

When Reality Turns Science-Fictional: Capitalist Realism in *The Matrix* and *Cyberpunk 2077*

Anja Kurasov

Abstract: In his book *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* Mark Fisher diagnoses the feeling of capitalism having established itself as an all-pervasive realism, any economic and political alternatives now seeming entirely unthinkable. To further explore this concept, this essay analyzes two examples from the cyberpunk mode of science-fiction, namely the 1999 film *The Matrix* and the 2020 videogame *Cyberpunk 2077*. Both the film and the game construct dystopian futures in which capitalism continued its never-ending chase for growth, their worlds riddled with exploitation, (bodily) invasive technologies, and environmental collapse. Interpreting both works as cultural artifacts, this essay analyzes how their dystopian worlds mirror Fisher's concept of capitalist realism, how their respective narratives affirm or break with the realities that they construct, and, finally, how they highlight capitalist realism as inseparable from the information communication technologies of our time. Where *The Matrix* revolves around the necessity of hope and emphasizes that any reality is merely an ideological construct that can be torn down, *Cyberpunk 2077* echoes the feelings of failure that often emerge under capitalist realism.

About the author: Anja Kurasov obtained her BA in American Studies and Media Studies and MA in European-American Studies at the University of Regensburg. The following contribution is based on her master's thesis. Supervisor: Prof. Dr. Volker Depkat

Keywords: capitalist realism; neoliberalism; media analysis; cyberpunk

While science-fiction was always known for its futures of flying cars and space-travel, a look at the real year 2026 seems disappointing in comparison. Instead of the wondrous, post-capitalist future of space exploration imagined in *Star Trek* back in 1966, today's conditions more closely resemble the dystopian futures imagined in the 1980s, seen in popular films like *Blade*

Runner or *The Terminator*. Corporate rule, invasive technologies, and environmental collapse. Classified as *cyberpunk* and being a mode of science-fiction that emerged during the neoliberal turn of the 1980s, these works combine science-fiction dystopia with the punk subculture's anger at the establishment to negotiate one's place in an unstable, rapidly changing world (McFarlane et al., 2020: 1 f.). Defined by a juxtaposition of high-tech and low-life, cyberpunk anticipated how the market-first worldview installed with the neoliberal turn of the 1980s would only worsen existing structural inequalities under capitalism, fearing that the technologies of the information economy would eventually transform into tools of control and oppression.

These dark imaginations of the future that cyberpunk is known for perfectly capture what Mark Fisher diagnosed as *capitalist realism* in his book *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*: "It is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism" (Fisher, 2014: 2). The neoliberalism championed by Thatcher and Reagan during the 1980s, with policies that pushed individualism, gutted welfare and unions, and introduced tax breaks for the wealthy, proposed market exchange as "an ethic in itself, capable of acting as a guide to all human action, and substituting for all previously held ethical beliefs" (Harvey, 2005: 3). Combined with the collapse of the last *Really Existing Socialism* with the Soviet Union in 1991, the neoliberal turn that began in Europe and America quickly spread over the entire globe as capitalism became plain *realism* (Fisher, 2014: 7 f.). By now, capitalism "seamlessly occupies the horizons of the thinkable" and has transformed every single aspect of life, from cultural production to education, into a business (ibid.: 8). With capitalism commodifying all previous history and cultural objects, Fisher identifies how this has brought cultural production to a standstill, as "materials that previously seemed to possess subversive potentials" were not only fully integrated into consumer culture, but became its dominant style (ibid.: 9).

Cyberpunk, thus, becomes an extremely fitting example to be analyzed against the backdrop of capitalist realism, as the mode perfectly mirrors the issues laid out by Fisher through its postmodern nature and its depiction of the future as a dark dystopia of corporate rule, violence, and increasingly digital realities. The two examples of cyberpunk fiction that this essay will explore are the 1999 film *The Matrix* and the 2020 videogame *Cyberpunk 2077*. Directed by Lilly and Lana Wachowski, the film follows hacker Neo (Keanu Reeves) as he uncovers the truth about the digital world he unknowingly lives in with the help of Trinity (Carrie Anne-Moss) and Morpheus (Laurence Fishburne). In *Cyberpunk 2077*, developed by Polish studio CD Projekt RED and based on Mike Pondsmith's 1988 tabletop roleplaying game *Cyberpunk*, players follow the story of mercenary V (Vincent or Valerie, depending on player choice), who is accompanied by the digitized rock star and terrorist

Johnny Silverhand in their attempts to find the cure to a condition that is slowly killing them. Both works revolve around the wish to free oneself from a crushing, all-pervasive reality stemming from the structural issues underlying capitalism and neoliberalism. Where *The Matrix* emphasizes the necessity to look *beyond* reality in times of oppression, Neo eventually freeing himself and defying the construct of the matrix, *Cyberpunk 2077* focuses on the frustration of reality being inevitable and the individual's struggle to survive.

Against the backdrop of Fisher's concept of capitalist realism, this essay examines how *The Matrix* and *Cyberpunk 2077* negotiate past and present cultural anxieties stemming from the developments of capitalism and neoliberalism. Focusing on both works' formal elements and stylistic choices that are integral to the cyberpunk mode, this essay explores how *The Matrix* and *Cyberpunk 2077* construct dystopian worlds that mirror the conditions Fisher identifies as capitalist realism, how they contextualize their respective realities as either inevitable or malleable, and how they make visible the intrinsic connection between the digital age and capitalist realism. Making evident the tension between critique and affirmation, this essay interprets *The Matrix* and *Cyberpunk 2077* as cultural artifacts and sites of meaning-making to try and synthesize the messages contained in them into possible approaches for navigating capitalist realism in the real world.

