CTRL

By

Sandro Quattrini

FADE IN:

Colours swirl towards the center of the screen. A cacophony of human-made and machine-like sounds dash in and out of the soundscape, aimlessly trying to overpower the quick, repetitive rising and falling notes that dance along the out-of-control, spiraling shapes which gravitate around a point of light at the heart of this chaotic picture.

There are too many stimuli to keep up with, and the image begins to distort, flashing error messages, but the madness persists. More sounds join in, the music grows louder, the scene is about to detonate, until-

                                                        CUT TO:

INT. CONSCIOUS

Out of a bottomless pit we rise. Otto's pupil, by now the size of a billiard ball, scans the world around him. Neurons flicker in and out of the dark void, like shy fireflies against a starless night sky. Otto's deep breathing and slow heartbeat echo throughout the chamber. He can still hear the NHB - the Neural Highway Browser - buzzing uninterruptedly outside his head. The one he is sitting on is silent, for it is only a projection of the real machine and is used as an interface to explore the contents of his conscious.

Otto sits up on the NHB slowly, as though he were swimming in gelatin. He still hasn't gotten accustomed to entering his own conscious. As he continues repeatedly to sweep the room with his eyes, with each blink and each pass he slowly comes to his senses.

In front of him stands a blurry figure. Otto's heart drops. How could there be somebody else but him inside his own head? After many squints and eye-rubbings, the figure becomes clear and Otto's panic is replaced by fear and confusion. He looks at himself - at the Otto standing before him.

Otto reaches for the "EJECT" button on the NHB, but before he can press it the doppelganger grasps his wrist and pushes him back against the machine's seat, trying to immobilize him, trying prevent him from leaving and disappearing with the NHB -
 the only connection between his conscious and the physical world.

Otto strikes his opponent with a headbutt powerful enough to free himself *from* himself. Before the doppelganger can stop him, Otto smashes the EJECT button and vanishes out of his conscious with the NHB.

                                                CUT TO:

INT. ROOM - UNKNOWN

By all accounts, the situation seems to be normal. The NHB
sits still, no strange error messages or buzzes at all, save
for the status screen still displaying the message "IN
CONSCIOUS" distortedly.

Otto pulls out the large black cable connecting him to the
NHB from his nape and jumps off of the machine. Unable to get
away from the intruder in his head, he hurriedly reaches for
a piece of paper and scratches some words crudely onto it.

                    OTTO (TEXT)
          YOU GOT HACKED. BACKUP AND GET
          ANTIVIRUS.

He signs the note and tapes it next to the NHB's dashboard.
The ergonomic, leather cushion creaks as he sits down on it
and plugs the thick cord onto his nape.

He browses to the "DELETE AND RESTORE" tab and selects
"DELETE 1 HOUR".

                    NHB (TEXT)
          Are you sure you want to delete the
          last hour from your conscious?

Otto selects "YES".

                    NHB (TEXT)
          Warning: system detected in conscious.
          Make sure you backup your unsaved
          progress before deleting and
          restoring.

Otto shakes his head lightly and selects "NEXT". A ten-second
timer and an abort button appear on screen while Otto leans
back on the machine. The timer beeps with each second.

Upon reaching zero, Otto's body goes limp. The NHB buzzes
ever-so-slightly louder than usual for a few seconds before
returning to its nearly-imperceivable state. Otto wakes just
as he does every morning, clear, fresh and oblivious.

Quickly, worry takes hold of him. Why would he wake aboard
the NHB? He stares at the machine and notices the dashboard
displaying the message:

                         NHB (TEXT)
              Restoration successful. Username:
              Otto. Date: 25/11/52.

The message is followed by a prompt asking whether he needs
help getting up to speed and the options "I know who I am"
and "About me".

Otto sees the note next to the dashboard and grabs it with a
hesitant hand. He is taken by a sense of impending doom,
failure, betrayal and anger. The note is balled up and thrown
on the floor, where it joins dozens of other balled-up pieces
of paper.

In the internet browser, he writes on the search bar: "Have I
been hacked". Then: "Has my consciousness been hacked?" He
follows those queries with variations of "How to protect
conscious" and "Consciousness antivirus", as he is jumps from
website to website detailing the risks of using NHBs.

Finally, he comes across multiple users discussing antivirus
softwares on a forum. One of the comments with most points is
a link redirecting to the website of a software called Brain
Bastion, which automatically plays a video advertisement of
their product.

