Running on the Edge
Mapping the Future Screens of Night City's Digital Life and Urban Spaces

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| abstract

This paper develops a digital ethnography to examine the dynamics of *Cyberpunk 2077*'s *Night City*, an immersive metropolis, exploring how emerging future screen technologies reshape urban experience, narrative agency and social interactions within immersive digital environments. Anchored in the broader discourse of the creative, cultural and entertainment industries, this study investigates how emerging screen-based technologies redefine the relationship between space, audience and content through a speculative world-building. *Night City*, as a meticulously realized fictional world, provides fertile ground for analysing the social and individual impact of future screen technologies on immersive storytelling, spatial reconfigurations and community interactions. Adopting a digital ethnographical approach (Hine, 2020; Berg, 2022), the research combines participant observation, visual documentation and analysis, and reflexive analysis within the virtual setting of *Cyberpunk 2077*. Fieldwork was conducted through a "nomad" character path, allowing the researcher to experience *Night City* both as an outsider and as a participant. Fieldnotes, screenshots, and in-game interactions were collected, coded and thematically analysed, following the principle of interpretive and reflexive ethnography (Gold, 1958). The approach discloses a complex interplay between space, embodiment, and participation within the digital city. The spaces and architectures of *Night City* emerge as a fluid synthesis of material and virtual design. Corporate towers, neon-lit streets, and decaying suburbs mirror the city's economic and social stratification of the metropolis. In this scenario, the player's technologically enhanced body is a site of continuous negotiation between the self and the machine, reflecting broader tensions of identity, alienation, and control. Meanwhile, pervasive screen culture gives form to participatory practices where immersion and interactivity allow hybrid communities and the co-creation of narratives that blur the boundary between observer and active participant. In this sense, the city itself becomes participatory: a networked environment where technological infrastructure and human interactions constantly co-construct meaning. Fusing speculative design with cutting-edge media technologies, the game encourages critical reflection on the social impact of immersive media in blurring the boundaries between reality and simulation. This ethnography contributes to an understanding of the future screen as a catalyst for innovation, pointing out its potential to redefine the relationship between space, audience and content, and create new imaginaries. It also highlights the value of mapping the material culture, behaviour and style of digital inhabitants as a lens for understanding how screen-based technologies mediate and reimagine our interactions with urban life in increasingly hybridised digital-physical landscapes. This study frames the future screen as both a medium and a methodological tool – an active interface that constructs, rather than merely represents, urban experiences. By applying ethnographic tools to a speculative digital environment, this research tries to contribute to the methodological debates on digital ethnography and to the theoretical discussions on identity, spatiality and social life within increasingly hybrid techno-urban landscapes.

1. Introduction

The rapid development of immersive digital technologies has significantly transformed not only media practices and habits, both in terms of consumption and forms of social interaction (Handa et al., 2012; Suh, Prophet, 2018), but has also altered and influenced urban landscapes and related narrative practices (Wakabayashi, 2002). These phenomena are increasingly present in everyday life, such as interactive advertising (Wilson, 2023), smart cities (Kunzmann, 2014; Yin et al., 2015), mobility applications (Lopez-Carreiro et al. 2020). However rich in insights and stimuli, all these fields of study are still anchored, to varying degrees, in the physical and material dimensions of urban spaces and the practices they enable or facilitate. This paper intends to move into a field characterised by a form of "other" materiality (Han, 2022) – digital environment that simulate the sensory and social qualities of physical space through screen-based technologies –, presenting an ethnographic study based on *Night City*, a hyper-realistic digital metropolis where the events of the video game *Cyberpunk 2077* are set. The intention is to explore how an interweaving of technologies and digital technical advancements manage to reshape the relationship between space, audience and content in a de-materialised context, albeit one that is deeply connected to and indebted to the materiality and imaginaries of cities (Lindner, Meissner, 2018), past, present and future. In this study, immersive digital technologies are intended as screen-based systems (augmented, virtual or mixed) (Melro, Oliveira, 2018) that extend the users' spatial and sensory engagement. The concept of urban imaginary is used to describe how such environments project and reshape collective vision of the city (Lindner, 2006). Situated within the broader discourse of the creative, cultural and entertainment industries, this study investigates how screen-based media redefine urban engagement, individual action and collective narrative. Therefore, this paper aims to answer the following questions: how will future screen technologies redefine the experience of urban spaces? How does *Night City* serve as an ethnographic field for exploring digital urbanism? By examining virtual architecture, aesthetic configurations and social interactions within *Night City*, this research addresses the interplay between immersive technologies and urban imaginaries. We intend, here, to consider how spatial reconfigurations, technological augmentations (Carmigniani et al., 2011) and participatory media challenge conventional notions of narrative and identity, shaping a speculative vision of future urban life (Ratti, Claudel, 2016). Through its use of extended reality (XR), artificial intelligence (AI) and IoT-driven interactions, *Cyberpunk 2077* epitomises the potential of this set of tools for creating an increasingly hybrid social experience (Dincelli, Yayla, 2022), fusing virtuality with physicality. These technological and narrative convergences make Cyberpunk 2077 a fertile ground to analyse how future screens mediate the boundaries between the physical and the digital urban experience.

