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This thesis seeks to understand how interactive representations of the science fiction staple, the cyborg, create possibilities for embodiment and queering. The cyborg is positioned as a theory by Donna J. Haraway to explore the expansive opportunities to surpass gender binaries by embracing technological adaptation to human forms. I push this concept further to determine how gender is perceived and performed in imagined sci-fi futures. My research focuses on the practice of embracing cyborgian technology through interactive play in role-playing games within the science fiction subgenre, cyberpunk. In examining the works, *Cyberpunk Red* (a table-top role-playing game) and *Cyberpunk 2077* (a role-playing video game), I interrogate the potential for the cyborg to be queered through collaborative and interactive play. By delving into the history and structure of role-playing games along with the themes of the cyberpunk genre, I reflect on the queer potential that this media provides to players and audiences.

QUEERING THE CYBORG IN CYBERPUNK ROLE-PLAYING GAMES

by

Meg Oslund

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Approved by

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Professor Faye Stewart.
Committee Chair

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to the cyborg writers that inspire me to explore critical thinking in popular culture: Adrienne Shaw, Stefan Kriek, Mike Pondsmith, Sophie from mars, and the foundational Donna J. Haraway. I also give special thanks to my thesis committee and chair for providing me with constructive feedback: Faye Stewart, Sarah Cervenak, and Sam Harlow. I also wish to thank my supportive friend and colleague, Lane McClaine-Rowe, for their input, edits, and collaboration. I thank my cyberpunks, who created inspiring queer futures with me: Vale, Vega, Soma, Fix, and Flipper. And I thank my partner, Tom Prendergast, without whom this project would never have reached fruition.

This thesis written by Meg Oslund has been approved by the following committee of the

Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Committee Chair

                                                          Professor Faye Stewart

Committee Members

                                                          Doctor Sarah Cervenak

                                                          Professor Sam Harlow

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CHAPTER I: AN INTRODUCTION

"The cyborg is our ontology; it gives us our politics. The cyborg is a condensed image of both imagination and material reality, the two joined centers structuring any possibility of historical transformation…the cyborg is a creature in a post-gender world"
– Donna J. Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto"[1]

Donna Haraway captures the vision of the feminist cyborg in her 1991 work, *"A Cyborg Manifesto"*, connecting the creature to "both imagination and material reality"[2]. The cyborg is a combination of technology and humanity– a blending of predetermined expectations naturalized by society and potential to blur and queer the boundaries that contain them. A cyborg is a technological staple of the science fiction genre, composed of high-tech aesthetics that craft a depiction of our future as a fusion of human and cyber society. There are copious examples of the cyborg in contemporary society. Technological adaptations like prosthetic limbs, metal hip implants, pace makers, cell phones, airpods, and even glasses present a blending of human and machine for the purpose of improving functionality for people. As an interactive relationship, the machine and body form a techno-body constructed for enhancement. This blurring, or queering, is tangible through collaboration between feminist actors to forge new paths past the heteronormative material with which they are faced. Cyborg history stems from warcrafts and capitalist machines (i.e. tanks, gas masks, steroids, guns), forming new methods of domination as well as liberation, the interaction between feminist, ant-racist, and anti-ableist actors and technology is paramount in making the cyborg a queer and collaborative creature.

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[1] Haraway, Donna Jeanne. "A Cyborg Manifesto." Essay. In *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, 150. New York: Routledge, 1991.
[2] Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto", 150.

The cyborg is established in science fiction work, the cyberpunk subgenre specifically, as something to be feared and admired. She is both human and technology, which presents a troubling focus in this genre for the tumultuous relationship humans hold with the artificial intelligence they create. Haraway positions the cyborg in an imagined future of a "post-gender world". She sees the cyborg as a creature able to escape gender conventions, but still genders the cyborg using "she/her" pronouns. I also gender the cyborg as feminine, but as a way to position the cyborg as a creature that can and does get gendered in the cyberpunk genre. While she is able to disrupt gender binaries through her ability to blend and blur societal boundaries, she can also perform gender as an act of agency. Performing non-binary or gender fluid identities are within her bounds, I just chose to gender her as feminine to display how normative gender terms might be co-opted for transformation.

Haraway's cyborg cannot ignore the gender trappings of past societies because they are still implicit in how the cyborg is addressed and the agency she holds. My approach differs from Haraway in that I find the gendering of the cyborg in an imagined reality to present the possibility of queerness through queer futures. Haraway's blurred lines of gender exploration through the cyborg offer interactive, gendered moments in imagined realities. Her theory behind the extended imagination of a "post-gender world" negates gender performance as a potentially queer endeavor that frames futures within the realm of possibility.

The purpose of this project is to analyze how the imagined realities of role-playing games, specifically cyberpunk role-playing games, queer the cyborg through interactive and collaborative play orchestrated in a future world that offers more queer potential than

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Haraway's "post-gender world". I study the interactive elements of games like *Cyberpunk Red*, a table-top role-playing game (TTRPG) that emerges in a cyberpunk future with a variety of customization opportunities that create pathways to embodiment for players in a world grounded in capitalist critique of our current society.[3]

I use *Cyberpunk Red* (*CP Red*) as an example of how the cyborg can be queered through collaborative and interactive gameplay in and out of the game's world. I contrast and interrogate the queer potential of another RPG, *Cyberpunk 2077*, for its lack of choice and agency for players.[4] *Cyberpunk 2077* (*CP 2077*) is a role-playing video game (RPVG) that focuses on a specific story with allowances for divergence and player interaction, but only in predetermined methods instigated by a heteronormative developer, CD Projekt Red. Both of these games have queer potential, it is just a matter of what gets lost in the process of creating a cyberpunk media to which players can engage and relate.

The Lost Potential of a Post-Gender World

Haraway insists that the cyborg is "a creature in a post-gender world", mapping the feminist cyborg body onto a world that is not tied to societal constraints.[5] In this sense, the cyborg does not keep remnants of patriarchal domination from her past. I hold tension with Haraway's work because I see the cyborg in a world "without genesis" as disruptive of the progress in feminist work; I find her instead to be in a "world without end" as a continuation and exploration of what is to come of feminist and post-feminist work.[6]

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[3] Pondsmith, Mike, CD Projekt Red. *Cyberpunk Red*. 1988, 2020.
[4] CD Projekt Red. *Cyberpunk 2077*. 2020.
[5] Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto", 150.
[6] Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto", 150.

Haraway states that the cyborg may exist through both of these worlds; however, I disagree.

I see the potential of a world without end in posthumanist theory, an idea which has a strong presence in the cyberpunk genre, proposed by theorist Stefan Kriek. As Kriek alludes, posthumanism is "a merging of biology and technology to a point where the human becomes something other than human".[7] Posthumanism depicts an image of humanity without humans at the center of innovation or societal frameworks. In most science fiction stories that implement posthumanist theory, the framework is largely dystopian, seeing the end of humans as the end of society. In cyberpunk work, however, there are endless possibilities as to how a world could continue without the influence of humanity. Rather, the technological influences frame the story as an act of futuristic fantasy– something just far enough from our worldview to find it improbable, but progressive enough that the story seems positively fixed in a potential future.

I disagree with the post-gender framework that Haraway narrates, as I believe it negates the possibility to queer the cyborg body. If the cyborg exists in a "post-gender world", gender conventions and heteronormative structures are no longer relevant. This concept ushers in more imagination than reality, and the cyborg is a blend of *both* aspects for a reason. Grounding the cyborg in fantasy and reality opens up opportunities for queer representation in futures that could extend our own. She is already present in our current reality in many ways; the fantasy elements that derive from the cyberpunk genre allow for these cybernetic (pertaining to biological and technological symbiosis) components to

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[7] Kriek, Stefan. "The Technobody: Posthumanism as a Utopian/dystopian Enclave in Cyberpunk and Postcyberpunk Science Fiction", 110. Doctoral Thesis. University of Johannesburg Press: Johannesburg, 2017.

become more powerful[8]. The cyborg exists as a counter-culture to human-centered norms. By human-centered norms, I refer to able-bodiedness, physical attractiveness, "natural" aesthetics, and bodily representations of societal expectations. In cyberpunk works, the cyborg offers people who relate to supportive technology in their daily lives the chance to see themselves as the new normal, a contrast to the ideologies around disability studies in current normative discourse. The imagined worlds of cyberpunk ground gender and bodily autonomy in futures of embodiment, which does not ignore the problematic history of the cyborg, but instead revels in the progress she has made in an accessible world.

The "post-gender world" is more fictitious than real, imagining a society within a vacuum rather than a society that comes with history and chooses to push past the work of its predecessors. In this sense, the technology of gender is adapted rather than thrown out altogether. This technology is *queered* to display the possibilities of gender within high-tech society, to examine what role gender plays in a more mechanically driven world, and to present a reflection of our current society's arguably less queer timeline.[9]

Humans at the forefront, by Haraway's point, reflects "man-kind", rather than a history of more inclusive feminist progress. While Haraway states that mankind's unity should have more feminist and Marxist revolutionary motivations, she recognizes that there is an "oppositional consciousness" to consider when instigating collective action. Oppositional consciousness, proposed by Chela Sandoval, encourages a distinction between marginalized communities as a unified agency, while fortifying intersecting

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[8] Kriek, "The Technobody: Posthumanism as a Utopian/dystopian Enclave in Cyberpunk and Postcyberpunk Science Fiction", 13.

[9] Muñoz, José Esteban. "Queerness as Horizon: Utopian Hermeneutics in the Face of Gay Pragmatism. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. NYU Press, 2009.

ideological frameworks towards collaborative revolution.[10] By challenging these ideologies from within, identity and agency become far more crucial to capturing revolutionary praxis in fiction. The post-gender world does not ever truly take shape within the framework of oppositional consciousness because it disowns these unifying identities in the effort to transcend the problematic history associated with identity markers. In this case, there are potentially few realistic outcomes derived from post-gender worlds in cyberpunk fiction, as the revolutionary work within would not inclusively represent all the progress of our real world — it would only exist in fantasy.

An Introduction to the Cyberpunk Genre and Selected Media

Cyberpunk, as a genre, imagines the cyborg as a form of technical adaptation to a dystopian future. The cyborg is crafted from both human and cyberware parts, instilling the transformative themes of the genre through integral characters/creatures. Bodies adapt to form purposeful or aesthetic physical transformations that can do anything from automatically changing hair or eye color to "jacking into the Net" to perform heists and filter through confidential information.[11] Cyberpunk is a subgenre of science fiction that stems from the New Wave of the 1960s to 70s, with Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* setting the stage for many works to come.[12] The book follows a bounty hunter searching for androids in a post-apocalyptic, nuclear wasteland of San Francisco. The book's premise was later adapted by director Ridley Scott to make the film, *Blade Runner*.[13] The narratives at play in this book and

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[10] Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto", 155.

[11] Pondsmith, *CP Red*, 197.

[12] Dick, Philip K. *Do androids dream of electric sheep?* Los Angeles, CA: Boom, 2011.

[13] Scott, Ridley. *Blade Runner*. United States: Warner Bros., 1982.

film delve into the moral dilemma of who is truly human, and what humanity becomes after so much of society is lost to nuclear war.

Cyberpunk can be defined as a bridge between the technical and the human. The "cyber" in cyberpunk refers to cybernetics, a scientific study of "the communication and control systems in animals and machines", whereas the punk aspect lies in the setting and social commentary at play in the storytelling.[14] The setting is a dystopian near-future that highlights moral and ethical quandaries (similar to K. Dick's work) of society through the lack of humanity evoked in space and its human characters. The tone is bleak and the narratives are explicit in their disdain for multinational corporations and authority.[15] An important note is that cyberpunk media exists traditionally in a not-too-distant future of *our* world, giving the stories an edge of dread and reality to them.

The cyborg is illustrated through expressive technical forms of embodiment–whirring motors under the skin, blaring red eyes that don't blink, and weaponry that emerges from arms, legs, chest, anywhere there is space. These represent ways of being that tie the material body to cyberspace and to cyberpunk storytelling. The material body is framed (and queered) in cyberpunk through the cyborg and its exploration of different modes of embodiment through technology, sexuality, and gender. The material body, as Judith Butler defines it, follows the movement and actions of a body that regulates and imposes heteronormativity through gender performance.[16] This bodily formation is important in theorizing the feminist cyborg within cyberpunk media.

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[14] Kriek, "The Technobody: Posthumanism as a Utopian/dystopian Enclave in Cyberpunk and Postcyberpunk Science Fiction", 13.

[15] Kriek, "The Technobody: Posthumanism as a Utopian/dystopian Enclave in Cyberpunk and Postcyberpunk Science Fiction", 15.

[16] Butler, Judith. *Bodies that Matter*, 235. Routledge: New York, 1993.

There are a variety of cyberpunk media examples found in film, books, and television, however, I will be studying interactive media that conveys a direct link between the work and the participant to show how they are embodied through multiple layers of technology and play. The cyborg is created by human society, but she quickly surpasses/sidesteps the sociopolitical motivations of that society in pursuit of humanity beyond mankind. The technology-driven future is both a fear and motivation created by contemporary and historical capitalism, and as such represents a symbolic tension between humans and machines in cyberpunk stories. There might be humans in the stories, but they are painted as obsolete by comparison. In *CP Red*, people who do not modify their bodies or mind with any tech (some who completely reject it) are known as "neo-luddites", a reference to the 19th century group under the same title who rejected textile machinery.[17] This terminology is seen as derogatory, as to not be outfitted with the latest technology can drastically reduce chances of survival. As is, the cyborg transcends the limited scopes of gender binaries, but I think that cyberpunk representations in interactive role-playing games offer gendered embodiment in queer, participatory ways that allow people to feel represented in media.

In this study, I examine how gender, technology, and embodiment interact as cyberpunk interactive media queers the theory of the feminist cyborg, and the importance of interactive media as a method of technological embodiment. Haraway's influential cyborg presents her as a product of human aspirations while shifting the focus from creation to exploration of the material body and her gender performance, which is detailed in Judith Butler's work. The cyborg in cyberpunk interactive spaces offers potential for queer futurity. The interactive imaginary of the

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[17] Pondsmith, *CP Red*, 236.

games I discuss presents a queer future through gender embodiment and transformative technology.

Cyberpunk is a fairly niche genre of science fiction, owing a great deal of that to its more staunchly political and anti-capitalist media representations. The "punk" in cyberpunk harkens some and distances others. That being said, since the more popular releases of games (like *CP 2077*) and popular films like *Blade Runner*, *The Matrix*[18], and most recently the Academy-Award winning film *Everything Everywhere All At Once*[19], the nuances of this genre have grown more accepted. Still, knowing that some might not understand the groundwork at stake in this study before theorizing, I will give some overview of the concept of TTRPGs, the specific media I discuss in later chapters, as well as how they connect through interactive measures.

While Haraway's work explains the cyborg's origins and motivations, I believe that the cyborg can be queered through moments of embodiment found in cyberpunk stories where characters transform to fight conventionality, not just emerge through technological measures but also through societal reconstruction and imagination. The science fiction genre, cyberpunk allows for this transformation through cybernetic connections, anti-capitalist motivations, and technological embodiment. These cyberpunk concepts are queered through the added function of interactive gameplay offered in table-top role-playing games and video games. Through this cyberpunk media, the cyborg is both *in* the games (as a character) and orchestrating the game (as a player), enabling gender performance and queerness in a multi-faceted experience.

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[18] Wachowski, Lily & Lana. *The Matrix*. United States. Warner Bros., 1999.

[19] Kwan, Daniel, Scheinert, Daniel. *Everything Everywhere All At Once*. Film. A24, 2022.

The cyborg, a being past gender conventionality, challenges said conventionality through technological transformation. She is not one thing or the other, but a blending of what is real and what is fiction in such a way that gender becomes shapeable in her grasp. She mechanizes dehumanizing techniques that shift assumptions of what "being human" truly means, and who is marginalized by conventional humanity. In this, she can both challenge human nature for its historically racist, sexist, and ableist definition of what may be deemed "human", while also potentially harboring those perceptions to enact an almost genocidal eradication of any humanity (e.g. *The Terminator*).[20] The "seductions of organic wholeness" are not necessary in a post-gender world, along with the gendered norms that prescribe their importance.[21] Haraway dissects organic wholeness as a motivation for naturalized unity, something inspirational to man, but not cyborg. This wholeness, or unity, relates to an "identification with nature in the Western sense" that the cyborg does not need to prove its meaning-making or its purpose.[22] In Haraway's "post-gender world", what the reader sees as real is pushed past its limits to a sci-fi future.

Technological embodiment thrives in science fiction worlds, and participants become immersed in the mechanics of gender and sexuality presented through interactive media sources like cyberpunk role-playing games. Players are able to create characters using technology to perform gender in material and imaginative ways. They can embody these characters through role-playing amongst others, queering participatory agency through both a separation and connection to their character's actions. The setting and

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[20] Cameron, James. *The Terminator*. Film. Paramount Pictures, 1984.
[21] Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto", 150.
[22] Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto", 150.

themes of cyberpunk offer opportunities for queer utopia, and crafters of the game and the game's sourcebooks interact in very queer ways.

Time is integral to the genre of cyberpunk as it frames the aesthetics and setting of the world. The cyborg reflects futuristic imaginings of the body, and holds a strong connection to the setting through her techno-body. Through her technical transformations and material body, she is crafted as a product of her time, engendered by the society from which she derives. Because cyberpunk settings are depicted in the future, a time not yet seen, time and societal norms are generally less linear and lean more on fiction and performance. By that logic, gender performance and conventionality have less restrictions, and can therefore become more adaptable and queer. Time as a socially constructed element of both reality and fiction influences how the cyborg is incorporated into the genre of cyberpunk. Cyberpunk exists in a fictional time, typically set in a not-too-distant future, yet containing satirical implications based on contemporary ideologies. Time transforms in fictional spaces like these, leading more for the imagination of the audience rather than the constructed linear passage to which we are so accustomed.

Science fiction imagines our future through the technological framework and societal norms of our current timeline. From that distinction, our ontology is crafted in a time and space not too distant from our own, but with exaggerated results of our current society. In *CP Red*, the future is set in a post-nuclear horizon where the seawater and rain glow with an iridescence caused by the nuclear fallout and climate catastrophe. This example hits closer to home as our planet is indeed under great climate peril, and nuclear war is an ever-constant threat of global proportions. As the fiction reflects reality in an almost satirical way, so too does the cyborg represent posthuman politics through the

queering of what humanity means in our reality. I see Haraway's transformative elements of the cyborg (the mechanics of shifting from "human" to "something else") as a queering of the material body and gender norms. Themes found within the science fiction subgenre of cyberpunk coordinate with this queering to portray a queer utopia through admittedly dystopian settings.

Queering the Cyborg

I use the term "queering" to question how queer/queerness is *used* in what I believe to be a historically heteronormative space, and how the genre elements of cyberpunk are well-suited for a queer framework. It functions in many ways throughout this thesis as a noun, a verb, and an adjective. Queering functions as a verb to "seek to trouble, to undo or unfix categories", as Wendy Peters states.[23] Likewise, to queer is to "challenge dominance of heterosexist discourse" in order to create something more inclusive. [24] I use this verb form in order to express the action of queering that occurs through interactive gameplay. To queer in role-playing games is to create space for queer people and narratives in heteronormative spaces. I seek to uncover how these games allow players to do just that. Alternatively, I use queer as a noun and adjective to explain the possibilities of gameplay and fictional worlds. I refer to José Esteban Muñoz's definition of queerness as "performative because it is not simply a being but a doing for and toward the future", characterizing the queer possibilities of role-playing games and imagined futures in cyberpunk stories.[25] Eve Sedgwick's definition of queerness is concise in its openness,

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[23] Peters, Wendy. "Queer Identities. Rupturing Identity Categories and Negotiating Meanings of Queer." *Resources for Feminist Research* 32, no. 3-4 (2007): 202.