                         SELLER
                    (Enthusiastically)
              Telephones, computers, smartphones,
              all of these inventions rocked the
              world. Neural Highway Browsers are the
              next big hit of our generation, but
              using these machines carries its own
              risk. Just like computers, you have to
              protect yourself from pesky intruders
              trying to hack into your device and
              maybe even
                    (With dramatic depth, the words
                    appearing on screen)
              get inside your head!

A visually distressed person sitting on an NHB has cartoonish
robbers disguised as their victim enter his head. They begin
to thrash the place while implanting data into and stealing
information from their victim. The visuals are crude but to
the point.

                         SELLER
                    (continuing)
              Brain Bastion offers you the
              possibility of downloading super

                    advanced programs into your brain,
                    which will then protect you with all
                    their might from any outside threat!
                    Thieves, scammers, even imposters! No
                    one can get through these iron-clad
                    defenses!

A mighty terminator-like robot shows up to the rescue of the
person aboard the NHB. The robbers brandish a pocket knife at
the sight of the antivirus and stab it. The robot, impervious
to the thieves' blade, boots them out of the conscious with a
strong kick to their behinds. The victim is now as happy as a
clam.

                         VICTIM
                    (To the robot)
               Thank you Brain Bastion!

                         ROBOT
                    (Laughing, with the seller's voice)
               You're welcome!
                    (Back to the audience)
               Use Brain Bastion today and stay safe!

The video stops.

Otto checks out the AIs offered to him, but isn't sold on the
idea of downloading pre-programmed softwares from the
internet into his conscious. Wherever he looks at, the words
"Virus", "Scam" and "Malware" pop up in his head. He takes a
pensive look at one of the torn, motivational cat posters
still hanging from two nails on the wall.

                         POSTER (TEXT)
               If you want something done right, you
               gotta do it yourself.

He narrows his eyes. The cat's wisdom has pierced into him.

One of the free options being offered to Otto is a blank AI
onto which users can upload their own programs. Considering
the AI is but a husk of itself, with no pre-programmed
purpose, it is the safest option to opt for. Otto connects a
small white cable emerging from the dashboard into his nape
and turns a dial 180 degrees, from "out" to "in". He
downloads the blank AI then disconnects from the NHB.

The thick, black cable he uses to enter his conscious lies
motionless on the floor, but Otto is on his guard, as though
he were about to take hold of a venomous snake. He strangles
the viper then has it bite his nape.

                                        CUT TO:

INT. CONSCIOUS

A grey, faceless AI stands immobile in front of the NHB.
Without wasting any time, Otto gets off the Neural Highway
Browser and sits the robot on the machine, taking extra care
as to not damage his future protector.

He plugs the black cable onto the port on the AI's nape and,
standing right beside it, browses to the DATA tab. There is
only a 1.1-petabyte file named "Otto" inside. He drags the
file to the AI's folder, which it begins to copy.

                                        CUT TO:

INT. AI

File names flood the screen. Ranging from descriptions of
Otto's physique to the tiniest details of his behavior.

INT. CONSCIOUS

As Otto eagerly waits for the AI to finish copying everything
about him, the machine is enveloped in graphics making it
look exactly like Otto.

INT. AI

As the last files are copied, images begin to appear, but are
too distorted to be described. They blend and are reshaped,
mixing colours, lights and shadows to create stranger
patterns than the last. We hear a baby cry and people
talking, then beeps and boops of all tones and notes. The
colours converge on a single point at the center of the
screen, where they fall as if they were bucketloads of paint
going down a drain. The computer perseveres despite bearing a
great load. The image distorts and the sounds combine into
one continuous crash, like a jammed drill. The AI goes dark.

INT. CONSCIOUS

The AI, now virtually identical to Otto, stares wide-eyed at
the deep void surrounding it. Its eyes rest on Otto, who
approaches it to help it stand up. Startled, the AI aims for
the EJECT button on the NHB, but Otto grasps its wrist.
Pushed back against the machine's seat, the AI headbutts
Otto, who stumbles backward. Without skipping a beat, the new
Otto hits the EJECT button and disappears aboard the NHB.

Alone inside his stolen conscious. Otto becomes statuesque.

Shocked and horrified, he begins to hyperventilate as the hard truth hits him. He hears footsteps, a sheet of paper crinkling, a marker scratching, all muted, all happening outside what used to be *his* head. Keyboard buttons being pressed and a short warning jingle. The last thing he hears are ten beeps and a slightly-louder-than-usual buzz from the NHB.

                                        CUT TO BLACK

                THE END