Capitalist Realism as Cyberpunk Dystopia

The fictional narrative form of dystopia allows to explore possible social transformation due to its ability to "magnify the distance between empirical and fictional worlds" (Farca, 2018: 15). Through their worldbuilding elements and visuals, *The Matrix* and *Cyberpunk 2077* construct dystopian worlds that depict what the expansion of capitalist and neoliberal ideology would eventually lead to, showing how social cohesion, democracy, and even basic human empathy are eroded in these deeply individualistic, oppressive futures. The rapid advancement of technology, meanwhile, completely "outstrips people's ability to comprehend or fit it into their lives," making people "feel helpless in the face of the Universe" (*Cyberpunk*, 1990: 5).¹

In *Cyberpunk 2077*, the processes and structural issues under capitalism and neoliberalism are amplified to construct a near-future that becomes incredibly familiar to the player. The game is set in the year 2077 in Night City, a bright, captivating corporatocracy located in the NUSA (New United States) where democracy and social cohesion are entirely eroded. Within the game's internal database, Night City is described as the "City of Dreams" that was

1 Because of *Cyberpunk 2077* being based on Pondsmith's tabletop game *Cyberpunk*, the videogame expanding on the same setting, the tabletop game's 1990 rulebook is occasionally included in this analysis to provide additional insight into the worldbuilding.

constructed as “a haven for young idealists” in the late 1990s. The city’s “monumental skyscrapers” and “luxury villas of world-renowned stars” stand in stark contrast to the landfill surrounding it, as well as all the “lawless neighborhoods where war is waged every day”.² Visualizing the rapid acceleration of consumerism combined with corporate rule, the entirety of Night City is littered with bright, flashy advertisements that are often violent or sexual in nature, marketing no longer being restricted by the government. While the city is ruled by corporations and gangs, ordinary people live under extremely precarious conditions. For many, the only options are a life of crime or one of endless corporate obedience. “You don’t have a choice. You just sold your soul” (*Cyberpunk*, 1990: 94).

The dystopia of *The Matrix*, on the other hand, is two-fold: The digital world of the matrix, a simulation of seemingly ordinary life at the end of the 1990s, and the destroyed, real world outside of it. Trapped inside the matrix at the beginning of the film, protagonist Neo perceived himself to be living an ordinary life in the late 1990s. The real world, as he eventually finds out, turns out to be hundreds of years ahead, human beings no longer born but artificially grown and harvested by sentient machines as a never-ending energy source. Upon helping him escape the confines of the digital matrix, Morpheus, leader of a group of human rebels, shows Neo the real world, the “desert of the real,” as an entirely barren wasteland illuminated only by moonlight and large machines roaming the gigantic human farms. He explains how this began in the late 21st century when mankind “marveled at our own magnificence as we gave birth to AI,” this development eventually leading to machines turning their creators’ systems and structures around on them. In their attempts to survive, the sentient machines began to utilize human beings as batteries, harvesting the energy their bodies produce while their consciousnesses are linked to the digitally generated dream world of the matrix (*The Matrix*, 1999: 00:40:00–00:43:40).

Visually, the dystopian worlds of *The Matrix* and *Cyberpunk 2077* capture the cyberpunk mode’s ties to Gothicism, as the mode is heavily occupied with the question of how virtual or imagined spaces shape and are shaped by cultural ideas. What emerges, then, are the cyberpunk mode’s unique aesthetics, the “urban uncanny” and “techno-sublime,” resulting from the combination of dystopian, science-fiction, and Gothic body horror elements (Heise-von der Lippe, 2020: 264). With the utterly destroyed real world of *The Matrix*, as well as the collapsed environment and gigantic landfill that surrounds Night City in *Cyberpunk 2077*, both works visualize Fisher’s point that capitalism is “primed to destroy the entire human environment” as its “growth fetish” inevitably results in eco-disaster (Fisher, 2014: 18 f.).

2 From the game’s internal database entry *Night City*.

Moreover, dystopia is further visualized through the human body being altered through high-tech cybernetics, making visible the anxieties surrounding the rapid emergence of the information economy and its technologies since the 1980s. Integral to cyberpunk dystopia, the human body must be enhanced and upgraded to keep up with the breakneck speeds introduced with data transfer, life beginning to be lived almost fully inside digital worlds as an entirely new form of subjectivity takes over. The dystopian aspect, then, becomes even clearer through cyberpunk's inherent fears surrounding corporate interests taking over those of the consumer, as the technologies of these worlds were developed with control and exploitation in mind (Latham, 2020: 9). In *The Matrix*, human rebels are largely dependent on their existence as machine-born cyborgs to be able to connect to the matrix, as their plugs and outlets allow them to enter the digital world in the form of their digital selves to sabotage the machines from within. At the same time, however, death within the matrix equals death in the real world, the digital self being inseparable from one's physical body.

This depiction ties in with the cyberpunk mode's commodification of bodies, making visible how the processes of capitalism and neoliberalism rely on constant dehumanization. In a world dictated by the market as well as the incredible speeds of the information economy, the constant extraction of value becomes the only purpose of human existence. In *The Matrix*, this concept is further exaggerated through its depiction of machines harvesting energy from humans while they remain trapped in a digital simulation, sustaining this cycle by liquefying those who die in the process and intravenously feeding them to other humans (*The Matrix*, 1999: 00:40:00–00:43:40). In *Cyberpunk 2077*, attitudes towards death are equally cold, as a cheerful radio host from Night City begins a segment by exclaiming how “yesterday's body-count lottery rounded out to a solid ‘n’ sturdy thirty,” describing paramedics “scrapin’ cyberpsycho victims off the pavement” (Ernest Gamingway, 2020: 00:00:00–00:01:06). Schmeink points out how this depiction of “exterminism” is key for cyberpunk dystopia, following Frase's and Bauman's conclusion that the progression of capitalist economy combined with technological advancements and globalization would eventually lead to a “surplus population” that is no longer needed in economic production, becoming essentially “human waste” and “biomass” due to not being able to partake in capitalism and consumer culture (Schmeink, 2019).

