

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: Cyberpunk 2077

Platform: PS4/PS5, Xbox One/Series X/Series S, PC

Genre: FPS Action-Adventure RPG

Release Date: December 10, 2020

Developer: CD Projekt RED

Publisher: CD Projekt RED

Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Gabriel Amatangelo, Marcin Blacha, Tomasz Marchewka

Overview

“Legends are made here. What will yours be?” – Official Cyberpunk Website

The year is 2077. Late-stage capitalism has weeded its way into the depths of America where the oppressed only get oppressed in style. V is a cybernetic mercenary in the neon megalopolis of Night City but before that, they were a corporate Arasaka rat in one life, a nameless street kid in another, and a traveling nomad in the last. It didn't matter anyway. All that mattered was who V would make of themselves. When their best friend Jackie Welles approaches them with a high-stakes job at Konpeki Plaza, their life takes a dramatic turn. What starts as stealing a prototype biochip, 'The Relic', from Yorinobu Arasaka quickly spirals into the assassination of CEO Saburo Arasaka, the death of Jackie, the chip getting stuck in V's head, and V awakening to the digitized ghost of the long-dead rockerboy terrorist, Johnny Silverhand, slowly overwriting their mind.

Thus, the central conflict of *Cyberpunk 2077* is introduced – V must find a way to remove the chip or lose their identity entirely. With Johnny in their head and the help of some friends, V navigates Night City's dark and tangled web, the line between V and Johnny blurring more and more as time goes on. They face different, opposing perspectives with every person they meet and every hardship they endure. Goro Takemura, a once-loyal Arasaka bodyguard, becomes a surprising ally, while Johnny Silverhand becomes a friend – maybe even a best friend. But this friendship comes at a cost as only one can survive. So the final questions remain: Will V sacrifice themselves and let Johnny live on in their body? Will they take the path of least resistance and end it all, there and now? Will they sell their soul to Arasaka for a slim chance at survival? Or will they cling to their humanity, say goodbye to Johnny for good, and live on as someone forever changed by the people of their past and the consequences of their choices?

In this oppressive exploration of identity, autonomy, and the commodification of life in a world where people would surrender parts of themselves to survive, where the city you live in *refuses* to permit you an internal life– can a thing of beauty truly never fade away?

Characters

→ V

Can you reclaim an identity that's no longer yours?

The player character and the hero of the story– V, short for Valerie or Vincent. Regardless of which life path and gender the player chooses, V leaves their past life to become a mercenary in Night City, chasing after a name for themselves, hoping to become another NC legend. Of course, what they get instead is a biochip of a dead terrorist stuck in their head, slowly overwriting their consciousness. V is, without doubt, a complex character but their personality is highly dependent on player choice. Still, there are several core traits that define them. They're strong, resilient, and adaptable– a resourceful survivor, especially in a place as unforgiving as Night City. They struggle with personal ambition and are forced to test their loyalty with difficult decisions, especially when it comes to choosing between people they care about. While they may not always make the morally right choice, they always try to do their best for their friends. The truth of V's identity gets revealed more and more the closer to the end they are, the nearer to death they face with every choice they and the player make.

V represents the central theme of identity in a world where tech, capitalism, violence, and greed blur the line between human and machine. Where one must fight to reclaim agency over their being. Where people are more than willing to sacrifice autonomy for survival and strength, poisoning and fashioning their bodies with cybernetics. Of course, V is more than just a character– they *are* the player. Through them, the player explores Night City with all its moral dilemmas, flawed characters, and intriguing relationships. Their evolving identity not only shapes how the player experiences the story but also what it means to live authentically in a place designed to strip that away– a place like Night City.

***"I just want the world to know I was here. That I mattered."* – V**

→ JOHNNY SILVERHAND

Who gets burned when you blaze down the rebel path?

Rockerboy, terrorist, rebel. *Dead*. These are just a few words used to describe Johnny Silverhand, lead singer of *Samurai*, the band he used to rally the people of Night City to rage against the machine. His charisma is undercut by his ego, just as his rebellious nature is dominated by his self-destruction. When his then-girlfriend, Alt Cunningham, was taken by Arasaka and killed, his hatred for them grew, blaming the corporation for her death. This set him on a long and vengeful path that eventually led him to his death. He launched an attack on Arasaka but ended up captured by them, subjected to their *Soulkiller* program, and made into an engram. When he 'wakes' in V's head, fifty years later, he sees that his fight was for naught– nothing has changed. If anything, it's gotten worse.

Johnny Silverhand is the definition of the anti-establishment rebel, an extremely common archetype in the cyberpunk genre, but is also there to show what happens when radicalism is taken to its extreme. His war against Arasaka represents the resistance against corporate oppression, but his

rebellion is as much about his hatred for what Arasaka stands for and what they do to the people as it is about his desire for personal vindication, clouding his judgment to the point where he prioritizes his crusade over the well-being of his friends. Years later in V's head, Johnny sees that all his friends have moved on without him. From him. His existence as an engram, a digital ghost, forces him to confront his mortality and question his legacy– is he remembered as a hero, a freedom fighter? Or as a reckless terrorist who leaves destruction in his wake? This is what makes Johnny not just a complex character in his own right, but also a character that forces the player to face difficult questions about morality, sacrifice, and the nature of rebellion. With Johnny being one of the biggest influences on the player and V, they must decide where to side with Johnny's ideals or find another solution– some going against it.

"This is why you don't bring back fallen warriors. Sooner or later, they're going to see everything they fought for's turned to shit." – Johnny Silverhand

→ **GORO TAKEMURA**

Is it honor or blindness to stay loyal to a corrupt system?

Ex-bodyguard to Saburo Arasaka, Goro Takemura is a man of discipline and unshakable loyalty, deeply shaped by Japanese ideals of honor, tradition, and duty– a stark contrast to most in Night City. He becomes an ally and friend to V after Saburo is killed by his son Yorinobu– which V witnessed. He wants V's help to bring Yorinobu down and, in turn, he helps V get closer to their goal of removing the Relic, the biochip. While Goro is not blind to the corruption of Arasaka, he is still unwaveringly loyal to Saburo and believes in the "old ways" under Saburo. His inability to question or challenge the system that shaped him is his tragic flaw. This rigid moral code of his makes him an outsider in Night City, and he often expresses he feels like one. It also allows him to serve as a moral counterweight within the story to both V and Johnny as someone who follows the idea of a more controlled resistance, considering his complex relationship with power.

