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# Chippin' In: An Analysis of the Criminological Concepts Within *Cyberpunk 2077*

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## Abstract

The cyberpunk genre dominates much of our popular culture, from how we think of cyber- and white-collar crime, to our understanding of how technology influences the criminal justice system. This article explores the common criminological themes prevalent within the recent video game *Cyberpunk 2077* as an example of popular criminology. Specifically, it explores the game's story and environment by examining key characters' responses to structural inequalities through an anomie theory lens. Key characters and groups within the game exemplify Merton's (1938) different responses to rampant poverty and socioeconomic inequality. This is then extended to the "cyberpsycho" problem within the game, incorporating General Strain Theory to discuss why specific individuals develop the problem within *Cyberpunk 2077*.

## Keywords

cyberpunk, criminological theory, education

The cyberpunk genre of retro-futuristic fiction represents a salient example of Merton's (1938) argument that social structure impacts how subcultures react, develop, and mandate deviant or violent revolt against anomic society. Influential to say the least, the genre uses the rapid and unimpeded development of technology to illustrate the

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inequalities within the socioeconomic order, as well as the harmful relationship between humans and technology (Cavallaro, 2000; Murphy & Vint, 2010). Arising because of the 1980s' culture of decadence, it also served as a "return to roots" from the excesses of science fiction's New Wave Movement (Sterling, 1988). Authors of cyberpunk stories contended with the reality that they lived in a science fiction world; that the inventions of science fiction were becoming a reality at an alarming rate. Moreover, the term cyberpunk came to mean "the overlapping of worlds that were formerly separate: the realm of high tech, and the modern pop underground" (Sterling, 1986, p. xi). Even in the 1980s, cyberpunks were grappling with the fact that the wall between science and humanities was crumbling and that this new reality must be explored. They saw that technology was invading every aspect of people's lives through computers, communication and entertainment devices, and medical advancements, rather than being safely centralized in labs and factories.

As cyberpunk literature and film explored themes of technological innovation and invasion (e.g., artificial intelligence, prosthetics and cybernetics, hacking, etc.), socioeconomic inequality, and crime, Michael Pondsmith, the creator of the Cyberpunk paper role-playing game, built upon these themes to produce the history, verbiage, and style of the world shown within *Cyberpunk 2077*. Popular culture, through the characters of Judge Dredd, Neo, and Robocop, has adapted these themes to explore criminologically relevant concepts, such as anomic despondency, the growth of law in the face of technology, and the evolving understanding of gender and social identities. CD Projekt Red's game *Cyberpunk 2077* is a synthesis of these tropes. Since its release in 2020, the game has been examined for its open-world environment (Maj, 2022), its depiction of dystopian healthcare systems and technological disparities (Fox, 2021), and its influence on the cyberpunk genre (Sun & Zhou, 2022). Moreover, it effectively incorporates anomie and strain responses as key points of its narrative. As such, it represents an important piece of popular criminology (Rafter, 2007); a unique exploration of Merton's ideas of conformity, innovation, retreatism, and rebellion in a cyberpunk environment.

The sky above the port was the color of television tuned to a dead channel. (Gibson, 1984, p. 3)

Gibson's *Sprawl Trilogy* effectively perfected the cyberpunk aesthetic and genre (Cavallaro, 2000) with his three novels *Neuromancer* (1984), *Count Zero* (1986), and *Mona Lisa Overdrive* (1988). In each, his hacker "cowboys" exist at the margins of society—between corporate domination and irrelevance, making use of corporate technology in new ways. These hackers make use of their technological prowess (the "cyber" aspect) in service to their own ends, which often oppose the omnipresent government and corporate entities (the "punk"). Focusing on the massive megapolises that are becoming a reality, his works feature themes of corporate domination, social inequality, and rampant technological progress. As such, these novels served as a counterpoint to the more utopian vision common in science

fiction (Moylan, 2010; Sterling, 1986), incorporating Gothic fiction's focus on intentional cruelty, paranoia, insanity, and the brutality of the environment (Cavallaro, 2000). Gibson's work incorporated the prevailing cynicism and suspicion of the powerful, common in the punk subculture, into his work and combined it with a stylized esthetic that still dominates the genre.

*Blade Runner* (Scott, 1982), *Robocop* (Verhoeven, 1984), and *Dredd* (Travis, 2012) serve as an esthetic forerunner and then descendants of Gibson's noir environment to explore the role that law enforcement plays in an increasingly dystopian society. With their titular heroes, each work explores different aspects of the cyberpunk genre. Scott's (1982) Deckard is a cold enforcer of humanity's existing social dominance over the artificial replicants in the sprawl of a polluted and congested Los Angeles. Operating in a crime-ridden and privatized Detroit, *Robocop*'s protagonist, Murphy, survives cybernetic augmentation after a corporate-sponsored gang shootout leaves him effectively dead (Verhoeven, 1984). Governed by overtly beneficial prime directives of "Serve the public trust," "Protect the innocent," and "Uphold the law," Murphy as the cyborg Robocop begins a campaign against the caricatures of criminals and gang members. Sworn as a Judge, Dredd had the lawful authority to investigate crime, decide guilt, and sentence perpetrators on the spot (Travis, 2012). Effectively the embodiment of the concept of street justice (Sykes, 1986), with all the brutality and lack of due process that entails, *Dredd* follows the Judge and his rookie partner on a "day in the life"-style story, where the pair fight through hordes of gang members in an effort to punish murderers and escape a massive apartment complex.

