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Special Issue

Peripheral Religions and Games

edited by

Carolin Puckhaber, Aska Mayer and Knut V. M. Wormstädt

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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.

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

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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.

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Material excess has dethroned mindfulness, and fetish has usurped genuine connection. Corporate interests prey on the widespread preoccupation with wealth, status, and power, and it can be hard for even the player to distinguish between diegetic and extradiegetic in-game advertisements. True to its namesake genre, the world of *Cyberpunk 2077* – in the words of its marketing copy – values style over substance (Currit 2020). But in this speculative future where life comes so cheap, can there ever be more to that life than what meets the eye? What becomes of religion in a place – in a time – like this? In *Cyberpunk 2077*, where chrome replaces flesh with ease and memories can be perfectly reproduced in digital form, what becomes of the invisible and immaterial world of the spirit?

In this article, we interrogate the role of peripheral religion – and the peripherality of religion – in the gameworld of Cyberpunk 2077 and ask how the presence of religious belief in the game intersects the behavior of the game's underlying systems. Through a hermeneutic analysis of both the game's narrative and mechanical elements, we contend that despite the secular register of its techno-dystopian setting, the highly enchanted nature of the Cyberpunk 2077 gameworld subtly reinforces the epistemic legitimacy of the very beliefs and practices the world pushes to the periphery. The validity of such an analysis is twofold. On the one hand, researchers like Hjarvard (2012) or Lövheim (2011) have already highlighted the increasing role of media, including entertainment media, in the shaping of the perception (and even practice) of modern religion. This process may also be especially pronounced in case of already peripheral religions often silenced by a combined lack of material means and cultural capital. Triple-A games like Cyberpunk 2077, with their significant cultural capital and high production values, serve as part of this process while also raising questions around how games like them portray religion. But Cyberpunk 2077 also deserves particular attention since the cyberpunk genre, even in its literary incarnation, had a

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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

relationship between these groups and the dominant diegetic society through the concept of the *enchanted world*. The enchanted world stands in contrast to modernity, which we understand not as a neutral historical period but as an active project defined by ongoing secularization, bureaucratization, and rationalization. We argue that, regardless of whether a particular religion is widespread or marginal within the gameworld, the very practice of religion consistently signifies peripheral or marginal status, which implicitly reinforces a secular worldview as the norm.

Paradoxically, this marginalization may be approached as a form of support, since in the *Cyberpunk* world it is the marginalized who are supposed to inherit the Earth, and their worldviews may serve as a better conceptual model for understanding the gameworld, as evident in case of Fool on the Hill quest – our primary object of analysis.

Literature Review, Methodology, and Limitations

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

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health amid the shallow consumerism characteristic of *Cyberpunk 2077*'s setting. Our own analysis similarly contends that spiritual matters are surprisingly central to the game and its namesake genre.

This past research, either tacitly or explicitly, has adopted a largely hermeneutical approach. As Kłosiński (2022) defines it, hermeneutics, which we can also call hermeneutic analysis, operates both as a "paradigmatic theory for thinking about interpretation and as a method which can be applied to search for meanings and their explanations." Hermeneutic analysis formalizes the process of encountering and interpreting games as texts, and this method remains a cornerstone of the game researcher's toolbox, with scholarly articles on the methodology of ludohermeneutics occurring with relative frequency over the last fifteen years (Tanenbaum and Bizzochi 2011, Karhulahti 2015, Tanenbaum 2016, Arjoranta 2022). While hermeneutics can encompass phenomenological approaches to games as texts, our analysis privileges more generalizable interpretations as the primary analytical lens due in part to the intrinsic limitations of this method.

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At its core, hermeneutic analysis presupposes that meanings exist within a text and that by closely attending to the text and its presentation one can extract those meanings and put them into context within a larger historical and theoretical context. This method, however, has its limitations. Tanenbaum (2016) observes that a game's indeterminacy, scope, and difficulty can all prove to be barriers to close reading. In order to mitigate the problem of scope, we have chosen to narrow our analysis to the game's Fool on the Hill quest. The linearity and ease of playing through that quest have proven to be less problematic for our analysis. Beyond that, the inherent subjectivity of a reader-centered approach can yield a multiplicity of interpretations, rendering an obvious challenge to the production of generalizable knowledge. To

attenuate this, we introduce – and frequently refer back to – extant theories in diverse scholarly domains as a means of substantiating our interpretations of the text across individual experience. One of the theories that we use to scaffold our analysis is Gonzalo Frasca's (2003) definition of simulation.

