Halting State a Good Read for Security Geeks

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I’ve been reading science fiction since 1957. There was a phase in my childhood when I devoured old-school science fiction stories now referred to as being from The Golden Age (<http://www.nvcc.edu/home/ataormina/scifi/history/goldenage.htm>). Early science fiction often posited what we would now think of as fantasy: unexplained invisibility, time travel full of unresolved paradoxes, and extra-terrestrial monsters with an inexplicable attraction to human females. However, from about 1939 through about 1950, Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) graduate John W. Campbell Jr. (<http://www.space.com/sciencefiction/campbell_991130.html>) established a new trend in science fiction in his magazine _Astounding_ (which later became _Analog Science Fiction and Fact_ (<http://www.analogsf.com/>)). Authors such as Isaac Asimov, A. E. Van Vogt, and Robert Heinlein and dozens more responded to Campbell’s emphasis on using real science as the environment for their stories.

I have just finished reading a novel called _Halting State_ (<http://www.amazon.com/Halting-State-Charles-Stross/dp/0441014984/ref=pd_bbs_sr_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1200697317&sr=8-1>) by Charles Stross (<http://www.antipope.org/charlie/index.html>) that strikes me as a significant event for security specialists in the development of today’s science fiction. Much as William Gibson’s (<http://www.williamgibsonbooks.com/>)_Neuromancer_ (<http://www.amazon.com/Neuromancer-William-Gibson/dp/0441012035/ref=pd_bbs_sr_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1200697509&sr=8-1>) is credited with popularizing the notion of cyberspace in establishing the cyberpunk style, I think _Halting State_ may be the first book that speaks directly to the culture of information security specialists.

Stross has been writing science fiction since he was six years old. After studying pharmacy, “he went back to university in Bradford and did a postgraduate degree in computer science. After several tech sector jobs in the hinterlands around London, initially in graphics supercomputing and then in the UNIX industry, he emigrated to Edinburgh, Scotland, and switched track into web consultancy and a subsequent dot com death march.” (<http://www.antipope.org/charlie/fiction/faq.html>) He went on to become a technical journalist specializing in Linux and freeware. “He now lives in Edinburgh, Scotland, with his wife Feorag, a couple of cats, several thousand books, and an ever-changing herd of obsolete computers.”

I do not want to spoil the twists and turns of the story, so all I’m going to say is that Stross captures experiences, concepts, terminology, and attitudes to which I strongly related given that I’ve been programming computers since 1965. He uses an interesting technique of narration: every chapter is written in the vocative (“You do this…”) from the point of view of a different character. The characters are interesting and simpatico: I like them. I like their Scottish accents (“Whae did ye get _that_?”), their profanity and their running internal monologues as they comment on each other and on the outrageous situations that evolve from a bank heist carried out by orcs and a dragon in a massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMPORG) <
Believe me, it gets weirder, but weird is good when you are thinking about information operations involving virtual reality.

If you like science fiction, I think you will enjoy this book and that it will make you think about the direction of security as VR (virtual reality) increasingly intersects RL (Real Life).

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