Alyssa Torralva

Dr. M. Nicosia

PRFL / WGST 330

12 December 2022

<div align="center">Identity Amongst Technology</div>

Cyberpunk 2077 (2020), a much awaited game, launched in an incredibly buggy state. To many people the game was near unplayable and caused its reviews to plummet by the end of the month. Its vibrant and realistic story world was overshadowed by the layers of connection and physics issues that would oftentimes lock people out of progressing. Now that the game has gone through multiple patches, as well as releasing a highly successful Anime Series, it's in a state where players are starting to pick up the game again to see what they missed. I, being one of these people, picked the game up when it was on sale and I was taken back by the level of quality and care put into the style and feel of its setting, Night City. When I first booted up the game I was surprised to see the amount of customization options the game had to offer, including giving my female character a phallus. As I continued the game however, I noticed just how dark the world was. This future hypothetical is made more real by its depiction of overpopulation, pollution, and crime. I soon realized that this game world wasn't going to be happy or fantastical, but I was now curious of how it would handle the concept of Identity since the first thing I saw of the game was a woman with a penis. Having finished the game I can say for certain that the world of *Cyberpunk 2077* creates an environment where maintaining identity and individuality is challenged by the constant pressure of corporations and the rise of technology.

Before continuing I wanna make known that the character customization of the game and the way the game handles gender aren't perfect. There still is very clearly a form of binary that

takes place when it comes to making how your character will interact with the greater world. I think Militsi said it best in her paper:

> The relationships formed within the game are well written so that they convey the sense of a realistic entanglement. Within the game the characters that surround and are entangled with V have strictly defined sexualities, meaning that no matter the choices V makes within the game, V might be turned down on the basis of the voice tone -and on points the body type the player has chosen to embody the character with (see Appendix V). River who encapsulates the ideal of masculinity will not get involved with V unless V assumes the body type that is understood by the game as female. However, in engaging romantically with River while having the masculine voice can also be viewed as a way of queering the evinced hegemonic masculinity and the player can mock the entrenched norms that want "macho" men to perform in accordance with certain ideals. (Militsi 28)

While it is unfortunate that the game does not allow more options in character customization, the way it is now still lends for a breaking of norms that otherwise we would not have been able to see were it not for what is present. When it comes to diversity in games I think we can oftentimes get overloaded with the idea of what they could have done instead of respecting and appreciating what was given to us without asking. Of course we should still complain to make sure that these issues won't be repeated.

Within the gameworld, we see multiple forms of slang thrown back and forced. From the word "Scratch" to refer to profit or the most popular slang term "Choom" which is used as the common fill in for Buddy or Pal. The most important slang term to the idea of identity exists in

the words "Input" and "Output". Not only are the words perfect for a world run by technology and cybernetic implants, the two terms are used in reference to sexual partnership. An Input being a person with a penis and an Output being a vagina. When I first heard these terms while playing through the *Cyberpunk: 2077* (2020), I had to pause it to exclaim to a friend how creative of a concept it was. Given how today's society we see terms like these being tossed around in the form of "Top and Bottom". The writers ability to make a genderless slang term out of real life usage and to flavor it to be connected to tech in some way is impressive to say the least. Not only did it bring up the idea of sexual relationships in a means that was thematically appropriate, but it also gave its audience even more world building. (and at the same time gave me a brief chuckle).

One of the first openly trans characters we meet is a bartender devoid of Cyberware named Claire Russell. The first indication we have of her identity is when we go and visit her in her personal garage. As soon as the doors open we see a very apparent trans flag on the back of her truck (The flag is also present on the dashboard inside of her vehicle). After a couple missions in which you help Claire with some street races, she eventually confides in you the real motives behind why she wants to race. She divulges information about her husband and the reason she doesn't sport cyberware in the following dialogue:

CLAIRE. Sweetest man I ever knew. We were friends before my gender transition.

Brought daffodils to the hospital… To new beginnings, he said…

V. Were you married long?

CLAIRE. Twelve years. Dean used to laugh that for our fifteenth… Said he'd finally talk

me into my first implant. Was prepping some surprise.

V. Mind if I ask why you don't sport any chrome?

CLAIRE. I love machines, V, I do, but I don't ever wanna become one. That

weird?