In each of these films, the criminal justice system takes a radical idea about the criminal justice process and criminal behavior and exaggerates it. *Blade Runner* takes the idea that deviants (in this case, Replicants) can be detected through standardized tests to the extreme; that an abnormal result on a psychological assessment must be met with severe force. The roles and behavior of sworn law enforcement are also exaggerated in *Robocop* and *Dredd*, with both protagonists unfeeling arbiters of the law, one a machine governed by programming and the other a bureaucrat enforcing the law with no discretion. As a counter to Gibson's frequent protagonists of the underground hacker or merc, these three put the main character and the audience on the side of the oppressor; a role that law enforcement has frequently played throughout history (Hinton, 2021). However, cyberpunk has also been at the forefront of exploring our societal evolution.

A cornerstone of this exploration can be seen in *The Matrix* (Wachowski & Wachowski, 1999). Building on cyberpunk's frequent examination of identity, artificial intelligence, and the hacker ethos (Cavallaro, 2000), Thomas Anderson begins the film living two identities, one as a beige corporate programming drone as the socially accepted identity and the other as a hacker exploring the key question within the film—what is the Matrix?—as his true self, Neo. The antagonists of the first film, the Agents, are analogous to the informal and parochial control that so many marginalized individuals fear—that anyone who is not living as their true self (i.e., "free" or "unplugged") can be taken over by the social control mechanism and

sanction, ostracize, or harm those at the margins. *Psycho-Pass* (Goto and Sai's (2017)) delves further into the potential for technological social control in their anime exploring "a society of algorithmic tyranny" (Wood, 2019, p. 325). Similar to the Agents of *The Matrix*, and their constant surveillance of the human population for those with the potential to be "unplugged" and Scott's (1982) blade runners employing psychometric tests to sort the human from replicant, Goto and Sai's (2017) work examines how justice decision by the algorithm can create a perverse system of social control. However, popular criminology can also explore more interactive media.

Video games build on these static works by combining these different elements into a form that permits players to explore their morality and identity. Fawcett and Kohm's (2020) analysis of the Batman: Arkham series of games introduces the concept of the dual-layer approach. This relies on the player taking in the surface layer of what is actually occurring in the game while also considering the second, or countervisual, layer where the player incorporates their own morality and experiences to interrogate the first layer. Consequently, the narrative within the game is not the only one that should be examined, but also the types of choices that the game forces the player to take and what that choice means in the context of the narrative.

In this article, I examine the criminological consciousness within *Cyberpunk 2077*'s dystopia in a way that frames the discussion of how society might react to the multi-faceted threats of widespread inequality, environmental degradation, and radical technological change. As an exemplar of cyberpunk culture (Sun & Zhou, 2022), the game's focus on a low-level criminal trying to survive in the dystopian environment (rather than a corporate security specialist trying to unravel a worldwide conspiracy such as in *Deus Ex*) facilitates a useful viewing through a criminological lens. Players take the role of V, a mercenary (merc) within the Night City underworld, and can customize their character's background, appearance, gender, and abilities. The backgrounds provide a significant window into the game's world before it starts. Players can choose between the "nomad," "corpo," or "street kid" lifepaths, with each getting its own introductory set piece before moving into the main game. Both the nomad and street kid backgrounds place V within particular subcultures; either the descendant of farm workers turned clan of migratory drifters who are comfortable operating as criminal or corporate labor, or a member of the Night City underclass with deep connections to the local neighborhood. In contrast, if V has the corpo background, they are unceremoniously fired during their prologue and ostracized, only to be taken in by their local friend, Jackie, and introduced to the criminal underworld of Night City. Moreover, the game's first-person structure affords the player the ability to experience Night City more directly than with a third-person viewpoint or with a static character. These design choices take advantage of the genre's well-known capacity to extrapolate existing trends into dizzying, and often horrifying, detail (Sterling, 1986). Taken together, *Cyberpunk 2077*'s narrative focus on V's more personal story, the visceral depictions of disadvantage, crime, and anomie within the game, and the broad array of customization available for players make the game a useful study within popular criminology (Rafter, 2007).

First, I take a broad view of the criminological themes present in *Cyberpunk 2077*, highlighting examples, identified through several play-throughs, where they build on the common tropes within the genre. Second, I describe Merton's (1938) classic anomie theory and discuss how the game explores the various reaction to societal anomie, as well as the "cyberpsycho" epidemic within the game that serves as an extension of these concepts into general strain theory-territory. Finally, I argue that *Cyberpunk 2077* allows players, and by extension—those interested in criminology, to explore high-level topics within the discipline. Namely, the classic concepts of deterrence, street and decent codes, concentrated wealth and poverty, and the impact of technological inequality.