[24] Beemyn, Genny, and Michele J. Eliason, eds. *Queer Studies: A Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, & Transgender Anthology*. New York: New York University Press, 1996.

[25] Muñoz, "Queerness as Horizon: Utopian Hermeneutics in the Face of Gay Pragmatism", 1.

stating that the word 'queer' is "the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlapses, and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically".[26] Sedgwick and Muñoz identify the unifying element of queerness that I find most influential in cyborgian theory—the possibility and future of queer life. Cyborg beings persist in futures that they create, in fictional worlds grounded in real sociopolitical discourse. I use these definitions of queer to amplify the agency players have in creating cyborg futures for themselves, framing their own narratives. I use the cyberpunk genre and role-playing games to queer the cyborg based on player interpretation and creation.

Just as I queer the cyberpunk genre, I queer the cyborg through an exploration into gender embodiment. Embodiment is defined in a variety of ways. For this thesis, I focus on Anne Balsamo's definition of technical embodiment as a postmodern understanding of how the body *works* in relation to how it is interpreted by society through identity markers such as race, gender, sexuality, etc.[27] As I interpret cyborgian theory, I tend to use "technological embodiment" in place of "technical" as examples of this embodiment in cyborgian theory are commonly found within cybernetic aesthetics. I also refer to gender embodiment as Zachary DuBois, Jae Puckett, and S.J. Langer define it, "individually unique and inclusive of the body, behavior, and social treatment".[28] Combining these two definitions, I can frame the cyborg through technical and technological forms of embodiment. Haraway notes that the cyborg is a "fiction", a creation to depict "the female

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[26] Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Tendencies*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993.

[27] Balsamo, Anne. "Forms of Technological Embodiment: Reading the Body in Contemporary Culture", 282. Chapter. *Cyberspace/Cyberbodies/Cyberpunk*. Sage: London, 1996.

[28] DuBois, L. Zachary, Jae A. Puckett, and S.J. Langer. "Development of the Gender Embodiment Scale: Trans Masculine Spectrum." *Transgender Health* 7, no. 4 (August 1, 2022), 287-91.

experience".[29] This depiction embodies not only the female experience, but the gendered experience of being othered, and how that affects interpretations of the body through technical and mechanical measures.

As a personal example of this interpretation, I have a hormonal disease called PCOS which causes me to have an excess of hair in areas that society deems improper or wrong for women. If I grow hair on my chin, I shave or wax to retain the smoothness that is expected of cisgender women in my society. I understand that I do not *have* to do this, and I have had moments of exhaustion with this situation, but overall, I feel engendered through my facial hair. I get worried that people will perceive my gender in ways I'm uncomfortable recognizing myself. I know that some transgender women take the same hormonal medication I do to maintain higher levels of estrogen, and they have to deal with people's perceptions of other gender norms alongside this. My shaving is a form of technical and gendered embodiment for me. I use tools to modify my body and perform gender by my definition, knowing full well how that is implicated by society's definition as well.

Embodiment is a crucial element of cyberpunk and cyborgian theory and varies in forms. Embodiment is how a being performs a projection of themselves through organic or inorganic means. Gender embodiment is the connection between a being's gender identity and the way that identity is framed as a performance of selfhood. In terms of the cyborg, both gender and technological embodiment merge to bring something new to our ontology, as Haraway states.[30] The cyborg's existence still incurs fear of the unknown and a fear of

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[29] Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto", 149.

[30] Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto", 150.

power beyond man. The connection between man and machine becomes tenuous rather than supportive. Haraway's theory of the gendered cyborg might equally incur this fear of the unknown as it is crafted on the margins of human existence and society.

I see technology as transformative and queer, offering modes of embodiment that surpass what is physically human, forming new imaginings of the material body. Technology becomes a tool for gender performance, and gender can be framed through shifting societal norms that do not privilege conventional human norms (e.g. able-bodiedness, cisgender, or whiteness). Contemporary norms are queered by the cyberpunk genre and the interactive space of gameplay. As cyborgian methods transcend societal norms of our reality, they are found most at home in the genre of cyberpunk.

Gender embodiment is not always as straightforward as the construction, or reconstruction of the body via aesthetic enhancement through clothing or medical procedures to present a gender outwardly. Gender embodiment can also happen through everyday moments that can affirm a gender performance for someone, like choosing what to wear in the morning, or a stranger correctly assuming your pronouns. These moments do not need to represent gender norms, but they can transform modes of embodiment through gender performance and representations of the material body. These gendered moments are present through role-playing in TTRPGs and RPVGs as they allow players to perform gender from their own interpretation as well as the interpretations of the other players and game mechanics. As players interpret gender in new and differing ways, they craft a sort of queer utopia in which gender and sexuality are malleable by the players' collaborative measures, not strictly through contemporary societal norms.

The cyborg is queered in a cyberpunk genre study, highlighting how gender and genre conventions intermingle to craft an image of queerness through the imagined world and its characters. The queered imagining does not move away from gender performance as a cyborg but embraces new manifestations of what gender means through technology. The cyborg remains a gendered being, the technological embodiment only proving to expand her expression of gender and fluidity. Futuristic depictions of technological and gendered embodiment queer the cyborg as they pair with the setting of most cyberpunk works.

The queer utopia of the cyborg is a concept that leans into queer future through positive coexistence with technology, a blending rather than a denial.[31] I refer to José Esteban Muñoz's definition of queer utopia, which emerges through the "concrete possibility of another world" that makes openings for queer life instead of the reality of our contemporary society that regularly enforces queer death. Muñoz's theory of queer utopia relates to queer futurity as it promotes a hopeful progression of queerness over time. Queer futurity maps queerness onto a future of possibility, an "insistence on potentiality" that makes the future of queerness as inevitable as that of the cyborg.[32] The queer utopia captured through the feminist cyborg promotes a positive correlation with technology and how it can be utilized for queer and gender embodiment. This utopian world differs from the notion of Haraway's imagined future world, a "post-gender world". Gender is a complicated construction that has the ability to confine and free people from normative

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[31] Muñoz, "Queerness as Horizon: Utopian Hermeneutics in the Face of Gay Pragmatism", 7.
[32] Muñoz, "Queerness as Horizon: Utopian Hermeneutics in the Face of Gay Pragmatism, 7.

behavior. The cyborg is capable of adapting gender for the use of embodiment, a queering experience that has more possibilities than Haraway could have imagined.

Role-Playing and the Interactive Makeup of the Cyborg

RPGs and cyberpunk genre stories are historically subcultural, with mainstream fame being a recent phenomenon due in large part to the show, *Stranger Things*.[33] In recent years, the realm of TTRPGs have shifted to form more inclusive dynamics both through the creators and players of these games. Depending on the game, TTRPGs offer different ways for players to engage with the world and each other in storytelling. Players begin by creating a character that they use as a source of statistics and characterization for how they make choices in the game. Players take on the role of their character, acting how they imagined their character would act. The storytelling is mostly done by the GM, as they are the keeper of the game's plot, but players can "flavor" their moves and actions to fit the role they are trying to play. I find these player-motivated situations present a variety of gender embodiment and performance.

The characterization that the players do in TTRPGs is *performance*, and as they craft their own narratives, they also perform gender through technological (gameplay) modes of embodiment. Butler discusses this embodiment through performance when discussing drag, in which she states "in the place of the law of heterosexual coherence, we see sex and gender denaturalized by means of performance which avows their distinctness and dramatizes the cultural mechanism of their fabricated unity".[34] In a way, embodiment through drag and role-play scenarios are tantamount as they both perform gender in meaningful, occasionally exaggerated ways in order to reclaim agency over "cultural mechanisms". The line of

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[33] Duffer, Ross & Matt. *Stranger Things*. TV Series. Netflix, 2016.

[34] Butler, Judith. "Bodily Inscriptions, Performative Subversions", 418. Chapter. *Gender Trouble*. Routledge: New York, 1990.

demarcation for gender and sex are blurred and queered through drag performance, a similar case

for role-playing of a different sort, TTRPGs. Performance in TTRPGs, and specifically in *CP*

Red, stems from an aesthetic performance as well as a deeper understanding of the player's

character. In these games, players are able to escape the heteronormative posturing of our reality

to a unifying imagining of queerness through technical embodiment and performance.

The character is a cyborg, existing in and out of the reality of the game through

collaborative gameplay that is beyond physical capability. Players perform gender or queerness

in potentially incomprehensible ways in our reality, that only become clear once thrust into the

fictional world with imaginative gender distinctions. Cyborgs might come in the form of orcs or

witches, even potentially human if the player chooses. The main distinction being the interplay

of character and player–how that embodiment is displayed through technical means (pen and

paper) to craft an image of the cyborg that is queered through collaborative, unifying

imagination. Collaborative customization transgresses boundaries similarly to Haraway's

formation of the cyborg, instilling feminist partnerships through player-player and player-game

master discussion and interplay. TTRPG stories offer more chances for player embodiment than

other non-interactive cyberpunk fictions, and *CP Red* is an important example of this.

CP 2077, on the other hand, displays queer potential in how it is structured as a RPVG,

however the narrative and developmental decisions made by CD Projekt Red leave more to be

desired. In *CP 2077*, player choice begins at character creation, stemming from the

customization of a seemingly inclusive cyborg body creator. From there, player choice is

implemented through dialogue boxes (ways for players to choose a line of dialogue offered by

the game), as well actions they might perform in combat or interactions with the world. I argue

that these interactions and opportunities for embodiment are limited to the scope of CD Projekt

Red's ideological pursuits, differing from the potential found in *CP Red*. While the feminist

cyborg is present in this game, there are few collaborative ways to queer her in this cyberspace.

CP 2077 came out in the year 2020 and has since been synonymous with disaster, both in terms

of critical reception and game mechanics. The story of *CP 2077* takes place in the same world as

CP Red with some notable characters from the source material included as well. This integration

of characters and world-building from Mike Pondsmith's work is left to the developer's

interpretation of what cyberpunk looks like to them. This led to a variety of scandals involving

how gender, sexuality, and race were portrayed in CD Projekt Red's imagined future.

As an RPVG, the game is marketed as a single-player open-world game for the story,

placing the player in the eyes of the character they create. This both adds to and neglects

potential embodiment through gameplay in that the player is imagined through the body of the

character, but the character they have created through the character creation page is almost never

clearly visible in gameplay at all. I mention these mechanical and external factors of *CP 2077*'s

failings because I think that they emerge from more broader issues that reflect their performance

as an RPVG. These games are virtual instead of TTRGs real, physical gameplay. They create an

image of an imagined world, similar to that of TTRPGs, however they are visually and

conceptually formed by an external developer, leaving little room for player customization in

terms of world-building. The creativity comes into play through storytelling, actions, and

character creation that many RPVGs offer. Within these set-worlds, players may pursue different

life paths, romantic partners, or even create a space for themselves within the boundaries of the

worlds. In most of these online games, players can queer their characters through their

relationships as well as their gender performance. Gender is a performative choice throughout

role-playing games, and the ability for players to embody that choice contains multitudes in these spaces.

The cyberpunk works that I am studying are connected by the influential fictional world created by game developer Mike Pondsmith. It is his represented cyberpunk media that I engage with and relate to Haraway's theory of the cyborg. His work, along with player/creator interpretations of it, help frame the spectrum of embodiment through interactive gameplay. A character's body may be manipulated through the use of cyberware, allowing for their identity and existence in cyberspace to be queered on a material and performative level. If you include the fact that the interpretation of the character may shift based on player choice and action, players have multiple opportunities to negotiate queer experiences in their interactive play. I explore how interactive gameplay offers a more direct influence on the gender experience of characters and players through game mechanics and roleplay that surpass less participatory modes of cyberpunk media.

Gender and the gaming community have a rather difficult past and contemporary connection to interactive spaces based on previous large-scale harassment of women players and creators (Gamergate, as it was called). Many online creators have discussed the prevalence of misogyny in gaming circles online, which culminated in a massive attack on one game reporter, Anita Sarkeesian, who received constant threats and denouncements from an aggressive online audience (of mostly men).[35] Sarkeesian ultimately left her position as a games journalist due to the harassment she received, and only recently was she able to open up about the pervasive issue of toxic masculinity in online and offline

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[35] Farokhmanesh, Megan. "Anita Sarkeesian Hates Talking About Gamergate-but She Has To." Wired, November 10, 2022.

gaming. Women and gender fluid content producers in online spaces, like Jessie Gender,

note a resurgence of that feeling nowadays, especially in communities of video game

players, incorporating gender fluid people and trans women to the ire of the internet.[36]

Despite this hostility, the actual gameplay of TTRPGs and RPVGs offers fruitful

interaction with gender performance and queerness, creating more space for embodiment

through game mechanics.

  The possibility for hostile or problematic performance is always a variable in these

games, however the customization involved in playing these games, along with the

collaboration embedded in the storytelling, allow for more inclusive and queer

communities to thrive in ways they might not elsewhere. In cyberpunk games, players are

asked to put societal norms to question as the "punk" elements of the game paints these

norms as obsolete and part of the system that is antagonistic to their goals. In this space,

players are able to queer their cyborg and perpetuate personal narratives they might not

have before.

<div align="center">

Methodology and Positionality

</div>

  The complexity of gender through gameplay technology is something I seek to

interpret further as it relates to players and their personal embodiment. I use this media

source to initiate a conversation about how these games may present issues in terms of

inclusivity and embodiment. Transformations in this RPVG live within the finite walls of

CD Projekt RED's visual imaginings. Players may customize a character model, how their

character's techno-body is interpreted in the game, but the story is rigid with few options

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[36] "Jessie Gender". *Trans Bullies, Streamers, and Right-Wing Tactics*. YouTube, 2023.

for deviation. I will explore how this rigidity changes the way player embodiment occurs in the game. *CP 2077* crafts more visual representations of cyberpunk as an aesthetic. The game highlights the neon imagery and high-tech style of the genre without emphasizing the discourses that dominate other iterations, positions that authors Stefan Kriek and Anne Balsamo explore in depth.

Opportunities to reflect on Haraway's cyborg and the queering of the cyborg appear in *CP Red* and *CP 2077* through their integrated character creation, interactive gameplay that allows players to embody their characters in a variety of ways, and the storytelling of the cyberpunk genre. This storytelling frames the material body and material reality through imaginative means, allowing the "myth" of the cyborg to be representative of gender queering for players who do not feel they can represent that feeling in their own bodies. The ways in which players may interact with the genre are far more tangible and deliberate, creating a safe space for them to perform gender roles that are meaningful to them. The genre of cyberpunk crafts technical transformations that mirror transformative gendered embodiment in contemporary society. Muscular gun implants on arms, contact lenses, luminescent color-changing wigs, penis pumps, and cybernetic vaginal birth control all represent a form of gender performance in contemporary and future imaginaries. They hold context within both worlds. In this thesis, I use the framework of cyberpunk to queer Haraway's theory of the cyborg further, positioning it in an interactive setting to showcase the possibilities for queer futurity in cyberspace. I explore this cyberspace as it interacts with gender performance, technological embodiment, and material bodies that form meaning from myths.

I position myself as a feminist researcher, but also as a passionate advocate for genre studies. I appreciate both science fiction and RPGs for the nuances that they offer to

queer and feminist work. I will engage with scholars like Haraway and Butler to examine how queerness offers different methods of embodiment in cyberpunk RPG spaces. Haraway's feminist cyborg represents queer future through possibility and adaptation. In cyberpunk spaces, the cyborg is transformed through technology, furthering her adaptability through the genre, as well as through the interactivity available in role-playing games. I use José Esteban Muñoz's definitions of queer future and queer utopia to theorize interactive gameplay through futuristic themes found within the cyberpunk genre. Steven Kriek's posthumanist interpretation of cyberpunk and postcyberpunk round out my discussion of the cyborg and the many political worlds that she inhabits.

Jaakko Stenros and Tanja Sihvonen explain the history of queerness in TTRPGs that I find to be essential to an understanding of gender and technological embodiment through these media sources. To that end, I also allude to Anne Balsamo's insight into the way the material body "works" in society (even imaginary future societies), as well as how embodiment functions in these imagined societies. Adrienne Shaw's *Gaming at the Edge* reflects the effect of role-playing on queering the body and the cyborg. Her work with interactive and collaborative gameplay opens up possibilities for queering through community.

Chapter Descriptions

I organize my findings in the following chapter structure. The queer history and player involvement in gaming spaces are both important elements to introduce my theory and are therefore presented first. I then discuss how these shifts in mechanics and queering of narratives in RPG formats are reflected in *Cyberpunk Red*, as well as how cyberpunk crafts a queer version of the cyborg through interactive forms of media. I move from *Cyberpunk Red*, the TTRPG, to *Cyberpunk 2077*, the RPVG, in order to understand how that different media changes player

choice and interactive play. I also discuss how the storytelling of *Cyberpunk 2077*, as well as how it was created and received, influences the queerness of the game and the cyborg.

I. <u>Unpacking TTRPG Lore and Queering Characters</u>

      I examine how the history of TTRPGs have evolved over time. From problematic and misogynistic beginnings, TTRPGs shifted to become more inclusive through the interactive and collaborative play instigated by players. While game creators and developers continued to favor more exclusive, normative content in source materials, players decided to take matters into their own hands and create worlds within which they could feel embodied. The characters represented through game lore can be archaic at best, and harmful at worst. I offer examples of how these characters are framed in the gaming context, and how these creatures become queered through the customization of players and game masters. I reference the evolution of TTRPGs to contextualize where *CP Red* fits into that historiographical framework. This line of history represents how important the interactive format of TTRPGs are for players, allowing for more inclusive and fluid representation. The technology and narrative work found in TTRPGs allows for the cyborg (player/character) to be queered. The shift in how content is created leads to more technological means for character and player embodiment.

II. *Cyberpunk Red*<u>'s Interactive Gameplay and Queer Cyborgs</u>

      In this chapter, I explore the connections between cyberpunk themes found in *CP Red* and the queerness that can come with embracing those themes as well as TTRPG formats. I expand on the interactive capabilities discussed in chapter one but focus on how these interactive elements are portrayed in *CP Red* gameplay. Through gameplay examples from games, I have orchestrated/played and a game run by *CP Red* creator,

Mike Pondsmith, I examine how the cyborg represents gender and queer moments in play. I unpack how the cyborg body is crafted in transformative ways through an intensive character creation unlike many other TTRPGs in functionality and aesthetics. The combination of these mechanics allows for possible gender performances by characters/players. I refer to Heather Greenhalgh-Spencer along with Anne Balsamo's understanding of the body and how it reflects technological embodiment within *CP Red*. Player choice drastically impacts the storytelling and cyborg imaginary represented in *CP Red*.