1.1. Cyberpunk 2077: *Historical and Contextual Overview*

A necessary premise, considering our object of study, is an in-depth background and history of the video game in question. *Cyberpunk 2077* is an open world role-playing game (RPG) (Zagal, Deterding, 2018) developed by CD Projekt Red and released in December 2020 (Maj, 2022). It was inspired by Mike Pondsmith's series of tabletop role-playing games (Pondsmith, 1993), the game is located in *Night City*, a dystopi-

an metropolis of the future dominated by megacorporations, cybernetic augmentations and clandestine subcultures. This contextual overview is not merely descriptive, it serves as a foundation for understanding how the game's world-building and narrative system can be transformed into a site of ethnographical inquiry. References to science fiction (Luckhurst, 2005), classic dystopias in science fiction literature (Savoye, 2011), cyberpunk aesthetics (Murphy, Schmeink L., 2018) are consistent and easily discernible throughout this fictional universe. The development of the game has been a very famous case throughout the gaming community. Widely anticipated, eagerly awaited – not least due to CD Projekt Red's earlier success with *The Witcher* series – its launch was characterised by controversy of various kinds, caused by technical problems and inconsistent performance, particularly on older gaming hardware. After a probematic launch (Escourido-Calvo, Martínez-Fernández, 2022), *Cyberpunk 2077* has received substantial updates regarding game mechanics and further development of both the storyline and graphic performance. The game takes advantage of cutting-edge technologies, including ray tracing, advanced artificial intelligence and dynamic world-building, to offer deeply immersive experiences. Drawing inspiration from literary works such as William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (Myers, 2001) and films such as *Blade Runner* (Kerman, 1991), the game encapsulates themes of transhumanism (Fukuyama, 2004), digital surveillance (Bauman, Lyon, 2013), digital post-capitalism (Betancourt, 2015) and socio-political stratification. The imaginative connections to classic sci-fi is reinforced by the inclusion of the actor Keanu Reeves – extremely-iconic for his role in *The Matrix* – whose likeness was digitally reproduced to embody Johnny Silverhand, one of the game's central characters. These thematic layers also provide a conceptual connection to the sociological and phenomenological frameworks later applied in this study, especially in relation to alienation, identity and the city as a site of technological mediation.

The portrayal of *Night City*, the pulsating core of all the videogame's events, is that of a living, breathing urban entity, complete with different factions, interactive Non-Playable Characters (NPCs) (Uludağlı, Oğuz, 2023) and emerging narrative mechanics (Batylda, 2020; Li, 2024). This dynamic representation of urban life makes *Night City* terrain for ethnographic explorations, a place where the boundaries between environment, technology and social behaviour can be observed and analysed. These are some of the elements that contributed to making the game an interesting laboratory not only for technical, but also theoretical reflections. From its complex narrative structure to the visual and thematic representation of cybernetic futures, *Cyberpunk 2077* lends itself to be used as a model to explore the intersection between future screen technologies and digital urbanism and, in general, to initiate reflections on the imaginaries of the future of urban spaces and how humans, and technology, can interact with and within them. Starting from this consideration, we will attempt to clarify how future screen technologies, represented in *Cyberpunk 2077*'s *Night City*, reshape the relationship between urban space, narrative practices and digital community interactions in immersive virtual environments, and we will do so by applying the ethnographic method to game practices (Caliandro, 2016). The following methodological section will outline how this ethnographic engagement was structured and how data were gathered and interpreted within this complex digital setting.

Figure 1. Johnny Silverhand.

