

New alt.cyberpunk FAQ

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This is version 4 of the alt.cyberpunk FAQ. Although previous FAQs have not been allocated version numbers, due the number of people now involved, I've taken the liberty to do so. Previous maintainers / editors and version numbers are given below :

- Version 3: Erich Schneider
- Version 2: Tim Oerting
- Version 1: Andy Hawks

I would also like to recognise and express my thanks to Jer and Stack for all their help and assistance in compiling this version of the FAQ.

The vast number of the "answers" here should be prefixed with an "in my opinion". It would be ridiculous for me to claim to be an ultimate Cyberpunk authority.

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1. What is Cyberpunk, the Literary Movement ?

Gardner Dozois, one of the editors of *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* during the early '80s, is generally acknowledged as the first person to popularize the term "Cyberpunk", when describing a body of literature. Dozois doesn't claim to have coined the term; he says he picked it up "on the street somewhere".

It is probably no coincidence that Bruce Bethke wrote a short story titled "Cyberpunk" in 1980 and submitted it Asimov's mag, when Dozois may have been doing first readings, and got it published in *Amazing* in 1983, when Dozois was editor of 1983 Year's Best SF and would be expected to be reading the major SF magazines. But as Bethke says, "who gives a rat's ass, anyway ?!". Bethke is not really a Cyberpunk author; in mid-1995 he published *Headcrash*, which he calls "a cybernetically-aware comedy" (thanks to Bruce for his help on this issue).

Before its christening the "Cyberpunk movement", known to its members as "The Movement", had existed for quite some time, centred around Bruce Sterling's samizdat, *Cheap Truth*. Authors like Sterling, Rucker and Shirley submitted articles pseudonymously to this newsletter, hyping the works of people in the group and vigorously attacking the "SF mainstream". This helped form the core "movement consciousness" (the run of Cheap Truth is available [by FTP](#)).

Cyberpunk literature, in general, deals with marginalized people in technologically-enhanced cultural "systems". In Cyberpunk stories' settings, there is usually a "system" which dominates the lives of most "ordinary" people, be it an oppressive government, a group of large, paternalistic corporations or a fundamentalist religion. These systems are enhanced by certain technologies, particularly "information technology" (computers, the mass media), making the system better at keeping those within it, inside it. Often this technological system extends into its human "components" as well, via brain implants, prosthetic limbs, cloned or genetically engineered organs, etc. Humans themselves become part of "the Machine". This is the "cyber" aspect of Cyberpunk. However, in any cultural system, there are always those who live on its margins, on "the Edge" : criminals, outcasts, visionaries or those who simply want freedom for its own sake. Cyberpunk literature focuses on these people, and often on how they turn the system's technological tools to their own ends. This is the "punk" aspect of Cyberpunk.

The best Cyberpunk works are distinguished from previous works with similar themes, by a certain style. The setting is urban, the mood is dark and pessimistic. Concepts are thrown at the reader without explanation, much like new developments are thrown at us in our everyday lives. There is often a sense of moral ambiguity; simply fighting "the system" (to topple it, or just to stay alive) does not make the main characters "heroes" or "good" in the traditional sense.

2. What is Cyberpunk, the Subculture ?

Spurred on by Cyberpunk literature in the mid-1980's, certain groups of people started referring to themselves as Cyberpunk, because they correctly noticed the seeds of the fictional "techno-system" in Western society today, and because they identified with the marginalized characters in Cyberpunk stories. Within the last few years, the mass media has caught on to this, spontaneously dubbing certain people and groups "Cyberpunk".

Specific subgroups which are identified with Cyberpunk are : Hackers, Crackers, Phreaks and Cypher-punks.

- "Hackers" are the "wizards" of the computer community; people with a deep understanding of how their computers work, and can do things with them that seem "magical".
- "Crackers" are the real-world analogues of the "console cowboys" of Cyberpunk fiction; they break into other people's computer systems, without their permission, for illicit gain or simply for the pleasure of exercising their skill.
- "Phreaks" are those who do a similar thing with the telephone system, coming up with ways to circumvent phone companies' calling charges and doing clever things with the phone network.
- "Cypher-punks", these people think a good way to bollocks "The System" is through cryptography and cryptosystems. They believe widespread use of extremely hard-to-break coding schemes will create "regions of privacy" that "The System" cannot invade.

