Crip Cyborgs: Disability, Embodiment, and the Prosthetic Future in *Cyberpunk*

Introduction

In 1988, Mike Pondsmith created the tabletop role-playing game *Cyberpunk*. It was later adapted into an action role-playing video game by CD Projekt Red. The game, as the title suggests, embraces the cyberpunk genre defined by authors like Philip K. Dick, Michael Moorcock, and William Gibson. In this near-future dystopian late-capitalist world, you play as a character who attempts to start a revolution by blowing up a megacorporation skyscraper.[1] The premise just sounds like a regular "high tech, low life" cyberpunk story;[2] but Pondsmith added a twist: players can implant "chromes"—a type of high-tech inorganic prosthetic—into their bodies. By equipping "chromes," the characters of *Cyberpunk* become cyborg-like beings that embrace the organic and the inorganic. It is of course Donna Haraway who wrote extensively on the idea of the cyborg as the "illegitimate offspring" of capitalism.[3] For Haraway, the cyborg embodies a kind of feminism: it is a "creature in a post gender world."[4] It is a "techno-sublation" of the male and the female, the organic and the inorganic, and of other hierarchical dichotomies. I would like to add one more dichotomy to her list: the able-bodies and the disabled-bodies.

Despite the fact that there are no known cyborgs existing in our current society, people are experimenting the idea of replacing organic parts with inorganic prosthetics. Medical-wise,

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[1] CD Projekt Red. *Cyberpunk 2077*. Warsaw: CD Projekt, 2020. Video game.

[2] Bruce Sterling, "Preface," in *Burning Chrome*, by William Gibson (New York: HarperCollins, 1986), xiv.

[3] Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Science Fiction Criticism: An Anthology of Essential Writings*, ed. Rob Latham (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 308.

[4] Ibid., 307.

we have inorganic parts like prosthetics for people with disabilities, and the iron-lung, a type of negative pressure ventilator that stimulate breathing for patients with lung-failure.[5] Elon Musk is also developing the "Neuralink," a brain implant that can create a direct link between the human brain and the computer.[6]

These technologies, while designed to "heal" or "enhance" the organic human bodies, simultaneously unsettle the very distinction between what counts as able-bodied and disabled. The chrome-clad bodies of *Cyberpunk* literalize this destabilization: the so-called "abled" bodies of our society are no longer the normative baseline from which deviation is measured, but only one possibility among many other hybrid forms. In Pondsmith's world, disability is not simply "corrected" by technology; rather, technological modification becomes the universal condition of embodiment in the "high-tech, low life" late-capitalist society. Everyone is, in effect, prosthetic. The "organic body" is always disabled. The "chrome" is therefore not just an accessory but an ontological intervention that challenges the myth of the self-contained, autonomous able body. In *Cyberpunk*, the "incarnate subject" becomes a site where disabled bodies and able bodies collapse into one another, revealing embodiment as fundamentally hybrid and interdependent.[7] The cyborg-like bodies of *Cyberpunk* literalize what phenomenology and disability studies

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[5] BBC News, "The Man in the Iron Lung: How Paul Alexander Lived Life to the Full," BBC, June 14, 2023, https://www.bbc.com/news/health-68627630

[6] CBC News, "Elon Musk's Neuralink Brain Chip Implanted into 2 Quadriplegic Canadian Patients as Part of Clinical Trial," CBC, September 5, 2025, https://www.cbc.ca/news/health/neuralink-brain-chip-clinical-trial-1.7626598

[7] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History, and Politics*, trans. James M. Edie (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964).

already insist upon: that the subject is never a dis-embodied consciousness, but a being constituted through vulnerable, passable, and modifiable physical body.

In what follows, I will first in my essay demonstrate why Haraway's "A Cyborg Manifesto" is relevant to disability studies by examining the conceptual overlap between feminist theories and disability studies. Second, I will pay close attention to the *Cyberpunk* game franchise, and illustrate why the "chromes" are also the "illegitimate offspring" of capitalist society, and I will analyze why cyborg bodies destabilize the boundaries between able-bodies and disabled-bodies.

Rejected Bodies

In her essay "A cyborg manifesto: Science, technology, and socialist-feminism in the late twentieth century," Donna Haraway writes: "The cyborg is a creature in a post-gender world; it has no truck with bisexuality, pre-oedipal symbiosis, unalienated labor, or other seductions to organic wholeness through a final appropriation of all the powers of the parts into a higher unity."[8] For Haraway, cyborg beings inherently embody feminist ideas because it lacks a gender-dichotomizing origin story (Adam-Eve).[9]

Her ideas could be adopted to disability studies because women are often treated as disabled males historically. Aristotle writes in his Generation of Animals: "Just as it sometimes happens that deformed offspring are produced by deformed parents, and sometimes not, so the offspring produced by a female are sometimes female, sometimes not, but male. The reason is

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[8] Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," 307.

