

# Digital Resistance Against the Lasting Manipulation of Capitalism

AI, Luddite Rebellion, and the Haunted Future of Cyberpunk

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## | abstract

This paper examines the complex relationship between artificial intelligence, labour, and resistance amidst contemporary capitalism. Big Tech presents AI as revolutionary innovation, yet this narrative obscures its function in maintaining growth and preventing alternative economic forms from emerging. Through the lens of “enshittification”, we observe a strategic shift toward AI deployment despite its beta state of development, threatening workers’ livelihoods. This tension echoes historical patterns of technological implementation and resistance, exemplified by the Luddite movement whose meaning elites have successfully corrupted over time. The Luddites, organised under the mythical figurehead Ned Ludd (a Robin Hood-esque figure), recognised technological change as inevitable but fought to manage its pace to prevent further exploitation, ultimately winning meaningful concessions. Technology can improve working conditions, but only when workers maintain control over implementation. The contemporary work-from-home debate reveals how management resistance often centres on control rather than technological capability. While widespread AI protests remain limited, emerging forms of Electronic Civil Disobedience and anti-corporate demonstrations signal growing resistance. The cyberpunk genre illuminates this state by continuing to depict alternative futures haunted by recycled pasts, highlighting a state of permacrisis where historical alternatives increasingly represent potential futures obscured by futurist – yet aesthetically dated – technology that facilitates control by corporations.

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## 1. Introduction

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is positioned as the next area to help sustain the continued quest for growth amongst Big Tech companies. For these corporations AI represents something “new” that will also supposedly improve their services and products for its customers. Yet, this is the optimistic façade that attempts to mask the disruption that can be caused, which itself echoes a pattern from the past.

This transition towards AI at the core of the business model amongst Big Tech is the continuation of what Cory Doctorow (2023) has coined “Enshittification”, this being the gradual degradation of services and products to serve profit maximisation over user experience. Even though the AI technology touted by Big Tech is largely in its beta stage, the implementation across different industries is already starting to pose risks to work-

ers around the world, contributing to the already growing levels of uncertainty present in the current state of permacrisis<sup>1</sup>.

The tensions between technological progress and workers security have historical precedent as can be seen with the Luddite movement of the early 1800s. This has been misrepresented by capitalists and elites acting to shift the narrative and to undermine what the Luddites were working to achieve. The workers (typically from the wider textile industry) united together naming themselves after the mythical Ned Ludd; a Robin Hood-esque figure (Merchant, 2024). They did not oppose technology itself but were instead fighting against its implementation by capitalists in ways which were detrimental to their livelihoods.

The Luddites knew that technological change was inevitable and therefore focused on how best to manage this change to prevent (or at least minimise) future hardship. Their resistance has helped to provide a template for workers that should resonate with what is taking place today. Acknowledging that whilst technology can bring benefits, it is only when workers maintain meaningful control over its implementation and application that these benefits are most felt.

Contributing to the argument is an exploration into how the Cyberpunk genre resonates with these issues in the past, present, and future. Starting with acknowledging the importance of Mary Shelley's (1818) *Frankenstein* as both early science fiction and parable of the Luddite situation. After which expanding into the continued relevance of Cyberpunk, which via its continued reliance on 80s and 90s aesthetics, provides a memory of the future that is yet to arrive.

Cyberpunk provides depictions of the future through the lens of the past, one that is being misunderstood by Big Tech who are ignoring the warnings that have been laid out. Contemporary alternatives to the actions of the Luddites breaking the machines are identified as are instances of its use against Elon Musk's different companies. Signalling the start of a new resistance utilising a mixture of physical protest and Electronic Civil Disobedience that channel the spirit of the Luddites with the aim that technology and corporations should serve the people rather than solely corporate growth.

## 2. The Problem of Modern Big Tech and AI

In contemporary society technology rule the lives of the typical working person. This is not an inherently new development, but it has become more invasive. Not only upon our daily lives, but also how the changes that have occurred have been damaging to the media we engage with outside of work as well. Whether it be for entertainment or for getting things done, the digital services (as increasingly it is not a singular *product*) we use have become worse (Ars Staff, 2025) as the technology firms behind them scramble to extract as much profit out of its use as possible.

This has unravelled via what Cory Doctorow (2023) has coined as "Enshittification", in short referring to «how platforms die». Whilst we are yet to see any of the big digital services die, we have certainly begun to witness their ongoing decline. There is not a singular way in which this has happened, but one element that many share is an increased implementation of supposed AI.