Simulation and Representation

While the people of *Cyberpunk 2077*'s Night City are quick to push religion to the periphery, it is the subtle behaviors of the gameworld – as a type of simulation – that suggests religious beliefs are in fact epistemically sound worldviews. Gonzalo Frasca (2003, 224) contrasts representation and simulation, asserting that, unlike games, "traditional media are representational, not simulational." This distinction was not just academic but political. Much like many other ludologists of the time, Frasca aimed to liberate the emerging field of game studies from the perceived dominance of traditional narrative studies, emphasizing the unique affordances of games (interactivity, nonlinear systems, etc.) as meaningfully differentiating games from other representational media. This logic is also reflected in earlier work, such as that of Espen Aarseth (1997), as well as lan Bogost's (2007) later concept of *procedural rhetoric*.

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

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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 colorcoding 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

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the analyzed quest. Games rely on representation to *encode* (Shaw 2017) in-game systems as simulations, and the resulting simulations serve, from a practical standpoint, as yet another form of representation for cultural concepts with which the player may or may not be already familiar.

The interdependence between representation and simulation closely ties the content of video games to larger cultural conventions surrounding a game's production and reception. Simulations and representations of concepts outside the virtual space of the game acknowledges the openness of the game as a system. By recognizing certain audiovisual elements of the gameworld as resembling something outside of itself, the player is prompted to interpret the behavior of these encoded objects as simulations of their real-world corollaries. This may affect the player's understanding of a simulated phenomenon's behavior, since audiovisual layers do not simply signal the way a simulation should be perceived but also endow it with credibility. This is especially true if the player cannot easily compare the simulation's behavior with that of the phenomenon it allegedly simulates. This interdependence also impacts the central idea needed to understand the game's approach to religion: the concept of enchantment.

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Characteristics of Enchantment

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

(1993) first articulated the idea of the *disenchantment of the world* in 1917, but the concept has since been richly developed further by scholars such as Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer (1972) along with Charles Taylor (2007), one of the most notable recent scholars of the topic. However, Saler's work stands out due to his particular focus on the role of popular culture – particularly the role of shared imagined worlds – in complicating the disenchantment narrative.

Saler argues that Western interest in imagined secondary worlds – as seen in the Sherlock Holmes detective stories of Arthur Conan Doyle, the Cthulhu mythos of H. P. Lovecraft, and in J. R. R. Tolkien's Middle-earth – reflected a desire to re-enchant the primary world and liberate the imagination from the constraints of over-rationalized modernity. To achieve this re-enchantment, those who engaged with fictional secondary worlds adopted a form of double consciousness that Saler (2012, 46) calls the "ironic imagination": the ability to simultaneously accept the rules of a secondary world distinct from the primary one while bearing in mind its constructed, fictional nature. Put another way, it is the ability to enjoy a fictional world not in spite of its falseness but because of it. While the ironic imagination bears some similarity to Huizinga's (1955, 10) concept of the "magic circle", Saler (2012, 100) further highlights the social and pragmatic aspects of this process: by exposing the constructed nature of rules in secondary worlds, it trains readers to recognize the constructed nature of social conventions in the primary world.

To play an RPG like *Cyberpunk 2077* – to provisionally entertain a possible future where one can augment their body with cybernetic implants or project one's consciousness directly into cyberspace – is also an act of the ironic imagination. Thus, it too may be an attempt at re-enchantment. But to properly conceptualize the representation of religion and understand its purpose in *Cyberpunk 2077*, it is crucial

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to first raise another set of questions. Does *Cyberpunk 2077* present a simulation of an enchanted, disenchanted, or re-enchanted world? What are the rules governing religion and belief that players should accept through the ironic imagination? What purpose can belief serve in a gameworld constructed extradiegetically by fully discernible, tangible computer code?