[9] Ibid., 307.

that the female is as it were a deformed male."[10] Similarly, Freud argues in his famous penis-envy theory that, a female, upon realizing she does not have a penis, experiences a sense of loss or inferiority and desires the penis she believes she lacks.[11]

Susan Wendell's feminist disability theory helps clarify why Haraway's cyborg can be productively reread through the lens of disability studies. In *The Rejected Body*, Wendell argues that disability is not simply a medical condition, but a social relation or construct structured around norms of bodily ability that privilege a young, healthy, able-bodied male standard.[12] Drawing on feminist critiques of gender, she shows that women have historically been treated as if they were physically deficient—not because of innate impairment, but because social expectations actively limit the development and expression of bodily capacity. Disability, in this sense, emerges not from bodily difference alone but from environments, institutions, and cultural ideals that define certain bodies as inadequate. Wendell's analysis reveals that able-bodiedness functions as an invisible norm rather than a natural fact, a point that resonates strongly with Haraway's critique of organic wholeness. By exposing how bodily "lack" is socially produced rather than biologically given, Wendell provides a framework for understanding cyborg bodies not as aberrations or compensations, but as figures that unsettle the very criteria by which bodies are judged as normal, functional, or complete.

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[10] Aristotle, *Generation of Animals*, trans. A. L. Peck (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann, 1943), 175.

[11] Sigmund Freud, "Some Psychical Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction between the Sexes" (1925), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 19, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1961), 248–258.

[12] Susan Wendell, *The Rejected Body: Feminist Philosophical Reflections on Disability* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 8.

Michelle Terry's production of Richard III at Shakespeare's Globe (2024) crystallizes many of the tensions raised by feminist studies and disability studies. Michelle Terry, an able-bodied woman performing a role historically male and disabled, unsettles the long tradition—traceable from Aristotle through Freud—of perceiving the female body as bodily difference that is either lacking or defective in relation to the masculine societal norm. However, the production rose some controversy as it decides to substantially remove Richard's disability.[13] By decoupling Richard's villainy from bodily impairment, the Globe production seeks to resist the ableist logic that equates physical difference with moral deformity. Yet this gesture risks reproducing a different problem identified by Susan Wendell: the erasure of disability in the name of normalization. If women have historically been treated as if they were disabled, and disabled bodies have been stigmatized as deviant or "monstrous," then removing disability from Richard in order to "liberate" the character may inadvertently reaffirm able-bodiedness as the unspoken standard. Terry's Richard thus exposes a central dilemma in contemporary performance: whether challenging ableist metaphors requires eliminating disability from representation altogether, or whether it demands confronting how disability has been made to signify deficiency.

Taken together, these discussions reveal that Western thought has long framed bodily difference through logics of lack and deviation. Feminist and disability theorists such as Susan Wendell expose how these hierarchies are socially produced rather than biologically given, sustained by an unmarked norm of able-bodied masculinity. Read through this genealogy of bodily normativity, Haraway's cyborg emerges not as a celebration of technological novelty, but

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[13] Nadia Khomami, " 'The Level of Hate Was Dangerous': Michelle Terry on the Backlash to Her Casting as *Richard III*," *The Guardian*, May 21, 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/stage/article/2024/may/21/the-level-of-hate-was-dangerous-michelle-terry-on-the-backlash-to-her-casting-as-richard-iii

as a theoretical figure that exposes and fractures the inherited logics through which gendered and disabled bodies have been marked as deficient, incomplete, or in need of correction.

Chrome and Capitalist Prosthesis

If Haraway's cyborg is the "illegitimate offspring" of capitalism, then the "chromes" of *Cyberpunk* literalize this analysis by rendering prosthesis inseparable from capitalist economy. In Pondsmith's world, bodily modification is not an exceptional medical intervention reserved for the disabled, but a routine requirement for survival within late capitalism. Chromes are expensive, upgradable, and market-regulated; they promise enhancement, but they also create new forms of dependency. For Pondsmith, the chrome is a "materialized metaphor" that symbolize capitalism's invasion on to the individual, organic body. In the video game adaptation of *Cyberpunk* by CD Project Red as well as the anime adaption by studio Trigger, the notion of "cyberpsychosis" is introduced. "Cyberpsychosis" is a fictional neuropathogenic state in which a person who has replaced too much of their organic body with cyberware which would cause the individual to lose a sense of subjectivity and humanity.