1.2. *The Participatory City: Modular Storytelling and Player Agency*

The playful and narrative dimension of this platform presents certain peculiarities that make it of particular interest for the purposes we propose here. Firstly, one of these is the procedural nature of story construction. One of the distinctive features of *Cyberpunk 2077* is its modular narrative approach, in which players influence narrative outcomes through a dynamic decision-making process. Unlike traditional linear narratives, the game exploits procedural storytelling techniques – a system generated and adapted by algorithms in response to player choices, allowing for multiple paths and outcomes – to create unique and personalised experiences (Short, Adams, 2019). The city itself reacts to the player's decisions through adaptive artificial intelligence (Гаранін, Моісеєнко, 2018), enabling a process in which content is not simply displayed. In this system, users actively shape the paradigms of interactive storytelling. This dynamic interaction reinforce the notion of player agency, the user capacity to co-produce meaning and narrative within the constraints of programmed systems (Murray, 1997). Within the media universe of *Cyberpunk 2077* there is also a very complete incorporation of technology and bodies (Downey et al., 1995). The integration of the Internet of Things and wearable technology within *Night City* enables participatory content consumption. Intelligent implants, virtual reality overlays and brain-machine interfaces allow real-time access to information, transforming the role of the player and his or her character from passive observer to active participant.
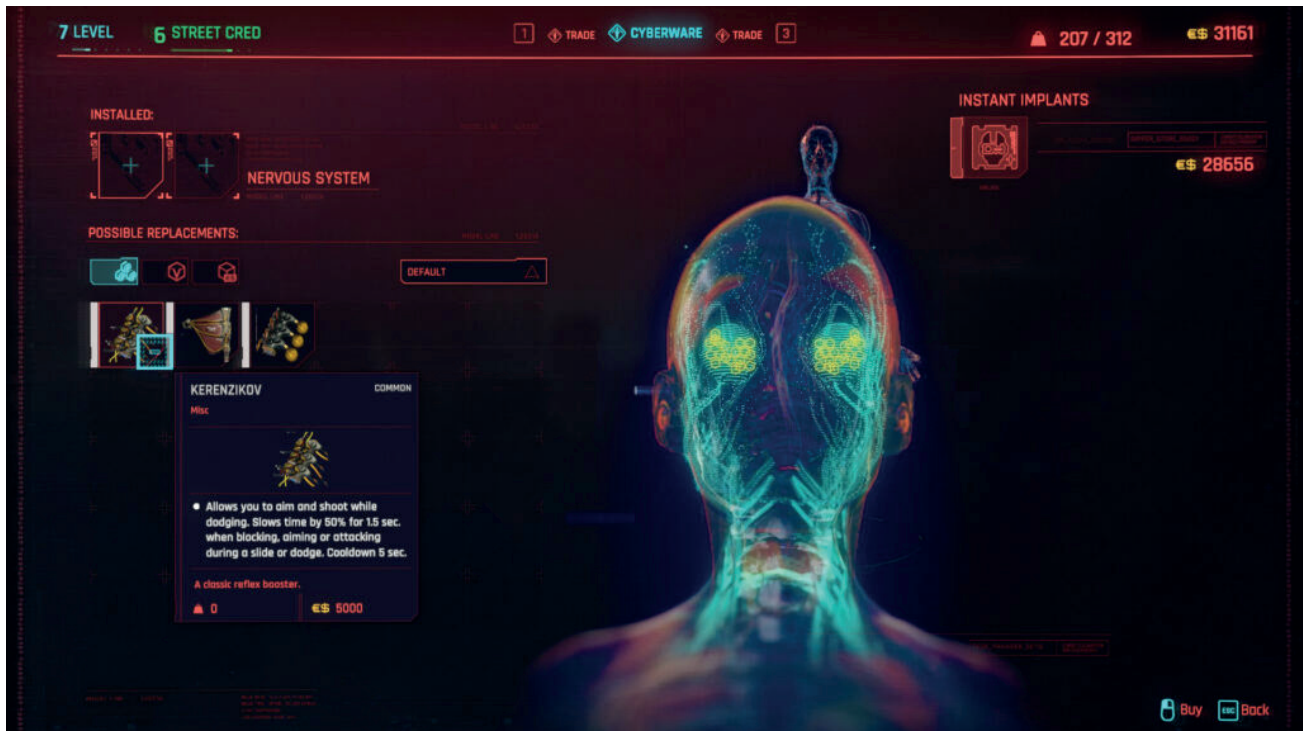
Figure 2. Example of a neural implant for body augmentation in *Cyberpunk 2077*.

This level of integration, besides being a fundamental element of the game dynamic, also represents a potential trajectory of the media industries, where digital platforms facilitate forms of co-creation and personalised interaction (Spurgeon et al., 2009). It would seem that we are indeed confronting a media and technological product that transcends traditional conceptions of immersive videogames. This evolution very much exemplifies what future screens are: media interfaces that no longer simply display information, but actively mediates, augments and co-produces user experience. For these reasons, *Cyberpunk 2077* positions itself within the technological sphere that we might define as the "screen of the future", capable of transcending traditional visualisation technologies to include augmented, virtual and integrated media that amalgamate synergistically, in an organic manner, with human perception and spatial configurations. These screens do not merely present information, but actively mediate interactions, enabling immersive experiences that influence identity, behaviour and urban spatiality. Within this framework, *Night City* operates both as a medium and as an environment, a living interface through which observe how screen-based technologies transform urban spatiality and embodied experience. This conceptualization directly informs the ethnographic approach outlined in the following section.

2. Methodology: Digital Ethnography

This research adopts a qualitative digital ethnography (Hine, 2020; Paoli, D'Auria, 2021) designed to observe, record, and interpret the socio-spatial and aesthetic configurations of *Cyberpunk 2077*'s *Night City*. The study combines in-game fieldwork, visual documentation, and reflexive analysis to investigate how players experience and perform urban life within this immersive environment. Following Gold's (1958) typology of field roles, the researcher positioned himself as a

