

TAYLANUMUT DOĞAN

PROGRESSIVE GAMEPLAY

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PROGRESSIVE GAMEPLAY: EMERGENT  
ANTICAPITALISM IN STORY-DRIVEN  
VIDEO GAMES

A Master's Thesis

by  
TAYLANUMUT DOĞAN

Department of  
Communication and Design  
İhsan Doğramacı Bilkent University  
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*To the ones who remain at the margins of society*

PROGRESSIVE GAMEPLAY:  
EMERGENT ANTICAPITALISM IN STORY-DRIVEN VIDEO GAMES

The Graduate School of Economics and Social Sciences  
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by

TAYLANUMUT DOĞAN

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November 2023

PROGRESSIVE GAMEPLAY: EMERGENT ANTICAPITALISM IN STORY-  
DRIVEN VIDEO GAMES

By Taylanumut Doğan

I certify that I have read this thesis and have found that it is fully adequate, in scope and in quality, as a thesis for the degree of Master of Arts in Media and Visual Studies.

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Didem Özkul McGeoch  
Advisor

I certify that I have read this thesis and have found that it is fully adequate, in scope and in quality, as a thesis for the degree of Master of Arts in Media and Visual Studies.

-----

Ergin Şafak Dikmen  
Examining Committee Member

I certify that I have read this thesis and have found that it is fully adequate, in scope and in quality, as a thesis for the degree of Master of Arts in Media and Visual Studies.

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Timothy Sean Wright  
Examining Committee Member

Approval of the Graduate School of Economics and Social Sciences

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Refet S. Gürkaynak  
Director

## ABSTRACT

### PROGRESSIVE GAMEPLAY: EMERGENT ANTICAPITALISM IN STORY-DRIVEN VIDEO GAMES

Doğan, Taylanumut

M.A. in Media and Visual Studies

Supervisor: Asst. Prof. Dr. Didem Özkul McGeoch

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This thesis considers the potential of story-driven video games in promoting liberatory discourses. It examines *Cyberpunk 2077*, an action/roleplaying game set in a cyberpunk city rife with violence and social inequality; and *Night in the Woods*, an adventure game about a gothic mystery set in a small Rust Belt town. The thesis adopts a textual and formal approach in conjunction while analyzing the discourses of social liberation and their effectiveness in the interactive yet solitary experience of single-player gameplay through these two video games. In doing so, the thesis adopts a critical theoretical framework that considers these two video games in relation to the Spectacle of capitalist society and the forms of resistance adopted by the Situationist International, as well as the cultural materialist approach of Raymond Williams. Observing these approaches in narrative flow as well as player interactivity, this thesis aims to contribute to the body of thought that evaluates video games as potential sources for discourses of social liberation.

Keywords: Cyberpunk, Gothic, Raymond Williams, Situationist International, Video Game

## ÖZET

### İLERİCİ OYUN: HİKAYE ODAKLI VİDEO OYUNLARINDA GELİŞEN ANTİKAPİTALİZM

Doğan, Taylanumut

Yüksek Lisans, Medya ve Görsel Çalışmalar

Tez Danışmanı: Dr. Öğr. Üyesi Didem Özkul McGeoch

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Bu tez, anlatı temelli video oyunlarının siyaseten özgürleştirici söylemler geliştirmedeki potansiyelini incelemektedir. Bu doğrultuda tez, şiddet ve eşitsizlikle dolu siberpunk bir kentte geçen büyük bütçeli bir aksiyon/rol yapma oyunu olan *Cyberpunk 2077* ; ve Pas Kemerinde geçen, gotik bir gizem anlatısına sahip olan macera oyunu *Night in the Woods* ile ilgilenmektedir. Metinsel ve biçimsel bir yöntemi bir arada benimseyen tezin ana hedefiyse bu iki video oyunu üzerinden, tek kişilik video oyunlarının etkileşimli ama yalnız oynanışlarındaki toplumsal özgürleşme söylemlerinin etkinliğini analiz etmektir. Bu doğrultuda bu iki oyunu kapitalist toplumun Gösterisi ve Durumcu Enternasyonal tarafından benimsenen direniş biçimleri ile Raymond Williams'ın kültürel materyalist yaklaşımıyla bağlantılı olarak ele alan eleştirel bir teorik çerçeve benimsenmiştir. Bu yaklaşımları anlatı akışı ile birlikte oyuncu etkileşimi içerisinde de gözlemleyen bu tez, video oyunlarını toplumsal özgürleşme söylemlerinin potansiyel kaynakları olarak değerlendiren düşünceler bütününe katkıda bulunmayı amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Durumcu Enternasyonal, Gotik, Raymond Williams, Siberpunk, Video Oyunları



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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

With the exception of social components provided in online or multiplayer gameplay, video games provide solitary experiences that might be considered antithetical to political activity, which is characterized by the interrelation of different subjects. Yet as examined by Lefebvre (2014), its potentials explored by Williams (1965) and put into practice by the Situationists (Sadler, 1998), everyday culture and practices can be a political battleground. As such, video games are not bereft of being political, even as their status as works of art may be put into question. Carrying over the interactivity of being both “procedural and participatory” (Bogost, 2007, p. 42) as computer software, video games are uniquely situated as being solitary yet participatory experiences that may simulate social and political themes with the inclusion of player agency within their narratives.

Video games can also be politically conscious, and their conscious influence may even be carried outside of their reflections on screens. On a matchday during the Pride month of 2022, fans of Portland Timbers (a soccer team in the United States) sitting in the stands erected a huge banner of Mae Borowski, the protagonist of *Night*

*in the Woods* (Infinite Fall, 2017). Mae, an anthropomorphized pansexual feline, was represented as holding an axe above her shoulders. This banner was accompanied by two other ones that stated the following pride message: “FROM STONEWALL A BRICK AND PORTLAND AN AXE / RESPECT OUR PRIDE OR EXPECT OUR WRATH” (Gerblick, 2022). In the intersectional spirit of the utilization of the video game as a political signifier for LGBTQIA+ freedom, the video game also deals with the postindustrial decay of Rust Belt towns, issues of the working class, and the politics of being left behind by the system. As suggested by these narrative threads and their relation to linear yet socially conscious gameplay mechanics, the video game provides a politically valuable experience. As such, this thesis attempts to examine the potential of gameplay and interactive narratives in pursuing anti-establishment politics in the context of *Night in the Woods*.

This crowdfunded narrative adventure game was developed by three developers for total funding of 209.375 USD provided by 7372 backers on Kickstarter (n. d.), which is in line with its narrative focus on the margins of society. Yet, another video game with a focus on anti-capitalist themes was developed on the opposite end of the industry. Developed by one of the largest European video game developing companies CD Projekt Red (2020), *Cyberpunk 2077* is set in the universe of the pen-and-paper roleplaying game *Cyberpunk 2020* (Pondsmith et al., 1990). Carrying over the original roleplaying game and its depiction of a dystopian cyberpunk world that values “style over substance” (Pondsmith et al., 1990, p. 4), *Cyberpunk 2077* presents the extreme contradictions within capitalism in a dystopian cyberpunk setting. Perhaps ironically, CD Projekt Red was also involved with over-exploitative labor practices during the development of *Cyberpunk 2077*:

Employees at CD Projekt Red, the Polish studio behind the game, have reportedly been required to work long hours, including six-day weeks, for more than a year. The practice is called “crunch” in the video game industry, and it is sadly all too common. (Hall, 2020)

The ordinariness of such practices in the video game industry was examined by Schreier (2017), and its effects on the process of crafting a video game on the artists and developers were explained (especially in relation to artists with disabilities) with great insight (Stone, 2018). The presence of this trend, while unsurprising in terms of the political economy of capitalism, begs the question of why a video game that deals with anti-capitalist themes is produced by a company such as CD Projekt Red. Beyond the dissonance of the company with regard to its role within global capitalism, and the veil of ideology that makes the present seem the best of possible worlds, this discrepancy leads one to question the worth of an anti-capitalist narrative that is produced within the harsh production processes present within the industry.

As such, this thesis was prompted by the contrasting images of two video games with anti-capitalist themes present in broader anti-establishment sentiments. In comparing these two games with respect to their potential as works that might challenge the conception of capitalism as a force for good, and promoting alternative modes of social and productive organizations, the following research questions are formulated:

RQ1: How do the gameplay mechanics, the gameworld designs, and the aesthetics of *Cyberpunk 2077* and *Night in the Woods* relay to the player the sociopolitical themes of these games?

RQ2: How does the narrative progression of each game allow the player to experience the anti-capitalist themes present?

RQ3: Are these video games politically transformative? If so, how do they achieve this status?

These questions are considered within the boundaries of a textual reading of the two video games in terms of their gameplay mechanics, settings, narratives, and their respective genres. The textual readings are also accompanied by discourses of culture and politics of anti-capitalism as they relate to the video games in question. In an attempt to understand the seeming tension between the textual characteristics of *Cyberpunk 2077* and its process of production, this dystopian video game is considered through the Situationist lens (Sadler, 1998; Debord, 2004; 2005; 2006; Wark, 2013), which tackles inconsequential images of rebellion as part of the broader Spectacle, and provides praxis with a focus on overturning the Spectacle within a capitalist urban environment. As such, the discrepancy of themes and production process being related to the video game's anti-social gameplay that individualizes social struggles is considered in relation to the political consequentiality of its representations. *Night in the Woods* remains as the source of a contrasting image of politically conscious gameplay, which is considered in relation to building social coalitions in everyday life against the dominance of global capitalism, urban decay, and nostalgia-fueled reactionary politics. Considered through the cultural materialist lens of Williams (1965; 1977), as well as the Situationist strategies such as the *dérive* (Debord, 2006) and *détournement* (Novotny, 1998), the video game's potential to represent emergent cultures and potentially influence their reproduction in real life is considered through an analysis that merges progressive discourses with gameplay mechanics, socially realistic representations of towns and denizens, as well as the interactivity of the narrative in broader terms.

To this end, the following CHAPTER 2 considers the broader discussions present in the field of video game studies. Beginning from the early discussions on video games

and their function as narrative texts and interactive software, the literature review considers the political and philosophical discussions relating to video games, and their role as the ideological tool of global capitalism, as well as their potential in promoting liberatory discourses. CHAPTER 3 outlines the theoretical frame of this thesis with an emphasis on the 20th-century Western Marxist approaches that originated from texts relating to culture and its dialectical relationship with the socioeconomic characteristics of society. To this end, the theoretical framework focuses on the Situationist strategies as their focus on the practices of everyday life provides a fitting frame for the consideration of video games as interactive and political narratives. For similar reasons, Williams (1965) and his approach to culture that emphasizes the pluralities within the dominant culture, as well as his ruminations on the potential of emergent cultures is adopted. CHAPTER 4 characterizes the approach of this thesis by establishing its formal (Vught, 2022) and fragmented textual approach (Carr, 2019). The following chapters analyze the two video games in question through the aforementioned theoretical background and methodology as its basis. CHAPTER 5 broaches the gameworlds of both video games while also considering the exploration mechanics presented to the players, as well as the political characteristics of these aspects. The following CHAPTER 6 considers the relevant side-narratives present within the two video games in the context of these mechanics, essentially observing the political implications of the gameplay as it is realized within small narratives. CHAPTER 7 approaches the main plots of *Cyberpunk 2077* and *Night in the Woods* in relation to the contrasting representations of death as an individual experience versus a social one, as well as the politics of hope present in the endings that can be achieved by the players.



Consequently, this thesis attempts to analyze the potential of anti-capitalist and broadly anti-hegemonic discourses in video games, while also considering the issues of representing dystopian narratives versus grounded and ordinary ones and the political implications of this choice. In addition to this, the thesis aims to consider the limits of employing broad scales in gameplay that provide narrative content on a massive scale not unlike a theme park, while also pursuing the value of pointed and contained experiences of gameplay. All in all, this thesis attempts to contribute to the understanding of what constitutes a politically conscious video game, and promote video games that seek to utilize the unique interactive quality of the medium to provide experiences that challenge exploitative social hierarchies.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### 2.1. Ludology and Narratology

This thesis focuses on the unique role of players, gameplay loops, and their functions in *Cyberpunk 2077* and *Night in the Woods*. It treats these processes as part of the narrative experiences in which interactivity is only one part of the story. This approach therefore decidedly takes a position in one of the central points of discussion present in game studies, namely the one between narratology and ludology. In light of this, it is pertinent to approach video game scholarship initially on this divide between ludology and narratology, as this difference in approaches is quite central to understanding what kinds of media video games are. Although many later considered this point of discussion to be an artificial divide, it still merits consideration due to its centrality to video game studies and its defining role in gauging the medium's proximity to literature and film.

##### 2.1.1. Ludology

Approaches that consider video games as non-narrative experiences of play from the point of view of the player (referred to as “ludological approaches” from here

onwards) consider video games through their medium-specific qualities, their interactivity being regarded as one of the most prominent of these aspects possessed by the medium. Similar to how a game played by children in a playground is based on a set of rules, so are video games based on a computational set of rules and systems on which interactivity depends. Ludological approaches naturally prioritize these sets of rules and the continuous calculations of a video game in their approach toward the medium. Essentially, they are based on the ontological situating of games as a medium that is based on calculable rules; as a system rather than a narrative story.

By the turn of the 21st century, this focus on the act of play and the players drove a turn away from literary methods that had been common in game studies until that point. Frasca (1999) argued that games are not narratives as far as the player is concerned, as they are, quite critically, embedded within the process rather than remaining on the outside looking in. During this period when ludology grew as a reaction to the narratological approaches commonly used in game studies, Juul (2001) suggested that “there is an inherent conflict between the *now* of the interaction and the *past* or ‘*prior*’ of the narrative”. While conceding that elements of narrative were present in video games with elements such as cutscenes or worldbuilding, Juul (2001) hypothesized a conflict between narratives and player interaction with video games. This tension between the necessary historicity of narratives and the story-in-the-making aspect of videogames is resolved as such: “a videogame is an act of narration, in the now” (Cassidy, 2011, p. 303). The conception of play as a separate category of human experience is not a new development, as it is seen in Huizinga’s (1938/2002) modernist cultural study on

play titled *Homo Ludens*, which treats the act of play as an almost intrinsic part of humanity. Huizinga (2002) notes that “genuine, pure play is one of the main bases of civilization” (p. 5). The relevance of Huizinga’s conception of play to contemporary ludology is playfully referred to as “a playful specter is haunting the world” (Frissen et al., 2015). In an approximation of Huizinga’s view of play by postmodernism, Minnema (1998) similarly argued that postmodern culture itself is “a game without an overall aim” (p. 21). Molded by the structure of a video game, this approach gained an important role in considering video games as a medium that deals primarily with gameplay as opposed to narrative, as more traditional forms of media such as novel or film does. Consequently, ludological approaches that prioritize rules, gameplay and game for game’s sake are based both on the anthropological imperative towards playing as suggested by Huizinga (2002), as well as the supposed dissolution of grand narratives as seen in the postmodern epoch, which relegates narratives to the background while processes come to the fore.

Although the primary focus of ludology has been the focus on video games as systems with mechanical rules, there has also been a reaction to this conception of video games as well. Vargas-Iglesias and Navarrete-Cardero (2019) took a “cybersemiotic perspective” (p. 587), which broadens the focus of ludology towards human interaction with machines. This approach is borne out of the perceived absence of a clearly defined and uncontested definition of what gameplay mechanics constitute in ludological approaches. As noted by Vargas-Iglesias and Navarrete-Cardero (2019); Sicart (2008) and Järvinen (2008) provide contested definitions of gameplay, with Sicart (2008) conceiving of gameplay mechanics as tools created for interaction with the game world, and Järvinen (2008) approaching gameplay

mechanics as constraints and walls put up in the way of the player to guide them (Vargas-Iglesias & Navarete-Cardero, 2019).

Sicart's (2008) approach conceives of mechanics as starting out from scratch and building towards something, while Järvinen (2008) conceives of mechanics as the limits put on a boundless game-world. The difference between these approaches are arguably a result of the lack of consideration for the game development procedures and processes, which the approach brought about by Vargas-Iglesias and Navarrete-Cardero (2019) attempts to make up for. By referring to the automatic and hard-coded parts of a game that always occur ("overcoded abduction"), one of several choices made by the game depending on the situation ("undercoded abduction") and mechanics produced on the go, ("creative abduction") (p. 594), they approach video games from a software development perspective, which is one of the possible logical ends of ludological approaches. Approaches that consider video games from their development process onwards are also found in the work of Bogost (2007). Referring to "game engines, frameworks, and other common groupings" (Bogost, 2007, p. 14), considers "procedural tropes" (p. 14) as the building blocks and frameworks for video games. This is considered similar to how "the sonnet, the short story, or the feature film" (Bogost, 2007, p. 14) provides frameworks for works of literature and film, which inform the later groupings of video games in genres.

