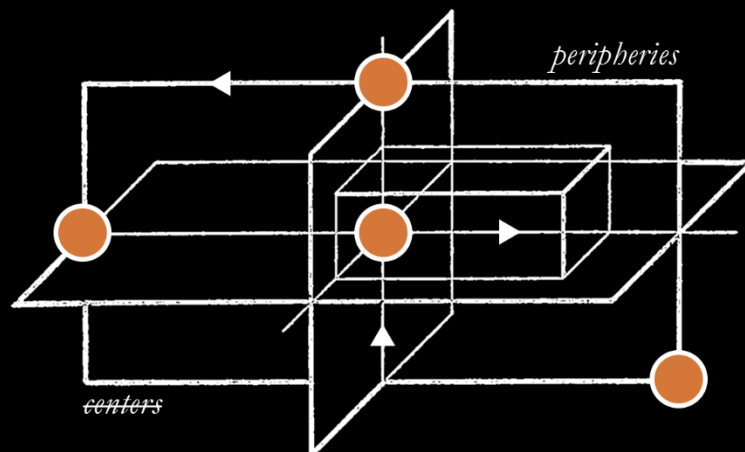


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Peripheries – Title Image. Image by Aska Mayer. CC BY-NC.

Special Issue

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“The World is a Maze of Illusions.” Peripheral Religion and Enchantment in *Cyberpunk 2077*

Leonid Moyzhes and Mikael D. Sebag

Abstract

In this article, we examine peripheral religion and the peripherality of religion in *Cyberpunk 2077* (2020). From a hermeneutic analysis of the game’s narrative and mechanical elements, we argue that – despite the secular register of the game’s techno-dystopian setting – the underlying enchantment of the gameworld subtly reinforces the epistemic legitimacy of otherwise peripheralized religious practices and beliefs. We begin with an overview of key theoretical concepts concerning simulation, representation, and enchantment that converge at the core of our argument. Following this, we situate *Cyberpunk 2077*’s gameworld within the longer literary history of cyberpunk as a genre of speculative fiction and conclude with a close reading of the tarot-themed questline Fool on the Hill that runs parallel to the game’s main narrative. Our analysis illustrates the complicated relationships between the game’s fictional setting, its mechanics and rules, and the game’s status as a simulation of an enchanted world, which together invite players to reflect on peripheral religion in a present day characterized by the secularizing spectre of the Enlightenment.

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Keywords: Religion, *Cyberpunk 2077*, Cyberpunk, Enchantment, Peripherality, Simulation, Resonance, Myth, gameenvironments

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At first glance, the world of CD Projekt Red’s 2020 video game *Cyberpunk 2077* would have you think it is disenchanted. The bleak, dystopian future of the gameworld’s timeline has largely replaced the belief in religion with the veneration of technology.

special relationship with religiously inspired imagery and more broadly portrayed futures that paradoxically combine advanced technology and premodern worldviews. The capacity of video games to present this contradictory system in the modern context – and in virtual environments – demands a particular form analysis that interrogates how the genre of cyberpunk, in accordance with Istvan Csicsery-Ronay's (1991, 182) ideas, promotes reflection on the role of religious worldviews in the modernity.

To make our argument, we begin with an overview of academic literature concerning *Cyberpunk 2077* and situate our contribution and methodology within this scholarly context. From there we lay out our analytical framework, which draws on extant theories in simulation and representation to argue that the gameworld consists not only of the fictional setting but also the behaviors of its underlying systems. From this analytical perspective, we further interrogate the extent to which the imaginary future of *Cyberpunk 2077* is enchanted when compared to both that of the premodern past and the disenchantment of the present day. We situate this interrogation of *Cyberpunk 2077*'s gameworld within the longer literary history of cyberpunk as a literary genre, its indebtedness and similarities to Gibson's (1984, 1986, 1988) *Sprawl* trilogy, and that series' own elements of enchantment. We conclude with a hermeneutic analysis of a tarot-themed questline that runs parallel to the game's main narrative.