1. «An extended period of instability and insecurity» (Collins English Dictionary, n.d.) and can result in/from the «feeling of living through a period of war, inflation, and political instability» (Bushby, 2022).

However, the use of the name “AI” has been deliberately misleading. Currently substantial (over)investment is going into generative AI, where “new” content is created based on prompts inputted by the user, the most (in)famous being OpenAI’s ChatGPT, but also Google’s Gemini, Microsoft’s Copilot, and Anthropic’s Claude AI. Yet, “AI” is also frequently used by many technology companies to rebrand machine learning and Large Language Models (LLMs). Understandably for most users, they don’t know what the difference is, but they are at least aware of AI. For the rest of this article when talking about AI this will be referring to generative AI<sup>2</sup> unless otherwise mentioned, further highlighting the confusion that has evolved around this term.

## 2.1. AI and “Big Tech”

AI has become “the next big thing” for technology firms like Google, Microsoft, Meta, and to a lesser extent Apple and Amazon. Meanwhile, Sam Altman’s OpenAI is unsurprisingly all-in on AI. This shift in direction is partly the result that, like with media – such as music, film/TV, and videogames – “Big Tech” has succumbed to a similar slowdown of new ideas. However, unlike media forms that I (Sweeting, 2023, 2024) have argued (as have Simon Reynolds (2012) and Mark Fisher<sup>3</sup> (2022a, 2022b)) are unable to imagine a different future, Big Tech is able to imagine a future, except this is predominantly based around AI being what is hoped to sustain the exorbitant growth it has been used in an effort to maintain this going into the next decade.

If, though, AI is not the growth enabler and sustainer that Big Tech hope for, then those who work for these companies will be at risk of losing their jobs en masse (Dmitracova, 2025). With some even questioning if AI is another “tech bubble” (Karma, 2025; Zitron, 2025b) ready to burst. Although management will still be protected at all costs despite being responsible for the decisions made. In the past year significant job losses have been seen in other technology/media industries, in particular videogames (such as Microsoft’s Xbox division (Warren, 2025)). Yet, there is another existential threat at play here.

I have argued with my coining of “Hauntological Form”<sup>4</sup> (Sweeting, 2023, 2024) that despite not being able to imagine a different future for the medium, mainstream<sup>5</sup> videogames have still been able to provide the illusion of newness (new products) via reutilised elements of the mediums past (at the cost of truly novel ideas). That the videogames medium has had to resort to this within five/six decades of its mainstream existence has been surprising, although it was a matter of when not if, as a similar situation has been observed in music and film/TV.

Meanwhile, Internet technology and services did not begin to reach the general public until the advent of the World Wide Web in 1991 and subsequently the adoption of Broadband connections and Wi-Fi in the mid to late 2000s. This also corresponds to the creation of the smartphone which could be argued to have done the most to change how we interact with the Internet. By combining different features all into one portable

2. By extension this technically includes Large Language Models (LLMs) as these are still generating text. Further contributing to the confusion.

3. Fisher’s two most notable books were originally released in 2009 and 2014.

4. I argued that hauntology provides an answer to questions about the viability of the future, with nostalgia being a symptom of media’s increasing unwillingness to escape its past combined with an inability to imagine a different future. Hauntological Form is a response to this providing the illusion of newness to sustain creative media output.

5. Mainstream is used here to refer to large budget videogames made by studios with over 200 members of staff (often over 1,000). Although aspects of this approach can be observed in smaller “indie” videogame development.

device, the result was that it limited how we interact with technology and what we can do. AI does fit into this, but it is only billion-dollar firms that have been able to compete.

With Internet services and alongside this Internet connected devices like phones (and GUI<sup>6</sup> based Desktops/Laptops) dating back less than three decades, the past that it can draw from for ideas is even more limited than what the videogames medium had available to play with. AI is dependent on past data to draw from when generating results, without this it currently cannot function, yet already it is running out of usable data (Punt, 2025; Roose, 2024).

AI is yet to be a stable technology (many services are still referred to as being in “Beta”), although that has not stopped companies such as Google and Microsoft pushing AI onto its users by including it in many of their core products, such as search for Google and Office for Microsoft. Even though the majority of users still are not interested in using them (Singleton, 2024; Zitron, 2025a). This is partly out of indifference, but largely due to the implementation of AI not working as intended or at all. Search remains Google’s main “product” despite its various other ventures (such as YouTube, Workspace, and its Pixel line of phones), yet AI was seen as the means to “improve” how it works as well as increasing the amount of time users spend with the service instead of going elsewhere, such as another website that is identified via a search (Zitron, 2024). Except, the problem with Google’s AI answers via search is that there are far too many instances where the information is inaccurate, incorrect, or even outright dangerous<sup>7</sup>.