José Muñoz's theory of queer futurity influences my discussion of *CP Red*'s imaginative world built upon interactive play and blurring the boundaries of what is or isn't possible. In *CP Red*, the setting of Night City as well as interpretations of the cyborg reflect Haraway's theory of the cyborg through this blurring/queering. I examine the meaning-making found in the source material alongside player interpretations. The synthesis of source books and player interactivity in *CP Red* portray gender embodiment through cybernetic (connection between cyberware/technology and the human) means.

III.   Misrepresentations of Cyborgs and Cyberpunk in *CP 2077*

I examine RPVGs and their innate ability to craft cyborgs in cyberspace. I illustrate how the cyborg is developed in this gaming platform as a contrast the cyborg found within *CP 2077*. She is not at home in this contemporary game, as the cyberpunk setting reads hollow in comparison to other cyberpunk games of the time. I analyze how the structure and interactivity found in RPVGs offer a great deal of player embodiment and opportunities to queer the cyborg, and how that potential is lost in the *CP 2077* game. This game has many issues that range from development to marketing to engagement. I

interrogate how these issues affect the queerness found in the game, and how the cyborg can be queered in this space.

While *CP 2077* takes place in the same narrative world as *CP Red*, the main storyline as well as aesthetics of the game are very much a CD Projekt Red interpretation. Their vision misrepresents cyberpunk themes of anti-capitalist rhetoric and technological transformation (customization), imposing their own ideological pursuits over any potential to queer the dialogues at play. I reflect on how the state of the *CP 2077*'s creation and the substantial lack of "punk" in this cyberpunk game creates a disingenuous interpretation of the genre. I use content creator, Sophie from Mars', critique of the game through a trans feminist and anti-capitalist lens to highlight the pitfalls of CD Projekt RED from development to reception. In exploring the evolution of this RPVG, I position gender and technological embodiment in the virtual world of *CP 2077* (for better or worse).

CHAPTER II: UNPACKING TTRPG LORE AND QUEERING CHARACTERS

"Our capacity for love increases with each person we cross paths with throughout our lives and with each moment we spend with those people. But too often we neglect that part of ourselves in favor of others, and by the time we realize just how important it is, we find ourselves with fewer folks around to practice with. But the seven of you have something that nobody else ever had. Time…Time enough to grow indescribably close. Time enough to, to learn how to care for each other, how to allow yourselves to be cared for." – Griffin McElroy, *The Adventure Zone*[37]

The Adventure Zone

I first heard of TTRPGs through one of my favorite podcasts, *The Adventure Zone (TAZ).*[38] The podcast narrates the gameplay of the McElroy family, a trio of brothers and their father, as they navigate through the twists and turns of a *Dungeons and Dragons* TTRPG story. The podcast started in 2014, and all of the members had little to no prior knowledge of how to play a TTRPG.[39] In many ways, their initial start began with more collaborative storytelling than strict game mechanics. Improvising stories and dialogue came naturally to them as they had been doing it for years through their comedy podcast, *My Brother, My Brother, and Me*.[40] Their comedic style and storytelling endeared me to TTRPGs and what they could offer in terms of characterization. It was comforting to know that understanding the material and world-building would come with time; the main function of this media is a *game*, and so the desired outcome is primarily to have fun. Even as I densely research the complicated history of TTRPGs, media like *TAZ* grounds these games in cooperative fantasy.

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[37] McElroy, Griffin. "Ep. 64 The Stolen Century - Chapter Five". *The Adventure Zone*. Podcast Audio. June 1, 2017.

[38] McElroy, Griffin et la. *The Adventure Zone*. Podcast. Maximum Fun. 2014.

[39] McElroys, *The Adventure Zone*, Ep. 1: Here There Be Gerblins - Chapter One.

[40] McElroy, Justin et la. *My Brother, My Brother, and Me*. Maximum Fun. 2010.

The above quote relates to dialogue between characters from the McElroy family's game, exhibiting how deeply personal and emotional role-playing can become. As Griffin McElroy discusses the "time" that the characters have with each other in the game, it parallels the connection the players have to each other in forming new stories based on their own experiences and relationships with each other. In this distinction, the McElroys queer their characters from their original configurations, taking what were once simple introductory characters and shifting them into embodied visions of themselves. While their characters might not have been a one-to-one comparison of their identities in real life, they turned into cyborgs of their own creation, becoming queer through their departure from the source material (literature that contains the rules, roles, storylines and information about games), and even the literal queering of certain characters. The malleable nature of the McElroys' characters was what first interested me in playing these games for myself.

The first opportunity I had to play a TTRPG, I was anxious about how my gender and queerness would be received in a heteronormative, male-dominated space. My discomfort was spurred by the social interaction that was so essential to these games, wondering if I could be welcomed into a space weighted down by a history of patriarchal pressures. I felt that I would need to be the token fem-presenting character in our party, or that players might say some problematic things (feeling empowered by their historical dominance in gaming spaces). Not only that, but my endearment to the McElroy brothers' nonchalance at game mechanics was not universal, and I feared my lack of experience with the game would not be received well.

While I was still reluctant to join a game with a group of strangers (who turned out to be all masc-presenting), I ventured into this community with tentative optimism. I

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wanted the *TAZ* experience for myself. I wanted a fun and comedic journey through fantasy worlds, and to create a character that I could develop into a meaningful representation of myself and the collaborative imagination of my fellow players. In playing as a character, describing their thoughts and motivations, performing their actions through rolls, and anticipating their reactions to certain situations, I gained agency over the character's experience and my experience with a group of players.

When I refer to collaborative gameplay, I specifically mean the ways in which players discuss solutions to conflict, create dialogue, and solidify "an emergent 'imagined community".[41] The act of collaboration in these games is the foundation for how narratives are formed and how the story progresses. Monsters are slain by *parties* of players. Players interact with one another to express their stories and decisions. This collaborative gameplay was what shined through *The Adventure Zone*, and what I found so exciting about TTRPGs.

Even as the gameplay of my first TTRPG was collaborative, I was able to assert my position in the narrative as an active element to the story. Through character moments, I was able to craft an image of myself in fantasy spaces, with players embodying their own characters alongside me. This desire to meld narratives through interactive play is not special to me alone, but rather a hallmark of the contemporary TTRPG experience for many people. Narrative motivations have shifted to include more queer and feminist stories than the genre's patriarchal history could predict.

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[41] Huddleston, Stefan. "When Worlds Collaborate: The Style of Early Tabletop Role-Playing Games | Analog Game Studies," December 18, 2022.

My entry into TTRPGs serves to show the impact of interactive gameplay and how that can reframe what is often depicted as a rather conservative space in terms of queer and gendered representation.[42] This movement in TTRPGs' cultural climate reflects the power players have in changing the game. Their interactions with each other (as players and characters) have the possibility for them to embody progressive narratives for themselves that do not originate from the source material. This embodiment is an assertion of the self and the body in game lore, a way for players to see themselves in fantastical worlds. Interactive play can take shape in politically charged and expressive ways. I look to Haraway's theory of cyborg writing as an analysis of this practice. Her theory claims that "no objects, spaces, or bodies are sacred in themselves; any component can be interfaced with any other if proper standard, the proper code, can be constructed for processing signals in a common language".[43] By these standards, cyborgs and cyborg writing can occur in interactive play, through the combined efforts of players to enact new rhetoric. I see the integration of new or altered narratives in TTRPG lore as a queering of media to represent more cyborg bodies. These texts are not "sacred" nor are the characters within them. Customization is a necessary part of the role-playing process, which includes customizing the source material.

Mary Flanagan theorizes that games function as a method of cultural expression, asking if they "not only provide outlets for the entertainment but also function as a means for creative expression, as instruments for conceptual thinking, or as tools to help examine

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[42] Jaakko Stenros and Tanja Sihvonen. "Out of the Dungeons: Representations of Queer Sexuality in RPG Source Books." *Analog Game Studies* 2, no. 5 (2015): 75–92.

[43] Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto", 163.

or work through social issues"?[44] I see TTRPGs as an overlooked example of queering

conventional notions of sexuality and gender. Flanagan's "tools" are in the game

mechanics, character arcs, collaborative storytelling, and interactions between characters.

Progress begins in the source materials, in adaptations of the genre found through player

embodiment and made *for* player embodiment.

I analyze my introduction into this realm of gaming through a feminist and queer

lens, seeing that my trepidation relied on the very real history of sexism and homophobia

in many popular TTRPG circles.[45] I grow more comfortable when I embody my character

in a safe and inclusive environment, using source materials along with a crafted,

collaborative, and interactive imaginary. Sometimes this level of comfort requires like-

minded players, however I also argue that this is not a necessity for embodiment, even

though the potential for a "space apart" in TTRPG gameplay can be a transformative

experience.[46] This interactive space is a "shifted, heightened reality in which the players

control the rules and social world of the game". As a collaborative cyberspace of gameplay

and storytelling, players are the primary motive for change, even if it is not what all

players desire. An inclusive space apart is shaped through not only the group of players,

but the GM, lore, and game mechanics.

This chapter discusses the history of TTRPGs in order to understand the origins of

some of its more glaring issues as well as its progress. I introduce the foundational

elements of what makes a TTRPG, how it is played, and the frontrunners of the genre. I

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[44] Flanagan, Mary. "Introduction to Critical Play", 1. *Critical Play: Radical Game Design*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2009.

[45] Jaakko Stenros and Tanja Sihvonen. "Out of the Dungeons: Representations of Queer Sexuality in RPG Source Books."

[46] Kawitzky, Felix Rose. "Magic Circles", 132. Performance Research, 25:8.

also interrogate the TTRPG gaming community and how the queer community has crafted

a space for queer futurity in an interactive imaginary. I refer to the work of Felix Rose

Kawitzky and Antero Garcia to frame the possibilities for community and imagination of

TTRPGs. Kawitzky's theory of "magic circles" presents a connection between

performance and "becoming", an image of embodiment that is constructed through

"queerness, play, and utopia".[47] In this space of collaboration, players are able to support

each other through narrative movements that function differently than other forms of

storytelling, queering the narrative through interaction.

I also refer to Antero Garcia's work on race and gender as categories of identity in

the original TTRPG, *Dungeons & Dragons*.[48] Privilege and power in source material

illustrate how these categories carry a history of sexism and racism. This historiographical

framework of TTRPGs revisits the origins of these games and how they have shifted and

changed throughout the years, through content, game mechanics, and player inclusivity. A

history of TTRPGs, as well as an understanding of how they are played, are necessary to

understand how they have changed over time.

I also present a snapshot of queer dialogues in TTRPG history, then move to

discuss how this shift in content (mainly through community creation) reflects the

queerness of the genre itself. Jaako Stenros and Tanja Sihvonen inform my exploration

into the history of queerness in TTRPGs. They interpret the shift as continuous formation,

one that is built upon the interactive elements of the game alongside the storytelling. In
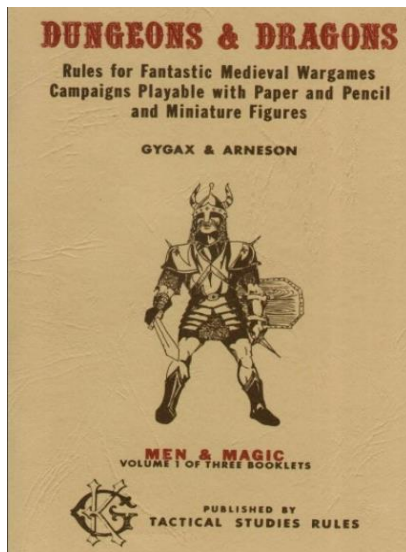
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[47] Kawitzky, "Magic Circles", 131-132.

[48] Garcia, Antero. "Privilege, Power, and Dungeons & Dragons: How Systems Shape Racial and Gender Identities in Tabletop Role-Playing Games." *Mind, Culture, and Activity* 24, no. 3 (July 3, 2017): 232–46.

framing the history through a gendered and queer lens, possibilities of embodiment emerge

in the structure for players to enact queer collaborative narratives.

Men and Magic

Figure 1. First D&D Sourcebook

Note. *Dungeons and Dragons* first sourcebook, which depicts an image of a sole

man in a suit of armor.

There is a clearly targeted market in the original *Dungeons and Dragons* (*D&D*)

texts being called *Men & Magic* (see Figure 1 above). This illustrates a world of exclusion,

one that is formidable ground for privileged members of society but rocky for others. In

the case of Men & Magic, women were not even mentioned as potential players in the

original source book. All the pronouns implemented in describing players were masculine

(he/him/his).[49] More potential can be found in producing lore (by the company or

community) that queers this originally marginalizing material. That process of queering

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[49] Dave Arneson and Gary Gygax, "Volume 1: Men & Magic".

occurs through the integration of more inclusive player dynamics. Before collaborative

play in TTRPGs extended to a wider player base, they framed the "men" in magical spaces

as the center for all interactive measures. In order to understand where TTRPGs are going

in terms of queer embodiment, it is important to know where they began and how they are

played.

TTRPGs are primarily games played in person, enacted by players and a Game

Master, or GM, who orchestrates the plot of the story with which players engage. The type

of story– themes, setting, rules, etc.– depends on the game. *Dungeons and Dragons*

(*D&D*) was the first role-playing game, invented by Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson in

1974. The mechanics began as a continuation of war games, with a strong focus on the

combat elements of gameplay.

"Wargaming", or the German term, "Kriegsspiel", relates to the style of military

strategy game that first emerged in nineteenth century Prussia which resurfaced in

popularity around the 1950's and has remained a staple TTRPG since through a variety of

iterations.[50] The original format of war games situated boats as a vessel of combat, and

Gygax and Arneson took the "hit points" (points amounting to the livelihood of a vessel)

from this naval combat and transferred it to a *humanoid* combat format.[51] This mechanical

adoption makes TTRPG's connection to technical embodiment implicit in the livelihood of

characters. Mechanics that characterize whether a character lives or dies, the effect a blow

will have to a player's statistics, is formulated by technical origins that make the human

and machine intertwined at the base level of gameplay.

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[50] Schuurman, Paul. "A Game of Contexts: Prussian-German Professional Wargames and the Leadership Concept of Mission Tactics 1870–1880." *War in History* 28, no. 3 (2019): 504.

[51] Dave Arneson and Gary Gygax, "Volume 1: Men & Magic".

The game's setting, core themes, and characters derive from "an idealized, overwhelmingly Eurocentric, Middle Ages" that pulled character classes and races from mythology, with heavy influence from Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* series.[52] High fantasy and historical warfare are the main contributors to *D&D*'s formation, and can make for a problematic combination of toxic masculinity and violent overtones. In addition to this toxicity, there is also a complicated history of masculine sexuality at play in TTRPGs.

For over a decade after *D&D* was first published, sex and sexuality remained nonexistent in TTRPGs beyond the hypersexualized covers of source books.[53] While the game's to the severe lack of sex in these games, a more apt conclusion is the cis-male community that formed around the seventies to eighties with games like *D&D* or *Warhammer*.[54] This demographic formed the creators of the game, and then spurred a cultural basis on which the games were marketed.

The straight, white, and cis-male beginnings of the TTRPG world carved out space for that group alone in the identities included, empowered, and represented in those materials. Stenros and Sihvonen speak in great detail about the TTRPG cultural climate, stating that, in *D&D*, "considering the context where role-playing games emerged– a male-dominated wargaming community–it is not surprising that the themes concerning sexuality or gender were not dealt with in the source books".[55] Through these masculine-dominated origins, sexuality was negated from the role-playing aspect of TTRPGs. Instead, players

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[52] Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings*. United Kingdom: Allen & Unwin, 1954.
[53] Stenros and Sihvonen, "Out of the Dungeons: Representations of Queer Sexuality in RPG Source Books."
[54] Games Workshop. *Warhammer 40,000*. United Kingdom: Games Workshop, 1987.
[55] Stenros and Sihvonen. "Out of the Dungeons: Representations of Queer Sexuality in RPG Source Books."

focused on violence play, with women NPCs taking the brunt of most of that violence[56].

Players would be faced with seductresses and evil witches, and the brutality of initial

gaming mechanics that would influence players to solve conflict through combat. Violent

gameplay mechanics, formed by machine combat and militaristic vernacular, made the

opposing characters seem less human, more like obstacles to be knocked down.

This antagonistic embodiment differs from cyborgian embodiment; possibilities for

queerness and transformation are limited to violent methods, forming a path more towards

a linear queer death than any possible queer futures. Violent play originating in war games

reflects the "informatics of domination", a contrasting element to configuration of the

cyborg.[57] The informatics of domination, as Haraway describes the term, refer to the ways

in which oppressive dialogues integrate oppressed people into neoliberal systems, and

exploit their experiences within those systems.[58] I do not mean to place "good" or "bad"

labels on embodiment through TTRPG gameplay, but I understand the escapism these

games provide offer potential in queer contexts and damage in others. That already crafts a

world of exclusion, one that is formidable ground for privileged members of society but

rocky for others. More potential can be found in producing lore (by the company or

community) that queers this originally marginalizing material.

Ironically, while the games' lore and interactive play remained mostly sexless (by

which I mean little to no sexual/romantic role-playing elements), the imagery of men and

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[56] Stenros and Sihvonen, "Out of the Dungeons: Representations of Queer Sexuality in RPG Source
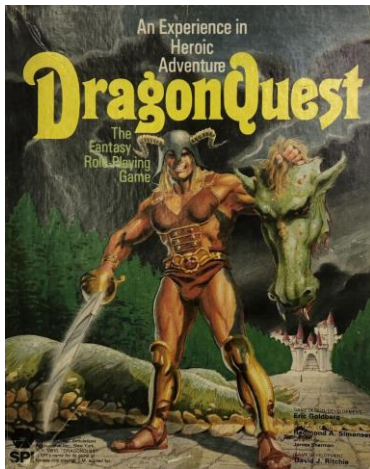Books."

[57] Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto", 163.

[58] Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto", 163.

women in these source books were highly sexualized (see pictures below). Violent and racist imagery still remained.

The imagery of TTRPGs is an important factor to gameplay as it has the power to influence how players perceive their characters and the characters of the game. Source book art reveals a visual of the world and the ways in which the creators choose to depict that world.

Figure 2. *Dragon Quest* **Sourcebook**

Note. Dragon Quest role playing game source book, which depicts a muscular man in little clothing, smiling while carrying a dragon's head.

Figure 3. *Different Worlds Magazine*, **Issue #10**

    Note. Different Worlds magazine issue #10, which depicts a woman in scantily-clad armor and multiple weapons next to a large blue orc with stereotypically Asian aesthetics.

    Sexualized imagery of men and women offers a glimpse into how to perceive gender in this game. Figure 2 above depicts an extremely muscular man in scantily clad armor with a bulging crotch, carrying the head of a dragon. In Figure 3, a woman in a bikini top and skirt carrying multiple weapons and a large blue creature (most likely an orc) with problematic Asian physical attributes. These early images of characters in fantasy worlds offer troubling depictions of gender and race that overtly sexualize and racialize characters. In the early days of TTRPGs (1970s-80s), the cover art of barely clothed women and men intrigued and tantalized players, and allowed a certain demographic to see themselves as appealing as the art[59]. Decades later, the importance of visuals and aesthetic performance remains in the gameplay and storytelling, just shifted based on the audience and time.

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[59] Ehara, Tadashi, Issue #10: Chaosism.

