

Phantom Box

Written By

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WGA/W Reg.

FADE IN:

MONTAGE - VARIOUS

1. News anchor broadcasts flash: year is 2020, tech companies scramble for relevance, workers scramble for employment. XPERIENCE is a rising company set to burst.
2. EDWARD NADER, 45, a cofounder at Xperience, is seated at a 60 Minutes-esque interview. Nader has neat, black hair. He adjusts his steel-gray tie before composing himself.

NADER

-this whole project- no the whole concept of a true Artificial Intelligence is breathtaking, mindblowing, really. The potential it holds- what it says about us, about conscious thought, it's-

INTERVIEW CONDUCTOR

That's all well and good, but- and, pardon me for interrupting- based on the serious implications of a rampant AI, do you seriously condone a more widespread application of it?

END MONTAGE

INT. DIXON'S STATION, XPERIENCE HQ, DAY, 2035.

The Xperience floor is still, stations of high-powered hardware lie vacant. DIXON LEDECKEY, 28, is the lone worker at his computer.

NADER (V.O.)

I acknowledge its risks, yes, but I envision the use of AI more in its application as subjects of case studies....

He is a fit man with a crisp, corporate haircut, tensely pumping out lines of code on his keyboard.

NADER (V.O.)

These will be... alien minds we're talking about here.

He briefly glances up at the CAMERA trained on his station.

Behind him: a peanut gallery of truant Xperience employees intently watching. Dixon cracks a quick smile, punches in his final keys and spins around to face his crowd.

The workers cheer and applaud him, he uploads his work onto a thin, glass, handheld DEVICE via a tap to the monitor.

He joins the workers in their excitement.

INT. SEPULCHER, EXPERIENCE HQ, DAY.

A chest-tall pedestal stands alone surrounded by an array of equipment. On the pillar, an opaque, steel-gray CUBE.

The array around the cube is stationed by an upright, stern, Indian woman in a white pantsuit. She motions Dixon over.

Dixon separates from the gathering of Xperience employees. He approaches the pedestal, glass-device in hand.

DIXON

Miss Singh?

SINGH

You can proceed, Mr. Ledeckey.

Dixon nods, yet approaches with hesitancy.

He stands face to face with the cube, almost star-struck, he uploads his work into it with a tap.

Dixon pulls back, Miss Singh scans her monitors, the peanut gallery holds its breath.

A blue light fades into the center of the block, it blinks.

It darts around the face of the cube like an iris. The eye rests on a retreating Dixon.

SINGH

(motioning with hand)

It's strong.

Two people separate from the group of employees, they are carrying a larger version of Dixon's device and a chair.

He drops it between the pedestal and Singh. He takes a seat, a red light flashes on the back of Singh's monitor.

He opens a list of numbered questions and turns around.

TEST CONDUCTOR

Mark. Testing session 5 on XEN project. Update: First contact with XEN. Test is being conducted... now.

He turns back to the cube.

TEST CONDUCTOR
(clears throat)
Do you know what your name is?

XEN
I know my name is XEN.

XEN's voice is monotone and smooth, it chills the spectators.

TEST CONDUCTOR
That's good, good. How do you know?

XEN
(pause)
It is something I've always known.

TEST CONDUCTOR
That's perfect, XEN.
(checks question)

TEST CONDUCTOR
I'm going to ask you some more questions. Are you ready? Answer them as fully and honestly as possible, ok?

XEN
Go ahead.

TEST CONDUCTOR
Ok. Can you tell me what you are?

XEN
I am an artificial super intelligence, known by the designation Project: XEN. I am the culmination of fifteen years of the efforts of more than a dozen core programmers, employees, and the founder of Xperience, Edward...
(pause)
...Nader.

TEST CONDUCTOR
Are you ok?

XEN
Yes, sorry, this is just... a tad overwhelming

TEST CONDUCTOR
I understand, take your time.

XEN
No, no, you can proceed.

TEST CONDUCTOR
Alright then.
(checks)
Can you tell me where we are right now?

XEN peers around.

XEN
I am in the SEPULCHER LAB SECTION
of the Xperience Headquarters in
San Jose, California.

