Ripperdocs and game makers: Bioethics in the dystopian future of (post)cyberpunk fiction

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The basic ethical principles that underlie biomedical and behavioral research involving human subjects – respect for persons, beneficence, and justice – face deterioration and decline in the future envisioned in cyberpunk and dystopian science fiction. In the near-future setting of the first-person role-playing game Cyberpunk 2077, well-being, longevity, and enhancements are the privileges of corporate elites. However, they can be partially afforded across social strata thanks to the grassroots and do-it-yourself “ripperdoc” clinics. Some people can live for as long as 150 years; most die young due to crime and extreme social disparities, but all have access to a range of life-enhancing treatments advocated and envisioned by transhumanist scholars. In recent novels that represent post-cyberpunk genres, such as Neal Stephenson’s Fall; or, Dodge in Hell (2019), the distribution of advanced technologies such as personality constructs and mind uploads becomes problematic. The ripperdoc is replaced by an afterlife “game-maker”, a maverick of world-building who sells virtual real estate to those who can afford their place in the expanding cloud of afterlife worlds. This article focuses on the evolution of the theme of affordability and access to biotechnology and how it becomes more nuanced and aligned with current discussions around resources, climate change, and social disparities in access to healthcare and technology.

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NIGHT CITY AND ITS BIOETHICAL PARADOXES

At first sight, the streets of Night City, the cyberpunk metropolis from the role-playing tabletop games created by Mike Pondsmith, present a bustling image of diversity and prosperity. Its squares, night markets, and pavements brim with individuals who express their social affiliations and aspirations through various technological and biological enhancements. Technologically enhanced entertainment, fitness, and well-being are advertised at every corner and ingrained in daily activities: from mundane tasks, such as eating synthetic ramen noodles, to illicit ones, like the services offered in Joy-Toy bars where citizens of Night City – and the player – can choose from a selection of “dolls” or sex workers willingly implanted with a biochip that erases the memory of the encounter. If we accept Donna Haraway’s assertion that bodies are “maps of power and identity” (1991, 180), then the maps found in cyberpunk literature depict a world teeming with diverse identities, each afforded a considerable degree of access to tools for individual expression and enhancement.

Upon closer inspection, however, the very foundations of bioethics – the notions of respect for persons, beneficence, and justice (Steinbock 2007, 4) – are fragile, fluid, and unevenly distributed. Gang violence is a daily occurrence, and some parts of the city are controlled almost exclusively by criminal groups, resulting in a generally low life expectancy. Communal services in Night City are nearly nonexistent, with tons of rubbish bags littering the side alleys and patches of barren land. Only two public hospitals still exist, and they suffer from lower-level flooding and disruptions in regular water, power, and communications services. They are the “last stand for major surgery and the ability to handle the periodic plague outbreaks” (Pondsmith 2020, 301). The reasons behind troubles with public healthcare and communal services are evident if one looks above the level of streets and overcrowded apartment blocks of the metropolis. Small civilian aircraft of the wealthy elite cruise the higher latitudes of the Night City, comfortably maneuvering between corporate luxury skyscrapers during the daytime and high-end entertainment venues at night. Crews of escorted medics from the Trauma Team, a highly expensive but highly efficient air ambulance, can attend to any emergency within the Night City in minutes. Even higher, above the Earth’s surface, orbital medical clinics offer advanced surgeries to those who can afford them. An apparent two-tier healthcare system seems to be at work in the world of Cyberpunk. As a mirror of the socio-economic conditions of Night City, this liberal system gives a convenient narrative springboard for themes of rebellion and self-determination and for an inflationary punk attitude of main protagonists that characterize the cyberpunk genre (Higgins and Iung 2020, 93).