### **2.1.2. Constructing Genres**

The mechanic-focused approach of Vargas-Iglesias and Navarrete-Cardero (2019) takes on genre "as the main interactive unit of video games", which they attempt to define through the previously described categorization of gameplay mechanics. This

is based on their disposition to being automated, contingent, or creatively produced at a given moment. This approach can be traced back to Wolf (2001), who suggests that the centrality of interaction prevents narrative genres from becoming the dominant approach to video game genres. Instead, Wolf (2001) constructs forty-two genres that classify what Clearwater (2019) considers to be early video games, which consist mostly of games from the 1970s and 1980s. Although the approaches taken by Wolf (2001) and Vargas-Iglesias and Navarrete-Cardero (2019) are quite distinct—in that the latter approaches the issue of the genre from a point of view of game development—they nevertheless consider gameplay mechanics and elements as their core for constructing genres. Similarly, Bogost (2007) suggests “procedural genres” (p. 14) which are based on the previously mentioned procedural tropes found in the development process of video games.

Aarseth (1997) adopted the concept of the cybertext as the basis for video games as calculations generating signs (Van Vught, 2022), which makes the question of what kinds of formations are commonly seen a critical matter in approaching video games. Of course, tracing common formations while categorizing them brings the question of the genre to the fore, as such conceptions of genre play an important role in considering the game systems, sets of rules, and conventions that make up the medium. Prominent ludologists attempted to establish a commonly accepted typology of video games based on their approaches to space, time, player structure, control, and rules (Aarseth et al. 2003), which has been challenged and modified since (Elverdam & Aarseth, 2007). Outside of the casual and commonly understood categories of video games such as action / role-playing games or adventure games, this classification attempted to establish far less subjective categories, most of which

depend on easily answerable yes/no questions. For instance, according to Elverdam and Aarseth (2007), both *Cyberpunk 2077* and *Night in the Woods* would be teleologically finite games as they have a clear ending to them, while the space flight simulation game *Elite: Dangerous* (Frontier Developments, 2014) is teleologically infinite due to its unending gameplay.

However, even though these categories can be clearly understood and games sorted through them with relative ease, the way these categories are combined and the meanings attached to them are nevertheless dependent on subjective opinions. As such, they are not able to establish a commonly understood typology of video games outside of their individual elements. In recent years, there have been genre-specific studies such as the one made by Dor (2018), which questions what makes a strategy game deserving of the label, and Therrien (2015), who traced the history of first-person-shooter games and the discourses surrounding them. While setting out from casual and commonly utilized definitions of genres, these approaches nevertheless have the potential to establish holistic views of genre as they consider both the player communities, the journalistic reactions, and developmental procedures. Similarly, there are approaches to classification that somehow sidestep this issue by considering the player communities and publishing strategies into account: “It is evident that genre classifications and labels are as much ‘bottom-up’ products of a community as they are ‘top-down’ taxonomies” (Clarke et al., 2017). Therefore, genres are better understood as holistic formations that, in addition to the intrinsic qualities of games, are based on player communities, publishing strategies, and journalistic discourses. This necessitates that they always remain in flux and outside of the categories proposed by Aarseth et al. (2003) and Frasca (2003).

The ludologists' approach to genre has been contrasted by the more multi-disciplinary approach of Burn and Carr (2006), which is based on Bakhtin (1981) and his conception of literary genre as a constant dialogue between the artist and the audience, as well as the social context surrounding them. Accordingly, Burn and Carr (2006) consider role-playing games in relation to their audiences and the themes present in their worldbuilding, such as the prevalence of fantasy settings. This multi-pronged approach helps construct an understanding of genre that is more holistic than the ludological line that considers structures and elements in isolation. One of the most interesting recent contributions to the issue of genre in video game studies has been made by Voorhees (2019), who suggests that the trouble with establishing commonly accepted video game genres is intrinsically related to the frozen debate between ludology and narratology. As opposed to the ludological approach to genre, Voorhees (2019) proposes what they describe as an "agonistic line", which is "a competing history of genre characterized by pluralism and discursivity and loosely organized around notions of interaction and gameplay" (p. 17). Removing the discussion of genre from the focus on a given game's "structure and elements — particularly its rules—" (Frasca, 2003, p. 222), Voorhees (2019) instead broaches genre from the point of view of the opposition between ludological and narrative-oriented scholarship. Partly inspired by Burn and Carr (2006), as well as Miller's (1984) essay with the self-descriptive title "Genre as Social Action", Voorhees (2019) considers narrative-oriented analyses and ludological analyses as irreconcilable positions which inform an "intersection" that considers "how human motives conjoin with material and social contexts; understanding the mutually constitutive relationship between reflecting and shaping society" (p. 31). Narrative-



oriented approaches such as this one take on video games as artistic texts that are part of the broader social issues and contexts, which allows these analyses to move beyond how mechanics in video games interact with one another and the player. They consider video games as cohesive systems that are juxtaposed with other video games in terms of their approach to broader social relations in establishing genres.

## **2.2. Video Games as Narrative Texts**

The recent challenges to ludological approaches from the narrative-oriented camp have often been related to the proliferation of genres that offer cohesive narrative experiences that are inevitably informed by existing social and political realities and capable of producing discourses that relate to the broader society. Narrative approaches are especially relevant for video games categorized as “walking simulators”, which contain “minimal game mechanics and little mechanical difficulty” (Mitchell et al., 2020). Among these are games such as *What Remains of Edith Finch* (Giant Sparrow, 2017) which provides a “hybrid ludic/literary experience” and “foreground[s] reading by engaging with various literary structures, themes, forms and genres” (Bozdog & Galloway, 2020, p. 223). Similarly, *Firewatch* (Campo Santo, 2016) “problematizes toxic masculinity” through its focus on the dialogues between a firewatcher and the conversations they have with their supervisor through radio (Kagen, 2018). Through its representation of LGBTQIA+ themes and characters through exploration, *Gone Home* (The Fullbright Company, 2013) and its “queer wandering” (Ruberg, 2020, p. 633) have been a point of discussion. The scholarship around games such as these inevitably puts focus on the previously described literary or social themes they engage with, as the limited gameplay mechanics they utilize are put in the service of their narratives, which

serves to shift the discourse around these games to narrative-oriented approaches described here.

### **2.2.1. Narrative Agency and Consequences**

The previously described scholarship had been dedicated to games that have mostly linear narratives that put them in line with what has been described as a literary experience (Bozdog & Galloway, 2020). Yet there is also narrative scholarship that focuses specifically on video games which are reliant on branching narratives that are influenced by player action. Ranging from episodic graphic adventure games such as *Life is Strange* (Dontnod Entertainment, 2015) to science-fiction action/role-playing game *Mass Effect* (BioWare, 2007), these video games are often considered outside of the purely literary approach to narratives, including the role of player agency in shaping narratives as well. Bringing us back into the discussion of whether narratives necessarily exist in the past (Juul, 2001), or whether there can be narratives in the present, shaped by the player (Cassidy, 2011); these video games and the discourses surrounding them are decidedly a topic of discussion for narrative-oriented approaches as the interactivity present in narratives provides novel ways of approaching them. Approaching the “biographical time travel” (De Miranda, 2018, p. 828) present in *Life is Strange* (Dontnod Entertainment, 2015), De Miranda (2018) applies the perspective of Sartre and his existentialism to the role of the player in a narrative:

Even if everything is coded in the game of life by a godlike scriptwriter, human agents can still rebel against alienation. They must cocreate a meaning that is not always rationally predictable, evaluate their existence, and form projects. (p. 827)

De Miranda (2018) applies this concept of freedom within constraints to *Life is Strange* (2015), the narrative of which revolves around time travel and fixing the

mistakes of the past. Accordingly, this functions as a metaphor for narrative agency, which has hard limits created by video game developers, yet these very constraints are regarded as an opportunity for players to conceive meanings for themselves. Similar to Burn and Carr (2006), De Miranda's (2018) approach is especially salient in considering the narrative agency presented in *Cyberpunk 2077* and *Night in the Woods*, since these games present political narratives that consider whether it is possible to resist or overcome the existing sociopolitical order. This theme is especially receptive to the questions of narrative agency and the limits of player control over a given narrative, as the rebellious protagonists supposedly work against the established order of the world, and the narrative limits placed upon the player inform whether they can succeed or not.

Fittingly, the limits of narrative agency and the ethics of choice-making are often considered by philosophers and scholars of philosophy through role-playing games where choice-making plays an important role in narratives such as *Cyberpunk 2077*. Through the final choice of *Cyberpunk 2077*, Mihai Burlacu (2021) considers the representation, or rather, the imitation of free will present within narratives that include choices on the part of the player. Considering the episodic graphic adventure series *The Walking Dead* (Telltale Games, 2012), Stang (2019) considers the illusion of player choice and how it is maintained in a video game where the narrative supposedly depends on player actions: "while the sensation of agency is cogent in *The Walking Dead*, many of the decisions offered to the player are actually false choices because the different options eventually lead to (mostly) the same outcome". Similarly, arguing against the assumption that choice-making mechanics mean freedom for the player, Arsenault and Perron (2009) put the assumption that video

games are an interactive medium under duress, referring to a video game as being “a chain of reaction” (p. 119) as opposed to being genuinely interactive. They argue for considering the supposed interactivity present in video games as “inter(re)activity” (p. 120) with respect to the gameplay limitations put in place by developers in anticipation of player actions. This ludological argument is in conflict with the previously described narrative and player-oriented approach of De Miranda (2018), who derived player freedom from the narrative limitations, suggesting that players are able to wrest new meanings from the narratives limited by writers and game developers.

However, there have also been attempts at drawing boundaries around player agency in relation to morality, especially prominently observed in some role-playing games. As noted by Stang (2019), role-playing games such as *Dragon Age* (BioWare, 2009 - 2014) employ quantified relationships between the player character and their NPC companions with unique personalities and dialogues, which is at least partly determined by player choice across the story. This is one of the ways in which the video game derives consequences from player choice and allows for complex relationships between the player and their companions at the same time. *Pillars of Eternity II: Deadfire* (Obsidian Entertainment, 2018) takes this one step further by also quantifying the feelings companions have towards each other, in addition to the player character. However, there have also been some attempts at quantifying ethics on the part of player agency. This is a unique convergence of gameplay mechanics and character development in the form of what could be described as quantified morality on the part of the player character. Critical of this practice, Sicart (2009) refers to *Fable* (Big Blue Box, 2004) and another BioWare title, *Knights of the Old*

*Republic* (2003), both of which utilize a binary morality system of good and evil: “Because the choices [the players] make are going to be measured and evaluated by the game system, moral choice no longer implies a reflection upon their actions, but rather a strategy, another token in the world of the game” (p. 211). Similarly, *Mass Effect* (BioWare, 2007) adopts a “paragon/renegade” system, (Schulzke, 2009) which functions as representations of action hero archetypes with one functioning as a traditional hero, and the other as a ruthless anti-hero. There is a multitude of reactions towards morality meters from the point of view of the players. As noted by a survey of players, some players take morality meters “as a moral guide” while others as “a score”, yet others did not enjoy a binary system judging their actions (Formosa et al., 2022, pp. 116-117). This form of quantified approach to ethics and morality is not present in either *Night in the Woods* or *Cyberpunk 2077*. However, the absence of such systems is relevant in considering the more nuanced approaches taken by these video games in their narratives and player agency.

### **2.2.2. Worldbuilding and Environmental Storytelling**

Outside of the limits of player agency, player character development, and interactivity in narratives, narrative-oriented scholarship has also focused on the unique potential video games have exhibited in establishing deep settings. As noted by Jenkins (2004), “game designers don't simply tell stories; they design worlds and sculpt spaces” (p. 121). These worlds, however, are themselves another outlet for storytelling, outside of the traditional written texts and dialogues, yet in tandem with these aspects of the narrative. This is not a novel development in storytelling, since the concept of environmental storytelling is derived from theme parks and the way they weave stories without ever utilizing written or spoken language (Carson, 2000).

However, there is also a literary past to this aspect of video games: “Games fit within a much older tradition of spatial stories, which have often taken the form of hero's odysseys, quest myths, or travel narratives” (Jenkins, 2004, p. 122). This literary connection is relevant for many video games that prioritize worldbuilding, such as the Tolkien-influenced setting (Martin, 2011) of *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2006), or the Rust Belt setting of *Night in the Woods*. Ewan Kirkland (2021) considers the environmental design of *Night in the Woods* as a representative of the American Gothic. In addition to its plot oriented around the mystery of a missing person (Infinte Fall, 2017), this exploration-oriented adventure game also focuses on environmental storytelling through its setting, the Rust Belt town of Possum Springs, which is “unmistakably North American” with its “rail car diner, subterranean pretzel stand and shopping centre” (Kirkland, 2021, p. 103). According to Kirkland (2021), the setting also helps accentuate the relationship between the protagonist and the setting, which is established through an exploration of the town, whereby the setting itself becomes a character to engage with. Similarly, Martin (2011) suggests that the binary of the pastoral and the hell-inspired settings provided in *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2006) helps serve to visually establish the central conflict of the narrative, wherein “the bucolic, pre-industrial repose of Tamriel is threatened by an industrial Oblivion” (Martin, 2011). Returning to the earlier mention of walking simulators and their inherent literary qualities, it is noted that environmental storytelling occupies an important role in establishing them. According to Bozdog and Galloway (2020), walking simulators “creatively engage with the narrative potential of this environment through extensive use of environmental storytelling and rely heavily on text (written or verbal), sound, and music alongside visuals for creating atmosphere” (p. 792).

Accordingly, sound design is as much a part of environmental storytelling in video games as visual cues are. As considered by Kjeldgaard-Christiansen and Hejná (2022) in their study on the vocal performances of characters in *Disco Elysium* (ZA/UM, 2019), voice acting can help establish the setting and distinguish characters, their origins, and class backgrounds among other things. Similarly, soundtracks can also establish settings and distinguish parts of the world presented (Stevens, 2021), functioning as yet another tool for establishing a layered setting as part of the narrative of a video game.

Moving beyond the detail-oriented environmental storytelling present in video games, taking stock of the broader picture of the expansive settings presented in many video games is also a common point of consideration (Bartle, 2003; Latorre, 2015). One of the purposes of the environmental design of a video game is to provide an outlet for narratives outside of the plot, as seen in the proliferation of fictional histories and codexes present in many narrative-oriented video games:

Most of the codex entries refer to historical matters or are at least historically oriented. Additionally, many of the characters Shepard interacts with function as “living codices” providing hard information about the universe or merely glimpses into the lives of its exotic alien societies. (Carvalho, 2015, p. 130)

Moreover, Carvalho (2015) considers the historicity of the worldbuilding seen in this science-fiction role-playing video game *Mass Effect* (BioWare, 2007), arguing that the world (or rather, the galaxy) it is set in is mired in a reproduction of the liberal assumptions about the future, and the romanticization of the space race. Similarly, Patterson (2015) considers the same series from the point of view of its representation of multiculturalism, through its representations of alien civilizations and their co-existence in a dangerous setting. Taking on the fantasy role-playing setting of *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2021), Bjørkelo

(2020) considers the representations of fantasy race relations and the apparent white nationalist affinity for the role-playing game. These aspects of broader worldbuilding are often considered in the context of paratextuality (Švelch, 2020), as the broad worldbuilding aspects of a video game sometimes exist not for narrative purposes, but to help establish living virtual worlds with histories of their own (Carvalho, 2015). Dwyer (2022), for instance, considers a singular aspect of living worlds, the representation of sex work as seen in *WATCH\_DOGS 2* (Ubisoft Montreal, 2016), which is a relevant point of discussion for *Cyberpunk 2077* as well. Dwyer (2022) approaches this topic from the point of view of sound design. All of these suggest a fragmented view of worldbuilding and the game development process, consequently requiring broad analyses drawing from distinct aspects of video games.

