

**HAZARDS OF VIRTUALIZATION:
ABJECTIFICATION AND IMMERSION IN *CYBERPUNK 2077***

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Tartalom

Abstract.....	2
1. Introduction.....	3
2. The Postmodern, the Posthuman and the Context of the Subject	7
2.1. Contextualization	7
2.2. What is <i>Cyberpunk 2077</i> ?.....	10
3. Methodology	13
4. Escapism and the Fantasy of Inhabiting a Virtual World.....	17
5. Bridging the Early Modern and the Postmodern.....	20
6. The Posthuman Subject within a Virtual World	23
7. Rebellion against and Rejection of the Self in <i>Cyberpunk 2077</i>	26
8. Hubris, Temptation and Escape.....	29
9. Conclusion	34
Reference List	36

Abstract

Through understanding the process of postmodernity as a transitional period, this paper explores the representation of the postmodern identity crisis within CD Projekt Red's video game *Cyberpunk 2077*, which is contrasted with Heiner Müller's drama *Hamletmachine*, through the theory of the semiotics of the subject. Focusing on Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject, the analysis examines how these works reflect on their respective cultural paradigm shifts and represent the changing tendencies regarding the constitution of the socially positioned human subject. *Hamletmachine* establishes Hamlet as a self-conflicting subject within a postmodern framework and introduces the machine as an abject entity, while *Cyberpunk 2077* immerses players in an interactive narrative that challenges their socially defined subject positions. Thus, starting out from an interpretation of *Hamletmachine* as a play that thematizes the character type as a manifestation of epistemological and cultural uncertainties, the analysis interprets the game's protagonist as the typical Hamlet-character. Drawing on the interplay between escapism (understood in the paper as a coping strategy) and abjection, the analysis of the video game identifies a shift where the virtual world and the machine become the primary aspects of identification, pushing "real life" into an abject position. Through this lens, *Cyberpunk 2077* reflects on the themes of identity, subjectivity, death, and virtualization, which in turn reveals the dangerous tendency of immersive digital spaces to alienate players from reality and rendering escapism into a double-edged sword, which is simultaneously a healing mechanism and a potential source of existential detachment. Ultimately, the paper highlights how *Cyberpunk 2077* addresses the dissolution of traditional categories (the human, gender roles, social roles, etc.) and the unsettling effects of postmodern virtualization on the human subject. As a result, I maintain that the video game can function as a critical and instructive depiction of escapism and virtualization, since it reflects on the postmodern identity crisis and warns of the dangerous cultural and societal tendencies of seeking validation and purpose within digital spaces, which can lead to stagnation, personal decline, or even suicide. By inviting players to critically interact with these tendencies, the game transcends its fictional world to pose questions about identity, agency, and the shifting boundaries between the real and the virtual, which are analogous with the changing cultural frameworks of the abject and the subject.

1. Introduction

The foundation of this paper stands on the theory of the subject and relies on the work of Freud, Foucault, Grosz and Kristeva regarding the aspects and the process of the constitution of the subject. I draw a comprehensive analysis of CD Projekt Red's¹ video game, *Cyberpunk 2077*, which I contrast with *Hamletmachine* by Heiner Müller, based on Kristeva's theory of the abject. I argue that these two literary works not only carry the imprint of their respective historical-cultural paradigm shifts, but also reflect on the identity crisis that results from those shifts and informs the types of subjectivity in the current postmodern and posthuman era. For this purpose, *Hamletmachine* was chosen because it establishes the Hamlet character as the self-conflicting subject within the postmodern context, while *Cyberpunk 2077* utilizes this character to challenge the audience in an interactive manner to make the players reflect on their own socially defined subject positions. Additionally, the early modern is used to define the postmodern as a transitional period to understand its processes and paradigm shifts, and the two eras are connected by the self-conflicting Hamlet character. Therefore, I explore how CDPR's *Cyberpunk 2077* reflects on the postmodern identity crisis, the shift in connection with the abject and virtualization and how the video game interprets this transitional time period. As a result, the analysis of the video game yields the critical insight that the postmodern condition and virtualization can result in the abjection of the subject's reality and real life while the virtual world is established as the main object of identification, which can also lead to suicide in extreme cases.

In order to understand the postmodern as a transitional time period, the comparison of different eras is necessary. Consequently, the tendencies of the current postmodern and posthuman times² can be conceptualized through the similarities of psychological and physiological changes in the constitution of the subject that are better visible from a comparative point of view. Therefore, I take the early modern, in which William Shakespeare was the most successful and influential in employing the Hamlet-character, to help me with viewing the postmodern from an outside perspective. The most important frame that bridges these vastly distant eras is the self-conflicting character of Hamlet. Both the early modern and the postmodern are times of identity crisis, where questions about the constitution of the human subject results in self-doubt and uncertainty within a world that lacks well defined roles,

¹ Abbreviated as CDPR.

² There is no space in this research to properly examine the differences between the postmodern and the posthuman. Therefore, throughout the paper posthuman is understood as the late stage of postmodernity, which can describe today's phenomena.

categories and models. As a result, the socially positioned subjects may find this unbearable and seek an escape route that leads to a space which could provide them with a defined role, validation, satisfaction and peace, which they lack in their everyday life. This space is often found in the imaginary and fantastic worlds of the theatre stages, apocalyptic fantasies and the carnivalesque social practices within the early modern, while it is experienced through virtual worlds and virtual realities in our current time.

Moreover, escapism is also a defining aspect in connection with the process of the constitution of the subject. This process was already part of the paradigm shift of Shakespeare's time, where thinkers, writers and dramatists systematically started to reflect on how the human being was established as the socially positioned subject, with the abject being the frame for that process. In contrast, the borders of the subject that are defined by the abject are disturbed during our contemporary time. Consequently, nowadays the virtual world starts to function as the main scene of identification and thus real life is put into an abject position. Also, in connection with video games escapism is understood here, as Hussain et al. explains, as a dangerous coping strategy for the individual to deal with trauma, inconvenience and suffering, which can lead to the negligence towards, or denial of real life (2021, 11). This denial or rejection process, combined with the constitution of the socially positioned subject, can provide then the answer to the questions of how the virtual world becomes the main definitive point of reference, and through this, how the cognitive categories and thus also the subject and the abject themselves as well are reformulated.

The paper's main foundation is Kristeva's abject, which is the thing that lurks behind our conscious mental activities. This in Freudian terms would be the taboos of the Id, hiding deep within the unconscious, which stem from sexuality, traumas, instincts, urges, desires and fears that also include irrational and well-founded ones (Freud 1964, 219-223). In contrast, Borlik posits the concept of the abject on the edge of instincts, which humans repress and thus differ from animals (2017, 34). Consequently, in the process of the constitution of subjectivity, the individual can undergo this repression and create their relation with the abject through escapism for which an immersive and interactive video game, such as *Cyberpunk 2077*, is a great tool.

It has to be noted that the video game is based on Mike Pondsmith's original table top roleplaying game, titled *Cyberpunk 2013*, released in 1988. *Cyberpunk 2077* is also a multimedia product, because it has comic book, novel and Netflix series narratives tied to its core. The analysis of these, even separately, could provide basis for several academic papers.

Therefore, I opted to focus only on the video game. Additionally, there are references to other notable postmodern and cyberpunk narratives to pay them homage, such as *Bladerunner*³ and *The Matrix*⁴, in the game, which firmly root it within the wider cyberpunk genre. However, based on these it can be stated that there is no direct connection or link between Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *Cyberpunk 2077*. Therefore, since there is no mention of *Hamlet* in the game, it is my idea to connect the two and interpret the main character of the narrative as the self-conflicting protagonist, and I believe it may have been an unconscious process from the part of the developers that *Hamlet* was integrated into the game in this way.

Therefore, *Hamlet* in my analysis of *Cyberpunk 2077* is understood as a typical or model character, but not a stock- or flat character. Already in the early modern context, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* was a self-conflicting split character, because it was a transitory period, where the medieval traditions and categories were either already questioned and deconstructed or there were multiple conflicting aspects that together were impossible to integrate and synthesize by the subject. For instance, *Hamlet* is dedicated to both being a king and a murdered and being a humanist; however, you cannot be a humanist if you are a murderer. Therefore, the protagonist is in conflict with aspects of his own subjectivity. Similarly, in *Cyberpunk 2077* the player is faced with the problem of conflicting categories, such as association with the virtual and the machine, the urge to return to nature and a more simplistic lifestyle, and the rejection of the machine, but still depending on it.