"participant-as-observer", taking an active part in the gameplay while keeping analytical distance. This allowed for both experiential immersion as well as critical reflection on the structures that shape interaction and representation within the digital environment. Such gameplay sessions were performed for about 87 hours, divided into several sessions. Spatial observations, interactions with NPCs, environmental hints, and moments of narrative choice regarding the story were written down in details during these sessions. Screenshots and video captures were also collected to complement the textual notes with visual evidence. All fieldnotes and screenshots were reviewed and thematically coded using an inductive approach (Thomas, 2003). Codes have been iteratively refined to capture three analytical dimensions: (1) spatial configurations and mobility, (2) embodiment and technological augmentation, and (3) participatory and community practices. This was done by following the logic of reflexive interpretation typical of qualitative ethnography (Delli Paoli & D'Auria, 2021). Fieldwork delved more deeply into the lived experiences of *Night City*'s inhabitants, both players and non-playable characters (NPCs), to understand how screen technologies inform community structures, power dynamics and narrative agency. The observation focused not only on the player's own trajectory but also on NPCs and environmental interactions as ethnographic "actors" within the digital city. Drawing on sociological theories, the research situates *Night City* as a microcosm of emerging digital realities. In order to conduct the research, the choice was made to use, of all the possible characters available to play the game, that of the nomad. Selecting the Nomad path also aligned with the methodological principle of studying marginal perspectives as vantage points for understanding digital societies (Bauman, 2000; Hine, 2020). This outsider position mirrors the ethnographer's stance, both embedded in and detached from the observed environment. This choice was motivated by several reasons, deriving mainly from the sociological literature and the plot that this choice enables. Firstly, by using this character, the first steps in the game are taken outside the city, into which one only enters later. Given the nature of *Night City*, a digital megalopolis of the future, as we briefly began to explain, the choice was made to experience its conflictual dimension and otherness, choosing to use a character who embodies this aspect in the most marked way possible, the "nomad" precisely. In this way, the experience of the metropolis as an "other", alien space was experienced and deepened precisely through this particular point of view. The game sessions have been used in the manner of a participant observation (Kawulich, 2005), visual (Pink, 2021) and textual materials generated by the in-game interactions have been collected in the same manner as a field diary (Blommaert, Jie, 2020). Throughout the fieldwork, reflexive notes were used to track emotional responses, interpretive decisions, and ethical considerations, acknowledging the researcher's presence as part of the digital field (Bovone, 2010; May, Perry, 2014). All texts generated in this way were sampled and transcribed, and similarly, images were captured and used to develop descriptions of the game environments and subsequent theoretical reflections. Reflexivity was treated as a methodological tool rather than a limitation. Navigating through an avatar required recognising how perception, embodiment, and interaction were technologically mediated. The researcher's agency was thus intertwined with that of the digital environment, echoing the notion of the digital ethnographer as participant (Berg, 2022). Therefore, such reflexive and conceptual work made it possible to translate gameplay experience into analytical insight.

2.1. *V as the Stranger: A Nomad's Journey Through the Simulated World*

From the very beginning of the game, the protagonist, V, played in the "nomad" mode (a choice that, as we have explained, is methodologically motivated), turns out to be a foreigner ante litteram, a "vagabond" (Bauman, 2000), an archetype that echoes Simmel's (1908) concept of the *Stranger*, whose position of proximity and detachment allows for a distinct perspective on social structures. He is a solitary figure, traversing arid and desolate landscapes, estranged from the community, family and the world he is about to enter. In this reading, the Nomad becomes not only a narrative role but a methodological stance, reflecting the ethnographer's own position in a digital field – simultaneously inside and outside the observed environment (Bovone, 2010). The game starts outside the city, in an area called Badlands, which stretches like a merciless desert. Once part of a clan, now isolated, V's first steps are defined by exile, both spatially and in terms of identity. V's arrival in *Night City* is not an act of coming home, there is no sense of belonging. As such, this outsider gaze serves as an analytical device that, through the avatar's embodied journey, reveals the mechanisms of exclusion and assimilation at work in the city. *Night City* appears as a corporate-decadence and technological saturated entity, a place built on illusion and power where everybody speaks a language that V has not learned. Every encounter, every place, is a potential danger a device of alienation, holding him in his alien status. One of his earliest interactions, with a mechanic, fully illustrates this sense of hostility and rejection of the foreigner. The following in-game dialogue exemplifies how otherness and marginality are performed within the ludic narrative, translating sociological categories into interactive experience:

> V: You said it was nothing serious when i came in, you said you were sure.
> Mechanic: Guess I was wrong. You can always look for another shop where they won't ask a low nomad while he's hugging the border.

This outsider status gives Nomad V a unique perspective. Like the Stranger V, he has a disenchanted view of the city, which is seen and experienced with cynical realism: it is not home, it is not a harbinger of entertainment It is a melting pot of possibilities and threats, each to be sifted with the utmost circumspection. Such disenchanted observation recalls Schütz's (1944) notion of the *well-informed stranger*, who must reconstruct social meanings from fragments of interaction. In *Night City*, the player-avatar enacts this interpretive effort through exploration and choice. Human relationships within this space are dangerous, approached with circumspection and caution. V himself offers resistance to the city, to assimilation, bringing with him the spirit and rebellion of the margins: the desert, the street, the clan values of loyalty, survival and, at times, harshness.

> V: I don't know why but I felt I could count on you. Belonged to a nomad family too once, city doesn't change us all that much, I guess.
> Panam: That's hard to deny.