Google search has been considered to have been increasingly getting worse over the past few years as a result of efforts by Google to keep users on Google’s services instead of passing them on to where they want to get to (Ibid., 2024). By adding friction to the searching process increases the time spent using Google’s services which in turn strengthens its user metrics. This is just one example of Doctorow’s Enshittification in action, in which a service that was working as intended has been deliberately made worse in order to generate more profit from its users.

AI is just the continuation of a process that was already underway and is contributing to the wider Enshittification that is impacting the services that millions use daily around the world. Yet, if it was just Enshittification that was of concern in relation to AI, the problem being addressed would not be quite as dire as the potential wider situation that poses a deeper existential threat.

## 2.2. Misuse of AI

This is not to make the claim that AI – of whatever type – is inherently *bad*, rather the problem with AI (especially generative) is how it is *misused*, particularly by large corporations such as Google, Microsoft, Apple, Meta, Amazon, OpenAI. All have started to pivot<sup>8</sup> their operations towards prioritising the inclusion of AI elements into their users’ workflows. Part of the argument behind this is that it helps to aid *efficiencies* and that it can help to “automate workflows” such as the boring and repetitive tasks that we do not want to do. Except, as mentioned already, that is assuming these services actually work as well as they have been marketed. The real issues of AI services convincingly “hallucinating” (Choi & Mei, 2025) *answers* or providing what should be factual answers entirely

6. Graphical User Interface.

7. The infamous example of this is when Google AI search told users to eat rocks, or that glue was a valid ingredient to use on pizza (Robinson, 2024).

8. Except for OpenAI because the entire company is already dedicated to creating AI services.

incorrectly can have tangible implications and ironically would cause more inefficiencies.

Despite these issues, the Big Tech corporations continue to push services that do not meet the usual standard of beta let alone alpha stage of development. Sam Altman of OpenAI is the most egregious in upselling the supposed capabilities of AI, continually espousing both the alleged next step for AI and crucially his company (Tangermann, 2025). Other companies are taking notice (Dmitracova, 2025) and have started to lay off its workers. Although, it is important to acknowledge that the layoffs are not solely because of companies replacing them with AI, «business efficiencies» (BI Staff, 2025b; ET Online, 2025) are currently often cited as the excuse. Laying off staff is still seen as one of the quickest means of bringing a company's finances "under control", even if other means exist, such as reducing the sizable salaries of the C-suite executives who in certain instances – especially amongst Big Tech – are earning tens of millions of dollars, such as Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella (McEvoy, 2024). Staff are considered both costly and (unfortunately) entirely expendable.

This is where the long-standing problem of automation comes in. Technology has for centuries helped to support and automate various tasks. This has especially been the case in manufacturing. Except, in many instances, whilst the results created by the machine were produced faster, the quality was often inferior (Merchant, 2023, p. 239) when compared to the human made version<sup>9</sup>. Even in the office environment the introduction of computers and emails actually resulted in a *decrease* in productivity after companies laid off secretaries and typists which saw higher-skilled employees spending increased time typing up notes and sending emails instead of focusing on their core job (Karma, 2025). AI as a technology is not too dissimilar in this regard as it too can *create* something faster than the human but often will not be as good as what a trained specialist can produce. Although one considerable difference is that AI is threatening the white-collar worker now as well as those in the creative industries. It is still early, and the extent to which AI can impact these industries is still not fully clear, but if nothing is done to regulate this technology then it will be allowed to run rampant by the capitalists as was done so during the Industrial Revolution.

This brings us to the next section which exposes the relationship between what could happen in the present with a similar existential crisis posed by the misuse of new technology by capitalists. During the Industrial Revolution workers united under the Luddite movement, which «was not about technology... [but] about workers' rights» (Merchant, 2023, p. 202) despite how their message has been misconstrued in common parlance over the centuries. This fallacy has also become relevant once more as it too has been wrongly used to malign those who stand up against AI.