Furthermore, ideology throughout the paper is used as it is defined within the frameworks of the theory of the subject. As Žižek phrases it, "ideology is the system of the ideas and representations which dominate the mind of a man or a social group" (1994, 120). Therefore, it is understood as being performative, banal and an everyday occurrence, which is invisible for the people, who just want to get through the day (Žižek 1994, 1–3). It shapes 'reality' by acting as a filter that separates the real—the direct experience of the physical world—from the human subject (Žižek 1994, 3–5, 52, 123). Also, for ideology to function, fantasy (the capability of imagination) is a fundamental basis. Consequently, this is how abstract systems can solve paradoxes, contradictions and conflicting narratives for its participants, because fantasy helps to overlook the inherent problems in the system and make it appear as a coherent narrative framework (Žižek 1994, 6–7, 29–30).

³ A rooftop scene is set up to reference the iconic "Tears in the rain" monologue.

⁴ In the game, the blue and red pills function similarly to those in the Wachowskis' film.

In conclusion, based on Kristeva, Foucault, Borlik and Grosz, the human subject is established on multiple important pillars, which, in case of their deconstruction, can trigger an identity crisis through the unsettling of the constitution of the subject as this process is disturbed by the dissolution of their fundamental categories. ‘Death’ and the corpse are the signifiers of non-existence thus creating the original category of the abject and the frame of the subject. However, players who cannot find purpose or agency and validation outside the virtual world will seek the virtual as the identifiable and can also seek suicide so death can lose its category as the abject. This leads, ultimately, to the idea that the abject is not a fixed notion at all and while the corpse occupied this position firmly for a long period of time, it is now prone to changes. In *Cyberpunk 2077*, a paradigm shift can be observed, where real life is abjectified, treated as something to be rejected or escaped, aligning with Kristeva’s theory of the subject. The goal of the paper, however, is not to draw a thanatological analysis, nor to provide answers to the postmodern identity crisis, merely, I only provide an interpretation of *Cyberpunk 2077* that analyses its reflexive aspects on the themes of identity, subject, death and virtualization. The game immerses players in a virtual world that challenges the significance of reality, prompting players to invest emotionally in the digital space over the physical one. This process turns escapism into a tool, encouraging players to confront their detachment from reality and reevaluate the boundary between the real and the virtual. Through this, *Cyberpunk 2077* reflects on and challenges the positioning of real life itself as something alien, uncomfortable, and ultimately secondary to the immersive digital experience, which is dangerous (Hussain et al. 2021, 11) and the game highlights the emerging social issues of this tendency.

2. The Postmodern, the Posthuman and the Context of the Subject

2.1. Contextualization

First of all, for the purpose of connecting the early modern and Shakespeare's *Hamlet* with the Postmodern and *Cyberpunk 2077*, I employ Todd Andrew Borlik's analysis of posthuman Hamlet figures and symbols (2017). Therefore, the novelty of this paper includes the connection of Müller's *Hamletmachine* and CDPR's *Cyberpunk 2077* as this was never done before. Within the early modern, Shakespeare among the chaos of the dissolving archetypes and the challenging of the Medieval world view, could not yet see the result of this process regarding what kind of new categories, social roles and norms are being created, similarly to us, who cannot fully comprehend the new frames that are being developed in our era of transition. The proto-typical character that is borne out of this process is the self-conflicting mind, who is Hamlet. The similarities between the postmodern and the early modern, therefore, trigger the re-emergence of the Hamlet character as a symptom of the culture's identity crisis, and the appearance of Hamlet-figures can be observed in video games that are the most influential medium of our time. As a result, I argue that *Cyberpunk 2077* employs the self-conflicting Hamlet as a protagonist, because the narrative reflects on this cultural symptom.

Lyotard (1984) establish already during the 1970s that postmodernism is tied to capitalism. Furthermore, as he already noted, computerization and the spread of technological dependency through commercialization and consumerism impacts the nature of knowledge, its production and language, and, as a result, the constitution of the subject (1984, 3–5, 9–11). This postmodern condition sets the ground for the birth of the cyberpunk genre and, thus, the narrative of both *Hamletmachine* and *Cyberpunk 2077*.

Borlik delves into the early cyberpunk subgenre through Nick O'Donohoe's *Too, Too Solid Flesh*, Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* and William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (Borlik 2017, 35, 39). Upon the basis of the subject in conflict that is a fundamental part of *Hamlet* and postmodern protagonists as well, he establishes a well-founded connection between the English Renaissance's Shakespeare and Postmodernity, while providing also a bridge between the cyberpunk genre that houses posthumanism and the theory of the subject (Borlik 2017, 34, 39). This bridge is a crucial notion to the thesis of this paper, because the self-conflicting, split, and self-challenging protagonist of Hamlet is a trope that is the product of the crumbling environment and context of society. The Hamlet figure emerges in the centre of crisis as identity, culture and ideology are deconstructed and reformed within periods of grand paradigm shifts, such as in posthumanism, which questions and challenges the

notion of the human being (Borlik 2017, 32). “Though it predates the Internet, *Hamletmachine* does envision a future in which the human-computer interface renders one indistinguishable from the data one produces” (Borlik 2017, 33), which is a fitting diagnosis of the identity crisis modelled also in the narratives of *Neuromancer*, *Blade Runner* and *Cyberpunk 2077*. This triggers a want for escape from reality in the light of the subject’s inability to cope with the crisis and the lack of tools to reconstruct reality for the self-conflicting subject.

Additionally, there are already Shakespeare and even *Hamlet* video game adaptations. Novitz brings several examples, such as *William Shakespeare’s Hamlet: A Murder Mystery* (1997), *To Be or Not to Be* (2015) and *Elsinore* (2019), which illustrate the narrative and influential capabilities of video games (2020, 10, 15). However, *Cyberpunk 2077* is not a direct adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, instead it utilizes the titular self-conflicting character as the protagonist to reflect on the contemporary tendencies.

As it is established by Kristeva, the abject is neither subject nor object; however, it makes the third vertex of a triangle (Kristeva 1982, 1). Moreover, it is the frame that encompasses the subject itself, separating it from everything else and establishing a foundation for its emergence (Kristeva 1982, 1–4). The question then arises what the relationship is between the subject and the abject, and how is it negotiated. Both *Hamletmachine* and *Cyberpunk 2077* show the abject and the subject as not solid entities but as processes that are ever-changing. For instance, Kristeva associates our reaction to the sight of the improper and the unclean, such as dung, blood, gore, innards, decay, etc., with the abject; those that we do not want to associate ourselves with, because they are the anti-thesis to existence (1982, 2–3); while Borlik posits the concept of the abject on the edge of instincts, which humans repress and thus differ from animals (2017, 34). However, the abject is also there to deconstruct the binary oppositions of the subject-object, the living-dead and the human and inhuman relations by blurring the lines between them and taking an in-between position in this system (Kristeva 1982, 7; Borlik 2017, 34). These are the rejected parts of the subject, which were once part of the whole, but which are now outside of the identity and the socio-cultural order (Kristeva 1982, 17–18).

In other words, the abject is what upsets the balance, not in the place of the subject or the object, but what is resisted by the body – instinctual; a reaction against a threat to the system and which is also what creates us as humans and connects us with reality (Kristeva 1982, 3–5; Grosz 1994, 193). Additionally, Elizabeth Grosz also delves into the question of the abject in order to develop a connection between the conceptualization of the human body and ideology

(1994, 188). Based on her arguments, three broad categories or levels of abjection can be established (Grosz 1994, 193). First, abjection against food, which is an abjection also regarding the incorporation of the outside by the body. Second, abjection toward bodily waste, which culminates in the relation of human and death in its reality and biology, how the human being can deal with and abject the corpse. Third, abjection towards sexual differences, the benign form of this abjection starts with the abjection of signs, then it culminates in actions (Ibid).

Consequently, the notion of Kristeva's abjection ties back to the social body that is created by culture and our participation, because that determines our norms, limits, categories and our relationship to the above-mentioned aspects (Grosz 1994, 193, 210). As a result, it can be established that different bodies are produced through different historical periods, and cultural and sexual practices are necessary in creating our identity and subjectivity (Grosz 1994, 190). Culture frames our bodily experiences and does so within a sexed or gendered category as well (Grosz 1994, 209). Simply, because sex and gender are inseparable from the human experience, thus the body cannot be separated from the mind either (Grosz 1994, 210).

