

The Art of Trash in “Cyberpunk 2077”

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Exploring the employments of trash in art, Amanda Boetzkes argues for an emergence of a “new waste imaginary” (2019, p. 28). Rather than focus on a straightforward condemnation of consumerism, burnt-out as an awareness-raising strategy and susceptible to corporate appropriations (2019, p. 27), it “grapples with the with the unimaginable scale of climate change and its effects, the global scope of oil capital, processes of anthropogenesis which change the nomenclature of life, and the possibilities of resistance and ethical response that emerge from within this fraught terrain” (p. 28).

As attuning human perception to “the topological agents of the earth’s wasting” (p. 237) is crucial to such an undertaking, in this presentation I argue that the aesthetic employments of waste and trash in *Cyberpunk 2077* (2020) resonate with the artistic paradigm identified by Boetzkes, and expand it onto the modes of environmental storytelling and the perception shifts characteristic of digital games (Klevjer, 2012).

I explore the relevance of the waste aesthetics in three in-game areas: visual depictions of trash in gameworld locations and landscapes, approached through the lens of waste studies (Liboiron, 2022); visual, narrative and gameplay depictions of the human body as a resource full of replaceable tools, approached through a biopolitical lens with a specific focus on Roberto Esposito’s consideration of the corporeal mediation between the categories of persons and things (2015); and narrative, as well as performative self-styling based on the internalization (Foucault, 2005; Prozorov, 2019) of a “cyberpunk” identity.

The above areas of waste aesthetics will be analyzed with regard to the five ways of establishing and affirming a system of power by dealing with garbage, as indicated by Mary Douglas (1984) and incorporated into waste studies by Max Liboiron (2022). The said strategies involve: “labelling” (Douglas as cited in Liboiron, 2022, p. 35) - e. g. game settings mixing trash with living and dead human bodies in the streets; also the internalization of a social reject status by various characters; “physical control” and “avoidance” (Liboiron, 2022, p. 36) - e. g. in-game violence as a foundation of numerous social interactions; also the formation of Night City no-go zones; “attributing danger” (Douglas as cited in Liboiron, 2022, p. 37) - e. g. “cyberpsycho” as a conceptual category; and “ingesting symbols of resistance to annul threats to power” (Liboiron, 2022, p. 38) - e. g. V’s mercenary jobs.

By investigating the functions and flexibility of those five factors in the gameplay experience, I will confirm the game’s effectiveness in exercising the perceptive sensitivity to and interpretative scrutiny of waste, and argue for *Cyberpunk 2077*’s input in the conceptualization of the environmental crisis as a reality that needs to be embraced and comprehended in order to be changed.

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