

Zero Days

“Zero Days” is a documentary thriller about the wacky world of cyber war. The title refers to certain kinds of unguarded points of entry—or flaws—within computer systems that can make them vulnerable. In this instance, the film traces the story of the infamous Stuxnet, a piece of self-replicating computer malware--known as a "worm" for its ability to burrow from computer to computer on its own.

Noted documentarian Alex Gibney examines the background to this virus (discovered in 2010) and speculates, based on several sources, that the U.S. and Israel intelligence secretly confected Stuxnet to specifically target a key part of a nuclear facility in Natanz, Iran, but that the virus ultimately spread well beyond its intended target to threaten other systems.

“Zero Days” describes the discovery of the mysterious Stuxnet through the testimony, among others, of two U.S.-based cyber investigators, Eric Chien and Liam O'Murchu, who explain in detail (often using blowups of computer code) how they tried to trace the origin of the malware to determine its real targets. Their inquiries ultimately reveal a web of intrigue involving the CIA, the NSA, the US Military's new Cyber Command, Israel's Mossad, and other operations both here and abroad.

Among talking heads discussing Stuxnet are noted journalistic sources such as David Sanger, national security correspondent for the *New York Times*, who is willing to speculate on who created the virus, and interlocutors like Gen. Michael Hayden, ex-Director of both the NSA and the CIA, who still isn't willing to admit that Stuxnet even existed.

The most striking figure discussing the malware is a tough, forthright blonde woman whose image and voice are disguised; she identifies herself as a National Security Agency operative and confidently confirms the US-Israeli connection and its Iranian target (which, in turns out, was never really damaged by Stuxnet). Her actual identity provides a neat surprise at the end.

Gibney, very much an advocacy filmmaker (witness “Taxi to the Dark Side” and “Going Clear”) makes the point that there is too much secrecy in matters of cyber warfare, and that intelligence authorities have to fess up so we can all live in a more predictable, safer world. He highlights this in an early sequence where he has a whole string of spokespersons deny, deny, deny that they know anything about Stuxnet, a neat parody of the serious clam-up.

Gibney probably does have a point about opening up on cyber matters—though he finally belabors it—and he could have presented this important, yet very murky, topic in a more coherent manner to filmgoers. Still, with his film's compilation of the potential catastrophes lurking in the ether, he can certainly scare the bejesus out of us. (*The film is currently not rated and runs 116 mins.*)

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