V. A little, I guess. But it's fine.

CLAIRE. Dean - only person who coulda convinced me to chrome up. But…

guess we'll never know if he'da managed, huh? (*Cyberpunk 2077*)

Claire continues about the nature of Dean's death and how another racer had killed him in a race, which was ruled as a situational hazard, and not cause for prosecution. Since then she's been on a revenge plot to get to a point where she could kill the man without consequence. Fortunately, you can talk her out of this plot with the right choices. The point that matters, however, is how they choose to handle an openly trans character within the story. It would be insulting to have a Trans character obsessed with modifications, as if body modification was some drug, and being trans was just part of it. What we get instead however is a story about a very human woman, in a world where this type of response to trauma is normalized. We also get a woman who, at its heart, is broken not by her own identity, but from the environment that Night City is. Comparatively to when Anna McFarlane said in her book *The Routledge Companion to Cyberpunk Culture*:

> There were grounds for optimism around the normalization of sexually dissident
>
> practices and identities, so the outlaw status of cyberpunk's protagonist was in
>
> many way ideal for queer/lesbian cyberpunk's own heroes. Furthermore, the
>
> inability to tell if someone's virtual gender reflects their 'real' gender identity,
>
> much less if it is tied to some sort of biological reality, should have also made
>
> cyberpunk a haven for trans sf writers. Yet, despite claims about "spectacularized
>
> gayness", there remains more queer-identified than trans-identified cyberpunk

writing, suggesting there is still a long way to go for cyberpunk to catch up to the

quotidian realities of everyday life. (McFarlane)

Cyberpunk 2077's narrative manages to accomplish this goal by not only letting the

player choose to play a Trans Identifying character, but also by having trans characters

within its story world that make the world just that much bigger.

The world building present in Night City also pushes this narrative of intentional

corruption. Being a place ruled by Corporations, or Corpos, even walking down the street you're

able to see the level of influence these conglomerates have. Ads are plastered nearly everywhere

that it makes it impossible to go longer than 1 minute in Night City without being visually

assaulted by countless ploys and tricks to get you to buy a new product, the latest piece of

cyberware, or even pornography. A large proponent of these ads tends towards the sexual side of

things. Even in todays market "Sex Sells" is a well known staple of cologne or perfume ads to

clothing and even beverages. There is one ad in particular, however, that managed to gain a bit of

notoriety before the game came out. This ad depicted a woman drinking an energy drink with a

portion of the ads image showcasing a very noticeable phallic shaped bulge in her skintight suit.

The reason that this got a lot of traction from audiences was many people claimed it to be

Transphobic. While yes, the ad exploits what would be an in-world Trans Model, and these types

of ads shouldn't be considered good, Polygon Journalist Charlie Hall states in his article that,

"Redesiuk [the ad's artist] said that it was designed to feel jarring and overly aggressive, like all

the other ads in the game, but not because of the femme-presenting trans model. … '*Cyberpunk*

2077 is a dystopian future where megacorporations dictate everything,' … 'They try to, and

successfully, influence people's lives. They shove products down their throats. They create those

very aggressive advertisements that use, and abuse, a lot of people's needs and instincts. So,

hypersexualization is apparent everywhere, and in our ads there are many examples of hypersexualized woman, hypersexualized men, and hypersexualized people in between.'" (Hall) Redesiuk very aptly described the nature of the Cyberpunk world. While this sexualization of a trans person is bad, it's no worse than the countless other ads that depict some order of breast, butt, or bulge. The mere idea that a corporation is capable of viewing a trans model as being profitable, however, speaks to the present state of the world. *Cyberpunk* continues to create an environment so accepting of all walks of life, while at the same time the Corpo's act as a sort of predator. Seeking money when there's blood in the water, and using individuality as a means to profit.