### **Cyberpunk 2077 and the Impact of Social Structure on Anomie**

Epitomized by the Sprawl trilogy (Gibson, 1984, 1986, 1988) that established the genre, cyberpunk stories take place within a grimy cityscape, characterized by rampant income and social inequality, crime, and disorder. It is within this socioeconomic structure that cyberpunk incorporates the different causes of and responses to the lack of the means necessary to accomplish the culturally mandated goals. As within most dystopian fiction, most people are poor and without the means needed to improve their station. Where cyberpunk builds on this is through the discussion of how technology reinforces this inequality while also giving the downtrodden the perceived ability to "make it" by expanding how someone can succeed. However, this is often a false choice for many as the need for technology drives corporate dominance over society through widespread indentured worker programs that require terms of more than 20 years.

From a criminological viewpoint, the cyberpunk environment reflects a similar cityscape to what Merton (1938) and other Columbia University-affiliated sociologists viewed as a "criminogenic" environment. During the Progressive and Great Depression eras that Merton observed, society was characterized by rampant poverty and severe socioeconomic inequality. He believed that these related problems impeded most within society from achieving culturally mandated goals (i.e., the American Dream). When individuals adhered to society's goals (i.e., economic success), and had the means to do so, they would not engage in criminal behavior. The norms of society dictate which means are socially acceptable and which are labeled as deviant or criminal. However, not everyone has access to the same resources or wants to achieve the same things, which leads to the norms that reinforce society's goals and approve of the means used to achieve them being attenuated. Consequently, those blocked from economic success would need to adapt to their circumstances, which range from "going through the motions" at work or abusing available vices, to creating new modes of success (i.e., crime) or fermenting outright rebellion against the system. Table 1: Possible Responses to Anomie, reproduced from Merton (1938), displays how individuals can respond to the adherence or rejection of culturally mandated goals as well as the presence or absence of acceptable

**Table 1.** Possible Responses to Anomie.

	Culturally Mandated Goals	Acceptable Means
Conformity	+	+
Innovation	+	-
Ritualism	-	-
Retreatism	-	-
Rebellion	±	±

means of achieving those goals. Individuals who adhere to society's goal of economic success and have the means to achieve that goal will conform; meaning they will not commit a crime. When people lack those means, or choose not to strive for those goals, they will respond in a variety of ways.

Building on this, Agnew (1992) argued that potential offenders' psychological states affect their responses to the strains of life. In addition to the strain of not being able to achieve the economic success that Merton described, Agnew incorporated the more psychological strains of receiving a negative stimulus (e.g., a punishment or stigma) and the removal of a positive stimulus (e.g., loss of a job or relationship). When these strains are seen as unfair or severe, are experienced by individuals with low levels of self-control, or if the strain incentivizes some type of deviant coping, criminal behavior is likely. These two perspectives have informed social policies, from feeding the poor to providing job training in correctional facilities.

Within *Cyberpunk 2077*, cybernetic modification is a prerequisite for most jobs, necessitating most to enter corporate service through indentured servitude for decades to pay off the costs of their implants. While an interesting game mechanic, players choosing whether and which implants to "chip" builds on a central idea within much of cyberpunk media; determining what does it mean to be human when one can replace the human (Cavallaro, 2000). However, this opportunity is not equally distributed. For those with means, their cybernetics make them smarter, more capable, and less reliant on traditional health practices or medicine, even when compared to entry-level corporate workers. This divide between haves and have-nots functions as a driving impulse for players—to upgrade their bodies with technology so that they can compete at a higher level. For the rest of the denizens of Night City, their choices are limited. Consequently, the structure and lore within the game affords players the opportunity to explore the relationship between socioeconomic structure and criminal behavior in a unique way.

### *Lost another day to pointless drudgery!*

As with most societies, conformity to the proscribed goals and prosocial means is the default response within *Cyberpunk 2077*. However, few of the characters that V

interacts with in Night City have the ability to succeed in this society. For the vast majority of civilians (i.e., the non-player characters [NPCs] within the game), this is displayed through ritualism as they lack the means to truly conform to society's goals for the individual. These NPCs exhibit ordered responses throughout the day in a way that gives life to the city itself. While a more common function of games<sup>2</sup> set within open worlds, this holds in the real world. People have jobs, partners, friends, and neighbors that reinforce conformity to society's norms while also providing the (noneconomic) means to accomplish them. However, Night City residents face extreme levels of poverty and under-employment that indicate that ritualism is a common response to the lack of upward mobility or success. Moreover, those without corporate employment are often left with temporary work or employment within a gray market economy of earning money through salvaging, data hacking, or other gig work. Night City's criminal underworld forms the lower level of society within *Cyberpunk 2077*, preying on civilians through extortion, thefts and robberies, and drug manufacture, often without any legal or social consequence.