Some other groups which are associated with Cyberpunk are :

- "[Transhuman](#)" are actively seeking to become "[Posthuman](#)". This involves learning about and making use of new technologies that can potentially increase their capacities and life expectancy. They follow [Transhumanism](#), a set of "philosophies of life" (such as the Extropian philosophy) that seek the

continuation and acceleration of the evolution of intelligent life beyond its currently human form and limits by means of science and technology, guided by life-promoting principles and values, while avoiding religion and dogma.

- "[Extropian](#)" are dedicated to the opposition of Entropy. Politically, extropians are close kin to the libertarians, including some anarchists, some classical liberals, and even a political neoconservative or two. But many extropians have no interest in politics at all, and many are actively anti-political. Extropians have a principle called "spontaneous order", but politics is by no means the only domain in which they apply it.

So are Cyberpunks any or all of the above, well not really. One person's "Cyberpunk" is another's obnoxious teenager with some technical skill thrown in, a self-designated Cyberpunk looking for the latest trend to identify with or yet another mass media label used as a marketing ploy. Whilst most Cyberpunks understand, and some have a good working knowledge of the above definitions, these pursuits are seen as a means, rather than an end. The "end" of course depends upon your own personal goals.

There are those who claim that "Cyberpunk" is indefinable, which in some sense it is. Moreover, most regulars on alt.cp are uncomfortable about even implying that there actually are any cyberpunks. The point being that we all live in a cyberpunk society today, after all Gibson himself said "The future has arrived; it's just not evenly distributed".

Therefore, by definition most some people are already Cyberpunks. That is why when some post on alt.cp claiming that "I am a cyberpunk" don't get flamed to death, just ignored, whereas statements such as "survival through technological superiority" get flamed from here to eternity and back.

In the end, anybody insisting they are a Cyberpunk will probably get flamed in alt.cyberpunk. Think of it as a trial by ordeal. John Shirley (noted cyberpunk author) didn't make it through the entrance exam. Chairman Bruce might just hack it, but as far as I know he's never come visiting.

3. What is cyberspace ?

To my knowledge, the term "Cyberspace" was first used by William Gibson in his story *Burning Chrome*. That work first describes users using devices called "cyberdecks" to override their normal sensory organs, presenting them with a full-sensory interface to the world computer network. When doing so, said users are "in cyberspace" (the concept had appeared prior to Gibson, most notably in Vernor Vinge's story *True Names*). "Cyberspace" is thus the metaphorical "place" where one "is" when accessing the world computer net.

Even though Gibson's vision of how cyberspace is in some sense, surreal, it has stimulated many in the computing community. The word "cyberspace" is commonly used in the "mainstream world" with reference to the emergent world-wide computer network (especially the Internet). Also, some researchers in the "virtual reality" arena of computer science are trying to implement something like Gibson's Matrix into a more general computer-generated environment, even if its purpose is not "accessing the net".

4. Cyberpunk Literature

The following is intended to be a short list of the best in-print Cyberpunk works. Note that quite a few works written before 1980 have been retroactively labelled "Cyberpunk" due to stylistic similarities, eg Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, or similar themes such as Brunner's *The Shockwave Rider* or Delany's *Nova*).

- William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, about a cracker operating in cyberspace, a cybernetically-enhanced

bodyguard/mercenary, and a pair of mysterious AIs, got the ball rolling as far as Cyberpunk is concerned. It won the Hugo, Nebula, P. K. Dick, Seiun, and Ditmar awards, something no other SF work has done.

Gibson wrote two sequels in the same setting, *Count Zero* and *Mona Lisa Overdrive*. Gibson also has a collection of short stories, *Burning Chrome*, which contains three stories in Neuromancer's setting, as well as several others, such as the excellent *The Winter Market* and *Dogfight*.

Gibson's two most recent works are *Virtual Light* and *Idoru*; they share a setting (San Francisco and Tokyo, respectively, of the near future) and a few characters, but are otherwise independent. Compared to his first trilogy, the technology they posit is less advanced in some ways and they are more theme-driven than plot-driven, but they deal with many of the same concerns as other cyberpunk works ("Idoru" is a Japanese borrowing of the English "idol", and refers to a media-company-manufactured pop-music star, a "virtual" example of which plays a prominent role in *Idoru*).