Saler's work primarily focuses on the interactions between the primary and secondary worlds but pays less attention to the characteristics of the worlds themselves. But he is also far from the only scholar to have studied enchantment, and the concept has undergone significant study since Weber (1993) first introduced it in 1917. Political philosopher Jane Bennett (2001) argues that the world itself is neither enchanted nor disenchanted, but rather it is the individual's attunement to the vibrancy of the world that determines their capacity for personal enchantment. Jason Ā. Josephson-Storm (2017) meanwhile contends that the disenchantment narrative is not even based in reality – that the proliferation and persistence of occult beliefs and activity, especially in Weber's own time, render the story of disenchantment more of a myth than a true historical account. And Charles Taylor (2007, 38) holds that the modern, disenchanted self is "buffered," in contrast to the earlier "porous" self, which was interconnected with other people, the divine, and nature; Taylor contends that for the modern, buffered self, there exists the possibility of detaching from, or disengaging with, everything outside the mind. For our analysis, we draw upon Taylor's ideas and extend them with insights from Halloy and Servais (2014) on the modern experience of enchantment. In doing so, we can identify several traits that characterize the enchanted world: the widespread presence of nonhuman consciousnesses we might call animistic nature, an uncertainty about agency, and a ubiquity of liminality. These concepts allow us to understand how a gameworld like Cyberpunk 2077's Night City might grapple with themes of enchantment or disenchantment.

Animistic nature, the widespread presence of nonhuman loci of thoughts and feelings, perhaps represent the most obvious trait of the enchanted world. In the premodern universe, the world was populated with thinking entities – spirits, angels, ghosts, giants, and other beings – all of which shared a fundamental, non-anthropocentric understanding that consciousness is not exclusive to humans. These nonhuman consciousnesses do not simply refer to minds belonging to other species; they encompass entities with unique qualities that combine human-like notions with absurd or incomprehensible worldviews.

As a consequence of animistic nature, the enchanted world is a place filled with uncertainty and anxiety about agency. If the world is understood to be populated by inhuman agents and semi-conscious entities, the relationship between cause and effect becomes much more intricate than the linear causality we are typically accustomed to in a Newtonian conception of the universe. The idea of incorporeal forces – such as angels, demons, malevolent spirits, or ancestral ghosts – exerting influence over individuals produces this uncertainty. Concepts like fate, cosmic order, and the use of magic or other supernatural means to either predict or alter the course of future events further complicate our understanding of agency. In such a world, supernatural causes do not simply override natural ones – instead, they create an ongoing tension, where individuals struggle to pinpoint the true reasons behind events and outcomes. The notion of possession, explored by Halloy and Servais (2014), represents a particularly extreme example of this uncertainty, where an individual's sense of self and agency is questioned by an external, often monstrous, force. This can occur in the case of either (involuntary) demonic possession or in the ritual invitation of neutral and benign incorporeal entities (like angels or Lwa/loa). And this is only one end of a spectrum of interactions between human and

nonhuman forces, with varying degrees of influence and control that continuously blur the lines between self-determined actions and external manipulation.

The third key characteristic of an enchanted world is the *ubiquity of liminality*. This refers to a paradoxical situation in which the worldview simultaneously recognizes the existence of fundamental, often binary, categories – such as life and death, human and nonhuman, male and female – while also acknowledging the presence of entities, objects, and institutions that transgress these boundaries. Examples of such liminal entities include mills and graveyards, shamans and spirits, specific times of day, and, of course, various types of monsters. These transgressive entities do not negate the fundamental categories they breach; rather, they reinforce these boundaries by providing a contrast to an established and presupposed order of things, while simultaneously evoking fear by exposing their arbitrary, fragile, and contingent nature.

