

Cyberpunk : Today Squared

Michael Gunderson

April 18, 1996

The concept of cyberpunk inherently involves a displacement in time. The future, whether as seen from the eyes of someone in the 1950's or the 1980's, is the setting for the various cyberpunk realms we explore. What distinguishes cyberpunk from other forms of science fiction is that it is extrapolative, based on the knowledge of today. More specifically, it is pessimistically extrapolative. The human race is not going to wake up tomorrow and realize how badly it has screwed up and suddenly mend its ways. The world of tomorrow will be just like the world of today, only worse. Cyberpunk can be defined as a view of tomorrow based on the assumption that negative trends of today will continue or get worse.

In today's society, the trend toward the individual over the group as a whole seems to be stronger than ever. In the past people worked to better their children's futures, or their country; today, many people work solely to better themselves. This can cause positive forms of individual expression, such as artists who refuse to follow the trends of old or the executive who will not put up with merely maintaining the status quo. It has also produced negative individualism, wherein the individual pursues his or her own goals to the exclusion of, and sometimes to the detriment of, the good of the many. The old "rebel without a cause" has evolved into the criminal hackers of today and into the cyberpunk anti-heroes of tomorrow. Information in the world of today and tomorrow is power, because everything today is handled as transactions of information. Money is sent on wires instead of in trucks, and a corporation can prosper or be destroyed if the wrong person gets vital information. A cyberpunk protagonist will seek to "rebel against harmful or oppressive authority" and "attack anything that tries to hide information". The character Rickenharp from *Freezone* rebels just to be different. Case, from *Neuromancer*, and the title character from *Johnny Mnemonic*; both make a living on other people's information, with Johnny eventually turning on all his former employers by using what was left of the supposedly confidential information in his head. Cyberpunk takes individualism to its worst extrapolated extreme, and makes it almost seem heroic. The world of the many has gone down the proverbial hole, and the individual is all that have left to hope for.

As recent history has shown, the power of capitalism is making itself known worldwide, in places where such things would have been unthinkable even a decade ago. If McDonalds can put up a franchise today in Moscow, what is to say they won't do so tomorrow inside the White House ? And, as humorists will tell you, the Japanese already own most of America. With the mergers, buy outs, and hostile takeovers going on today, it is not hard to foresee a future in which mega-corporations control vast areas of commerce. And when we apply our pessimistic filter to this prophecy, it is also not hard to see these corporations taking over much more of the world than its commercial interests. It is a short step from "buy this" to "buy this, there's no one else" to "buy this, or else". And when we look into cyberpunk, these corporations show up all too quickly. Johnny and Case both had their lives turned totally on end because of slights against corporate conglomerates, whether or not those slights were intentional or by accident. And even when they do something positive, such as SenTrax' therapies in *Snake-Eyes*, it is always for the greater good of the company before the needs of the client. When the government of today passes legislation to help some businesses while ignoring others, or violates First and Second Amendment rights to keep our mouths shut on the Internet and the guns in the hands of the criminals, it is hard to tell big government, big business, and organized crime apart. Tomorrow, they will be one and the same.

The way businesses gain power is via products. They give the customer what he or she wants, or convinces them that they want what the business has to offer. Technological advancements, when not being driven by the impetus of warfare, come about because of consumer demand. And with all this new technology, people want to expend less and less effort to use each new piece, possibly because there is daily more and more that needs to be learned. Computer output was once contained in banks of flashing lights, or paper tape. Computer input was once restricted to punched cards, or keyboard. Now, people want things easier. It is not a hard step to move from the mice and GUIs of today to the cybergear of tomorrow. Technology is both easier to use and harder to control, and if we assume that this trend will get worse, the abuse of technology as found in much of cyberpunk fiction comes becomes easy to see. Artificial limb recipients become the grotesque cyborgs found in *Johnny Mnemonic* or perhaps the replicants of *Blade Runner*. The "snake" in Tom Maddox' *Snake-Eyes* is a cybernetic implant gone haywire, and Mnemonic is able to earn a living because of a chunk of hardware in his brain. Today people "surf the Internet"; the netrunners of cyberspace take a far more interactive role in their virtual world, usually for negative or selfish reasons. When technology can be used with a mere thought, you'll know we're in the future. And if it is used predominantly negatively, you'll know we're in the future according to cyberpunk. If it were otherwise, we'd not be in the cyberpunk future, but something altogether more optimistic, like *Star Trek*.

Of course, no discussion of cyberpunk would be complete without mention of drugs and drug use. It is believed by many that overt government attempts to curb drug use in the past and present will inevitably fail, as did Prohibition in the 1920's, and there is no reason to believe it will get any better. And since we are arguing that "today, only worse" is a definition of cyberpunk, it is with relief that we find numerous examples of drug use, abuse, and overuse in many works of cyberpunk fiction. Drug usage has spread over a wider spectrum, so that even the dolphins of *Johnny Mnemonic* are addicted to smack. Rickenharp of *Freezone* is a former/current user of a drug that is better than anything today, less harsh in the come-down, and more deadly in its withdrawal, once addicted. Perhaps the harshness of reality makes the prospect of any kind of escape one which is quickly grasped.

What, then, makes cyberpunk any different from other "dark future" themes found in the fiction of today ? The main difference is that, in cyberpunk, there is no one event you can firmly point to and say, "This is why the world is so screwed up". There was no World War III to send us all into barbarity. The anti-Christ didn't show up and lead us down the pristine path to Hell. Aliens didn't invade, and a comet didn't strike the earth. The dark future of cyberpunk is based entirely on the dark underside of human nature left unchecked. We have no one left to blame for our future than ourselves.

So what, in the end, is cyberpunk ? The individual becomes the anarchist. The office job becomes an Orwellian Big Brother. Technology invades the body just as it invaded the home and the work place. Drug use is almost accepted as a fact of life. What do all these things have in common ? The roots of them all are already around us, if you look at it with the proper frame of mind. And a healthy lack of respect for humanity as a whole. But humanity is not all bad, so the future is not inevitable. If altruism, goodwill, and cooperation can somehow gain more importance beside greed, jealousy, and rage, then the cyberpunk future may never come to pass. But if thousands of years of history are any indication, humanity is not good at recognizing its own fault, nor is it adept at improving them.