"I do not know. I do not recognize myself." – Goro Takemura

→ **YORINOBU ARASAKA & ARASAKA CORPORATION**

Can you claim to be a liberator while wearing the crown of a tyrant?

Arasaka Corporation is the ever-looming presence casting its dark shadow over Night City. The dragon circling the princess in the tower. They're a Multinational Capitalist Empire that deals in corporate security, banking, and manufacturing but really, they're more than that– they're the entity that shapes Night City's world order.

Yorinobu Arasaka is the rebellious son of Saburo Arasaka, and he considers himself to be both an insider and an outsider to his father's empire. He critiques his father's tyranny and the corporation's grip on society and hopes to be the bomb that takes down Arasaka from the inside. He wants to free the world from its oppressive rule so, to do this, he takes over the company, murdering his own father and disrupting the operation from within. While he manages to damage the corporation, causing it to lose billions of dollars, his rebellion feels more hollow than anything, driven by selfishness rather than actual

care for the people Arasaka hurt. And of course, with that much power, can Yorinobu actually be trusted to make any meaningful change in the long run?

“The Arasaka name must remain unbroken. Its legacy will live on — even if I have to burn everything down to do it.” – Yorinobu Arasaka

→ JACKIE WELLES

Will you chase your dreams or will your dreams chase you to the grave?

V's mercenary partner, best friend, and former Valentino gang member. Jackie Welles was an underdog with a larger-than-life personality, known for being a force of nature in a fight and one of the few, good people in Night City. He was known to value friendship, loyalty, and family above all else. Of all these positive traits, it was his relentless desire to be something greater than himself that brought his downfall. His elusive dreams of making it to the major leagues, of becoming an NC legend, led him to his death. He serves as a stark reminder of just how mortal people are, even in a society dominated by cybernetic enhancements, showing just what the cost of ambition truly is in Night City.

“The only way you get to the top in Night City is if you climb over bodies. I’ve accepted that... but I won’t be just another rung on someone else’s ladder.” – Jackie Welles

→ ALT CUNNINGHAM

Do engrams dream of electric sheep?

Alt Cunningham was the girlfriend of rockstar Johnny Silverhand, sure, but she was also the best netrunner Night City has ever seen. With a reputation like that, Arasaka soon caught wind, kidnapping her and forcing her to develop Soulfighter— a program that can preserve the consciousness and memories of dying individuals. She became Soulfighter's first victim, her body dying and consciousness being forever kept as a digital ghost in the net. Sixty years later, Alt can help V with the Relic as a protector beyond the Blackwall. Alt offers a unique perspective to V, standing as an example of the human cost when it comes to technological advancement and all the questionable ethics that come with it. She is someone who transcended her body, but still retains some of her identity like her memories, personality, and intellect, though she no longer processes emotions as she once did. So what exactly is it that defines humanity? The body, mind, or soul? Emotions, memories, or mortality?

“You think being human is the pinnacle of existence? It’s the cage you never see.” – Alt Cunningham

→ JUDY ALVAREZ

Can empathy survive in a city without a soul?

A braindance technician and loyal friend, Judy is one of the most emotionally resonant characters in the game and a potential love interest for female V. She grew up in a small town that was bought out and destroyed, turned into a reservoir. The fact that her hometown was taken ties directly into her longing for a community. Throughout the game, her story intertwines heavily with Evelyn

Parker, who was her best friend. When Evelyn killed herself, it shook Judy to her core. Her cause of using her braindance techie skills to expose corruption and fight exploitation is turned into something deeply, deeply personal, more so than before. It is colored with grief. Ultimately, Judy's arc becomes one of hope and empathy struggling to maintain in a place such as Night City, of fighting for change and fighting through loss.

***"You gotta live for yourself. You won't get far in life if you just let people walk all over you."* - Judy Alvarez**

→ **PANAM PALMER**

When freedom means being alone, is it worth more than the belonging you've left behind?

V first meets Panam Palmer in the Afterlife, just another merc looking to make it in Night City. Really, Panam is a former member of the Aldecaldos nomad clan, but, due to disagreements, had become estranged. Should V help Panam, she can become a good friend and even a potential romance option for male V. In all actuality, Panam's story centers around her search for belonging and her conflicted want for independence but also her family, the Aldecaldos. She wrestles with being both an outsider and a potential leader within her nomadic family and she can be loyal to a fault, willing to risk everything for her friends and clan. She is stubborn, passionate, and struggles with trust, but can potentially form a deep bond with V, allowing V to even join the Aldecaldos and escape from Night City for good.

***"We all make our choices, but in the end, our choices make us."* - Panam Palmer**

→ **EVELYN PARKER**

What escape is left when your entire being is a commodity?

There is no book more closed than Evelyn Parker, an enigma of beauty and cunning. Though clever, she was only able to manipulate the playing field so much before it got the better of her. She was a Clouds doll- or a special type of prostitute that during sessions, is controlled by a chip with their clients' fantasies and desires- but she started getting into more nefarious business. As a consort, she was a frequent guest of Yorinobu Arasaka and Konpeki Plaza, recording a braindance of his suite for a heist- the same heist V and Jackie end up on. Unfortunately, Evelyn's story takes a dark turn. After a netrunner attack on her at Clouds, she was rendered comatose but still aware of her surroundings. In this state, she was raped and sold multiple times, left to the black market where she was forced to endure endless abuse. Thankfully, she was located by Judy and V but was never truly able to recover from the trauma. Evelyn committed suicide soon after. Her epitaph reads: *"She died valiantly fighting the system."*

***"All my plans... all my dreams... it was supposed to be different. Better."* - Evelyn Parker**

Breakdown

ONCE UPON A CRIME...

Once upon a crime, in a cyberpunk America, V finds themselves with a dead best friend and a couple of months to live. But how did they get there?

In *Cyberpunk 2077*, the main quests are structured in three acts and employ a loose adaptation of the familiar monomyth while blending in existential themes that generally come with the cyberpunk genre. The game covers major themes of identity and autonomy, and what it means when corporate oppression and greed threaten that— what it means when humanity becomes a commodification. It posits difficult questions of morality and choice as much as it does legacy. It brings forth themes of a world under hypercapitalism and corporate wars, where transhumanism is the norm.