We actually get a slight glimpse behind the Corpo wall in a mission appropriately titled "Violence." In the mission we are introduced to a character that goes by the handle: Lizzy WIzzy. She is a Celebrity that is presently suspicious of her boyfriend and a possible affair taking place. On the surface this mission isn't anything too substantial, the one oddity about this character is that they are covered head to toe in chrome. We learn from in game splash text how this came about:

> The turning point in her career came in 2071, when Lizzy unveiled herself in her
> true cybemodified[sic] form - an erotic re-imagining of Snow White. At the end
> of her concert, Lizzy ate a synthetic apple laced with specially-prepared poison
> that induced cardiac arrest. For a full minute, the LED screens showed a close-up
> of the flat line on her electrocardiogram while her body lay motionless on the
> stage. The concert was put on hold for five and a half hours while a team of
> rippderdocs[sic] swapped out her biological organs for the latest generation of
> MoorE Technologies implants. After being revived, Lizzy sang "Re-start,

Re-heart, Repeat" which sat at the top of the world charts for the next full year. "I

always felt like my mission was to cross the ultimate frontier," she later said in an

interview on N54 News, "That frontier is death." (*Cyberpunk 2077*)

We learn in a gruesome and public display she poisoned herself and had planned to completely

eradicate all parts of herself that were biological. Not to mention she did this all for show and

numbers.

Lizzy's issues only get worse as the mission progresses and we learn that the boyfriend

isn't actually having an affair, but rather in the middle of making a deal to have Lizzy's

personality copied onto an Engram. While this process would kill Lizzy as far as the body is

aware, this would make her copy, or rather her soul, immortal forever, in a state of constant

purgatory. If the player chooses to inform Lizzy of this choice, we are called by her for an

additional portion of the mission in which we see her and the body of her boyfriend in a room.

As we get a feel for the situation we realize that Lizzy lost control of herself and strangled her

boyfriend. Rather than being distraught, this makes Lizzy feel invigorated, saying she has an idea

for another means to gain notoriety. This alludes to the possibility of Lizzy undergoing a form of

cyberpsychosis. Cyberpsychosis being described in game as, "... a collective term for all

psychotic and anxiety-related personality disorders caused by hardware implanted in the body

and any and all behavioral mods, including software." (*Cyberpunk 2077*) While Lizzy's tale is a

long one, it perfectly shows the way that the human body is contorted into a commodity to be

updated and upgraded. This form of gentrification of the human body made it into something to

be gawked or looked at like a spectacle. The warping of the human body with the cyber pairs is

even more proven through Haraway's Cyborg Manifesto when she states, "Communications

sciences and biology are constructions of natural technical objects of knowledge in which the

difference between machine and organism is thoroughly blurred; mind, body, and tool are on very intimate terms. The "multinational" material organization...of daily life and the symbolic organization of the production and reproduction of culture and imagination seem equally implicated." (Haraway 36) The idea of machines and organisms being blurred to the point where it's impossible to determine the nature of the body gives way to a destruction of self. No longer is one able to tell if their body is of their own flesh, of their mind, or just a tool to be altered and upgraded at will and to the satisfaction of others.

Cyberpunk is a setting that holds a very special place in my heart. It's one that never shied away from difficult topics and issues and instead faced them head on. Throughout the story of *Cyberpunk 2077* I fell in love with the diverse set of characters from all walks of life and moral guides. Even now we struggle with many of the primary themes the setting gives us, from corporate greed to our constant desire to appeal to spectacle. At times it's difficult to discern what parts of the world are based in fiction, and what are grim predictions of our own future. To say that the team at CD Projekt Red did a good job depicting Mike Pondsmiths world would be a discredit to the writing team. The amount of life that is brought into a world so devoid of good endings has amazed me to no end. The importance of maintaining ones sense of self despite the growing need to become something alien is made all the more important through this amazing storyworld.

Work Cited

Donna J. Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the
Late Twentieth Century," in Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature
(New York: Routledge, 1991), 149-181.

Militsi, Anna. "Undoing Gender Interpellations in Role-Playing Videogame Spaces: The case of
Cyberpunk 2077 as a case of resistance from a feminist post-constructionist perspective."
(2021).

McFarlane, Anna, et al. *The Routledge Companion to Cyberpunk Culture*. Routledge, 2019.

Hall, Charlie. "CD Projekt Red Explains Controversial Cyberpunk in-Game Ad Featuring Trans
Model." *Polygon*, Polygon, 12 June 2019,
https://www.polygon.com/e3/2019/6/12/18662443/cyberpunk-2077-trans-advertisement-
cd-projekt-red-e3-2019.

Cyberpunk 2077. CD Projekt Red, 2020.