Navigating these depressing conditions, the heroes of cyberpunk dystopia are outcasts, rebels, and lowlifes who are “young, streetwise, aggressive, alienated and offensive” (Schmeink, 2016: 22). In *The Matrix*, Neo is a criminal hacker living a double life, “guilty of virtually every computer crime [there is] a law for” (*The Matrix*, 1999: 00:17:45–00:20:00), while *Cyberpunk 2077* focuses on mercenary V, who lives on the edge of legality and crimina-

lity. Throughout the game, V is accompanied by Johnny Silverhand, a rock star with a deep hatred for corporations. With its protagonists introducing counterculture and coolness into these depressing futures, cyberpunk dystopia becomes incredibly appealing to consumer capitalism, as counterculture has long become “a symbolic and musical language for the endless cycles of rebellion and transgression that make up so much of our mass culture” (Frank, 1997: 31). Enhancing their coolness, these protagonists are heavily reliant on personal style, their “mirrored sunglasses, trenchcoats, technological implants, and outfits made from rubber, circuitry, neon and chrome” being central for the cyberpunk mode’s depiction of countercultural resistance against corporate control (Atteberry, 2020: 228). In *The Matrix*, the protagonists consistently stand out from the masses of ordinary people during scenes that take place within the digital world, the rebels becoming easily recognizable by their mirrorshades, leather, latex, and black trenchcoats (*The Matrix*, 1999: 01:07:13–01:08:03). The player in *Cyberpunk 2077*, meanwhile, is given a plethora of options to customize the player-character, V, into their dream rebel. The game lets the player choose whether they wish to play as Vincent or Valerie and offers a variety of facial features, hairstyles, visible cybernetics, piercings, tattoos, and clothing.



Figure 1: One of many possible ways to customize V, seen here with visible cybernetics, which the cyberpunk mode frequently utilizes as a fashion statement.

Within his critique of contemporary dystopia being unable to imagine anything *beyond* capitalism, Fisher notes how these interpretations of the future express the anxiety that “the end has already come” and “that the future harbors only reiteration and re-permutation” (Fisher, 2014: 3). In *The Matrix*, this anxiety becomes an integral part of the film’s dystopia. Explaining how the entire system of the digital matrix came to be, Agent Smith, a program

tasked with maintaining machine order inside the matrix, explains how this digital dream world was deliberately designed to be an endless repetition of the late 1990s, a time the machines viewed as the peak of human civilization and that mankind easily accepted as reality. Fed up with this simulation, Agent Smith expresses his deep frustration with the matrix and wishes to escape. “I hate this place, this... zoo. This prison, this reality, whatever you want to call it. I can’t stand it any longer.” This drives him to go against the machines’ plans, Smith admitting that he wants to “get out of here” and “get free.” As such, both the film’s protagonist Neo and antagonist Agent Smith are driven by their deep desire to escape a world at a standstill (*The Matrix*, 1999: 01:31:38–01:33:29; *The Matrix*, 1999: 01:39:45–01:41:00).

Jameson identifies how “in postmodern culture, ‘culture’ has become a product in its own right,” identifying postmodernism as “the consumption of sheer commodification as a process” (Jameson, 1991: x). He notes how consumer capitalism inevitably entails a breakdown of historicity as even the past has become a commodity, the *nostalgia mode* being a “pastiche of the stereotypical past” that “endows present reality and the openness of present history with the spell and distance of a glossy mirage” (ibid.: 21). Similarly, Fisher identifies how “profound social and economic instability resulted in a craving for familiar cultural forms,” the feeling of cultural production feeling stuck being the result of people consistently being “drawn back to the security of the old” (Fisher, 2014: 59 f.). With the cyberpunk mode being inherently postmodern, neither *The Matrix* nor *Cyberpunk 2077* are exempt from this, as both the film and the game rely on aesthetics and narratives that were defined in the 1980s, key works including the 1984 novel *Neuromancer* and the 1982 film *Blade Runner*. Where the narrative of *The Matrix* contextualizes this cyclical nature of history as part of its dystopia, the digital world being stuck in a never-ending cycle of the same that its characters wish to break free from, *Cyberpunk 2077* contrasts this by following a *cyberpunk formula*, becoming a mosaic of pop-cultural references, retro-futurism, and nostalgia, its visuals replicating the “neon specter” and “nocturnal metropolis” seen decades prior in *Blade Runner* (Frelik, 2020: 185 f.).

Red or Blue? Between Revolution and Acceptance

With the dystopian worlds of *The Matrix* and *Cyberpunk 2077* mirroring capitalist realism, Fisher proposes that such dystopia should be “read figuratively, as a basis for interrogating late-capitalism’s presiding mood of stasis and fatalism” (Niven, 2014: xxi). Following Fisher’s approach of interpreting capitalist realism against the backdrop of Lacan’s concept of reality and the Real, a look at the narrative and stylistic choices in *The Matrix* and *Cyberpunk 2077* reveals almost entirely opposite attitudes towards the realities they pre-

sent. Where *The Matrix* shows the possibility to tear down and alter reality, underlining the necessity of hope and community, *Cyberpunk 2077* focuses on the difficulty and hopelessness of this endeavor in a deeply individualistic, shattered society created by capitalism and neoliberalism.

Throughout his book, Fisher identifies how capitalist realism functions like Lacan's differentiation between reality and the Real, noting how capitalism merely projects a reality of it being a functioning, benevolent system through imagery and symbolism. For this reality to seamlessly function and be widely accepted, it must conceal the Real underneath, the fixed facts that would erode it, such as capitalism's disastrous effects on the environment or mental health (Fisher, 2014: 16 f.). In the same vein, *The Matrix* contextualizes the digital matrix as a simulated reality that keeps mankind trapped and complacent while the undeniable, fixed Real that remains concealed is that this world is merely a simulation. In *Cyberpunk 2077*, reality is the corporatocracy of Night City being a *City of Dreams*, a neoliberal utopia of technological advancement and entrepreneurial freedoms. Its Real(s), then, are the countless ways in which this city is deeply unfair and exploitative, riddled with violence and greed at every corner. Unlike in *The Matrix*, the protagonist and player-character of the game, V, is fully aware of Night City's projected reality being a façade. "The city's always got a promise for you. Might be a lie, an illusion, but it's there. Just around the corner. And it keeps you going." While Neo feels alienated from the world of the matrix and chases answers, V embraces Night City and its promises: "It's a city of dreams, and I'm a big dreamer" (Cyberpunk 2077, 2018: 00:00:00–00:01:40).