- Bruce Sterling's anthology *Crystal Express* contains all of the "Shaper/Mechanist" short stories about the future humanity and "post-humanity". Those short stories are also available with *Schismatrix*, a Shaper/Mechanist novel, in the combined volume *Schismatrix Plus*. Also to be found in *Crystal Express* is *Green Days in Brunei*, a story which shares the setting of Sterling's novel *Islands in the Net*. Both are near-future extrapolations in worlds very similar to our own. Sterling also has another collection in print, *Globalhead*.

Sterling edited *Mirrorshades: A Cyberpunk Anthology*, which contains stories by many authors; some are questionably cyberpunk, but it has some real gems (*Mozart in Mirrorshades* being one).

Sterling's latest novel is *Holy Fire*, set in a "gerontocratic" late 21st century Earth dominated by the "medical-industrial complex", and focuses on a group of young European artists, hackers, and intellectuals determined to go their own way in a world dominated by elderly wealth.

- Gibson and Sterling collaboratively wrote *The Difference Engine*, a novel called "steampunk" by some; it deals with many cyberpunk themes by using an alternate 19th-century Britain where Babbage's mechanical computer technology has been fully developed.
- *Snow Crash*, by Neal Stephenson, carries cyberpunk to a humorous extreme; what else can one say about a work where the Mafia delivers pizza and the main character's name is "Hiro Protagonist" ?
- Larry McCaffrey edited an anthology, *Storming the Reality Studio*, which has snippets of many cyberpunk works, as well as critical articles about cyberpunk, and a fairly good bibliography. Other works of criticism are Bukatman's *Terminal Identity* and Slusser and Shippey's *Fiction 2000: Cyberpunk and the Future of Narrative*.

Some other good cyberpunk works include :

- Walter Jon Williams, *Hardwired* : a smuggler who pilots a hovertank decides to take on the Orbital Corporations that control his world.
- Walter Jon Williams, *Voice of the Whirlwind* : a corporate soldier's clone tries to discover what happened to his "original copy".
- Greg Bear, *Blood Music* : a genetic engineer "uplifts" some of his own blood cells to human-level intelligence, with radical consequences.

- Pat Cadigan, *Synners* : hackers and other misfits pursue a deadly new "virus" when direct brain interfaces first appear in near-future LA.
- Jeff Noon, *Vurt* : a Clockwork Orange-esque tale in an England where virtual reality is truly the opiate of the masses.

Some good out-of-print works to look for are Cadigan's *Mindplayers*, Michael Swanwick's *Vacuum Flowers*, Daniel Keyes Moran's *The Long Run*, and Vernor Vinge's short story *True Names*.

5. Magazines About Cyberpunk and Related Topics

Some magazines which are popular among Cyberpunk fans are :

Mondo 2000

Many Cyberpunk fans have an uneasy relationship with *Mondo 2000*, their esteem for it varies according to the amount of technical content and affected hipness in the articles. Nonetheless, if anything could claim to be the Cyberpunk "magazine of record", this is it. With the departure of many of those providing creative impetus (notably, R.U. Sirius), its days may be numbered.

bOING-bOING

bOING-bOING's status is uncertain; most of its writers now work for *Wired*, it has ceased newsstand distribution and no longer offers subscriptions. However, if one can get a copy, it's worth looking at.

Wired

The magazine which, through aggressive positioning, has managed to become the "magazine of record" for modern techno-aware culture. It's aimed more at technically-oriented professionals with disposable income, but many cyberpunk fans like the articles on network and future related topics.

SF EYE

Described by some as the "house organ of the cyberpunk movement", founded by Stephen P. Brown at the urging of his friends Gibson, Shirley, and Sterling. Published semi-annually, and contains a regular column by Sterling.

Phrack

2600 Magazine

Two mainstays of the computer underground. Phrack deals more with people and goings-on in the community, while 2600 focuses on technical information.