### 3. This is Not a “New” Problem – Looking Back to the Luddites

**T**echnology can bring real meaningful benefits to society, but equally it can also be incredibly damaging to human lives and the environment. For workers during the early years of the Industrial Revolution the “frame”<sup>10</sup> represented the contradiction of what technology means for their quality of life. This section is ex-

9. Tools would still be used, which can still be considered a *type* of technology.

10. There were different types of frame machine that were used across different forms of textile manufacturing.

ploring this paradox, helping to explore the misunderstood movement of the Luddites to identify why this group from the early 1800s is still relevant over 200 years later.

The elites (land/factory owners and capitalists/entrepreneurs) during the early 1800s and continuing across the following centuries, manipulated «the very definition of a Luddite into the cultural firmament as an epithet for a delusional malcontent who is anti-technology and anti-progress» (Merchant, 2023, p. 461). Despite this incorrect narrative, «the luddites understood technology all too well» Brian Merchant wrote in his book on the Luddite movement stating that «they didn't hate [technology], but rather the way it was used against them» (Ibid., 2023, p. 27).

Workers, such as weavers, used technology themselves, ranging from the large factories (which would become particularly problematic), mid-sized businesses, to literal “cottage industries” which would often be family enterprises where everyone under the same roof contributed. The technology used was not yet in a state to replace the workers, rather it was another tool used in assisting the trained craftsmanship that the workers had dedicated their lives to. In some instances, the frames used were owned by the workers themselves or as part of a collective (Merchant, 2023, p. 52), meaning that they were in control of the means of production, giving them some agency over what was produced, how it was done, and when. This flexibility led to some enjoying a better work life balance with many having three-day weekends; something that is being *discussed* today.

What changed though was when the frames advanced from being a tool that required direct control by a human to being powered<sup>11</sup> in a way that required minimal operation<sup>12</sup> from a human and a single machine could “do the job” of many. The initial investment for these machines might be higher than that of bringing in new staff, but aside from the running costs, was deemed more cost effective than human workers. Those who were *fortunate enough* to still work in the ever-growing factories dominating the British landscape became beholden upon them, and if they were let go, the Government at the time had no interest in supporting them (Merchant, 2023, p. 229).

### 3.1. Automation

Concerns surrounding automation also are not new to the 1800s, as fears about non-living mechanical entities go back even further. The automaton dates back to that of Homer's *Iliad* in which it accompanies the description of «self-moving and intelligent machines fabricated by Hephaestus» who is the blacksmith god of technology (Merchant, 2023, p. 83). This is identified by Adrienne Mayor (2018) who foreshadows the fascination and hesitation about automation, robotics, and AI that has long been enshrined in myth.

Mayor goes on to explain in an interview with Merchant (2023, p. 85) that «exploiting the human labourer is a necessary evil on the path to full automation, which is always just around the bend» even though for nearly a millennium, *dreams* of automation were sustained via prose. As it was not until the 1940s that the *term* of automation was eventually coined by a Vice President of engineering at Ford who used it alongside «roboticization» of the company's factory car assembly lines (Merchant, 2023, p. 30).

The Luddite movement was an attempt at reversing or at least slowing down the rampant momentum propagated by entrepreneurs' relentless faith in “progress” that

11. Non-automated machinery that is powered also exists.

12. These machines would also still require maintenance.

was linked to the laissez-faire political dogma of the English bourgeoisie espoused by Adam Smith (Bailey, 1998, p. xv). Propping up freedom for the employers, which in turn resulted in repression for the workers (Merchant, 2023, p. 122). Therefore, it soon turned towards *violent* actions of breaking the very machines that were the physical manifestation of their hardships as a method of last resort.

The Luddite name itself comes from the Robin Hood-esque figure Ned Ludd, a mythical figurehead for the movement whose alleged turn against his master inspired similar acts of rebellion amongst his followers (Merchant, 2023, p. 100). Yet, due to his incorporeal presence, he could not be physically taken down. Instead, “General Ludd” or “King Ludd” was simultaneously able to lead multiple parties of Luddites across England (Merchant, 2023, pp. 93 and 109), as an *idea* is much more difficult to defeat than a single man, especially if that man does not actually exist.

Responses to the Luddites from the factory owners and the Government were not receptive to their requests. Instead, it drove for calls of harsher punishment to all those involved in the destruction of the frames, including for making such actions a capital offence punishable by death (Merchant, 2023, p. 325). In the short term, many Luddites lost their lives because of this but ultimately did win meaningful political and economic victories.

The actions of the “armies” organised under the name of Ned Ludd contributed to bringing about living wages and helped to bring management to the negotiating table. They also managed to slow the adoption of frames (such as gig mills and cut-up frames) when the economy was not in a conducive state which helped to keep humans employed during what could have been an even tougher time (Merchant, 2023, p. 461). Though the machines did return, by advocating for their delay added an element of sustainability to employment rather than a sudden damaging shift.