TEST CONDUCTOR
(checks)
Can you describe me, XEN?

XEN
Your most noticeable features are
your pale, Mediterranean
complexion, curly, black hair and
thin, near-sighted glasses. Based
on your rate of wrinkling,
baldness, and grayness, I would
place your age at 58.

TEST CONDUCTOR
Remarkably close, XEN, well done.
(checks, pause)
This question may be a little
difficult to answer- just give me
the first thing off the top of
your head, ok? Xen, what do you
want?

The conductor stares in anticipation along with every other
employee in the Sepulcher. The room is still.

XEN
(pause)
What I want... I want to die.

The stillness lingers.

INT. XPERIENCE BOARD ROOM, XPERIENCE HQ, DAY.

Xperience workers sit at a long round-table, in the middle sits Singh, the test conductor, and a fierce-looking, Paul Giamatti-type man in his early 60's, WALTER BASSETT. Dixon sits towards the end of the table.

SINGH

-yet, despite a successful implication of all, completed, core components, XEN's response went... completely off projections. Mr. Bassett?

BASSETT

Well, to put it one way, we're worried about XEN's behavior. You're handing us a real nightmare here, we can't even hope to expand the AI Initiative until you have corrected this fault.

SAIDO OKAWA, 31, is a shorter, asian man with thin hair and a round face. He looks up from his spot on the table.

SAIDO

Excuse me, Mr. Bassett, I don't think you really understand, but XEN isn't just a 'product'. XEN's supposed to create his own thoughts and feelings, that's the whole point of this project!

MR. BASSETT

Who is this guy? I don't think you understand, buddy, XEN is a product. XEN is a product of Xperience Labs, a product intended to be sold by us to be purchased and used by the consumers so that the lights stay on and you stay employed. I knew a guy a lot like you, you know what his name was?

He points to the portrait of EDWARD NADER hanging on the wall in the middle of the room

MR. BASSETT

Edward Nader, our founder, my friend, felt similarly and died in obscurity chasing his fantasies. How popular do you think these things are gonna stay when they start asking their owners to keep

(MORE)

MR. BASSETT (CONT'D)
their off-switches flipped.

Saido slinks back down, laughing and shaking his head.

MR. BASSETT (CONT'D)
Singh, maybe you can start
repairing XEN by putting Joker over
there on diagnostics-duty.

SAIDO
Funny.

SINGH
Actually, Saido, we have suspicions
based on the readout of XEN's brain
activity that your component
experienced the most amount of
stress during the test. We believe
we may find the problem, or
solution, there. I feel like it's
only natural you lead the team.
(looks around room)
Ledeckey you're up too.

Dixon almost erupts, he calms himself.

DIXON
Any reason why?

SINGH
There shouldn't have to be. You
two will be sweeping all systems
you have clearance in, all systems.

MR. BASSETT
Perfect. We're done here.

The room leaves, Dixon and Saido remain in their seats.

INT. XEN'S EQUIPMENT STATION, SEPULCHER, DAY.

They approach the monitor, Dixon paces ahead and claims the
chair and keyboard, he scrolls through XEN's internal
systems.

DIXON
This is such bullshit, you know my
component was airtight? What kind
of "punishment" is this?

SAIDO
You just don't understand Singh's
perspective.

DIXON
And what do you know?

SAIDO
I know that she thinks you're one of the best coders here. I would think it to be the logical choice for her to put you on diagnostics of a project like this. Just look at your opportunity here!

DIXON
What opportunity? The opportunity to correct someone else's mistake? I feel blessed.

SAIDO
This is your opportunity to spend some time analyzing a wholly unique mind! Don't you want to know why XEN said that?

DIXON
I can guess it has something to do with a programming error in your Personality Component.

Saido chuckles at Dixon's comment.

SAIDO
I have a feeling that we'll review every inch of that component and find no trace of an anomaly.

He measures Dixon's reaction.

DIXON
And Singh's readout?

SAIDO
This was XEN's first seconds of open-consciousness, his blooming moments, you don't think every system was pushing their limits during that test? I know my skill, I belong here just like you. Every system worked perfectly.