21C

6. Cyberpunk in the Visual Media (Movies and TV)

TV gave us the late, lamented *Max Headroom*, which featured oodles of cyberpunk concepts. The Bravo cable network and the Sci-Fi Channel are rerunning the few episodes that were made. TV also gave us the somewhat bloated *Wild Palms*, with a "cyberspace", evil corporations, and a cameo by William Gibson.

Also shown on the Sci-Fi Channel is *TekWar*, a series based on William Shatner's *Tek* novels, which evolved from a set of TV movies based on those novels. While possessing some traditionally cyberpunk elements and extended "cyberspace runs", they (or at least the TV movies) tend to boil down to good guys vs. bad guys cop

stories (TekLords features a central plot element that those who have read *Snow Crash* will recognize).

Blade Runner, based loosely on Philip K. Dick's novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* ? is considered the archetypical cyberpunk movie (Gibson has said that the visuals in *Blade Runner* match his vision of the urban future in *Neuromancer*). Few other movies have matched it; some that are considered cyberpunk or marginally so are *Alien* and its sequels, *Freejack*, *The Lawnmower Man*, *Until the End of the World*, the *Terminator* movies, *Total Recall*, *Strange Days*, and *Brainstorm*.

Cyberpunk stories can also be found in Japanese anime films, including the *Bubblegum Crisis* series and *Ghost in the Shell*.

There is an hourlong documentary called *Cyberpunk* available on video from Mystic Fire Video. It features some interview-style conversation with Gibson, is generally low-budget, and the consensus opinion on the net is that it isn't really worth anyone's time. Gibson is apparently embarrassed by it.

Regarding films based on Gibson stories : at one point a fly-by-night operation called "Cabana Boys Productions" had the rights to *Neuromancer*; this is why the front of the *Neuromancer* computer game's box claims it is "soon to be a motion picture from Cabana Boys". The rights have since reverted to Gibson, who is sitting on them at the moment.

Gibson's short story *Johnny Mnemonic* was made into a big-budget full-length motion picture. Gibson himself wrote the screenplay and was a close consultant to the director; the result "has his blessing", so to speak. As might be expected, there are many additions to the short story as well as outright differences. The film contains elements not only from the original story, but also from *Neuromancer* and *Virtual Light*; there is much more violent action, and the ending is more upbeat. Very significantly, Molly does not appear in the film; her place is taken by a character named "Jane" (who has no inset eyeglasses or retractable claws) due to issues surrounding use of the Molly character in any future *Neuromancer* production. The film was not a critical or box-office success in the U.S., which Gibson has partly blamed on the post-production editing; he claims the longer Japanese release is the better one.

The Gernsback Continuum was adapted into a short (15 minute) film in Britain; it has been shown on some European TV networks, but I don't know if it's available in the US. Rumors also abound that *New Rose Hotel* will be brought to the big screen by various directors. Other rumors claim that *Count Zero* will be made into a film titled *The Zen Differential*.

William Gibson wrote one of the many scripts for *Alien 3*. According to him, only one detail from his script made its way to the actual film : the bar codes visible on the backs of the prisoners' shaved heads. A synopsis of Gibson's script can be found in part 3 of the [Alien Movies FAQ](#) list.

7. Blade Runner

The [Blade Runner FAQ](#) answers many of the more common questions. Here are short answers to the most common.

- There are several alternate versions. The original theatrical release in the US omitted the Batty-Tyrell eye-gouging sequence and a few other bits; these were added back in Europe and the video release. In 1992, a "director's cut" was released, now available on video, which omits the Deckard voiceover and the "happy" ending, and reinserts the "unicorn scene". Before that, however, a different cut (known as the "workprint") was shown at two theaters, one in LA, the other in San Francisco, for a brief period; this has a different title sequence and soundtrack, some different dialogue, no voiceover and no happy ending, but

no unicorn sequence.

- The 5/6 replicants problem : this is widely accepted as an editing glitch which slipped through to the release. The film originally featured a fifth "live" replicant, "Mary", who was later deleted. In the workprint, the line "one got fried7" is changed to "two got fried...". Bryant does not include Rachel in the original six escaped replicants. However...
- Internal clues, such as lack of emotion, the photographs, and the reflective eyes, do suggest that Deckard is a replicant. However, this is not explicitly stated in any cut. The "unicorn scene" gives this theory more weight.