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Enchantment and the Cyberpunk Genre

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 (Als), particularly the

voodoo-inspired entities in the second book, *Count Zero* (Gibson 1986). However, the concept of Als intertwining with black religious traditions as supernatural entities was already introduced in Gibson's earlier *Neuromancer* (1984), where the Al Wintermute manipulates a space-based Rastafari community. We can find an homage to these Gibsonian associations in *Cyberpunk 2077* with the Voodoo Boys, a Haitian street gang of illicit netrunners (computer hackers) whose digital expertise comingles with mystico-religious iconography and ritual. The Voodoo Boys, perhaps unsurprisingly, play a central role in assisting the player navigate the more mysterious side of cyberspace. Als are just the surface, however, as the idea of personality constructs – digital reflections of human consciousness – also appears frequently in Gibson's work. *Neuromancer* centers its plot around the pursuit of digital immortality, with various characters, both aiding and hindering the protagonists, acting as digital *ghosts*. These entities serve as inspiration behind the idea of the character of Johnny Silverhand (famously portrayed by Keanu Reeves) in *Cyberpunk 2077*.

What is particularly significant in the *Sprawl* trilogy is that, unlike in *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (1987-1994) which features the android Data as a human-like character with true consciousness, Gibson does not simply extend the possibility of consciousness to silicon-based (digital) lifeforms while fundamentally maintaining a human-centric view of the mind. Instead, he questions the very concept of consciousness itself and challenges the boundaries between having, lacking, and simulating an independent personality. In addition to the previously mentioned array of Als, one of the most intriguing examples of this is the corporate structures of the main antagonist in *Count Zero*, whose modus operandi is described as follows:

"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,

one limb, a delicate probe or palp. The whole would be larger, much larger. How could she have imagined that it would be possible to live, to move, in the unnatural field of Virek's wealth without suffering distortion? Virek had taken her up, in all her misery, and had rotated her through the monstrous, invisible stresses of his money, and she had been changed. Of course, she thought, of course: It moves around me constantly, watchful and invisible, the vast and subtle mechanism of Herr Virek's surveillance." (Gibson 1986, 59)

This is one of the most overt elements in Gibson's work, where corporate entities are portrayed through language that implies they possess a semi-independent existence, even a will of their own. Alongside the various Als, ranging from digital ghosts to self-proclaimed *loas*, this constructs a vision of a world governed by truly nonhuman consciousness, whose nonhumanity is not softened but rather emphasized repeatedly.

The prevalence of consciousness(es) in Gibson's work – and in *Cyberpunk 2077* – intersects with a pervasive anxiety about agency. Much like the Als, there are numerous moments across Gibson's *Sprawl* trilogy where these anxieties appear. Armitage, a key patron to the protagonists in *Neuromancer*, has his entire consciousness rewritten by Wintermute for the singular purpose of completing a critical mission. Angie, a protagonist in *Count Zero*, undergoes a genetically engineered alteration to her brain anatomy that, while enabling her to access cyberspace without external devices on the one hand, renders her vulnerable to influence from various cyberspace entities on the other. Slick Henry, the protagonist of *Mona Lisa Overdrive* (Gibson 1988), suffers from chronic short-term memory loss due to a prison sentence, leaving him uncertain about his actions during periods of blackout. These storylines unfold against the backdrop of memory trafficking and Als capable of possessing humans, reminiscent of the relationships seen in Caribbean religious traditions explored by Halloy and Servais. This is not coincidental: another

prominent cyberpunk author, Bruce Sterling, in his preface to the *Mirrorshades* anthology, outlines the fundamental themes of cyberpunk, particularly those involving the intersection of mind, memory, and control:

"The theme of body invasion: prosthetic limbs, implanted circuitry, cosmetic surgery, genetic alteration. The even more powerful theme of mind invasion: brain-computer interfaces, artificial intelligence, neurochemistry – techniques radically redefining the nature of humanity, the nature of the self." (Sterling 1986, xiii)

But once again, the fantastic technologies themselves – in this case, technologies that enable mind manipulation – serve as simply the most overt manifestation of anxiety concerning agency. Even characters unaffected by mind invasion in the literal sense are constantly left uncertain about their goals, motivations, and relationships, reflecting a pervasive sense of disorientation. This uncertainty feeds into another form of agency-related anxiety central to cyberpunk narratives: the theme of conspiracy. In his analysis of the *Deus Ex* series (2000, 2003, 2011, 2016) Christian Knöppler (2020, 197) argues that the game does not merely employ conspiracy as a narrative device but actively recreates the specific mode of thought Richard Hofstadter (1996, 29) described as the "paranoid style:"

"Resort[s] to the central image of "a vast and sinister conspiracy" set against their way of life. Crucially, "[t]he distinguishing thing about the paranoid style is not that its exponents see conspiracies or plots here and there in history, but that they regard a 'vast' or 'gigantic' conspiracy as the motive force in historical events. History is a conspiracy, set in motion by demonic forces of almost transcendent power."