In addition, as Grosz phrases it, "[t]he body is constrained by its biological limits," which is important to underline, because these limits frame us as well, but prosthetics arise to help us, and also, we fantasise about our own bodily advancement and capabilities (1994, 187). This notion leads to the proposals of the cyberpunk genre that offers to its characters the possibility of rising above their own humanity, which often causes their downfall as they leave behind every stretch that made them who they are, starting from the body even to the mind.

Moreover, *Cyberpunk 2077* (2020) and its expansion *Phantom Liberty* (2023) make together a monumental video game created and published by CDPR, a Warsaw based Polish company, which also provides an insight into a unique perspective in relation with capitalism and consumerism. Due to its communist past, as Rácz and Egyed argue, both economic and cultural development in the region of Central-Eastern Europe show a different path in comparison to Western Europe and the United States of America (2023, 10–11). In comparison, the differences make this region a periphery, where foreign influences make the region economically dependent on the so called "core" territories (Rácz and Egyed 2023, 11–12). This state offers a quasi-outsider perspective regarding the economic and social tendencies of the European Union and, consequently, the US, in which capitalism is allowed to flourish with less regulations and with less welfare institutions (Rácz and Egyed 2023, 15, 22–24; Rejda 2015, 35). Moreover, it is very peculiar in the US where a strong social safety net is lacking due to the prioritization of private insurances, unlike in the EU where welfare states try to prevent their

citizens from falling off (Rejda 2015, 18–20, 24). Viewing this from a peripheral position allows for criticism that differ in approach and sentiment from those critiques that come from the centre of this system. As a result of this viewpoint, the futuristic, dystopian and extreme-capitalist reimagination of the US by CDPR's video game offers a thorough criticism and reflection on the economic, societal and cultural problems of our current time.

2.2. What is *Cyberpunk 2077*?

When I refer to the game as *Cyberpunk 2077*, I refer to the complete narrative that includes the expansion as well, which basically completes the story. It is a trend regarding the development of video games that if the project takes years, then developers split the game up into parts, similarly to trilogies of books or films, or even publish the parts of the game in a periodical form just as they would do with television series. In the case of CDPR's video game, it is monumental, because a thorough completion takes up between one hundred to two hundreds of hours, or more. Which renders its huge amounts of details impossible to be fully analysed by a limited paper such as this. As a result, the game becomes a journey that takes effort and time in order to be immersed in its world. However, it is very rewarding, because a player who manages to do so is presented with experiences that are intense and with virtual companionship by the game's characters that appear in most cases almost as if they were real.

Culturally and philosophically, the game poses several postmodern questions in connection with identity to its audience, which are necessary to be solved in order to complete the narrative. At first, we are presented with the protagonist, V, whose gender, identity and personality are all defined by the player. As a result, V is similar to a blank page, accompanied by tools, phrases and markers to help in the composing of the life narrative of the character. Consequently, the first interaction starts with the creation of a subject, and since V is the avatar of the player, this interaction is the first challenge as well that is aimed at the audience, proposed with a simple question: who are you? Which question is of course not that simple to answer as it is presented above in connection with the postmodern condition.

Furthermore, the world and narrative of the game offer several approaches that the audience can interpret and utilize in the formulation of the answers. Alongside literature, mythological and technological texts, different religions, such as Buddhism, Christianity, Shintoism, even Satanism, among others, and philosophy from the ancient Greek masters, through the thinkers of Rome, to modern philosophers, such as Schopenhauer, are presented most of the time without any guiding context in order to offer these notions to the players to interpret, choose from and incorporate into their worldview. These quotes and references turn

up in various places and in different forms, such as texts to be read or conversations to be listened to. However, in some cases these are also used as parts of in-game advertisements that butcher these philosophies, which is *Cyberpunk 2077*'s attempt at critiquing capitalism and highlight how everything can be utilised in the name of profit, production and consumption.

Moreover, these even mirror or narrate the actual narrative as both the player and the main character have to interact with death and the abject. For example, Schopenhauer is quoted in the game in order to be interacted with.

[D]eath is the great opportunity no longer to be I;—to him who uses it. During life the will of man is without freedom: his action takes place with necessity upon the basis of his unalterable character in the chain of motives. [...] Therefore death loses these bonds; the will again becomes free; for freedom lies in the *Esse*, not in the *Operari* (*Cyberpunk 2077* 2020, “The World as Will and Idea”).

This is analogous with the plot's main conflicts. Namely, these conflicts are between death and life, survival and disappearance, and virtual and real. From the moment that the biochip is inserted into V's brain and when Johnny Silverhand (the virtual engram of a once living person's digitalized psyche) appears, the game becomes a competition of identities and V literally becomes a split subject as the same body is now inhabited by two minds, where both wants to take over and eradicate the other like a virus. As a result, this central narrative element lends itself to be interpreted as an analogue to the micro- and macrodynamics of the theory of the subject. V, whose mind is invaded by outside ideology, and who struggles with the constitution of the subject, becomes a self-conflicting protagonist.

Additionally, being a video game, *Cyberpunk 2077* is interactive regarding its storytelling. Thus, players are required to navigate and explore its dystopian world, and make decisions regarding the branching points of the narrative. As a result, each player experience is unique to different degrees, and the narrative has multiple distinct endings, which depend on the choices of the players. Moreover, these endings are depending on the answers that the players can come up with regarding the psychological and philosophical dilemmas of the story. For my analysis this interactive nature is a key component as video games are capable of the active inclusion of their audience when it comes to interpellation, establishing norms and internalizing behaviour and habits.

Within academia, *Cyberpunk 2077* has already been analysed with different approaches earlier. These readings of the narrative included approaches from ludology, gender studies and Marxism. For instance, Zarzycka presents counter arguments that originate from the field of gender studies as the game's narrative does not include enough contemporary thematization of

social and gender related issues (2022, 27, 35). However, the game reflects on these by allowing for transgender experiences in a world where technology is capable for total transitioning. Additionally, Maj highlights that the narrative of the game might be lacking from the perspective of performative ludotopias, as it communicates the borders of the world rather poorly (2022, 51–53). Although, he also admits that this does not harm the narrative, and it is only problematic from the technical side (Maj 2022, 61–62). While Kłosiński establishes the context of the narrative as a criticism for capitalism and presents the theme of fearing the other on the basis of Foucault (1986, 24), he only analyses the wish for the exorcism of Johnny Silverhand's ghost, but does not move onto the sphere of the theory of the subject (2022, 79–80). On the contrary, he even goes on to claim on the basis of Johnny being a literal ghost that “*Cyberpunk 2077* is a realization of a modern or even romantic project,” which is rooted in hauntology and takes the argument in a different direction (Kłosiński 2022, 80). Moreover, it can be established that no analysis has been written that understands the character of V as a self-conflicting postmodern Hamlet.

3. Methodology

Throughout the paper I rely mainly on Borlik (2017) to give a foundation for the connection of the postmodern and the early modern and to draw a comprehensive understanding of Müller's *Hamletmachine* that reflects on the reemerging Hamlet figure in the aforementioned period. Furthermore, Freud (1937), Kristeva (1982), Grosz (1994) and Foucault (1983, 1986, 2000) are my sources for the establishment of the split-subject and the analysis of the process of its creation. Therefore, these authors serve as the theoretical and methodological background, which allow for the analysis of the subject, the abject and the micro- and macrodynamics that affect the self-conflicting protagonist's psychological and physiological crisis. Additionally, I employ Ferrando's work (2013) to define the trans- and posthuman in order to analyse the contemporary as a period of interregnum and a process of transformation, similarly to the early modern.

As mentioned above, Grosz explains how the human body has its limits (1994, 187). This can be connected to several cultural and literary elements, such as superheroes, cyborgs or even droids. In a cultural and academic manner, these can be connected with trans- and posthumanism (which I define below), with the question of what makes us human. Do our limitations also make us human? These concepts populate the imagination of authors, and these are predominantly present in the cyberpunk genre. Notably, *Altered Carbon*, *Cyberpunk 2077* and *Neuromancer* also toy with the idea that through prosthetics and technology humans can overcome the bodily limitations. In these narratives also lie challenges and questions that are the imprints of the postmodern and posthuman identity crisis. For example, on what basis shall an individual's identity be formulated, when there are no fixed categories? What are the borders of the concept of the human, what is it that separates the human from the machine in this age of cyborgization? Among many others, all of these questions are presented for the players through the game, from the very beginning, when they have to create their own player avatar to interact with the world; which is a defining moment, because that will affect how they are going to experience the game.

