

The Eighty Sixth issue of a sort-of letter substitute, fanzine kinda thing. Maybe weekly, maybe not. Available from:

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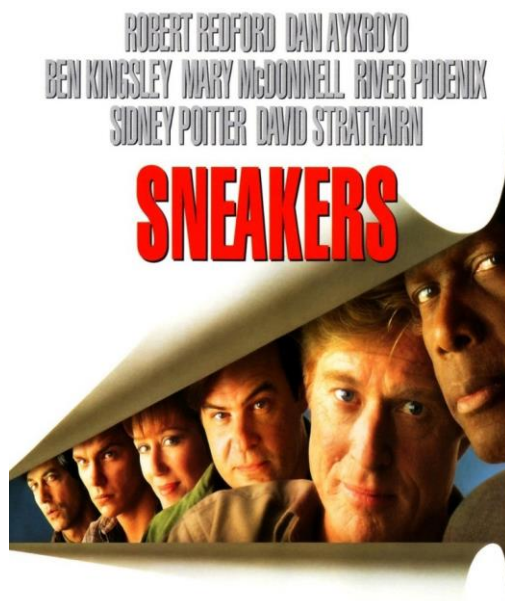
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Available via the World Wide Web, or as an email attachment. I recommend the Portable Document Format (pdf) or, if you insist, a word or Rich Text Format (rtf) can also be emailed or posted. Get in touch and we'll sort something out. Another burst of fannish energy from Tommy, proof read by Eugene Doherty. Dated, already, 25th July 2021

Sneakers & Hackers.

I have a legendary poor taste in movies – my 'Bakebook'¹ feed recently had me extolling Gravity to Mike Meara and people jumped in saying what a terrible movie it was. I just don't get it. I saw it at the cinema on a really big screen – and it was amazing! Rich Coad stated that the movie had no concept of orbital mechanics etc. Do I care? This is popcorn movie-making at its best -a huge spectacle, some decent-ish acting and edge of the set pace. I always take issue with Eugene Doherty when, literally on the way out of the movie theatre auditorium (not even the building!), he starts to point out technical/historical/factually inaccurate elements of a movie which then either distracts from the enjoyment or, in some cases, ruins the whole movie. Doesn't matter whether he's right or wrong² – it's the nerdish obsession to dissect.

It's a movie folks!



Two movies that capably fit into these arguments are the subject of this missive. I have been known to wax lyrical about trainers – athletic not fashion - but this subject is a whole different kettle of fish. Two movies about the same subject, coming from the same premise but using completely different approaches. Let me tell you why I *still* really enjoy them and they both still fascinate me.

Context is all however. I'm not a hacker or sneaker and although I have reverse engineered a virus that attacked jpegs when I was working for the NI Film Commission – with its huge database of film location photographs (you get it...) – I was never tempted to hijack it or even dig a little to see what I could do. Not too sure why that was – my innate risk aversion I suppose. But it was a classic example of phishing emails from back in the day.

So, what is it about this world that fascinates me? It's pure fantasyland, Matrix type stuff – secret masters of the universe who can do anything with computers – it's entertaining and fun.

Sneakers is the more 'mature' of these movies – has an older cast,

with some decent actors and generally good performances. The script and plot aren't great but it progresses at pace and is lively, with enough jokes and nerdy computer references to keep you hooked. What I really liked about this (and even Hackers gets this...) is that the methods used are fairly realistic.

¹ Might also be useful for Corflu in 2023... https://www.inyourpocket.com/belfast/How-till-spake-Norn-Iron-A-guide-to-local-phrases_70619f

² He's right about Alien: Prometheus tho...

The opening flashback in Sneakers had the college students doing stuff that in the 60s you probably could do (with a bit of a stretch). The social engineering used to get IDs is classic Honey Trap stuff and even some of the vaguely Mission Impossible heist type stuff had a whiff of the plausibility about it. So, there was enough there to get me hooked but not enough to go all over board on the Eugenes... The ending was a bit crap to be honest, Carl being offered anything in the world, and all he asks for is the female NSA agent's phone number. I know it was meant to be sweet, but it was just a bit too cloying. Better was this piece of conversation:

Whistler: I want peace on earth and good will toward men.
Abbot: We are the United States Government! We don't do that sort of thing.

Hackers is much more fun – but a lot less serious. There's a real sense of this being a video game almost or a Role-Playing Game. It is more to do with the young person getting into computers – being socially distant, sitting alone at their screen and just messing around to see what they could find. This, I'm sure, has resonance with a lot of Sci-Fi fans – maybe substituting books, RPGs, comics or something else for computers. Looking back on the movie, I'm amazed the number of methodologies used in 1995 to hack computers are still relevant: dumpster diving, shoulder surfing, social engineering, appealing to base instincts. It really is a 101 in hacking techniques – which it shares with Sneakers.

Where it goes spectacularly wrong – and they really should have known better – is using state of the art equipment for the period; which is now just silly. Extolling the virtue of a 28k Baud modem dialup is just excruciating – that's SF writing 101 there dudes... Calling the big mainframe a Gibson is a nice touch – but the way it is done is very clumsy and it kinda just sticks out poorly. There is a certain lack of detail on the characters as well – though this is not about them to be honest – and the bad guys (including the FBI) are just terribly done. I mean really gross characters straight out of a bad comic book. Sloppy really.

But I still love the movie – and not just because of Angelina Jolie. It's fun, has a cracking soundtrack, a few neat ideas and a rudimentary insight into what hacking is (was?) all about – “Hack the Planet” seems to echo these days with Extinction Rebellion.

Both movies aren't great, I'll grant you that, but there's enough in there for me to give them a bye ball on the failures to just enjoy the romp. Suggest you may want to check your brain and enjoy the ride too.

Lots of great LoCs on the last couple of issues which I'll round up to single issue next time round – which won't be long.

Also looking to get a bigger one-off done for Corflu this year. You are coming? <https://corflu.org/>