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

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extends to the minutiae of everyday life, echoes the same anxiety about agency and control. As István Csicsery-Ronay, Jr. (1991, 189) writes, "Cyberpunk is part of a trend in science fiction dealing increasingly with madness, more precisely with the most philosophically interesting phenomenon of madness: hallucination (derangement)." In this context, hallucination – whether caused by drugs, mind manipulation, mental illness, or advertisement-induced self-delusion – represents just one manifestation of a broader skepticism toward reality and one's place in it.

Finally, this brings us to the third trait that encodes the world as (re-)enchanted – the ubiquity of liminality. Here, once again, we see a twofold interplay between overt technological imagery and broader cultural intuitions. On the surface, the genre of cyberpunk is rife with liminal tropes, with the iconic figure of the cyborg being the most prominent – though certainly not the only – example. In Gibson's work, we encounter digital ghosts, humans with animal features, and gods, along with spirits discussed earlier, cyber-ninjas and space Rastafaris. Taken together, these entities, like the cyborg, collapse cultural and temporal oppositions, which other scholars have productively observed as being central to the cyberpunk genre (see next paragraph). Additionally, Simstims, the fictional technology that inspired *Cyberpunk 2077*'s braindance, allow to transfer figments of one person's consciousness to another, further disintegrating individuality as personal memories and experiences are transformed into commodities that serve corporate greed.

Larry McCaffery (1991, 7) emphasizes cyberpunk's focus on the breakdown of fundamental categories central to Western civilization: male/female, organic/inorganic, artifice/nature, reality/illusion, original/duplicate, life/death, and human/inhuman. Perhaps unsurprisingly then, there is a persistent tension between defined binaries and the entities that blur or transgress those boundaries.

Importantly, the cyberpunk genre encodes all of these examples specifically as liminal rather than being categorized as entirely new or future classifications. Csicsery-Ronay (1991, 187) further conceptualized cyberpunk literature through the notion of *implosion*, writing, "there is implosion, a drastic, careening plunge toward some inconceivable center of gravity that breaks up the categories of rationality by jamming them together." This sense that categories impose themselves upon one another – of being jammed together – arises from their repeated transgression. However, these breaches do not completely devalue the categories themselves; rather, they are essential in maintaining the sense of "invasion and transformation of the body by alien entities of our own making" (Csicsery-Ronay 1991, 188) that is essential to achieving that sense of implosion.

Cyberpunk literature offers numerous tropes and images aimed at constructing an enchanted secondary world, many of which were later incorporated into works such as *Cyberpunk 2077*. Night City, as presented by CD Projekt Red, is not *supposed* to be rational, bureaucratic, or – most relevantly for the purposes of our article – secular. But what exactly does enchantment in cyberpunk media mean for the representations of religion, particularly peripheral religion, that feature so frequently in cyberpunk fiction, especially when these representations often attract critique for insensitive and colonial depiction of real-world religion (e.g., Lavender III 2020)? Can we say that *Cyberpunk 2077* presents itself as a simulation of life in an enchanted world? And if so, how does the gameworld understand its own enchantment?

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, Als, 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

post-capitalist techno-dystopia can erode a person's Humanity, it is nevertheless *real* to begin with; it is a concrete attribute – a quintessential human-*ness* – that players are encouraged to preserve for the sake of their personal, social, and existential wellbeing (not dissimilar to the Essence attribute in the fantasy cyberpunk franchise *Shadowrun*, to name another example). But, in line with cyberpunk generic conventions, should the player succumb to the logics of capitalism, they may conversely construe Humanity as a resource, as fungible as any other, to be exchanged for material wealth in the form of cybernetic augmentations.