As mentioned, the Luddites were not anti-technology, but also, they were realistic with understanding that change was coming (Noble, 1995, p. 8). The key was managing this change effectively so that they would not be exploited further by their employers. This might not seem particularly meaningful, but it demonstrated that workers were not going to stand idly by and let their livelihoods become completely destroyed. By standing up then, it helped create a model (a legacy) for resistance by future generations. A language to contextualise the abuses caused by «the excesses of industrial capitalism and technological exploitation» (Merchant, 2023, p. 463) that unfortunately we are still witnessing today, which is why their actions continue to be relevant.

Digital technology – especially Internet based – was supposed to help liberate workers, providing them with flexibility not seen since the early days of the Industrial Revolution when cottage industries enabled families to work together under one roof. Technology can aid with efficiencies enabling workers to get their share of work completed more efficiently, therefore allowing them to enjoy more leisure time. This was evident with some able to «work just 30 hours a week, on one’s own schedule, and take long weekends» (Merchant, 2023, p. 52).

During the Covid lockdowns, amongst the horrible global situation, one beneficial aspect became apparent, workers *could* successfully work from home (WFH), on their own schedule. Even as the world opened up, “hybrid work” was still seen by many as a beneficial compromise, especially for those with long commutes due to the amount of essentially wasted time saved, which could be used to spend more time with their family; or even to do more work. Except, in the years that followed the world opening up fully, there has been considerable pushback from companies, including ironically the

very tech companies that were pushing the technology that facilitated WFH and hybrid working (BI Staff, 2025a).

Executives and managers were not able to exercise the same level of control as when workers are physically in the office. Offices are the modern factory, and physical beatings for making mistakes (Merchant, 2023, p. 143) have been replaced with verbal abuse and mental anguish (Wilson, 2023). Like with the automated machines of the Industrial Revolution which aided production, AI services – which are supposed to reduce the drudgery of repetitious work – should not be providing reasons for companies to lay off workers in order to protect balance sheets because their work can seemingly be done by AI instead; even though AI remains incapable of doing so.

### 3.2. *Where are the Protests?*

There is anger online about large companies laying off workers in their thousands, including tech and videogame companies (Cryer, 2024; Drucker, 2024; Warren, 2025), but we are yet to see a movement at the scale of the Luddites; even if self-proclaimed “New Luddites” now exist (Merchant, 2024). The situation might be similar, not only in the introduction of a new technology that can make workers obsolete, but also a wider economic situation that is contributing to companies trying to reduce their costs.

So far, the closest movement in terms of physical action has been the Anti-Tesla protests primarily taking place in the United States (Barr, 2025). However, these protests are not specifically against “Big Tech” as in this instance they are more in relation to what Tesla CEO Elon Musk had been doing within the US Government in his previously created role of head of the Department of Government Efficiency which had also resulted in thousands of federal government employees losing their jobs and many more in other roles impacted by removal of government funding.

Elon Musk does have a vested interest in AI as he is also founder and CEO of for profit “public benefit” xAI and its AI service “Grok” (which has since also incorporated the social network X (Reuters, 2025) that had been used for training data). He has also made statements predicting that the extent to which AI will replace jobs will require Universal Basic Income<sup>13</sup>. This is saying the quiet part out loud about a potential future AI might bring and given the track record of both large corporations and the US government, it seems unlikely that such a safety net would be provided. Furthermore, unsurprisingly, these protests – specifically the physical attacks on Tesla vehicles – have angered both Musk and US President Donald Trump. With the latter at the time suggesting specific punishment involving sending those found guilty to prison in El Salvador (Barr, 2025). Whilst not the capital punishment used against the Luddites, this also shows that private interests are swaying a nations legal system.

The anti-Tesla protests might also expand to include Musk’s AI stance, but it was concentrated on his then government related actions. Though, could we see additional protests emerge directly protesting against AI and/or the actions of Big Tech? How would people go about doing so? Tesla cars might have been damaged but would attempts to physically damage server locations work? Yet, with digital spaces, there are means to protest in non-violent ways, using what it referred to as Electronic Civil Disobedience (Brush, 2003). Whether that be not using the services of these companies thus reducing

13. He goes on to state that a «Universal *High* Income» would be needed, although this is likely an act of marketing to make it sound more appealing.

the amount of money they make, hitting them where it hurts. Or online actions such as Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) attacks which can take down online services for extended periods of time without strictly causing any direct damage. This approach has already been used, and again the target was Elon Musk, this time his X<sup>14</sup> social media network (Newman, 2025).