### **2.3. Critical Approaches to Video Games**

Before venturing forth to the critical approaches as present in the narratives of video games, it is pertinent to discuss critical approaches to the medium itself. Among the most prolific of these is Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter's *Games of Empire* (2009). Partly inspired by Hardt and Negri's analysis of imperialism after the Cold War, and their conception of immaterial labor in *Empire* (2000), Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter (2009) considered themselves to be taking a third position separate from the scholarly works that condemn video games as a whole medium, and those who celebrate it as worthy and therefore deserving of scholarly attention. This third position is described as a form of "critical political analysis" (p. xxvi), which could be considered an appropriate dubbing for the prolific works of scholars such as Wark (2007) and Bogost (2007; 2015). Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter (2009) approach the medium as an industry with interests aligned with the rest of global capitalism, its



protectors and beneficiaries. This approach is as valid as it has always been, as encapsulated in the uncritical depiction of the United States military, warfare, and torture as seen in several blockbuster military first-person shooter video games (Donald, 2019). Beyond the critique of gameplay violence as seen in the earlier reactions to combat-oriented video games, this approach questions the power relations behind game development and asks which instances of violence are glorified. A relevant counter to the industry's broader glorification of militarism comes in the form of another military shooter titled *Spec Ops: The Line* (Yager Development, 2012). This third-person shooter "depicts the breakdown of soldiers within the game world" (Donald, 2019, p. 376) as they commit war crimes in the form of using chemical weapons on civilians. The effect of this game is described as a "positive discomfort" (Jørgensen, 2016) on part of the player, and in line with Sicart's (2009) conception of ethical game design, as the player is made to feel the consequences of their violent actions. This is in contrast with *America's Army* (United States Army, 2002-2022), which propagates the following: "the U.S. Army recruit, one learns from *America's Army*, is an apolitical being" (Bogost, 2007, p. 77). This contrast is especially relevant in considering the depiction of violence in *Cyberpunk 2077*, as it occupies an interesting space in that it presents a non-critical representation of violence, yet the narrative is seemingly not in service of the existing global political and economic order. In fact, it presents an anti-capitalist facade.

Moving away from the industry, Wark (2007) approaches video games as atopian experiences wherein the gamespace is both representative of various social relations and contexts while also being removed from them; representing without substance, in

a sense: “The gamer struggles to make of the game a separate world, for escape, for critique, for atopian play, and yet gamespace insinuates itself into the game” (Wark, 2007, p. 42). Beyond trying to come to terms with the non-work aspects of playing video games (Wilkie, 2016) with their social and political relevance, Wark (2007) also draws attention to the overturning of the Situationist praise of play as opposed to work: “While the counter-culture wanted worlds of play outside the game, the military entertainment complex countered in turn by expanding the game to the whole world, containing play forever within it” (p. 16). This dystopian conception of video games, reminiscent of the cyberpunk futures of the digital world as the space for limitless growth for capitalism (Schweighauser, 2015) presents a bleak picture for the counter-cultural potential of the medium.

### **2.3.1. Liberatory Discourses in Video Games**

However, there has been another strand which considers video games as potentially politically liberatory. As stated by Bogost (2011), “one of the unique properties of videogames is their ability to put us in someone else’s shoes” (p. 18). Much like the previously discussed *Spec Ops: The Line* (Yager Development 2012), *Papers, Please* (Pope, 2013) places the player in the shoes of an oppressive apparatus of the state, this time in the form of an immigration officer. Morissette (2017) considers this video game from the point of view of the conflict between “moral concerns” and “obedience, rationality, and efficiency”, deeming it a philosophical video game as the quandaries it places the player require soul-searching as the game proceeds. Moral quandaries where player agency is forced to tread between the player’s own conscience and the morally questionable narrative furthered by game mechanics lead the player to actively politicize their thoughts and actions, which makes such video

games politically enticing.

On another front, there are many video games that attempt to engage the player through identification with the protagonist and the resulting affection. For instance, these empathic qualities of video games allow players to explore friendships in an immersive manner. Considering *Life is Strange* (Dontnod Entertainment, 2015) and *Night in the Woods*, Harkin (2020) approaches the empathic qualities of these video games and their potential to represent female friendships. As both games feature protagonists on the edge of adolescence and adulthood, Harkin (2020) emphasizes the liminality of the relationships they represent, both of which are estranged friends attempting to reconnect. Harkin (2020) considers these games as “productive representations of adolescent girlhood” (p. 127). As the political themes of *Night in the Woods* is inherently related to the personal relationships and the affection shown to the community of characters presented in the game, it is extremely relevant in discussions of anti-hegemonic narratives present within the game.

Focusing on the inner world of the player character of *Night in the Woods*, Consalvo and Phelps (2020) attempt to relate the cosmic horror of the game with the class character of the protagonist, recontextualizing the “mentally tortured Gothic protagonist” (Kirkland, 2021, p. 106) as someone who suffers because of her class character. Similarly, the protagonist of *Cyberpunk 2077* is depicted as being mentally unstable due to their split personality. Similar to the depictions of friendships, these inner conflicts also serve to establish affection with the protagonists in a way that allows the player to identify with them. In tandem with the previously described elements of video games such as worldbuilding and environmental storytelling, the

player is potentially led to a great degree of identification with the struggles of the protagonist in a way that is harder for other forms of media to replicate.

The deeply political story of “rural marginalisation under capitalism, mental illness, horror, desperation and hope” (Veale, 2021, p. 2) present in *Night in the Woods* and the similarly political narrative of corporate oppression and personal resistance found in *Cyberpunk 2077* are both realized for the player through affective materiality, which is described by Veale (2021) as follows:

Affective materiality is a tool for exploring how engaging with textual structures shapes the affective experience of a story. The experience of video games is distinctive because their modes of engagement can lead to players feeling responsible for the decisions they make within the diegetic space of the game and its contextual storyworld. (p. 13)

The layers of textual structures present within the video game, and the player interaction required to engage with these structures form an affection between the player, the protagonist, significant characters, and the setting. As noted by Burgess and Jones (2020), this affection can sometimes even manifest as quasi-romantic feelings. This is in relation to the previously discussed immaterial labor present in playing video games, which according to Wilkie (2016) covers the following:

“‘Play,’ in other words, encapsulates the supposedly immaterial logic of cognitive capitalism in the sense that creativity cannot be separated from the worker” (p. 117).

This highlights the effect of investing one’s time on a given text and the affection born out of this laborious activity, which is arguably what can make video games artistic works worthy of consideration. As stated by Nguyen (2020), “Art can be morally and politically active; it can be personally and morally transformative” (p. 167), which emphasizes the counter-hegemonic potential of video games. In line with this idea, this thesis attempts to explore the counter-hegemonic potential of

video games in a critical approach to narrative and gameplay. In doing this, this thesis takes inspiration from De Miranda's (2018) approach to narrative that prioritizes players' construction of meanings, as well as Carvalho's (2015) approach to worldbuilding and the distinct critical approaches provided by Wark (2007) and Bogost (2007).

## CHAPTER 3

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

#### **3.1. *Cyberpunk 2077* and the Situationist Lens of the Genre and the Medium**

##### **3.1.1. Cyberpunk and the Spectacle**

Cyberpunk is a politically charged convergence of science fiction and dystopia, and as such, works in this genre have conventionally worked as commentaries on the future of capitalism. Often intrinsically critical of capitalism, if not outright hostile towards the social and economic order, cyberpunk is a genre that represents (often critically) the intensifying social alienation and the unrestricted monopolization of economic life, which subsumes all other social existence unto itself. Essentially, cyberpunk imagines a dictatorship of the bourgeois that cuts out the intermediary of the nation-state, shaping all parts of social and economic life according to its goals. Considering *Neuromancer* by William Gibson (1984/1994), one of the genre-defining texts of cyberpunk, Schweighauser (2015) suggests that it imagines “the possibility of a limitless space into which capital can expand to escape its own inherent contradiction of overaccumulation” (p. 212). Emphasizing the possibility of capitalism overcoming the inherent self-contradictions it possesses, Schweighauser (2015) argues that the cyberpunk future as depicted by Gibson's works as a dystopian

one, a future where the monopolistic capitalism has the possibility of growing indefinitely into the limitless cyberspace, which replaces the material world as the primary area of lived space. Similarly, Brande (1994) notes that Gibson's protagonists are depicted as "console cowboys" (p. 510), who traverse, unlike the lands expropriated during the Westward Expansion of the United States, a limitless expanse of space no limit to the actions of those who are jacked into the cyberworld exists. This imagination of the cyberworld as a limitless expanse also imagines capitalism in a constant state of expansion. This state of being is impossible to realize for contemporary capitalism: the past frontiers have been integrated into the system through colonialism, and all that remains are the internal contradictions of capitalism looking for release: "There is, under such circumstances, no long-run spatial fix to capitalism's internal contradictions" (Harvey, 1981, p. 9). Cyberpunk and its ethereal yet material (in the Marxian sense) cyberworld, therefore, posits a "spatial-fix" (Harvey, 1981, p. 9): a representation of the fantasy of an eternal frontier. It is the perfect setting for the reification of capitalism, "transform[ing] human desires and even all of nature for the sake of its own maximal valorization" (Saito, 2017, p. 100).

Cyberpunk's reification takes the form of Debord's (2005) concept of the Spectacle.

While explaining how ideologies function, Debord (2005) states the following:

"They represent a distorted consciousness of realities, and as such they have been real factors that have in turn produced real distorting effects" (p. 116). The material reality is constantly reproduced according to how it is understood, which is mediated through ideology. Consequently, this reproduction of material reality itself functions as a shaper of history. Debord (2005) considers this symbiotic relationship between the ideal and the material through the concept of the Spectacle, which is the distorted

reality asserting itself materially; the world being shaped in the way it is conceived of by false consciousness. Debord's conception of the Spectacle attempts to overcome historical materialism as proposed in the Theses on Feuerbach, which according to Debord, "idealizes matter" (2005, p. 117). Debord's realignment of materialism and idealism recognizes that idealism becomes concrete through cultural activities informed by the false consciousness, after which point it stops being simply false consciousness and becomes a materially present part of life (Debord, 2005). As such, the Spectacle itself potentially becomes the primary mediator between individuals and the wider world: "separation has built its own world" (Debord, 2005, p. 118). Cyberpunk should be considered as a fictional representation of this function of the Spectacle, as a future of capitalism constructed according to the capitalist ideology present today. The genre's focus does not simply represent capitalism as it is, but attempts to imagine its futures while being tapped into the ideology of late-stage capitalism, with its abandonment of the urban commons (Harvey, 2012) and the representation of the fictitiousness of the possibility for endless economic growth (Harvey, 1981). As such, this is what allowed cyberpunk to critique capitalism as a historical entity with a past and a future rather than a static entity stuck in the present. Cyberpunk is therefore a genre about the future of unchallenged Spectacle, as much as it is about post-humanism and the deepening of the contradictions of capitalism in the bottomless pit of the cyberworld.

### **3.1.2. *Détournement* without Consciousness**

This is one of the reasons behind cyberpunk's seemingly prophetic qualities, as the trajectory of capitalism which has been observed since the emergence of cyberpunk has led some to declare that "we are living in cyberpunk futures" (Murphy &



Schmeink, 2018, p. XXVI). Technology monopolies are seen as existential threats to the existing forms of democracy because of their unprecedented control over the flow of information (Fukuyama et al. 2021), and their increasing influence over government policy (Popiel, 2018) causes distress for the proponents of liberal democracy. These growing similarities themselves are often subsumed by the Spectacle, with the neon-adorned cutting-edge aesthetics of cyberpunk being reproduced in real life as aesthetic expressions devoid of political intentions, but not free of political consequences. One of the most prominent examples of this turn in cyberpunk expressions in the medium of video games is *Cyberpunk 2077*. This approach to the video game in question constitutes one of the focal points of this study. In many ways, the expression of cyberpunk aesthetics detached from its political core is an appropriation of a certain situationist praxis called *détournement*, which is “the reuse of preexisting artistic elements in a new ensemble” (Situationist International, 2006). As a form of praxis, *détournement* seeks to subvert the intended meanings of compositions, creating different meanings out of the same parts of a composition. The Situationist International considered *détournement* as “a collage aesthetic that involved the appropriation and recombination of cultural fragments that transformed their original meaning” (Novotny, 1998, p. 100). *Cyberpunk 2077* taps into the well of cyberpunk, seemingly appropriating and repurposing the aesthetic and ideological tropes of the genre, which is why its juxtaposition with *détournement* as an SI praxis is relevant for this study.

### **3.1.3. Psychogeography and the Open World**

Urbanism and its relation with living (gameplay in this instance) occupies a central point of situationist theories and praxis, which is the reason applying them to an

open-world video game such as *Cyberpunk 2077* is especially apt. As one such concept, psychogeography originated in situationist praxis as a way of analyzing the effect urban spaces have on emotions and the psychological state of being (Debord, 2006). In part, this effort was borne out of a need to make more sense of another situationist practice called *dérive* (Sadler, 1998). Referring to the practice of letting the city guide oneself without any preexisting purpose, the practice of *dérive* sought to find gaps in the capitalist urban society. In practice, *dérive* probes the city for understanding, and tries to divorce the setting from the functions attached to it by the capitalist society. Taking this anti-organizational and purely impulsive practice, psychogeography attempts to place *dérive* in a more systematic rethinking of organizing urban environments. This effort to understand the connection between the urban space and the individual led to imaginative mapping practices that sought to deviate from the needs of the capitalist society. Sadler (1998) states the following on this method: “On the one hand it recognized that the self cannot be divorced from the urban environment; on the other hand, it had to pertain to more than just the psyche of the individual if it was to be useful in the collective rethinking of the city” (p. 77). In line with the theme of reconciling overarching systems with the emancipated individual seen in many of the theories and the concepts of the Situationist International (which in turn points to a reconciliation of Marxist and anarchist approaches to emancipation from capitalism), psychogeography is a form of praxis that seeks to do away with the bourgeois organization of the urban space in favor of “an organized spontaneity” (Sadler, 1998, p. 78).

In practice, applying psychogeography in the context of video games such as *Cyberpunk 2077* means considering the open world design of the game’s setting

(Night City in *Cyberpunk 2077*) as well as the mapping practices seen in the world map of the games. The application of psychogeography in video games helps conceive the relationship between the player, the player character, and the setting of the game while revealing the purpose and the effect of the central practices observed in gameplay. This is seen in how the games treat their world maps, allowing one to ask questions such as how much the players are dependent on them, which gameplay activities are represented on them, and whether they reflect the settings in question and their respective representations of social relations.

#### **3.1.4. Games, Politics, and Strategy**

The spectacle is the experience composed of stimulating cues devoid of any purpose beyond establishing a sense of awe, as far as its tangible representations in media are concerned. For media such as film, this is often related to special effects, as well as the stimulating effect brought about by the presence of actors and directors becoming household names unto themselves, whose work is viewed through the lens of fame and recognition of their previous work. The video game industry contains much of the same in the form of visual fidelity, improvements in animations, prolific voice actors, and creative directors who are celebrities in every sense of the word. The ever-improving visual fidelity and ever-growing scales of representation functioned in much of the same way, which makes the basic premise of “passive consumption of moving images” (Jankowski, 2021) still a part of the spectacle of video games, although not enough by itself. In addition to these non-interactive aspects of the spectacle, it has been proposed that interactivity itself and the algorithms that compose a video game can also be regarded as spectacle. Fizek (2022) puts forward the idea of an “algorithmic spectacle”, which unlike other non-computational visual

representations “embraces complexity and decentring” (Fizek, 2022). Considering the base code, which players who do not tinker with their games rarely consider, Fizek pushes the envelope of spectacle to include the potential presence of spectacle within game mechanics.

Debord (2004) himself was fascinated with the potential of play beyond spectacle, focusing on its ability to represent or simulate real life. Influenced by the Prussian general and military theorist Carl von Clausewitz’s works on military strategy, he developed a board game titled *Game of War* which is “first mentioned in Debord’s writings in 1956.” (Wark, 2013, p. 175). In his later writings, Debord somewhat facetiously notes that “this may well be the only one of [his] works that anyone will dare acknowledge as having some value” (Debord, 2004, p. 56). This game attempted to represent the core principles of warfare, which Wark (2013) relates to Debord’s role as a strategist rather than a philosopher only. It presents warfare as taking place in an asymmetrical field, with victory and defeat hinging on predicting the opponent’s “disposition of forces” (Wark, 2013, p. 180). The spectacle, much like the fog of war in the game, prevents the players from seeing all the pieces and the field, and various strategies are required to pierce through this veil. A game can function as something far more crucial than an analogy, or a representation of reality. As in the tabletop game developed by Debord, it may train the mind to think strategically. It may also, as this study is concerned with, reveal structures of oppression and the present state of things while also pointing towards a path forward, as it will later be discussed through an analysis of *Night in the Woods* in this thesis.