The two realities of Night City, that of the elite and that of the street, are not entirely at odds with each other. The biotechnological advancements achieved before and after the fall of nation-states and the ascent to power by global corporations are not exclusive to the financial elite. Although the wealthy have access to subtler forms of bodily enhancement in their orbital clinics, a whole range of cyber and bio-implants are accessible on the street. This relatively easy access to “cyberware” (cybernetic prosthesis) is possible thanks to the independent network of grassroots, do-it-yourself clinics of medical practitioners called the “ripperdocs”, or – as one character
from the computer game calls them – “chrome shamans”. On the narrative timeline of Pondsmith’s tabletop games that cover years before Cyberpunk 2077 or Cyberpunk Red: The Roleplaying Game of the Dark Future (2020; Cyberpunk 2013, 1988; Cyberpunk 2020, 1990), ripperdoc shops are shifting clinics, which became the primary source of medical care. Ripperdocs were doctors who helped most people get medicine, emergency care, and moderate-level cyberware installations. In the later timeline of the Cyberpunk 2077 game, the ripperdoc clinics have stable locations and offer a wide range of enhancements for almost every part of the human body. For example, Victor Vector – a doctor whom the players befriend during their adventures in Night City – sells titanium bones, a ballistic coprocessor for hand enhancement, “Gorilla arms” cyber limbs, reinforced tendons, fortified ankles, Kiroshi Optics for enhanced vision and even a new “operating system” for cybernetic brain enhancement.

Ripperdocs made cyberware available at low cost to a wide range of clients, and the streets of Night City are abundant with individuals and whole communities that use it. Boxing rings, car racing tracks, and dance floors are areas of life that cannot sustain activities related to them without cybernetic upgrades and prostheses. Such democratization of cybernetic enhancements results in society’s global, transgenerational cyborgization. Only those who choose not to be enhanced – Luddites and humanists (Benko 2005, 8) – keep their bodies in their natural-born, non-enhanced state, perhaps as a gesture rejecting the posthumanist claims that technology is constitutive of identity.

The arsenal of personal cyberware available at Victor Vector’s do-it-yourself clinic is partly superficial and justified by the demands of gameplay and combat mechanics; players need weapons, and the game delivers them as implants and prostheses. There are, however, some less visible services on offer at the ripperdoc’s practice: life extension and slowing aging. Although not very beneficial for the gameplay, these subtle biological enhancements are crucial for the narrative and the overarching story of the Cyberpunk saga. Life in Night City often ends violently prematurely due to the high crime rate and the lack of public services, and even the ripperdocs offer a selection of subtle biological enhancements. Rouge is an important character in Cyberpunk 2077 and is around 90 years old in the game’s main timeline. We know it from the playable backstory of Johnny Silverhand, when he and Rouge, (who is in her late twenties or early thirties in 2013) take part in an attack on Arasaka Tower, a symbol of the domination of Night City by a Japanese mega-corporation. Rouge’s longevity and comfort of living as a late octogenarian or early nonagenarian is a mystery the player must solve. However, it also indicates the overall state of healthcare and access to methods of life enhancement.

The corporate, capitalist, and libertarian transhumanism represented in the Cyberpunk dystopia, from the vantage point of affordable life-enhancing services of ripperdocs, shows its egalitarian, beneficial, and even friendly side. Benjamin Krohmal and Ezekiel Emanuel present three major systems of access to health care in modern democracies: a multi-tiered market system (USA), a one-tier system of public access to all medical care, and the most popular two-tier system, such as in the UK, Israel, and the Netherlands where market-tier coverage supplements an extensive public
tier of healthcare (Krohmal and Emanuel 2007, 176). The world of Cyberpunk 2077 represents the first case, reflecting the health care in the United States, but the model is in its collapsing, almost post-apocalyptic phase.

The institution of the ripperdoc gives it an interesting twist that can contribute to bioethical debates about the strengths and weaknesses of the system. As a local center of market-grade access to medical and enhancement services, health advice, and well-being counseling, ripperdoc clinics of Night City justify the two-tier solution and prove the validity of arguments of the father of bioethics – John Rawls – who claimed that a certain amount of inequality is beneficial for those who are worst off. Affordable implants and other enhancements that citizens of the cyberpunk metropolis wear as a statement of status and even a fashion accessory illustrate the effectiveness of the “difference principle”, which Rawls defines as: “unequal distributions are unjust unless the worst off are better off with the inequality than without it” (Krohmal and Emanuel 2007, 176). Even though the figure of the ripperdoc is a sign of a failed state in its public systems, he/she is also a beacon of health care in a world of inequality.

THE LIMITS OF DO-IT-YOURSELF IN LIBERTARIAN TRANSHUMANISM

The mix of anarcho-libertarian individualism, socialist-utopian communitarianism, punk attitude, and geek know-how that characterizes the world of cyberpunk fiction of William Gibson, Bruce Sterling, and other authors of the early era of the genre (Raulerson 2010, 115), conveniently creates a buffer zone between the represented life of wealthy and the poor, those with access to latest advancements in biotechnology and those who lack the access.