The main reason behind the selection of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Müller's *Hamletmachine* and CDPR's *Cyberpunk 2077* is their reflectivity on their time's paradigm shifts and the identity crisis that comes with such changes. First, *Hamlet* is reflexive on the shift and the shaking of the human concept in the early modern under the weight of the religious turmoil of the reformation, the technological advances and the age of exploration, which resulted in the expansion of the world and a change in the world view. Second, *Hamletmachine*

reflects on once again a paradigm shift, which is the result of technological advancement, mostly consisting of the advanced machinery, such as industrial robots, self-driving cars, computers that mimic human behaviour and thus, the human psyche's association with the machine in an attempt to get away from reality. Finally, the interactive narrative of *Cyberpunk 2077* models human interaction with the virtual that becomes a reflection of the abjection of reality and the process of going into virtuality – the dystopian allegory of the horrors of the present.

Before moving onto Kristeva, it is important to establish the understanding of Freud's Death Drive theory, because, while the subject is established against non-existence, death gives it also value and a relief that is sought after, which theme is also heavily present in the two dramas and the video game as well. Freud argues that alongside the pursuit of pleasure, the human subject is also driven by its self-destructive nature (1937, 396–397). The “death-instinct” is also necessary for the constitution of the identity, the self and ultimately the subject (Freud 1937, 396–397). First of all, “Eros” is the drive for life and pleasure that the living person seeks; and the second, “Thanatos” is the drive for death that we want to escape because of the unbearable suffering of real life (Freud 1937, 397). Therefore, the subject also relates to death, which keeps it intact, but also unconsciously, on an instinctual level, desires it to escape life (Ibid.). Furthermore, Bloom argues that Freud's theory of the death drive received a lot of criticism, and goes on to Lacan in order to establish it as a viable tool for analysis (2016, 592). He explains that Lacan took the death drive a step further and drew parallel with “the symbolic death of the subject,” establishing the theory as a psychoanalytical and literary tool (Bloom 2016, 592). While paradoxical, Bloom explores the notion of the “‘whole’ subject within the symbolic order of language” by Lacan, in order to establish the fundamentals that the subject is both defined against death and simultaneously desires it in order to cease the imbalance of life and existence, which is impossible (2016, 592, 594).

As established by Kristeva, death is the non-existence, thus the original abject and the frame of the subject (1982, 3). Ideally, we never want to associate ourselves with the cadaver; however, that is not always the case. The combination of Kristeva's abject theory with Freud's Death Drive theory makes it possible to understand how the corpse becomes the object of curiosity and eventually a goal. As Freud argues, we are moving towards death, because we want the suffering to end (1937, 397). However, this becomes a paradox, because as it is noted by Kristeva, the cadaver is the abject, because we are unable to either categorise it, or incorporate it into the subject; the existence – because it is non-existence (1982, 4). Therefore,

by creating an identity against it, the abject becomes what frames the subject (Kristeva 1982, 3–4). Mainly, it is easier to tell what we are not than what we are and certainly, we are not corpses. However, the abject is more than just the corpse, it is just the fundamental abject in Kristeva’s theory, the other aspects that belong to the abject are more personal and not so fixed (1982, 4). Thus, the abject also contains a changing nature, which is tied to the cultural and ideological processes within the constitution of the subject. Not only does ideology define what the abject is, but it also determines how we relate to it, through examples as how we are allowed to perform in relation to it, such as the ritual of mourning as Foucault argues in relation to “biopolitics” (1983, 219–221; 2000, 73–75; Kristeva 1982, 3–4; Powell 2011, 353).

In addition, Foucault argues that the ideological aspects regarding the subject and death also have great effect in the conceptualization of the above-mentioned aspects (2000, 79; Powell 2011, 353). Powell argues, based on Foucault (2000, 78–89), that historical and societal contexts play a huge role in the creation of the relationship between death and the individual (2011, 352–253). For instance, in the medieval *ars moriendi* tradition, people were instructed how to live, die and mourn well, as it was similarly done by the codes of the different social classes later on (Powell 2011, 353). Therefore, Powell argues that both the creation of the abject and our relationship with death and consequently with our taboos are the products of our contemporary time and context, and chiefly it is dictated from a power position or the institutes of power (2011, 359).

The last remaining questions are related to posthumanism and transhumanism, in which case I rely on the work of Ferrando (2013) to conceptualize them. Scientific and technological advancement brings to the table a new kind of issue that transcends what was established as the notion of ‘human’ before (Ferrando 2013, 26–27). “The movement of transhumanism problematizes the current understanding of the human not necessarily through its past and present legacies, but through the possibilities inscribed within its possible biological and technological evolutions” (Ibid.). As a result, questions arise that try to find the main aspect that constitutes a human being. For instance, where does identity reside and where is it from; can the identity of a person be separated from the body? These are questions that are seemingly impossible to answer as of yet (except that it seems nowadays that there is no identity without the body – the neurological system is important in our experience), but they are relevant and important in the wake of a technological revolution that carries the possibility of digitalizing the human mind (Ferrando 2013, 27–28). Posthumanism “is ‘post’ to the concept of the human and to the historical occurrence of humanism, both based, as we have previously seen, on

hierarchical social constructs and human-centric assumptions,” as Ferrando argues to define the term to provide an empirical philosophical tool for the analysis of human existence in a postmodern context that blurs the categories around us (2013, 29).

Therefore, since Shakespeare equals with the early modern, and based on Borlik (2017, 33) Müller’s *Hamletmachine* is contextualized in the postmodern, then based on Ferrando, *Cyberpunk 2077* can be viewed through the lens of the transhuman. These frameworks are employed in my argumentation to refer to both philosophical and moral questions. For instance, if it is possible to carry one’s consciousness into another body, then what are our moral obligations regarding the human beings? What is the human (in) essence then?

The above defined questions disturb the socially positioned subject in a deep manner. Given that the body and the mind are defined as inseparable, thus the issue presented in *Cyberpunk 2077* regarding the rewriting of the protagonist’s mind, similarly to a computer’s memory, also includes the recalibration of the nervous system is a traumatic narrative that implies our fragility. As a result, in the case of *Hamletmachine* and *Cyberpunk 2077* the main disruptors of the subject’s order are shown to be the everyday machines that (already) took over our lives and with which we constantly interact. Both narratives establish the dissolution of the human identity and either mash it together with the machine or distil it into program codes and numbers. This puts the mark of terror and trauma on the audience members as subjects, who are conceived also as they attempt to escape into the video game’s world. Moreover, in the case of *Cyberpunk 2077*, this is the machine, through the processes of macro- and microdynamics the program rewrites the subject and alters the identity and thus the notion of the human being. Video games that previously meant the safe haven or the childhood to someone are now telling about the destruction of the individual.

4. Escapism and the Fantasy of Inhabiting a Virtual World

The abject as the fear inciting mystery also makes for wonder and curiousness as well, as it is established upon the notions of Kristeva and Freud (1982, 4; 1937, 397). We want to avoid it, but we also desire it, and escapism is one of the coping strategies. Psychologically, this escapism that is present in video games has a positive and a negative side as well (Hussain et al. 2021, 1, 11). In the research of Price, analysing the popularity of Isekai narratives in the USA and Japan, it is shown how escapism in the form of inhabiting different worlds appears in narratives and is growing in popularity (2021, 58–63). For instance, there are notable genre narratives that play with the trope of reincarnation in video games, such as *Skeleton Knight in Another World* (2018) and *In the Land of Leedale* (2022), among others. Therefore, it can also be argued on these grounds that the seeds of abjection of real life are present in different cultures.

