

What is Cyberpunk ?

SFAM

February 19, 2007

Created by Illusivemind, here is a single sentence definition of cyberpunk :

Cyberpunk is about expressing (often dark) ideas about human nature, technology and their respective combination in the near future.

While some see cyberpunk to be a long-since dead relic of the 80s, I consider it to be alive and well. There are many aspects of "cyberpunk-ness" but these are what I consider the most important cyberpunk themes :

Negative Impact of technology on humanity : in a cyberpunked near-future, technology runs rampant, and usually manipulates most societal interactions. Dystopian near futures are very common, but so are futures where the impacts of specific technologies are played out in a world only slightly different from the present. Sacred societal boundaries are often crossed with regularity. Often the earth is severely damaged. Crime and drug use are often key supporting themes.

Fusion of man and machine : in addition to cyborgs, sentient programs and robots, cyberpunk often blurs of what it means to be human. Traits we take for granted as representing humanity disappear via introspective looks brought on by the fusion of man and machine. In some cases, such as in the extreme Japanese cyberpunk films, the fusion is explicitly invasive. In other cases, sentient programs take over roles traditionally occupied by humanity, thus, marginalizing humans on the fringes of society. This fusion also affects the control of perception - numerous storylines explore with influences to perception, usually involving some method of virtual reality environment to either mask or take the place of the "real world".

Corporate control over society : Cyberpunk almost always has an ever powerful controlling entity that directs society. Most often this is represented as a corporation. Some times its simply an ever present singular government. A common theme for corporate control involves a futuristic dystopia, where the last traces of high civilization exist only in an enclosed and protected city, where civil liberties are removed under the guise of protecting humanity.

Story focuses on the underground : Cyberpunk almost always focuses on the underground of society. While the story may lead to revolution and toppling the power structure, the perspective is always that of the oppressed or the punk, anti-hero of the oppressed.

Ubiquitous Access to information : Cyberpunk often deals with the continual spread and access to information. Hacker themes and ever-connecting internets are common. Additionally, the connection of humans to this omnipresent information stream leads to the blurring of the virtual with the real.

Cyberpunk visuals and style : Cyberpunk visuals, ideally, are dirty, hyper-realistic "lived in" looks at the near future. Often cyberpunk films will have a single dominating color that permeates the film. We also see patterns of dark motifs contrasted with shocking neon color schemes. And just as important, a sense of slick style often pervades a cyberpunk movie.

Clearly, Cyberpunk is not an exact concept. Its meanings vary.