The story itself branches in a few different ways with different endings across many missions, but the narrative structure is evident and purposeful. The game follows a hybrid structure of an Open World exploration with a Gated Sandbox for the Prologue and Act 1, as parts of the map and story will be unavailable to the player until the main quest progresses. It also incorporates a limited branching narrative design with significant choices that affect the final endings available to the player. This hybrid structure of *Cyberpunk 2077* ensures the key themes, major plot points, and relationships remain consistent across playthroughs while still leaving room for player choice.

Main storyline details and narrative structure:

PROLOGUE

The Corpo-Rat: Lifepath option and **Prologue.** V starts as a mid-tier corporate at Arasaka, trying to navigate dangerous, corporate politics. They meet Jackie and are forced out of the life they've known.

The Streetkid: Lifepath option and **Prologue.** V starts as a street kid, growing up in Heywood, Night City. What starts as a job, ends with Jackie Welles holding a gun up to their head. Police show up, and V and Jackie end up thick as thieves— partners for life.

The Nomad: Lifepath option and **Prologue.** V starts as a nomad leaving their clan in the Badlands with hopes of making it big in Night City. Their first job is to smuggle a hot item across the border, leading them to meet their new best friend, Jackie.

ACT ONE

Six months later, V and Jackie are on a job to rescue Sandra Dorsett in a den of Scavengers. This is V's **Ordinary World** now. They find her alongside plenty of dead bodies stripped for their cyberware to sell in the black market. Thanks to V and Sandra's Platinum Status Healthcare, she survives with Trauma Team International showing up, showcasing how only those who can afford premium-tier services are offered life-saving medical care. This reinforces the late-stage capitalist economy where survival is commodified and access to basic necessities is determined by economic status rather than being available to everyone. It likely implies just how far into the for-profit systems healthcare programs have fallen. Afterwards, V visits their friend Viktor, a Rippperdoc, and gets new cyberware installed. V's **Call to Adventure** occurs Jackie informs V of a big job he lined up with top fixer Dexter DeShawn— to steal an experimental biochip known as "The Relic" from Arasaka. V is hesitant at first, nearly **Refusing the Call**, but in the span of the conversation, Jackie manages to convince them. The job requires a stolen Militech drone called the Flathead. V

successfully retrieves the Flathead and meets Evelyn Parker and Judy Alvarez where V learns to use a braindance wreath to inspect Yorinobu Arasaka's room to locate the biochip, then V and Jackie manage to get into Konpeki Plaza. During the heist, the two steal the biochip but everything goes wrong when Yorinobu assassinates his father, Saburo Arasaka, which ends up with V and Jackie shooting their way out of Konpeki Plaza, Jackie dead, and V being shot in the head with a biochip in their brain. The heist, as a whole, is V **Crossing the First Threshold**. This is **Plot Point One**, where they make that leap into the irreversible and leave behind their ordinary life. Nothing is the same after this heist.

ACT TWO

V wakes from being shot in the head after strange hallucinations of a red man to see Goro Takemura killing Dexter DeShawn. Goro helps V escape and they learn from Viktor that V's hallucinations are that of Johnny Silverhand's memories and that the biochip with Johnny's engram is slowly taking over V's consciousness– killing them. They also actually *meet* Johnny for the first time, who tries to kill them until he realizes they're... connected, so to say. The moments V meets both Goro and Johnny are arguable the **Meeting the Mentor** moment. The two characters serve as a guide to V in many different ways and from different perspectives. Throughout Act Two, V can pursue quests related to different people which leads to different endings becoming available to them– these are the **Tests, Allies, and Enemies**. All the while, the quest *Tapeworm* will activate at several points during Act 2. V will get chances to talk to Johnny and try to understand him as the story progresses. This quest defines the relationship V and Johnny have by the end of the game.

Evelyn Parker	Alt Cunningham	Anders Hellman	Goro Takemura
V tracks down Evelyn Parker to get help with the biochip but finds that she suffered a traumatic incident and has gone missing. When V and Judy find her, Evelyn is injured and broken– raped and sold through the black market. Though V and Judy confront the people responsible for this and uncover more about Evelyn's connection with the biochip, Evelyn's story ends tragically with her suicide, leaving Judy devastated.	V learns of a legendary netrunner named Alt Cunningham, creator of the Soullkiller program capable of transferring consciousness into the net and Johnny's ex-girlfriend. Johnny tells V what happened to Alt all those years ago and, through the Voodoo Boys, V makes contact with her. Alt helps V and Johnny, giving them critical information about the biochip and a potential solution.	With Goro Takemura's help, V tracks down an Arasaka scientist who helped create the biochip, Anders Hellman, with the hope that he can remove it without V dying. He provides insights into the Relic's design but confirms it's impossible to remove it without destroying V. He reluctantly agrees to help even though he offers no immediate solution.	Goro becomes an ally, and maybe even a friend, to V throughout Act Two. With V's help, he hopes to expose Yorinobu for murdering his father, Saburo, and, in return, helps V track down Anders Hellman. After an intense mission of infiltrating parade floats, V and Goro manage to make contact with Hanako Arasaka, Saburo's daughter, to expose the truth.

ACT THREE

Act Three begins with the point of no return **Plot Point Three**, *Nocturne Op55n1*. V meets with Hanako Arasaka in the Embers Club which is, arguably, the **Approach to the Inmost Cave** as, at this point, there is no turning back. Hanako discusses her proposal to confront Yorinobu. From here, V is in the endgame and must decide how to proceed– this is where V chooses which path to approach the **Supreme Ordeal**– accept Hanako's plan, team up with Rogue, call Panam and the Aldecaldos for help, pursue the final

mission solo with Johnny, or choose the path of least resistance and commit suicide, then and there.

