

# How Latinidad and Border Politics Construct *Cyberpunk 2077*

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## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

In thinking about the cyberpunk genre, what media artifacts define the genre and its aesthetic? Within the global north, material such as *Neuromancer*, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*, and *Blade Runner* come to mind as foundational to the cyberpunk genre. This body of work established the familiar aesthetic of a pessimistic over-developed dystopian setting with human cybernetics, and grim future. The question I proposed earlier is important to understand as I argue that the recent game *Cyberpunk 2077* (CD Projekt Red 2020) is an important media object within the cyberpunk genre that has resounding cultural significance for the genre for years to come. Therefore, I argue that the familiar cyberpunk aesthetic that *Cyberpunk 2077* enacts is achieved through Latinx tragedy, border violence, and surveillance in its play, visuals, and narrative which sets a harrowing precedent for the cyberpunk genre. *Cyberpunk 2077* veers into the dangerous territory of becoming a playground of maintaining borders yet is through critical engagement with Latinx characters and culture in *Cyberpunk 2077*, we are instead able to reimagine *Cyberpunk 2077* as a playground of radical and queer possibilities that celebrate Latinx subjectivity.

The way Latinx communities are racially visualized in relation to tragedy, surveillance, and border violence to define the grim tone of cyberpunk is often not accounted for in science fiction, cyberpunk, and game studies. Thus, my approach to *Cyberpunk 2077* is inspired by critical insight of dark play, theorization between race and western hegemony within cyberpunk, which then leads into my critique of the way border politics is being actualized through the game *Cyberpunk 2077*. Starting with Sicart who defines play as a way of being and how dark play, the way negotiates real and imagined violences (Sicart 2014) is applicable for the way Latinidad is both in the play of *Cyberpunk 2077* and played with.

The setting of *Cyberpunk 2077* is futuristic California based Night City with almost racially and ethnically separated neighborhoods, such as Japantown, Chinatown, Pacifica (The Haitian District) and Santo Domingo. Indeed, Night City is incredibly diverse, but each neighborhood has stark differences in class and living situations, such as Santo Domingo being primarily the Latinx and working-class neighborhood, that fall back into stereotypes. *Cyberpunk 2077* could be analyzed as what Patterson describes as a global game. The game deploys stereotypes associated with its many nationalities inhabiting the game. Superficial, yet still harmful, it manages to evade the seriousness of these implications due to it being ubiquitous in its diverse futuristic setting. (Patterson 2020)

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Cyberpunk 2077 also deploys what Wendy Chun calls high-tech orientalism which is a process of othering and abjection where Asian/Asian Americans are casted as non-human to establish the subjectivity of the dominant actor. (Wendy 2012) This is seen with how the major enemy in Cyberpunk 2077 is a highly technological and corrupt Japanese corporation, Arasaka. Arasaka is led by the Arasaka family who threaten the livelihood of the civilians of Night City and is the main opponent to the Player Character. The way various Asian cultures are deployed Cyberpunk 2077 exerts xenophobic sentiments of the present, for example China in the game is still presented as an ominous threat that characters are suspicious of. This troubling depiction of Asian people, to be ultimately commodified and eliminated, is used to achieve a certain aesthetic, resonates with Ficke's concept of Ludo-Orientalism. Ludo-Orientalism confronts the design and rhetoric of games that reinforces an east vs west binary and ongoing racial hierarchies that are deployed within and beyond the games that players "may not even think of as related to play." (Ficke 2019, 3) Kishonna Gray also speaks to how real harmful systems of oppression and violence are normalized in gaming culture calling it symbolic violence, (Gray 2020) which extends to Latinx communities represented in the game. With this focus to Latinx communities we can turn to Molina-Guzmán concept of symbolic colonization. Symbolic colonization is the ideological process that homogenizes races and ethnicities as a singular entity which media reproduces dominant norms and beliefs towards, in this case Latinidad, as a gendered, racialized, foreign, and consumable construct. (Molina-Guzmán 2010) In *Cyberpunk 2077* the game homogenizes the diverse cultures of Latin America as a single category of Hispanic or does not seem to locate their culture.

The work and activism critical scholars are doing through giving language to the problematic positionalities of the subjective future of Asian people in cyberpunk is inspiring. I seek to do the same for Latinidad being constructed in the cyberpunk genre through the game Cyberpunk 2077 that also considers play. Do we play into these border imaginaries facilitated by the cyberpunk genre going forward? Cyberpunk 2077 transposes real and present Latinx suffering and issues in its design. For example, if players select the "Street Kid origin," the criminal background, they start in a Hispanic Bar. To establish a crime scene, brown-coded Latinx people speaking Spanish are trafficking drugs in low tech gear and are quickly killed off. The shadow of border violence and forgiveness is pervasive. Jackie Welles, a major Latino character, dies in his quest for the American Dream. Judy Álvarez nearly loses a loved one due her position as a Latina worker in the sex industry. *Cyberpunk 2077* is not only homogenizing and reenacting harmful stereotypes of Latinx people, but its presence as a genre defining game and its slippage as borderveillant game is concerning. Fojas describes borderveillant media as media that continues the infrastructure of border surveillance based on racial capitalism and inequality (Fojas 2021). With so much attention to Latinx suffering imagined through the rubric of borders and borderland violence, it sets the precedence of cyberpunk to forever connect Latinidad to borders as a genre defining aspects intrinsic to cyberpunk. It is through working together with critical scholarship and care for marginalized communities that reimagines cyberpunk as transformative playgrounds, such as how Latinx players resist and reimagine these narratives, that support Latinx subjectivity and speculative realities beyond borders throughout media and games.

## **Keywords**

Borders, Cyberpunk 2077, cyberpunk, Latino/a, narrative

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