This example illustrates how the various *Cyberpunk* games simultaneously offer a simulation of existing cultural models just as the interactions of their underlying mechanisms reshape our understanding of them. The game draws credibility not from fidelity to the simulated images themselves but by tapping into an older, more widely accepted myth: the notion of a real, tangible humanity inherent in each individual. This aligns with what Bogost (2007, 28-40) termed a "procedural statement": a persuasive statement on a subject conveyed through the game's rules, rather than through audiovisual or textual elements. We see a similar process in the broader inclusion of enchantment-encoding imagery within cyberpunk games. The TRPGs can be seen as adopting images associated with liminality, anxiety about agency, and animistic nature but repurposing their functionality to align more closely with prevailing ideologies, particularly those related to so-called *subtraction stories*.

Charles Taylor (2007, 29) defines subtraction stories as:

"Stories of modernity in general, and secularity in particular, which explain them by human beings having lost, or sloughed off, or liberated themselves from certain earlier, confining horizons, or illusions, or limitations of knowledge. What emerges from this process – modernity or secularity – is to be understood in terms of underlying features of human <u>117</u>

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 disenchants 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.

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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

point of contact to Night City's criminal underworld, frequently soliciting V's engagement in potentially illicit missions (same as any *fixer* in the gameworld).

Similarly, there are numerous moments that heavily draw on elements inspired by the enchanted quality of cyberpunk literature. The main questline offers V the opportunity to work with the Voodoo Boys, the aforementioned street gang who blend the practice of *jacking in* – of projecting one's consciousness directly into the Net – with syncretic elements of Haitian Vodou. And towards the end of the game, V descends into the forbidden part of the Net (cyberspace) to speak with the digital construct of Alt Cunningham, Johnny Silverhand's former girlfriend. Like Johnny, Alt's consciousness persists beyond death through a digital avatar, and with its surreal visuals, this scene resembles an Alighierian visit to purgatory – a similarity even verbally remarked upon by the game's characters. However, no quest combines diegetic peripheral religiosity with the idea of a re-enchanted futuristic world to a greater extent than Fool on the Hill.

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Fool on the Hill is a side quest, although it is closely connected with the main story and runs throughout almost the entirety of the game. The quest begins shortly after V becomes infected by the biochip that houses Johnny Silverhand's posthumous digital consciousness and serves as the MacGuffin at the center of the game's main neo-noir narrative. At first, V notices a strange mural-like image on a wall in the city, which turns out to be a hallucination. Following this, the quest appears, allowing V to consult two characters about these visions: Misty, the proprietor of the New Age boutique Misty's Esoterica and Chakra Harmonization, and Victor Vector, a street doctor specializing in illicit cybernetic implants. Victor claims the visions are merely the result of the biochip overriding V's brain, without offering any concrete explanation for why the visions take their specific form. Misty, on the other hand,

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interprets the images as signs from higher powers and draws the player's attention to their resemblance to tarot cards. The player is then tasked with gathering all the murals scattered throughout the city, which, like the various opportunities V has to meditate with the NPC Zen Master, requires the player to slow the pace of their action. Even the very process of scanning the images – watching them slowly reconstitute from large, unformed pixels into a single, vivid icon – heightens the player's attention to the vibrancy of the world around them and thus, by Jane Bennett's (2001, 5) definition, enchants their experience of it.



Figure 2. The Graffiti of the Empress (screenshot by Leonid Moyzhes 2025). © CD Projekt Red

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

Justice. First is the Fool, the first card of tarot's major arcana, the trump card suite most famously associated with tarot. The player's journal describes it as follows:

"The Fool is everyone – including you and me. Each step he takes on his journey feels like stepping into a brave new world. Ultimately, the journey will change him. But as the card shows, he's a trustworthy lad whose tireless hope drives him toward his goal." (Cyberpunk 2077 2020)

The player finds the card mural outside of V's starting apartment. Here the game overtly, albeit metaphorically, frames V – and thus the player by extension – as the Fool: naïve but enterprising and soon to confront a series of ever grander figures on their quest towards enlightenment. The allegorical imagery for the major arcana historically comes from triumphal processions icons that were popular from Roman antiquity well into the Italian Renaissance. The costumed figures in these parades were often grand and memorable figures; so just as the Fool encounters characters as majestic and strange as the Magician and the Emperor, so too does V directly engage with legendary hackers and heads of megacorporations.

