

Review: Valley of the Boom captures Silicon Valley's insanity



Enlarge / The packaging could only be more perfect if it included an AOL CD.

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The first dot-com boom set the stage for a lot of the world we experience today. IPOs and insane valuations, tech companies without an obvious business model, the vague aroma of scams, all of it centered on Silicon Valley. Two crashes later, most of the big players are dead, merged, or dismembered. Yet some of the ideas—massive online social networks, Web browsers as a software platform—have come to pass. So how did we get from

the first boom to here?

National Geographic's upcoming six-episode series, *Valley of the Boom*, doesn't trace out the entire history from the '90s to the present. Instead, it follows three very distinct companies from that first boom to bust, using a mix of interviews with key players, documentary footage, and some extremely well-acted scenes to fill in details. It sounds like a recipe for chaos, but there are definitely some lessons about the Valley and tech companies here in a package that's fantastically entertaining.

Order from chaos

Lots of documentaries contain acted scenes—early human hunters silently crafting spears or obscure actors playing out historic scenes in period dress. With its series *Mars*, National Geographic tried to do something a bit different, using current-day interviews and documentary footage about the prospects of traveling to Mars but mixing them with extended dramatic scenes in which a fictional crew went through the process of setting up a home on Mars.

Valley of the Boom takes that a step further. Yes, there's plenty of actual historic footage from the boom years available, and it's lightly sprinkled throughout the series. The people behind it have also lined up some phenomenal interviews, including Netscape's Jim Clark and Jim Barksdale, founders of a smaller company called TheGlobe.com, and build engineers at Netscape and Microsoft. Ars' own Dan Goodin, who wrote the definitive history of one of the companies profiled, also makes extensive appearances thanks to an extended interview that recapitulates that history, which we've managed to obtain a clip of.

But Dan's interview isn't his only appearance in the program—an alternate version of Dan, played by actor Jacob Richter, also shows up. That's because *Valley of the Boom*

involves extensive acted scenes, in this case portraying events of the past—not literal attempts to recreate them but scenes that help advance the history and give viewers a feel for what it might have been like to be a fly on the wall for some of the events (as you can also see in this clip).

The real Dan Goodin and Steve Zahn, with Zahn playing the fake version of a CEO that Dan profiled.

But calling them acted scenes seriously undersells what's on offer here. There's also a rap battle and a number that wouldn't be out of place in a Broadway musical. The series' version of Jim Barksdale metaphorically dies as Microsoft literally cuts off his air supply. A grammar-school-age math wiz is brought in to explain who gets what piles of money on IPO day—and how some people can end up millionaires while still having been shafted in the grand scheme of things.

It probably sounds like chaos, and there are parts (like the rap battle) where it's undoubtedly a bit silly. But it actually holds together remarkably well, and in many ways, it makes the stories more compelling and easier to digest. A lot of credit has to go to Lamorne Morris, who plays a never-having-existed banker who acts as a narrator, scene setter, and general MC. Bradley Whitford, known for his work on *The West Wing*, does a fine job of being Jim Barksdale, but the show is stolen by Steve Zahn, who has bulked up to portray a fugitive con man with messianic delusions who somehow ended up being in charge of a multimillion dollar company founded on vaporware.

Learning through example

The film structures its history around three companies. One of them is obviously Netscape, which was the grandfather of the boom and a Valley high-flyer until it suffered from a mixture of questionable business decisions and Microsoft viewing it as a threat. The film is unabashedly pro-Netscape, but the

arrogance that comes across in interviews with an Internet Explorer team member makes the pro-Netscape bias understandable.

Also present is TheGlobe.com, an early social network that wasn't actually in the Valley (it based itself in New York City) but rode the tech boom to an outrageous IPO anyway. Its two founders are incredibly personal in interviews, so much so that the actors don't seem to fully capture their charm. It nicely captures the who-needs-a-business-plan-growth-at-all-costs mentality that drove the boom.

And then there's Pixelon, the company that supposedly had revolutionary video streaming technology but was actually using off-the-shelf mpeg compression (and during one demo used a well-disguised version of a Windows Media Player codec). While its founder is now out of prison, he apparently declined to be interviewed for this project, leading to a heavy reliance on Dan Goodin to fill in the historical blanks. Dan's great, but nothing in the program can compete with Steve Zahn's portrayal of the delusional grifter who took Pixelon's venture funding and blew most of it on a giant party in Vegas.

The three examples—a true success story, a near miss, and a complete fraud—nicely capture the spectrum of what was going on in Silicon Valley during the boom years. I lived in nearby Berkeley at the start of the boom and returned for frequent visits as it picked up steam. There was a certain surreality to the mixture of complete insanity driven by paper millionaires and the fact that a subset of the paper millionaires actually cared deeply about what they were doing and really did hope to change the world.

If it takes a rap battle breaking out in a boardroom to convey that surreality, I'm ok with that. If you're also willing to suspend that much disbelief, *Valley of the Boom* makes for a compelling watch and a glimpse into the chaos that helped make the world we're living in (and, indirectly, allowed me to have

a job writing this).

The first episode airs Sunday night on the National Geographic channel, and some of the content is available to stream on the program's website.

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