In the moment they are forced to upload a synthetic consciousness, a body augmentation compulsory to stay in *Night City*, their detachment deepens. The presence of this form of digital consciousness, called – as we have already mentioned – Johnny Silverhand in his mind further increases the alienation, making him an outsider even to himself, not only to the city and its inhabitants. This internal conflict turns the character into

a double outsider, externally, to the society around him, and internally, to his own body and consciousness. This moment of enforced hybridisation turns the body into a site of contested identity production, a digital-phenomenological condition exemplifying the mediated self (Chouliaraki, 2010; Soukup, 2013). To interpret the Nomad as the Stranger is to consider *Cyberpunk 2077* not only as a metaphor for power, technology and rebellion, but as a study of alienation, identity and the quest for meaning in a simulation-built world. The nomad does not want to belong to *Night City*. He observes it, walks through it, he questions it and then selects what he chooses to take and what to leave behind. His trajectory thus echoes the ethnographic process in and off itself: observing, engaging, and selectively interpreting the field transforms gameplay into a reflexive act of knowledge production.

2.2. *Re-configuring Space: XR, Urban Topographies and Material Culture*

The game practice also allows one to experience the topographical diversity of *Night City*, testifying to the fusion of digital architecture and cultural expression. In ethnographic terms, spatial exploration within the gameworld is treated as a process of digital wayfaring (Frömming et al., 2017), where movement through virtual space produces situated forms of knowledge and sensory engagement. The city's diverse neighbourhoods, from the corporate-dominated centre to the rebellious and infamous streets, illustrate how urban spaces are designed as reflections of socio-political and economic hierarchies (Nas, 2011; Egoreichenko, 2018). By incorporating elements of extended reality into gameplay, *Cyberpunk 2077* allows one to experience a fluid reality within which digital overlays inform all aspects of existence. These superimpositions include holographic billboards, immersive advertisements and networked street environments, generating imagery and visions of a future in which technologies would seem to dictate spatial awareness and behavioural patterns in urban landscapes. From a methodological standpoint, these XR elements were documented through visual fieldnotes and screenshots, analysed as digital artefacts (Arnold, 2016) that convey the interplay between perception, technology, and social behaviour (Berg, 2022). The economic logic embedded in *Night City*'s visual saturation aligns with the notion of the *society of the spectacle*, where the urban landscape becomes an interface for mediated consumption (Debord, 2024). Like contemporary metropolis, *Night City* is divided into several strongly characterised neighbourhoods, each with its own unique and distinctive atmosphere, ambiance, architectural style and socio-political elements. Its urban landscape reflects a mixture of advanced technologies, corporate domination and social decadence. In this way, the following analysis continues with a brief description of the urban characteristics of these spaces and their imagery. Moving through the districts and streets of *Night City* it is quiet easy to identify a set of themes that recur, not only through storytelling and narration but also through the aesthetics and architecture in the digital environments. Each neighborhood was analysed ethnographically, not merely described, to interpret how architectural aesthetics and interactive design embody power, inequality, and cultural identity.

– City Center: the city centre, characterised by towering skyscrapers, neon advertisements and a refined corporate aesthetic. The environment of this district is marked by cleanliness, technological sophistication and the presence of powerful corporations dominating the skyline. Its modern architecture is functional, austere and utilitarian, with a cold and impersonal futuristic atmosphere. This neighbourhood

Figure 3. *Night City* map. Source: https://game-maps.com/C77/Cyberpunk-2077-World-Map.asp.

represents the pinnacle of capitalistic excess and the social divide between the elite and the poor (Böhme, 2017).

– Westbrook: it is the neighbourhood of the rich and the opulent. it is full of luxury hotels, high-end residences and well kept streets. Its ambience is well-groomed, upscale, dominated by shopping malls and neon-lit nightclubs (Elshater, Abusaa-da, 2022). The architecture blends futuristic luxury with a hedonistic nightlife culture, where extravagance and excess are on display, representing, again, the disparity of wealth that defines *Night City*'s social hierarchy (Hae, 2011).

– Watson: it is a neighborhood that combines a rapidly growing working class and immigrant population. It shows a juxtaposition of older, more industrial structures alongside newer, high-tech developments. The area is characterised by busy streets cluttered with makeshift shops and neon signs. It has a more chaotic and lively atmosphere, where technology and poverty coexist. The architectural style here varies, with decaying buildings alongside gleaming corporate complexes, illustrating the disjunction between progress and decadence (Lee et al., 2014).

– Santo Domingo: Santo Domingo is a working-class industrial district, which hosts factories, power plants and technological production sites. Its environment is austere and utilitarian, with a pervasive sense of pollution and neglect in the area. The

architecture of the district is predominantly industrial, characterised by large, functional structures with little concern for aesthetics. The constant hum of machinery (Morillas et al., 2018) and the smell of industrial work give the area a raw atmosphere, reflecting its role as the backbone of *Night City*'s economy (Stilgoe, 1982).

– Heywood: it is a residential neighbourhood, generally associated with working-class families and poorer communities. It is characterised by a mix of urban sprawl, with dense apartment blocks and suburban-style housing developments (Baldassare, 1992). The environment is claustrophobic, characterised by crowded streets that convey a feeling of suffocation. The architecture reflects a more old-fashioned, lived-in style, with concrete structures and occasional patches of greenery and parkland. The atmosphere of the neighbourhood is more personal and intimate than the more corporate sectors of *Night City*, with several elements of urban decay (Breger, 1967).