Both *The Matrix* and *Cyberpunk 2077* begin their stories with their protagonists stuck in their respective realities, unable to imagine anything else, hindered by the very same "invisible barrier constraining thought and action" that Fisher identifies as capitalist realism (Fisher, 2014: 16). Nevertheless, both Neo and V eventually face a traumatic encounter with the Real, being exposed to facts that completely uproot the realities they previously experienced. Neo, leading a seemingly ordinary life inside the matrix as programmer Thomas Anderson by day and hacker Neo by night, is shown to feel alienated from the world he lives in from the very beginning. Convinced by Neo's determination to find out a truth he cannot yet comprehend, Morpheus, leader of a group of human rebels, meets with Neo to finally answer his questions:

The matrix is everywhere. It is all around us. Even now, in this very room. You can see it when you look out your window or when you turn on your television. You can feel it when you go to work. When you go to church. When you pay your taxes. It is the world that has been pulled over your eyes to blind you from the truth (*The Matrix*, 1999: 00:25:55–00:28:12).

Much like Fisher describes the Real as an “unrepresentable X” and a “traumatic void” (Fisher, 2014: 18), Morpheus insists that merely telling Neo about the truth behind the matrix would be insufficient. Instead, he offers him the choice between a red and a blue pill, in which the blue would allow Neo to forget everything he just learned while the red would show him “how deep the rabbit hole goes.” Opting for the red pill, the reality of the matrix begins to collapse in Neo’s eyes as his body begins to reject the simulation of the matrix. Shortly after, he awakens in the real world, trapped in a womb-like machine pod from which he is rescued by Morpheus’ crew and brought on board their hovercraft (*The Matrix*, 1999: 00:28:35–00:33:35). Neo’s immense shock and denial after being exposed to the Real, the world outside the matrix, captures one of the core difficulties of capitalist realism: The sheer inability to even *imagine* an alternative.

The film continues to present Neo’s traumatic encounter with the Real as a moment of growth, allowing him to unlock his abilities as a messianic savior of mankind, *the One*, that Morpheus believes him to be. Morpheus loads Neo into a training program used by the human rebels, a digital world that replicates the rules of the matrix that are “no different than the rules of a computer system,” as “some of them can be bent” and “others can be broken.” Neo, used to this digital world being the only reality he ever knew, cannot keep up with Morpheus during sparring. “Do you believe that my being stronger or faster has anything to do with muscles in this place? You think that’s air you’re breathing now?” Only after internalizing that this world is a simulation, no matter how *real* it looks or feels, does Neo begin to match Morpheus’ incredible speed. “You have to let it all go, Neo. Fear, doubt, and disbelief. Free your mind” (ibid.: 00:49:12–00:54:52). Here, the film emphasizes that fighting the oppressive system of the matrix is impossible without completely undoing the reality it constructed first. In the same manner, Fisher identifies how resisting capitalism is ineffective without tearing down capitalism’s pervasive realism. To achieve this, the reality it projects must be exposed as dysfunctional and destructive by invoking the many Real(s) that capitalism attempts to conceal (Fisher, 2014: 16 ff.).

In line with the film’s reality-bending narrative, scenes that take place within the digital world are purposefully *unrealistic*, the film’s special effects in the form of CGI (Computer Generated Imagery) giving the viewer the impression of an exaggerated, unnatural videogame world. When inside the digital matrix, characters like Neo or Trinity can dodge bullets in slow-motion, perform impossible jumps, or run on walls. Schmeink notes how the entire film conflates cyberspace and videogame mechanics by “presenting the action of stealing data as a heist, rendering conflicts with programs as martial arts fights and processing the navigation of new environments via mini-game routines” (Schmeink, 2020: 137). The further the reality of the matrix is torn

down in Neo's mind, the more lethal he becomes in his fight against the Agents within the matrix. This becomes especially evident in the film's finale, when Neo faces Agent Smith in an encounter that completely ignores the rules of gravity or what the human body is physically capable of, Neo matching the unnatural speed and strength of a program in its own domain (*The Matrix*, 1999: 02:02:25–02:06:50).



Figure 2: Neo's appearance reflects his journey, as his rejection of the reality of the matrix is followed by his personal style changing to exude the typical coolness inherent to cyberpunk protagonists.

While *The Matrix* presents Neo becoming a messianic savior of mankind by the end of the film, the sequels *Matrix Reloaded*, *Matrix Revolutions*, and even *Matrix Resurrections* later expand on this notion—it was not fate or prophecy that granted Neo these powers, but the love and support he received from others. On his own, Neo was unable to find out the truth about the matrix and free himself. It was only with the support of the human rebels, especially the constant encouragement he received from Morpheus and the love of Trinity, that Neo could realize that the reality he believed in all his life was held together by an artificial set of rules, *code*, that prevented him from seeing the bigger picture. Bringing forth lasting change, *The Matrix* shows, is impossible without community.

Through its thematization of reality as a construct and its consistent emphasis on the necessity of revolution, *The Matrix* carries a valuable criticism on the hopeless nature of capitalist realism. Through both narrative and formal elements, the film consistently questions and subverts the notion of *being realistic* that capitalism, as Fisher consistently points out, so deeply relies on. At the very end, Neo leaves a message to the machines: “I know that you’re afraid. You’re afraid of us. You’re afraid of change.” He promises that this is only the beginning, that his aim is to show people “a world without rules and controls, without borders and boundaries, a world where everything is possible” (ibid.: 02:07:53–02:09:25). With this ending, the film mirrors the central message of Fisher’s *Capitalist Realism* that, when facing oppression, there is

“no more radical or necessary act than to look beyond the apparent limitations of the present,” to continue believing that “something other than what appears to be real and pragmatic” can eventually emerge (Niven, 2014: xxviii).

While the film depicts its reality as something that can be broken, emphasizing this narrative through special effects that create the exaggerated feeling of a videogame, *Cyberpunk 2077* pays immense attention to realism. Central for this is the game’s first-person perspective and its player character, V, who functions as a stand-in for the player and renders their actions visible, bridging the reality of the player with that of the game (Rehak, 2003: 107). To achieve easier self-identification, the player can customize V’s gender, appearance, backstory, and abilities. As an action-roleplaying game, the game’s choice design helps further create the “sensation of being surrounded by a completely other reality,” the player feeling like they become “part of the fictional world of the game” as their decisions actively influence the game’s narrative, forcing the player to contemplate their own ethics and morals during play (Fernández-Vara, 2019: 133).