Hanako Arasaka	The Afterlife	The Aldecaldos	Secret Ending
V chooses to assist Hanako with her plan, helping her and her loyalist Arasaka forces infiltrate Arasaka Tower– to the Supreme Ordeal . Together, they confront Yorinobu and Hanako reclaims control of Arasaka Corporation, but V collapses after Yorinobu’s capture. In this ending, the structure differs from the others. The Reward is met when they take control over Arasaka Tower and after V collapses, when they remove the engram from her brain as promised.	V seeks Rogue’s help to infiltrate Arasaka Tower with Johnny’s help. Rogue agrees but insists Johnny takes the lead. They put a crew together, create a plan, and execute a full-scale assault on Arasaka Tower, entering the Supreme Ordeal with Johnny at the helm of V’s body. They reach and enter the digital realm where V is met with their Reward , a chance to reclaim their body. Alt reveals she can extract Johnny’s engram from V’s brain, effectively “killing” him. This presents V with the final choice which is arguably The Road Back , as it’s one more threshold that V has to cross, one more challenging decision to make before their desires are fulfilled– remove Johnny’s engram and live on or let Johnny remain, condemning V to die, but allowing Johnny to live. Whatever choice made leads to the Resurrection .	Turning to Panam and the Aldecaldo family, V secures their help only after V helps them. After, V and Panam lead the assault on Arasaka Tower– the Supreme Ordeal , the Belly of the Beast – with the Aldecaldos’ firepower to back them up. V reaches and enters Mikoshi, the digital realm, where V is met with their Reward , a chance to reclaim their body. Alt reveals she can extract Johnny’s engram from V’s brain, effectively “killing” him. This presents V with the final choice which is arguably The Road Back , as it’s one more threshold that V has to cross, one more challenging decision to make before their desires are fulfilled– remove Johnny’s engram and live on or let Johnny remain, condemning V to die, but allowing Johnny to live. Whatever choice made leads to the Resurrection .	If the player withholds from making a choice, just letting V sit there, Johnny, after five or so minutes, will offer V another, secret choice– to face the Supreme Ordeal alone by storming Arasaka with just the two of them. And they do just that. Just V, with Johnny as mental support, storms Arasaka Tower, taking down Adam Smasher and eventually reaching Alt in the digital realm where V is met with their Reward , a chance to reclaim their body. There, Alt lets V make their final choice which is arguably The Road Back , as it’s one more threshold that V has to cross, one more challenging decision to make before their desires are fulfilled– save themselves and remove Johnny, killing his consciousness for good, or let Johnny remain and take over V’s consciousness. Whatever choice made leads to the Resurrection .
<i>Leads to The Devil ending</i>	<i>Leads to The Sun ending or Temperance if Johnny is saved.</i>	<i>Leads to The Star ending or Temperance if Johnny is saved.</i>	<i>Leads to The Sun ending or Temperance if Johnny is saved.</i>

EPILOGUE

The Devil	The Sun	The Star	Temperance
<u>Where is My Mind?:</u> V wakes	<u>Path of Glory:</u> V wakes up in	<u>All Along the Watchtower:</u>	<u>New Dawn Fades:</u> Months

in an Arasaka space station, Johnny's engram already removed from their head (the **Reward**). At some point, V is told the news– that the Relic caused permanent damage and they *still* only have six months to live no matter what. Here is where they're given their final choice– their **Road Back** decision: Sign their life away to Arasaka and have their mind placed in Mikoshi to be potentially brought back to life in the future, the same way Arasaka is uploading Saburo's engram into Yorinobu, or refuse and go home to Earth and live out their remaining days. In other words, sell their soul to Arasaka or die. Whatever their choice, their **Resurrection** is bitter and tainted, and the **Return with the Elixir** following right after of V either going back to Earth or going to get downloaded into Mikoshi.

their penthouse, no more Johnny in their head, next to their romantic partner if they have one. They put on Johnny's Samurai jacket and then head out into an AV to meet with Mr. Blue Eyes at the Afterlife. The two discuss a big job at the Crystal Palace– a space station for the rich. By the end of it, V is all geared up in a spaceship, flying into the stars towards the Crystal Palace. This entire epilogue is follows their **Return with the Elixir**, where they go home, alive. This is the direct result of the Return and the Ressurrection.

Directly after the Arasaka Tower assault, V and Panam drive back to their makeshift camp after a heart-to-heart. V, Panam, and Mitch discuss their raid and their plan to escape. If Judy was romanced, she would be there to speak to V. After some discussions, V finally escapes with the Aldecaldos, leaving Night City behind for good. This entire epilogue is follows their **Return with the Elixir**, where they go home, alive. This is the direct result of the Return and the Ressurrection.

later, Johnny wakes up in V's body, now Johnny's body with V no longer present– completely gone. Johnny has evidently made a new life for himself somewhere near Pacifica, with his own apartment and a new somewhat friend, Steve. Johnny protects Steve from his abusive father and, after a jam-out session with Steve at the music store, Johnny goes to visit V's and Rogue's niche, staying some final words. After, Johnny hops on a bus and leaves Night City for good, leaving Steve one final gift– a guitar. This entire epilogue is follows their **Return with the Elixir**, even though they go home not as V, but as Johny. This is the direct result of the Return and the Ressurrection.

NOTE: The expansion Phantom Liberty includes a brand new ending known as The Tower but, since it was not a part of the main game from release, it will not be included, nor will any of the content from the expansion be in this analysis.

QUIET LIFE OR BLAZE OF GLORY?

Alongside V, the characters of Night City are complex, layered individuals each driven by their own desires. V just wants to live, Johnny wants to take Arasaka down, Panam wants independence, and Judy wants justice for those close to her who have been exploited in many ways, like Evelyn. Evelyn wants an escape from her life, Goro wants justice for Saburo's murder, and even Yorinobu wants power to reshape Arasaka's control over the world. These are the conscious desires of the characters.

What makes these characters complex are their unconscious desires: V is searching for a sense of purpose, for something to define just what their life stands for– to leave a legacy and not die a nobody. Johnny, with the more people from his past he meets, yearns for redemption, to make amends, especially with Alt Cunningham and, perhaps even with V. Panam feels at odds with her nomad family but still yearns to prove her worth to them, conflicted between freedom and belonging. Judy desires a

sense of belonging and trust, searching for a genuine connection and family after Evelyn dies. Evelyn searched to reclaim control over her life in a world that preys on the vulnerable, hoping for agency. Goro longs for redemption for failing to protect his charge and is forced to question his blind loyalty, and Yorinobu wishes for freedom from his father's shadow.

So with all these different desires and characters pulling V and the player every which way, how can the question of–

“Quiet life or blaze of glory?” – Dexter DeShawn

– be answered, and how can the answer be found in every one of these characters?

Johnny Silverhand is a blaze of glory defined. He embodies it with his rockstar lifestyle and revenge plots that led him to his legendary death. Goro Takemura represents the quiet life with honor, but his character questions whether this quiet duty is inherently meaningful or if stepping outside of that quiet life to pursue justice and truth is the more honorable path. Panam follows the blaze of glory for her family while Judy seeks a quieter life with purpose.