Situationist theories and praxis provide a lens through which one can view the

cyberpunk genre from the point of view of social and political liberation from capitalism. This relation is evident from the conception point of cyberpunk as a genre, which has been considered countercultural from its onset (Murphy, 2018). In addition to this relation between the genre and the theoretical lens, it is also evident that situationist theories and praxis provide a fitting lens for examining open-world video games as a medium of storytelling and gameplay. For situationists, according to Pyyry (2019), “knowledge was connected to lived experience and change would stem from everyday practice” (p. 321). This focus on the ground level of social life as the catalyst of desirable social change indicates an understanding of conceiving politics derived from individual experiences. In considering the countercultural potential of an open-world video game set in a cyberpunk setting, this focus on the individual experience, as well as the setting itself as an actual living space instead of simply as a gameworld, allows for an evaluation of the game’s countercultural potential.

### **3.2. *Night in the Woods*: the *Dérive* and Emergent Cultures**

This thesis utilizes the theoretical lens of the Situationists to explain how cyberpunk can represent resistance to capitalism in a future where capitalism has won out: where its opposition (if it exists) is without coherence. Much like Žižek (1994) and Fisher (2009) conceived the impossibility of imagining a future beyond capitalism, so does *Cyberpunk 2077* conceive of resistance as inherently futile. This section of the theoretical framework details how this conception of anti-capitalist resistance can be turned on its own head through an application of the situationist theory of the *derive* (Sadler, 1998), the conception of cultural materialism (Williams, 1977), and the post-autonomist conception of local resistance (Fordyce, 2020).

### 3.2.1. The *Dérive* as a Post-Autonomist Laboratory

In opposition to the defeatist conception of anti-capitalism present in cyberpunk, the post-autonomist theories of Virno (1996), Williams's (1977) conception of emergent cultures, and the situationist lens can be turned towards *Night in the Woods*. This is a grounded yet exuberant adventure game set in a post-industrial town called Possum Springs, which was construed based on actual post-industrial Pennsylvanian towns such as Vandergrift (Consalvo & Phelps, 2020).

As noted by the post-autonomist Fordyce (2020), video games can function as laboratories that can configure potential futures in addition to functioning as attempts at representing existing reality. It can be argued that *Night in the Woods* functions as a relatively successful example laboratory of liberatory politics due to its scale, which is limited to a small-town, and narrative-focused gameplay. Specifically purposeful in this configuration is the situationist concept of the *dérive*, which is alluded to in the previous section and is in need of further exploration here: "In a *dérive* one or more persons [...] let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there." (Debord, 2006, p. 62). This act of exploration is based on following "the path of least resistance that is automatically followed in aimless strolls" (p. 10), which is replicated in the primary gameplay mechanics of *Night in the Woods*. Without quest marks, maps, or any indicator other than the two-dimensional plane, the player is allowed to experience what Debord (2006) describes as "the sudden change of ambience in a street within the space of a few meters" (p. 10). Through this "spatial-explorative agency" (Bodi & Thon, 2020, p. 159), the player is able to engage in a counter-hegemonic and anti-reactionary

narrative that emphasizes the importance of direct action conceived as a political strategy (De Cleyre, 1912/2004). As suggested by Nguyen (2020), video games can reinforce autonomous agency, which is a potential that shines through the *dérive* imprinted gameplay of *Night in the Woods*.

### **3.2.2. The Emergent Class and Revolution**

The deep-rooted relation between the setting of *Night in the Woods* and the political conflict its narrative presents allow for a further discussion of the challenges faced by grassroots working-class politics. In considering the struggles of the marginalized main cast of characters present in the video game, a cultural materialist framework that is mostly based on Williams's (1977) concept of "dominant, residual, and emergent" (p. 121) cultures is utilized. The juxtaposition of Debord on the one hand, and Williams on the other, is based on their conception of the interrelation of the material and the ideal conceptions of culture and cultural productions: Debord (2005) claims "separation has built its own world" (p. 118) in his description of the Spectacle, and therefore overturning the base-superstructure relationship. Meanwhile, in his opposition to the elitist understanding of what constitutes art, Williams (1965) considers cultural productions as all-encompassing: "We create human world as we have thought of art being created" (p. 54).

While Debord (2005) focuses on the totality of the Spectacle, Williams (1977) looks for gaps and points to prod within the totality of the system through his cultural analysis, which culminates in his conception of the "dominant, residual, and emergent" (p. 121) cultures. Focusing on the co-existence of cultural bases within society, Williams (1977) argues that there cannot be a complete "bourgeois culture"

(p. 121), and that the remnants of older social relations are present and partly embedded in the dominant culture (providing the example of organized religion). The “emergent” (p. 126) on the other hand, is the by-product of the diffusion of the dominant culture to every part of life, according to Williams (1977). As the dominant culture seeps into every facet of life, alternative and oppositional cultural practices born out of class antagonisms and immediate reactions rear their head (Williams, 1977) just as swiftly.

Williams (1977) defines the working class as the “emergent class” (p. 177), a nomenclature that is significant. It is historical in the sense of referring to the proletarianization of the large segments of the population which began with the Industrial Revolution, while also hinting towards emerging in the sense of being in the process of liberation, as the gravediggers of the bourgeois (Engels & Marx, 1998). According to Williams (1977), this emergent class is also the source of emergent cultures, which is indicative of the existence of socially conscious and potentially revolutionary pockets of social forces residing within the broader society. As suggested by Hall (1980), culture is as much about practices as it is about thought, and in this instance, these practices are represented by the local politics of *Night in the Woods*, which occur within the paradigm of the unevenness of development. As noted by Hall (1980) in a rebuke of Althusserians and their cut-and-dried approach towards development and dissemination of ideas, there is “an untidy but characteristic unevenness of development. What is important are the significant *breaks*—where old lines of thought are disrupted, older constellations displaced...” (p. 57). The cultural development of a society is open-ended and dependent on practices employed by the residual, dominant, and emergent cultures within society.



### 3.2.3. Conclusion

These determining practices, much like the strategizing employed by Debord in his *Game of War* (Wark, 2013), are struggles dependent on the disposition of forces, which make themselves present in cultural divisions as well as the material struggles of anti-capitalism. The emergent cultures are therefore represented as the vanguards of the liberation from capitalism in the narrative of *Night in the Woods*, yet this vanguard is unlike Lenin's (1902/1990) conception of the vanguard party that considers politically educated workers leading a mass movement. Instead, it promises a conception of politics through direct action, where power is not built, but done away through decentralized political action in the form of affinity groups such as embodied by the main cast of characters in *Night in the Woods*. The cultural conflict between the old reactionary workers and the disaffected millennial precariat represented in the game's narrative provides an opening for a liberatory political movement, as the precariat player character of the game faces her own distorted reflection in the form of reactionary workers who represent the residual culture of decades ago; they clearly portray the consequences of disaffection with globalization without class consciousness, leading the player character to consider the importance of class consciousness. As noted by Williams (1977), "the complexity of a culture is to be found not only in its variable processes [...] but also in the dynamic relations" (p. 121). These dynamic relations such as the one seen in *Night in the Woods* provide a strategy for the emergent class to be born in reaction to the residual culture, wherein the reactionaries feed the desire for radical change, much like the bourgeois digging their own graves through the proletarianization of society. It was previously noted that Debord (2005) considered culture as the driving force behind the

Spectacle, and that he considered this alienation as an all-encompassing one, completely abandoning class consciousness. Yet, as seen in Williams's (1977) cultural materialism, the dynamic relationship between the unevenly developed cultures present within a society can be the driving force for the emergent culture to establish itself against the dominant culture, and with it, the dominant social and economic structure that is capitalism.

In any case, the juxtaposition of the Situationist International and cyberpunk dystopia together with cultural materialism and Rust Belt working class might impress upon the reader a sense of undue eclecticism. As argued previously, video games are both commercial products that may not function as anti-capitalist works of art, while also having the potential to engage in liberatory discourses and produce liberatory strategies. The purpose of this specific combination of theoretical framework is to engage in discourses of liberation holistically, dealing with both the mediocrity of conformity and the liberatory discourses seen in video games.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **4.1. Methodologies in Video Game Studies**

True to the interdisciplinary nature of the field of video game studies, the methodologies applied can be quite diverse and distinct from one another. So much so, one point of view suggests that one of the most pressing issues with video game studies is “a divergency of perspectives on game analyses, hindering the development of clear guidelines on how to actually conduct them” (Malliet et al., 2022). The question of methodology essentially depends on both the objects of analysis (i.e. audience, industry, certain video games or genres, etc.) as well as the point of departure in treating video games; namely, whether they are considered texts to be analyzed, player-oriented systems, or something else altogether. As this study is involved with a social and political analysis of narrative-oriented video games, this overview of the methodologies applied in video game studies will be limited to studies that directly approach video games as texts (Carr, 2019; Bozdog & Galloway, 2020; De Miranda, 2018) and those which consider them as ludological experiences (Vargas-Iglesias & Navarrete-Cardero, 2019), as well as mixed approaches (Cassidy, 2011). Additionally, the methodologies adopted by studies that are specifically

concerned with the social and political discourses present in video games (Latorre, 2015; Veale, 2021) are given a special focus.

One early attempt at developing a specific methodology for video game research was concerned with establishing a framework for approaching the diverse aspects of video games. Konzack (2002) established the following aspects regarding video games: “hardware, program code, functionality, game play, meaning, referentiality, and socio-culture” (p. 89). More focused attempts at establishing methodologies for textual analyses were also present, with one such suggestion establishing a four-point categorization of objects of analysis: “Object Inventory, Interface Study, Interaction Map, and Gameplay Log” (Consalvo & Dutton, 2006). More contemporary methods, however, seem to be tailored to specific gaps within broad methodologies while also containing an interdisciplinarity that seeks to establish a connection between video game studies and broader humanities and social sciences. Inspired by literary methods, yet geared towards more systemic and ludological approaches, Vught (2022) suggests Russian formalism as a methodology for analyzing video games. Detached from industry, audiences, and social contexts, the approach constructed by Vught (2022) provides an opportunity for considering video games as machines that produce aesthetic responses. Resonating with the detached approach of Vught (2022) are Vargas-Iglesias and Navarrete-Cardero (2019), who argue that there is a missing link between video game studies and video games as software and adopted a “cybersemiotic perspective” (p. 587), which considers the human-machine relationship inherent in playing video games.

Textual approaches focused on representation often use methodologies derived from

literature and film studies. For instance, inspired by Bellour's (1975) essay regarding the fragmentation of textual narratives in film, Carr (2019) draws attention to the difficulties involved in applying textual analysis as conjured by Roland Barthes, suggesting a fragmentation of textual elements and analyzing them separately, in categories such as "structural, textual, and intertextual" (Carr, 2019, p. 710), which could potentially allow the game analysis to cover the multifaceted aspects of video games as texts. Quite relevant for this study as well, Carr (2019) applies this methodology of fragmentation onto a "hybrid RPG" (p. 716) titled *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* (Eidos-Montréal, 2011). Establishing the player as the analyst, Carr (2019) draws attention to the relevance of the divergent social contexts individual players are part of. In contrast with Vught (2022) and his application of Russian formalism, Carr (2019) refers to the importance of representations of identities within video games (such as disabled people in relation to cyberpunk physical augmentations), which brings the subjective game analysis closer to the political discourses involved with social identities. In considering the social discourses present in an installation of *Grand Theft Auto* (Rockstar North, 1997-2013), Pérez Latorre (2015) advances a methodology that deals with "the character/player, the game world, and the game play activities" (p. 420). Unlike Carr (2019), who is focused on the specific moments and fragmented parts of video games, Pérez Latorre (2015) provides a bird's view of ludology, connecting broader aspects of the player character, the space the game takes place in, and what the player does within the said space. Although opposed with one another in terms of scope, the approaches taken by Carr (2019) and Pérez Latorre (2015) seem interlinked in terms of their purpose, which is providing an analysis of social discourses found in video games.

In a study that directly deals with video games and their representation in political discourse, Demirbag-Kaplan and Kaplan-Oz (2018) consider the references to the *Grand Theft Auto* series in relation to police brutality and conflict with police during the Gezi Uprising of 2013. The method they utilize involves an interview of protesters in relation to their gaming experiences and whether they exhibit signs of “digital virtual consumption” (Demirbag-Kaplan & Kaplan-Oz, 2018, p. 624), which is related to players wishing to turn gameplay experiences into real-life ones. Directly questioning whether video game consumption leads to political action, the method of this research attempts to fill the gap between the actuality and the virtuality of radicalization and political activity in general.

The previously discussed methods are all quite relevant to the approach of this thesis, and even if they are not directly applied within this study, they nevertheless functioned as points of influence. As such, they recontextualize this particular thesis and its relevance within the broader field of video game studies.

#### **4.2. Applied Methodologies**

This thesis is broadly composed of a comparative textual analysis of *Cyberpunk 2077* and *Night in the Woods*, an action RPG and an adventure game, respectively.

Focusing on the different aspects of these video games such as their gameworlds, gameplay mechanics, and narratives; this comparative analysis utilizes distinct methodologies, which will be detailed in this section. Through the methodologies which will be discussed, the thesis will attempt to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: How do the gameplay mechanics, the gameworld designs, and the

aesthetics of *Cyberpunk 2077* and *Night in the Woods* relay to the player the sociopolitical themes of these games?

RQ2: How does the narrative progression of each game allow the player to experience the anti-capitalist themes present?

RQ3: Are these video games politically transformative? If so, how do they achieve this status?

Starting out with the space design of these two video games in question in CHAPTER 5, this thesis focuses on the constructions of the cyberpunk urban space and its denizens found in *Cyberpunk 2077*, together with the postindustrial midwestern American town present in *Night in the Woods*. This chapter on space initially takes on both games with reference to the method of video game formalism as conceived by Vught (2022). Based on the literary method of Russian Formalism and its reinvention called neoformalism (Thompson, 1981), this approach is useful in decoding the formal aspects of the games' 3D and 2D worlds with respect to their genres, as well as the visual points of view the player takes in engaging with these worlds. As stated by Vught (2022) in his conception of video game formalism, "the aesthetic game experience of the player is intertwined with game form and functions as the methodological starting point for doing the analysis" (p. 299). Considering the formal aspects of the game worlds, and their functions without reference to authorial intentions and narrative meaning, this method allows the study to round out the second method to be utilized in CHAPTER 5. This is Carr's (2019) textual analysis that takes the individual experiences of the player as the primary starting out point for textual analysis. In stark contrast with the earlier formalist approach in the chapter, this method adopts subjective experiences with the game world in relation to

social and political discourses and meanings attached to the elements present within the space and the environment of the gameworlds.

CHAPTER 6 similarly utilizes multiple methods in conjunction with one another. This chapter is intended to be especially diverse in terms of its points of analysis, which requires the utilization of a multitude of methods. Starting out with a comparative analysis of gameplay mechanics and the tools made available to the player, the chapter will take advantage of the textual analysis of Carr (2019) and her conception of fragmenting elements of gameplay and analyzing them separately. For instance, *Night in the Woods* contains a multitude of mini-games in conjunction with the main exploration and dialogue mechanics, which necessitates a fragmentation of these parts to analyze them. Carr (2019) states that “this version of textual analysis is a practice that, by definition, involves situated, embodied interpretation, and selective omission” (p. 716). Situating certain parts of gameplay under distinct points of view to interpret these video games is particularly effective at considering representations of distinct sociopolitical identities and discourses, which is the focus point of this study. Similarly concerned with the social and political discourses generated through video games as texts, yet on a higher vantage point, Pérez Latorre’s (2015) method of analyzing ludic design provides a useful systematic method for considering how gameplay generates meaning through the points of analysis which may be summarized as such: the player character and their interaction with the game; the interactions with the gameworld and the segmentation of the said world to establish an order of narrative; gameplay activities available to the player and their relation to creating meaning (Pérez Latorre, 2015). Utilizing Carr (2019) and Pérez Latorre (2015) in conjunction with one another, the chapter utilizes a two-



pronged method that considers the subjective experience of gameplay together with the individual aspects of gameplay detached from the experience of engaging with them with a broader viewpoint.