Antero Garcia performs a study on the frequency of men and women represented in the art of D&D historical editions. In his work, Garcia outlines how over a forty-year timespan, women consistently appear in less than half of the images of people in the literature.[60] This study, while interpreted through a gender binary, does offer a definitive example of how women and nonbinary people are underrepresented in the source material, even as recently as the latest edition from 2014. The original depiction of characters in 1974 source books still lingers in the discourse as something derived from violent measures as well as something that marginalizes, or others, a variety of people. Visuals in RPGs motivate players to craft interactive narratives with the imagery provided as a benchmark from which they can imagine their own characters. TTRPGs use a combination of narratives and mechanics to craft play, a process which has a long-standing history of interactive imagining between players and source materials. This history is implicit in the gameplay from the very beginning.

Not only the first of its kind, *D&D* remains the most popular TTRPG to date, with the fifth edition of their rule system released in 2014 being the most recent iteration. *D&D*'s rule system revolves around dice rolls that correspond to a player's character statistics. The materials needed to play most TTRPGs are dice (varying in numbers of sides), paper, pencil, and sourcebooks (rule books and lore of the game's imaginary world). Felix Kawitzky and Sean Hendricks note how "randomizing elements", like dice, "produce an experience that provides a challenging, entertaining and potentially surprising push-back for both the players and the GM".[61] Randomizing outcomes present chance and

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[60] Garcia, "Privilege, Power, and Dungeons & Dragons: How Systems Shape Racial and Gender Identities in Tabletop Role-Playing Games", 239.

[61] Kawitzky, "Magic Circles", 129.

luck as legitimate components of gameplay, making tangible what is normally unplanned. Random tools allow for players to think on their feet and consider possible shifts in their own fixed narratives–they need to adapt when necessary.

Once a group of about 2-5 players and one Game Master (GM) is curated, the GM will then set the scene. The GM has the road map for players to follow, but player choice is integral to the gameplay, so they can choose something that the GM may not have anticipated. This creates more opportunities for characterizing moments in the game. Players will talk to each other and non-playable characters (NPCs), that are played by the GM, as their characters. They take on the role of their character, acting how they imagined their character would act. If they use skills or start combat, they make rolls of their dice to see how well those situations work out. The storytelling is mostly done by the GM, as they are the keeper of most of the knowledge, but players are able to "flavor" their moves and actions to fit the role they are trying to play. These player-motivated situations offer opportunities to queer the story and assert agency over character decisions. The characterizing that the players do in TTRPGs are *performances*, and as they craft their own narratives they also perform gender through technological modes of embodiment (i.e. TTRPGs).

The GM is a necessary role for the game to function, and their conceptualizing of the story is how players are initially able to progress through the game. They hold information on potential relationships and characterization that could happen between characters. As essential leaders of role-playing, they are able to queer the story first and players can follow if they choose. In some cases, the GM is even able to craft their own story, world, and characters for players to interact with, instead of using a source book

with pre-written storylines and information. In this instance, player engagement and collaboration are more interactive from the start. GMs guide players based on "past gaming experiences, the game space, the preferences of participants, characteristics of the characters, etc.", which can influence the potential queerness permissible in these magic circles.[62] The GM's skills, personal experiences, and intent for the story can reflect how queer the game starts, how much adaptation and progressive planning might affect player decisions. Ultimately, it is the combination of their influence *and* the players' collaboration with the given scenarios and materials that make the game a transformative space.

When a player creates a character, they not only pick their race, gender, class, and ethical alignment–all loaded categories, to be sure– they also select the numbered bonus that correlates to their abilities. Given a game scenario, a player might have their character do something that they will have to roll a twenty-sided dice (D20) to predict the outcome of that action. The flat number of the roll is then added to the ability bonus that their character has that corresponds to that particular skill. From there, the GM determines the "flavor" of the affected roll. They may give important clues about the story, or maybe allow players to find high-value items, or have them fall into a cavernous hole in their path. The basics of a good TTRPG centers on the interactions between the players (the characters of the story) and the GM (the crafter of the story). Without this synergy, the game goes nowhere and the imaginative world-building is lost.

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[62] Daniau, Stéphane. "The Transformative Potential of Role-Playing Games: From Play Skills to Human Skills", 430. *Simulation & Gaming* 47, no. 4 (August 2016).

The ending of a TTRPG usually amounts to some sort of reward or the party

(group of players) saving the day in some way. These decisions are organized by the GM,

the players, and the source material's storyline. The stakes are consistent, depending on the

length of the campaign (the length of the game, which could last one session or several

over the course of weeks, months, or even years). The stories could potentially be

elaborate and character-driven, action-motivated brawls, or (commonly) treasure hunts

with an easily discernible happy ending. Most games end in triumph, as players want to

feel that they have accomplished something. In the case of *The Adventure Zone*, the

McElroys' first campaign spanned over nearly six years with the resulting prize of saving

the fictional universe and finding each of their characters' dream endings[63]. The character

Taako, an audience favorite played by Justin McElroy, had originally planned a journey to

discover and create the first taco in this fantasy world. He would find ingredients through

gameplay, amidst larger plot points of the story, perfecting his culinary craft. His

resolution was him not only creating the taco, but becoming a fantasy world-renown TV

chef and reuniting with his long-lost twin sister.

TTRPGs do not have to be high-stakes in order for players to feel embodied

through the proposed narrative. The story is the game, and players have spent some

amount of time in the "skin" of their character, forming their story arcs just as any fiction

author might do for a book character. When their story is done, players want the catharsis

of accomplishing what they intended to, even when they had drifted into side plots along

the way. "As a system for 'collaborative creation' within a fantasy-focused virtual world,

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[63] McElroy, *The Adventure Zone*.

D&D is an analog for group production of cultural artifacts, narratives, and expressions of agency"[64]. The story, whether emerging from the GM's own creation or that of a source book, works as a guide more than anything else. There are rules to the game, but the way the story unfolds will never go exactly as the source material suggests. Predictable outcomes are few and far between when the narrative is driven by several players and statistical rolls, however, the source material can influence how characters interact with each other and the story depending on the lore.

Orcs and Race

Identity markers at play in TTRPGs include, but are not limited to, race and gender as categories of customization. These classifications in particular have been the subject of critique for role-playing game history. Race is an especially complicated issue in TTRPGs, as the position of races in game lore include a variety of fantasy races that carry their own prejudice and oppression.

In a game that welcomes magical creatures, *D&D* hosts a large amount of problematic descriptions of them in game lore. This lore pertains to the stories and scenarios that players will carry out, as well as how they create their characters in the perspective of the fictional world. Their creation reflects D&D's initial climate and demographic–namely cis, white men. As race classifies characters through gaming mechanics, they also craft narratives built on political and social stakes relevant outside of *D&D*'s lore. This entrenchment can mean different things depending on the character/player. There has been a recent racial critique of the *D&D* race of orcs in the

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[64] Garcia, "Privilege, Power, and Dungeons & Dragons: How Systems Shape Racial and Gender Identities in Tabletop Role-Playing Games", 232.

game's lore, how they are represented as "gray-green", evil, and statistically less intelligent than other races.[65] Theorists like Alex Kostrzewa posit that this imagery, along with their often "savage" description, prescribes a depiction of a "less-evolved" race with a distinct non-white characterization.[66] Critics of the genre's racial representations allege that the game desensitizes players to racial warfare. "When we combine the inherently lethal nature of fantasy roleplaying games with a moral framework wherein the 'Good' races are at war with the 'Evil' races, genocidal actions towards the evil races is not just permissible, but becomes a moral duty in and of itself".[67] TTRPGs offer interactive measures to understanding gaming lore that can be aggressive and problematic. The way races are coded as well as how GMs and players interact with this material can be entirely situational, depending on the social atmosphere as much as the game's lore. While racial hierarchies still rampage the source material, players and the GM have the ability to diverge from those paths to craft a more nuanced take to the lore.

Source materials can speak to how queer the narratives can be without player intervention. Most lore taking root in science fiction (*Cyberpunk Red*) and fantasy (*D&D*) have a "reputation…for being the province of privileged, white, cis heteronormative/ men and boys".[68] There is a certain amount of gatekeeping that comes with this history, and that is why I find it necessary to highlight player voice and action over the motivations of gaming companies. Capitalist goals are not reflective of cyborg experiences in embodying

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[65] Garcia, "Privilege, Power, and Dungeons & Dragons: How Systems Shape Racial and Gender Identities in Tabletop Role-Playing Games", 240.

[66] Ogilvie Kostrzewa, Alex. "Racial Essentialism in High Fantasy". Roanoke: Bowling Green State University, 2022.

[67] Ogilvie Kostrzewa, "Racial Essentialism in High Fantasy".

[68] Garcia, "Privilege, Power, and Dungeons & Dragons: How Systems Shape Racial and Gender Identities in Tabletop Role-Playing Games", 238.

ways, but rather objectify their experiences as marketing and storytelling strategies. Orc representation in D&D is often coded to represent non-white, marginalized communities and exposes the "informatics of domination" that do harm in a fantastical and realistic context.[69] In the case of TTRPGs, race and gender are integrated into the mechanics of the game as a way to romanticize the plight of oppressed races in reality by framing them in fantasy contexts. This problematic rhetoric enforces dominant racist ideologies in source material; however, content has improved over time through the collective influence of marginalized communities creating space for themselves in TTRPGs.

In their efforts to combat racial biases, non-white players have shifted statistical mechanics that privilege races like elves (coded white in game lore), to be more inclusively representative of orcs (coded as non-white and queer respectively). The *D&D* systems at play up until fifth edition have given orcs a "natural" deficiency in intelligence, and made them appear as "inherently evil", which players would then omit or change through their own iterations of gameplay.[70] Homebrewing, or player contributions to changing source material, became a staple element of crafting inclusive *D&D* material.

I have been in games with players who act as orc characters, and they had goals to make their character perceived as intelligent and compassionate while still facing racial discrimination head-on. If the GM made the orc woman unwelcomed in a town the group was visiting, the player would shut it down by letting the town know that she was indeed an orc and that she was also on a mission to save the town from a blood curse. Similarly, there have been novels made about D&D characters and worlds that depict "uncommon

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[69] Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto", 163.

[70] Garcia, "Privilege, Power, and Dungeons & Dragons: How Systems Shape Racial and Gender Identities in Tabletop Role-Playing Games", 240.

races", as they are called in source books, differently than their original representations. Travis Baldree writes about the queer romance between an orc and tiefling as they run a coffee shop together in a fantasy setting.[71] Characterization of these women contrasts D&D's efforts to pigeon hole them based on their fictional race. As an author and player of TTRPGs, Baldree is able to change the narrative to portray more queer and racially inclusive stories in and out of the game.

Problematic history exists in TTRPGs and stems from *D&D*; however, the interactive methods of gameplay offer the ability to counter the source material to create a safe and fun environment for players. Of course, the game environment is also reliant on the culture of the players, their ideologies and how that influences how they choose to play the game or interact with characters. TTRPGs that followed *D&D* made improvements on the problematic material, however, the climate around the TTRPG space proves the necessity of a collaborative inclusive environment, based on the source material as well as the climate of the group.

Characters and Players

Social performance in RPGs creates opportunities for players to express queerness through gameplay– to relate to characters and form distinctive social situations through relational play. Social performance is enacted through dialogue and relationships in the game, granting players the chance to enact queer moments through performance and improvisation. I once played a fem-presenting druid (earthly witch character), who was receiving prophetic dreams of the GM's plot progression through the image of a beautiful

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[71] Baldree, Travis. *Legends & Lattes*. London: Tor, 2022.

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princess. My character was motivated to move the plot forward and find this princess because she believed she was in love with her. Adding this improvised queerness to the story allowed me to feel more embodied as my character, and relate to her goals. My character choices provided a queer agency toward the story.

Katherine Cross, author of "The new laboratory of dreams: Role-playing games as resistance", reveals how her experience as a queer trans woman playing the RPG, *World of Warcraft*, allowed her to express her gender in new ways that weren't "naturally" embedded in the gameplay.[72] She frames this progression as a "constant 'becoming' that allows for self-conscious…social reconstruction".[73] The intentional transformation she describes is an imagined queerness imposed on stories. The cyborg is formed within the bounds of "becoming" her character in role-playing spaces: "The cyborg is our ontology".[74] I find Haraway's theory of the cyborg at home in this example of ontologically mapping queerness in heteronormative space. Cross' connection to gender expression and performance in *World of Warcraft* works as an act of resistance.

Gender expression and queerness take on new heights in role-playing games. These games offer possible futures unavailable to our current social context. Players can safely perform gender in fantasy spaces, form queer relationships with NPCs or other players, and use fantastical politics as a platform for discourse about real issues. Communication, combat, and magic queer the ideological framework of TTRPG history through their

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[72] Cross, Katherine Angel. "The New Laboratory of Dreams: Role-Playing Games as Resistance", 70. *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly* 40.

[73] Cross, "The New Laboratory of Dreams: Role-Playing Games as Resistance", 73.
[74] Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto", 150.

interactive and mechanical elements. Queer empowerment comes from these magical modes of embodiment.

In another season of *The Adventure Zone*, the McElroys play *Monster of the Week*, a TTRPG made by Evil Hat Productions.[75] Players are in a fictional Appalachian town of West Virginia, encountering cryptids and monsters with a style similar to shows like *Twin Peaks*[76] or *The X-Files*.[77] Travis McElroy's character, Aubrey, is a queer magician who finds out she can manifest fire. Her story arch revolves around a journey to trust those around her, as she has been let down in the past. She finds a friend and romantic partner in an NPC, Dani. This experience in a queer body, even for a straight cis-male, offered representation and perceivable embodiment for listeners.

Travis, while not being queer, took great strides to embody a character that was not only compelling, but served as an example of cyborg queerness through technical means. He performed queerness as it is represented in our reality, but transferred it in fantasy spaces to show the queer potential of role-playing for activism. The McElroys' commitment to representation stems from their desire to present more diverse narratives in these historically white, cis-male, heteronormative performance games. As a group of older cis-white men, they realized the impact that their positionality played in the relatability for listeners. Their inclusive motivations reflect how the cyborg can be a tool for transformative activism in magic circles.

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[75] Sands, Michael. *Monster of the Week*. Game. US: Evil Hat Productions, 2012.
[76] David Lynch and Mark Frost. *Twin Peaks*. ABC, 1990.
[77] Carter, Chris. *The X-Files*. Fox, 1993.

The cyborg is the player and the character, and achieves meaning through gameplay. Gameplay is the creation, the "beginning", of ontological purpose in TTRPG narratives. The character does not exist until the player makes them exist. By this extent, the player and character are linked on a purely technical level. Players impose their imagined bodies on the narrative of the game. In cases where they queer the normative dialogue of game lore, players "rewrite the texts of their bodies and societies" through character embodiment.[78] Haraway sees this act as a form of "cyborg writing", and I understand this connection between players and characters to be a method of technical meaning-making.[79] Travis McElroy embodied a character outside his own personal experience, yet he did so by rewriting the normative narrative expected of him, queering his experience and character through ontological intention.

The cyborg is embedded in not just cyberpunk media, but in TTRPGs as a whole, appearing as manifestations of queer and technical embodiment through the interactive and collaborative play. Rather than confined to any genre, the cyborg exists in a queer world, one full of potential futures.

Similar to the cyborgian link I find between players and characters, I also find linkages between the cyborg and the fantasy world through the mechanics of world-*building*. The worlds of TTRPGs are formed by player agency, whether they are crafted within set lore or not. The fantasy world becomes a "political space" as its characteristics are motivated by player choice and "shifting power dynamics" between the game lore and

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[78] Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto", 177.
[79] Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto", 175.

the player's society.[80] The world is crafted with the experiences of GMs and players at the

forefront. Sometimes this connection is an intentional reflection of society, framing

important political issues as fantastical in order to work through them in a microcosm.

Other times, players form satirical worlds without the prescience to contextualize what is

happening. Politics are integrated into the gameplay by the players, and this commentary

queers political structures in our society by imagining them in systems *players* can control,

outside of dominant patriarchy.

In another *D&D* podcast, *Dungeons and Dragons and Dinner* (*DnDnD*), characters

enter a village that has poor working conditions for the craftspeople. One character decides

they will attempt to unionize the townspeople to leave the place better than when they

came.[81] In the game's storyline, this is steered as a "side quest", or something that an

individual or a couple players are working to accomplish that does not pertain to the main

goal of the game. That being said, the political motivations of the players, the way they

interpret a fantasy town and the imagined people within it, is formed through their own

experiences, and therefore informs the story alongside the lore and mainline gameplay.

Players construct characters with their political and social history attached, similar

to how cyborgs carry their human histories.[82] Cyborgs find pathways to transcend human

societal norms; likewise, players are able to surpass bodily expectations in reality through

a projected ontology in games, embodying their character as an extension of themself. This

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[80] Kawitzky, "Magic Circles", 130.

[81] Graessle, James et la. "Ep 2: Swamp Stew Part 1". *DnDnD*. Podcast Audio. Moorpark Media, June, 2018.

[82] Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto", 163.

embodiment acts as a performance in collaborative play, one not only forged by characters singularly, but in group narratives.

In the fantasy world of the TTRPG, things might be imagined–characters, towns, political structures, magic–yet the actions that players take within those worlds hold real value and real queer potential. They queer the gameplay, the world, and the source material that has been so historically problematic in order to create a future for their character and party that moves beyond the social constructs of their reality and the fiction of the game. This experience is an embodiment of the "space apart", reconstructing futures in the players' eyes, through their actions.[83] This freedom is what Munoz's concept of queer utopian futures represents. I see a cyborg's future in these imagined realities shifted through collaborative and inclusive community, outside of societal expectations. The cyborg future does not forget structures of oppression and domination, she forms new futures on the basis of changing those dominant structures. Cyborg futures are about transforming space and time for progressive, collaborative play. Queering futures in TTRPGs establishes social and political shifts as part of the interactive gaming experience.

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[83] Kawitzky, "Magic Circles", 132.

Figure 4. *Thirsty Sword Lesbians* **Source Art**

Note. Source art from the TTRPG, *Thirsty Sword Lesbians*, which depicts two women holding hands and gazing at each other lovingly with a squid on top of them.

Queer elements in TTRPGs are first introduced through characters. Their heteronormative history along with the power of this medium's player-led narratives tethers queerness to player choice. There are games that are inherently queer through source materials, like *Thirsty Sword Lesbians* by Evil Hat Productions (source art pictured above). The main focus of this game is to "tell queer stories with friends", putting queerness at the forefront of roleplaying interactions.[84] While queer narratives can exist in source materials initially, players ultimately begin queering through character creation. Even in gay-coded games like *Thirsty Sword Lesbians*, character creation is the first step

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[84] Dickey, Dominique et la. *Thirsty Sword Lesbians*. Game. US: Evil Hat Productions, 2021.

for players to queer their characters in games. As Kawitzky states, "customization is a queer survival skill".[85] The ability for characters to present queer in games, by deliberate exploration into character creation, can be an empowering shift from the original game material and real life. Queerness has not been historically well-received in TTRPGs, and the chronology of queer-coded characters in source materials represents the lengths players have had to go to find (or make) embodiment in characterization.