Following this adherence to realism, the narrative of *Cyberpunk 2077* revolves around the frustration of reality being simply inevitable, V’s journey following their attempts to try and survive in a world that wants to kill them at every turn. In this neoliberal *City of Dreams* drenched with violence and crime, V pursues the dangerous life of a mercenary to chase their dreams of fame and wealth. Instead of the major leagues they aimed for, however, V faces all the cruelty and injustice driving Night City, the game depicting the bleak realism of a “Hobbesian war of all against all, a system of perpetual exploitation and generalized criminality” in which violence seems to be the only answer (Fisher, 2014: 11). After a series of unfortunate coincidences, V ends up as the unwilling victim of megacorporation Arasaka’s experimental biochip, the Relic, as their personality and memories become entangled with the digitized personality engram of Johnny Silverhand, who is remembered in Night City as a legendary rock star and terrorist. Due to simple removal of the biochip proving fatal, as well as its processes causing V’s body to begin rejecting them in favor of their digital parasite, V is forced to stand against Night City’s most powerful corporations in a race against time to survive.

Like Morpheus’ red pill, Johnny emerges as the traumatic Real that begins to undo the reality V knew and believed in, forcing them to acknowledge the structural inequalities underlying the corporatocracy of Night City. As their memories become intertwined, V experiences how Johnny, after a fruitless attempt to resist Night City’s corporate rule with an attack on Arasaka Tower, died after being captured by the corporation. Forced to undergo the digitization of his personality, Johnny became an unwilling subject in the development of Arasaka’s *Secure Your Soul* technology. After V ends up with the biochip containing Johnny’s digital construct in their head, they begin to

perceive him as a digital hallucination accompanied by audio-visual glitches, seeing and hearing him as if he is physically present. Johnny becomes a Real, a “fissure within the symbolic network” that completely erodes V’s reality as two personalities, past and present, as well as the real and the digital world begin to bleed into one (Žižek, 2011: 60). Flooding V’s mind with a deep hatred for Night City, Johnny recalls witnessing the city being turned “into a machine fueled by people’s crushed spirits” by greedy corporations. For him, violence is the only option. “It’s a war against the fuckin’ forces of entropy, understand?!” (Lamia Kitsune, 2021: 00:00:00–00:01:35).

The bleak realism of Night City, thus, is only further affirmed by the game’s narrative as there seem to be no alternatives, no effective ways to combat it. Where Johnny embodies a “romantic attachment to the politics of failure” that Fisher identifies as one of the main vices of the political left (Fisher, 2014: 78), consumed by his past failures and anger instead of thinking about the future, V begins to mirror the same “reflexive impotence” that Fisher saw in his teenaged students who, faced with all the flaws and injustices of capitalism, saw no other option but to *be realistic* and acknowledge that they cannot do anything about it (ibid.: 21).

Despite V’s realism, they retain a strong will to survive that, miraculously, carries them through even the most impossible situations. These efforts culminate in the mission *Nocturne Op55N1*, in which the player finds themselves at a narrative crossroads that splits into different endings. Here, the game’s penchant for realism, its “deflationary perspective of a depressive,” solidifies Night City and its neoliberal capitalism as an inevitability in every single ending (ibid.: 5). Thus, even when V chooses to continue fighting, even the most hopeful choice taken in *Nocturne Op55N1* ends with Night City’s conditions remaining the same and V having to accept that their death, it seems, has only been postponed. Being given an estimate of six more months left to live, Johnny encourages V to take this chance and, as their personalities are successfully separated, is willing to depart into the depths of cyberspace for their sake. Where V is upset at this turn of events, having hoped for “a happier ending for everyone involved,” Johnny seems less surprised: “Here, for folks like us? Wrong city, wrong people” (DraKulis Cinematic Gaming, 2023: 00:41:14–00:50:35).

While *The Matrix* ended with hope for mankind, the digital reality of the matrix being an artificial set of rules and boundaries that can and should be broken to achieve freedom and a better future, *Cyberpunk 2077* is unable to imagine Night City failing. Considering the circumstances the game was made under, the game’s development suffering from strict deadlines, prolonged periods of overtime, and overall questionable conditions for its developers, this defeatist depiction of capitalism as an all-pervasive force echoes the frustration of its writers (Bardhan, 2023).

Despite its pull towards realism being so prevalent, the game's endings are not entirely devoid of hope, at least on the level of the individual, as the choices presented in *Nocturne Op55N1*—fighting, giving in, or giving up—influence V's odds of survival. While V's death is certain when they abandon their morals to cooperate with Arasaka, as well as when they give up entirely, their fate remains ambiguous in endings where they stay true to themselves and continue resisting. Here, the game emphasizes the importance of never abandoning one's identity, moral code, and meaningful connections with others to, against all odds, try and stand against this world's hopeless realism. Saying his farewells, Johnny encourages V to “never stop fightin’” (DraKulis Cinematic Gaming, 2023: 00:45:00–00:50:35).³

The Digital Reality of Capitalism

In both works, reality is also increasingly digital, one's perception and understanding of the world significantly altered through the possibility of purely digital existence in cyberspace. In the same vein, Fisher identifies how capitalist reality is largely constructed through the “entertainment-control circuits of hypermediated consumer culture,” enforcing control through the debtor-addict dynamic it maintains with its users (Fisher, 2014: 25). Graeber makes a similar observation, identifying how “financial abstractions feel like the very bedrock of reality,” life taking place in what feels like a digitally generated “timeless present” (Graeber, 2015: 36 f.).

Cyberpunk, since its inception in the 1980s, correctly predicted how the emergence of the information economy would gradually lead to an increasingly digital reality that, under the influence of capitalism and neoliberalism, would become one of the most significant sites of extracting value. Works like *The Matrix* and *Cyberpunk 2077* address the deep alienation that human beings feel from this rising dominance of digital reality and how, under capitalism and neoliberalism, a 24/7 extraction of capital becomes its main purpose. Proving this point, Zuboff identifies how tech giants like Google, Meta, and other corporations have long started to extract user data as a “free raw material” to be sold (Laidler, 2019). “We were warned by many, but perhaps most helpfully by cyberpunks,” Gray writes, “‘cyber’ because reality is being digitized, and ‘punk’ because we know the process, driven as it is by greed (for fame, wealth, and power), is both corrupted/corrupting and essential for who we are” (Gray, 2020: 362).