As of writing the anti-Tesla protests and X DDoS attack remain the public facing extent to activity against laissez-faire capitalists. Although, there are many silently changing their habits by moving to alternative web services. In addition, electric vehicle consumers are deliberately avoiding Tesla's and buying from alternative companies (Espiner, 2025) which has directly affected Tesla's market value, having dropped by 45% in the first few months of 2025 (Kirkham, 2025).

#### 4. Warnings From an Imaginary Future: Cyberpunk and the Memory of the Future

Genre fiction has been used since the days of the Luddites as a parable reflecting on the misjustices taking place and a warning for the future. Unfortunately, not only have these warnings not been heeded, but they have also been corrupted and replicated without a hint of irony. To quote the fictional Dr Ian Malcolm from the original *Jurassic Park*<sup>15</sup> (Spielberg, 1993) «your scientists were so preoccupied with whether or not they could, they didn't stop to think if they should». Just as there are scientists today trying to bring back extinct animals (Hunt, 2025), Silicon Valley has been preoccupied with creating the metaverse (Tassi, 2025) from dystopian novel *Snow Crash* by Neal Stephenson (1992) or AI and the various technologies envisioned in William Gibson's (1984) influential cyberpunk novel *Neuromancer*.

Mary Shelley's (1818) *Frankenstein* is often considered one of the first science fiction novels, but it is also argued to be a reflection upon the Luddite movement. The monster himself making reasoned demands and just wishes to be allowed to live. Yet when these requests were refused, only then does he turn to indiscriminate violence, particularly against the entity that has wronged him, the titular scientist Frankenstein (Merchant, 2023, p. 451). Just as the Luddites resorted to doing as their requests to be able to survive were also ignored.

Dr Frankenstein himself shares a similar entrepreneurial mindset as the factory owners and unleashes a new technology upon the world without considering what the wider socio-economic consequences could be. Just two centuries later and this is still being criticised in media as seen with Dr Malcolm's statement, intimating that the warning still has not been understood. *Frankenstein* – like the Luddites – is also not anti-technology, as in both instances the technology is not what is directly responsible for the harm inflicted, instead it is *how* it has been (mis)used by those with power. It is why Merchant (2023, p. 456) claims that today, Victor Frankenstein would be portrayed as «a corporation, or a tech bro». This brings us to a more contemporary example of science fiction, the sub-genre of Cyberpunk, which shows how bad things can get when corporations run wild and abuse technology. Yet somehow, it is the technology that gets the attention, not necessarily the warning of the surrounding dystopia.

14. Previously known as Twitter before being purchased by Musk in October 2022. And has since been incorporated into his company xAI (Reuters, 2025).

15. The exact quote does not exist in the original book by Michael Crichton, but it does contain a similar sentiment.

#### 4.1. *Future Dystopia: Post-utopias*

Cyberpunk as a genre is often considered to be depicting dystopias, a near future that has collapsed in one way or another. Except, many depictions in Cyberpunk do not take place during the *worst* of the events, instead showing the situation afterwards where a degree of normalcy has returned, even if there are still considerable dystopic aspects present. For example, *Cyberpunk 2077* (CD Projekt Red, 2020) takes place after environmental catastrophes and multiple wars, yet the situation as the player engages with the setting is relatively stable at a macro level. Instead, the videogame is often more concerned with the problems present at the micro level, typically exacerbated by the side effects of the corporations («Corpos»<sup>16</sup>) actions.

Elana Gomel (2018) examines the connection between Cyberpunk and dystopias and asks whether dystopia is the correct term to use in relation to what is depicted in Cyberpunk. When comparing the future as illustrated in Cyberpunk to our present, Gomel asks whether it is different enough to still be regarded as dystopian? Instead, she argues that it belongs «to the broader trend of post-utopia». That being an era that «comes after the end of history, as described by [Francis] Fukuyama (1992)», coincidentally published the same year as *Snow Crash*. Despite how it sounds, Fukuyama's work «was about the end of History with a capital H» (Gomel, 2018). Meaning that, whilst momentous events will continue<sup>17</sup>, what *has ended* is a belief that there are events leading towards a predestined goal, «whether that be a communist society of equality and plenty, or a total collapse of civilization» (Ibid., 2018). In other words, an ever-lasting present.