The Cyberpunk saga, but especially the narrative of the Cyberpunk 2077 game, introduces a clear border between the two strata of the social world. This border runs across aging, longevity science, and mind-uploading technologies. Only Saburo Arasaka, the head of the ruling corporation, can live for up to 160 years and has the privilege of highest-grade mind-uploading into the virtual space of the Mikoshi – an experimental cyberspace infrastructure housing the “souls” of the dead. At its base level, the Mikoshi is experimental because Arasaka tests its supporting technologies on enemies of the corporation, convicts, and bodies from mortuaries. The experiments support advanced and sophisticated “personality constructs”, such as the project of complete consciousness transfer and digital immortality of the aging Saburo Arasaka.

The story of Cyberpunk 2077 is a rendering of two classical narrative motifs: the magical agent (Propp 1968, 26) with a flavor of the rags to riches theme (Negi 2021, 44). The main character V. comes into possession of a “relic”, a military grade personality construct and at the same time a “soul cage” of Johnny Silverhand, the punk-rebel killed during the attack on Arasaka Tower in 2013. The capturing of the relic happens by coincidence – during a failed heist in the hotel room of Yorinobu Arasaka, the son and heir to the powerful father Saburo. During the escape from the heist scene, V. (controlled by the player as a male or as a female charac-
(Mariusz Pisarski) inserts the relic into their head, saving their lives when the fixer who ordered the heist decides to shoot the protagonist. Revived with Johnny Silverhand effectively implanted in their brain, V. embarks on a journey to the world of high society and high technology of the Night City – helping to uncover the crime of patricide that Yorinobu Arasaka hides from his family and the public.

Personality constructs in the world of Cyberpunk – the result of mapping someone’s consciousness into a multidimensional digital grid – are futuristic, military-grade experiments geared to help the most powerful and the richest achieve a form of digital immortality. The Arasaka Corporation strictly guards the technology and does not make it publicly available. Such a setting represents the harshest version of libertarian transhumanism, with market-regulated access to the fruits of posthuman science, which, in theory – as Francisca Ferrando concludes – can be “the best guarantor of the right to human enhancement” (Ferrando 2013, 27). In the realities of the Cyberpunk saga, the science of aging and advanced posthuman technologies of enhancement, especially the techniques of digital immortality, are available only to the ruling elite. On this level, the bioethical principles of respect for persons, beneficence, and justice apply only to a fraction of society, and the possession of these “magical agents” in any form by an average citizen of Night City can end in arrest, death and imprisoning of the digital scan of one’s mind in the Mikoshi – a cyberspace prison of the afterlife. These gloomy scenarios happen in several different endings of the Cyberpunk 2077 multilinear plot. If V. does not escape the machinations of the Arasaka family, they is either dead or imprisoned in the Mikoshi.

INEQUALITIES OF POST-CYBERPUNK

If the figure of ripperdoc functions as the beacon of relevant normalcy in the access to the enhancement technologies in Cyberpunk 2077, then a gamer or more specifically a game world creator is the Promethean figure of Neal Stephenson’s post-cyberpunk novel Fall; or, Dodge in Hell (2019). I suggest calling this novel and several of Stephenson’s other speculative sci-fi works post-cyberpunk, because after publishing his first two novels – Snow Crash (1992) and Diamond Age: Or, A Young Lady’s Illustrated Primer (1995) – the author abandons a rather limiting formula of cyberpunk fiction, as a highly stylized “post-modernization of sci-fi” open for borrowings from various genres, modes, and registers of culture, pop-culture, and fashion (McCaffery 1991, 11–14).

Fall; or, Dodge in Hell, just like later books by Stephenson, is a work of speculative fiction based in the near future that focuses on one aspect of that future and elaborates on its consequences for the represented world and society. The main protagonist, Richard “Dodge” Forthrast, the billionaire CEO of a viral online game, T’Rain, after a sudden accident, collapses into an irreversible coma. While deliberating what to do with Dodge and when to switch him off from life support, his family and friends discover a request in his testament to cryogenically preserve his body until the time when technology arrives that would bring him back to life in one form or another. Just a few years after Dodge’s body is frozen, the technology of “revival” becomes available. Mind uploading techniques, defined as “the transfer of a human mind,
memories, personality and ‘self’” (Prisco 2013, 235), are advanced enough to recreate Dodge’s thinking, feeling, and other “self”-defining processes in a virtual world.