– Badlands: they are located on the outskirts of *Night City*, a stark contrast to the urban areas. This district is characterised by desolate desert landscapes, abandoned structures and a sense of isolation. The environment is barren, harsh and desolate, with the remains of old highways and industrial ruins dotting the landscape. The architecture is stark and utilitarian, with a post-apocalyptic aesthetic (Hicks, 2016; Walter, 2019). The Badlands embody the collapse of civilisation beyond the city walls, a place where survival becomes the primary concern.

– Pacifica: once destined to become a luxury resort, the area has fallen into a state of disrepair, becoming chaotic and lawless, dominated by gang activity and social unrest. The environment is in a state of decay and neglect (Du Toit, 2010), with crumbling buildings, overgrown streets and crumbling infrastructure. Pacifica's architecture combines modern and traditional elements, with colonial-style buildings and Victorian-style houses.

– Corpo Plaza: situated in the heart of the guild-controlled sectors, Corpo Plaza is an elegant and sterile environment that accommodates the elite of *Night City*. The area is dominated by corporate headquarters and luxury establishments, characterised by clean lines and modernist architecture. The district exudes wealth and power, with minimal human presence outside of corporate executives and security personnel. It serves as a symbol of corporate hegemony and the growing gap between the elite and the general population (Monnet, 2011).

Across these environments, the juxtaposition of affluence and decay reveals how digital urban design reproduces material hierarchies while simulating agency and mobility (Manovich, 2006; Graham, 2016). This approach treats *Night City*'s cartography as a symbolic system rather than a topographical one. Each of *Night City*'s neighbourhoods presents a unique reflection of classic cyberpunk themes such as class stratification, corporate control, technological advances and social decay, contributing to the narrative of the city, its dynamics, and a constant element of resistance and struggle, typical of dystopian storytelling (Merrifield, 2000). The inhabitants of *Night City*, as well as the environments in which they move and in which they act, express their identity not only through belonging to a certain place or district, connoted both spatially and stylistically, but also through a complex interaction of cybernetic enhancements, digital fashion and interactive objects. Wearable screens, retinal displays and neural interfaces enable seamless integration with the city's pervasive technological infrastructure. This media-based material culture underlines the impact that future screen technologies will

have on self-representation and community interaction, further dissolving the bound-aries between physical and digital embodiment. From an ethnographic perspective, mediated bodies like these are paradigmatic exempamples of how digital material culture extends embodiment into hybrid techno-social spaces (Hickey, Smith, 2020). Their screen-based self-representations become empirical traces of the future screen's social and aesthetic functions.

3. The Metropolis and the Stranger: A Reflection on *Night City* Through Simmel and Schütz

The case at hand, while providing a vivid depiction of technological saturation, urban alienation and fragmented identities, also stands as a fertile cue to re-vise, through the lens of classical sociological theories, the metropolis of the future (Hardy, 2022) and the figure of the Stranger within it. Likewise, *Cyberpunk 2077*'s *Night City* offers an environment full of insights and stimuli, that easily recall the concepts pioneered by Georg Simmel in *The Metropolis and Mental Life* (1950) and *The Stranger* (1908). In fact, the possibility of interacting with different characters, often alien to the city itself, is offered as a cue to thematise otherness, a notion finding consistent theoret-ical roots, such as those provided by Alfred Schütz's phenomenological interpretation in *The Stranger* (1944). These founding concepts, although developed in a completely different context and historical moment, may prove to be still valid tools for interpreting the more psychological, social and existential dimensions of individuals navigating both the spaces of the gaming platform and the hypermodern, technology-mediated urban spaces that are more and more becoming a tangible and widespread reality. By exam-ining the lived experience of the inhabitants of *Night City*, both the playing character V and the multitude of NPCs, we can create a parallel with Simmel and Schütz's ideas on detachment, anonymity and the struggle for meaning in an oppressive urban landscape (Øversveen, 2022). This reflection will consider the way *Night City* represents the intensi-fication of modern urban experiences and creates an environment that amplifies both the aloneness of the individual and his existential disorientation. Within this framework, the digital ethnographic observation of *Night City* allows for the revisit of these classical notions through player embodiment, mediated perception and interactive agency, situ-ating Simmel and Schütz within a future screen context.

3.1. *The Metropolis and Mental Life: The Intensification of the Stimulus in* Night City

This analytical section situates the findings within a phenomenological and socio-logical framework. Drawing on Simmel's (1903) reflections on urban experience and Schütz's (1944) analysis of the social world as a structure of meanings, the study inter-prets *Night City* as a mediated metropolis is interpreted as technologically reshaping perception, distance and interaction. This interpretive framing allows the ethnographic material to be read as empirical articulations of Simmel's and Schütz's theoretical intu-itions. In *The Metropolis and Mental Life* Simmel argues that urban existence is charac-terised by an overwhelming onslaught of sensory stimuli, resulting in a "blasé" attitude, defensive adaptation to cognitive overload that manifests today in mediated environ-ments saturated with data and images (Lash, 2002), an adaptive detachment necessary