CHAPTER 7 bends towards the cultural significance of these video game narratives, with the textual analysis method of Carr (2019) being applied in relation to the political theoretical framework of the thesis. A comparative analysis of the class identity of the player character and the main cast of characters present in both video games fragmented from the rest of the narrative and gameplay leads to a consideration of the main narrative, particularly the contrasting endings present in the two video games. In reference to Williams's (1977) cultural materialist theory of dominant, residual, and emergent cultures and its contrast with Debord's (2005) argument about the existence of an all-encompassing Spectacle, the textual analysis of the conclusions of the political narratives constitutes the main argument and the *raison d'être* of this study.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **SPACE DESIGN AND THE POTENTIAL OF EXPLORATION**

Regardless of genre and point of view, video games either take place within a given space, or somehow utilize a space that is visually accessible to the player. Depending on the video game in question, it might be a map of the world, a football pitch, or a small enclosed space. The player's point of view and the tools provided to them are placed within a given space, which limits the potential of gameplay. The edge of the world exists in one way or another, be it an endless sea for a player character who cannot swim, or an unkillable monster that prevents them from ever venturing beyond the designed space. The environment constructed by the game developers functions as the board on which the stories are told. In many cases, video games are "spatial stories" (Jenkins, 2004, p. 122) in which the gameworld can shape the narrative flow. As suggested by Vught (2022), the formal components of the game are what defines the experience of gameplay. The limits of the gameworld also provides a momentous experience. Faced with the end of exploration and the edge of the gameworld, the player's immersion can be shattered, with the borders of the world providing a moment of self-reflection for the player. Consequently, the experience of gameplay is also defined by what is excluded from the world it

inhabits. The gameworld forms the basis of the experience of gameplay; the maze in which the story of the mouse who searches for the cheese can be told.

### **5.1. The Open World of Night City**

Open worlds are an attempt at avoiding this break in immersion. Constructing a seemingly vast world embeds within the player a sense of limitlessness. They can go anywhere, take in the scenery, and engage with the gameplay mechanics as they see fit. As Wark (2007) states with regard to the comparatively very small world of *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City* (Rockstar North, 2002), “you don’t really have to be anywhere, or do anything” (p. 101). Often a circular experience in terms of exploration, the player rarely has any need to push towards the edge of the world. The open world experience is defined by this freedom for the player to advance the narrative when they desire to do so, engaging with the expansive and cohesive gameworld at their own pace. In formalist terms, it is the lack of (or the perceived lack of) separated levels that establishes this experience. Ideally, the world is seemingly laid at the feet of the player all at once, rather than opened to the player according to the main narrative flow of the game. In this context, exploration takes on a key role as an extension of player agency, upon which the narrative rests.

#### **5.1.1. A Formal Guide to Night City**

Prior to observing the relationship between the narrative and the gameworld, it is pertinent to discuss the formal qualities of the gameworld of *Cyberpunk 2077*, especially with respect to its open-world qualities. Although many video games since the inception of the medium have been developed as open-world experiences, the manner in which such an experience has been achieved has differed greatly. This is

at least partly due to technical limitations and advances. For instance, many older video games such as *The Elder Scrolls II: Daggerfall* (Bethesda Softworks, 1996), *Fallout* (Interplay Productions, 1997), and newer video games inspired by the same form of open worlds such as *Pillars of Eternity II: Deadfire* (Obsidian Entertainment, 2018) utilize a simple map on a 2D plane upon which the player could leave and enter sporadically spread areas, which they could explore in real-time. However, another strand of open-world has emerged with the commercial success of *Grand Theft Auto III* (Rockstar North, 2001), which utilizes a fully 3D urban environment that the player could explore in real-time, in a third-person view of the player character at all times.

Although it is a first-person-shooter instead of a third-person one—which appears to have been a point of contention during the game’s development process— (Hall, 2019), *Cyberpunk 2077* inherits this form of open-world game design, which has been an industry standard within the last decade (Muncy, 2015). However, unlike the earlier open worlds which relied on either smaller size (*Grand Theft Auto III*), sporadic narrative content (*Fallout*), or procedurally generated spaces (*The Elder Scrolls II: Daggerfall*); recent titles are often far more dependent on designers who handcraft every single aspect of large open worlds crammed with visual, audial, and narrative content:

The increasingly large space renders content design a serious problem. Designers have to mass-produce trivial tasks such as gathering materials or fetching tools so that the large space does not feel empty, and questlines in different areas, too, are often designed with similar templates—we may call this “formulaic open world”. (Wang et al., 2023, p. 4)

This is the defining aspect of Night City, the open world of *Cyberpunk 2077*. With the exception of the narratively significant scripted and voiced “main jobs” and “side

jobs”, there exists a plethora of “gigs”, “cyberpsycho sightings” (mini boss-fights), and various ongoing criminal activities, which the player can engage with in a variety of manners which may or may not involve lethal violence, often depending on player choice. Although they are rather formulaic, these activities narratively engage with the player in an indirect manner through environmental and contained textual storytelling: a journal found on a dead body, the location of a given activity, a text message to the player, and so forth. The player engages with the open world through these activities, which are often in the form of a commercial service on the part of the player, which is the reason why they are called “side jobs” and “gigs”. The player engages with the world as a mercenary and a bounty hunter; the daily routine of the player character is often little more than completing these services upon which they are paid.

The player moves between the jobs by way of their automobile (even though Night City boasts a futuristic monorail service, the player is unable to utilize it), which happens to be one of the most significant expenses the player can make in addition to protective clothes, body modifications, and lethal or non-lethal weaponry. The total commercialization of all player activity is a feature of this cyberpunk urban space, yet the limited existence of potential consumerism outside of a car, a house, and tools of the trade, the player exists for their jobs. Essentially, the player has the spending habits of a medieval craftsman within a world of excessive consumption and hedonism. Even the potential of body modification is reduced to being another tool in the arsenal of the player. In essence, the open world is organized around the job, the denizens of Night City the player engages with are often targets, victims, or employers. The non-playable characters the player sees throughout the city are often

set on their paths, with little chance of interaction between the player and them, in line with what Wang et al. (2023) suggest about recent iterations of open-world, which contain “an absence of meaning in spatial design” (p. 2). On the surface, this is similar to what Aarseth (2008) suggests about *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004): a theme-park rather than a living and breathing world; mostly an imitation of a cyberpunk urban environment rather than a chaotic urban space filled with conflicting interests, multiple individualities, and constantly overlapping lives.

### **5.1.2. Districts and Denizens**

The applications of cyberpunk genre conventions could be regarded as an inherent component of this limited nature of interaction with the city. As stated previously, *Cyberpunk 2077* takes place in an open world spanning a chaotic urban environment and its outskirts. Night City is a free city situated in California; seemingly free of nation-states, yet not free of the influence of megacorporations. The aesthetics of Night City is decidedly cyberpunk, taking inspiration from various sources ranging from the Los Angeles of *Blade Runner* (Scott, 1982) to the Neo-Tokyo of *Akira* (Otomo, 1988). Like all urban environments, it contains multitudes of human experiences, which can be sorted through district by district.

The starting district for the player is Watson. Situated in the north of the city, it is a rundown and chaotic neighborhood, containing one of the megabuildings in the city which harbors thousands of city dwellers and many small businesses. The district is characterized by the domination of Arasaka, as they control the Waterfront section of the district, providing the megacorporation the critical harbor access it needs to

connect the Californian city with its headquarters situated in Japan. Outside of the Waterfront, is a neglected battleground between two of the many gangs the city has to offer: the Tyger Claws who recruit the Asian immigrant population to its ranks, and the Maelstrom who recreationally replace their body parts with implants, or “chrome” as they are called in the slang of the city. The district is the realm of the disaffected urban poor. As Arasaka’s only interest in the district is their access to the harbor, the gangs and the urban poor are left to their own devices.

Heywood is situated on an island located at the heart of the city. While parts of it are still home to the urban poor, they are contrasted with the workers who work for many of the megacorporations in the city, or “corpos” as they are called in the local slang. Corporation workers form the labor aristocracy of the city, the cyberpunk equivalent of the English workers who indirectly benefited from the colonial possessions of the British Empire (Lenin, 1993). Yet the meager material benefits enjoyed by the corporation workers come at the cost of total loyalty to their employers, and the preeminence of job over life; not unlike the player character who rushes from gig to gig throughout the gameplay. The district contains one of the only visible patches of greenery in the city in the form of parks. The nearby City Center district contains behemoth-like headquarters of all the megacorporations present in the city, those who have the most to lose and the most to gain. Arasaka Tower has risen from the ashes of the nuclear attack on it, and it looms above the rest of the city once more. Westbrook district is the living space of the rich and the powerful in the city, ranging from Charter Hill where the more affluent of corporate workers reside, and North Oak, the hilly neighborhood of the super-rich.

The southern district of Santo Domingo is as neglected as Watson. Containing industrial factories, as well as the suburban poor, this district is home to the 6th Street gang, who brandish military insignias, signaling that they may be veterans of the Corporate Wars. Pacifica, which is situated on the southwest edge of the city, is perhaps the most unique part of Night City. An abandoned project of a vacation resort, the district contains husks of hotels, malls, and a stadium, many of which are long overrun by the Voodoo Boys; a gang of advanced hackers in long black *The Matrix*-esque (Wachowski & Wachowski, 1999) trench coats hailing from Haiti.

The outskirts of the city provide more insight into the broader world and economics thereof. Oil refineries dot the northern edge of the city, flames burning through their exhaust vents as in the opening shot of *Blade Runner* (Scott, 1982) while the southern plains contain solar panel farms. Meanwhile, an immense landfill occupies the zone to the southeast; worryingly close to the city proper. To the east, however, there is an immense stretch of land that is devoid of structures, yet not devoid of human life. Nomad clans ride across this space, making their home wherever they can park their impressive vehicles; a reminiscent image more in line with the post-apocalyptic *Mad Max: Fury Road* (Miller, 2015) than it is of cyberpunk.

The player is given access to information about these districts and their roles in Night City through a variety of sources. Of course, the visual depiction of each of these districts provides the first impression of these social and economic divisions in the city, which is at times supported by the narrative progress of the game. The player moves through these differing environments with ease; there are no physical barriers that keep the player from driving by any of these districts and regions; yet as



suggested by the previous section, there exists a social barrier that limits the encounters the player has with a certain criminal and violent element of the city, which is often generalized to the broader world within the text itself. One of the earliest dialogues between the player character and their comrade-in-arms Jackie gives away this conception of Night City. The starry-eyed Jackie “can’t stop digging Night City”, claiming that legends are born there as he lists characters from the original pen-and-paper roleplaying game *Cyberpunk 2020* (Pondsmith et al., 1990). These characters, “Andrew Weyland, Morgan Blackhand, Adam Smasher”, as Jackie says, are well-known mercenaries who are employed by different megacorporations as enforcers; with Adam Smasher being one of the primary antagonists of the game as the lethal face of the Arasaka megacorporation. On the surface, the gameworld of Night City as exemplified by its dangers and opportunities is the shiny spectacle with which the player character becomes disillusioned as the narrative progresses. However, the formal elements of the gameworld suggest a contrasting immersive quality to the video game: with its first-person view and a gameworld that is defined by its commodified engagement with the player.

### **5.1.3. Alienated from the Virtual City**

As will become obvious in the following chapters, the formal qualities of the world are in conflict with the main narrative. In part, this is due to the formal aspects of the game embracing the spectacle of cyberpunk. The gameworld repurposes earlier cyberpunk imagery with unclear goals in mind (the unexplored implications of juxtaposing oil refineries and solar panels comes to mind), which evokes a sense of aimlessness, with the player themselves being confined to a world of exploration in the name of “main jobs”, “side jobs”, “gigs” and bounties. This aligns with Debord’s

(2005) conception of the alienating nature of the spectacle:

...all the time and space of his world become strange to him with the accumulation of his alienated products. The spectacle is the map of this new world, a map which covers precisely its territory, The very powers which escaped us show themselves to us in all their force. (p. 19)

In this sense, the virtual spectacle of the gameworld allows for an onset of alienation, with the game itself limiting the player only to the exploration for the purveyance of either providing services or seeking goods in the form of a new car, a new weapon, or a brand-new body part. Yet, all that this allows for is not a simulation of a better life, but a better mercenary: the car allows for easier travel, and the weapon and the body modifications increase the player's performance as a mercenary. To provide an example, *Cyberpunk 2077* utilizes cyberpunk tropes such as extensive recreational body-part replacements, which gives the mercenary player character an edge in combat situations. This is reflected in improvements oriented towards combat situations, improvements which are received in gameplay with visual effects such as the bullet time effect which signifies increased reflexes (it has been applied in many first-person-shooter games since its utilization in *Max Payne*) (Remedy Entertainment, 2001), or simply increased damage dealt to enemy combatants without visual feedback. While representing the destructive potential of body augmentation, the game falls short of representing the visual transformation of the player character and the visual representation of the mutilation inherent in the process. At no point does the player encounter their player character without their limbs, for instance. In this way, the game treats various cyberpunk cultural tropes without exploring their potential body-politic implications through the player character. This treatment of cyberpunk as only a category limited to the combat mechanics rather than a politically charged genre is a consistent theme seen across *Cyberpunk 2077*.

All in all, the exploration of Night City produces alienation through its formal limitations. Similar to how Debord (2005) connects the capitalist urban space and the alienation of the worker, this alienation of the player from the virtual activity of playing *Cyberpunk 2077* is perfectly in line with Marx's conception of the alienation of labor in his *Manuscripts of 1844*, which is the "loss of realization for the workers; objectification as *loss of the object and bondage to it*; appropriation as *estrangement*, as *alienation*" (Marx, 1977, p. 68). The worker becomes alienated as they are distanced from the product of their labor, which is appropriated by the capitalist. This alienation is present even in capitalist play, which is something *Cyberpunk 2077* could be considered as an example of. Wilkie (2016) states his conception of immaterial labor through "'play,' [which] in other words, encapsulates the supposedly immaterial logic of cognitive capitalism in the sense that creativity cannot be separated from the worker" (p. 117). This post-workerist approach considers gaming as an example of creative labor. Creative labor is deemed valuable to the capitalist system not for any material product, but for the alienation it produces on the part of the worker. In essence, it is as close to cyberpunk as one could approach, wherein immaterial and limitless expansion of the economy and social life dependent on alienation (Brande, 1994) becomes the primary mode of human interaction with the world. As will become even clearer in the narrative analysis of the video game, the exploration of this virtual world is reminiscent of going through a theme park built in the image of a cyberpunk urban space, which reproduces the alienation of cyberpunk precisely because it cannot move beyond the aesthetic vocabulary of cyberpunk, into the deeply anti-capitalist core of the genre.

## 5.2. The 2D Postindustrial Town of Possum Springs

*Night in the Woods* provides the player with a counter-example of a gameworld that does not reproduce the alienation of the capitalist urban space. This is precisely due to its treatment of the denizens in relation to the postindustrial town they are situated, with the material consequences of postindustrial decay never for a moment overtaking the potential human beings have in creating an alternative future for themselves. Possum Springs, as the small post-industrial town is called, is set atop a 2D plane: it pales in comparison to the expansive three-dimensional Night City, both in terms of its size and the flexibility of exploration choices. In essence, the 2D plane is a constraint that provides a preset sequence of events and gameplay options for the player while not necessarily limiting their options for exploration. At the same time, almost every resident of the town is located in the same set places even as the narrative progresses: the science teacher is always by his telescope on his roof, the best friend of the protagonist is at his cashier job, the office workers are on their smoke break; the lives of the small-town residents are perhaps unsurprisingly constant. This is further supplanted by the game being set in static moments of a given day, with the progress being established through returning to Mae's bed and sleeping, or joining her friends in an outing. The formal elements of the gameworld and exploration mechanics, similar to what Veale (2021) states regarding the narrative, exist to support a narrative about an established protagonist and the residents of the small town:

*NITW* [*Night in the Woods*] does not subvert the fundamental mechanics of gameplay. Instead, it uses the very constrained context of its protagonist to tell a story that uses the player's perception of responsibility to explore themes of rural marginalisation under capitalism, mental illness, horror, desperation and hope. (p. 2)

The static two-dimensional layout of the small town is crucial, as it pushes

exploration in the direction of a mostly linear sequence that guides exploration towards the main narrative itself. This complements the simplicity of the gameplay mechanics that consists of little more than exploring in the left-right direction, sometimes jumping up to reach roofs and other high points in the town. This basis is occasionally interrupted with minigames that are both removed from the basis, yet provides additional feedback that helps the player engage with the particular part of the narrative: “the player is, therefore, required to be attentive to the way the game is organized as a system, in which the procedural, ludic and the semiotic/representational are united” (Krzywinska, 2014, p. 506). While the gameplay is quite casual in its dependence on easily completed challenges in the form of exploration and momentary minigames, these distinct gameplay mechanics also function as a way to unite converging yet distinct themes and plotlines of the game into a divergent, yet coherent whole. The divergence of gameplay mechanics is also manifested in the worldbuilding of Possum Springs, which combines aspects of this postindustrial American Gothic setting to convey its story.