An example of the problematic language in games occurs in Task Force Games' *Central Casting: Heroes of Legend* (1988), in which non-heteronormative forms of sexuality and queerness are categorized as "sexual disorders" that are attributed to "Darkside personality traits by most societies".[86] The Darkside personality traits, in the context of the game, frame any sexual behavior as "abhorrent", and that sexualizing role-play is "flippant, careless, or callous".[87] These mechanics frame queerness as a negative trait, something that can actively harm the player's chances (and party's chances) of survival depending on how the GM interprets them. Having this element incorporated into the collaborative framework of the game is what I find the most insidious. It forces players to acknowledge these markers in ways that can do real harm to the players enacting queerness as embodiment. Whether or not that might be the case, this first iteration of queerness in dialogue with TTRPG gameplay depicts homophobic narratives, limiting the queer potential for players. Queer collaboration is then based on GMs and their connection to the source material–how far they are willing to drift from that source material.

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[85] Kawitzky, "Magic Circles", 131.

[86] Allen Eldridge and Stephen Cole. *Central Casting: Heroes of Legend.* Game. Task Force Games, 1995.

[87] Stenros and Sihvonen, "Out of the Dungeons: Representations of Queer Sexuality in RPG Source Books".

The GM's positionality interprets potential "sexual disorders" in the game, and their willingness to queer the material could shift how collaborative play functions in *Central Castings*. As these are the initial strokes of queerness in TTRPG games, I understand the historical and religious context that frame these narratives, and I see how they prompted more direct shifts in interpretation through later iterations–based primarily on the engagement and creation of players. In order to craft new versions of queerness in the historically heteronormative space of TTRPGs, queer players act as "cyborg writers", a term developed by Haraway, using the tools of the game creators to "mark the world that marked them as other".[88] Through their own manipulations of the lore, the ways they play the game, the ways they work together to form new futures for their characters, they are imagining worlds where they may survive and thrive in a world made by and for them.

One of the earliest examples of queerness in RPG lore comes in the form of Slaanesh from the *Warhammer* series, created by Games Workshop.[89] Games Workshop has made multiple game formats over the years, but their original iteration in 1987, *Warhammer*, is a TTRPG, and *Warhammer 40K*, followed as an RPVG in 2004.[90] Slaanesh is represented in both of these formats, with consistently sexualized imagery. Slaanesh is a chaos god who represents "lust and excess". Their incarnation differs depending on the source book or wiki, however, they are said to be "neither woman nor man", but hold the physical characteristics of both (usually on each side of their body).[91]

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[88] Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto", 175.
[89] Games Workshop, *Warhammer 40,000*.
[90] Games Workshop, *Warhammer 40,000*.
[91] Games Workshop, *Warhammer 40,000*.

Their lore is attributed to multiple "trickster" deities (Hermes, Aphrodite, and Loki).[92]

Within the source material, their pronouns range from "he/him" to "she/her" to "it/it's".

The lack of decisive language for this character might be attributed to their chaotic

presence in the lore, and yet there is a clear gendering that occurs through the subtitles

given to them (i.e. "the prince of pleasure", "she who thirsts"), along with their imagery

and the imagery of their followers.[93]

Pictured below are visuals of Slaanesh attacking a soldier (Figure 5) alongside their

legion of followers, the Exalted Daemonettes (Figure 6), in the RPVG, *Warhammer 40K.*[94]

Figure 5. Slaanesh

Note. Warhammer 40K source art, depicting the creature Slaanesh attacking a rival

soldier using pain and pleasure.

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[92] Games Workshop, *Warhammer 40,000*.
[93] Games Workshop, *Warhammer 40,000*.
[94] Games Workshop, *Warhammer 40K*.

Figure 6. An Exalted Daemonette

Note. Warhammer 40K source art, depicting an exalted daemonette, a soldier of Slaanesh, with an androgynous body and very little armor or clothing.

Sourcebook art accompanied by the transphobic language in the lore make them a prime example of how RPG lore can reproduce negative stereotypes of marginalized communities. Likewise, visuals of video gameplay in *Warhammer 40K* imprint a sexualizing, bodily image of Slaanesh and their army.[95] Their followers' bodies move in a dance as they battle in the RPVG, causing players to focus on physicality in gameplay. However, the "feminizing" aspects of the character and army are novel to the almost entirely male world of *Warhammer 40K*. Outside of the Sisters of Battle (Adepta Sororitas), there are not really any female or non-male warriors in the lore outside of Slaanesh and their Daemonettes.[96] The Daemonettes follow the tenets of Slaanesh as a

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[95] Games Workshop, *Warhammer 40K*.
[96] Games Workshop, *Warhammer 40K*.

salacious chaos god, taking physical pleasure in each blow they deal. Their armor ranges from androgynous to sultry.

In the table-top version of the game, physical miniatures for Slaanesh and their army have a hot pink or lavender coloring, gendering and queering them with their appearance in a sea of black and gray and red that is common coloring for most *Warhammer* models. In doing this, they appear othered, but also strikingly powerful. The power Slaanesh possesses derives from pleasure and sexuality. As a sexual deity, Slaanesh retains their strength during battle by taking sexual pleasure from the pain they inflict. Their sexual pleasure is an empowering force for gameplay. In a way, this is another instance of collaborative gameplay, with players achieving more in-game victories by the physical connections they have with other characters.

To express sexuality in appearance and interactive play places sexuality at the forefront of the battle–where it has been otherwise nonexistent. I find this entry, while definitely problematic, to also be representative of queerness as a narrative of sexual expression. I understand that this narrative is a common trope and antagonistic depiction of queerness in most media, but I also believe that categorizing sex and sexuality as oppositional to each other creates a naturalizing dichotomy that I find more troubling. In order for the source material to be queered, players need to have active roles in understanding and depicting sexuality. That comes not from ignorance or erasure of sex and sexuality, but from an understanding of sexuality as a tool to queer gameplay. This player agency reflects cyborgian revolutionary practices.

Powerful shifts in queer representation still have the potential of disturbing negative depictions in RPGs. While Slaanesh is consistently developed as a harmful

stereotype in source material, they provide a blueprint for queer players to interpret and envision gender fluidity in their own imagined realities. Slaanesh is a cyborg figure in the source material through their "trans-formative" bodily autonomy.[97] Their sexuality and gender fluidity give them agency in heterosexual, cisgendered game lore. Their cyborg body "is not innocent...it does not seek unitary identity and so generate antagonistic dualisms without end".[98] Slaanesh, and other queer characters written into RPG source materials, offer the distinct ability to queer the narratives of lore by being represented in that lore.

Representation alone does not ratify problematic material, but players are able to engage with these characters and change them to frame their own queer and gender experiences. Feminist cyborgs are crafted through collaborative play, shifted by feminist actors. They do not come from natural origins and they shouldn't have to in order to be validated in the space of gameplay. That is what I find so important about TTRPGs, the ability to queer games at their very core. In TTRPGs, players can queer games by the extreme level of collaboration involved in storytelling. In RPVGs, players can expand on these characters through role-playing moments in the games, and can even make queer material themselves.

Fan fiction and art, game modifications, and even new iterations of RPGs are crafted by players who love the characters in source materials, but wish for them to be imagined in more inclusive spaces–ones they map onto fantasy worlds. If customization truly is a "queer survival skill", then these games are the battleground on which cyborgs

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[97] Cross, "The New Laboratory of Dreams: Role-Playing Games as Resistance", 75.
[98] Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto", 180.

will claim their right to survive.[99] Queer characters that were once diminished to harmful caricatures are now rebranded by queer communities, adapting the source material of games they love to be more representative of real queer people and their imagined realities. These are creations not formed from heteronormative unity, but complicated to redefine "pleasure in the confusion of boundaries".[100] This complication changes the political landscape of the game, reframing it for revolutionary work. I see players as cyborg writers striving for inclusivity in text that has been marketed towards heteronormative groups. Their collaborative gameplay portrays queer futures by players' conditions that enter out of necessity and love rather than exclusivity and profit. Players are cyborg writers that craft their own pathways to embodiment in "spaces apart".[101]

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[99] Kawitzky, "Magic Circles", 131.
[100] Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto", 150.
[101] Kawitzky, "Magic Circles", 132.

CHAPTER III: *CYBERPUNK RED* – TELLING STORIES & QUEERING CYBORG BODIES

"There are no sacred boundaries [in cyberpunk]: the body is modified, the mind is no longer private and even consciousness can exist outside the body in a virtual reality"
– Stefan Kriek, "The Tech*nobody*: Posthumanism as a utopian/dystopian enclave in cyberpunk and postcyberpunk science fiction"[102]

Cyberpunk is a genre that transforms contemporary reality into imaginative futures through technology. When paired with interactive gameplay, the genre can also transform players into cyborgs through the sociopolitical satire and embodiment it offers. This genre persists because its anti-capitalist themes are still relevant to our societal issues, and new methods of play are crafted to queer players and cyberpunk stories. My research focuses on how cyberpunk can be a space for queer futurity, formed through collaborative gameplay and queer narratives. As TTRPGs in general are morphed into queer configurations, cyberpunk games in particular are able to queer the cyborg through their satirical framework and the technical embodiment they offer. Material bodies carry meaning in cyborg stories through their adaptive capabilities.

In *Cyberpunk Red*, these capabilities are furthered through extensive mechanical and narrative customization. Haraway's cyborgian theory dissects why science fiction, coupled with Marxist critique, can develop queer narratives through inhabiting a cyborg body, but that theory does not stop at bodily formations.[103] It continues to form relationships between cyborgs in stories they create. TTRPGs' interactivity grants players/consumers of the genre influence over how queer the games can be.

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[102] Kriek, "The Technobody: Posthumanism as a Utopian/dystopian Enclave in Cyberpunk and Postcyberpunk Science Fiction", 18.
[103] Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto", 159.

Cyberpunk Red has high intensity stories that revolve around relationships and character embodiment more than action and combat. This changes the interactivity found within common TTRPGs like *D&D*. With more of a concentration on how the players choose to represent themselves and their character, their collaboration in gameplay has more opportunities to queer the cyberpunk genre and the cyborg herself. I analyze how the correlation between player choice and embodiment interacts with an anti-capitalist, post-apocalyptic setting. Queerness is examined through the body, both its material reality and disconnect from imagined "organic wholeness".[104] Role-playing in cyberpunk spaces imagines the body as a complex creature that is not wholly human or machine, but a blend of both through mechanics made by the game and the player's choice in storytelling. When coupled with anti-capitalist rhetoric, the body takes on new meaning, with more inclusive dialogue around what the physical form can become. In this sense, the body is queered to represent cyborgs in non-normative bodily formations.

A disability studies approach to *CP Red* explores how players configure their bodies in cyberspace, through interactive role-playing and technical embodiment. Players exert agency over their bodies in reality and play by marking themselves as cyborgs. This language is normalized in cyberpunk media, and as such creates inclusive dialogues around disability and gender fluidity. Players can embody characters as extensions of themselves, their bodies transgressing social normativity in reality to become expressive in cyborg imaginaries. Players can queer their character's gender, or represent non-normative body standards with the intent of embracing that queerness in gameplay. I interrogate how the techno-body is crafted in *CP Red* through a variety of mechanics and collaborative narratives, unearthing cyborgs from cultural

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[104] Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto", 150.

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norms as a way to queer those norms in imagined realities. This study is made clearer through the work of Alison Kafer in her work, "The Cyborg and The Crip", in which she unpacks the potential of Haraway's cyborg to queer disability studies.[105] Kafer's formative knowledge on the progression of the cyborg over the past thirty years influences my understanding of where the cyborg can be found in queer futures. I see the cyborg in both reality and fiction, and that relationship is made explicit in the setting of cyberpunk media, portraying contemporary issues through technologically transformed visuals.

Visions of high-tech creations amongst crumbling infrastructure paint a political sharp contrast that conveys a clear class divide through visual mediums. Night City, the setting of *CP Red*, illustrates a post-apocalyptic, nuclear fallout. Societal divides are shown through Neighborhood Zones, which players may cautiously traverse throughout the game, depending on their gang affiliation and economic status. Neighborhoods like Old Japantown, Old Combat Zone, and South Night City are husks of what they once were before the 4th Corporate War; now they house mostly gangs, cyberpsychos (cyborgs who have lost their humanity and sanity to technology), and industrial space. Conversely, New Westbrook and Rancho Coronado portray economic growth and stability, with glamor and commercialism seeping into every street sign. Outside of neighborhoods, there is the Reclaimed Perimeter and The Open Road, which house most of the nomads who do not reside in Night City itself, but have their own unincorporated hub.

The distinction between these areas display the gentrification of a city torn apart by capitalism, resembling many US cities as well. I am from the Chicago suburbs, and when

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[105] Kafer, Alison. "The Cyborg and The Crip." Chapter. *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, 103–28. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2013.

reviewing the map of Night City, I can't help but see the severely segregated neighborhoods of home. *CP Red* reflects our world and the sociopolitical issues we harbor through capitalism. In visualizing these elements and role-playing in their imagined reality, players have more agency to enact change in these spaces. The magic circles formed in this game allow players to initiate political discourse in gameplay.[106] A player could be a part of a rival gang to the area they need to traverse, leading to the optional conflict issued by the GM encompassing their experience in that space and how it could affect the storyline. This example, as well as a myriad of possibilities that could occur due to the political atmosphere of Night City interact with the characters' narratives just as they impact the narratives of real people in these neighborhoods. The societal factors that craft conflict in and out of gameplay are inspired by the players' experience with that kind of environmental conflict in the real world. This imagined society is formed by the hierarchal structures within the *CP Red* world, just as ours is implicated by the gentrifying elites in our own society.

Outside of the politics of neighborhoods, even the contrast in visuals based on economic status displays aunty-capitalist sentiment. Outfitted techno-bodies with sleek silver skin and shiny new cyborg bodies differ from the scavenged, miss-matched, and outdated bodies of cyborgs in less accessible areas. Players with little money or status must find other avenues to upgrade their bodies, adding the element of creationary class divide. Even if their bodies are perceived to be lower class, they still function in gameplay similarly to higher class characters.

The visuals are what differ, and carry meaning through that difference. Aesthetics are part of the embodiment of characters as well. They frame players' bodily autonomy and the

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106 Kawitzky, "Magic Circles", 132.

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connection they have to the setting and societal expectations of the world. In customizing their cyborg body (by any means), players can queer the body with a social commentary on the cyberpunk world and the real world. Haraway's cyborg body is rebuilt to be queer, with a focus on how the body *works* alongside its beautiful exterior, and depicts the ramifications of that exterior in and out of the cyberpunk world. The laboring body emerges from within the player's actions and choices as characters, making their practicality as important as their skills.

In this chapter, I discuss how *CP Red* crafts the cyborg body, and how that body carries meaning and queerness through gameplay and customization. Non-normative narratives of bodily autonomy queer the body in both the real and cyberpunk world. They queer the bodily inscriptions imposed on players in reality, in order for them to display "difference" in inclusive ways. I use Judith Butler and Anne Balsamo's understanding of the body – its materiality, performance, and the agency it provides – as a way of determining how the cyborg body is queer.

Player engagement in collaborative play, the mechanics of the game, and the materiality of gender have concrete meaning *CP Red*. I explore how that meaning is informed by posthumanist politics and social commentary on capitalist oppression in our society. Marginalized communities take the brunt of capitalist oppression, therefore having a capitalist critique in the game allows for players to interact with revolutionary themes to some degree of separation and analysis. Capitalism displays gender in problematic ways, through heteronormative marketing and violence. I see a link between the anti-capitalist content in *CP Red* and the fluidity of gender expression that this cyberspace provides. These themes show freedom of gender expression through interactive play, creating space for progressive dialogues made by and for players.

Stefan Kriek refers to the anti-capitalist themes as foreground for the posthuman, where cyborgs can feel embodied through their "lack of organic wholeness".[107] Their non-sacred bodies forge new beginnings in *CP Red* without the constraints of reality's gender expectations. Haraway imagines the cyborg as a "fallen" creature that explores the far reaches of our society and beyond through her power in the absence of innocence. She posits that the distinction between the cyborg body and the human body is her ability to surpass the dichotomy of purity and sin (i.e. sacred and sacrilege).[108] The cyborg transcends this naturalizing duality to show how beings that are not perceived as inherently pure have more opportunities to change and improve, as they are not trapped by any binary logic of "goodness/badness" and the conventions attached to it. Haraway's foundational exit from a dichotomy of purity and innocence greatly influences my analysis of gender fluidity and bodily autonomy, displaying how expressive the cyborg body can be when not associated with normative bodily perceptions. The cyborg body is rewritten through game mechanics and character exploration that player choice allows. The interaction between cyborg characters and the world can be further explored through the factor of time in the cyberpunk genre. Time is both fluid and mechanical in *CP Red*; it can be malleable through its depiction of futures, but also concrete in the actions players take through gameplay. Players have control over the construct of time, illustrating player choice as it is associated with forming queer futures.

I argue that time in *CP Red* queers futures for players by offering possibilities outside of our contemporary, straight timeline. Instead, time fluctuates depending on the collaborative storytelling of players and the GM. Player control over time creates more chances for queerness

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[107] Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto", 150.
[108] Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto", 175.

to last in cyberspace. The ways that time can be manipulated represents how players have more

opportunities to create time for themselves– a queer futurity that is crafted through imaginative

and collaborative means. I refer to Jose Esteban Muñoz's work, "Queer Utopia: The Then and

There of Queer Futurity", in this chapter to explore how queer time connects to the utopian

enclaves at play in *Cyberpunk Red.*[109] I also discuss queerness as a fluid futuristic fantasy that

can be found in *CP Red* through gameplay and invocation of the cyborg– Haraway's theory and

beyond.

Cyborg Bodies and The Fall

> "A cyborg body is not innocent; it was not born in a garden; it does not seek unitary identity and so generate antagonistic dualisms without end (or until the world ends); it takes irony for granted." – Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto"[110]

The cyborg body is a collection of bodily inscriptions made meaningful by human

creators. She carries with her the knowledge that she is not innocent, that her body is not *whole*,

but a sum of parts that inform a collective identity. Understanding this bodily formation can be

quite freeing. The cyborg is not faced with the pressure to submit to societal norms, but is

deemed a lost cause – a fallen creation. Understanding the cyborg's sacrilege, the cyborg can be

queered based on her own chosen customization. In falling from grace, the cyborg gains bodily

autonomy to reimagine herself and give herself new meanings. In *CP Red*, the cyborg begins as a

creature of the player's design, open to a variety of possibilities as she is not a sacred "human"

entity, but a technology to be crafted and queered.

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[109] Muñoz, José Esteban. "Queerness as Horizon: Utopian Hermeneutics in the Face of Gay Pragmatism". *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity.*
[110] Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto", 180.

Body modifications are some of the more concrete transformations that occur in *CP Red.*

Through character creation, players are able to design the technological additions to their body.