Ostensibly, the Night City Police Department is supposed to respond to these predations. The department fields a variety of drones and cybernetically enhanced officers to address the rampant violence within the city. However, the residents see it as incompetent in the in-game media reports and as woefully undermanned, especially given the sheer number of crimes V can respond to throughout the city. This mirrors the ritualism seen within the civilian population; most of the officers the protagonist interacts with throughout the game are going through the motions of police work because of the department's inability to do something about the violence (i.e., a lack of means). One of the key side characters, River Ward, participates in two world-building side quests that exemplify this. First, Ward is a supporting character in a quest to understand the death of Night City Mayor Lucius Rhyne. Ward stopped an assassination attempt while Rhyne was preparing for a press event, but he still died from "a heart implant failure" days later. During the investigation, Ward notes that both his superiors and partner in the department have encouraged him to accept the official explanation and move on to a different case. However, during a warrantless raid on a clandestine club, they discover that someone murdered Rhyne with a computer virus that infected his implants and that Ward's partner covered it up while under orders. During a later confrontation with his partner, Ward is told that this is just the way things are done in Night City; the powerful will be in control, and one either accepts that that will not change or be swept aside.

Later, while still a police officer, Ward begins investigating the disappearance of his nephew and calls V for assistance. After accessing the inept case file that the NCPD created in response to the missing person report, Ward and V discover that the primary suspect in the nephew's disappearance was shot by NCPD officers and is on life support. Only after the pair discover that the suspect is a serial killer preying on teenagers does the system begin to function. This level of incompetence, and the ritualism that allows it to fester throughout the city, make the actions of the second-most important character in Night City almost seem reasonable.

### *Blaze Your Way Down the Rebel Path*<sup>3</sup>

Johnny Silverhand, one of the original role-playing game characters from the tabletop game that CD Project Red incorporated into *Cyberpunk 2077* (Pondsmith, 1988), is one of the two primary characters within the narrative. Within the game, Silverhand is a veteran of a corrupt war that began in the early 2000s. After witnessing the atrocities committed by his government and its corporate backers, he deserted and started a band to raise awareness of the need to stand against these issues. By 2013, he was the first “rockerboy,” a punk musician who use their charisma and influence to foster rage against corporate machinations and government complicity. However, this persona held a darker side; one willing to foment riots to serve as distractions for raids against Arasaka, one of the major corporations dominating Night City, the last of which culminated in his detonating a nuclear device in the heart of Night City and killing thousands. In the aftermath, Arasaka extracted the memory engram from the captured Silverhand, relegating him to digital purgatory. During V’s heist in Act 1, this persona is transferred to V’s psyche and becomes a quasi-cancerous presence that will slowly overtake their mind.

Throughout the game, Silverhand is the embodiment of rebellion, both in a literal and anomic sense. Starting with his experiences as a soldier in an unjust war, he developed new goals and orientations that ran counter to the pro-corporate mindset in society. His experiences in Night City only reinforced his rebellion, with Arasaka’s conscription of his girlfriend ending in her death during his rescue attempt. Rather than the amoral ideal represented by Capone in Merton’s (1938) original work, Silverhand developed his morality that focused on allowing people to choose their path. Moreover, his status as a ghost commenting on V’s actions and trying to convince him to continue his war against corporate ownership of people makes him similar to the radicalization process described by Sawyer and Hienz (2017). Silverhand’s actions combine Merton’s rebellion with the overarching goal of violent terrorism—to influence others to compel them to also rebel and cause fear in the minds of conformers.

While Silverhand is the most prominent example of rebellion as a response to anomie within *Cyberpunk 2077*, he is not alone. Rebellion against the system through rejecting the corporate-approved means is a common thread across the various groups and characters within the game. Panam Palmer, a member of the Aldecados nomad group, argues with her leader (Saul Bright) throughout the game about whether the group should accept a corporate job. Frequently, she accuses Bright of selling out for an easy solution to their problems rather than continuing with their ways. The protagonist can voice their opinion if they choose, but this conflict has been long simmering within the history of the game, going beyond the outskirts of the city and into the slums.

One of the primary districts within Night City, Pacifica, has chosen to cut itself off from the rest of the corporate-supported infrastructure. In its place, members of the Haitian diaspora, derisively called “Voodoo Boys” (VBs), reinforce their social norms and traditions rather than acquiesce to the wider social mores. Within the

game's narrative, the VBs have attracted the attention of multinational law enforcement for trying to contact rogue artificial intelligence within the Net, a potentially cataclysmic goal. Their goal is to join forces with the sentient programs, with the VBs serving their heterodox gods in the coming war with humanity and building on the themes of the connection between religion and technology (Cavallaro, 2000). The group's focus on maintaining their code of behavior in place of the prevailing social norms builds upon Merton's (1938) assertions about anomic rebellion by incorporating Anderson's (1999) street codes. Members of the VBs reject the proscribed goals and means available to society and replace them with their own. The peer-network reinforces this rejection through informal social control and more direct means, such as violence. Consequently, the only way to navigate the social minefield in this district is to understand the unique mores and folkways therein.

Thus, rebellion is not an uncommon response throughout *Cyberpunk 2077*, with it being a significant source of conflict and social upheaval within Night City. However, this is not the default response. For many, they throw themselves into trying to succeed by any means necessary.

