

MOVIE Review

Rewind: Tron
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Beautiful in its abstract and archaic view of a computerized world, “Tron” is an amazing film that still resonates today. Way back in 1982, computers were not commonplace as they are now. Very few could even imagine what went on inside those electrical impulses or behind those ones and zeroes. So, it was a truly wonderful experience when “Tron” breathed life and imagination into technology, giving a face to that which lacked one.

The plot is a basic good vs. evil story with a technological bent. Kevin Flynn, played by Jeff Bridges (“Iron Man,” “The Big Lebowski”), is a video game programmer with a chip on his shoulder. He created several extremely popular games for the ENCOM Corporation, but never got any credit for his accomplishments. An executive named Ed Dillinger stole the game ideas and then fired Flynn.

Dillinger also created the Master Control Program (MCP), a megalomaniacal computer program that rules ENCOM’s mainframe. Over time, the MCP has become sentient, and routinely hacks into other computer networks—kidnapping programs and assimilating them to make itself more powerful. It hacks into the Pentagon and attempts to take over all of the computer networks in the world. When Dillinger tries to intervene, the MCP turns on its creator, blackmailing him.

With the help of his two former coworkers Alan (Bruce Boxleitner from “Babylon 5”) and Lori, Flynn sneaks into ENCOM and tries to break into their network. Flynn believes he can recover the information he needs to prove that he created ENCOM’s popular, money-making video games. The MCP realizes what Flynn is up to, and “zaps” him with a laser that takes real world objects and digitizes them into the computer world. Heady stuff for 1982.

Flynn wakes up inside the computerized world. The MCP sentences Flynn to die by forcing him to play as a character in video games—ironically, the very games that Flynn programmed. The hero soon meets the titular character, Tron (also portrayed by Boxleitner), and the two set forth to take down the MCP.

Though interesting and straightforward, the story takes a back seat to the visuals. “Tron” utilized the most cutting-edge computer animation techniques available when it was produced in 1981, and combined that with backlit animation and live action. These three very different techniques seamlessly blend into a vision of a surreal, electronic world. Geometric shapes and gridded, CAD-like surfaces make up the haunting digital landscapes. No textures here—just solid-colored polygons in a vast, endless world.

The interior settings in the world of “Tron” are just as stunning as the exteriors. Etched lines glow vividly in primary hues. It is like a cross between a circuit board and a nighttime street scene in “Blade Runner.”

Then consider the Light Cycles—perhaps the most popular scene in “Tron”. Brightly colored and blazing fast, the Light Cycles make perfect 90-degree turns and trail a solid wall of color behind them. Only in a movie—or in a video game—could something this cool ever happen.

The film also anthropomorphized computer programs, giving a touch of humanity and personality to those anonymous little lines of code that toil away. Like humans who believe in and worship a higher power, programs in turn swear allegiance to the “Users”—those who create and use the programs. All programs take pride and enjoy what they do. Just ask the helpful actuaries program named Ram, who like Flynn is forced to battle for his life as a video game character. Speaking of which, all programs fear death, or “derezzing” as it is known in the “Tron”-verse.

“Tron” is fantastic because it came out at a time when computers were still a big unknown. Other than computer scientists, who really knew what AI or a GUI was? Back then, not many. Even though we know much more about that today, “Tron” is still awesome for the way it creatively visualizes computer technology. And while the tech has improved exponentially since, few films have eclipsed “Tron” for its vision of the digital world. ≈