### **5.2.1. A Static yet Interdependent Town**

The simplicity of the world design contributes to the sense of decay portrayed in the game. Unlike *Cyberpunk 2077*, the gameworld is neither buzzing with activity nor does it feature any moving people other than the unemployed Mae Borowski. The gameplay revolves around the exploration of the small town with its rusted bridge that provides the only connection with the outside world, the abandoned shopping mall that reminds the player of a more prosperous past, the middle-rising apartments and suburban-style residential streets, the underground canal that has become the regular haunting place of the disaffected youth, the exploration is that of an

unchanging place where there is always very little going on. Kirkland (2021) situates this characterization of Possum Springs within the American Gothic genre: “The game features distinct settings of American Gothic fiction, namely the woods, the small town and the urban ruin. These variously represent sites of fear, danger, escape, melancholy, awe and wonder, responses associated with traditional Gothic spaces” (p. 103). These spaces are separate levels, yet this does not impede Mae’s going back and forth between them, and the only true limitation to the exploration seems to be the outer edges of the town. Krzywinska (2014) describes this setting as “a multidimensional assemblage of fragments and remnants” (p. 513). This description is quite accurate as the world design of the game separates the town into different sections. The main street is divided into sections with residential spaces, the town center, the church, the abandoned mall, and the canal occupying distinct scenes. With their distinctive town residents, each of these scenes emphasizes separate yet interconnected aspects of the postindustrial American Gothic.

Combined with the simple yet divergent gameplay mechanics, the construction of the gameworld is critical to understanding how *Night in the Woods* diverges from *Cyberpunk 2077* in its representation of capitalism and the resistance to it. Peterson (2012) considers gameworlds as partial simulations, which is a starting point that might help the observer understand how these gameworlds simulate the social aesthetics and the culture of capitalist society differently. As stated by Williams (1977), “the complexity of a culture is to be found not only in its variable processes [...] but also in the dynamic relations” (p. 121). The representation of dynamic relations in these gameworlds are critical to understanding how playing these games help conceive the effects of capitalism differently.

On its surface, the gameworld of *Cyberpunk 2077* contains more dynamism: an aesthetically fully realized city filled with numerous non-playable characters, and some with their own agendas and roles within the narrative. There is a multitude of ways for the player to affect the city and its residents, mostly physically and often violently. While the non-playable urban residents are often walking and going somewhere in *Cyberpunk 2077*, they do not have daily routines or any goals beyond providing a sense of urban crowd: they are little more than props; the shopkeepers with which the player interacts are little more than the vending machines which are also dotted across the gameworld. The gameworld of *Night in the Woods*, while being mostly static, is also reflective of the postindustrial decay, in a fashion that goes beyond the simple representation of social conditions, showing them through the construction of the gameworld and reproducing them within the narrative progress.

Exploring Possum Springs, the player comes across a convergence of distinct aspects of the postindustrial small-town American Gothic experience. In one optional sequence called “Old Gods of the Fort Lucenne Mall”, Mae and one of her friends called Bea visit the aforementioned mall, where the nostalgia of having experienced the place when it was not so abandoned leads to a depressing experience. As the two old friends reminisce about the past in the food court, near the giant fish-head-shaped fountain, Bea stumbles upon something profound and quite significant for our purposes here: “Thinking about this place [...] not knowing how something worked used to seem like magic. Now not knowing means it might be going wrong and I may not be able to fix it. Helped knowing someone was at the controls, you know?”

Now I'm just tired all the time from the shop" (Infinte Fall, 2017). The aforementioned shop is her father's small hardware store, which she manages by herself. To cheer her friend up, Mae literally attempts to find "the controls" (of the fish-head fountain of the mall). Jumping up and down like an actual cat, Mae manages to find the controls of the fountain, which she manipulates and plays around with to sprinkle the passersby and cheer her friend up. Obviously, it is the player who actually does this by controlling Mae, stumbling upon the controls through blind and vertical exploration of the mall. Through exploration, the player gives Mae the controls, literally in this case. The absence of power within the social life is reacted upon by a trip to the past. While not fixing their lack of power, Mae nevertheless takes control where she can. Not being able to thwart the urban decay by herself (or rather through player action), Mae acts as a situationist drifter, "the new flâneur" (Sadler, 1998, p. 56) in the small-town setting. The denizens of the small town, stuck in their small scenes within the gameworld, are explored by Mae, who goes through the borders of these scenes seamlessly.

This situation the residents of Possum Springs are in is reminiscent of the urban conditions in post-war Paris that gave rise to the situationist concept of drifting in the first place: "If the city was becoming enslaved to late capitalism, then sooner or later its cultural mix, its 'margins,' its ethnic and working-class ghettos, would disappear" (Sadler, 1998, p. 55). As Possum Springs is based on a small town in western Pennsylvania, it is hardly a ghetto, nor even an urban setting that deserves the title in terms of its size. Yet, drifting with the intent to learn about the struggles of the residents is deeply related to the process of self-reflexive exploration: as will be discussed in detail later, Mae faces her own struggles through the exploration of



Possum Springs, visiting her friends and the residents of the town. In this sense, *Night in the Woods* fully utilizes the potential of the medium in creating reflection on the part of the player that is potentially socially transformative, which in a way is reminiscent of what Debord and the Situationists wanted to achieve through *détournement*: “Debord’s situation could be reframed as an attempt to increase the audience’s self-reflective awareness of their position as spectators, thereby shifting the opposition of hegemonic versus plural meanings towards the latter” (Penner, 2015, p. 173). Though removing it from its Marxist roots quite a bit, Penner (2015) notes the radical democratic potential of the processes proposed by the Situationists. While being related to the concept of the *dérive*, or drifting, the emphasis on exploration in the videogame is further supplanted by the divergent gameplay mechanics, as emphasized by smaller minigames and self-contained dialogues found within the gameplay mechanics, which are an example of *détournement*. The self-reflection as induced by the exploration and interaction with the denizens takes away the spectator-like quality of gameplay, allowing the player to go through the same self-reflection Mae goes through as allowed by the gameworld and the gameplay mechanics. The conjunction of distinct modes of interaction with the world, as exemplified by the gameplay mechanics based on exploration and the scene-based construction of the gameworld, separates experiences while also making Mae the sole link between these. The protagonist’s status as the link between divergent aspects of the video game forms the crux of the player’s role as an active instigator of change.

## CHAPTER 6

### THE SPECTACLE IN NONLINEAR PROGRESS

As previously discussed, the relation between the gameplay mechanics and the gameworlds of these two video games are quite divergent in how they interact with the respective themes of these games. *Cyberpunk 2077* seeks to represent and allow the player to interact with a dystopian futuristic world in the form of Night City: a city of mercenaries, gangs, and megacorporations, which are always depicted as the thread-pullers behind the scenes. As a mercenary, the player belongs to this “active” part of the city; remaining among those who are able to affect the world around them. The poor underclass, the mentally ill, and the otherwise “regular” people of Night City are almost completely behind the scenes, remaining in the scenery. *Night in the Woods*, through its simple exploration mechanics and the dialogues prompted by this central mechanic, manages to bring to the fore this very group of people that are absent in *Cyberpunk 2077*. Possum Springs, unlike Night City, emphasizes the potential of the marginalized in affecting their world, effectively carrying with them the potential to “make their own history” (Marx, 1943, p. 23). This social realist representation of a working-class community contrasts with the rebellion-laden imagery of *Cyberpunk 2077*.

The previous chapter considered this issue through the lens of the gameworlds and the gameplay mechanics, and the interaction between these two. This chapter will move on to the important side narratives present within these games. Viewing these parts of the video games in relation to the previously discussed gameplay mechanics and the mappings of these gameworlds, the cast of characters present and their interactions with the respective player characters V and Mae Borowski will point the way forward. In addition to this illuminating consideration of the heart of these video games, the sound design and the respective soundtracks of these games will also be considered. As video games are made whole through the interaction of conjoined systems (Voorhees, 2019), a view of the soundtracks and the sound design will allow this study to both observe the subject matter at hand through different lenses, as well as contributing towards a coherent analysis of these video games which could be meaningful in its holistic approach.

### **6.1. The Retrofuturistic City**

*Cyberpunk 2077* directs the player to their goal through the use of the mini-map, which utilizes a GPS-like system (even when the player is on foot) to guide the player to their selected objective, of which there could be many at one time. The navigation system aims to be comprehensive and useful: it is a far cry from the blind drifting of the Situationists, or even the blind exploration of Possum Springs in *Night in the Woods*. To provide an even more complete view of the city, the game also provides a map of its whole world. This map visually emphasizes the verticality of Night City. One glance provides the player with the information as to the density of the city, with skyscrapers towering over most parts of the city, and these are

surrounded by the mid-rise almost (but not quite) suburban neighborhoods. There is also a monorail present in the map, which suggests that it could have been made available to the player as the promotional material for the game once suggested: a remnant of a scrapped idea, which is all too common in video games of this caliber. The presence of an alternative mode of transportation that contrasts with the solitary and isolating aspects of driving could have made a positive contribution to the representation of the regular residents of Night City.

In many respects, the urbanism and the mapping thereof present in Night City reminds the player that it is a pastiche of aesthetics that depends on the vague impression of a cyberpunk futurism that has existed since the 1980s. This feature of worldbuilding is retrofuturistic in many ways, which is defined as “a practice of referencing, framing, or inserting elements of older futuristic imaginary into contemporary narratives” (Frelik, 2013, p. 207). Consequently, it is an amalgamation of past visions of the future within their present understanding of them; a nostalgic look into the future. It is no coincidence that one of the primary characters within the video game is voiced and modeled after Keanu Reeves, the lead actor of *The Matrix* (Wachowski & Wachowski, 1999), the north of the city features rising flames of oil refineries the same as the opening shot of *Blade Runner* (Scott, 1982), many of the vehicles within the game are influenced from *Akira* (Otomo, 1988), and the primary style of architecture within the city is brutalism, which had its heyday during the Cold War (Niebrzydowski, 2021). Similar to *Fallout* (Interplay Productions, 1997) and its representation of the Atomic Age, *Cyberpunk 2077* is in an aesthetic relationship with the retrofuturism of earlier cyberpunk worlds with little revision according to the present circumstances. With regards to the retro-futurism of the

*Fallout* series, McClancy (2018) states the following:

The games thus combine a retrofuturist aesthetic with a post-apocalyptic one, like a mashup of Disney's Tomorrowland and Mad Max, and essentially posit two imaginary histories: one in which the future of the Fifties came to pass, and one in which that future was destroyed.

This retrofuturism is therefore critical of the futurism of the past, in a sense juxtaposing an essentially optimistic worldview with a ruined world, which produces cathartic moments within gameplay. As *Cyberpunk 2077* works with an aesthetic that was already critical of the future it envisaged, it simply functions as an aesthetic reproduction of cyberpunk, with little self-reflection on part of the themes and subject matters considered. The retrofuturism of *Cyberpunk 2077* is an amalgam of past fears reflected onto its imagination of the future hegemony of capitalism, as the world of *Cyberpunk 2077* presents eerie similarities to the contemporary world, imagined from the past. As in the 1980s, the Soviet Union exists in some form and is in conflict with China, an imagined continuation of the Sino-Soviet Split. At the same time, the Soviet Union of *Cyberpunk 2077* is dominated by the monopoly of SovOil, a corporation like any other. In many ways, *Cyberpunk 2077* affirms the theses of Situationists, who characterized the Soviet Union as having its own spectacles: “The bureaucratic regimes in power in certain industrialised countries have their own particular type of spectacle, but it is an integral part of the total spectacle, serving as its pseudo-opposition and actual support” (Debord, 2005, p. 28). Consequently, the world in 2077 is imagined through the lenses of the past, often in line with the view of Cold War-era revolutionaries such as the Situationists who considered both the Western and the Eastern Blocs as in conflict with the freedom of the proletariat.

Yet, these old conflicts still carry with them signs of the present struggles in

contemporary capitalism. Reminiscent of the fight for public healthcare in the United States today, one short text from the game titled “Emergency on Demand” gives the example of the Soviet Union as being able to provide modern healthcare for its citizens: “The difference, then? They don't leave their people to die on the streets, at the store, in their homes” (CD Projekt Red, 2020). This is reminiscent of some of Bernie Sanders’ (2016) arguments which posit the rest of the developed world as being able to provide affordable healthcare for their citizens: “Pharmaceutical companies like Eli Lilly and Pfizer have fought to make it illegal for the American people to get cheaper prescription drugs from Canada and Europe” (p. 270). As such, *Cyberpunk 2077* is able to absorb present conflicts into its retrofuturism. According to Debord (2005), “Time remains motionless, like an enclosed space. When a more complex society finally becomes conscious of time, it tries to negate it - it views time not as something that passes, but as something that *returns*.” (p. 73). The spectacle of antagonism between the capitalist West and the so-called socialist East is reproduced within the worldbuilding of the video game, the retrofuturism of which carries the spectacle of the Cold War into the present, and more critically, reinterpreting present conflicts through the lens of the Spectacle of the Christmas Past. A side narrative within the video game exhibits the plasticity of the revolutionary politics within the game in a quite self-aware manner. However, a short introduction to the main narrative and one of the central characters within the narrative, Johnny Silverhand, is in order prior to approaching this specific side narrative.

## **6.2. A Fortune Teller for the Spectacle**

The aforementioned conflicts within the game occur mostly behind the scenes, as optional short texts are scattered across the world, and the marginalized working

class is often part of the scenery rather than being active agents within the narrative. As the video game involves characters who are active in altering the state of the world, and exhibit little interest in the marginalized communities who have a harder time doing this, the progress within the game is quite self-involved on the part of the player. The progress within *Cyberpunk 2077* occurs through several categories of quests, which could be divided between the main narrative and side narratives. The player advances within the main narrative through completing what are called “main jobs”, in reference to the mercenary profession of the player character V. Contrary to this nomenclature, however, the main narrative is quite a personal journey for V. A short overview of the main characters seems to be in order in establishing the personal aspects of V’s journey and considering the division between the main jobs and the side jobs the player engages with throughout the gameplay.

Though they are an up-and-coming mercenary for most of the narrative, the origins of V are left up to the player. The player is able to choose between three different lifepaths: The Streetkid, the Nomad, and the Corpo. The Streetkid, as the name would suggest, establishes V as a native of Night City and part of its underclass for most of his life. Having been drawn to a life of crime, and acquainted with the gangs and the violence of the urban environment, this lifepath is perhaps the one who is most at home throughout the narrative. The Nomad has been an alien to the urban life of Night City, and grew up as part of the Bakkers: one of the tribes that roam the desolate Badlands that stretch across the American West with their tricked-up cars and rigs, leading a life away from the corporations and the urban life as much as possible. Representing an alternative to corporate domination, these tribes are nevertheless not alien to violence and raids, which posits them as a historically

anachronistic alternative to the system rather than a legitimate post-capitalist alternative to it. The third lifepath is that of the Corpo, who starts out as a cog in the intelligence division of Arasaka in Night City. Becoming a victim of the inner power struggles within the corporation, V is eventually forced out of the company, which they take as an opportunity to become an independent mercenary.

In every one of these origins, V's path eventually crosses with that of Jackie, a starry-eyed mercenary and former gang member. His optimism with regard to "making it" in Night City sweeps V away, and they complete a number of jobs together quite successfully. Eventually, the duo is hired to complete a heist in the heart of Arasaka, and they eventually find out that it is above their league. The digital relic they are after functions as the catalyst for the main narrative, as it contains the essence of Johnny Silverhand, a vigilante rock frontman who once happened to lead an assault against Arasaka, nuking their headquarters Arasaka Tower in the process. Imprisoned within the very digital relic V and Jackie had sought to steal from Arasaka, he is eventually freed when V is forced to (seemingly irrevocably) insert the chip into their brain to preserve the chip from being destroyed after the heist goes wrong and Jackie is killed. As V later finds out, Johnny starts to co-habit V's brain, eventually fated to completely overtake V's personality within a few weeks, unless they find a way to prevent it from happening. This becomes the primary motivation for V throughout the rest of the main narrative. The following acts of the game simply consist of V getting more and more daring (and desperate) in searching for a way to become the sole owner of their own body.