Our approach to examining both *religion* and *periphery* is twofold. We define peripheral religion as religious beliefs and practices prevalent among groups marginalized within the game's fictional society: immigrants, ethnic minorities, gang members, death-row convicts who turn to Christianity, New Age shopkeepers, and Buddhist monks rejecting cybernetic augmentation. We conceptualize the

While much has been written already on *Cyberpunk 2077* in the years following its release, matters of religion and spirituality are rarely at the center of conversation. Past scholarship has largely focused on urban analyses of the game's metropolitan setting of Night City (Li 2024, Liang 2024), the causes and consequences of its troubled release (Escourido-Calvo and Martínez-Fernández 2022, Zarzycka 2022, Siuda et al. 2023), and matters of the game's ludonarrative dissonance and harmony (Saldivar 2022, Li and Chen 2023). Other game scholars have also used *Cyberpunk 2077* to ask questions surrounding the nature of open worlds and exploration in computer roleplaying games (Gómez-Maureira et al. 2022, Maj 2022) and to interrogate themes of transhumanism and the body and in cyberpunk settings (Fox 2021, Pisarski 2024). Of particular relevance to our article is Chris Lay's (2024) idea that the countercultural *punk* element of cyberpunk is to attend to one's spiritual

Yet if we closely examine Frasca's definition of simulation, we can also discern a connection with older conceptualizations of the term. Frasca (2003, 224) claims that "to simulate is to model a (source) system through a different system which maintains some of the behaviors of the original system." While the emphasis on the behavior of a system is critical to our analysis of *Cyberpunk 2077's* gameworld and its enchanted nature, another key aspect is that for the system to function as a simulation it must be recognizable to someone. This aspect of recognition echoes a definition provided

by Hartmann (1996) and later expanded by John Simpson (2011, 199), who asserts that simulations “imitate one process by another.” For Simpson, simulation is subjective and culturally conditioned. He compares simulations to models and states, “insofar as simulations have the same relational properties as models, as introduced previously, simulations are processes that model other processes. As a result, what counts as a simulation is inherently observer-relative” (ibid.).

Sebastian Möring (2015) explores a similar idea in his article analyzing Rod Humble’s video game *The Marriage* (2007). He posits that *The Marriage* serves as the perfect simulation: it is an abstract game representing relationships, where two members of a union are depicted as blue and pink squares, and various problems and opportunities are represented by circles of different colors. The game system attempts to simulate a form of relationship through its gameplay. However, it still relies on the player to interpret the game as a simulation. For this to happen, the game needs both its own mechanisms coupled with the individual and textual layers, starting with the title itself. According to Möring (2015, 260), the real question is not whether *The Marriage* is a simulation but rather, “what does *The Marriage* simulate? Love-related activities, an individual experience of love, or a metaphorically structured concept of love?”

In practical terms, this illustrates a complex interplay between the aesthetic and procedural halves of any simulation. In naming the game *The Marriage* and color-coding the squares in pink and blue, Humble frames the squares of his game as people in a relationship. In turn, the behavior of those squares and the rules governing their behavior are further framed by this aesthetically induced interpretation. Our own analysis moves fluidly through this messy palimpsest of interpretive layers. This approach relaxes the opposition between representation and simulation, allowing us to address both audiovisual, textual and interactive layers of

While the manifest properties of *Cyberpunk 2077*'s gameworld – such as the visible absence of magic or other similarly fantastic elements – would suggest that the world is unenchanted, the behaviors of the game's underlying systems suggest otherwise. The historian Michael Saler (2012) argues that the modern world is disenchanted, a state he describes as resulting from three interconnected and ongoing processes: secularization, bureaucratization, and rationalization. The sociologist Max Weber

Cyberpunk, whether considered as a genre, aesthetic style, or marketing label, engages extensively with imagery that resonates with the attributes of enchantment. We see it especially in the works of William Gibson, one of the most prominent founding figures in the early cyberpunk movement whose writings were a significant source of inspiration for *Cyberpunk 2020* (Pondsmith 1990), the tabletop RPG that laid the foundation for the *Cyberpunk 2077* digital remediation and continuation. In this sense, *Cyberpunk 2077* participates in and extends Gibson's literary tradition of techno-dystopian enchantment. Gibson's *Sprawl* trilogy abounds with nonhuman loci of thoughts and feelings as Halloy and Servais (2014) would define them. A prominent example is his portrayal of artificial intelligences (AIs), particularly the

"As she [the protagonist Marly Krushkhova] walked the Louvre, she seemed to sense some articulated structure shifting to accommodate her course through the city. The waiter would be merely a part of the thing,

While *Deus Ex*, particularly the first game in the series, excels in this approach, a similar theme is present in Gibson's work, particularly in *Count Zero*. The fragment depicting a world controlled by a single ultra-wealthy individual, whose influence



Figure 1. Joshua Stephenson's side quest storylines exemplifies *Cyberpunk 2077*'s interest in religion (screenshot by Leonid Moyzhes 2025). © CD Projekt Red.

