

Catch Me If You Can is a crime comedy that leaves viewers in awe of the young protagonist's ability to swindle others. Of course, being directed by Stephen Spielberg and starring actors like Leonardo De Caprio and Tom Hanks, it was sure to be a success.

The film follows the life of a sixteen-year-old Frank William Abagnale Junior, as he becomes a full-time con artist. Throughout his life, the real Frank Abagnale impersonated an airline pilot, was appointed Chief Resident Paediatrician at Cobb General Hospital, in Georgia, and became the Assistant Attorney General in Louisiana. He cashed almost four million dollars in fraudulent cheques, in twenty-six foreign countries and fifty states, all through good old-fashioned graft.

Having the confidence to bluff your way into an airplane's cockpit in an impressive feat, but it's hardly the kind of scam that affects us in modern life. However, rewatching this old favourite – with terms such as 'scareware' and 'pretexting' in mind, I began to see many similarities between Abagnale's traditional cons, and the online scams that threaten us now. Abagnale relies on the same principals of human behaviour, and emotions such as fear or greed, that hackers and social engineers do. The only difference – he did it face to face.

In the opening scenes of the film, we see Abagnale's extradition from France to America. A seemingly critically ill Abagnale (De Caprio) is locked in a cold cell when FBI agent Carl Handratty (Hanks) arrives. The French guard warns "You do not pass him anything. You do not open door" in his limited English, stating only what is necessary. As Handratty reads the extradition terms, Abagnale begins to cough violently before collapsing. While Handratty is initially unconvinced, he is calling for a doctor moments later, as fears of Abagnale dying set in. Contrary to the guard's original instruction, the door is opened and Abagnale is escorted to the medical wing. In the minute long argument Handratty has with the prison warden, Abagnale manages to escape unnoticed.

While he wasn't as ill as he pretended, he was still too sickly for a successful escape and was soon captured. However, one could argue that this was a (failed) attempt at real life scareware. According to imperva.com scareware is when "victims being bombarded with false alarms and fictitious threats. Users are deceived to think their system is infected with malware, prompting them to install software that has no real benefit (other than for the perpetrator) or is malware itself. Scareware is also referred to as deception software, rogue scanner software and fraud ware". One could argue that Handratty was bombarded with false alarms and fictitious threats, as Abagnale being deathly ill was fictitious and threatened Handratty's years of work to catch him. This in turn led to him being deceived and was followed by his taking foolish action causing himself more harm than no action would have – the same way deception causes victims of scareware to take foolish action in installing harmful software.

Then, the film rewinds six years, to where it all began. We soon encounter our next hoax; in the same way that scareware preys on fear, baiting preys on greed and curiosity. Be it the promise of a thousand pounds if you click here, or a genuine desire to donate money to help homeless kittens here, the outcome is often the same – granting a hacker access to your device or account. We see Frank Abagnale Senior use a real-life version of baiting quite early in the film. He attempts to rent a suit for Frank Jnr. The sales assistant is unconvinced by his claims of a "a death in the family. War hero, military funeral, twenty-one-gun salute" he turns to baiting. A bright, expensive looking necklace appears in his hand, and a question on his lips "Is this yours?" and he asks the young, well-dressed sales assistant. "I just found this in the parking lot. Must have slipped right off your neck". From the sales assistant's point of view a lost necklace has no owner coming back, and this man offering it has no reason not to believe it's hers. It seems like a win for her, when really it is a win for Abagnale Snr. – the same way that thousand pounds seems like a win for you, when really it is the hacker who benefits.

As the film progresses, Frank's home life falls apart, and he runs away. The sight of a pilot, and how well he is treated, inspires Jnr. to try his hand at it. Rather than go back to school, go through the application process, and undertake all the necessary examinations, Frank took a shortcut. He pretended to be a schoolkid writing an article for the school paper and rang Panam Airlines to request a meeting with Mr. Morgan – Panam head honcho. This clever ruse gave

him the perfect opportunity to ask endless questions and learn everything he needed to know in order to get what he wanted – in this case, free flights and the ability to cash payroll cheques. Nowadays, pretexting is when “an attacker obtains information through a series of cleverly crafted lies. The attacker usually starts by establishing trust with their victim by impersonating co-workers, police, bank and tax officials, or other persons who have right- to-know authority. Abagnale may not have claimed to be from the bank or asked for credit card details, but his con fits the pretexting definition perfectly. In fact, he was simply the in-person version of a common online issue.

As Abagnale’s antics grow, Handratty becomes fixated on catching him. Approaching the Christmas holidays, Handratty tracks Abagnale to his hotel. On entering Abagnale’s room, Handratty sweeps the room with his gun, intent on finding his perpetrator. A flush sounds in the bathroom. Water from the tap hits the sink. He’s got him, Abagnale is still in the room! Handratty is ready, gun in hand, when out steps – a fast taking young man in a suit, drying his hands and commenting on “this guy” ’s equipment, and “envelopes addressed to himself”. A tense few seconds proceeds a disappointed Handratty learning that the man before his is from the Secret Service. The young agent checks Handratty’s ID, before asking Handratty to mind the crime scene and exiting the room with the most valuable piece of evidence. The sheer guile Abagnale displays in this scene is something your everyday hacker lacks. The quick thinking and self preservation we see is admirable, if sustained by unadvisable intentions. There is no online equivalent to this, it is simply one of many moments throughout the film where viewers are filled with reverence of Abagnales ingenuity.

The film continues, and from pilot, to doctor, to lawyer, to engaged, Abagnale does it all. Tension builds, and viewers can sense the approaching climax as Handratty investigation draws nearer and nearer still. All good things come to an end, and on November 2 nd , 1970, Frank Abagnale’s spending spree was no different. Only five years into his twelve year sentence, he was released on parole, to work in the FBI’s Financial Crimes Unit. In the closing scene, text fills the bottom of the screen, telling the audience a little bit about Abagnale’s life in 2002, when the film was released.

Who’d have thought that impersonating a pilot would have so many similarities with modern day scams? The tricks remain the same, only now it’s online that’s the platform for deceit. All in all though, you have to hand it to Abagnale – his story makes one hell of a film. By Isobel McAuliffe, Transition Year, Tullamore College.