VR.5: Merely Filler or Genuine Substance?

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On March 10th, Fox aired the new series, VR.5. The show was to replace M.A.N.T.I.S., one of the lowest rated shows last season. Previous to M.A.N.T.I.S. was The Adventures of Brisco County Jr., an equally low-rated program. The X-Files, which recently won a Golden Globe for the best dramatic series, follows the seemingly cursed time slot of VR.5.

VR.5 stars Lori Singer (Short Cuts, Fame, Footloose) as Sydney Bloom, an electric worker who discovers a way to tap into the sub-conscious, using virtual reality. Michael Easton (Days of Our Lives) plays Sydney's good friend, Duncan, a goofy character fond of metaphysical and spirituality. Sydney also meets Dr. Tom Morgan (Anthony Stewart Head), "Virtual Philosopher," who will probably serve as some kind of a mentor to Bloom.

From the first opening minutes of the show, Sydney Bloom is introduced to the computer, albeit primitive, which is brought home by her father. Following a visit from a shady man, Sydney's father takes Sydney and her twin sister out for a drive, supposedly for ice cream. In a misfortunate accident, the car tumbles into water, resulting in the death of Sydney's twin sister and father. This traumatic experience periodically returns to haunt Sydney. To make matters worse, Sydney's mother overdoses on pills, resulting in some kind of permanent damage.

Some other important scenes from the first episode: Sydney's first connection to some kind of sub-conscious realm (with her landlord) and her initial discovery of the deeply embedded secrets of a homicidal fellow worker. In the second episode, a little more about 'The Committee,' as referred to by Dr. Morgan, is revealed. Some glaring similarities between VR.5 and The X-Files are beginning to surface, such as internal conspiracy, and childhood trauma (Fox Mulder and Sydney Bloom both lose siblings very young).

The plot in itself has already improved with the airing of the second episode, but there is a lot of room for improvement. One glaring problem is the near patronizing dialogue; Lori Singer delivers the lines as though she were talking to an eight-year-old. Apparently Fox is trying to cater to a less knowledgeable crowd, but perhaps that is not a bad thing. Media has beaten virtual reality into the ground, along with catch words and phrases such as multimedia, interactive, cyber [fill in the blank], and the one I personally hate with a passion, Information Super Highway. These words continue to fester in the pop media's perception, which is a shame, because some possess a great deal of meaning to many people. The most ridiculous concept is how Sydney makes her connection to her semi-conscious. If my eyes aren't fooling me, all Sydney is doing is making a voice connection, moving the receiver over to the dataline, putting on the glasses, and then the nice little computer animation pulls her in. It is my greatest fear that VR.5 will feed this kind of garbage to the television/media manipulated world.

Without getting too sidetracked, there were some very intriguing dimensions to VR.5. For example, VR.5 pertains to the fifth level of interaction, with one being monitors (or the television), two keyboards and mouse, and so on. The 'trips' which Sydney experiences are shot in black and white, and then tediously recolored frame-by-frame, with graphics computers. The result is a very disorienting, surreal, and 'trippy' scene. Not only that, but within her 'trips' are many symbols to baffle Sydney and viewers alike. During the show, these symbols become integral in solving the actual problems within the real world. For example, the Tree of Life becomes a metaphor for a boy's desire to return home, and until Sydney realizes this, the episode is not resolved.

In general, the acting could be better. However, even The X-Files was not exactly blessed with stellar acting in the early beginnings, even with film actor, David Duchovny, in a leading role. Lori Singer will certainly improve, as she learns what drives her character. A potential pitfall for this show is if the early childhood experiences of Sydney Bloom do not make a strong tie to the present day storyline. Too often, writers try to establish a character's background without making the experience a significant part of the character. In the two episodes which have been aired, the death of Sydney's father and sister have not been particularly integral to the continuity of the storyline. Again, the writers have a lot of room for improvement. The show is on Fridays at 8 p.m., preceding The X-Files.

Hard Rock

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Hard Rock Cafe, the Hard Rock Hotel promises to promote environmental responsibility. Gamblers will have the chance to "Save the Planet" by playing designated slot machines. Proceeds from the machines, which feature an overhead Tote Board that computes the number of remaining rainforest acres, will go to the Natural Resources Defense Council, Conservation International and Sting's Rainforest Foundation.

The hotel will also recycle all glass, aluminum, steel, paper and cardboard products used on the premises. The housekeeping staff will use only non-toxic, biodegradable cleaning products. Leftover food, clothing and furniture will be donated to the needy. Water-saving measures are also being undertaken by the hotel to preserve our natural resources.

So if you're looking for the stereotypical Las Vegas experience—complete with bad lounge singers, obnoxious casinos and bad buffets—stick to the Strip. But if you're looking for a fresh night out doing the casino thing—"Vegas For A New Generation"—check out the Hard Rock. Who knows, you may even see Superman there.

Alternative Rock artist Sheryl Crow helped christen The Joint, the hotel music club.