V, on the other hand, represents neither. They represent the choice. For V, this question is both literal and existential. Will they choose the path of the quiet life? The one that secures their survival? Or are they willing to risk it all for a shot at greatness, a shot at vengeance, and a shot at purpose beyond just surviving?

LOWLIFE, HIGH-TECH

In a world where hypercapitalism has invaded America, global crises occur worldwide, and corporations go to war, no description fits the duality of *Cyberpunk 2077* more than “lowlife and high-tech”. It’s a world where advanced technology seeps into every aspect of life, yet society is filled with inequality. This is at the heart of Night City, a ‘free’ city on California’s coast full of crime, corruption, corporations, and culture, and its environmental storytelling is masterfully conveyed through this canvas.

Night City itself serves not only as a backdrop to the story but also as a character itself, as everything it’s made of reflects the harsh realities of its people. Every district, every alley, every street, and every megastructure is designed to symbolize a fractured society, separated by corporate greed and systemic oppression. This fracture is so prevalent, that even the aesthetics of Night City are divided. There are four visual styles used in both the environment and fashion of Night City: **Entropism, Kitsch, Neokitsch, and Neomilitarism**– all reflective of the social classes.

To start, **Entropism** is a style governed by *necessity, not aesthetics*. Its colors are dull and earthy and the components and materials are cheap, making up those in poverty. It reflects the struggle of the lower class where survival outweighs the aesthetics. The district of Watson is a prime example of Entropism, of an area that can’t afford to modernize. As the official Cyberpunk 2077 Twitter account puts it, “*Watson used to have it all. Nightclubs, skyscrapers, corporate offices, a top-end medcenter – but economic disaster put an end to all that. Now, it’s known as ‘the bad neighborhood of Night City.’*” It’s ramshackle, shanty buildings, and patched-together vehicles combined with the utilitarian weapons of the street gangs in Watson epitomize the Entropism aesthetic.

Kitsch is a style just a class above Entropism. While not at all luxurious, it imitates luxury by being flashy, bold, neon, and cheap. It is *style over substance*. It is bright plastics and accessibility. Its

gaudy style is marked by tacky colors and showing off cyberware, with designs inspired by the American cars of the 1980s and 90s. It's extremely prominent in areas like Japantown and gangs like the Tyger Claws.

On the other hand, **Neomilitarism** is *substance over style* and is a stark contrast to Kitsch with its sleek lines, dark colors, and intimidating minimalism. It's palette tends to be blacks or greys, with oppressive pops of red, and is mostly seen in the corporate world. It's rigid, cold, and demanding– a sleek, domineering military aesthetic that has its roots in the crisis that followed the Fourth Corporate Wars. Most commonly seen in corporate buildings like Arasaka Tower, it reflects the dominance of corporate power, prioritizing control and intimidation over any sort of individuality.

Finally, **Neokitsch** is the style of the rich, the idea that *style is substance*. It's a higher-end interpretation of Kitsch with cleaner aesthetics and expensive, luxurious materials. As stated in the *Cyberpunk Wiki*, Neokitsch is led by “*Celebrities, braindance stars, business magnates, heirs to corporate fortunes and corporate executives. They abandoned the cold, deadly elegance of Neomilitarism and returned to the roots of Kitsch, but gave it a fresh, new look.*” This style really showcases how the rich adopt trends from the working class for their exclusive use, separating themselves from the masses.

This consistent style of architecture and character design in adherence to class differences really bring Night City to life, especially when coupled with environmental storytelling around every corner. Whatever the four visual styles don't tell the player, the city will tell in one way or another. The hyper-sexualized billboards, the constant news cycle on the radio, and the consumer-driven slogans like “Chrome it Up” all saturate the city, showcasing a culture obsessed with consumption and cybernetic enhancement. The graffiti tags scattered across nearly every interior and exterior building reveal stories of resistance, desperation, and gang claims, and even the cramped apartments of Night City with built-in vending machines to show just how much consumerism has invaded the home add layers and layers of narrative to the urban landscape.

NOT CYBERPUNK ENOUGH?

When it comes to the cyberpunk genre, the core critique it makes is against unrestrained capitalism and technological overreach. The genre itself originated in the 1980s as a response to not only rapid technological advancements like video games and personal computers but also major economic shifts and the rise of neoliberalism. It also was a result of cultural shifts, the Cold War, rapid growth of megacities, and more, but at the forefront, the genre heavily critiques exploitation and dehumanization that inherently come with free markets and unchecked capitalism.

With that being said, one of the main critiques of *Cyberpunk 2077* is that it's not cyberpunk enough– not in terms of aesthetics, but with how it fails to embrace it's anti-capitalist roots. To them, it's a world that almost romanticizes corporate dominance and consumerism with all the glamour and allure of Night City, with all it's neon lights and cool tech, without actually offering a clear path to dismantle the system.

And that's the thing. It doesn't offer a clear path to resist or dismantle the system. The game even goes so far as to point that fact out:

“You oppose the corporations, their order, their world, in a mindless way, yet you offer no worthy alternative.”– Goro Takemura

As Goro Takemura so implies, resisting capitalism isn't simply about rebelling against the system, the system that they take part in every day whether they want to or not, it requires envisioning a viable alternative– something so incredibly daunting to do that most fall short. Goro is someone who fits this mold. He's an idealist capitalist worker and a former Arasaka loyalist who recognizes the corporate dominance and corruption, but for some reason, simply can't imagine a life outside of its structure.

"I've declared war not 'cause capitalism's a thorn in my side or outta nostalgia for an America gone by. This war's a people's war against a system that's spiraled outta our control." – Johnny Silverhand

In contrast, Johnny Silverhand is all about that fiery rebellion, but even his approach lacks the long-term vision that Goro points out. His approach is personal. It's not just about capitalism as a whole, but what exactly it took from him. What Arasaka took from him.

Arasaka and other megacorps like Militech and Biotechnica wield more power than any government in this world. They dictate the laws, control technology, and shape the norms of the people– they all assist in creating a neon dystopia under this corporatocracy. A dystopia where corporations, not people, defined opportunity, defined morality, and defined survival.