### *Roll the Bones—I'm Chippin' In<sup>4</sup>*

With the means of success in Night City held by the corporate interests, it is no surprise that those outside the corporations innovate new ways to achieve their goals. Individuals who exist on the fringes of society are seen as “edgerunners” in the parlance of *Cyberpunk 2077*, as they engage in frequent criminal and/or violent acts that go outside of prevailing mores. Like the mafioso operating out of cafes, bars, and the backs of shops, “fixers” within the city's underworld match clients to mercenaries with a reputation. It is within this environment that *Cyberpunk 2077* frames the inciting incident of the first act of the game—a heist that would make the reputation of the three mercs involved. At the start, V and Jackie are taking “small-time” rescue missions for a local fixer. However, once they prove their mettle, a more prominent fixer offers them a job: steal a prototype from the Arasaka Corporation. This one job would solidify their reputation and send them “straight to the major leagues” of the Night City underworld.

Within anomic environments, cultural mores often develop as a result of the criminal networks that take root in response to the lack of social control (Kirk & Papachristos, 2011, 2015). Combined with the ritualism exhibited by law enforcement, Night City residents would be forgiven for being cynical toward any effort by police to control crime and would take matters into their hands, either through hiring their own mercenaries or responding to violence in kind through firearms or cybernetics. As such, this legal cynicism leaves the community with economic opportunity—paying mercenaries to resolve their disputes rather than relying on the criminal justice system. This is where the protagonist fills their niche.

As explained within the game, clients who have work available for hire will seek out “fixers” to select mercs (mercenaries) with the skill set necessary to complete the

job. These intermediaries rely on the merc's reputation to hire those suited for the task. In many ways, this is a reversion to the concept of private law enforcement described in [Kuykendall's \(1986\)](#) discussion of the evolution of the detective's role throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. Many of these private contracts involved quasi-prosocial acts such as data and property recovery and responding to reports of crime to overt acts of crime such as sabotage and contract killing, becoming the "secretive rogue" seen among detectives between 1850 and 1920. As such, this private security and law enforcement industry that developed is a quintessential example of innovation—the public recognized goals and services they needed but lacked the prescribed means to achieve them and created a system to obtain those goals.

This innovation in the face of a lack of formal social control extended to the corporate cold warfare seen throughout *Cyberpunk 2077*. The corporations exist as near-government entities, with private armies and police forces that zealously protect corporate secrets and property. Just as ardently, those same private armies attempt to undermine their competitors through acts of espionage, sabotage, and assassination. For example, during the corpo lifepath, V was a member of Arasaka Corporation's counterintelligence service and is a witness to the assassination of several members of the European Space Agency—an action that they are tasked with covering up by turning a rival Arasaka executive into a patsy. Throughout the game, and often outside of the main storyline, corporate agents attempt to achieve their goals in ways that go beyond what contemporary private employees can do without consequence. As such, they extend [Merton's \(1938\)](#) innovation in the face of lacking prosocial means to accomplish goals in the corporate arena.

This depiction links innovation to [Sutherland's \(1940; Simpson, 2019\)](#) conceptualization of white-collar criminality. In effect, the treatment of corporations within the game exemplifies the deferential treatment toward corporate malfeasance by law enforcement that Sutherland called out. Frequently, these corporate crimes caused more damage to the public than any of the gang members, encompassing the massacre of witnesses to the murder of a defector, the widespread pollution and destruction wrought in the pursuit of profit, and broadscale weaponization of the law to protect corporate reputation. Indeed, many of Night City's criminals have been charged with the crime of slander towards a corporate agent, indicating that even the freedom of speech is curtailed through corporate dominance. This dominance leads corporations to be quasi-nations, each with its territories and goals, and each willing to engage in clandestine and open warfare to achieve their goals.

To that end, those that work within the upper echelons of corporations exhibit many signs of psychopathy. They ignore or rationalize the immoral aspects of their behavior, focusing on how to turn any situation to the corporation's or their benefit and relying on the reputation of the corporation or their position within it to get what they want. This fits a common theme in criminology's understanding of white-collar criminals' personalities being different from other types of offenders ([Ragatz et al., 2012](#)). However, their ability to neutralize their violations of the prosocial norms against violence and other crimes is fairly similar to their noncorporate counterparts ([Ragatz et al.,](#)

2012; Schoultz & Flyghed, 2020; Stadler & Benson, 2012; Sykes & Matza, 1957), the *Cyberpunk 2077*'s corporate-aligned characters often attempting to deny harms occurred or that they were justified in their actions. This rationalization of corporate supremacy and the employees' dominance across the social structure extends into the legal sphere.

The crimes of corporations within Night City are obvious, prevalent, and harmful to all, and yet are continuously ignored by law enforcement and the government itself. Corporate criminality (by individual actors and corporations as a whole) is routinely ignored, similar to the Mob-controlled police investigations through domination of the sociolegal arena (Peterson, 1983). The police cannot investigate corporate executives or enter corporate property without that corporation's permission, thereby ensuring that they are not held accountable. Moreover, accusations of crimes against the corps are routinely ignored or, if the accuser persists, buried under litigation or killed. This corresponds to a consistent theme across the cyberpunk genre: the weaponization of the civil legal system (Effross, 1997). Corporations are usually subject to less oversight from Net Watch, the international law enforcement agency with authority over the Net and the use of artificial intelligence across the world. Because Net Watch is beholden to the corporations for funding, equipment, and political support, they exist as oversight in name only, with corporations free to act with impunity as long as they do not publicly defy them or upset the balance of power. This domination over the various mechanisms of control (civil, criminal, and governmental) also extends into the criminal underworld.