In a series of vignettes portraying the emergence of the digital afterlife for Dodge and other people, Stephenson highlights the new technology’s economic, political, and societal consequences. Dodge wakes up as a seemingly blank slate, devoid of memories from his bodily existence, yet with strong tendencies and behavioral patterns visibly inherited from his game developer and virtual reality builder career. In a playful state of creativity, Dodge shapes the empty digital landscape into a virtual landmass that becomes an island with mountain ranges, rivers, and a town in the center, surrounded by sea. Souls arriving on the island are less capable and less creative than Dodge, and soon a power relation starts to develop within the growing society of digital souls. While the population grows in the virtual world, a continuous effort to secure the necessary infrastructure is in full force in the physical world. The computing power necessary for sustaining the digital afterlife is highly resource-consuming. It becomes clear that digital “immortality” depends on the material and economic support of the living. One can be immortal if someone on the other side provides “afterlife care” or “death care”. As a result, the immortality technology is accessible only to the narrow group of the wealthy who can pay for the costs of server farms and data banks over an extended period that stretches from the time of death to an unknown “forever”.

Just as in the case of wearing a cybernetic implant in the world of Cyberpunk, having one’s real estate in the virtual afterlife becomes a sign of social status. Scientists responsible for the software and hardware of the simulation observe that although fully autonomous in their actions and habits, the bodiless constructs do not fully resemble the living persons they were in the physical world. The dead do not even care for the life they had left behind but are mainly preoccupied with their standing within the social hierarchies developed on the virtual island. Indeed, the society of the afterlife starts to resemble the society, religion, and social hierarchies of ancient, pre-democracy Greece, with gods, myths, and priests at the higher levels of the social hierarchy and a large population of subjects at the lower levels. The significant difference, apart from the fact that it is a generated virtual world with a population of uploaded minds in the late 21st century, is that the gods, priests, and priestesses come from one particular circle from the physical world: they are the game developers who worked with Dodge. The world-building skills from the matter formed of pixels and alphanumeric data prove to be the most crucial differentiating factor in the society of uploaded minds. For those uninitiated, the souls of former developers can create something out of nothing, giving them a divine status. As a result, new inequalities and problems with access to the benefits and the digital paradise arises. The simulation resembles a feudal world of angry gods, proud nobles, competing factions, and subjugated masses.

**CONCLUSION**

*Fall; or, Dodge in Hell*, a novel published 25 years after Stephenson’s debut *Snow Crash*, convincingly illustrates the distance between the visions of the future in the cy-
berpunk genre and recent speculative fiction and science fiction. The technoromantic utopia and cybergothic dystopia, characteristic of the early novels of William Gibson, Bruce Sterling, and Stephenson (Goicoechea 2020, 25), have given way to more realism-driven fiction. Just as universal health care is hard to sustain, universal access to the transhuman technologies of longevity and immortality will not be possible; inequality is not only a given but may as well be the most stimulating factor that results in the evolution of enhancement technologies to develop. Such is the overall theme and conclusions brought by the speculative reflection of the future of mind uploading and possible life after death in a posthuman society that Fall; or, Dodge in Hell and later installments of the Cyberpunk series bring to the current discussions about transhumanism and bioethics. Importantly, reality is catching up with science fiction. Recent research in longevity science is seriously trying to bypass the biological limits of the human body and extend our life beyond 100 years – the reverse aging methods of David Sinclair (Sinclair and LaPlante 2019), which have found some success, is just one example. Elon Musk’s Neuralink, a company that builds brain-to-computer interfaces that can lead to mind uploads, delivers another example of efforts to bring to life technologies that quite recently were still in the domain of science fiction. Not everyone, however, will fly to Mars or have a recreational weekend trip to the Earth’s orbit – the latter a service already offered by Amazon, Virgin, and Space X. The envisioned futures of cyberpunk fiction and speculative fiction discussed in the article were much more conservative regarding access possibilities and medical access policies compared to those proposed by some contemporary entrepreneurs today.

REFERENCES


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