As Deleuze et al. argue, escapism connected to video games originate from want and need for emotional stability and the lack of tools to solve real life problems, thus the virtual world is used as coping mechanism and as a sanctuary (2018, 19). In addition, escapism that is both measured in past studies and that of Deleuze et al. may overlap with the “adaptive emotion regulation strategy”, and this shows that brief distraction, such as shifting focus to something pleasant, is generally more beneficial for well-being than the avoidance of traumas (2018, 19–20). Eventually, the tendencies and problematised factors underlined by Deleuze et al. result in addiction and the rejection of the real world for a virtual one (2018, 21). Additionally, Siricharoen links escapism and virtualization with developing anxieties (2019, 3). Murata et al. already in 2020 reported that since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, suicide rates, and both non-suicidal- and suicidal self-harming tendencies more than doubled, alongside the hours spent in virtual environments (2020, 244). However, these physical and psychological tendencies show also similarity to the reforming notion of the abject and the rejection of the self that is argued by Kristeva (1982, 5), and which is exemplified by Müller’s *Hamletmachine*. This escapism and emotional investment into the virtual world are used against the players in *Cyberpunk 2077* to challenge the individual and move them out from this virtual safe-space.

The player in a video game world can experience jouissance, oblivion and abjection at the same time. Kristeva defines oblivion in relation to the notion of forgetting who we are and where we are, while we and our environment seem both infinite and momentary (1982, 8–9). The abject is constantly remembered in its exile, because it is a composite of judgment and affect (“condemnation and yearning”) stemming from our drives, instincts, norms and

behavioural patterns – which are not just inborn attributes, but are also imposed on the subject by the outside world (Kristeva 1982, 8, 10; Powell 2011, 359). While *jouissance* is the physical or intellectual pleasure, delight and ecstasy, which can be experienced as passion, as the form of gateway to the abject – which victimizes the subject (Kristeva 1982, 10). These happen through submission or willingness (Kristeva 1982, 9), and during the process of playing a video game these occur naturally.

Video games as interactive narratives provide ground for a form of escapism which is more enhanced than dramas, books, films, etc. were before. Although, these can still serve as grounds for escapism. However, the interactive nature of video games makes them more effective, because we can make decisions, interact with, and as a result make changes to the narrative and the outcome of the story, while previously, we could only imagine it, but could not totally alter the outcome of the story (Consalvo et al. 2016, 1–3). Additionally, as Consalvo et al. reveal, this makes the ideological effects of the narrative more effective on the human psyche as well, because we are interactively shaping the story while the plot unfolds (2016, 3). Mainly, the players are faced with moral questions that challenge their ideological conceptions, and as the study finds, only 5 per cent of them are willing to choose the immoral ending of the narrative (Consalvo et al. 2016, 2–3). Therefore, while players have agency, they seek to act upon and perform their established moral system and ideological framework, but at the same time they are also affected by the narrative, yet they usually do not feel comfortable in stepping outside their own moral confinements.

As Consalvo et al. argue further, “[p]layers do not rely only on their own ethos or a game’s fiction to decide how to play—characters and avatar representation options also influence player actions and choices” (2016, 9). This implies a strong relationship between players and their characters. “The opportunity to reflect on decisions made and actions taken leads to fascinating accounts of the extraordinary care that players take when playing games, they are invested in or the meanings they construct from their playthroughs” (2016, 17). Upon this it can be established that immersion also invites players to exercise their own ideological frameworks. However, as Consalvo et al. find, there are some justified and otherwise immoral exceptions that are being excused on the basis that the player character is the hero, such as killing other characters (Ibid.). Although, most importantly, this justification only applies to ‘enemy’ characters and not in the case of ‘friendly’ characters; mainly, because the players also fear the negative consequences of evil deeds (Consalvo et al. 2016, 16). Furthermore, Consalvo et al. and Besmann et al. also find that players are heavily invested in and attached to both their

own player-character and other non-player-characters as well (2016, 10; 2012, 441). In addition, Besmann et al. point out that these fictional characters are treated more as humans than other humans, especially in a competitive situation (2012, 443). According to Hussain et al. this presents a dual nature for escapism in videogames that is both positive and negative (2021, 11).

As a conclusion, it can be established that ideology through the interactive nature of video games has a stronger effect on the audience. Furthermore, the players are not necessarily limited by the narrative itself or the game itself and barred from making evil decisions that could harm other characters, yet they cannot commit to these narrative identities of their own characters and their own actions. Therefore, it is their own human relations and ideological conceptions, alongside peer pressure, that make them cripple themselves and prevent these actions from happening (Consalvo et al. 2016, 16; Besmann et al. 2012, 443). This phenomenon I categorise as ‘character agency’, and it is a materialisation of the human nature and the ideologically positioned subject, which works against the player’s agency.

5. Bridging the Early Modern and the Postmodern

The concept of the human being, as it is underlined by Foucault, Kristeva and Borlik, is always a contemporary notion. In line with Foucault and Kristeva, Borlik argues that the concept of the human depends on its socio-historical context and is prone to change and reformulation (2017, 29). Furthermore, he argues and thus uses *Hamletmachine* to exemplify the process, that the subject is formed, defined and constituted also in its relation to objects and thus also by the position that humans take regarding the machines (Ibid.). These are concepts that are being questioned and problematized in *Cyberpunk 2077* as well, through the redefinition of this relation to machinery as the ‘cyberpunk’, and extreme-consumerist and capitalist existence is conceived by the cyborg mishmash of machine and human.

This postmodern conception of the human being, especially with regard to the identity crisis and its imprints in contemporary narratives is not unique from a historical perspective. According to Borlik, Shakespeare’s Hamlet is also a person of its own time’s technologies as he compares the brain to a set of book volumes (2017, 34). The English Renaissance also saw the blurring of the categories’ borders and the reformation of the abject. By focusing on the inside, Shakespeare in *Macbeth*, *Richard III*, *Hamlet*, etc. focuses on the abject of the time and returns it to the cultural discourse, to be reevaluated. *Hamletmachine* that relies on the blueprint of Hamlet’s character becomes the bridge between posthumanism (Borlik 2017, 31) and my analysis of *Cyberpunk 2077*, because with its intertextuality the play reveals the same questions and themes that lurk in Shakespeare’s era and the postmodern times.

In the original play, Hamlet is the embodiment of the self-doubting and self-challenging man, who is the reflection of the identity crisis that results from the paradigm shifts of the early modern. As Borlik argues, Hamlet’s character is the prototype, which reemerges in the postmodern in similar conditions and from similar contexts (2017, 30–31).

In Müller’s *Hamletmachine*, abjection is done through the progress from the gore to the machinery that is the mix of human and technology, which shows how it alters the way the brain works (Borlik 2017, 34). Similarly, it can be established that we, in this current age, operate more and more similarly to machines and through machines, since a merging of the human and the mechanical is taking place through the technical and robotical prostheses, implants, extensions and enhancements attached or built into the human body. The human being does not only depend on, but also becomes one with, the machine. Thus, in Müller’s play the abject is the transformation of the human into a different state, such as being one with our

gadgets, which is categorised as “abject poetics” by Borlik (2017, 34). The undivided self, which is also one with the machine, this theme in a similar fashion is also there in the Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, where the protagonist is one with his context. Technology, thus, is not there to aid us but to transform us and to deconstruct the subject and the human being (Ibid.). By the end of the play, the roles are reversed and reality becomes an abject from which an escape route is presented to be the fusion with the machine that is mindless and empty—the total integration with ideology.

Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, as Borlik establishes, is also the product of his own time’s technologies and contexts as it is exemplified by Hamlet’s own metaphor for his own mind being akin to a book, both in potential and functions (2017, 30–31, 34). In Hamlet’s character the doubts of the Renaissance man culminate, and thus drive Hamlet to inaction at the crucial moment, which later also causes his doom. This, in Act III, is the moment of doubt, where the crisis of identity and culture clashes with the order and value system that are being shaken by discoveries of both the outside and the inside world of the protagonist. The doubts and the values that would ideologically elevate the murderer, Claudius, above Hamlet, constitute the man that is unable to fulfil the act then and there because of his fears (the abject), which are the frames of his own identity. The question what the audience would do in such cases is left to imagination in the case of a theatre play or a book. However, when this dilemma is presented to the audience in a video game, a decision has to be made by the player.

Furthermore, the early modern is akin to the postmodern, because of their fundamental tendencies regarding the notion of the human being as it is challenged and deconstructed. Shakespeare’s time saw the establishment of the human being as an early subject as technology came into the scene with the four horsemen of the apocalypse: printing-compass-gunpowder-anatomy (Kiss 2011, 203). During our postmodern times we witness a similar tendency as the mind and the subject is recategorized in the shadow of the machine and the computer. This can be observed in contrast to the Enlightenment and the Modern eras, because there were strong categories that kept the subject and the identity intact, while challenges focused on the grand narratives to better humanity.