Remediating Enchantment

As a game, *Cyberpunk 2077* leverages numerous traditional cyberpunk clichés, including the imagery discussed above that characterize the secondary worlds of cyberpunk novels as enchanted. Cyborgs, AIs, memory manipulations (and other forms of mind invasion), the persistence of consciousness after death, and interactions with technology framed in religious terminology – all of these elements are present in the gameworld, often in prominent positions, reminding players of this side of cyberpunk aesthetic. Other systems of the game, such as inventory management, character progression, and the player's ability to control and manipulate the world around them by sight alone – made possible through computer codes that functionally equate to magic spells – structurally resemble the systems of

many fantasy games, inflecting *Cyberpunk 2077* with an intertextuality between itself and other (often fantastic) open-world RPGs.

But, as Simpson (2011, 197) observes, the fact that an object can be approached as a model of another object does not mean that such a model is necessarily useful or – in the case of recreational artifacts, like a video game – accurate or politically neutral. *Cyberpunk 2077* allows for players to recognize the game as a simulation of the cyberpunk genre and, therefore, an enchanted world insofar as cyberpunk worlds are themselves enchanted (which, as we have argued above, they are). However, such a simulation does not simply reference something: it also creates a form of understanding rooted in myths about the simulated objects (Barthes 1991). This is particularly important in the case of modeling complex concepts like the enchanted world, as the original, simulated system is itself not something players can easily examine and compare with a model presented in a video game. Many players do not live in a world they would recognize as being equally enchanted to that of a fantasy game, for instance, which makes evaluating the model of an enchanted world difficult without a meaningful point of comparison.

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Stig Hjarvard (2012, 34) has argued that an increasing number of individuals derive their understanding of religion not from traditional sources like family or education but from popular culture and entertainment, which he calls “banal religion,” representations of de-contextualized and non-intentional religious meanings. Lars de Wildt (2023) makes a similar case for video games, observing how young people in the West are more likely to encounter religion in games than via church attendance. Thus, while *Cyberpunk 2077* can indeed be understood as simulating an enchanted world, because the game itself serves as an important – perhaps the *primary* – venue for encountering images associated with an enchanted world and not merely as a

recreation of a familiar system, it also has the power to shape players' understanding of the very concept of enchantment itself. The original *Cyberpunk* tabletop roleplaying game (TRPG) provides a strong example of this. Both of its major editions – *Cyberpunk 2020* (Pondsmith 1990) and the more recent *Cyberpunk RED* (Pondsmith et al. 2020) – adopted as many of the aforementioned Gibsonian cyberpunk tropes as possible. In this sense, the tabletop game gives players the opportunity to engage with simulations of liminal entities, animistic nature, or anxiety about agency. However, the game mechanics of these editions subtly yet profoundly shift certain emphases within these tropes, creating possibilities for new and different stories and, consequently, new and different meanings.

One example is the Humanity mechanic present in both TRPGs (Pondsmith 1990, 73-75, Pondsmith et al. 2020, 230-232). Whenever a character receives an implant, they incur a Humanity cost, losing points in their Humanity attribute, which represents a diminishing connection to other humans as the character becomes increasingly machine. The lower the Humanity score, the further the character strays from their human essence, ultimately risking a descent into *cyberpsychosis*, rendering them a danger to others, including fellow player characters. While other TRPGs also track Humanity as a character attribute (with another notable example being *Vampire: The Masquerade* [Dowd, Stevens and Wieck 1991]), its expression in *Cyberpunk* gestures at the genre's inherent tension surrounding the hybrid nature of the cyborg. Yet simultaneously, the very presence of this game mechanism reduces the liminality of the cyborg itself. As discussed above, an essential aspect of cyborgs in cyberpunk literature is their existential ambiguity: the cyborg casts doubt on the very notion of humanity. In contrast, the Humanity mechanic operates quite differently: it reinforces the concept of humanity as a fundamental, essential trait with both figurative and mechanical value as players can spend it for tangible in-game benefits. While life in a

nature which were there all along, but had been impeded by what is now set aside."

In this context, there is no genuine anxiety about agency, no animistic presence, and no true liminality – only varying levels of awareness with the definite possibility of acquiring full knowledge, which in turn enables players to make informed, rational decisions and effectively disenchant the gameworld. In such a secondary world, religious and quasi-religious communities are, by design, bound to exist, yet they are also destined to be marginalized by the players. This epistemic frame, which positions these groups as either operating in bad faith or simply being ignorant or mistaken, casts religious worldviews as inherently flawed and peripheral to empirical ways of knowing. In this sense, in the gameworld of *Cyberpunk 2077*, public deviations from secular norms appear ultimately meaningless, and consequently, those who explore or embrace such deviations naturally find themselves relegated to the world's intellectual and social margins.