This visual inscription on the body is a queering of the natural body, introducing a new narrative

based on player preference. Haraway's cyborgian theory perceives the cyborg body as "not

innocent", aided by her ability to transform and surpass a biological binary that the human body

often carries in normative culture.[111] This binary is imposed on humanity, but gets queered in

cyberpunk work to incorporate more technological changes to the "human" form. These changes

are meant as improvements, imposed by human ideologies, yet once crafted they are typically

feared for their alienness to human biology. An example of this would be through

cyberpsychosis in *CP Red.* Players are encouraged to create technically-outfitted cyborg

characters in order to enhance their experience in gameplay; however, cyberware (technology

that players can add to their bodies that they *cannot* remove) has a price that characters pay with

their humanity. The more technological adaptations a player adds to their character, the lower

their "Humanity" statistic goes. When their humanity is almost nonexistent, they enter a

cyberpsychosis, in which they "no longer see themselves or others as complete, sapient

organisms, but simply as a collection of replaceable parts".[112] In this example, characters retain

fewer human characteristics, and GMs can roll for potential consequences of using cyberware in

a given situation. Cyberpsychosis expresses human anxiety over technological adaptation, the

fear that what might be deemed too much could influence the mental characteristics of a cyborg.

While transformation is encouraged for players, there is the lingering social norm that sees

technology as alien when met with the human body.

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[111] Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto", 180.
[112] Pondsmith, *CP Red*, 109.

This consequence of human expectations pressures cyborg bodies to retain some normative visual of human-ness, even as they are created to surpass humanity. The cyborg body is then left to transform based on player choice and agency over their character's mental and physical attributes. While the GM does influence potential outcomes if technological adaptation goes wrong, the incorporation of cyberware is ultimately up to the player. Cyberware has a precocious significance in *CP Red*, as it can both benefit and harm players depending on their integration on the cyborg form. Still, transformation is key to cyberpunk and *CP Red* especially. The human body morphs into something hybrid, something more statistically powerful. Beyond the "informatics of domination" that reinforces a privileged dichotomy in the "world system" of cyberpunk, the cyborg is formulated by a player's own interpretations and expression.[113] She exists both within and without societal norms, queering the body as a shifting and fluid creation written by cyborg players. The cyborg rewrites what it means to have a material body in cyberpunk spaces.

The techno-body in *CP Red* is designed for style and resourcefulness. It is about becoming the tools you need to survive, instead of relying on tools offered to a select few in society. This embodiment occurs through character creation, with the character sheet provided by *CP Red* acting as a guide for how the body is marked by the game's mechanics. The "cyberware" section of the character creation sheet (Figure 7 below) portrays the initial shift from human to machine, and the attributes that it can carry.

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[113] Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto", 163.

Figure 7. Cyberware Character Sheet

Note. Cyberpunk Red source art, depicting the "cyberware" section of the fillable character sheet and a skeletal frame to associate each piece of technology.

In this visual aid, the body is not seen with skin or bodily characteristics outside of a skeleton. Cyberware is then categorized as "with" or "without" a "foundational requirement". This distinction is based on what cyberware is seen (like a cybereye or robot limb), and what is not seen (like internal software or data chips). Both features provide embodiment for players in that they both craft an image of the cyborg based on a cybernetic (human and biological) connection between body and machine, and yet they are distinct in their mechanical attribute for gameplay. The practice of creating a character sheet with these factors in mind is a literal rewriting of the body using vast possibilities that *CP Red* offers. There is a deliberate blurring of

lines in the character creation process that rewrites what has been predicted/expected/enforced on

the material body (in reality) onto what could be explored/created/transformed on the cyborg

body (in an imagined reality).

The act of writing the cyborg into collaborative narratives queers both the body and the

source materials through player integration and choice. It is a corruption of both in the best

possible way. Queerness that uses "customization as a survival skill" thrives in this

reconstruction of the self to be seen outside of a violent, normative context (that frames our

society).[114] Her body could be modified with high-tech weaponry, cables and cords to jack into

the Net, or potentially modified vocal chords to copy voices. These technological elements add

to the survivability of players in a given scenario, but they are not the only technology that serves

to help or harm them. The addition of vehicles for nomad characters, who are transient characters

that generally move in packs of other nomad families, can make or break a heist situation if a

get-away car is needed. Gang colors on clothing or tattoos can make a neighborhood a safe

haven or hazard for players as well. Technical additions that exist in our reality can be just as

essential to survival in the game as futuristic technology, displaying how customization in

contemporary queer narratives are important to queer survival as well.

The "corrupted" cyborg body, with innocence untraceable on her body, can influence the

survival of a character based on their adaptations and narratives with which they are associated.

Her fall from innocence does not hold her back, but propels her forward towards a creative and

expressive future. She can transform from the fall. Haraway contends that "cyborg writing is

about the power to survive, not on the basis of original innocence, but on the basis of seizing the

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[114] Kawitzky, "Magic Circles", 131.

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tools to mark the world that marked them as other".[115] By this logic, cyborgs customize their bodies as a method of expressive resistance– a way to state that their livelihood does not depend on societal expectations, but rather their bodily autonomy in the face of those expectations. Players can customize characters as a way of queering the societal expectations of reality and imagination, forming bodies that *they* want. These bodies still hold remnants of societal norms, but they are reframed to center player agency in their customization. This customization can begin at the technical level of writing a character creation sheet.

The practice of creating a character through technical movements (paper to pen) visually and practically inscribes new meaning on the cyborg body for players–not only within the confines of the game, but in reality, as well. That meaning is a collection of normative and non-normative "parts" that reflect a player's identity. Players in previous games I have played have used the "cyberware" section of the character sheet to create stories, backgrounds, to their characters. One player thought to add extra arms to their character, who was a Medtech, in order to make their ability to perform medicine that much quicker and precise. This adaptation cost a great deal of humanity, but greatly attributed to their story and reason for continuing medicine and scientific exploration. The ability to craft a character's physicality makes cyborg writers out of the players of *CP Red*, informing how future gameplay will ensue.

Game developers making the games and the players creating the characters work in tandem and opposition to create avatars that could survive in an imagined dystopian future. I do not seek to argue that there is an intentional representation of queer embodiment through Mike Pondsmith or the other game collaborators. While I cannot distinctly say that it was not part of

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[115] Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto", 175.

the process, I claim that the process of creating a character in general is a queer act. Judith Butler states that "abject beings" are "not yet subjects" but instead classify what are "unlivable zones" outside of subjection, framing their existence as "circumscribing" to the subject.[116] Subject formation describes the normative representation of *CP Red* in that the structure of Pondsmith's world designates normative lines of livability and play for players based on heteronormative, cis-male ideals. The game's lore constructs meaning and subjectivity through these ideals, but the integration of "abject", or queer, beings can craft livable narratives for themselves, and identify unlivable zones crafted through normative means. Collaborative play and character creation give players the opportunity to queer developers' narratives to give themselves space in zones not written for them. They queer these spaces by performing customized gender and body subjectivity. *CP Red* creators do explore non-normative bodies to demonstrate how technology impacts disabled people, and attempt to construct narratives in the game based on their experiences.

Creators made an intentional effort to celebrate bodies that are not perceived as "normal" by societal standards of ability. Pondsmith and creators at CD Projekt Red had a team of disabled players test the game before the release (from which the *CP Red* story, "Black Dog", derives). Five out of six of these players wear prosthetic limbs, and were named the "Cyber6" as a group of "real-life Cyberpunks".[117] In the source material, creators explicitly state a correlation to cyberpunk and the progress of prosthetic devices in the real world, stating that "Often, the idea's something to cause concern but when it comes to what has been accomplished in the world of prosthetic devices, that idea is one of joy and it was something we wanted to honor in this

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[116] Butler, Judith. *Bodies that Matter*, 237.
[117] Pondsmith, *CP Red*, 435.

edition".[118] This directive is a conscious effort on Pondsmith and CD Projekt Red's part to form an inclusive dialogue with disabled bodies, as they have been a strong force in the Cyberpunk community from *CP 2020* to this iteration of *CP Red*; however, the limitations of the game do not emphasize the bodily experience of disabled people and the technology they might use, nor does it truly undertake the critique of expense in terms of prosthetics and cyberware.[119] The pain disabled people feel through the adoption of technology cannot be felt through gameplay, but I see the possibility for game mechanics to add an element of "wariness" or some other method of pain to the cyborg body as it adapts more technology. The only real consequence of cyberware in the game relates to the cyberpsychosis that can be inflicted on players with too many technological parts– a definitive problem by itself.

These experiences are real and expressed through critical discourse by Alison Kafer in her book, *Feminist Queer Crip*.[120] Her explanation of bodily pain for disabled people is formed in response to Haraway's manifesto, but can clearly relate to CD Projekt Red's attempt to integrate inclusive rhetoric in *CP Red*. Embodiment through technical spaces is not new or transformative in our society. Disabled bodies are an oppressed minority in our real world. The cyborg has always framed disability studies in her interrogation of binaries and technical bodies through "complex hybridization".[121] The adaptability and fluidity of the cyborg, along with her queering of normative body standards, coincides with a disability studies critique of cyberpunk spaces.

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[118] Pondsmith, *CP Red*, 437.
[119] Kafer, "The Cyborg and The Crip", 107.
[120] Kafer, Alison. "The Cyborg and The Crip."
[121] Kafer, "The Cyborg and The Crip", 108.

Kafer discusses how an embodied depiction of the cyborg has been connected to disability through "illustration" without much critical inquiry into how a disabled body is positioned as cyborgian[122]. This is where the player-imagined techno-body comes into play. Disabled people who either cannot afford prosthetics, or cannot tolerate the pain they bring, are able to embody the cyborg in a created fiction for themselves in *CP Red* by their own subjective constructions. Where the source material fails, these marginalized people can integrate their own narratives based on their lived experiences. While this is not a solution, and more creators should incorporate better dialogues with disability studies, the potential to queer the game through bodily customization is an option that not all media allows. The aesthetic and practicality of prosthetics in the game are normalized–there is no othering for the combination of cyborg and body, but rather a celebration. I find that, while misguided in some aspects, this offers a fantasy of technological embodiment for everyone, not just for disabled people.

Bodies in the game begin "corrupted" – they can transform based on that imperative. Knowing that, non-normative bodies can be framed otherwise, suited to the expectations and bodily autonomy of the player instead of real society or game developers. I understand that this imagined reality can still have some problematic attributes to it based on the collaborative gameplay; however, imagined realities can offer embodiment to people with disabilities, forming futures for themselves outside of normative societal boundaries. I find a similar function in the embodiment of the cyborg to craft queer futures.

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[122] Kafer, "The Cyborg and The Crip", 105.

Utopias and Performance

Queerness in *CP Red* is an embodiment, a performance, and a future. I locate the idea of utopia in *CP Red* through cyborgian bodies. Primarily, I use Muñoz's proposal of utopia and hope as "a critical methodology" and something "not yet here" to position player embodiment in cyberpunk futures.[123] Displacing queer utopia out of a present reality offers the opportunity for it to be explored in a future imaginary like *CP Red*. I see hope as an essential element of embodiment, something that requires not only a creation of space but a collaborative imagining of who can inhabit that space. There are multiple definitions of utopia that I grapple with as well, including Stefan Kriek's utopian enclave that connects directly to queer possibilities in a cyberpunk world. He frames this utopian enclave as "a space wherein both utopian and dystopian fantasies can take shape".[124] Kriek's theory places the utopian enclave just beyond human perception, but within the bounds of believability in fantasy settings. I position this enclave in *CP Red* because I find the possibility to queer in the source material, however there is no deliberate intention by developers to queer the cyberpunk genre or TTRPGs – it is an implicit queerness at play in the dystopian model of cyberpunk, merging with the queer utopian potential of role-playing games.

I also see Muñoz's investment into performance as a "means…to interrupt aesthetics and politics that aspire toward totality" as a potential linkage to Haraway's interpretation of "organic wholeness", seeing the act of performance as a deconstruction of unity; Haraway finds totality a potential limiting factor.[125] I note this comparison because I think both conceptions have value to my claims. Queer performance works to disrupt societal norms. It can perpetuate gender

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[123] Muñoz, "Queerness as Horizon: Utopian Hermeneutics in the Face of Gay Pragmatism, 97.
[124] Muñoz, "Queerness as Horizon: Utopian Hermeneutics in the Face of Gay Pragmatism", 97.
[125] Muñoz, "Queerness as Horizon: Utopian Hermeneutics in the Face of Gay Pragmatism", 100.

expectations in exaggerated arcs, like in the case of drag performance, as a way of disturbing normalized societal values. Queer performance in *CP Red* is depicted through dialogues, relationships, and character development through physical and mechanical customization. Performance shapes queer futures by interrupting what constitutes linear "straight time" in order to make space for marginalized groups whose lives become uninhabitable in restrictive measures of time. Muñoz references normative conceptions of queer utopia as a "stage", examining the damaging effects that conflation has on queer youth.[126] In his interpretation, queerness acts as a performance, something that is not a "simple presence" of temporality, but instead something that perpetuates queer futurity. It is a *lasting* identity marker in peoples' lives, and representations in games like TTRPGs can be formative for queer youth and adults. I appreciate this distinction of a lasting performance as it portrays the queer potential of long-standing games like *CP Red.* Cyberpunk is a high-tech fantasy genre that makes the future a fundamental feature. *CP Red* is set in an imagining of our not-too-distant future (2045), with the reality of our timeline explored in a fabricated future. Night City is the rebuilt, autonomous city between North and South California. This game has its roots in an imagined reality, one that stems from the history of our world, but is reworked to fit a fictionalized image of what our world *could* be. In this imagined reality, Kriek's utopian enclave takes shape, bridging our problematic history with a queered future.[127] The future is an embodiment of the cyborg, emerging from historic domination to reinvent itself as a queer and shifting imagining. Cyborgian futures forged from utopian enclaves display progressive politics that players interact with in *CP Red*. This game offers

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[126] Muñoz, "Queerness as Horizon: Utopian Hermeneutics in the Face of Gay Pragmatism", 98.
[127] Kriek, "The Technobody: Posthumanism as a Utopian/dystopian Enclave in Cyberpunk and Postcyberpunk Science Fiction", 23.

players a chance for their lived experiences to be felt and represented in collaborative movements that coincide with their personal narratives.

Muñoz asserts that the act of performance is not something stagnant, but more fluid. I see that distinction as a way to understand that queer temporality does not need to involve the present or present political ideation, but rather an escape route to queer potential in an imagined future. Something queer is missing our society, something that can be found through imagination and collaboration[128]. This queerness can be found in cyberpunk futures, and the queer cyborg body persists in these futures as it is measured by embodiment, aesthetic, cultural import, and meaning-making.

CP Red offers technological and queer embodiment in its portrayal of the cyborg body. I see this game as a hallmark of collaborative world-building, something that does not reiterate cultural norms but forges new ones. The aesthetics of a utopian enclave in a post-apocalyptic setting merge to create a gritty understanding of the political and social issues of our contemporary society while also pushing past those normative values to a deeper appreciation for queer futurity. Haraway' s theory of the cyborg not only inscribes queer potential on the body, but on the construction of setting and storytelling within interactive cyberpunk futures. Her interest in revolutionary cyborg writing relates to the anti-capitalist themes represented in *CP Red*'s future. I see the "punk" elements at play in the game as another chance for players to embody their characters in this imagined world.

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[128] Muñoz, "Queerness as Horizon: Utopian Hermeneutics in the Face of Gay Pragmatism", 100.

Aesthetics and Politics

Cyberpunk promises a critique around capitalism in its "punk" abstraction. The industrial

progress displayed in developers' aesthetic choices (Figure 8 below) map an imaginative

cyberspace onto familiar cities and landscapes, in this case Night City (i.e. Southern California).

Figure 8. *Cyberpunk 2077* **Cover Art**

Note. Cyberpunk Red cover art, depicting a high-tech city-scape with cyborgs traversing

the streets, with one blue, glowing feminine cyborg at the forefront.

A common tagline for cyberpunk settings is "high tech, low life", and the depictions of

these high-rise buildings covered in lights and excess are paired with the gritty back-alley dredge

and decay of a post-capitalist society. Players interact within these settings. In *CP Red*, most

areas have some level of disrepair from nuclear aftermath. Only the extremely wealthy areas are

able to retain their visual prestige, and this critique on segregation of cities is an explicit element

of the gameplay. Some characters might not be able to get into certain venues because of their

social status, gang affiliation, or appearance. The settings take on the role of conflict and

objective for players to collaboratively work through. For instance, I ran a session in which

players were unable to enter a high-profile club and the undercover Lawman (cop figure) of the

party had to flash their badge to get everyone inside, creating conflict among party members who were uncomfortable with a cop being on their team (as a role-playing scenario). I crafted a conflict (getting into the club) that the players needed to solve collectively, and the integration of a cop character in this environment changed how other characters reacted to this cop in future situations.

Cyberpunk is a genre full of anti-capitalist critique, both through settings and creators' aesthetic choices, as well as through the social discourse–what these fictional societies say about our own contemporary society. The satirical hallmarks of the genre critique the greed, excess, and power that comes with humanity's progress. There is a focus on the connection between humans and machines, a communication established as cybernetics that grounds characters to the setting and to the societal expectations of that setting.[129] The anti-capitalist rhetoric at play in cyberpunk media is represented both through the society and characters of that society (by extension, the players). In terms of *CP Red*, this anti-capitalist critique informs the mechanical difficulty, character motivations, technological access, and the social interactions between players and the game (orchestrated through the GM).

I source examples of capital at play in *CP Red* from a virtual iteration of the game run by Mike Pondsmith and a group of famous actors/creators for the 2020 E3 convention (a popular gaming convention).[130] In this game, the character Cereal Killer, played by Matthew Lillard, begins the game with low funds and a debt to his aggravated girlfriend. His experience differs from other characters like Too-Tall, played by John Kovaleski, who started the game with more

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[129] Kriek, "The Technobody: Posthumanism as a Utopian/dystopian Enclave in Cyberpunk and Postcyberpunk Science Fiction", 22.

[130] Mike Pondsmith et la. *Cyberpunk Red LIVE RPG - Part 1 (2020)*. YouTube, 2020.

economic value and connections.[131] This distinction creates a socio-economic maker for characters that initiates potential conflict as well as collaboration between players.

Storytelling meets anti-capitalist themes in *CP Red* through crafted scenarios, player choice, and the backdrop of a war-torn world. The scenarios are created by both the source books and the GM for the specific game. They are able to create a scene and situation based on the knowledge the source materials provide, in terms like "Streetkid" or "Rockerboy" with the purpose of grounding the source material in the language that characters might use in this world. *CP Red* doesn't sugar coat the language or terms used to integrate into stories. "The Fourth Corporate War", "Night City holocaust", "The Wasting Plague", "AIDS II"– all serve to describe the bleak and dark future that has emerged through capitalist means.[132] Likewise, these terms seek to gender interactions, with sexualizing undertones an implicit addition to dialogue. Examples of this can be found in the E3 game, in which a group of five masculine-presenting people make flirtatious jokes around the one feminine-presenting person.[133] One character, Lillard's, in particular, makes a habit of continuously hitting on this character (Nox Arya, played by Noura Ibrahim). Story moments like these ground the gameplay in problematic patriarchal structures and exhibit how gender aesthetics and gendered language interact with normative, collaborative groups.

These story moments carry weight in the game, making combat zones, drug addiction, gang wars, and the unhoused staple elements of gameplay. I once played a game in which the Night Market that players needed to meet at was in a combat zone, allowing for the strong

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[131] Mike Pondsmith et la, *Cyberpunk Red LIVE RPG - Part 1 (2020)*.
[132] Pondsmith, *CP Red*, 24.
[133] Mike Pondsmith et la, *Cyberpunk Red LIVE RPG - Part 1 (2020)*.

possibility of gang violence. Players did not think much of it at first, but when they were saddling up to leave, they were tailed by a group of carjackers. This added escalated conflict, and positioned the characters in the scene. Anti-capitalist themes frame the gameplay as darker or more severe, however the gritty tone is only part of the game's difficulty. Storytelling moments are shaped by scenarios that delve into political issues–revolutions, corporate espionage, Robin Hood-esque theft — all framing the characters by how they react to a given situation.