In *Hamletmachine*, as Borlik established, the abject can be more than just the cadaver: it is more than non-existence, it signifies the lack of agency and the human fear that it makes us obsolete, passive and takes over our lives (2017, 37–39). Similarly, as in our contemporary times the machines in the factory take away the work from the people, who often times are left without alternatives. The fear of the machine taking over our lives is there in other posthuman

and postmodern literary works, such as the *Matrix* and *Terminator*, among others; these carry the imprint of the fear that living-breathing humans are pushed to the side as useless rubbish.

However, as Müller's play presents, the machine can also become an escape route from the suffering of life. "My brain is a wound. I want to be a machine" (Müller 2001, 7). So, the machine in the end, as the result of a process, becomes not the abject (which was the starting point of the drama), but instead, it becomes part of the subject, because we associate ourselves with it (Borlik 2017, 35). Similarly, as a way to escape ideology in the Foucauldian terms is to merge and become one with it. "This is a far cry from the trans-humanist fantasy of overcoming the flesh (dismissed by the hacker hero of *Neuromancer* as the "meat")" (Borlik 2017, 35). The solution, therefore, in *Hamletmachine* is the escape into the machinery via merging with the machine. This merging is synonymous with the subjective identification with the abject and being one with it instead of rejecting it. The rejection is concentrated onto reality and it is put into the abject position, thus the protagonist strips all that created the initial subject.

In addition, Borlik delves into the foundations of the cyberpunk genre to voice the fundamental questions and fears that are phrased within them. He refers *Too, Too Solid Flesh* to exemplify the "post-human Hamlet" as "a mash-up of Hamlet and Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*", because the protagonist seems to be human with self-conflict, but proves to be an android (Borlik 2017, 39). As the abject undergoes a deconstruction in the postmodern and the frames of the subject are dissolved, the prototypical character of Hamlet reappears in contemporary narratives, which bridges the early modern with the postmodern. This typical character symbolises the crisis of the subject as the previously defining borders are no longer present. Similarly, as the Renaissance drama also represented the inner conflicts of individuals that originated from the reformation and the technological advancements of the time, which disturbed the formation of the subject.

6. The Posthuman Subject within a Virtual World

Cyberpunk 2077 through its narrative reflects on the process of abjection of real life, as the individual interacts with the virtual where the suffering of the real world can be alleviated. This reading of the titular video game is based on Freud's Death Drive theory (1937, 396–397) and the abject theory by Kristeva (1982, 3–4). This is a new paradigm shift that is imprinted within contemporary video games, where the subject not only incorporates and associates the self with the virtual world, but also moves real life into the abject position. This is established on the extreme tendencies regarding narrative immersion on a high level of escapism that results in the preference of the virtual over the real.

As it is established, within postmodernity, many examples of films, television series and even video games present the literal escape fantasy from everyday life. Moreover, Consalvo et al. (2016, 1–3) argue that the virtual can provide the validation, success and even the human(like) relationships which are missing in a not-so-ideal, alienated life, and thus the subject experiences more suffering and sorrow in the real life than in the virtual world, where in fact, the player may have the agency that is lacking otherwise in real life. As a result, real life becomes something that the subject starts to distance him or herself from, and eventually, it becomes the abject, whereas association with the virtual is established fully. In extreme cases this leads to the negligence of needs and thus results in death or in the even more extreme cases of suicide (Hussain et al. 2021, 9–11) in hopes of waking up within a virtual world as it is exemplified by the research of Price and the growing popularity of the Isekai fantasy (2021, 58).

In addition, as Borlik argues, within the cyberpunk genre the posthuman and technological fears of the people are also represented, such as the machine or AI taking over our lives (2017, 41). Furthermore, he also compares the cyberpunk genre to the Renaissance dramas, arguing that “[a]lthough Renaissance tragedy has long been hailed as one of the great crucibles of humanism, O’Donohoe’s cyberpunk novel ingeniously retools it to exalt the post-human in the broad sense of the term. It is popular post-humanism in that it celebrates techno-evolution and assuages the fear of the android ‘Other’” (Borlik 2017, 40–41), which fear is also echoed within the narrative of CDPR.

Posthumanism within *Cyberpunk 2077* is presented through multiple narrative tools and symbolism. The game gives us multiple ideological (cultural and religious) systems that try to answer the question of what defines a human being. Thus, the player is presented with

Christianity, Buddhism, Shintoism and Hellenistic philosophies, such as Stoicism, etc. within the narrative and the open world that is there for exploration. However, no straightforward answer is given, moreover, there are ideologies that are opposite of one another. As a result, the interpretation is left for the player and it materialises in an important decision affecting the story and the ending.

Several questions are asked by the game, for which players have to come up with answers. For instance, questions cover philosophical, transcendental and moral topics, including whether we have a soul or not. And if we do, then does it also transfer if we are digitalized and put into another body? This is a central question that comes up in relation to Silverhand, and later with V, who is also potentially digitalized as a result of players' choices. The answers given to these questions and our conception of these notions also determine what we see as good options or good and bad endings by the end of the narrative. From the point that V is executed and is brought back to life by the life saving features of the biochip that is inserted into the flesh, we as players are actually in control of a dead man walking.

Rather conveniently the protagonist is always referred to as V, which if uttered, sounds similarly to the pronoun 'we'. This is a very creative way of establishing a connection on a linguistic level between the player's identity and the avatar that is being controlled. This may affect the way we associate with and think about V, who we can also customize regarding appearance and gender. Therefore, we can basically even create a copy (or an ideal form) of ourselves and through this avatar we can interact with the game's world and exercise our agency in it. However, the avatar also becomes the host for our ideology, which limits us, because we are faced with making choices and decisions that are moral and the avatar is there to bear the consequences of these.

In line with the above-mentioned arguments of Consalvo et al. (2016, 16) and Besmann et al. (2012, 443), due to immersion, we start to see and consider the inhabitants of the living breathing game world as real people, to whom we relate as we would relate to another human being. The players can form meaningful relationships, receive from them appreciation and validation and even experience a form of love with them by taking some characters with whom we can establish a deeper relationship on dates and so on. This is an example of ideology in action, because we deal with the virtual characters according to our ideological behavioural imprints, conceived categories and notions. As a result, the characters and through them ideology have effect on and agency over the player.

Players may find themselves in the situation that they cannot act against the improvement of certain characters' 'life' even after an initial playthrough, because they formed strong emotional relationships with virtual characters. Furthermore, this may even get to the point where the players fall in love with certain characters. Immersion plays a huge role in this process, especially in a carefully constructed world, where the non-player characters have their own lives outside of the narrative, where players can interact with them like normal human beings. So, the players become unable to act against these characters even when that would save their "virtual" life (Consalvo et al. 2016, 16; Besmann et al. 2012, 443). As a result, it can be established that the issue is not with the illusion of choice presented by the program, narrative and their limitations, because the real limiting factor is the ideologically positioned subject.

7. Rebellion against and Rejection of the Self in *Cyberpunk 2077*

A carefully constructed system of values, order and humanity is put into a problematized position in the narrative of *Cyberpunk 2077*, where the ultimate decisions are not made by the individual characters within the narrative, rather it is left to the player to act or restrain from action. Hamlet, as it can be argued, was corrupted by the very act of listening to the ghost, which is an otherworldly entity, and which was supposed to be rejected. Shakespeare's protagonist listens to the apparition; however, the player character of *Cyberpunk 2077* is given the option to listen to the game's ghost, Silverhand, or to reject him. On the one hand, listening to him sets the protagonist and the player on a path of revenge and hubris in order to become the "Legend of Night City", which eventually results in the doom of the character and at best with some months left to live. On the other hand, rejection of the ghost results in the chance of resisting hubris. However, this rejection of hubris has to be carried out by the player, who is tempted by challenges, possibilities, drives and desires to stray from this path. Eventually, what the player puts into the abject position is going to determine what the outcome of the narrative will be. Whether we are morphed with technology, retain our humanity and reject the machine, exiled into hell or get our personality overwritten by a program, which all depend on the notion what the player formulates as an answer to the question of what a human is and what abject frames this notion.