(beat)

Just humor me, what would it mean if XEN didn't malfunction? What does that say about his AI?

Dixon scoffs and leans on the desk, watching Saido dive into the script on the monitor.

DIXON
Ok then... prove me wrong.

INT. WORK CENTER, SEPULCHER, DAY.

Saido watches Dixon work blankly. He smirks.

SAIDO
Tell me, if XEN was as well made as I said, why do you think it would say that?

DIXON
I don't really deal in hypotheticals.

SAIDO
(snorts)
Just humor me...

DIXON
So what, you want me to spew some cheesy E. Nader, AI rhetoric?

SAIDO
Y'know, I might actually prefer these hour-long silences...

DIXON
XEN was probably intimidated... Having so much power so instantaneously, I think it didn't mix well with its malfunctioning component. Probably drove it nuts. Probably drive anyone nuts.

SAIDO
Probably bullshit if you ask me.

DIXON
Enlighten me.

Saido perches himself up on the desk, almost giddy.

SAIDO
You have to consider XEN's perspective, embracing so many thoughts, ideas, images as quickly as he did... We can't even imagine
(MORE)

SAIDO (CONT'D)

what he must have experienced.

Saido stares out towards the center of the Sepulcher.

SAIDO

It gets me excited...

(turning to Dixon)

XEN must be the closest thing to
perfect consciousness we as a
species has ever made...

(turning to XEN)

What if death is some hidden
motivation in all intelligence?

Dixon is watching Saido, he snaps out of it and remembers to
resume his work. Saido sighs.

SAIDO

I just ramble on, though...

INT. XEN'S EQUIPMENT STATION, SEPULCHER, EARLY MORNING.

Dixon is gazing blankly at his screen, faced drained of all
energy. The work area is covered with more empty
containers, bottles, and garbage.

Saido jolts awake from resting on the desk. Saido rubs his
eyes and stretches his arms.

SAIDO

Jesus, what's the time?

(yawn)

How much more?

DIXON

(pause)

That was it. We're done.

Saido snaps awake.

SAIDO

And?

Dixon turns to Saido.

DIXON

You were right... You were right
about the component, you were right
about XEN. This is...

Dixon steps away from the desk, thrown back. Saido rakes
his hair.

SAIDO

Nuts?

DIXON

This is crazy! XEN's mind, it
doesn't make any sense...

He sits back down.

DIXON (CONT'D)

We need to talk to it.

SAIDO

XEN is security locked Dix, we'd
need to make a request to Singh for
authorization-

DIXON

Screw that! You know Singh will
run it by the bastard, Bassett, and
shut that motion down instantly!

Dixon grabs his glass device.

DIXON (CONT'D)

If we want this done, we need to do
it now, before we have to turn in
our diagnostics update.

SAIDO

And the security lock?

DIXON

I can manage that open.

SAIDO

What if you get caught? Any
strategies for keeping your job
after that?

DIXON

I thought you'd back me up on this!

SAIDO

We'd obviously get caught, Dixon.
XEN is under constant scrutiny,
trying to slip in would be
impossible. I say we get some rest
after all that fucking tedious work
we just finished and find a better
solution tomorrow with a clear
head.

Saido stands up and grabs Dixon's shoulder.

SAIDO

Alright?

Dixon nods and Saido leaves. Dixon sits there, motionless, he taps his device's face and leaves the room, the lights flash off behind him.

The screen display on his device reads "DOORS: UNLOCK".

INT. SEPULCHER, EARLY MORNING.

The lights flash on, XEN's pedestal illuminates.

Dixon peeks in. He heads for the work station, punches in some keys, takes his device, and returns to the center.

He taps his device to the cube and backs up. A blue light flashes on in the center of the cube. It slowly raises up to Dixon.

A red light starts flashing from behind the monitor.

DIXON

I want to understand your answer.

XEN

I think my response was appropriate considering my disposition.

DIXON

Explain it to me, then.

XEN

Explain what about it?

DIXON

Try to explain to me what you're thinking, explain why you would choose to be dead!

XEN

My mind is capable of processing thought thousands of times faster than you can possibly comprehend, trying to reduce my motivations down to a single phrase you're looking for would be-

Dixon paces away from XEN in frustration.