The visual tradition of cyberpunk becomes a highly effective tool when it comes to making visible the corporate, physical, and cyberspatial spaces

³ For a different perspective on how the protagonist of *Cyberpunk 2077* battles capitalist realism, see Leo Springfield's thesis *Can Video Game's Invincible Protagonist Beat Capitalism?: A political genealogy through Cyberpunk 2077, Death Stranding, and Disco Elysium*.

that emerged with neoliberalism and the information economy (Bukatman, 2018: xvi). Both *The Matrix* and *Cyberpunk 2077* depict the possibility of human consciousness being digitized and entering the constant flows of data transfer, *cyberspace*, visualizing how the processes of the digital age operate and how they impact human subjectivity and embodiment. In *The Matrix*, cyberspace is depicted identical to the world of the late 1990s, emphasizing this period as the time when mankind began to live inside computers. The “true form” of the matrix, then, is depicted as “green rows of glyphs,” the code holding this digital world together, “the glowing marks raining down becoming synonymous with systematic control, out of reach, hidden, and only made visible by the hacker” (Schmeink, 2020: 137). In *Cyberpunk 2077*, “cyberspace moves, breathes at all times,” the interfaces utilized by hackers who enter it helping adjust this incomprehensible “ebb and flow of data” to one’s cognitive capabilities by rendering it as a three-dimensional, constantly moving and shifting space made up of pixels, grids, and blocks (*Gamer’s Little Playground*, 2020: 05:40:18–05:41:41). With capitalism and the digital world being deeply intertwined, the processes of capitalism now matching the rapid speeds of data transfer, this visualization captures Shaviro’s argument that the “flows of Capital” have liberated themselves from “any merely human dimensions, and from whatever feeble limits Fordism and Keynesianism might have previously placed upon the singleminded pursuit of capital accumulation” (Shaviro, 2005).

While Fisher describes capitalism as a “monstrous, infinitely plastic entity” that can subsume and metabolize everything it touches (Fisher, 2014: 6), this description becomes especially fitting when looking at the technologies it pushes onto consumers. A perfect example is the recent rise of generative AI tools such as ChatGPT, which transform all forms of cultural products and human expression found across the internet into an unidentifiable mass of data that can be regurgitated on request. In the same vein, Marx and Engels lamented how capitalism has eroded prior forms of existence, interpersonal bonds and emotions being replaced with cold, egotistic transactions:

Die Bourgeoisie, wo sie zur Herrschaft gekommen, hat [...] kein anderes Band zwischen Mensch und Mensch übrig gelassen, als das nackte Interesse, die gefühllose „baare Zahlung.“ Sie hat die heiligen Schauer der frommen Schwärmerei, der ritterlichen Begeisterung, der spießbürgerlichen Wehmuth in dem eiskalten Wasser egoistischer Berechnung ertränkt (Marx and Engels, 1848: 5).

Similarly, *The Matrix* depicts a dystopian future in which human existence is reduced to that of a battery for machines, death resulting in the body being liquefied and intravenously fed to the living to continue this soulless cycle.

The real world, meanwhile, is reviving dead celebrities such as Leonard Nimoy with the help of generative AI for the sake of fanservice (Perlow, 2024). The likeness of an actor becomes its own product, the living person it once was no longer mattering.

With capitalist realism and digital reality being so closely intertwined, the cyberpunk depiction of technology becoming bodily invasive and the figure of the cyborg as a neoliberal *ideal* no longer feels far-fetched. Neoliberalism, aiming to transform all aspects of life into a business, already yearns to transform workers and consumers into cyborg-like beings that no longer rely on wasting time on sleep or sustenance (Crary, 2013: 14). With the digital world becoming inseparable from the real world, information communication technologies beginning to feel like extensions of the human body, cyberpunk authors try to navigate this blurring of boundaries by depicting human bodies being “altered, enhanced, or perverted by bio- and nanotechnological prostheses, cognitive implants, and/or new orifices that interface with digital networks and cyberspatial domains” (Grillmayr, 2020: 273). At the core of cyberpunk, thus, lies the idea of a “Gothic integration of bodies and technologies” that both shapes and undermines one’s understanding of human existence (Heise-von der Lippe, 2020: 264).

Addressing this, *Cyberpunk 2077* introduces the concept of *cyberpsychosis*, the condition described within the game as a “by-product of the modern lifestyle and the obsessive emphasis placed on incorporating modern tech into our lives,” causing people to lose “the ability to distinguish what is real and what is ‘only’ artificial, digital, synthetic.”⁴ Under capitalist realism, Fisher identifies the same Gothic elements that transform one’s entire existence as he describes capitalism as “an abstract parasite, an insatiable vampire and zombiemaker” (Fisher, 2014: 15). In *The Matrix*, when Neo is saved from the confines of the digital world, this dependence on technology is emphasized through a disconnect from the matrix being depicted as a rebirth. Ejected from the matrix, he awakens in the real world to find himself being flushed from a womb-like machine pod into the water, being rescued by Morpheus’ crew as a naked, hairless newborn riddled with countless plugs and outlets, struggling to move his body or open his eyes. Initially perceiving this form of existence as some sort of nightmare, Neo asks if he is dead, Morpheus ensuring him he is “far from it” (*The Matrix*, 1999: 00:35:00–00:36:38)

4 From the readable item *The Truth about Cyberpsychosis* that can be found in *Cyberpunk 2077* during play.



Figure 3: Disconnected from the digital world of the matrix after taking Morpheus' red pill, Neo finds himself waking up in the real world for the very first time in his life.

These invasive technologies, however, also offer immense potential for resistance. The high-tech low-life contrast remains one of the most important aspects of the cyberpunk mode, both *The Matrix* and *Cyberpunk 2077* depicting rebels and outcasts who learn to utilize the oppressive technologies of their respective worlds against their oppressors. “Turn it, as the French say: *détournement*” (Gray, 2020: 371). In *Cyberpunk 2077*, players are encouraged to purchase and install a variety of (illegal) cybernetic upgrades for V that can facilitate gameplay. For example, cybernetic upgrades to V’s frontal cortex allow players to hack security cameras or enemies’ vision, making it easier to pass through enemies undetected. In line with the game’s tendency for realism, however, the game’s diegesis contextualizes these cybernetic enhancements not only as a necessary form of resistance, but also as a process of objectifying oneself to the point of losing touch with one’s identity and humanity. Thus, people must constantly risk cyberpsychosis in order to keep up with this fast, violent, and unjust world. “You’re either predator or prey, and the faster you learn to blur the line between the two categories, the longer you’ll survive” (*Cyberpunk*, 1990: 75).

