’s the one ray of hope in a year of films very, very scared of the internet.

The internet and virtual-reality films of 1995 also show the emergence of a problem
that filmmakers are still struggling with today: how to represent a digital world on screen. You can see early attempts to create some sort of cohesive visual language to stand in for the internet. Status bars, for example, are used in more than one of these movies as a quick way to ratchet up tension; the heroes have to wait until the bar reaches 100 percent before they can flee to safety. It’s a cheap thrill, and one we sadly haven’t outgrown yet.

Mostly, though, attempts to create a new look for the internet are hideous, trafficking in cheesy, psychedelic swirls of numbers and symbols and environments that look like video games circa Nintendo 64. *Hackers* and *Virtuosity* both fall victim to the allure of pop-art colors: *Virtuosity* makes is virtual exit quickly, bringing SID 6.7 into the real world, but *Hackers* often goes into the “architecture” of circuitry, with skyscrapers of squares and rectangles standing in for the systems they’re trying to break into, and dreamy-looking equations standing in for the data they want to collect. Today, it looks dated.

You’d think that visual artist Robert Longo, who directed *Johnny Mnemonic*, would have better luck, but his vision of the internet looks like 3-D screensavers from Windows NT; the big climax shows a CG cartoon version of Johnny fighting viruses as if
he were playing a video game, all while Ice-T narrates. Four years later, *The Matrix* would look much more slick and stylish using nothing but monochromatic green characters scrolling across the screen. (*Johnny Mnemonic*’s shortcomings is a major reason the *The Matrix* was such a surprise hit.)

*GoldenEye* and *The Net* mostly avoid depicting the internet altogether, but that comes with its own set of problems. In *The Net*, where hacking is so crucial to the plot, Bennett has to spend some time at computer terminals. Here, the movie resorts to lackluster shots of Bullock furiously typing while talking to herself, explaining to herself what she’s looking at while a series of static web pages flash in front of her eyes. *Strange Days* acquits itself the best. Its virtual reality looks just like regular film footage—all conveyed in point-of-view shots for a more first-person perspective—that might have a tint to it if the recorder were colorblind. It’s simultaneously the most engrossing depiction of the virtual world and the one that looks most contemporary today.

It’d be easy to think that, in the past 20 years, filmmakers would have solved the problem of tackling the internet on screen, but they’re still struggling. Status bars still stand in as tension-mounting devices (as in *The Amazing Spider-Man 2*, which had an eye-roll-inducing race between a status bar and a plane crash). There are still visualizations of the internet as a psychedelic-colored version of the real world (though *Futurama* at least had some fun with this idea). And there are still shots that zoom along wires and down into circuits, like this year’s *Blackhat* (though Chris Hemsworth is a long way from Alan Cumming—good job, hackers). *Blackhat*, like its 1995 brethren, was a huge flop early in 2015 (even fewer people saw it than saw *Hackers* in its initial release). Even after two decades, during which the web has become fully integrated into our daily lives, the digital-paranoia subgenre still has room to mature.

**FILED UNDER:** Film, 1995 Week, Hackers, The Net, Virtuosity, GoldenEye, Johnny Mnemonic, Strange Days