When looking at characters like Johnny or Goro, it becomes evident that *Cyberpunk 2077* isn't necessarily about resisting capitalism, but identifying just how hard capitalism is to resist, and the game showcases this seeming pointlessness of the fight very well. Ultimately, the question of whether *Cyberpunk 2077* is cyberpunk enough is a matter of interpretation. The game isn't a tale of some grand rebellion where the good guys end up on top, but a harsh acknowledgment of just how tight the grip capitalism has on society is and how difficult it is to escape that grasp. In the end, while the game may not be anything crazy radical, it explores its themes as well as any other cyberpunk media, delving into the effects of hard capitalism on individuals and just how dehumanizing and brainwashing it can be. How easy it is to lose your identity in the face of rampant capitalism and how corporatocracy is the *inevitability* of capitalism.

ARASAKA AND JAPAN PANIC

In the 1980s, Japan quickly rose as a global economic power– and that worried Western countries. They outcompeted American automakers with companies like Toyota, Honda, and Nissan, and revolutionized consumer electronics with brands like Sony, Panasonic, and Toshiba. Their economic model during this period was often referred to as "Japan Inc." and the U.S., in response to this, implemented tariffs and restraints to curb Japanese dominance, all the while allowing anxiety about Japanese economic dominance to grow in America. This fear is prevalent in a lot of cyberpunk media around the time as, unfortunately, the genre as a whole is colored by much of the same anxieties that existed in the 80s, like the "Japan Panic", coined by David Morely and Kevin Robins, and depictions of East Asian cultures as technologically advanced and culturally alien, resulting in what's called Techno-Orientalism.

Cyberpunk 2077 falls into these same patterns. The way it presents Japanese economic dominance wouldn't be such an issue if it existed in a vacuum, but it frankly does not. It is heavily embedded into the origins of the genre and the game shows this in a way that is reminiscent of the fearmongering America exerted toward Japan in the 80s. To start, Arasaka Corporation, a Japanese

megacorp, embodies many of the old stereotypes that perpetuate a techno-orientalist framework, which in turn paints the Japanese culture as authoritarian, threatening, immoral, or at least morally ambiguous. The culture is seen as dehumanizing– in the game, they are quite literally the ones who created what’s stripping V of their identity– and are seen as a hyper-efficient and omnipresent force with totalitarian control. Even the Arasaka family themselves fall into these same stereotypes. There’s betrayal, patricide, intergenerational conflict, and so many honor-based motives that the inherently rigid and oppressive family structure could have been written from none other than a Western perspective. The aesthetics placed on Arasaka also resort to stereotypical “Japanese” aesthetics within the cyberpunk genre, with its cold efficiency and sleek minimalism, invoking something soulless yet domineering.

This is a problem and a pitfall of *Cyberpunk 2077* for many reasons. First, as mentioned before, it reinforces the old fears by leaning into the same old tropes, ignoring the evolution of global economic and cultural dynamics. It’s also presented in a way that lacks nuance or any sort of counterbalance. The Japanese presence in the game is almost exclusively tied to Arasaka and there isn’t much regarding alternative perspectives or Japanese characters to subvert this narrative. While Goro Takemura is complex and, in part, a character representative of Arasaka, even he does little to subvert this narrative, going so far as to commit seppuku if the player chooses the ending that goes against Arasaka. Ultimately, by making Arasaka the big, bad villain and tying its actions to stereotypical notions of Japanese culture, it reduces what should instead be a rich and diverse culture with a colorful history, both good and bad, to nothing but a monolithic, minimal, and antagonistic force in the game’s narrative.

Ultimately, *Cyberpunk 2077* missed an opportunity to challenge these stereotypes and potentially evolve the cyberpunk genre into something more reimaged, more self-aware, and more reflective of a rapidly changing world as it is.

CYBERPUNK 2024

Cyberpunk 2077 as a story does many different things, including serving as a cautionary tale. The game highlights the danger of unchecked capitalism, corporate overreach, and systemic inequality. While the game itself is set in an alternate, dystopian America, the themes still resonate with real-world issues, especially when comparing them to current events.

One of the things the very first mission of Act One, *The Rescue*, mentions is the existence of a Platinum Plan for Night City’s medical insurance. Thanks to Sandra Dorsett’s platinum status, she is able to get emergency medical care and evacuated off the premises by the Trauma Team. The others in the scav den weren’t so lucky. It is a fact of Night City that emergency medical care is only guaranteed to those who can afford these premium plans, and Trauma Team’s militarized methods, appearing with guns and aggression, shows just how indifferent they are to the average people like V, who is the main reason Sandra Dorsett was alive long enough to even get medical care. This ties into the game’s broader critique of a hyper-capitalist economy where *survival is a luxury*.

To tie this into modern society and very recent issues, the mission resonates with the ever-growing discontent surrounding for-profit healthcare systems with little care for the people, as evidenced by the recent events of the United Healthcare Executive shooting. This topic is not a discussion of right and wrong, but simply to view and target why these real-world frustrations are fostered among people and how systems prioritizing profit over people when it really should be the opposite, create a divide that can lead to extreme acts of violence.

Beyond healthcare, just consider the wealth disparity in America today, where billionaires accumulate more money than any one person needs while a majority of America works and struggles with low, stagnant wages and poor working conditions. In *Cyberpunk 2077*, we see a world dominated by mega-corporations with grand monopolies, mirroring real-world concerns about companies like Amazon and Meta, whose practices and surveillance tactics evoke fear among people, distrust among consumers, and dissatisfaction among workers.

This leads to the game's connection to the rise of mass protests and strikes. Even now, Amazon workers are striking in New York, another megacity marked by industry and consumerism. Groups like the Aldecaldos and smaller insurrectionist factions in *Cyberpunk 2077* mirror the real-world pushback against corporate and government failures.

The dangers of technology—specifically unregulated technology—are explored in the game. In Night City, techs like braindances and cyberware enhancement run rampant and exploit individuals, commodifying experiences and bodies. Again, to refer to *The Rescue*, Sandra Dorsett, and other victims were taken to be stripped of their cyberware so scavengers could sell it. While our modern-day technology is not as advanced as *Cyberpunk's*, there is a rising concern of AI encroaching on people's jobs and a preexisting concern of social media manipulating and changing the way people interact and technology that invades people's privacy.

