Cyberpunk Through Shadowrun

Christopher Chase

Cyberpunk has suffered through many definitions during its growth, from author Bruce Sterling's original assessment in the preface to *Mirrorshades* to his latest appraisal of the movement in his article, "Cyberpunk in the Nineties". Throughout its evolution, some consistent points have been made that one can mold together to form a definition of cyberpunk : a sense of bleakness, technology's dominant effect on the world, and a tendency to showcase the illegal points within the culture. If these three traits truly define the cyberpunk genre, then the Shadowrun Role Playing System, created by FASA Corporation in 1989, exemplifies these elements of cyberpunk.

Shadowrun and cyberpunk fiction are very similar in their view of the future world they present. As Sterling points out in "Cyberpunk in the Nineties", "there is much bleakness in cyberpunk, but it is an honest bleakness. There is ecstasy, but there is also dread" (Browning 6). An interesting point, but not one without merit. For indeed, cyberpunk does tend to forward the sentiment that the world spirals ever downward, to an end that no one can foresee. Tom Maddox's *Snake Eyes* embodies this point, with George's slow and continuous fall toward insanity as the machinery in his head attempts to control him. Shadowrun's chronology is very similar in this respect, from the physical plagues that rip through the world, thereby destroying over a third of the world population, to intense computer viruses that have the ability to kill people who access the data they protect. Many of the governments of the world have disbanded, including the United States -- who joins with Canada -- and Russia. Cities have become known as "sprawls" where only the strong survive, and even then it's a rough outing anytime you step out the door. The bleakness of the world plays into the hands of the shadowrunners, who live in the world of the "sinless", those who are not registered in the world database. They find the world desolate and anarchistic, but still manage to find profit in it while keeping their skin in one piece. One quote from the Shadowrun sourcebook says, "If you did it and lived, then you probably did it right" (Shadowrun 54).

One way that shadowrunners find profit through their activities and survive is through the use of technologically superior tools. Technology, according to Sterling, is also a powerful part of the cyberpunk genre. As he states in *Mirrorshades*, "...technology is visceral... it is pervasive, utterly intimate. Not outside us, but next to us. Under our skin, inside our minds" (xiii). Gibson's *Neuromancer* personifies this aspect of the movement, with Case "jacking in" to a computer deck and accessing large amounts of data. He yearns for the feeling of being in cyberspace, and laments the fact that he is "in the prison of his own flesh". Shadowrun follows this pattern closely, with runners whose entire existence is dependent upon getting another chance to stroll through the "Matrix". Another archetype in Shadowrun is the "rigger", a person who has been neurologically altered to mesh with a vehicle and, thus, become more proficient and efficient with it. This seems very close to the character George from *Snake Eyes*, who is surgically enhanced to be able to handle an aircraft with more ease. Other additions can be made to the human body, such as extending hand razors, adding memory chips to the human brain for data storage capability, and other types of enhancements. Corporations fight over technology and information, though not blatantly. The megacorporations turn to shadowrunners to infiltrate corporate databases and appropriate information, making them the carrier pigeons of data rather than insecure data lines. Technology literally pervades the human self and dominates the world.

Technology is by no means always used for the purposes of good. Often the shadier side of technology's uses, as well as other less-than-legal activities, show up in both cyberpunk fiction and the Shadowrun milieu. *Neuromancer*'s Case originally was a data thief, scouring the networks for information to be sold. In "Freezone",

Carmen and her group attempt an assassination of a prominent corporate official, and their escape from the clutches of the group hunting them drives the story. Shadowrunners are, by their very nature, illegal mercenaries who do business in the extralegal sector to promote their own welfare, be it either for money, information, or fame. They seek to make their fortune through illegal activities, and the more money on the line, the less legal their methods. Most activities conducted by a shadowrunner deal either with valuable data or unwanted individuals that may possess information that others would like to keep suppressed. Runners' reputations are passed by word of mouth rather than resumes, and the more jobs done, the more likely that someone noticed you. People go to such lengths as to surgically enhance their bodies to give them an edge when conducting "business", be it a cerebral datajack to access data more quickly or a "smartgun link" to give better firing accuracy.

It would be almost criminal to say that unlawful activities, a 486 with a modem and a manic-depressive view of the world make fiction cyberpunk. Cyberpunk fiction, along with every other genre, is difficult to define. Many of the original writers of the genre have made the attempt, with limited success. It seems that each time a writer brings forth a theory, he or she is summarily flamed for being an infidel. Bruce Sterling refutes Lou Shiner's assessment in "Confessions of an Ex-Cyberpunk" with his own ideas on the subject in "Cyberpunk in the Nineties". And herein lies the crux of the problem : each writer brings his or her own style of writing to the table, giving several flavors of cyberpunk. Gibson's writing pushes the senses, Maddox the psyche, and Tiptree the emotions. Thus what is presented here does not represent a full definition in the sense of "plug and play", but rather gives a guideline to the world of cyberpunk. And these three points form the central focus of the genre; a deeply harsh, bleak, and futuristic timeline, a devotion to or domination of computer technology, and story lines that bend toward the world of the illegal. Shadowrun covers these points well, from its bleak chronology to the overwhelming power invested in technology and information, down to the activities that people of the genre turn to in order to gain wealth and power.