To protect their reputations and ensure their deniability for particularly heinous or public actions, corporations often have informal relationships with the gangs across Night City. Given the corporations' quasi-nation status within Night City, they arm and supply gang leaders, give them intelligence and targets and allow them to sell ill-gotten goods without sanction (Badowski, 2020). This is broadly similar to the clandestine support of small arms given by Western governments to African dissident groups in the 1990s that the suppliers found useful (Rothe & Ross, 2011). This trade is facilitated by the various valuable commodities that one can trade for arms and the lack of comprehensive or enforced regulation (Stohl, 2005). Within *Cyberpunk 2077*, the corporations can offer much more than firearms and ammunition, with the major entities supplying cybernetics, pharmaceuticals, and even logistical support for gang-led actions. In effect, gangs are another facet of the long-standing corporate cold warfare that exists because of the anomic conditions across the world.

However, the gangs themselves represent an alternative structure for success that takes advantage of the lack of proscribed norms of behavior. Each gang maintains its territory across Night City, with its dominions over various illicit industries and rackets. Gang leaders protect their operations by encouraging cultures of violence. For instance, the bosses of the Tyger Claws gang prioritize profits and their monopoly over sex work and vice within the Westbrook district. To facilitate this, their lower-level members extort local businesses and rob residents; both as a way to maintain their control and to acculturate members to violence. Similarly, the outcast Wraith

gang of the Badlands and the Maelstrom of Watson areas have similar structures of violence as a means of maintaining economic power.

This relationship between illicit trades and violence is well established in prior studies (Howell, 1999), making it clear that the involvement of established gangs within a city corresponds to an increase in youth homicides by providing a necessary catalyst. These gangs must fight to admit and indoctrinate members, protect and expand their territory, and resolve disputes to maintain their control (Thrasher, 1963). Coupled with the ritualism exhibited by the Night City Police Department, violent gangs are allowed to dominate communities unquestioned. Consequently, the gang becomes the dominant social control framework, with the gang's social code standing in for the rule of law (Anderson, 1999; Horowitz, 1987). Within the gang hierarchies, as with the corporate, insufficiently ruthless leaders are deposed and killed, as only success matters—hesitation or failure results in death (Horowitz, 1987; Horowitz & Schwartz, 1974).

### *There's War in Peace!*<sup>5</sup>

This leaves those that have given up and retreated from accomplishing their goals. While historically the domain of addicts and drunks on skid row (Merton, 1938), those who retreat from life in Night City have more options than substance abuse. However, the reasons for retreating from this anomic dystopia are fairly consistent with their real-world counterparts; a lack of social connection and hopelessness. One of V's neighbors is an early example of this within the story. Barry Lewis is an NCPD Officer, one who has witnessed many of the acts of senseless violence in the city and law enforcement's inability to stop them. However, he is unable to cope with the pervasive injustice in the face of his peers' ritualism and takes a leave of absence after the death of his closest friend, a pet tortoise. One of the two NCPD officers at his apartment displays concern for Barry's absence from work, while the other believes that it is a ploy for disability benefits as an officer as tough as Barry would not need help. Depending on the protagonist's actions, the officers can learn about Barry's issues, which prompts Barry to either get the help that he needs or commit suicide. His actions are a direct result of his peers' ritualism in the face of the police's incompetence and corruption, and he is not alone in retreating from life because going through the motions becomes untenable.

Suicide is not the only way out of the anomic conditions in Night City. Many people retreat to technology to give them some measure of control over their life. Building on Gibson's (1988) "simstim" and Bigelow's (1995) SQUID concepts, among others (Cavallaro, 2000), *Cyberpunk 2077*'s braindances are recordings of people's brain patterns during evocative experiences that a viewer can then relive at their convenience. These recordings run the gamut from people experiencing romantic encounters to those taking part in massacres against civilians. This technology is a common threat in cyberpunk (Cavallaro, 2000; Sterling, 1986), with authors frequently exploring the modification of experience and the intrusion of technology. While mainstream

entertainment use braindances to give the masses a taste of the life of elites, often presenting a sanitized or staged experience, addicts often need more extreme content to receive the same high.

These “extreme” or illegal braindances allow the viewer to view content such as torture, rape, extreme combat, and murder. These recordings are often made by force against the victims, with the perpetrator wearing their equipment to document and monetize their own experiences. This gives the addicts more extreme highs of sensation and emotion to satisfy their desires, which also escalates their retreat from real encounters. Additionally, the illegal braindances represent a convergence of innovation and retreatism, with the dealers and manufacturers of such content providing content for the market without a thought concerning the morality of their actions. These “innovators” also contribute to the widespread violent crimes in the city, as they will often have an instrumental motive in recording their commission of aggressive acts.