An excellent resource for any fan is Paul Sammon's in-depth book *Future Noir: The Making of Blade Runner*, which goes over the differences between the various version in minute detail.

K.W. Jeter has written two novels which are sequels to the movie : *Blade Runner 2: The Edge of Human* and *Blade Runner: Replicant Night*. One's judgement of the "appropriateness" of this may be influenced by the fact that Jeter was a good friend of Philip K. Dick's. The first sequel deals very directly with the "extra replicant" and "Deckard a replicant ?" issues. The second sequel involves Deckard's participation in making a movie about his experiences hunting Roy Batty et al. (as seen by us in the movie). More sequels by Jeter are apparently to come.

8. Cyberpunk Music / Dress / Aftershave

There are a lot of posts to alt.cyberpunk asking what Cyberpunk's like, do, wear etc. These posts are seen as inane due to the reason they are asked, ie, "Cyberpunk sounds cool, how can I become one". Cyberpunk is not a fashion statement, therefore little of this FAQ is taken up with such matters.

In late 1993 Billy Idol released an album called *Cyberpunk*, which garnered some media attention; it seems to have been a commercial and critical flop. Billy made some token appearances on the net in alt.cyberpunk and on the WELL, but his public interest in the area seems to have waned. No matter how sincere his intentions might have been, scorn and charges of commercialization have been heaped upon him in this and other forums.

9. What is "PGP" ?

"PGP" is short for "Pretty Good Privacy", a public-key cryptosystem that is the mainstay of the Cypherpunk movement. However, before you rush off and obtain a copy of PGP, I think it may be of useful to explain why it should be used, and the best reason I've heard comes from the guy who developed it, Phil Zimmerman.

Why use PGP ?

"It's personal. It's private. And it's no one's business but yours. You may be planning a political campaign, discussing your taxes, or having an illicit affair. Or you may be doing something that you feel shouldn't be illegal, but is. Whatever it is, you don't want your private electronic mail (E-mail) or confidential documents read by anyone else. There's nothing wrong with asserting your privacy. Privacy is as apple-pie as the Constitution.

Perhaps you think your E-mail is legitimate enough that encryption is unwarranted. If you really are a law-abiding citizen with nothing to hide, then why don't you always send your paper mail on postcards ? Why not submit to drug testing on demand ? Why require a warrant for police searches of your house ? Are you trying to

hide something ? You must be a subversive or a drug dealer if you hide your mail inside envelopes. Or maybe a paranoid nut. Do law-abiding citizens have any need to encrypt their E-mail ?

What if everyone believed that law-abiding citizens should use postcards for their mail ? If some brave soul tried to assert his privacy by using an envelope for his mail, it would draw suspicion. Perhaps the authorities would open his mail to see what he's hiding. Fortunately, we don't live in that kind of world, because everyone protects most of their mail with envelopes. So no one draws suspicion by asserting their privacy with an envelope. There's safety in numbers. Analogously, it would be nice if everyone routinely used encryption for all their E-mail, innocent or not, so that no one drew suspicion by asserting their E-mail privacy with encryption. Think of it as a form of solidarity."

PGP site can be found [here](#). Alternatively, there are two newsgroups dealing with PGP and encryption, namely alt.cypherpunk and comp.security.pgp.

10. What is "Agrippa" ?

Agrippa: A Book of the Dead, the textual component of an art project, was written by William Gibson in 1992. Gibson wrote a semi-autobiographical poem, which was placed onto a computer disk. This disk was part of a limited release of special "reader" screens; the reader units themselves had etchings by Dennis Ashbaugh which were light-sensitive, and slowly changed from one form to another, final, form, when exposed to light. Also, the text of the poem, when read, was erased from the disk - it could only be read once.

On the net, opinion on the Agrippa project ranged from "what an interesting concept; it challenges what we think 'art' should be" to "Gibson has sold out to the artsy-fartsy crowd" to "Gibson is right to make a quick buck off these art people".

Naturally (some would say according to Gibson's plan), someone got hold of the text of *Agrippa* and posted it to Usenet.