As a result, hubris in *Cyberpunk 2077* comes into play in a very interesting manner, most importantly through player interaction. Aristotle in Ch. XIII of *Poetics* describes hubris that leads to the doom of the protagonist in dramas, which is also the proposed problem in *Cyberpunk 2077* as well, where the main issues stem from the hubris of the protagonist, who wants to be a legend (Aristotle, ch. 13). Players have to defeat their own hubris and ambition in order to survive. Therefore, the only salvation for the character, and consequently for the player, is to give up the cybernetic powers. The result is assimilation with the masses, but that gives the protagonist another chance at life. Furthermore, the audience of this tragic narrative may feel pity and fear, which stem from the abject, which is intensified through interactions via the player's avatar. As a result, these feelings become personal and the catharsis is enhanced.

Therefore, in a post-humanist manner *Cyberpunk 2077* also posits this idea that the new taboo is the machine-man. Corpses, innards, blood and gore are everyday occurrences in the game's world and thus in the space that the narrative takes place, which is called Night City. As a result, they can no longer serve as real shock to the inhabitants of this dystopian city. However, the digitalization of the human mind and identity is the taboo notion that we

eventually as players have to interact with. The very reduction of the human mind and thoughts into numbers and algorithms. However, the question remains: what does it mean to be human? What distinguishes us from the artificial intelligence or the machines that replace us?

In comparison, *Hamletmachine* and *Cyberpunk 2077* ask questions to challenge the individual on a level that questions the integrity of the subject and the abject. By the end of *Hamletmachine*, amidst the horror and the possible escape through the submission to technology, death itself and the cadaver itself do not seem too undesirable and something to be outcast or rejected – a way out of madness and sorrow. Similarly, *Cyberpunk 2077* offers the players multiple ways to commit suicide if they happen to reach a point of no return from where there is no way to achieve a happy ending or just survival. The players in this situation have to identify with and accept their own death and doom. Additionally, this happens when V, the protagonist, is seemingly saved through a method of the digitalization of the psyche. Thus, the question of what makes us human beings is shockingly put in front of us, which we must face.

Religion is a key factor in the creation of the abject and also it is a key nominator in the definition of the human being. Both *Cyberpunk 2077* and *Hamletmachine* are presented as a race towards death, which underlines our impending doom outside of the texts. The game offers multiple answers to the definition of the human, from Buddhism to Christianity; and it arrives at the conclusion that the mind is inseparable from the body, but cannot find an answer to the problematization of the human soul. Whether the human soul is preserved through its sacred nature or it is non-existent is asked from the player, and thus, the player has to answer this question through the choices that eventually determine the fate of V.

Like many things in the virtual world of *Cyberpunk 2077* death, religion and mourning are capitalized on very extremely to make profit by corporations. For example, the Arasaka corporation created a machine that can make an imprint of a person's consciousness, through digitalizing the human psyche. To which there are multiple reactions by the world's inhabitants.

Child: Why can't I talk to her? / Dad: Because mom got really sick and had to leave. But I know that she is watching you from on high, and that she loves you very much. / Child: Preston says that his dad died and he can still see him and talk to him whenever he wants. / Dad: Because Preston's dad... he didn't go to heaven like your mom. / Child: Preston says that his dad is in an even better place than heaven – he's at Arasaka. (*Cyberpunk 2077* 2020, Columbarium mourning scene)

This scene shows the redefinition process that is tied to death, mourning and the afterlife. Eventually, it also leads to a reformulation of the abject relation that people of this fictional world have regarding death itself. Effectively, corporations that have the technology to keep

the imprints of human beings ‘alive’ take over the function of religion as well. However, there is still resistance towards this process.

In Shakespeare’s plays, such as *Hamlet*, *Macbeth* or *King Lear*, where the insides are turned outsides and what was previously considered the abject is brought to the spotlight to be the focus of attention and curiosity, the conflicts of the self and the psychological transformation of the characters are given focus. Therefore, the audience witnesses the deterioration of the subject before their eyes as the frames and building blocks of the protagonists are questioned, challenged and eventually deconstructed. Similarly, there are two narrators in *Cyberpunk 2077* that inhabit the same body and mind, symbolising these psychological battles. One of them is V and the other is Johnny, who enters in Act II. We as players witness V’s decay and deterioration throughout the narrative as he or she gradually merges with the identity of Johnny. For instance, V is a no-smoker and Johnny is an addict, but as time goes on and the chip’s effects take hold, he or she may light a cigarette based on the player’s choices regarding the degree of resistance of the mentioned effects.

This illustrates, how self-abjection and rejection has to be carried out and also the value system of the player has to be challenged. What matters more, survival or moral integrity? If we opt to side with Johnny, we can become a rebel against the system, and take a morally elevated position; however, this is going to result in the death of our character in one way or another. On the contrary, if we opt to turn down Johnny, which can be difficult at times when the audience is conditioned to feel pity for him or when an emotional connection is established, then we have to take and occupy a morally negative space with which most people do not want to be associated with; however, this negative relation leads to V’s survival. This shows how emotions and human relations are played against the player.

8. Hubris, Temptation and Escape

Everything starts with the temptation of V by the Black Jesus of the bar called the Afterlife. The protagonist up until this point lives under the radar. However, the seeds of ambition are there, because V wants to be big and to be seen among Legends. However, the title of legend is reserved for those that go out with a “blaze of glory” (*Cyberpunk 2077* 2020, Conversations with Dex). That is the point when Dexter DeShawn the fixer, nicknamed Black Jesus, comes into play and tempts the player to attempt something big.

In *Hamlet*, temptation is represented by the Ghost of Hamlet’s father, the late King. Lending an ear to the ghost sets Hamlet on the road of revenge and doubt. The apparition should be an abject, because it represents death and all that is positioned as the other of the religious beliefs of Shakespeare’s time. As a result, Hamlet is conflicted, his mind is ridden with his aim of revenge, but also with the ideological concepts that stoke his own ambition and pride. At the moment, when Claudius is praying, Hamlet could easily end all matters. However, his worldview and his doubts cripple him. He is unable to send the king to the grave, because he believes that by doing so would award Claudius entrance to Heaven, because he was killed while praying and Hamlet would be bound to Hell for this act. Therefore, it can be argued that the ideology that constituted Hamlet’s subject and his ambition plays a great role in his doom.

In a similar manner, in *Cyberpunk 2077* temptation in the very beginning is done by Dex, who offers the protagonist and thus indirectly the player a deal that is hard to refuse. This fuels not only the protagonist’s ambition, but also that of the player who is an active participant. Later on, as Johnny enters the plot, he acts very similarly to Hamlet’s father, because he plants the seeds of revenge in V and fuels the players’ ambition by tempting to push further and complete loose ends that Johnny could not see through in his own life.

By the time we meet Dex again, after we failed to carry out the greatest heist and managed to fall victim to hubris and those who have much more power than the tiny mercenary that V is, we are confronted with the wrong end of a pistol’s barrel. “Member our first convo? Seems I’ve chosen the quiet life, after all. No blaze o’ glory for me” as it can be heard from the Black Jesus, before he puts a bullet in our head (*Cyberpunk 2077* 2020, No-Tell Motel scene). In comparison with V, at this point in the narrative, Dex is already past the point of no return and his doom and death are unavoidable.

This is the point, where Johnny comes in and saves V from dying and also unintentionally starts overwriting the mind of the protagonist as if it were a computer. Also,

this is the part, where the players are proposed the big question: if you want to retain your agency and humanity, then would you resist temptation by defeating your own ambition and hubris, or would you side with Johnny in his quest for revenge against Arasaka and the capitalist system? Thus, ambition leads to the abjection of real life as V merges with Johnny, who embodies virtualisation and identification with the virtual over the real as the cadaver of Johnny is incorporated into the protagonist's subject.

As Hamlet listens to the ghost, which symbolises non-existence, Johnny occupies a very similar position, who is the ghost of *Cyberpunk 2077*'s narrative. In this case, he is also the cadaver that we are not supposed to identify with. Both characters are functionally invaders and both of them want to control the protagonist either literally or ideologically. This makes Hamlet's figure equated with the self-doubting man as he struggles with the effects of ideology that penetrate his mind, and, consequently, establishes V as the protagonist that struggles with escapism and virtualisation.

There are multiple different endings to the narrative and these depend on the answers that the players give for the proposed questions of hubris and posthumanism. A way of retaining agency in the game is by suicide, which I categorise as ironic agency, the choice to go out as human. Otherwise, players can identify with Johnny and give up V to be either rewritten or digitalized. However, this outcome offers Johnny a redemption and a sense of humanity, which is especially shown when he symbolically buries V. However, the game's concept of hell also exists in the intensified and maddening suffering as the protagonist has to go around in circles while no real cure can be found, just to be presented with an option to either die on Earth within a few months of suffering or as a relief be imprisoned as an engram written on a chip.