Poverty, disorder, and violence deprive many of the denizens of Night City of their ability to live their lives, to say nothing of being safe or secure. Thus, the acts of retreatism, through substance abuse, isolation, or virtual satisfaction, are understandable responses to the conditions within society. However, *Cyberpunk 2077* expands on the classic responses to anomie by incorporating Agnew’s (1992) thoughts on the individual-level strain.

### *Need to Rage and Get Revenge! Need to Feel Myself Again!*<sup>6</sup>

Cyberpsychosis is a concept that CD Project Red imported from the original tabletop role-playing game (Pondsmith, 1988). The tabletop game used cyberpsychosis as a mechanic to limit how many cybernetic modifications players could give their characters. If the player added too many implants or did not try to retain their connection to humanity, they would become a “cyberpsycho” and indiscriminately harm others in the vicinity. The *Cyberpunk 2077* game described cyberpsychosis as cybernetics exacerbating underlying tendencies by separating individuals from their humanity, bit by bit. While small implants such as an organ replacement or a single appendage are unlikely to lead to cyberpsychosis, individuals are often encouraged to replace more of their organic bodies with technology. An explanation offered within the game is that technology affects the brain, in addition to being under the brain’s control. Consequently, cybernetics encourage individual to identify more with machines, with their lack of emotional connection to people, than with their humanity. Seventeen cyberpsychos-related quests appear within the game, where a fixer hires V to incapacitate them for experimental treatment rather than killing them outright. Each of these individuals experiences elevated levels of interpersonal or social pressure that induces them toward extreme violence. As such, moving beyond Merton’s (1938) classic typology of anomie is necessary.

General strain theory’s extension of Merton’s (1938) and Cloward’s (1959) work is relevant to understanding cyberpsychosis through the game’s reliance on identifying the stressful inciting event to show what triggered the perpetrator’s outburst. Agnew

(1992) defined the three strains as (1) failure to achieve proscribed (i.e., economic) goals, (2) removal of positive stimuli, and (3) imposition of negative stimuli. However, “what links strain to crime are the negative emotions individuals experience in response to strain” (Broidy & Agnew, 1997, p. 281). Thus, while many in Night City experience anomie, loss, pain, and hardship, only a few have the negative affect necessary to proceed from experiencing strain into violent behavior. In-game news reports make it clear that there is a significant amount of doubt about the official explanations for cyberpsychosis from corporations and government. Truly, the “cyberpsycho problem” may be an outgrowth of the same issue seen with firearm violence; that those who choose to arm themselves with more lethal weapons are more likely to kill (Cook & Ludwig, 2006). The *Cyberpunk 2077* public may be latching onto the fact that individuals who choose to implant grenade launchers and swords or overclock their reaction times may have a higher propensity for violence than those who choose to strengthen their lungs or heart. Indeed, several patterns exist that reinforce the usefulness of general strain theory in understanding cyberpsychosis in *Cyberpunk 2077*.

Across the 17 confirmed cyberpsychos, 13 are male (76%) and four are female (24%), with each having a precipitating experience that causes them to lose control over their impulses. These range from losing access to health care benefits that alleviated psychological trauma or medical issues, experiencing economic, social, or relationship strain, being victimized (directly or witnessing another’s victimization), and overexposure to technology. Effectively, each case begins with an instance of severe psychological or emotional stress, with males being more likely to respond to those stressors with anger toward targets outside themselves, while females are more likely to internalize their emotions, which results in depression or anxiety; a pattern supported by the extant literature (Broidy, 2001; Broidy & Agnew, 1997; Moon & Morash, 2017). Combined with the socioeconomic disadvantage that is pervasive throughout Night City as well as the corporations’ unjust domination of people’s lives, the individual-level experiences of strain through hardship or victimization become much more likely (Agnew, 2006; Hoffman, 2010) as many endure such a pervasive level of strain that one bad experience may push them over the edge.

### **Cyberpunk 2077’s Ending as a Reflection of Responses to Anomie**

The game’s closing act begins with V becoming increasingly affected by Silverhand’s intrusion into their brain. They must then make a choice, with the options mirroring Merton’s responses to the normlessness that V experiences. If they choose to conform to the expectations of their corporation-dominated society, they can take Arasaka’s offer to remove Silverhand’s engram from their mind. This leads to the figurative rebirth of the corporation’s dead CEO, as he forcibly inhabits the body of his rebellious son and leads to the continued corporate domination of society. Moreover, the game strongly implies that by conforming with this society, they are making a deal with the devil, with the game achievement for completing this ending being titled “The Devil.”

Depending on whether the player chose to complete various quest lines, V can call upon any available allies to help assault the Arasaka headquarters and take the technology needed to save their life. One option is to ask the Aldacado nomad clan for help, which they eagerly provide. “The Star” option involves V becoming a member of the clan, regardless of the player’s initial choice in the background. From there, the entire clan assaults a supply depot, using everything from civilian trucks to a salvaged tank to break through Arasaka security and access a tunnel borer to breach the headquarters. Once completed, V can decide to ride off into the night with their new family, conforming to the values of the Nomad subculture.