Another thing *Cyberpunk 2077* brings into question is just what kind of impact hyper-capitalism has on the world's resources and climate. In *Cyberpunk*, there's a scarcity of clean water and a limitation of fresh foods—which is really limited to only the wealthy. Food is made synthetically thanks to events like the Collapse where famines plagued the country along with a worldwide Food Crash. These all reflect our own environmental crises of the past and, potentially, the future. Our dependence on fossil fuels causes heavy deforestation and pollution, slowly killing the planet we call home. Games like *Cyberpunk* remind us that our earth may one day resemble the desolate wastelands we see and hear about in the game.

All in all, the game forces us to look inward to our society and ask ourselves—just what type of future are we building? The game cautions against a world where corporations are allowed unchecked power, a world where technology chips away at our humanity, and the divide between classes grows wider and wider. By reflecting on issues like wealth disparity, for-profit systems, environmental collapse, and technological exploitation, we are left with the stark reminder that, while a hyper-capitalist dystopia isn't necessarily inevitable, it is somewhere society can end up should it continue on the way it is.

Strongest Element

The heart of *Cyberpunk 2077* lies in its complex characters, relationships, and character-driven, *human*, storylines that shape the narrative. With a game that takes place in an overstimulating world, it needs something to hold it down, to anchor the experience for the player—that's the characters. V's journey is deeply tied to the people around them, whether they're friends or foes, and loyalty defines so much of V's journey right from the beginning. Each relationship adds to this web of intrigue in Night City and in V's life. With every choice the player makes, it reinforces the idea that the story is just as much about the people around V as it is about V's survival. This is evident in the credits of the game where video messages from almost everyone important in V's life play. Even throughout the game, after Jackie

is already dead, V can leave voicemails for him as if he's still there with them because V relies that much on their friends. Johnny Silverhand is another great, and perhaps the most compelling, example of the strength of this element from the game. The player witnesses him change alongside V, *with* V, making the stakes of their shared journey and the final decisions in the game all the more difficult. Besides Johnny, the side stories, as well, emphasize character-driven storytelling with Panam reclaiming her sense of belonging and Judy's fight for liberation, all while V fights their own journey with such primal stakes. This ultimately results in making the player feel that every relationship matters. That every relationship makes a difference. This depth of characterization elevates the game beyond being just any game with the cyberpunk genre slapped on, but one about humanity and connection and struggling together beneath a sprawling, indifferent system.

Unsuccessful Element

Even though the game excels in many areas, it's lacking in a way that hurts some of its narrative effectiveness, particularly in terms of poor pacing and focus which leads to ludonarrative dissonance, and shallow player choices.

It's no secret that the pacing of *Cyberpunk 2077* feels... uneven to say the least, which ties into the ludonarrative dissonance of the game. With V's terminal condition, the main story has to move quickly and urgently due to the stakes, but this directly clashes with the game's open-world design that encourages players to explore and immerse themselves in Night City. Narratively, it just doesn't make sense. If V needs to find a way to *not die* as soon as possible, why would they spend odd hours street racing with Claire or fight in a bunch of boxing matches, even as they're deteriorating? It creates a huge disconnect that can easily pull players out of the experience. In a game where gameplay is at the forefront, these core mechanics of combat and exploration contradict the narrative many times and create dissonance. It's established that the Relic is rapidly eroding V's mind, and we see V getting sick, weak, and falling to their knees in pain. Yet, somehow V still manages to mow down hordes of enemies with ease like an overpowered killing machine. V rarely feels as desperate or as at risk as the story suggests.

Even the main storyline, of V and Johnny Silverhand and the Relic, suffers from inconsistent pacing and a lack of cohesion. The story starts with a sense of urgency but it loses momentum, with some plot points feeling underdeveloped and rushed. Take the confrontation with Hanako Arasaka in the parade mission— it's built up over a series of missions, yet the player only gets two minutes of dialogue with Hanako before it's interrupted. Then, there's one more conversation with Hanako's proposal to help V if V helps her before the player has to make the big decision of which path to take in Act 3. Because the game failed to develop Hanako's character, storyline, and relationship with V, this weakens her path in the finale, creating a narrative imbalance. Players are more likely to reject her not because they necessarily disagree with her morally but because her route isn't compelling enough, especially when put up against other routes with characters that both mean more to the player and to V.

Another issue lies in the fact that *Cyberpunk 2077* often falls short when it comes to delivering impactful choices, as most decisions lack long-term consequences. Even the game endings don't have drastically different outcomes. They feel more like variations of each other or the theme. The ultimate fate of Night City, Arasaka, and "the system" as a whole feels relatively unchanged which, yes is some of

the point, but with certain paths being so grand– like killing everyone in Arasaka tower– one might expect to see more of a change. This creates a sense of detachment between the player and the world as their influence on it feels limited. Even smaller decisions in side quests don't extend or meaningfully change the larger narrative. There are a few options to save, fail to save, or kill certain characters but while these have immediate consequences, it rarely affects the overall story. Take Goro for example– he can die in Act 2 if the player fails to save him. Yes, with him dead, one of the endings becomes unavailable to the player, but that ending, as stated before, carries less weight than the others anyway and the player will still have multiple options to resolve the main conflict.

Highlight

Every story has an ending– *Cyberpunk 2077* has several. A highlight of the narrative, one that stuck the most long after completing the game, isn't the endings themselves but rather the song that plays in every single one– *Never Fade Away*. And it's not just the same *Never Fade Away* that's been playing on the radio throughout the game by Johnny's band, Samurai, but a more somber, slower cover of it sung by a feminine voice.

Written by Johnny Silverhand after the death of Alt, the song makes an appearance in the credits regardless of which ending was chosen, and which credits videos play. For each ending, the credits play different video messages from different characters showing a sort of reaction to V's final decision. What makes this song so significant is that it no longer feels like it's about Alt– it's about V. And, if the player took the time to make V and Johnny's relationship grow throughout the game, it's about the journey they've gone on together. There's a significant part of the song that even sounds like the two are speaking to one another:

***"I see your eyes, I know you see me
You're like a ghost, you're everywhere
I'm your demon, never leaving
A metal soul of rage and fear" – Samurai***

It's clear– Johnny is the ghost, the parasite. He is the demon, the metal soul of rage and fear, that will never leave V in more ways than one. He can, quite literally, never leave V's body by taking it over, resulting in V losing consciousness completely. This is, of course, a choice made by the player. If the player chooses to save V instead, then Johnny will "die" and go into cyberspace, forever just another piece of code. But still, he will stay with V in their memories.