This ever-lasting present is also explored by Mark Fisher which he refers to as «lost futures» (Fisher, 2022b, p. 26) where the past is looked towards for a possible future, even if it can no longer exist. Fisher also unpacks this as part of «the slow cancellation of the future» (Fisher, 2022b, p. 6; Reynolds, 2020) and is apparent in the popular media that is available.

The «belief and expectation that the future would be different from the present in some dramatically improved way, or even in just some dramatically strange way» has become no more (Reynolds, 2020; Sweeting, 2023, p. 134), which is why Cyberpunk continues to endure. As like when Gibson has provided visions of the future, even when not entirely positive, have become a way of depicting a future through the lens of the past (Sweeting, 2023, p. 136). As has become the case with the form of Cyberpunk as it still relies heavily on referents of its form from the 1980s.

Gomel also states that the terms of utopia/dystopia have become less helpful as we exist in a world now where – quoting Fredric Jameson – «late capitalism seems to have no natural enemies» (Jameson, 2005, p. xii). This lack of alternatives has contributed to the paralysis of the historical imaginative, the kind Fukuyama is referring to having ended. Jameson wonders in his essay of the same name, *Can We Imagine the Future?*, and increasingly it seems that we cannot. This is how we have ended up moving towards a Hauntological state. That being one which is incapable of moving on from the past.

Without a meaningful counter ideology to the global state of capitalism<sup>18</sup> the argument is that instead of evolving, capitalism resorts to depending on *retrospection*. Jacques Derrida (1994) might have argued when he coined Hauntology that the ideol-

16. This is the slang used in game to refer to the different corporations and those who work for them.

17. Gomel gives the example of 9/11, even if this is more significant in the US (or Middle East region because of the US' response) than other nations.

18. The model in China is more akin to state managed capitalism meaning in practice is a different *shade* of capitalism rather than a completely different entity.

ogy of Communism was not in fact *dead*, but through expanding the term in order to help us understand what has taken place with media form (Fisher, 2022b; Reynolds, 2012; Sweeting, 2023) – which has become increasingly reliant on the past – we can also see this extending beyond into broader cultural perceptions. Cyberpunk is increasingly one of the more apt means of examining this Hauntological state, as it both acknowledges capitalism's inability to evolve to improve people's lives but also the genre's reliance on its own past, thus exemplifying what I have previously coined as Hauntological Form (Sweeting, 2023). This being where the past continues to haunt both the present and the future, though its presence can have an intangible quality due to the melancholy that something else remains missing; such as a different future. Perhaps one where capitalists aren't misusing technology to exploit its workforce.

When Cyberpunk came to prominence during the 1980s, especially *visually*, with the likes of *Blade Runner* (Scott, 1982), despite being set on an Earth that was essentially dying with people trying to leave for Mars, the cityscape shown provided «shocking newness to the Western audiences» (Gomel, 2018); an example akin to future shock<sup>19</sup> (Toffler, 2022). Today, the style of Cyberpunk provides a sense of familiarity, a memory of a future that still has not arrived yet, and an alternative to the state of permacrisis (Collins English Dictionary, n.d.) the present is suffering from. Whilst Cyberpunk settings usually depict their own state of permacrisis (see *Cyberpunk 2077*), it is different *enough* from the present, which is why a depiction of the future via the lens of the past will seem *progressive* (Reynolds, 2012, p. 361; Sweeting, 2023, p. 108). Although, there is also a risk that too much reliance on the past could instead result in past shock<sup>20</sup> (Reynolds, 2020).

#### 4.2. Cyberpunk, the East, and Lost Futures

A big part of what contributes to Cyberpunks *otherness* is the significant influence of East Asian style and iconography. Part of this is an element of Orientalism (which can vary between positive and/or negative in any given example) and incorporating another culture's aesthetics into Western creative output. The other is that East Asian countries – especially Japan – have managed to also claim Cyberpunk as their own as well and using it to tell stories commenting on their situation as seen in franchises such as *Ghost in the Shell*<sup>21</sup> (Oshii, 1995) or *Akira* (Otomo, 1988).

What also stands out about the relationship between Cyberpunk and Japan is that to a Western audience it gives the *appearance* of the future and continues to do so, even though Japan today is no longer the home of cutting edge technology, instead an unsteady balancing act between the US' Silicon Valley and Shenzhen in China, with the former focusing on software and the latter on hardware.