Conversely, V can embrace the innovative spirit of the merc—asking the underworld denizens of Night City if they would like to fight Arasaka with him, or if V would prefer Silverhand take control of their body for the assault. In either case, the assault mirrors Silverhand’s mission from 50 years ago, where innovative mercs did battle with the conforming hordes of the corporation. If V survives, they take control of the Night City underworld as a living legend, one who has achieved city-wide notoriety.

However, V can also rebel against their fate and walk through Arasaka’s front door to take what they need without endangering anyone they care about. A hidden option, this choice is only available if the player built a strong enough relationship with Silverhand. Rather than representing V’s conforming to old or new social expectations, it represents furtherance of both of their rebellions. This ending both condones Silverhand’s motivations and satisfies V’s drive to be remembered, while also tempering Silverhand’s desire for bloodshed.

Finally, V can retreat from the challenge. V can decide to commit suicide to avoid having to go through the trials ahead and face the possibility of failure. But importantly, during each of these final missions, except suicide, V can decide to permanently relinquish control to Silverhand after they obtain the technology necessary to stop the disease’s progress, which leads to V’s consciousness being erased from their body and Silverhand being able to take control, effectively giving him another chance at life.

## Cyberpunk’s Place Within Criminology

The cyberpunk genre is exceedingly relevant to the study of crime, especially in the Information Age. At the most basic level, cyberpunk media is a cultural touchstone that can convey challenging concepts through these fictional worlds. For instance, students may gravitate toward a picture of *Robocop*’s squalor in Detroit, *Dredd*’s impoverished Megacity 1, or the Hobbesian nightmare of *Cyberpunk 2077*’s Night City. These images can convey more about how disadvantage can accumulate and reinforce within a community better than dry prose. The extent to which today’s college student connects to their peers and media underscores the implicit familiarity they have with issues with cyber-victimization, hacks of personal and corporate data, and the peril of information- and cyber-warfare. This familiarity with the risks inherent in technology, especially the risks of information control, makes cyberpunk media a novel but effective tool to educate students. However, its usefulness does not end with andragogy.

Cyberpunk terms and motifs have been incorporated into our understanding of emerging criminal behaviors and the adaptation of the old to the internet. Extremist groups, such as Q-Anon (Conner & MacMurray, 2021) and incels (O'Malley et al., 2020) make this explicit with their use of red-pilling to indicate indoctrination. Moreover, the widespread theme of cyberpunk, the fight against implacable oppression from decadent elites, underlies how extremists will often characterize their targets as oppressors and justify their attacks as attempts to wake up the masses to their chains. Similarly, the Blackhat hacker persona that has existed in cyberpunk since its inception (Gibson, 1984), which has been adopted both in later media (e.g., *The Matrix*, 1999) and hacker collectives like Anonymous, LulzSec, and Wikileaks (Yang, 2013). These groups' attempts to strike at powerful entities through cyberspace, through denial-of-service attacks, vandalism of webpages, and leaks, reflect many of the ways that cyberpunk protagonists engaged in resistance.

The use of technology by governments can also be viewed through a cyberpunk lens. The use of drones as means of surveillance and warfare is only becoming more prevalent, as are cyberwarfare techniques, such as weaponized malware. "Cyber war is an extension of policy by actions taken in cyber space by state or non-state actors that either constitute a serious threat to a nation's security or are conducted in response to a perceived threat against a nation's security" (Shakarian et al., 2013, p. 3). This is clearly seen in the suspected use of the Stuxnet worm to target Iranian infrastructure. However, more clandestine uses of hacking have become more common, such as the North Korean hack of Sony Pictures to deter slander against their leader for the distribution of leaked documents through Wikileaks.

*Cyberpunk 2077* offers criminologists a rich environment to explore an interactive environment. The game provides a window into the potential responses to anomie through the characters of Johnny Silverhand, Panam Palmer, River Ward, Barry, and the merc subculture. It also builds on Pondsmith's (1988) cyberpsycho concept by framing it as a psychological response to strain and anomie. Moreover, players, academics, students, and other interested parties can view the entirety of *Cyberpunk 2077*'s world through an academic lens to examine the causes, correlates, and consequences of pervasive inequality, technological development, and anomie. Moreover, it builds on a common artistic language of the depiction of a disadvantaged metropolis in such a way as to seem both familiar and foreign.

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## Notes

1. Refused. (2020). Ballad of Buck Rogers [Song]. On *Ballad of Buck Rogers*. CD Projekt Red.
2. The Bethesda Game Studios' *The Elder Scroll V: Skyrim* (2011) programed the NPC residents within the cities of their game to have set schedules during a day.
3. Refused. (2020). Chippin' In [Song]. On *Chippin' In*. CD Projekt Red.
4. Refused. (2020). Chippin' In [Song]. On *Chippin' In*. CD Projekt Red.
5. Refused. (2020). A Like Supreme [Song]. On *A Like Supreme*. CD Projekt Red.
6. Refused. (2020). Ballad of Buck Rogers [Song]. On *Ballad of Buck Rogers*. CD Projekt Red.

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