This dynamic reveals that prosthesis in *Cyberpunk* intensifies the logic Susan Wendell identifies in modern societies: bodies are valued insofar as they remain productive, efficient, and adaptable to institutional demands.[14] The chrome body thus exposes the violence hidden in the able-bodied ideal. What appears as enhancement is in fact a coercive standardization of embodiment, where bodies must continually modify themselves in order to remain legible as functional subjects. Disability in this context is not eliminated but redistributed: the unmodified body becomes newly disabled, while the modified body is perpetually at risk of malfunction,

[14] Wendell, *Rejected Body*, 23-24.

corporate control, or systemic exclusion. Chrome, then, operates not as a cure for disability but as a capitalist prosthesis that reveals how all embodiment under late capitalism is precarious, contingent, and structurally compromised.

In the Cyberpunk video game, we can encounter a retired boxer named Fred outside of the player's apartment, who is portrayed as physically muscular but lacks any inorganic enhancements. Coach Fred functions as a quiet but significant counterfigure within Cyberpunk 2077's landscape of hyper-augmented bodies. Unlike the chrome-upgraded inhabitants of Night City, Fred is presented as largely unmodified, emphasizing physical training, discipline, and organic strength over technological enhancement. Despite his extreme physical fitness, Coach Fred is effectively rendered disabled within the social and technological economy of *Cyberpunk*'s Night City. In a world where functionality is measured not by organic strength but by one's capacity to interface with cybernetic systems, Fred's largely un-augmented body becomes a site of obsolescence rather than mastery. His bodily perfection—once hallmarks of able-bodied normativity—no longer translate into social power within a chrome-dependent society. This is represented by his retirement: he is no longer able to continue his fight in the Cyberpunk world where organic able-bodiedness is no longer the norm.

On the one hand, the chromes act as a metaphor or critique for capitalism's invasive nature toward the body; on the other hand, it destabilizes the able-body disable-body dichotomy by revealing that able-bodiedness is not inherently physical, but socially constructed. Hence, *Cyberpunk*'s chromes reveal that prosthesis under late capitalism does not completely liberate bodies from disability, but reorganizes disability along new technological and capitalistic lines. Cyberware promises enhancement while enforcing a regime in which bodily value is measured by upgradability, productivity, and social status in the late-capitalist world. This transition is

what Haraway refers to as "[the] transitions from the comfortable old hierarchical dominations to the scary new networks I have called the informatics of domination."[15] However, it is precisely because of this new dichotomy of able and disable, "[hierarchical dualisms ordering discourse in "the West" since Aristotle] have been cannibalized … they have been 'techno-digested.' The dichotomies between mind and body … organism and machine … men and women, primitive and civilized are all in question ideologically."[16]

It is precisely this universalization of bodily difference that allows *Cyberpunk* to be read through the lens of crip futurity. Rather than imagining a future in which disability is overcome through technological progress, the game stages a world in which disability becomes the shared condition of embodied life. The cyborg subject of *Cyberpunk* is never autonomous, self-contained, or complete; instead, it is constituted through dependency on technology, infrastructure, and other bodies. This resonates with disability studies' insistence on incarnate subjectivity: the self is not a disembodied consciousness that merely inhabits a body, but a subject formed through vulnerability, limitation, and material contingency. In this sense, the cyborg does not transcend disability but generalizes it, exposing the fantasy of able-bodied independence as untenable. Crip futurity emerges here not as a utopian promise of bodily perfection, but as a reimagining of the future grounded in interdependence rather than mastery. The cyborg body thus reframes disability from a problem to be solved into a condition to be lived with, a new mode of being that acknowledges passibility, dependence, and modification as

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[15] Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," 316.

[16] Ibid., 318.

constitutive of subjectivity itself. In *Cyberpunk*, the future is not one in which bodies become whole, but one in which wholeness is finally abandoned as a governing ideal.

Conclusion

In the final analysis, this essay has argued that *Cyberpunk*'s cyborg or chrome bodies make visible a profound shift in how embodiment, disability, and subjectivity are organized under late-capitalism. By employing Haraway's cyborg theory and feminist disability studies as frameworks, chromes can be interpreted as not just technologies that eliminate disability but as mechanisms that redistribute it, transforming able-bodiedness from a biological condition into a technologically mediated and socially constructed norm. By staging a future in which all bodies are already hybrid, vulnerable, and dependent, *Cyberpunk* destabilizes the fantasy of autonomous, self-contained subjectivity that has long governed Western philosophical thought. This destabilization opens onto what disability theorists describe as crip futurity: not a vision of bodily perfection achieved through technological progress, but a future that acknowledges interdependence, limitation, and passibility as constitutive of life itself.

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