In opposition, *Cyberpunk 2077: Phantom Liberty*, which completes the game's narrative, offers an option to give up hubris and become an ordinary person. This is the only way of retaining all of our humanity, but losing everything that made us a superhuman cyborg. This is generally difficult to do, because that also means the abandonment of the hero's role. While giving in to hubris leads to a "blaze of glory" as V becomes a legend of the Afterlife by having only a few months left before dying. It is further complicated as the deterioration of V's identity is shown as he or she is now only being a husk. It seems that something is lost, which can be theorised to be the soul. Additionally, a false happy ending is constructed if the player chooses to leave Night City behind with his or her love interest.

In addition, the technology presented in the game, which is more advanced than ours, offers a lot of possibilities for the world's inhabitants with its downsides and risks as well. The

game treats technology as an integral part of capitalism's maintaining and reproduction process, similarly, as it is established above, based on Lyotard (1984, 3–5, 9–11). The player can experience technology as it is being somewhat liberatory for the individual, but eventually it is ordinary, because it is an integral part of life (Batylda 2020, 30–31). Moreover, it is even necessary in extreme cases, as it is also highlighted by some in-game text files, such as in the datashard titled “75 Years of Cyberware, by Tsutomu Takahashi”, which can be found at several clinics and apartments.

A century ago, losing a limb meant tragedy. It meant living with permanent disability, with severely reduced physical capability, and often with a chronic pain. What's more, people with disabilities frequently suffered from widespread discrimination, both active (e.g. employment bias) and passive or unconscious (e.g. poor infrastructural inaccessibility). Today, assuming the dismemberment victim is financially stable, loss of limb amounts to little more than a minor inconvenience. (*Cyberpunk 2077* 2020, “75 Years of Cyberware, by Tsutomu Takahashi” datashard)

Therefore, cyberwares are there to generate profit and boost production and make people dependent on technology (Batylda 2020, 31). In addition, utilizing cybernetics is not without side effects. “Although advances in medical science for the greater part of a century have reduced its incidence to a minimum, cyberware rejection can still occur in a small subset of the population. These unlucky few can experience a range of complications” (*Cyberpunk 2077* 2020, “Cyberware Usage and Its Side Effects” datashard). The game also presents this for the player through cyberpsychosis (when people lose control as their neural system rejects cybernetics), and through the medical system that also generates needs through the side effects in people to consume different pharmaceutical products to stay sane and functional or to be able to use prosthetics (Batylda 2020, 24, 30–31). As a result, this complex integration of the machine into the world and the narrative allows the analysis of the abject in relation to technology as it is an integral part of this virtual world's human environment, thus also it is a part of the creation of the socially positioned subject.

Consequently, the above-described relationship between machines, cybernetics and humans also presents the life-threatening crisis of V's mind and body, caused by Silverhand's invasion, under the light of health issues. After V is examined by Viktor Vector, the protagonist's friend, a ripperdoc⁵ and deliverer of the bad news; the player is given two medical pills, which pay homage to *The Matrix*, because one is blue and the other is red. Also, the player has to make a similar choice, as Neo in the film, several times throughout the narrative to either

⁵ Ripperdocs are specialists, who can “install” cyberware on the spot, which “isn't more complicated than a visit to the dentist's office” (Batylda 2020, 31).

take one or the other. The pills are presented by Misty (another friend of V), who describes the blue pills as the “Omega blockers – taken regularly, they’ll keep things from progressing too quickly,” given on the doctor’s orders, while the red pills are called “Pseudoendotrizine,” which is a ‘gift’ from her, as the “[e]ffect’ll be opposite. It’ll speed things up, free the demon, so to speak” (*Cyberpunk 2077* 2020, “Playing for Time”). So, the player can decide to either repress the ghost of Silverhand and barter for time before V’s condition progresses into a critical state by taking the blue pill, or take the red pill and let Johnny take control. For instance, during the main job titled “A Cool Metal Fire”, the player has to decide whether to let Johnny take control, and if the red pill is chosen here, then it can prevent the player from curing the main character and, consequently, losing control and the battle with hubris for survival in the long run.

The narrative in this sense becomes an allegory of battling a deadly disease, which can be analogous with the identity crisis of the postmodern condition, as the word ‘condition’ connects with disease. Therefore, the healing mechanism in *Cyberpunk 2077* is presented through the goal of surviving and defeating an illness. Thus, in this framework healing plays a major role, as medicine is presented as a means to save the life of the protagonist. Similarly, letting go of hubris is a way of achieving healing, instead of becoming a legend that expires quickly, by accepting Solomon Reed’s offer at the end of *Phantom Liberty* to be taken to a high-tech private hospital. This raises the question of how can the player take part in the narrative so that the video game could offer a positive outcome in the light of healing? By presenting the internal conflict against the identity crisis and virtualization as a kind of battle against a serious disease, *Cyberpunk 2077* can reflect on the problem of the self-conflicting subject in a graspable and down to earth manner and, thus, can also offer a positive outlook through literally utilizing healing in the game.

In summary, if we choose to give up hubris, then did we successfully reject the abjectification of real life? *Cyberpunk 2077* does not give a definitive answer, but it reflects on the identity crisis and provides multiple tools to decipher both the question and the possible answers to it. However, the player has to come up with some answers in order to complete the narrative and shape its ending. The narrative, therefore, reflects on the issue that the virtual becomes a place of refuge, a means of escape and, which people really escape to amidst the identity crisis. On the one hand, this process and interaction with the narrative can provide a healing mechanism through coping strategies that help the players navigate this crisis. On the other hand, as it is mostly an unconscious process, it can turn dangerously too appealing. As it can ultimately become a way to get rid of the suffering of real life. Therefore, an option is to

associate ourselves with what previously was considered the abject: the machine, the virtual.
And for total escape, real life becomes an abject in turn.

9. Conclusion

In summary, the challenges that are formulated in *Cyberpunk 2077* are in line with Kristeva's thesis, namely, with the interpellation and resistance that create both the subject and the abject. As the abject frames the socially positioned subject, in case of changes, the interpellation process results in a different subject. Müller's *Hamletmachine* shows that the societal and technological advancements result in transcending the traditional man-machine binary opposition, while cultural ideology, in the name of the autonomous, sovereign bourgeois subject, is still interested in upkeeping and disseminating the concept of this hierarchical opposition of man over machine. The drama deconstructs this ideological binary, and, at the same time, it also suggests that we as humans started to surpass this opposition; and we are embarking on the transition that take us over into the period of the trans- and the posthuman. Similarly, *Cyberpunk 2077* reflects on a new paradigm shift that now includes the virtual space in this equation, which can push real life into an abject position.

Furthermore, this research could be extended with a more thorough inclusion of the transhumanist theories in order to draw a complex analysis of the cyborg aspects of *Cyberpunk 2077*. Additionally, there are other connected multimedia adaptations and narrative extensions of the video game, such as books, comic books and a Netflix series, which could further support and extend the argument of this research.

In conclusion, *Cyberpunk 2077* eventually turns the personal imprints of ideology against the player, who is a socially positioned subject. Virtuality and the machine, offered an escape route and a focus for passion, gradually turn against the consumer and make the player face the inner fears and dilemmas that both dissolve and constitute the subject. The answers then that are offered by the game are also pointing outwards and surpass the game's world, because the problems presented are real and are only dressed to be of a different age. Therefore, the challenging of one's own self-integrity can equally result in either stagnation, improvement, or decline: outcomes that the player will take outside virtuality. As players who cannot find purpose or agency and validation outside the virtual world, they might opt to seek the virtual as the identifiable and can also seek suicide, so death can lose the abject position. The virtual space thus becomes valued over real life. And that leads to the idea that the real world, which provides only individual suffering, takes the place of the abject. This might eventually lead to the notion that the abject is a changing phenomenon and that we can also abjectify the real world and reconfigure it as the cadaver part of the subject; the way this process is reflected by the narrative of *Cyberpunk 2077*, where V can give up life in order to leave for a virtual space, also highlights

the dangerous tendencies present in the contemporary culture regarding escapism and our relationship with the virtual.

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