Regardless of V's relationship with Johnny, V's mark is left on those around them, on their friends. V's underlying desire of just wanting the world to know they existed, that they mattered, is fulfilled by the end of the story at every end of the story. So much of the song speaks directly to the theme of legacy and struggle, the first line being:

***"Cause we lost everything,
We had to pay the price" – Samurai***

And V did. Their story is one of constant struggle. Against death. Against corporate oppression. Against fading into nothingness. Yet, as the credits roll, and all of V's friends speak to V through their video message, it is clear that not everything is lost, and true legacy doesn't lie in survival or fate.

Never Fade Away amplifies the emotional weight of this journey and it ties into larger themes. With a game constantly asking the player "*Quiet life or blaze of glory?*" or in other words, "*What will you do to be remembered?*", the song answers these questions with a simple statement, simple proof that V's presence in Night City has left a mark that won't be erased:

"...a thing of beauty will never fade away..." – Samurai

Critical Reception

Games Radar+, Sam Loveridge - 5/5

This single quote from Sam Loveridge's review captures her opinion plainly: "*Cyberpunk 2077 is a paragon of open-world gaming, offering the kind of freedom to explore and define your character that provides a new pinnacle for the genre.*" She praises the game's dense, open-world content and world-building, painting the game as visually stunning. Content like the Side Jobs she finds full of depth and just as compelling as the main campaign which she, in turn, critiques for being too short and abrupt with its "point of no return". She does, however, state that the side content compensates for this. Alongside that, she compliments the combat and customization systems as well as the game's graphical fidelity, overall praising *Cyberpunk 2077* with five out of five stars.

IGN, Tom Marks - 9/10

This review by Tom Marks is highly positive as he considers it one of the most exciting and rewarding RPGs he's played despite its minor flaws. He appreciates the freedom and variety in the gameplay, highlighting how the game departs from traditional RPG structures by focusing a lot on side missions and making those just as impactful and as meaningful as the main storyline. Like Sam Loveridge's review, he also thinks the central quest is relatively short but the fact that the game offers plenty of optional content enhances the overall experience. Regarding combat, he states "*Combat isn't the most complex dance in the world, but I had complete control over the choreography,*" pointing out that even though the combat is nothing new, it's straightforward and still satisfying.

Game Spot, Kallie Plagge - 7/10

Kallie Plagge expresses quite a mixed opinion regarding the game but highlights both strengths and weaknesses. While she appreciates the game's open-world depth, exploration, and rewards, she critiques the disconnect that naturally comes with a time-sensitive main story with open-world exploration. She feels the game struggles to mesh its expansive world with V's impending fate. Plagge also dives into the game's cultural elements, finding it lacking and superficial, describing the world of Night City as a whole massive but unfocused. Her overall summation is that "*Night City is beautiful and vile... with no apparent purpose and context to that experience, all you're left with is the unpleasantness.*"

Lessons

→ Explore themes through every pillar of the story and it will prevail in the end.

There are four pillars that make up every story– plot, people, places, and purpose. The way the game applies the theme to each and every pillar enhances the narrative greatly. Regarding people, *Cyberpunk 2077* is full of flawed and complex characters, each embodying the game's themes on deeply personal levels. The world, Night City, is a character in and of itself, soaked in a neon dystopia that really showcases the game's critiques of capitalism and technology through environmental design. Its story and its central conflict force the player and V to face and explore existential questions about identity and legacy and its purpose, examining how to find meaning and identity in a world that strips it away, is elevated through things like music, existential questions, and more.

→ Embrace ambiguity– particularly in endings.

If *Cyberpunk 2077* proves one thing, it's this– ambiguity can resonate deeply. The game has several different endings, none quite so clear-cut. Each of them leaves more questions about sacrifice, survival, and the cost of ambition, and every path, though some are objectively better than others, is ultimately bittersweet. By creating an ending that allows the player to reflect on their choice, the ending lingers with the player, embedding itself into their memories. In other words, it leaves its mark.

→ Building strong relationships between complex characters builds a strong relationship with the player.

There's no doubt that building strong, nuanced relationships with characters will strengthen the player's emotional connection to the game and story. By introducing deep and interesting dynamics, especially between characters that are so complex and at the forefront like V and Johnny Silverhand, the relationship feels rooted and the player gets to see these two characters grow alongside each other. Even side characters like Jackie Welles or Judy Alvarez enrich the narrative. The friendship and, perhaps even romance, feel real. It doesn't feel like they're interacting with these characters for the sake of the plot but for the sake of connection.

→ Make player choices as meaningful as you can.

Not every game can allow for drastically branching paths based on player choice, but they can at least make the choices feel meaningful even if it has little impact. While the player might not be able to do much to change the overall trajectory of the story, they can feel like their journey is tailored based on their choices throughout the game and how it influences character relationships and player experience. With that being said, take into account just how illusive choices will be presented to the player, as there is a fine balance to be struck to avoid the disappointment of the player feeling their choices ultimately amounted to nothing.

→ Reflect real-world issues with nuance.

The real world is rarely so simple– your game world shouldn't be either. It's easy to categorize things into “bad” and “good” but in reality, it's never so black and white, so when it comes to tackling real-world topics and societal issues, it's best to not oversimplify them. They should be treated with nuance and depth and applied thoughtfully to ensure this representation is not only interesting and complex but integral to the story.

Summation

The rich narrative experience of *Cyberpunk 2077* puts the game right on the wall in the video game Hall of Fame with its portrayal of Night City, vivid and complex characters, and its thematic exploration of relevant issues we face today. From the world-building to the quests, the game is filled with depth left and right as well as moral dilemmas that create an all-around immersive experience that challenges the player. On top of that, its difficult decisions and variety in gameplay complement its colorful characters and branching narratives well. What CD Projekt Red created here is something bold and something so human, packing emotional punches that make the player question the world they know, question the systems and structures of power that exist today. Ultimately, *Cyberpunk 2077* is not just a game about moving fast under neon lights with smoking guns in a cyberpunk city, it is a reflection of our own world. A world of systemic inequalities. A world where humans endure the daily grind that's reflected in the rawness of living in *Cyberpunk's* hypercapitalistic society. A world where people desire change and connection under a system that keeps them divided, that keeps them down. Overall, while *Cyberpunk 2077* may not be a perfect game nor does it necessarily innovate the cyberpunk genre, it is noteworthy for its narrative not just for the gripping plot, world, and characters, but stands to be seen just as much for the difficult and relevant philosophical questions it poses.

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