  CP Red is meant to be a difficult game. Fundamental game mechanics rely on the difficulty of the game as negotiated through player rolls and GM intervention. The source materials make clear that the GM should be offering hard-lined decisions and costly consequences for player failures.[134] Difficulty could impede someone's ability to win a bar fight or deduce the illness of someone lying unconscious in an alley. While difficulty level does not totally dictate the gameplay or character embodiment, these hurdles represent character moments. Players are allotted one turn per round of combat/conflict in the game. This turn could be used for a variety of things: discussion, persuasion, combat, hacking, healing, etc. They are concrete elements that can impact a character's story progression and their embodiment.

  "Never Fade Away" is a *CP Red* story officially released by CD Projekt Red and written by Mike Pondsmith, based on the gameplay of them and their fellow party members when playing the game before release.[135] This story introduces the source book, before mechanical information, to give an example of cyborg narratives incorporated in the material. In this story, Johnny Silverhand is a cyborg Rockerboy and the voice of a cyber-revolution who gets jumped along with his girlfriend, Alt, in a back alley. Johnny is taken to be fixed up by his crew, but his

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[134] Pondsmith, *CP Red*, 72.
[135] Pondsmith, *CP Red*, 5.

girlfriend is kidnapped by affiliates of the megacorporation, Arasaka. The crew assembles to break Alt out, but they soon learn that Arasaka wants her to build a powerful weapon, the Soulkiller, which sucks the souls of unwanted Netrunners invading a secure network. This large corporation threatens Alt, as she is forced to work for the single largest corporate monster in Night City. In the end, she becomes a part of Soulkiller, inhabiting its construct without a way to tether her to her human body. Johnny finds her body, connected to the Net but not to the construct, and believes her dead. He walks out, carrying her lifeless frame as she screams silently from the monitors[136]. This story introduces the *CP Red* sourcebook as well as the tone of the game.

Through the characters and narrative motivations of *Never Fade Away*, players are able to discover the anti-capitalist themes as described through collaborative storytelling. The corporation's greed and cruelty cause Alt to lose her humanity. They use her body for experimentation, and treat her as expendable as a machine. She is dehumanized and objectified before she even syncs with Soulkiller. Instead, her "laboring body", in the words of Anne Balsamo, has only use for her reproduction of societal norms through "various technical formations".[137] The laboring body conveys a capitalist and gendered critique of corporate hierarchies and their inability to see value in human life, an important factor that leads to the high-tech fantasy of cyberpunk in the first place.

Through Alt's work, and the player who chose to embody her, a clear connection between player choice and anti-capitalist themes reveals itself. Navigating through this society and through these scenarios requires players to understand and embody the struggles that their

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136 Balsamo, "Forms of Technological Embodiment: Reading the Body in Contemporary Culture", 282.
137 Balsamo, "Forms of Technological Embodiment: Reading the Body in Contemporary Culture", 282.

characters and the characters around them might be going through. Anti-capitalist political theory permeates the high-tech aesthetic as a core tenet of the cyberpunk genre.

There is a strong connection between political theory and player interactivity. The themes found in the narratives of the game are then morphed, queered, by collective player actions. Discourse between players around political issues allow for them to transform into "cyborg monsters" that do not need to define cyberpunk worlds by the "mundane fiction of Man and Woman", but by their own imagined realities.[138] In this sample of Haraway's theory, players are cyborg actors and writers, imagining more fluid stories that surpass the binary distinctions of dominating patriarchal stories. They are able to take elements from cyberpunk stories, like Never Fade Away, and potentially rewrite the endings. They queer discourse based on their own political formations and those crafted in the genre. Players queer societal norms attributed by contemporary society to explore their faults and possible futures. Cyberpunk is satirical in its political ideology, and the ways in which players interact with the medium of TTRPGs make that satire more explicit and deliberate.

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[138] Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto", 180.

CHAPTER IV: MISREPRESENTATIONS OF CYBORGS & CYBERPUNK IN

CYBERPUNK 2077

"The dichotomies between mind and body, animal and human, organism and machine…
are all in question ideologically. The actual situation of women is their integration/exploitation
into a world system of production/reproduction and communication called the informatics of
domination."– Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto"[139]

I started my analysis of the cyborg in science fiction by referencing her origin in Donna

Haraway's work. In her dissection of "the informatics of domination", she argues that gender,

like many constructions imposed on bodies, is formed, shifted, and reiterated through public and

private modes of patriarchal surveillance.[140] Mapping the informatics of domination onto the

cyberpunk genre, I find that there is opportunity to reconstruct these systems through collective

creation and imaginaries. Queering the cyborg from how it originated (in histories of

domination) allows for new modes of gender inquiry and queer futures that stretch beyond the

scope of dominant ideologies of our current society. Motivations and efforts to create this

content exist in radical spaces of collaboration, as I have discussed in regards to TTRPGs. While

there are capitalist driven markets that profit from these games, the interpretation and queer

customization can still be wielded by the players. This gameplay activism, along with the general

mechanics of TTRPGs, encourage embodiment. When the informatics of domination are

challenged and surpassed in cyberpunk gaming, the material can be queered. When these

systems are faced with less player choice and radical change, the cycle of domination is

reinforced in ways that cause harm. Sadly, this cycle continues in *CP 2077*.

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[139] Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto", 163.
[140] Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto", 163.

Cyberpunk 2077 is a RPVG released by CD Projekt Red in 2020. The game developer

has built itself a "AAA" reputation among the gaming community, through the popularity of

their previous *Witcher* franchise, especially *The Witcher: Wild Hunt*.[141] "AAA" games, as

defined by theorist Amy Brierley, refers to "games produced by major publishers with high

development and marketing budgets."[142] Projekt Red has been well-loved by audiences for their

adaptation of *The Witcher* series by Andrzej Sapkowski, and their adaptation of the *Cyberpunk*

TTRPG to a video game format was much anticipated by fans.[143] Game enthusiasts trusted

Projekt Red to create an expansive and beautiful cyberpunk world that was reminiscent of the

original role-playing game with references to cyberpunk media outside of Pondsmith's work.

When the game announced that they would have Keanu Reeves as the Rockerboy, Johnny

Silverhand, in the game, fans were excited. They hoped *Cyberpunk 2077* was going to be the

game of the year. So, what happened?

CP 2077 had an early launch of the game, causing massive glitches and game

malfunctions. Even before the game launched, game journalist, Liana Ruppert, noted on twitter

that the game induced epileptic triggers of flashing lights and patterns that were excessive and

unneeded.[144] While the developers came out with a statement responding to this claim, they half-

heartedly issued a new warning for the game alluding to said triggers. This PR scandal didn't

bode well for the game, and it was not the only controversy to occur before its release.

[141] Tomaszkiewicz, Konrad et la. *The Witcher: Wild Hunt*. Game. CD Projekt Red, 2015.

[142] Brierley, Amy. "Communicating Love: Dialogue Icons, Control and Diminishing Social Complexity in *Cyberpunk 2077*". *Platform: Journal of Media and Communication* 9, no. 2 (December 2022): 37–54.

[143] Sapkowski, Andrzej, and Danusia Stok. *The last wish*. London: Gollancz, 2023.

[144] Carpenter, Nicole. "*Cyberpunk 2077* Sequences May Cause Seizures, Developer Patches in New Warning." Polygon, December 8, 2020.

Upon releasing a new trailer at the 2019 E3 convention, a popular gaming convention for

creators and game enthusiasts, CD Projekt Red displayed some potential game footage. This

footage included an image of an advertisement depicting a trans woman in a provocative and

problematic way (Figure 9 below).

Figure 9. *Cyberpunk 2077* **In-Game Ad**

Note. Cyberpunk 2077 still from a promotional video, which depicts an advertisement

with a trans woman model who has a visibly large penis bulge in her jumpsuit with the tagline

across the screen reading "Mix It Up".

The picture in question displays a fem-presenting model with a visible penis outline

(through a jumpsuit), with the advertisement reading "Mix It Up" and "16 flavours you'd love to

mix". Response to this image was mainly shock at the way Projekt Red decided to depict

transness in their futuristic game. In an interview with *Polygon*, art director Kasia Redesiuk

claims that the decision to include a trans model in this advertisement was based on "their looks"

and how they personally find "this person sexy". She also claims that this model is "used" and

objectified through corporate means as an advertisement: "They are displayed there just as a

thing, and that's the terrible part of it".[145] While the intent of being critical of hypersexualized advertisements definitely has a place in the cyberpunk landscape, this illustration does more to add to a sexualizing and dehumanizing of trans bodies. Redesiuk wants this image to seem "jarring and overly aggressive" as a form of capitalist critique, however I see this "edgy" progressive attitude as similar Villeneuve's depiction of feminine bodies in *Blade Runner 2049*– severely lacking in nuance or any legitimate critique within the material that is given. Due to fan backlash, the game removed this ad, however the damage was done. Marginalized communities were feeling disparaged by this game before it even came out, and once it did the bugs and glitches seemed to ruin it for most other parties as well. Aside from bugs, narrative storylines also suffered from a lack of contextualizing and exploration from development to execution.

Queer narratives would have been able to thrive in the game, *CP 2077*, if not for the developers' intent on *not* queering their content. For example, trans narratives are not as fully explored, despite the fact that the main character (player) has a masculine figure in their mind, desiring control over their body. This story could be unpacked for how this demanding male figure inside fem-presenting characters could disrupt their gender performance in the game, and potentially harm them. Likewise, it could also reaffirm masc-presenting individuals through the assertion of a gender of which they embody in and out of gameplay. Regardless of the queer potential of this storyline, it never truly reaches the depths of trans-formational interactive play.

The narrative choices and construction of the game that occurred before its release trouble the already tentative queerness that could be represented in the game. I reference *CP 2077*'s build-up and release because I think it contextualizes the content in the game as well as

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[145] Hall, Charlie. "CD Projekt Red Explains Controversial Cyberpunk In-Game Ad Featuring Trans Model." Polygon, June 12, 2019.

the critique I provide on the queerness and embodiment in this cyberspace. While *CP 2077* takes

information from *CP Red* and places it in a digital format, it does much more than that. It

removes one of the core elements that can be found in the TTRPG format– collaboration. There

is a multiplayer option, however the game's main story and the side quests that emerge in the

open world format are all framed as a single player experience following the main character, V.

In some ways, *CP 2077* tries to include new modes of embodiment, like through character

creation at the beginning of the game and the first-person view of the game, however these

moments become few and far between as the game goes on. I played the game in single player

mode on a PlayStation 4 years after its release. I wanted to know the context about how the game

was produced, as well as whether or not this game would crash my console before I started

playing (another potential consequence of the game's bugs). My experience, peppered with the

experience and critique by other players, like video essayist Sophie from mars, helps frame my

understanding of the gameplay and story.

My aim in discussing *CP 2077* is a bit different than in *CP Red*, as instead of queering

the cyborg through the embodiment found within the game's material and community-based play

and creation, I am merely searching for *remnants* of the cyborg in *CP 2077*. There is queerness

and technological embodiment in this game, founded in the core elements of RPVGs rather than

most narratives at play in the story. Unfortunately, it is outshined by the glaring issues that CD

Projekt Red have created through this gaming medium. In order to further unpack these issues, I

will discuss them and how they relate to my research's main tenet– understanding the queer

potential in role-playing games with cyborgian theory. *CP 2077* borrows similar aesthetics from

CP Red, but also attributes some unsavory tropes of the cyberpunk genre.

Video essayist, Sophie from mars, discusses the oversaturation of orientalist aesthetics at play in *CP 2077* and how it has been a pervasive commonality in the genre. Oriental aesthetics are an amalgamation of Asian (usually Japanese) appropriative content used as an "othering" technique, to not only paint the landscape as excessive *difference* but also antagonize that difference through hyper-capitalist motivations.[146] Orientalism, was first introduced by theorist Edward Said, but a more distinct iteration came later, by David S. Roh, to frame orientalism in nigh-tech spaces: *techno-orientalism*, refers to the ways in which Asian countries, and by extension Asian people, are depicted as cybernetic or "hypertechnological" by default.[147] This concept examines a fear of the other through the form of Asian people that was very prevalent in the early years of science fiction novels, and carried through more contemporary cyberpunk work for aesthetic dialogues. In more than just aesthetics, this fear of Asia still exists for western countries. I offer this framing of techno-orientalism as an example of complex and disappointing tropes at play in *CP 2077*, stemming from outdated ideology without the forethought to discuss their issues in the media. Due to the lack of player-led narratives in the game, these issues are not able to be unpacked through player gameplay or dialogue, which differs from the handling of problematic elements in *CP Red*.

I interrogate how the social interactions and relationship-forming storylines in *CP 2077* differ from *CP Red*. These differences are unavoidable as the directive for engagement is completely different in a video game RPG than that of a table-top RPG. And yet, there are still more differences that *CP 2077* deliberately makes to leave little choice in the social interactions of the game, lest they deter from the main storyline or the directed goal of a mission/relationship

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[146] Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. Toronto: Random House, 1978.
[147] Roh, David S., Betsy Huang, and Greta A. Niu. *Techno-orientalism: Imagining Asia in speculative fiction, history, and Media*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015.

path. *CP 2077* has one clear storyline that developers have made, and players are deterred from any other formative stories that divert from this path. Narrative differences result in a loss of queer potential, as the opportunity to engage in collaborative storytelling is all but removed from the game. Amy Brierley examines how this disconnect is displayed through dialogue icons in *CP 2077*, and how the visual aids imposed through dialogue menus in gameplay frame choice in targeted, heteronormative ways.[148] I use her analysis of dialogue icons and conversations with NPCs in the game to explain how player agency suffers from a *lack* of choice and of queerness.

My aim in this chapter is not to merely state that there is no visible queering happening in this game. On the contrary, it is because I see the potential for queerness in *CP 2077* and the cyberpunk genre as a whole that I feel so disappointed by this game's product. The cyborg can be queered in this cyberspace. There are possibilities for queer and technical embodiment. The issue lies in the developers' intent as well as the capitalist-driven production of the game. If queer future is to become possible in cyberpunk, collaborative creation needs to be at the core of the content and gameplay. Haraway discusses how collaborative feminist actors craft revolutionary work, which I associate with the interactive imaginary formed by a group of players in RPGs, creating queer futures with their own narratives.[149] The feminist possibilities in this game relate to moments in the main storyline, as well as some of the side quests, NPCs players meet, and the visual aspects of characterization through a player's character creation. While I see queer potential in these gameplay moments, I unpack how that potential is lost through capitalist motivations by a developer that focuses on the hypersexualized vision of queerness found in heteronormative media.

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[148] Brierley, "Communicating Love: Dialogue Icons, Control and Diminishing Social Complexity in *Cyberpunk 2077*", 41.

[149] Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto", 166-67.

I utilize Stacy Gillis' work, "The (Post)Feminist Politics of Cyberpunk", to engage in discourse around how *CP 2077*'s failings to queer or offer embodiment can stem from a larger genre issue when formed through patriarchal avenues[150]. Gillis interrogates the gendering of feminine creatures in cyberpunk works, and alludes to the troubles of postfeminist femininity and the "ass-kicking techno-babe".[151] I recontextualize this post-femininity in *CP 2077* to analyze how fem-presenting bodies in the games are sexualized and objectified, critiquing gender as it is depicted in the cyberpunk genre.

Social Expectations and Experiences

I understand social interactions in RPVGs to differ from TTRPGs in that they are usually informed by the game's written dialogue options as opposed to the direct dialogue contribution made by players. This automatically deters player agency in the games, as their potential to influence conversations and their own narrative is limited. Social interactions as well as the way characters interact with the world are primary gameplay factors in RPGs. So much of the role-playing aspect of games rely on how players are able to engage with (or not) social inhibitors as a way to progress storylines. In Japanese romance RPGs, known as otome games or "maiden games", the player progresses a storyline with the specific NPC with whom they wish to form an end-game relationship.[152] Character moments between the player and that NPC craft a relationship, and the player is able to embody their player-character in the game to answer dialogue questions or perform actions that will instigate a positive social interaction for them. While the options for player dialogue remain more limited in RPVGs as opposed to TTRPGs, the

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[150] Gillis, Stacy. 'The (Post)Feminist Politics of Cyberpunk'. *Gothic Studies* 9, no. 2 (November 2007): 7–19.

[151] Gillis, "The (Post)Feminist Politics of Cyberpunk", 8.

[152] Lopez, Caitlin. "Otome Games: Narrative, Gender and Globalization". Durham: Duke University, 2019.

ability for players to initiate relationships through dialogue is a prominent asset to social interactions. This experience is modified in *CP 2077* to represent the genre style and characters in the game.

The gameplay in *CP 2077* prioritizes sex and violence over social relationship-building. In other words, the universe of *CP 2077* projects other characters as objects – challenges or obstacles to be overcome – rather than as meaningful subjects. In *CP 2077*, social interactions with NPCs play a formidable role in how relationships are formed between them and the player as well as the player and the world of Night City, yet they do not offer queer embodiment, or technological embodiment through the mechanics of dialogue and action. Instead, dialogues and social interactions are formed through mainly hyper-sexualized or violent motivations, painting an extreme view of cyberpunk social networks that prioritizes sex and violence over relationship-building. While this method is still a form of embodiment, I argue that it does not open up the possibility of queer futures for the cyborg to thrive, but instead a hostile and toxic environment built to encase heteronormative ideals.

There are several important relationships presented to the main character, V, through the main storyline that provide options and alternatives for gender and sexuality through player choice and dialogue. V is the player's character, through whom the main story is told. Johnny Silverhand is the Rockerboy who spurred a revolution in the *CP Red* story, *Never Fade Away*.[153] In this story, he is the holographic image of a man inserted in V's mind. His consciousness melds with her own throughout the story, and even if he is not visualized, his voice is always present. V's relationship with Johnny is integral to the main plot as he tells them that their body should

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[153] Pondsmith, *CP Red*, 5.

not be their own, but instead his. His memories and personality, along with projections of him, seep into V (and the player's) foreground. His motivation is to take over– or potentially integrate with – V's body. This causes an ontological conflict within V as they become unaware of what part is themself and what part is Johnny. This extremely visceral inscription on the body marks it in potentially dangerous ways.

The social interactions between V and Johnny begin mostly hostile, with Johnny telling V to kill themself so that he can take over. He tries to impose a hyper-masculine gender identity onto V (who has the option of male or female pronouns), undercutting any differing gender performance V makes outside of Johnny's purview. Johnny's influence remains paramount to the storytelling, and it is clear in the marketing and actor choice for his role that he is the real central character to the plot. Keanu Reeves portrays Johnny in voice and character model, and he was the first character to appear in the game's commercials. There is a clear drive to have players embody Johnny, even as their physical form is not his. This problematizes gender roles in the game, as characters who choose a fem-presenting or non-binary experience are then thrust into a masculine-dominated narrative that reconfigures their experience through the image of Johnny Silverhand. Problematic or not, player embodiment is complicated by the relationship between V and Johnny, and the bodily performance they portray.