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V later encounters the Strength mural near where the player meets one of their most reliable NPC companions, Panam Palmer. Its in-game description reads:

"Strength is the card of resilience. It is associated with determination, bravery and internal struggle. One must have dedication in order to overcome obstacles and reach one's goal. Strength is about physical prowess and spiritual fortitude – the power that must be unleashed to achieve the impossible." (*Cyberpunk 2077* 2020)

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

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

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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.

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

meanings, allowing game developers to encode associations between the cards and game episodes, including the endings. On the other hand, this meaning remains fundamentally ambiguous, leaving players with the freedom to engage in openended speculation. The significance of tarot cards depends on the particular tradition of interpretation and context, with some schools of thought openly valuing the personal associations the cards evoke for the diviner on an individual basis (Farley 2009). On the other hand, many of the traditional meanings of the cards are mutually agreed upon and remain semantically stable across practitioners. Though *Cyberpunk 2077* does provide its own understandings, it fully capitalizes on this ambiguity, with Misty explicitly highlighting different, sometimes contradictory, meanings of specific cards. This encourages players to formulate their own interpretations of the story while still operating within the dominant decoding framework of the game (Shaw 2017).

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

logic. Players are required to undertake these journeys for tangible, pragmatic benefits – whether material or social – within a context of informational abundance and clear relationships between cause and effect. This approach contrasts sharply with how mystical practices were traditionally understood. Nevertheless, such an approach is still a simulation, as players can recognize the behaviors of another system (the steps of a mystical journey) in the system at hand (the journey from one religiously or mystically significant site to another in the game). And this resemblance serves as the basis for a procedural statement on the subject, naturalizing the subtraction-story understanding of the enchanted world and its rituals as Charles Taylor describes it. The mystical journey presents just another way to gain the material benefits in a linear, mechanized, and predictable manner.

However, Fool on the Hill presents a different situation by repeatedly incorporating the theme of mystery. First, the source of the visions remains undefined. The game emphasizes this uncertainty, with V expressing frustration at not knowing which supposed higher power is sending the visions, while Misty claims that the exact answer is irrelevant because "the world is a maze of illusions" (*Cyberpunk 2077* 2020). These fundamental anxieties about agency, diegetic ontology, and linear causality – combined with the fact that players are encouraged to undertake the quest to find all the murals regardless of the uncertainty underlying their origin – are further intensified by the ambiguity surrounding the meaning of the aforementioned cards. Fool on the Hill invites both the player and their player character V to offer their own interpretations. But these interpretations can, in turn, influence subsequent decisions regarding the ending, as Misty's tarot reading openly connects them with each other. In cultivating the liminal space of interpretability, *Cyberpunk 2077* subtly shifts the way players engage with the gameworld and the information it provides through the channel of peripheral in-world religion. Rather than offering sufficient answers or

irrefutable truths, it invites both the player and the character to step out of a space of making optimally strategic decisions with complete information and instead adopt the role of a mystic and follow their intuition to guide their decision-making.

Conclusion

Though at almost every possible turn it seems that Night City has replaced magic with technology and deeper meaning with shallow excess, enchantment still lingers under the metal-plated skin of Cyberpunk 2077. Beneath the ubiquitous messaging that status, beauty, and material wealth are the only icons suitable for modern worship, we find Christian criminals and New Age mystics, itinerant monks and the Voodoo Boys. The seemingly godless skyscrapers of Night City always reach towards something higher and greater than themselves. When V uses their cybernetic implants to ping a device, the entire web of the city's interlinked parts reveals itself. When V looks at street graffiti more closely, they see a tarot card. The question of whether the game helps or prompts the players themselves to obtain an actual mystical experience in the primary world would call for another article altogether. But when we look at Fool on the Hill, we see how the quest's design and the enchanted nature of the gameworld creates affordances for actions based on the logic of a premodern, enchanted world. We see a world characterized by animistic forces (in that an unknown higher power may have put V on the Fool's journey), anxieties about agency (questions remain about the extent to which it is V or the corrupted cybernetic implant that is responsible for seeing the images), and liminality (in that the murals themselves collapse the otherwise neat distinction between hallucination and reality).