for psychological survival in an environment saturated with information, movement and economic transactions. The metropolitan dweller is thus forced to develop protective devices, prioritising rationality over emotion in order to juggle the impersonal and alienated nature of city life. *Night City*, in an extreme, futuristic form, embodies this intensification of urban stimuli that is already being experienced in factual reality (Prokofyeva, Somkhishvili, 2023). The incessant movement, frantic activity, ubiquitous advertisements and cacophony of voices, both analogue and digital, create a sensory environment that mirrors Simmel's description of the modern metropolis, but in an exaggerated, cybernetically enhanced form. The characters that animate *Night City*, much like Simmel's city inhabitants, display a mixture of emotional withdrawal and hyper-rational pragmatism. The game's NPCs, be they corporate elites, street mercenaries or marginalised lower-city townspeople, display this detachment as they navigate a world defined by transactional relationships, rapid technological change and the ever-present pressing need to survive within *Night City*'s hyper-capitalist economy (Paris, 2005). This economy of attention and transaction aligns with the vertical stratification of power in digital urbanism, where accessibility and privilege are spatially encoded (Graham, 2016). Through ethnography, the situatedness of the players grasp this tension: participation becomes a mode of observation of how systemic constraints are internalized and reproduced within digital ecologies. This tension, this struggle between the individual, selfishly self-referential action and the oppressive determinism of the metropolis, is the real subject of V's journey, a mercenary who wants to climb the hierarchical levels of the town's underworld (Delanty, 2000). The player's options are apparently broad, yet utterly conditioned by systemic structures that come from the city (megacorporations, cybernetic enhancement and digital surveillance), which only corroborates the theory of impersonality and calculated rationality, already identified by Simmel in his observation of the modern metropolis in its auroral phase.

3.2. *The Stranger: Simmel and Schütz in the Cyberpunk Context*

Simmel's concept of the *foreigner* describes a figure who is physically present within a social system, but remains psychologically and socially detached, neither completely foreign nor completely integrated into the community. The stranger embodies mobility and objectivity, existing in a liminal space where identity is fluid but unstable. This concept is also taken up and explored by Schütz, but he does so by focusing on phenomenological experience. He describes the foreigner as someone whose habitual knowledge structures are disrupted when he enters a new cultural system. Deprived of the implicit and taken-for-granted knowledge possessed by actors in the same frame of action, the stranger must engage in an active, often exhausting process of interpretation and adaptation (Ålund, 1995). Even with regard to these reflections, their application in the contemporary continues to be fruitful and effective (Ålund, 2020). This process takes the form of the continuous negotiation made by the player with *Night City*'s unfamiliar codes in language, social hierarchies, and techno-cultural rituals, the interpretive labor of which recalls the notion put forward by Schütz. The ideas expressed by both Simmel and Schütz regarding the foreigner are blended into the figure of V within *Cyberpunk 2077*. As a mercenary moving through *Night City*, V is simultaneously part of the metropolis and perpetually on its margins. Unlike the elite corporate or gang members deeply entrenched, he acts within a liminal space (Thomassen, 2016) in his attempts to belong to a group and at the same time stay detached from it, often unconsciously. Whatever

path the character eventually goes for – to align himself with the corporate interests or to become a digital ghost, or an eternal nomad – the solution represents the existential problem of the stranger who continuously has to redefine his identity in a fluid and very often hostile environment (Jackson et al., 2017). This liminality also reflects the ethnographer's position in the digital field: both immersed and distanced, required to interpret meaning from within an unfamiliar symbolic system (Davies, 2012). Furthermore, the cybernetic augmentation and digital consciousness present in the *Night City* context intensify this sense of alienation. For example, V's interactions with Johnny Silverhand, the digital phantom embedded in his consciousness (Humphreys, 2015), make Schütz's notion of habitual knowledge disruption literal. V is not only socially alienated, but also ontologically, as his very sense of self is destabilised by the technological intrusion (Foucault, 1988; Gergen, 1996). The boundaries between self and other, between man and machine, blur in ways that allow the theoretical elaborations of Simmel and Schütz to be applied to the imaginative and speculative context developed by fiction and the spaces of cyberpunk (Heuser, 2003).

3.3. Night City *as a Space of Alienation and Possibility*

Beyond the alien's individual experience, *Night City* itself functions as a manifestation of urban alienation. The metropolis of *Cyberpunk 2077* is a space simultaneously characterised by radical freedom and overwhelming determinism, where characters can reinvent themselves in a multitude of different ways, but are simultaneously constrained by the technological, political and socio-economic structures of the city (Van Leeuwen, Maas, 2010). The city thus operates as a macro-field where individual trajectories intersect with structural forces, enacting a production of space as socially and technologically mediated (Lefebvre, 2014). Simmel's insights into the dual nature of urban life, the liberation of the individual from traditional bonds and the contemporary sense of isolation, deeply permeate and characterise *Night City* in its entirety. The city's digital interfaces, from virtual reality spaces to neural implants, further exacerbate the fragmentation of identity, reinforcing the theme of alienation in hyper-technological environments (Kellner, 2006). Documenting these environments through ethnographic observation reveals how digital architectures reproduce the same dynamics of alienation and control described by Simmel, but within the immaterial infrastructures of data, code, and simulation (Baudrillard, 1994).