Johnny is the distilled essence of the themes of the video game. As a distant memory



for Night City, he is remembered in fear and awe, having committed what was likely the most destructive event that occurred within the city by destroying Arasaka Tower in the year 2023 of the game's timeline: "Get the payload on the elevator, arm it, let gravity do its thing. Explosion rocks the foundation, tower crumbles - chaos, screaming, roll credits" (CD Projekt Red, 2020). Yet this was a targeted attack on the corporation's biggest project: "It was Mikoshi I was after, wanted to destroy it. Gave 'Saka ample time to clear the building" (CD Projekt Red, 2020). He wanted to destroy the same technology that allowed Johnny's personality to be stored within cyberspace; the technology that allowed ethereal immortality and carried the potential to free the person from their body: it is the ultimate cyberpunk alteration for one to make on their body: "Corps've already taken the world for their own, now they're coming for us" (CD Projekt Red, 2020).

It is in this context that the following side quest occurs. As is the case with all the quests within the game, it is titled after a song. In this particular case, it is the anti-police rock song "Killing in the Name" (Rage Against the Machine, 1992). The quest starts out with a text message from a mysterious organization: it appears that Night City has its very own revolutionary underground organization, which is called the "Bartmoss Collective". It is seemingly led by a mysterious figure called Swedenborg-Riviera whose statements are occasionally relayed through phone messages. A journalist hires V to identify Swedenborg-Riviera in order to interview them, which leads V to radio towers around the city to determine the location of the mysterious leader. Johnny, jaded in death, objects to V's pursuit: "Hoping once you find him he'll spill the meaning of life? Here, I'll save you the trouble—life makes no sense" (CD Projekt Red, 2020). At every step of the way, the individual thought

to be Swedenborg-Riviera contacts V via text, making statements such as “who that goes in search of me has already torn off the bourgeois-corporate blinders from their eyes and taken the first step toward the hanging garden of postcapitalism” (CD Projekt Red, 2020). The representation of the theorist/revolutionary is reminiscent of a parody of the leading figures of small sects of revolutionary groups such as the anarcho-communist Mikhail Bakunin who is referred to as “a romantic rebel” (p. 129) by Avrich (1970), or even the Situationist International, whose members used a similarly self-aggrandizing language: as stated by Vaneigem (2006) in the fifth Situationist International conference held in Göteborg in 1961 about the organization, “the activity it considers itself capable of carrying out, within the world of bureaucratization and reification, depends henceforth on its ability to maintain critical rigor, a rigor that will serve as a cohesive force” (p. 114). Bound to its theoretical cohesion without respect to their organizational strength, as Lenin (1990) stresses the importance of, the language utilized by Swedenborg-Riviera which carries with it the aesthetics of a theory without its content feels almost as if it is a parody of Vaneigem’s (2006) statement. In any case, the later messages of Swedenborg-Riviera become less and less coherent as V comes closer to discovering their true identity: “The nirvana of Marxian-Swedenborgism is around the corner” (CD Projekt Red, 2020). This is noted by Johnny, who appears every once in a while, to mock V’s pursuit of the mysterious individual: “Jesus V, this is philosophy for the hoi polloi. Have you ever read a book in your life? You know what—don’t answer. I don’t wanna know” (CD Projekt Red, 2020). As discussed in the previous chapter, *Cyberpunk 2077* often carries with it the aesthetics of capitalist domination and the resistance to it, negating revolution in favor of violence. In this case, the game takes note of this and self-referentially parodies this aspect of the game. The quest

unceremoniously comes to an end with V finding out that Swedenborg-Riviera is a fortune-teller bot stuck in an electronic billboard, hacked as a prank: “a wind-up philosopher in a box! Hand me a couple eddies—see what it cranks out next!” (CD Projekt Red, 2020). The unceremonious ending to this quest is a representation of the spectacle of Night City; a knowing admittance of the obstacles of revolutionary aesthetics without the potential for inducing change:

It is not a mere decoration added to the real world. It is the very heart of this real society's unreality. In all of its particular manifestations—news, propaganda, advertising, entertainment— the spectacle represents the dominant *model* of life. (Debord, 2005, p. 8)

The simulated fortune-teller signifies the simulation of resistance to capitalism. This playful resistance itself functions as a real revolutionary movement would. At a glance, it carries all the aesthetic characteristics of an underground revolutionary organization: it is led by a figure with a fake name, producing and relaying propaganda through whatever tool is available to them, which resonates in real people who follow the fortune-teller’s directives, as the journalist who is searching for Swedenborg-Riviera states: “I started looking into all this about a year ago, right after one of the Swedenborg’s followers lobbed a molotov into the Helvetia branch” (CD Projekt Red, 2020). In a nutshell, the spectacle itself is made real: “real life is materially invaded by the contemplation of the spectacle” (Debord, 2005, p. 8). However, this spectacle-based reality carries with it no potential for inducing change, as it is based on creating a pastiche of revolutionary aesthetics through propaganda, violent acts, and carrying itself in an atmosphere of secrecy that imbues the deeds committed with a sense of importance. Debord (2005) considers the spectacle as it pertains to revolution through his observations on the Eastern Bloc of the Cold War:

Just as it presents pseudo-goods to be coveted, it offers false models of revolution to local revolutionaries. The bureaucratic regimes in power in certain industrialised countries have their own particular type of spectacle,

but it is an integral part of the total spectacle, serving as its pseudo-opposition and actual support. (p. 28)

In the world of *Cyberpunk 2077*, it is not a bureaucratic power that reproduces the spectacle of revolution, but society itself with its simulated realities that produce no path to affect the hegemonic power of the megacorporations. Due to the lack of hope, and of organizational structures to follow a coherent plan towards change, revolution only remains as a concept to imitate.

### **6.3. A Derelict Mall and the Nostalgia for the Rebellious Youth**

*Night in the Woods* deals with a similar theme in one of its own side adventures called “Old Gods of the Fort Lucenne Mall”. This section was mentioned in passing in the previous chapter, and the point of including this section of the game will become clearer in this detailed approach to the side adventure. After the regular band practice with her friends, Mae has the option to ask to spend some time with her (now estranged) former best friend Bea. Due to the awkwardness between them, Mae cannot think of anything to do together, which leads her to blurt out “want to go to the mall?” (Infinite Fall, 2017), a place she had not been to in five years. Knowing the dereliction of the mall, yet resigned by Mae, Bea accepts her invitation.

As is the case with most of the side adventures in this small town in the American Midwest, they go by car. The shift between the various environments is sharp, as each side adventure such as this one is clearly marked off by a two-layered border: one between the initial scene and the car, and another between the car and the setting of the side adventure. In this sense, the representation of the Midwest town clearly depicts the difficulty of engaging in *dérive* in an environment designed for cars. As stated by Debord (2006):

Today the different unities of atmosphere and of dwellings are not precisely marked off, but are surrounded by more or less extended bordering regions. The most general change that *dérive* experiences lead to proposing is the constant diminution of these border regions, up to the point of their complete suppression. (p. 66)

The presence of borders between the parts of a town or a city is the primary obstacle in drifting through the totality of the living environment. A car-centric design therefore carves up all spaces into small chunks of spaces wherein the collective society turns into the suburban individual, cut off from the totality of social life to an extent. Any particular approach to level design in video games invariably reproduces a similar sense of unity or separation.

In any case, Mae and Bea make it to their destination wherein the bustling mall Mae had been expecting is not to be found: Mae asks “What the hell happened?”, to which Bea simply responds with “the internet” (Infinite Fall, 2017). However, they do come across a clothing store called “Urevolution”, its sign written in an edgy font, with the merchandise consisting of t-shirts of formerly popular bands and paraphernalia belonging to various teen subcultures which are anachronistic by at least a decade: ““Dead Party Boys stickers? In 2017’ ‘I hear they’re back in”” (Infinite Fall, 2017). Following this discussion, Mae decides to steal a belt buckle, which can either go smoothly or they can get caught by the shopkeeper, depending on the player’s ability to fulfill the minigame successfully. Following this, Mae also dares Bea to steal an item as she runs interference with the shopkeeper.

The minigame itself is like most others within the game, it is dependent on only following a single directive and can be accomplished quite easily. Yet the repetitiveness of these minigames can also be viewed as metaphors in and of

themselves (Consalvo & Phelps, 2020). The sequence in the mall itself depicts Mae longing for her childhood, while Bea has begrudgingly accepted her long hours of managing her father's hardware store, and having little time other than witnessing the decay of the town she grew up in. This sequence is not the first time Mae shoplifts, as she attempts to do so in a pretzel stand, and also in an abandoned building later on. As such, this is a representation of the town's downward spiral: "the American Dream of upward mobility has vanished from this place. Instead, poverty and working, service-class jobs that are largely dead-end take center stage" (Consalvo & Phelps, 2020, p. 349). Consequently, levels and minigames such as this one portrays the town's limited opportunities for its working-class population, while also serving as moments of bonding for Mae and her friends.

As a college dropout who struggles to find a purpose in her life, one-on-one outings such as the trip to the mall essentially draw Mae's attention from another minigame, one which occurs in her dreams as she goes to bed. As if subconsciously concerned with the fate of the town, she imagines the town and the surrounding woods at night, jumping up and down as she does during the day, yet this time with the aim to destroy her surroundings with a baseball bat. In many ways, Mae's daytime outings with her friends and the minigames she engages in shift her destructive tendencies to mending and building her previous friendships, which will be critical in the American Gothic mystery that is the main plot of the game, as will be discussed in the following chapter.

## CHAPTER 7

### THE CULT OF DEATH AND ITS OPPONENTS

Death occupies a central role in the main narratives of both games. Yet both games relate to death in quite conflicting manners in their main narratives. Death in *Cyberpunk 2077* is a dubious event that happens to an individual: the main quest itself is about the player character saving themselves from the destruction of their personality, from keeping the construct of another individual from taking over their own body. This is an individual struggle that ultimately results in the death of either player character V or the construct of Johnny. Meanwhile, *Night in the Woods* turns death into a community issue through its main story, which starts out as a missing person case that is personal for both Mae and her friends.

#### 7.1. The Individual Death in *Cyberpunk 2077*

The manner in which *Cyberpunk 2077* relates to death is far from being a cyberpunk take on the concept. While it represents constructs in the form of personalities without bodies, this approach to life is not applied to the player character V, who feels a natural affinity to their own body same as a contemporary individual would. V is not like Case, the protagonist of Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1994), who is rendered

unable to “jack in” to cyberspace due to damage to his nervous system: “For Case, who’d lived for the bodiless exultation of cyberspace, it was the Fall” (p. 6). This conception of the body and the paradise-like approach to cyberspace is missing from V, who has lived in his own body throughout their life outside of momentary experiences of “cyberdance”; recordings that encompass the totality of human senses, essentially allowing the participant to get into the skin of another person for the duration of the recording. In this sense, like a simulation or a video game, cyberspace is utilized to give way to bodily experiences ranging from death to sexual pleasure. Similarly, in *Neuromancer*, Case’s contempt of the human body is riddled with an obsession over flesh, as the narrator describes a young woman in reference to the “flesh [which] was smooth and firm” (Gibson, 1994, p. 9). In this sense, the experiences of the body are not overcome, but reproduced or fetishized in cyberspace, which functions as yet another avenue for the body to exert its will.

In seeking a solution to the seemingly mortal disruption caused by Johnny’s construct having been stuck in V’s mind, V nevertheless keeps putting their life in danger, seemingly for no reason other than practicing their profession as a gun-for-hire. In a similar contradiction to the conception of body, V’s relationship with their body and life itself is separated between the main narrative of the game, which is V’s pursuit of staying alive, versus the gameplay mechanics that treat death itself as a trivial subject as V kills and can get killed throughout the gameplay almost all the time. As such, there is a series of dissonances between life and death, between flesh and cyberspace, and even between narrative and gameplay.

Even though *Cyberpunk 2077* is not keen on letting the player determine the



personality of V and make varied choices throughout the game, it nevertheless allows the player to choose from a variety of endings. While there are many minute variations to each ending, there are four main ones, which are titled through tarot cards.

#### **7.1.1. “The Devil” and the Submission**

The first among these is “The Devil”, as it allows the player to make a deal with the creators of Johnny’s construct and the main antagonists of the game, the Arasaka megacorporation, much to the protest and resistance of Johnny. Embroiled in a power struggle, the daughter of the old CEO, Hanako Arasaka, enlists V to help her regain power over her renegade brother Yorinobu, who killed their father to take his place and reform Arasaka. Through their deal, V sides with the very status quo that Johnny fought against, who views it as such: “You betrayed yourself” (CD Projekt Red, 2020). There is a literal truth to Johnny’s words, in addition to the metaphorical one, as he states the following: “That line that kept V and [Johnny] Silverhand separate, well, faded a while back [...] I’m the V with a heavy conscience” (CD Projekt Red, 2020). Johnny, or rather, a part of the now collective personality of V/Johnny later on states the ending of the remaining V: “Sold a piece of your soul to the devil. YOU are no longer all there. YOU are not YOU”, which is later on affirmed by as they leave the operating table wondering, “Who am I?” (CD Projekt Red, 2020). While it is never stated that the operation was a failure, there are signs to suggest otherwise. In the end, it is made apparent that the damage to V’s body was permanent even after the removal of Johnny’s construct. Yet even then, V is presented with another choice to cheat death, as they are given with an opportunity to store their personality within a construct to wait for a suitable body, literally selling

their soul to Arasaka in the meantime. As an interesting aside, if V accepts the offer, the affectations present in the voice of the character change significantly, to that of Johnny's speaking patterns for the remainder of the ending. What turns this ending into a total affirmation of the status quo is the revelation that the essence of Arasaka's previous CEO Saburo was also put into a construct, which is later on inserted into his son and murderer's body as he rules through the youthful body of his son.

In this sense, the totality of the narrative signifies that no meaningful change has occurred since the start of the game, outside of the slim possibility that Arasaka may one day revive V in a new body, if they decide they can exploit them. The V who chooses this ending is characterized as somebody who is still a "small-time merc, little thief with her [or his] head in the clouds" (CD Projekt Red, 2020) by Johnny's construct. In this sense, personal gain takes the place of struggle, which is represented as pointless in any case. This ending illustrates the absence of what Cross (2012) calls the "laboratory of dreams" (p. 71); a virtual space wherein marginalized communities and individuals are given the opportunity "for self-conscious (or at least semi-conscious) social reconstruction" (p. 73). As an action/role-playing game, *Cyberpunk 2077* is disinterested in functioning as the basis of an emancipatory reconstruction, as all that is left of V in this ending is the shell of a personality who is either dying or devoid of ideals to change himself or the dystopian society. Whichever of these is worse is left to the interpretation of the player. Similar to the previously discussed contradictions, V's struggle seems to have resulted in their total submission to the status quo, having submitted to the capitalist realism (Fisher, 2009) of cyberpunk.

### **7.1.2. Self-sacrifice and the “Dialectic of Apocalypse”**

As opposed to submitting to the status quo and protecting their physical well-being, V also has the opportunity to fight against it at great cost. Going at it alone, enlisting the help of the mercenaries of Night City, or one of the nomadic tribes outside the city for an all-out assault on the megacorporation, V and Johnny conjoin together in their aims. This essentially indicates that the line between the gun-for-hire and the political prisoner who is trapped as a construct is seemingly disappearing. As opposed to the conflicting personalities depicted earlier, V and Johnny become closer than they ever were, getting to know each other’s inner layers, and influencing one another. However, this is all done with the purpose of separating the two personalities from the one body. Ironically, they get closer than ever in an effort to separate themselves. This dialectical relationship between the two personalities essentially turns the earlier impressions of two personalities battling for influence over the body of V into producing a new individual, one who is willing to take on the megacorporation in a suicide attack.

This mirrors Johnny’s own attack on Arasaka, producing a hopelessness caused by the absence of a goal beyond separating the two personalities from one body.