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Fool on the Hill also serves as a framing device for other game elements tied to the imagery of an enchanted world, potentially shaping the meaning-making processes the game prompts beyond this quest. Consider Johnny Silverhand's digital ghost haunting V, the similarities between jacking in and astral projection, the ability to produce change at a distance through the manipulation of digital symbols – a player might take any or all of these to be evidence of an enchanted world when seen in the light of larger pilgrimage to find tarot cards scattered across the city like hidden, divine signposts on V's spiritual journey. Manifestations of the divine – and conviction in the divine – appear in places where one might not expect to find them. We find Misty's New Age boutique in a red-light district in Night City's Little China. Voodoo Boys recite religious sermons during jacking in. The murderer Joshua Stephenson found religion in prison. Enchantment is ever at the corner of our vision, tucked under freeway overpasses and beyond the hazy glow of neon lights. Thus *Cyberpunk 2077* presents two corresponding claims about peripherality and religion.

First, *Cyberpunk 2077* portrays religion as something either existing on the periphery or deeply embedded in an individual's private life, envisioning a future world dominated by victorious secularism. Yet crucially, this secularism is not shown as a "natural" state for believers but as a constant struggle for the less secularized periphery of society, as shown in the Voodoo Boys who operate out of church basements, the ruins of office buildings, and abandoned underground transit tunnels. Similarly, V typically encounters the NPC Zen Master on the figurative – and sometimes literal – outer bounds of society. Even the game lampshades Zen Master's marginal, vagabond status, aptly naming V's quest as Meetings Along the Edge.

Second, quests like Fool on the Hill, the game's quasi-magical hacking system, and the presence of non-human consciousnesses in the form of Als together recreate the

cyberpunk genre's re-enchantment of modernity. These elements collectively depict a world where rationalization and secularization are mere facades, with non-secular traditions and worldviews – cast to the periphery of the society by cultural and economic engines – offer legitimate, viable, and sometimes *preferable* strategies for making sense of a bleak, dystopian reality. This idea is introduced not only through the potentially problematic colonial narrative of so-called primitive people and their religions (Rieder 2020, 335) – a presence of this trope in the game cannot be ignored – but also by inviting both the player and V themselves to assume the role of someone navigating an enchanted world. This invitation leverages not only audiovisual, textual, or narrative affordances but the unique qualities of video games as a medium: interactivity and the necessity for players to interpret and make sense of the information provided by the game to determine their in-game course of action.

As we have suggested via hermeneutic analysis of *Cyberpunk 2077* above, to better understand the nature of religion in video games – be that religion peripheral or mainstream – it is vital to consider the role of enchantment as a guiding force in the operations of a gameworld, irrespective of the setting's outward-presenting themes and aesthetic properties. While on the surface it may seem that religion in *Cyberpunk 2077* appears peripheral, the underlying enchantment of the gameworld confirms religion's status as a valid paradigm. Those tensions between the peripheral status of religion and its epistemic legitimacy – along with those tensions between secular materialism embedded in modern Western culture and a recreation of Gibson's skepticism toward the traditional disenchantment narrative – are neither fully articulated nor resolved in the game.

However, this open-endedness itself serves as a vital part of the game's approach to representing religion, as engagement through the ironic imagination with secondary worlds and their simulations may foster critical understanding of the primary world that inspired them in the first place. *Cyberpunk 2077* serves as a surprisingly nuanced attempt at using the interactive affordances of video games to portray the complicated situation of religion today and, through it, of the project of Enlightenment itself. Whether this serves as a representation of religion's role in modern society or only games-based popular culture is a subject for further analysis.

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