4. Conclusions

The conclusions presented here stem from the digital ethnographic fieldwork conducted in *Cyberpunk 2077*, interpreted through classical and contemporary sociological frameworks. Through an ethnographic approach to the game platform and the theoretical contribution of classical sociology, *Cyberpunk 2077* can be conceived no longer as a mere playful environment, but as a device that offers a vision of the metropolis that is both a logical extension of modern urban conditions and an extrapolation of future technological alienation (Skotnicki, Nielsen, 2021). This dual reading – empirical and theoretical – demonstrates how ethnographic practice can be extended to simulated environments, treating them as spaces of social meaning rather than fiction. *Night City* embodies the exasperated rationality, sensory overload and impersonal

transactions described by Simmel, while at the same time reinforcing Schütz's idea of the stranger – an experience also amplified by the protagonist's status as a "nomad" – existentially disoriented, struggling to juggle unfamiliar cultural landscapes and indifferent, aseptic and, at times, openly hostile human relationships. Cyberpunk as a genre, by its very nature, often has the function of reflecting, in an amplified manner, contemporary urban realities (Abbott, 2007). In an age where digital mediation increasingly shapes identity and interaction (Thompson, 2020), the themes of detachment, adaptation and existential uncertainty remain as relevant as ever. *Night City*, with its fusion of digital consciousness, corporate hegemony, and individual struggle, represents the culmination of these sociological tensions: a metropolis in which everyone is an outsider, but no one is truly free from the deterministic grip of its actual reality. *Night City* thus becomes a laboratory within which to observe the intersection of future screen technologies, digital urbanism and participatory media. From a methodological standpoint, conceiving the game as a laboratory underlines the potential of digital ethnography to explore hybrid social phenomena, where interaction and observation coincide within technologically mediated environments. By mapping the material culture, behaviour and spatial dynamics of its inhabitants, this experimental ethnography highlights the transformative impact of emerging media on narratives, imaginaries (Dunn, 2018), community interactions and urban reconfigurations. While digital and physical realities are incessantly on the move, often spiralling out of control (Brenner, Schmid, 2014), the study of speculative urban environments offers insights into the evolving shifting relationship of cities, their life within them, and technological infrastructures. In this sense, speculative urban spaces function as heuristic models that help anticipate and critically analyse future techno-social conditions. Future screens will not only reflect reality, but actively construct it, structuring how people live and move, not only in the network, but also in the factual realities. This finding supports recent research on the performative nature of digital infrastructures (Couldry & Hepp, 2018), where media architectures not only represent but actively organise social life. From a theoretical point of view, this raises crucial questions about the identity, autonomy and ethics of digital augmentation. The increasing entanglement of virtual and physical spaces space requires reconsidering the notion of human action in such mediated environments. Theories of posthumanism (Badmington, 2000) and digital embodiment (Taylor, 2002) suggest that such hybridised realities are not merely speculative fictions, but have predictive potential, and this potential makes them glimpses of a near future in which digital interconnectivity determines socio-political and personal existence. The future screen technology then emerges not only as an instrument of representation, but as a fundamental force in the ongoing transformation of cultural and urban spaces. The ethnographic reading of *Cyberpunk 2077* thus contributes to a broader understanding of the future screen as both an object of study and a methodological interface – an active medium through which contemporary urban experience can be observed, theorised, and anticipated.

4.1. *Rethinking Urban Engagement*

Beyond alienation, the ethnographic observation of player interactions and in-game collectives highlights emergent forms of digital community – temporary, networked, and often performative (Ohler, 2010). However, *Night City* also offers possibilities for new forms of community and meaning-making. If the status of foreigner initially leads to experiencing upheaval and disorientation, there is also a potential creative, synthetic di-

mension in it: finding ways to integrate oneself into the new system or redefining one's role within it are present and experienced goals. This aspect should not be underestimated, as much in the game experience as in the reflection on its possible validity for contemporary social life. In the cyberpunk world, this dimension often takes the form of subcultures, hacker collectives or nomadic networks that resist the dominant corporate order, presenting themselves as an alternative from below to capitalist power dynamics seemingly without alternatives (Fisher, 2022). These virtual formations parallel the subcultural logics (Williams, 2011) identified in *Night City*'s player communities and NPC factions, suggesting that resistance and adaptation coexist even within systemically controlled environments. These countercultural movements, just like contemporary digital subcultures, represent alternative pathways to belonging in an otherwise alienating urban landscape, as well as potential stimuli for re-appropriating ever-changing urban spaces and as a possible community escape from new, ever-present forms of alienation. Beyond mere entertainment, the experience of this study provides possible insights into forms of urban and community design and human-computer interaction. This points to the heuristic value of experimental ethnography in digital contexts, whereby simulated interaction can reveal patterns relevant both to urban sociology and design research. If the city of the future is moving in the same direction as the *Night City* of *Cyberpunk 2077*, then it will also be necessary to revise current forms of citizenship, considering new experiences of digital citizenship. Understanding how immersive environments influence human behaviour provides valuable insights into the integration of smart city technologies and ethical considerations related to surveillance, data privacy and algorithmic governance. In this light, the ethnographic engagement with *Cyberpunk 2077* underlines the necessity of integrating sociological reflection into the design of future mediated urban systems.

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