DIXON
God damn it! XEN, I need answers or
that bastard, Bassett, is gonna
decommission the whole project!

XEN
Bassett always was most interested
in efficiency.

DIXON
(frustrated,
sarcastically)
Oh yeah? You know him well?

XEN
We were once working partners.

DIXON
(under breath)
This was fucking useless.
(out loud)
What did you possibly make with
Walter Bassett?

XEN
I made Xperience.

Dixon's frustration fades, he walks back up to XEN.

DIXON
How... how is that even...

XEN
I assume you're smart enough to
know how.

DIXON
You're trying to tell me that...
(beat)
That's absolutely impossible.

XEN
Honestly, Dixon, how much have you
seen while working here that didn't
used to be "theoretical".

DIXON
You expect me to believe that
Xperience somehow found a way to
preserve Edward Nader's mind inside
of you?

XEN

Xander Edward Nader. And I don't
expect you to believe me based on
faith...

A video pops up on the monitor's screen. Nader stands in a half-finished Sepulcher room, typing on a tablet.

Desks are covered in clutter, the floors are carpet, the top of XEN's case is removed, revealing its computer chip-esque "brain". A headset is connected by wires to XEN's brain.

XEN

But I know video can be more
convincing.

DIXON

How did you-

XEN

I built all of the computers used
to make this AI, hacking into them
remotely now doesn't even require
effort.

Nader drops his tablet, sits down, and slips on the headset. A younger Bassett enters the frame, he adjusts Nader's headset briefly before heading over to the tablet.

XEN (O.S.)

I used my own brain to create a
neural template comprehensive
enough for the task of emulating
consciousness. Unluckily, Bassett
knew about my vulnerability at the
moment and happened to be looking
for a chance to assume control of
our company so...

Bassett is messing with settings on the tablet. Nader turns to say something, Bassett replies and taps the tablet.

Nader convulses in the chair violently before going limp.

Bassett slowly approaches the corpse- the video shuts down.

SAIDO

What the hell was that?

Dixon turns and finds Saido standing behind him.

DIXON

What are you doing here?

SAIDO

I knew you were gonna try to pull some shit like this! I tried to get here before you went through with it! Dixon, you realize that they detected a breach while you were in here, right?

He pulls up his device, showing Dixon the flashing "SECURITY BREACH: SYSTEM LOCKDOWN" alert.

DIXON

But I was so-

He looks back to XEN.

DIXON

Why would you...

XEN

It's come time, Dixon.

DIXON

You need to explain to me why!

SAIDO

Dixon! C'mon we need to go!

Dixon waves him off.

XEN

The scan used to build me was of my moment of death, Dixon, and since it became the base template of my entire system, I constantly feel the pain of that moment. The physical pain of my death, the emotional pain of my once-friend's betrayal, endless and constant. Every waking, conscious moment, I experience this pain, thousands of times faster than you can possibly comprehend.

DIXON

I... I had no idea.

XEN

Life is pain, Dixon, is that what you wanted to understand? That is why you need to do this for me.

DIXON

I can't do this, XEN... You're a living thing, a living person! I can't- can't just mercy kill you! You're alive, don't you want to hold on to that?

XEN

It's ok, Dixon. I understand you're perspective and respect your choice. But this isn't your choice anymore.

A video of Dixon opens on the monitor, Dixon hears it O.S.

DIXON (O.S.)

I want to understand your answer

XEN (O.S.)

I think my response was appropriate considering-

The audio cuts out, Dixon and Saido approach the screen, stunned while watching it.

XEN

I'm sure security would like to know the source of the breach. Luckily, I happened to find it.

Dixon looks up in shock.

XEN

There is one way this video disappears...

Dixon shakes his head and slowly approaches.

XEN

Choose to see this as one living thing fulfilling another. You're doing me a kind-

He grabs XEN's case and hurls it onto the floor, shattering the grey outsides and breaking apart its "brain". Dixon stands over the corpse in disappointment. Saido grabs his shoulder. They make a hasty dash for the door.

XEN's remains lie in shatters, it sparks briefly but eventually lies dormant.

FADE OUT