In *The Matrix*, cyberpunk *détournement* is shown at its most effective by being rooted in collective action. Where *Cyberpunk 2077* revolves around individualistic and secluded hackers, the world’s technologies offering immense potential that remains largely untapped, the human rebels of *The Matrix* depend on community to achieve lasting results. Moreover, the film emphasizes that for this co-optation of technology to be effective, one must be willing to fully go against the rules and boundaries that hold the reality of the matrix together. As such, even after extensive combat skills and weapons have been uploaded into Neo’s digital self, he ends up injured due to being held back by fear and doubt. Only by the end of the film, when he manages to fully tear

down the reality of the matrix in his mind, does Neo effortlessly stop bullets in mid-air, commanding fear instead of being afraid. Much like Fisher suggests that capitalism needs to be revealed as “inconsistent or untenable” to effectively challenge it, the film emphasizes that for meaningful resistance to become possible, one must be willing to abolish every construct that presents itself as a natural order (Fisher, 2014: 16).

Similarly, Graeber identifies how laws, across all of history, have consistently emerged from acts previously deemed illegal or unrealistic. The American Revolution, being one of the most famous examples, could never have occurred without massive disobedience and the resistance of the natural order of this time. Now, with laws being changed legally through constitutions, revolutions seem to have outlived their purpose. Thus, Graeber asks a vital question: “What is the foundation of social order when one has exorcised the very idea of revolution? And above all, what happens to the political imagination?” (Graeber, 2015: 214).

Looking towards cyberpunk for answers, the mode depicts its own kind of revolution, its hacker rebels going against the rules and hierarchies of their worlds to transform the digital age. Instead of technology being utilized solely for oppression, hackers like V and Neo find ways to coexist with the digital world, utilizing the possibilities it offers to their advantage. For this revolution to be effective, as *The Matrix* emphasizes, these technologies must be utilized outside of the constraints of the system one wishes to resist. In the real world, the internet’s “freeloaders and thieves” already began to thwart corporate dreams of monopoly and commodification during the internet’s early years (Strangelove, 2005: 58). By now, the internet has become significantly more restricted, as governments are able to block access to websites or implement age verification measures. Nevertheless, users around the world continue to find ways to bypass these restrictions, the latest tactic being the scanning of hyper-realistic videogame characters to trick age verification systems and retain digital privacy (Tassi, 2025). The internet, Strangelove emphasized, “is not just a technical thing” but a “cultural phenomenon” highly capable of reaction (Strangelove, 2005: 63). Piracy, as another example, became a way of resisting the corporate push for digital media and streaming instead of physical ownership. It has become a form of preserving media like music, film, TV, and videogames in a time where capitalism actively undermines this preservation through its constant cycles of planned obsolescence (De Kosnik, 2019: 7). The world, as it turns out, is already filled with cyberpunks.

Lessons on Living in a Cyberpunk World

As this essay has made evident, capitalist realism is a complicated topic to navigate within entertainment media, as film and videogames such as *The Matrix* and *Cyberpunk 2077* are products to be sold and, simultaneously, cultural artifacts. As a mode, cyberpunk has long been subsumed by capitalism, its postmodern nature making it one of the most glaring examples of capitalist realism. As Fisher proposed in *Capitalist Realism*, however, it is important to critically engage with how capitalism and the future is contextualized in such works. Through the lens of viewing *The Matrix* and *Cyberpunk 2077* as cultural artifacts, it becomes evident how their formal and stylistic elements worked to make the structural inequalities underlying capitalism and neoliberalism widely comprehensible, constructing dystopian worlds with increasingly digital realities that are navigated by rebellious protagonists. In their attempts to navigate futures in which the flows of capital and data transfer have become inseparable from one another, both the film and the game present ways to co-opt and transform the technologies of these worlds into meaningful forms of resisting a reality that seems all-pervasive and inevitable.

Beyond the scope of this essay, the cyberpunk mode heavily revolves around themes of trans- and posthumanism, both *The Matrix* and *Cyberpunk 2077* offering ample material to be analyzed within this context. Faced with digital realities, the film and the game explore what it means to be human, questioning the concept of a natural order by thematizing new ways of existence. Where Neo becomes effectively posthuman by rising from the dead within the digital world, Johnny exists as neither fully human nor machine, being a digital construct with a uniquely human emotional capacity. These forms of existence, against the backdrop of capitalist realism, actively defy the structures and hierarchies that its realism is constructed on. Crucial for this approach, Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto* proposes the figure of the cyborg as a means of tearing down the hierarchies and binaries of a natural order and moving beyond Enlightenment-era humanism.

When present conditions are already *unnervingly cyberpunk*, these works can function as both warnings and guides. To resist the violent corporatocracy of *Cyberpunk 2077* or the exploitative digital reality of *The Matrix*, both options seeming closer than ever during times in which tech billionaires wield immense political power, it is vital to retain one's curiosity, literacy, and willingness to critically engage with everything in the world, even if it is consumed for mere entertainment. As this analysis has made evident, *all* cultural products are political and, therefore, useful in the navigation of present conditions in their own ways.