V is already marked by what Judith Butler refers to as the "surface politics of the body", illustrated by the game's societal norms. Their cyborg body undergoes a "redescription of gender" by which their body is regulated and gendered by the fantastical elements of the game.[154] This gendering is present in the dialogue options that appear depending on whether the

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[154] Butler, "Bodily Inscriptions, Performative Subversions", 417.

player presents masculine or feminine. Yet that performance counters the "internal core" of

Johnny's and V's merged gender performance on the inside of V's mind and the player's visual

of the game.[155] Johnny and V's relationship is displayed as tumultuous because of the conflicting

representation of self. This narrative can reflect a facet of gender dysphoria, the misery of being

in a body whose sex does not align with their gender identity.[156] This depiction has the

possibility to exhibit queerness and the complexity of gender identity, however the game does

not display any desire to engage with that kind of dialogue. Instead, the game wishes to focus on

Johnny's past and experience, and the potential for V's existence in their body to be erased.

The issue of performance and narrative social interactions occur through the question of

whose body and whose mind is being experienced–is there room for the player to find

embodiment in this potentially toxic framework? V's potential dysphoria coupled with the voice

of a dominant male voice telling V to kill themself and let him take over their body represents

potential trauma for players of the game.[157] The embodiment that could occur through the social

interactions at play here are not promoting queer future, but rather queer death.[158] I see Johnny

and V's relationship as the potential for something great, something truly queer, but that gets lost

in an effort to make edgy, dark narratives. Not only does V lose any potential queerness through

their own introspective narrative dialogue (with Johnny), but the queerness represented within

the game's preset social interactions outside of V and Johnny instigate an "illusion of

queerness", one that does not allow players to be fully immersed or embodied through queer

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[155] Butler, "Bodily Inscriptions, Performative Subversions", 417.

[156] Atkinson, Sean R, and Darren Russell. "Gender Dysphoria." *Australian Family Physician* 44, no. 11 (2015): 792–96.

[157] Atkinson and Russell, "Gender Dysphoria".

[158] Stanley, Eric. "Near Life, Queer Death". *Social Text* 29, no. 2 (2011): 1–19.

representation. While there is no singular way to represent queerness in media, *CP 2077* makes it evident they weren't even really trying.

Outside of V's relationship with Johnny, framed almost as an internal conflict, the player has the opportunity to form social and romantic relationships with other characters in the game. In terms of romantic relationships, V has the option of pursuing a character from a selection of main story NPCs (non-playable characters) depending on their (and V's/the player's) sexuality. For players seeking a heteronormative relationship, they might pursue Panam or River, whereas for non-heteronormative relationships, players might select Kerry or Judy. In Amy Brierley's work, "Communicating Love: Dialogue Icons, Control and Diminishing Social Complexity in *Cyberpunk 2077*", she examines how the mechanics of dialogue icons act as a "picture, symbol or image representation that acts as supplementary communication in aid of dialogue" and how that representation diminishes player agency in *CP 2077*, along with queer potential.[159] In the game, vague dialogue icons are left for players to insinuate meaning as to how that particular dialogue option might result in social interactions. This open-ended approach to romantic dialogue allows for players to have more agency and determinacy in the narratives they play.

Emoji-style dialogue icons such as hearts or lips stand in the place of verbal dialogue and typically lead to action. See the example from the *Disciples: Liberation* RPVG below for a sampling of dialogue icons (Figure 10).[160]

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[159] Brierley, "Communicating Love: Dialogue Icons, Control and Diminishing Social Complexity in *Cyberpunk 2077*", 38.

[160] Bégin, Philippe et la. Disciples: Liberation. Quebec City: Frima Studio, 2021.

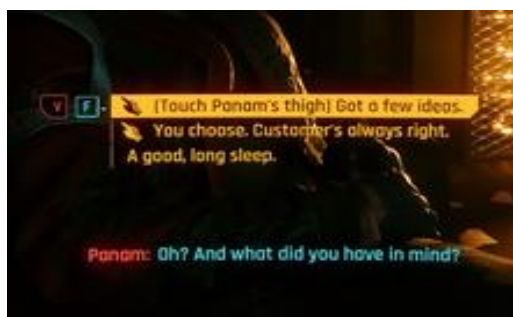**Figure 10. Disciples: Liberation Screenshot**

Note. *Disciples: Liberation* RPVG screenshot, which depicts different dialogue options and the icons associated with them.

In the case of romantic or erotic "dialogues," the end result is usually sex. For many games, these icons try to remain ambiguous, leaning into player choice as the dominant source of narration. In terms of romance, the heart icon usually suggests romantic dialogue. In *CP 2077*, the romance dialogue option is the image of lips (a lipstick mark), signifying a kiss or maybe something more. The shift in imagery with this distinction displays a more physical relationality to romance which is only furthered by the end result of most romantic pursuits in the game leading to sex.

CP 2077 romantic dialogue icons are displayed below (Figure 11 & Figure 12).

Figure 11. *Cyberpunk 2077* Dialogue #1

Note. *Cyberpunk 2077* screenshot, in which the dialogue options to romance the NPC, Panam, depict physical touch choices.

Figure 12. *Cyberpunk 2077* **Dialogue #2**

Note. Cyberpunk 2077 screenshot, in which the dialogue options depict a lipstick mark dialogue icon to illustrate the option for a sexual encounter with the NPC, Panam.

The game sets expectations for romantic relationships that are clearly instigated by dialogue icons, removing much player agency or ambiguity in the motivation of gameplay romance. This represents an extremely physical depiction of embodied love. The player is able to codify the relationship they form through the dialogue choices and actions they make (clearly formatted by the game), making the hypersexualized conquest of an NPC less socially complex and more formulaic.

As queer character options are available to romance in *CP 2077*, there is still queer potential displayed in the game, however the differences between these relationships and the heteronormative relationships depicts a clear friction developers had with that queerness. In mechanics alone, dialogue opportunities to choose a romantic relationship with queer characters differ from the opportunities in heteronormative relationships. There are clear "yes" or "no" options for the final heteronormative romance pursual, while in the final queer romance pursuals there is a third option to remain platonic. From the third path as well as the "no" path, no further

romance may be pursued for that character.[161] Leaving more options to "escape" queerness

represents tension with queerness being an option at all.

To push this concept further, the dialogue options for final queer romance pursuals are

timed, whereas the heteronormative are not. This frames queerness as almost a glitch in the

game–blink and you might miss it. With so little opportunities for queer dialogues to thrive, the

cyborg has less opportunity to *be queered* in this space.

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[161] Brierley, "Communicating Love: Dialogue Icons, Control and Diminishing Social Complexity in *Cyberpunk 2077*", 45-46.

Figure 13. *Cyberpunk 2077* **Johnny Silverhand Screenshot**

Johnny: And you're a cunt. Maybe we'll fit together after all.

Note. Cyberpunk 2077 screenshot, which depicts Johnny Silverhand's problematic dialogue with V (the player).

Determining the queer potential of *CP 2077* at the end of a sordid battle with the game's questionable decisions seems like a loaded statement. I understand the potential that RPVGs have to queer narratives and gameplay through dialogue, mechanics, and storytelling, but the *intent* of queerness in the game can represent what might get lost in translation. Queerness can exist in games that do not seek to queer, they just make that queerness harder to find. This research aims to find the lost queer potential, analyze the reasoning behind what was lost and how to move towards queer futures from that space. I see the cyborg in V, and in Johnny, in the joytoys, and in the players who embody a character crafted through queer customization. I

examine how these cyborgs reflect the motivations of the game, its marketing, and its inevitable failure as a cyberpunk media. Hyper-sexualized depictions of cyborgs in *CP 2077*, unplayable to RPVG players, span across Night City for consumers to bear witness. I question the motivations behind this sexualization as a form of embodiment, a way that differs from some of the TTRPG characters I have previously mentioned. Sexuality for the sake of spectacle differs from the possibility of embodied movement and performance that can occur through more direct interactive play.

NPCs frame sexuality as an aesthetic representation of the game, but what further underlines the drive for aesthetics without meaning is how character creation functions from the beginning. I have mentioned the innate queer potential of character creation as a formative source of how players can craft a queer image of themselves for gameplay to come. In *CP 2077*, character customization highlights this concept with the expansive body manipulation offered through the character creation screen. From here, players may select their preferred body type, genital type, and even nipple type by "masculine/feminine" options. The availability of these bodily transformations to coexist simultaneously, to coordinate in ways that few games have dared to venture into, is a very queer thing.
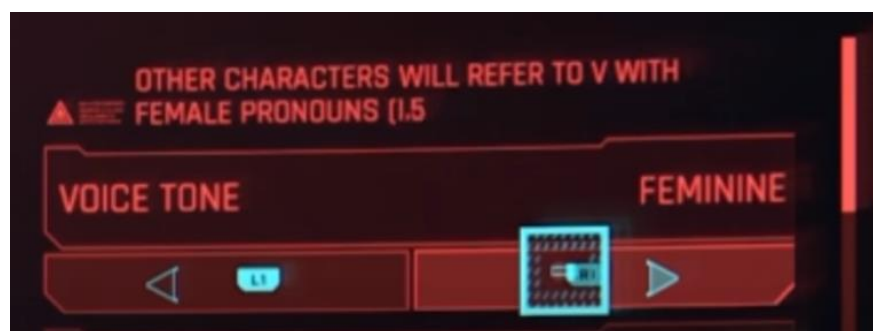
I find the character creation to have the potential to perform gender through fantastically queer ways. Judith Butler states that "gender identification is constituted by a fantasy of a fantasy" something that when performed through fluid formulations can "suggest an openness to resignification and recontextualization".[162] Interpreting Butler's stance, I see that gender in *CP 2077* is crafted by a fantasy of gender based on contemporary ideals that are also formed in

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[162] Butler, "Bodily Inscriptions, Performative Subversions", 418.

fantastical ways. This integrated fantasy of gender allows for people to form new gender expressions from within those cyclical measures. Gender performance becomes a fluid creation based on fantastical societal norms, which can be queered through their fictitious beginnings. I find this interrogation linked to the options for *CP 2077*'s character creation in that the ability to interact on such deep and fluid levels with gender allows for more freedom to explore and express queer narratives and embodiment. The cyborg comes alive not through maintained dichotomies but through a queer performance of gender norms, found in multiple iterations of fantasy. Players are able to craft an image that best connects to them in a manner quite similar to the TTRPG level of embodiment. The only issue comes in the glaring form of pronouns and voice.

While there truly is an expansive amount of customization options available for bodily transformation, creating cyborgs through physical and technological methods, the option for V's "voice" in the game only has two options that tie them to gender binaries. The option for feminine voice (in Figure 14 below) specifies a correlation to female pronouns.

Figure 14. *Cyberpunk 2077* **Character Creator Screenshot**

Note. Cyberpunk 2077 screenshot, which depicts the "voice tone" and pronoun choice from the character creator screen with the binary option of "feminine" or "masculine".

Tying voice to pronoun use in the game genders V in harmful ways. It denies the reality of women who have masculine voices, a possibility that CD Projekt Red did not consider amongst the otherwise inclusive character customization. The necessity of pronoun usage and binary gender language is highly contested by video essayist Sophie from mars, who sees this as more of "failure of communication" between developer teams, and that V's pronoun usage and voice should not need to be tied to any narrative structure to begin with.[163] Gender exists in cyborgian contexts to blur and queer gender binaries and to further interrogate the societal norms that impose those binaries on what should be player choices. If gender were a necessary component of narrative dialogue, where does it emerge?

Dialogue like the example displayed at the beginning of this section portray a few throw-away lines that surmise gendered discussion in the game. V is fighting with Johnny and says, "You're such a dick", to which Johnny responds, "And you're a cunt. Maybe we'll fit together after all".[164] This conversation, along with some other small distinctions illustrating V's gender are unnecessary, and add little substance or style to the game. They exhibit toxic behavioral traits of hyper-masculine dialogue, something that makes the heteronormative cis men in the room laugh and make everyone else slightly uncomfortable. Stacy Gillis references this kind of masculinity as a prevailing issue in the cyberpunk genre, which seeks to dehumanize female techno-bodies and impose an idyllic sex object instead.[165] The body is formed through realistic, contemporary societal norms. This shows how Projekt Red values normative gender binaries displayed on the surface of the body over transgressive queering of what lies beneath. There is

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[163] "Sophie from mars". *Cyberpunk 2077: Some Cyber, No Punk | Sophie from Mars*. YouTube video, 2021.

[164] Badowski, Adam. *Cyberpunk 2077*. Video Game. 2020.

[165] Gillis, "The (Post)Feminist Politics of Cyberpunk", 13.

little autonomy or agency to be found outside of physical description. The cyborg is not able to thrive on the surface alone.

Another example of feminized objectification comes in the form of "joy toys" which appear as characters in the main storyline in order to gain information. Joy toys are cyborg sex workers, which players can pay to have sex with both in and out of the main story. The two joy toys represented in the main story are Skye and Angel, which are primarily used as story progression and wish-fulfillment for players. V may choose a prospective joy toy to pursue based on the player's gender preference, and from there they are able to seduce and have sex with a cyborg sex worker as part of the game. While this display of sexuality is not inherently wrong, I do think that the way in which joy toys are present as a "doll" in the narrative, some*thing* to use and drain for information, is a misuse at best. Further, there was an issue of queer fear amongst heteronormative players at this point, as Brierely alludes: "In order to show which character is which, the game offers you images of the two on an in-game computer screen. But when it comes time to choose between them via dialogue options these images disappear, and the player is left with just two names".[166] The struggle for heteronormative players is that the gender-neutral names of these joy toys paired with the minimal view of the character made it difficult to parse which character belonged to which gender. Players were presented with an unintentional option to queer.

This conundrum led to a swift patch by the game developers to offer more time displaying the pictures of joy toys to prevent any "'accidental' queerness" that might ensue from

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[166] Brierley, "Communicating Love: Dialogue Icons, Control and Diminishing Social Complexity in *Cyberpunk 2077*", 42.

this choice.[167] I reference this moment to not only contextualize the gendered connection between the joy toys and perceptions of their bodies in relation to sex, but also in how quickly Projekt Red tries to negate the queer potential explicit in cyberpunk and RPG content. The player might embody a queer experience through this scene, through this dialogue choice, but that option is made more explicitly normative through mechanical interventions outside of the interactive play space. The hierarchical element of this example is how I find the queer potential of *CP 2077* so hard to pin down. In one instance there are queer characters and relationships for players to engage with, in another breath they are lost to constricting time frames and developer configurations. This is the main facet I struggle with in *CP 2077*. The queerness at play in the game has no real directive, and seems tacked on as a form of progressive performance with little substantive discourse around what that performance is *doing*.

The body, the cyborg, and the world cannot be queered through the integration of queer aesthetics alone. There has to be fluid opportunities for growth and change through the narrative and mechanical framework of the game. As an RPVG, there is less mechanical wiggle room than can be found in TTRPGs. From a structural standpoint, the game's story is already inscribed on the characters in the world, mapped over the bodies of player-characters as they traverse a world created (potentially) for them. If the world is not intentionally trying to queer itself, then the potential could be lost for good. Players can only impose so much on narrative-driven cyberspace without their own collaborative interventions. The cyborg is queered because *we* reconfigure and recreate her to the expectations of our own queer futures, ones intersecting and yet all our own.

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[167] Brierley, "Communicating Love: Dialogue Icons, Control and Diminishing Social Complexity in *Cyberpunk 2077*", 42.

CHAPTER V: A CONCLUSION

"Sex, sexuality, and reproduction are central actors in high-tech myth systems structuring our imaginations of personal and social possibility." – Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto"[168]
Donna Haraway's work influences how I consume cyberpunk media, and the myths that they reconstruct about gender and queerness. I cannot watch *Blade Runner 2049* the same way again, with its large naked women slowly walking next to skyscrapers, advertising sex and belonging for men in a high-tech fantasy. I see a misdirect in how games like *Cyberpunk 2077* frame queerness for marketability rather than substantial discourse and embodiment. These media represent the cyborg body with a clear limit of exploration, based on myth systems that seek to reinforce informatics of domination. These cyborgs can be queered, but they require extensive collaborative work on the part of the consumer/player. This research has focused on collaborative play as the vital source of queering and embodiment in role-playing games, mapping the cyborg body onto the characters players create and with whom they interact. I find a clear connection between Haraway's theory of the cyborg and the players' creations of selfhood they make for fantasy.

Players make their own myths, reconstruct societal norms, and embody their imagined selves in fantasy worlds. I find that the work of Mike Pondsmith and CD Projekt Red exhibit a complicated relationship with the cyborg and her agency in their games, but their input is made negligible when players are the ones in control. Mike Pondsmith writes in a forward to the *Cyberpunk Red* sourcebook that he and the development team, "want you to join us in the Time of the Red and make it your time too."[169] It is a welcoming message to players before they are

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[168] Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto", 169.
[169] Pondsmith, *CP Red*, 4.

introduced to the rules and world-building of the game, but I see it as an invitation to players to make their own construction of Night City. Pondsmith is a craftsman of science fiction role-playing, and as such he knows how to tell a cyberpunk story. He wants the players to tell their own story. That is what these TTRPGs are all about. Regardless of the queer potential in the source material, players are the harbingers of queer embodiment and gender performance in how they manifest identity through interactive play.

Haraway's cyborg cannot be found in a "post-gender world" of TTRPGs or reality because it does not exist. The persistence of gender norms in our reality and the imagined realities we create are formed by our experiences with normative discourse, for better or worse. Queering happens when feminist actors surpass these norms through collective action, making the identity markers of marginalized communities explicit in the queer futures they imagine. TTRPGs allow for queer people to envision their bodies in worlds that they control, carrying the weight of patriarchal history, but reconstructing their futures to see their queerness *last* in that space.

My tension with Haraway does not ignore the feminist progress she has made by introducing the world to cyborgian theory. I appreciate the cyborg for all she has done to craft technological embodiment for women and fem-presenting people; however, I queer her cyborg to fill a contemporary need for more diverse and inclusive representation of bodily autonomy and transformation. Gender is not limited to binary stances, as Haraway insists, and I wish to only further that theory in cyberpunk futures. The cyborg makes her own future, crafted in collaboration, as a projection of agency over her own queer trajectory.

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APPENDIX A: TERMINOLOGY INDEX

TERM/ACRONYM	DEFINITION
RPG	"Role-Playing Games"
TTRPG	"Table-Top Role-Playing Games"
RPVG	"Role-Playing Video Games"
CP Red	A table-top role-playing game created by Mike Pondsmith in collaboration with CD Projekt Red in which players explore narratives in a cyberpunk future setting.
CP 2077	A role-playing video game created by CD Projekt Red using Mike Pondsmith's previous work in a virtual format with a linear storyline.
D&D	The first and most popular table-top role-playing game created by Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson that is set in fantasy lands within which players can explore and create.
GM	A "Game Master", one who leads the narrative storytelling in TTRPGs.
Cyborg	A creature made up of both technological and human parts.
Cyberpunk	A sub-genre of science fiction that combines hi-tech aesthetics with noir themes and an anti-capitalist critique on modern society.
Cybernetics	The merging of biological with technological material.
Cyberware	High-tech aesthetic and practical parts of the cyborg body.