Concerning dualities, Haraway (2016) claims that “the self is the One who is not dominated”, and that “the other is the one who holds the future” (p. 60). Yet, she also notes the impossibility of a total merger between the two: “but to be One is to be an illusion, and so to be involved in a dialectic of apocalypse with the other. Yet to be other is to be multiple, without clear boundary, frayed, insubstantial. One is too few, but two are too many” (p. 60). V and Johnny are one such duality: the larger-than-life

personality of Johnny fills the gaps in V's political illiteracy and absence of any strategic goal, yet these two personalities also exacerbate each other's destructive tendencies. The gun-for-hire who commercializes their combat abilities is merged with the anti-corporate militant / rock frontman, which forms the recipe for a sacrifice of the self without broader consequences for the city; it is a personal struggle against a world-encompassing establishment, wherein the atomized self is unable to win against the hand they are dealt with. The only possible ending for V and Johnny is the dissipation of one or the other from the body. If Johnny remains the only occupant of V's body, he leaves Night City in what appears to be an open ending. On the other hand, V has more options depending on the player choices made throughout the gameplay. They may join the nomadic clan they befriended on a journey to the Arizona desert, as very little remains for V in the city. With the rest of the clan, V drives out of the city, as the radio program accompanying them on the way notes that, even though the antagonist megacorporation has taken a blow, "our wondrous lives in Night City won't change much – but when do they ever?" (CD Projekt, 2020). Alternatively, V may spend the rest of their days among the mercenaries of Night City, remaining in the familiar urban space with new schemes on the line. In the end, very little changes for the city, or even for V for that matter. All that remains with V is a leveled life with a shortened lifespan due to the construct of Johnny, which played havoc with their brain.

In this sense, the city and its denizens remain outside of the "possibility space" (Bogost, 2007, p. 43) of the video game; the tools provided for the personal struggle are not present for the rest of the city. As the gameplay mechanics are designed around the sole mercenary whose personal struggle occurs within the same

mechanics as their role as a gun-for-hire, the “possibility space” (Bogost, 2007, p. 43) cannot effectively challenge what Debord (2005) considered to be the Spectacle. The gameplay cannot conceive different tools with which to produce revolutionary outcomes.

## **7.2. Hope Against the Cult of Death in *Night in the Woods***

In many ways, the absence of the everyday residents and the everyday struggles of the city are the cause of *Cyberpunk 2077*’s deeply pessimistic narrative. Befitting the setting itself, the narrative of *Cyberpunk 2077* is constructed around gameplay mechanics that pose the player against the world, and what little relationships there are remain distant and commercialized in the form of business partnerships, with the few potential romantic relationships V can form being tested by the pressures of these aspects of the narrative. *Night in the Woods* excels at allowing the player to engage precisely with these everyday struggles that are shared by the residents of the town it is set in, even within the context of a Gothic narrative with a Lovecraftian bent:

*Night in the Woods*’ ludic combination of openness, restriction and inconsequentiality, matches the circumstances of its protagonist, whose life seems drifting uncontrollably and inevitably towards some tragic, potentially violent, Gothic conclusion. (Kirkland, 2021, p. 105)

This combination of inconsequential gameplay elements combined with the seemingly everyday struggles of the townies—inclusive of the protagonist, Mae Borowski—produces a narrative that is intrinsically inclusive of a collective struggle against the main antagonists, who remain veiled throughout most of the gameplay.

### **7.2.1. Friendships and Inconsequential Gameplay**

As demonstrated in the previous chapters, Mae and her friends have seemingly

ordinary lives, which is reflected in the inconsequential aspects of the gameplay present. During most days, Mae can engage in band practice with her friends. In a rhythm mini-game, the player plays the bass to match the rhythm and the melody of the song. The player may be sloppy in their playing, which prompts Mae to claim “I literally do not know this song” (Infinite Fall, 2017). In case of total success, Mae will simply boast, “All in a day’s work” (Infinite Fall, 2017). However, there are no tangible changes to what comes after band practice. In a similar vein, Mae may jump up to the highest point of the town as the player engages in some skillful display of acrobatics with the jump and direction commands on their keyboards, which results in Mae coming across a sleeping cat, leading her to write down on her journal that “roof cat is correct” (Infinite Fall, 2017): the consequence is what the player makes of it rather than anything tangible, which stands in contrast to the wide array of commercial rewards the player revels in *Cyberpunk 2077*.

In this sense, *Night in the Woods* promotes an existentialist manner of gameplay wherein producing meaning for the protagonist, as well as the player, depends on engaging with the “possibility space” (Bogost, 2007, p. 43) of the video game without tangible rewards or failures. As suggested by De Miranda (2018) with regard to *Life is Strange* (Donnod Entertainment, 2015), “*LIS* is built on the narrative assumption that existential control is complex, not always rational, and not a facet of an isolated Cartesian mind” (p. 835). This is just as applicable to *Night in the Woods* despite its absence of choice-making mechanics outside of Mae deciding which of her friends she wants to hang out with. Ironically, the absence of consequential choice-making mechanics (as was the case with *Cyberpunk 2077*) and their replacement with comparatively inconsequential choice-making mechanics produces

a sense of freedom, as the absence of a rationally conceivable universe allows the player to derive their own meanings from the small acts they commit to. It is in this sense that Mae hangs out with her friends: deciding to lie on the abandoned railway tracks with the gloomy kid Lori, breaking stuff to relieve some stress with Gregg, going to the mall with Bea, or ghost-hunting with Angus.

In any case, the player commits to hanging out and exploring without knowing how Mae's relationship with others will develop, or whether it will help with her main goal. As such, the inconsequentiality of gameplay allows for the construction of a narrative that is free in terms of wresting meanings from gameplay. Moreover, the existentialist gameplay that depends on interactions with the town without an imminent goal feed into a *dérive* (Debord, 2006) in the town of Possum Springs. Mae engages with what the setting has to offer in her exploration, which essentially allows her to engage with the town as a living entity. This is critical in allowing for the development of an emergent culture (Williams, 1977), as will be made clear in the following section.

### **7.2.2. The Cult and the Emergent Culture**

The throughline of the plot is a string of missing person cases, one of whom was Casey, a part of Mae's circle of friends. Together with her friends, Mae attempts to get to the bottom of this mysterious case while wrestling with her own personal demons, which haunt her in her dreams. After a string of close calls with the perpetrators, a breaking point in the case arrives on the night of Harfest—the *Night in the Woods* equivalent of Halloween. Upon hanging out with her friends Gregg and Bea, Mae is disappointed with the fact that her friends have lives outside their circle:

Bea has to take care of her store, while Gregg has planned a date night with his boyfriend Angus. It is at this moment that Mae witnesses another kidnapping, which prompts her to follow the hooded perpetrator to the edge of town.

Following this sequence, Mae overcomes her aimlessness and mobilizes her friends to seek out the source of the kidnappings, as their practices of hanging out transform into detective work. This coincides with Mae's uneasy dreams, which finally start to make sense as she talks with a cosmic entity she mistakes for a god, who clearly reflects Mae's uneasiness about life by defining it as a "monstrous existence" (Infinite Fall, 2017). The cosmic figure goes on to warn Mae about a "great beast" below (Infinite Fall, 2017) who threatens existence. As the cosmic and the mundane start to come together, Mae and her friends find the answers they're looking for in the relics of the industrial past of the town, amidst an abandoned mine. There they meet a cult that defines itself as "buncha of old boys doing their damndest to protect their own and their neighbors" (Infinite Fall, 2017). Reminiscing the loss of mining jobs and lamenting the deindustrialization of the town, they believe that their world was over until they found a much older mine, with an ancient bottomless well where a "great beast" resides. In exchange for the occasional sacrifices, the beast granted them health, and brought a semblance of life, pulling people like Mae back to town. For them, sacrificing the occasional "drifters, drunks, and delinquents" (Infinite Fall, 2017) such as Casey and the mental health of Mae was a worthwhile sacrifice to keep the town the way it had been, to stop the clock in its tracks. In the end, an accidental mine collapse traps the cult deep in the mines as Mae and her friends make their way out, likely resulting in the death of the "big costume party murder club" (Infinite Fall, 2017), as Bea called them.



Following this, Mae communicates with the beast itself, though she cannot understand it. However, she is still haunted by the beast as she believes she will die in Possum Springs, yet with a spirit of struggle: “until that happens / I want to hope again / And I want it to hurt. / Because that means it meant something / It means I am... something, at least” (Infinite Fall, 2017). Mae realizes herself within the harsh world that led a group of conservative townies to turn into a sacrificial cult, and she finds meaning in the struggle to go on without negating the difficulties of life:

The notion of ‘a universe that doesn't care and people who do’ is key. Thematically, it works to counteract the horrific notion of ‘monstrous existence,’ that our atoms might care to exist more than we ourselves do, that Capital and its sacrifices must persist. (Fiorilli, 2022)

In essence, the cult provides a monstrous response to a monstrous existence; providing the fascistic backlash against a sudden destabilization of the preexisting form of the mining town. Sacrificing the most vulnerable parts of society to the beast below, the cult provides the culling required by capitalism, essentially imbuing the town with a false and temporary life that is destined to come to an end. This illustrates how the residual forms of culture may serve to reinforce the dominant one. As opposed to Debord (2005) who claimed that the Spectacle of capitalism encompasses all, and Williams (1977) who claimed that aspects of the residual culture are overtaken by the dominant culture, there is an apparently symbiotic relationship between the dominant culture of capitalism, and that of the residual forms of capitalism present in the Rust Belt, as exemplified in Possum Springs. The reactionary responses to the localized failures of capitalism, as seen in the cult, only serve to reinforce it by culling the society of the vulnerable parts of the working class: the poor, the homeless, the immigrant, the queer... Yet, this symbiotic relationship between the beast and the cult also gives way to Mae and her friends,

who represent a pre-emergent (Williams, 1977) growth.

One of the final conversations between Mae and her friends points toward the relevance of external affinity groups as opposed to the individual struggle of *Cyberpunk 2077*: “Sometimes you need someone to be the thing you don’t have even if it’s something you’re supposed to already have. All of you are what kept me from floating off tonight” (Infinite Fall, 2017). This sequence is followed by Mae conversing with her father in a discussion reminiscent of the one she had with the cult, but with a social-democratic bent instead of a reactionary one. As opposed to the cultists who lamented the loss of mines, Mae’s father laments the loss of unions: “Unions were always there in the mines and the factory / ‘least for a while” (Infinite Fall, 2017). One of the few exceptions to the inconsequential gameplay of *Night in the Woods* is quite significant, as it provides Mae with a unique narrative opportunity at this point in conversation with her father. Through exploration, Mae is able to discover a single human tooth in the attic of her parents’ house alongside the belongings of her grandfather. Mae is also able to find out what this tooth means in the library while reading old newspaper articles. Apparently, it belonged to her grandfather’s boss, and it functioned as a signet for a militant worker’s organization, of which Mae’s grandfather was a member. Mae has the opportunity to present this tooth to her father, encouraging him to take a stand for himself against his boss. This exception to the gameplay mechanics provides a unique moment of clarity as to what is significant and what is not, essentially emphasizing the politically pointed aspects of the narrative. The player might miss this side plot entirely without totally engaging with the exploration aspect of the gameplay to the fullest extent. Thus, exploration becomes the representation of the politically conscious action; a

gameplay mechanic of Debord's *derive* (Debord, 2006) present in the ordinary engagement with the everyday practice of playing a video game.

## CHAPTER 8

## CONCLUSION

As demonstrated in the preceding chapters, this thesis has aimed to examine the counter-hegemonic potential of video games through an analysis of liberatory discourses present in *Cyberpunk 2077* and *Night in the Woods*. The relation of gameplay mechanics to lead to the establishment of such discourses within these narratives has been observed in detail. In addition to this, the relation of the narrative genre (cyberpunk and American Gothic) and the gameplay genre (action RPG and adventure game) in producing these narratives have produced answers to the initial questions that prompted this thesis. As observed in the comparison of the two games, it is clear that discourse follows the systems present within the games, the gameworld as a whole, and the narrative that is weaved through the interactions between the player, the systems, and the written plots. The character of the discourses present is dependent on whether these disparate elements are in dissonance or harmonious with one another, which remains the case with the liberatory and counter-hegemonic discourses these games present. However, the theoretical threads of Debord (2004; 2005; 2006) and Williams (1965; 1977) utilized in this thesis are increasingly put at odds through their conflicting views on the

totality of culture and the potential of artistic representations of resistance and counter-culture. Debord's (2005) condemnation of the Spectacle as a unitary separation from the material reality of capitalist exploitation gives way to an erasure of the pluralities present within the dominant culture, and of the strands that exist outside of the dominant culture.

As presented in CHAPTER 5, the gameworlds of *Cyberpunk 2077* and *Night in the Woods* differ immensely, as the cyberpunk Night City is intended to function as a mishmash of cyberpunk aesthetics as represented by its urban-walking denizens, neon lights, extreme poverty, and normalized street violence; the unfettered domination of the veil of the Spectacle (Sadler, 1998) in the form of the normalized dystopian conditions. *Night in the Woods* presents a bleak slice of reality in the form of the American Gothic; a reality which forms the site of a cultural struggle based on the stagnating Rust Belt. The gameplay mechanics of *Cyberpunk 2077* puts the player in control of the contradictory position of an unfettered and free agent who is narratively unable to change the status quo. As such, CHAPTER 5 compares the two forms of worldbuilding as to how they represent gameplay mechanics (such as exploration) as a politically conscious act on the part of the player. It is concluded that the protagonist's positioning in a socially active world as a link between related yet separate struggles of the townies of *Night in the Woods* is conducive to establishing a politically charged narrative. The socially inclined gameplay mechanics allow the player and the protagonist to engage in this world, allowing for interactivity in this political narrative, and giving the player the role of a politically active agent.

CHAPTER 6 overviews the parts of texts of these video games through some of their side plots. It is noted that the retrofuturism of *Cyberpunk 2077* brings about the past conceptions regarding the future of capitalist society into the present. This retrofuturism, when combined with the politically ineffective gameplay and the gameworld resembling a theme park for cyberpunk, brings about a Spectacle of its own, viewing current struggles through the lens of the past: nostalgia becomes the neutralizer for politically conscious action. This aspect of the game is directly materialized in a side quest, which functions as a critique of faux-revolutionary action. All in all, the relations between these aspects of the video game result in a narrative that presents overcharged forms of corporate domination together with forms of resistance that are reduced to illusory representations of effective acts, as a “pseudo-opposition” (Debord, 2005, p. 28). This is contrasted with a relatively understated and grounded side-narrative present in *Night in the Woods*, which presents a culturally ordinary and seemingly politically unconscious action: going to the mall with one’s friend. Yet, as presented in this linear sequence, going to the mall is a residual cultural practice that produces nostalgia for the years when the town was not on a downward postindustrial spiral. The protagonist and her friend overturn this longing for the past by stealing from a store with faux-revolutionary aesthetics and conquering the mechanical fountain in the middle of the mall, which turns a socializing moment into a deconstruction of the mechanical and ideological functions of the mall. This represents an everyday act of *détournement* within the *derive*-like exploration of the town’s mall; an everyday moment of bonding with one’s friend becoming a politically conscious act of deconstruction.

CHAPTER 7 tackles the main plots of both games in relation to their depictions of

death, political hope, and the potential of the progressive ruptures within the dominant culture of capitalism, which Williams (1977) called emergent cultures. It is noted that *Cyberpunk 2077* deals with death in relation to the separation of mind and body, with the mind theoretically being allowed to persist in the event of bodily death. This separation is nevertheless contrasted with the inevitability of death on the part of the protagonist, which is a reflection of the contradictions present in the dystopian cyberpunk capitalism of the video game. Similarly, the multiple endings provided by the narrative structure consist of a choice between submission, escape, or self-sacrifice: the personal nature of the player's struggle is unable to realize their own struggle within the broader society. This is, once again, contrasted with *Night in the Woods* in its emphasis on the potential of an emergent culture on the margins of society, which can challenge the dominance of capital through a struggle with the regressive and nostalgic cultural residues: the video game promotes collective hope in the face of a "monstrous reality" (Infinite Fall, 2017).

In essence, this comparison of the potential of political video game narratives with regard to challenging the dominance of capitalism and its cultural hegemony is dependent on the relationship between the gameworld's design, the nature of the gameplay mechanics utilized, and how these distinct aspects conjoin in the player experience. It is revealed that the openness of gameplay and the increase in scope of gameworlds do not necessarily promote a free narrative agency. Rather, it is revealed that the political potential of the narratives is dependent on the positioning of player agency with regard to the antagonists, as well as the political nature of the antagonists presented. While both *Cyberpunk 2077* and *Night in the Woods* deal with capitalism as its antagonist on some level, it is only the latter that is able to position

the protagonist to a politically active position through representations of *dérive*, *détournement*, and a protagonist who is part of an emergent culture that is hopeful even in the face of death and decay. As Debord's *Game of War* (Wark, 2013) sought to present the Spectacle as a tactical and strategic obstacle against revolutionary struggles, video games such as *Night in the Woods* ought to be considered works of art that are able to immerse players within a political agency that demystifies the cultural hegemony of capitalism. Outside of genuine political action that is practiced among the broader society, the unique potential of immersive agency can be similarly realized or represented in the momentary isolation of gameplay.



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