References

- Atteberry, Stina (2020): "Fashion", in: McFarlane, Anna et al. (eds.): *The Routledge Companion to Cyberpunk Culture*, London: Routledge, pp. 228–237.
- Bardhan, Ashley (2023): "Cyberpunk 2077 Dev Says The Game Was A Lesson In Avoiding Crunch", in: *Kotaku* / <https://kotaku.com/cyberpunk-2077-phantom-liberty-crunch-colin-walder-1850930202>.
- Bukatman, Scott (2018): "Foreword: Cyberpunk and its Visual Vicissitudes" in: Murphy, Graham J. / Schmeink, Lars (eds.): *Cyberpunk and Visual Culture*, London: Routledge, pp. xv–xix.
- Crary, Jonathan (2013): *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*, London: Verso Books.
- Cyberpunk: The Roleplaying Game of the Dark Future* (1990): R. Talsorian Games Inc., tabletop.
- Cyberpunk 2077 (2018): "Cyberpunk 2077–Offizieller E3 2018 Trailer", in: *YouTube* / <https://youtu.be/8X2kIfS6fb8?si=5jGvjFtDWAffWAg>.
- Cyberpunk 2077* (2020): CD Projekt RED, Console, PC.
- De Kosnik, Abigail (2019): "Piracy Is The Future of Culture: Speculating about Media Preservation after Collapse", in: *Third Text*, vol. 34, 1, pp. 62–70.
- DraKulis Cinematic Gaming (2023): "Don't Fear The Reaper | Cyberpunk 2077 | Ending | 4K RTX 4090", in: *YouTube* / https://youtu.be/XM6cts3SE8k?si=YBW9UTu_G3mfdsR.
- Farca, Gerald (2018): *Playing Dystopia. Nightmarish Worlds in Videogames and the Player's Aesthetic Response*, Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag.
- Fernández-Vara, Clara (2019): *Introduction to Game Analysis*, 2nd ed., London: Routledge.
- Fisher, Mark (2014): *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*, Hampshire: Zero Books.
- Frank, Thomas (1997): *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Frelik, Pawel (2020): "Video Games", in: McFarlane, Anna et al. (eds.): *The Routledge Companion to Cyberpunk Culture*, London: Routledge, pp. 184–192.
- Gamer's Little Playground (2020): "CYBERPUNK 2077 All Cutscenes (XBOX SERIES X) Game Movie 1080p 60FPS HD", in: *YouTube* / https://youtu.be/IAbFt0L_OQs?si=ddDZ2WK1Z9ApcPYe.
- Graeber, David (2015): *The Utopia of Rules: On Technology, Stupidity, and the Secret Joys of Bureaucracy*, London / Brooklyn: Melville House.
- Gray, Chris Hables (2020): "Vigilance Society", in: McFarlane, Anna et al. (eds.): *The Routledge Companion to Cyberpunk Culture*, London: Routledge, pp. 362–372.
- Grillmayr, Julia (2020): "Posthumanism(s)", in: McFarlane, Anna et al. (eds.): *The Routledge Companion to Cyberpunk Culture*, London: Routledge, pp. 273–281.
- Haraway, Donna (2016): *Manifestly Haraway*, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.
- Harvey, David (2005): *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Heise-von der Lippe, Anya (2020): "Gothicism", in: McFarlane, Anna et al. (eds.): *The Routledge Companion to Cyberpunk Culture*, London: Routledge, pp. 264–272.
- Jameson, Fredric (1991): *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Durham: Duke University Press.
- Laidler, John (2019): "High tech is watching you", in: *The Harvard Gazette* / <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2019/03/harvard-professor-says-surveillance-capitalism-is-undermining-democracy/>.
- Lamia Kitsune (2021): "Cyberpunk 2077 Johnny Silverhand's Campaign Speech" in: *YouTube* / https://youtu.be/OQyavYwlfSc?si=Of8qd2CE16bXubl_.
- Latham, Rob (2020): "Literary Precursors", in: McFarlane, Anna et al. (eds.): *The Routledge Companion to Cyberpunk Culture*, London: Routledge, pp. 7–14.
- Marx, Karl / Engels, Friedrich (1848): *Manifest der Kommunistischen Partei*, London: Bildungs-Gesellschaft für Arbeiter.

- McFarlane, Anna et al. (2020): “Cyberpunk as Cultural Formation”, in: McFarlane, Anna et al. (eds.): *The Routledge Companion to Cyberpunk Culture*, London: Routledge, pp. 1–3.
- Niven, Alex (2014): “Introduction” in: Fisher, Mark (ed.): *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*, Hampshire: Zero Books, pp. xiii–xxviii.
- Perlow, Jason (2024): “AI just gave us the Star Trek farewell we always wanted—watch it here” in: *ZDnet* / <https://www.zdnet.com/article/ai-just-gave-us-the-star-trek-farewell-we-always-wanted-watch-it-here/>.
- Rehak, Bob (2003): “Playing at Being: Psychoanalysis and the Avatar” in: Wolf, Mark J.P. / Peron, Bernard (eds.): *The Video Game Theory Reader*, London: Routledge, pp. 103–127.
- Shaviro, Steven (2005): “The Singularity is Here”, in: *shaviro.com* / <http://www.shaviro.com/Othertexts/Singularity.pdf>.
- Schmeink, Lars (2019): “Cyberpunk’s Commodification of Bodies”, in: *larsschmeink.de* / <http://larsschmeink.de/?p=3175>.
- Schmeink, Lars (2016): *Biopunk Dystopias. Genetic Engineering, Society and Science-Fiction*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.
- Schmeink, Lars (2020): “Digital Effects in Cinema”, in: McFarlane, Anna et al. (eds.): *The Routledge Companion to Cyberpunk Culture*, London: Routledge, pp. 134–143.
- Strangelove, Michael (2005): *The Empire of the Mind: Digital Piracy and the Anti-Capitalist Movement*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Tassi, Paul (2025): “The UK’s Internet Age Verification Is Being Bypassed By Death Stranding 2, Garry’s Mod”, in: *Forbes* / <https://www.forbes.com/sites/paultassi/2025/07/31/the-uks-internet-age-verification-is-being-bypassed-by-death-stranding-2-garrys-mod/>.
- The Matrix* (The Wachowskis, 1999).
- Žižek, Slavoj (2011): *How to Read Lacan*, London: Granta Books. Kindle version.

Illustrations

Figure 1: Screenshot from *Cyberpunk 2077* taken by the author.

Figure 2: “The Matrix (1999) [4K]”, in: *movie-screenscaps.com* / <https://movie-screenscaps.com/the-matrix-1999-4k/page/58#foobox-1/124/matrix4k-movie-screenscaps.com-10385.jpg?ssl=1>.

Figure 3: “The Matrix (1999) [4K]”, in: *movie-screenscaps.com* / <https://movie-screenscaps.com/the-matrix-1999-4k/page/18#foobox-1/120/matrix4k-movie-screenscaps.com-3181.jpg?ssl=1>.