Fool on the Hill

There are numerous scenes in *Cyberpunk 2077* that bring the player into contact with peripheral religion. In Night City, religiosity and peripherality go hand-in-hand. One prominent example is the three-part Sinnerman questline, featuring convicted murderer Joshua Stephenson who found Christ in prison and enlists the player-character (nicknamed V) to help in filming his own crucifixion. Another is the quest Losing My Religion, in which V must help a Buddhist monk avoid receiving unwanted implants prohibited by his faith. There are also several interactions with an enigmatic NPC called Zen Master who provides V with meditative braindances. Meanwhile, the NPC Sebastian "Padre" Ibarra, a former member of a Catholic street gang, acts as a

Each time V discovers a new card, the game offers its general interpretation in the player's journal. Most of the cards are located in places significant to the main story, with the content of each card hinting at hidden truths about the location or its inhabitants. Let us more closely examine three examples: the Fool, Strength, and



Figure 3. The Graffiti of Strength (screenshot by Leonid Moyzhes 2025). © CD Projekt Red.

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While Panam is unequivocally as resilient as the Strength card suggests, not all cards are tied to specific characters. Some allude to concrete situations that will or have transpired in their respective locations, especially in areas of Night City that players are unlikely to visit multiple times. For instance, the card Justice is found near the location where V encounters Evelyn Parker – a femme fatale responsible for placing V in their current predicament – after she herself has suffered severe physical and mental abuse. The card's description reads:

"Justice is the card of conflict resolution. It proclaims the need for order, to see through lies and deceit, and a return to the natural state of affairs. Justice implies a just sentence, but also due process." (*Cyberpunk 2077* 2020)

Finally, two cards, The Devil and Judgement, are absent from the main storyline. The player would be able to find them only during the sequence that leads to a specific

ending. The Devil is connected to striking a deal with the unfeeling Arasaka Corporation, while Judgement can be found during any other ending aside from that and V's suicide. It is also important to note that after collecting all the cards except for the aforementioned two, V can return to Misty, who performs a tarot reading and claims that there are four possible endings to the main character's quest. Each ending is signified by a different card, whether already found (The Star, Temperance, and The Sun) or yet to be discovered (The Devil). In a sense, the game endows tarot with a procedural form of epistemic legitimacy: its claims to truth about the gameworld are not only valid, they are hard-coded into the system of the game itself. However, in order to maintain the aura of mystery that is often necessary in creating the liminality and anxiety about agency that are essential to Halloy and Servais's definition of enchantment, neither Misty nor the card descriptions provide any concrete information about the exact nature of these endings.

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We can analyze the quest through three interconnected lenses. First, the quest's game mechanisms and structure align with numerous collectible quests present in other roleplaying games, including previous projects by CD Projekt Red – notably the infamous *girl cards* from the original *Witcher* (2007). Players traverse the secondary world of the game, putting in extra effort to achieve results represented by an aestheticized reward: in this case, a tarot card appearing in a specific section of V's journal. This ludic framing should always be considered when analyzing the more narratively loaded components of the quest.

Secondly, the quest invites players to engage in dialogue and interpretation of the game's main storyline, similar to how FromSoftware's *Dark Souls* series (2011, 2014, 2016) encourages participation in deciphering their lore. Tarot cards are particularly useful in this regard. On the one hand, they carry their own (largely stable) mystical

Thirdly, if we shift our attention to the roleplaying aspect of the game, the quest can be interpreted as a simulation – a system whose behavior mimics that of another system – of a mystical journey. On the surface, the aesthetic similarities are clear: V literally travels around Night City, receiving visions that signify the meaning and importance of particular characters and locations. However, what stands out in the case of this quest is its ability to simulate the aspect of mystery. Vision quests, elaborate rituals, and spiritual pilgrimages have a long history of serving as organizing principles for quests in digital RPGs, starting with *Ultima IV: Quest of the Avatar* (1985), continuing with numerous pilgrimages in *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind* (2002), and culminating in quests like God of Secrets in *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (2014) where the player character must recreate an ancient elven ceremony. However, these quests often present a curious admixture of aesthetics resonating with imagery from a premodern enchanted world combined with modern

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