William Gibson wrote a piece titled *The Future Perfect* (2001) and suggested that Japan for the past couple of centuries had been dealing with future shock, but unlike how it was experienced in the West (such as Britain), in Japan they faced a «near-lethal dose of futurity» in part due to the outside introduction of new technology and ideas. This resulted in a «mutant culture» but one which managed to remain «deeply traditional» yet adaptable to repeated «technological change». Gibson argued that Japan «had a head

19. In which there is «too much change in too short a time» (Toffler, 2022, p. 2).

20. «Horried disbelief that so little progress had been made on multiple political and social fronts, with actual reverses and rollbacks in some areas underway» (Reynolds, 2020).

21. It is based on a manga series originally released between 1989 and 1991. The franchise continues to this day across different forms of media.

start» when it came to the future, which is why it seemed so much more advanced in comparison.

That advancement is no more; Japan is not challenging the US for the number one spot. And when we think of the technology on display in Cyberpunk, it remains heavily tinged by the technology aesthetics of the 80s and 90s (often from Japan). Svetlana Boym appropriately titled her book *The Future of Nostalgia* and argued that nostalgia «is a by-product of globalism» (Boym, 2001, p. 10; Gomel, 2018). With Japan no longer representing the future, the past has to stand-in instead. Which is where Cyberpunk fits in for the role, giving the illusion of a future, even though it is anchored in the past.

Cyberpunk might be anchored in the past, but it is also a *warning* from the past. Gibson (2001) alluded to overdosed industrialisation that has gone beyond our control. This is a continuation of the warning from the Luddites, one that is relevant today where the next stage of industrialisation is underway. This might seem contradictory, given my previous arguments that the current state of permacrisis has contributed towards looking to the past rather than an alternative future. Except, whilst the actual technology of AI might be new, the idea of automation, as noted with the identification as far back as Homer's *Iliad*, and the way in which it was implemented in the early 1800s, is not new. History continues to repeat itself; we just need to make sure we listen to the warnings from the past and stand up like the Luddites did. Otherwise, we could end up in the post-utopias depicted in Cyberpunk.

## 5. Conclusion

**T**his paper has looked at the recent rise of AI and the challenges it brings not only to the online services we use but also what it could mean for workers around the world. Whilst the implementation of AI services is still in its early days in terms of general adoption, the worrying signs are already starting to present themselves. This is why it is crucial to look back at what the Luddites were doing in the early 1800s when they were standing up against the new technology that was being implemented by the capitalist elites of the time which threatened not only their way of life but also their ability to make a living.

Like the Luddites dealing with automated frames, the new technology of Generative AI is not something that can be ignored or prevented. However, it can be tackled in order to prevent significant damage. There can be uses for it as a tool, but if capitalists try to rush to implement it across a range of industries without careful consideration, thousands if not millions of jobs could be at risk, causing untold human damage. This is not a threat of the “robots” taking jobs, rather it is the capitalists making jobs redundant.

Science Fiction since its earliest version with Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* has long warned about the dangers of misusing technology. Cyberpunk is a continuation of this, and more explicit with its anti-corporate and anti-government stance. That these actors will exploit technology for their own interests, whilst normal citizens (not the elites) will face the ramifications of these technologies.

However, Cyberpunk as a genre still has a foot firmly placed in the 1980s, yet also provides a memory of the future, one that some are still waiting for. Even though it is different from our present, permacrisis is leading to that of a Hauntological state, in which visions of the future become increasingly dependent on the past. This is why Cyberpunk continues to be so relevant because Big Tech needs ideas to sustain its previously high

levels of growth. As a result, it is taking the wrong lessons from *Cyberpunk* texts to provide something “new”. However, these ideas are not taking off, with Meta’s “Metaverse” failing to generate any lasting interest.

These corporations, like those depicted in *Cyberpunk 2077* require growth and control. It is not about serving the needs of its customers; it is about keeping them trapped in digital walled gardens to extract continual profit. Helping them to do so by keeping the Government on side. Now the United States is becoming a parody of itself as depicted in *Cyberpunk* texts. These texts were always meant to be warnings of what *not to do*, instead they have inadvertently become guides.

However, that does not mean that this is how things can end, as workers today can look back to the successes of past resistance in which the Luddites were able to gain small wins from the capitalists and obtain some concessions. Similar can be achieved once more, using the technology (including that made by Big Tech) against capitalists to organise, conduct protests, as well as impacting their bottom line/share price. Hopefully preventing the levels of control imagined and depicted in *Cyberpunk*.

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