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The contribution of linguistic landscape to the construction of a dystopian world in the video game Cyberpunk 2077

ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to show the contribution of linguistic landscape to the construction of a dystopian world in the video game *Cyberpunk 2077*. Virtual linguistic landscape remains a largely unexplored field as it has only recently raised the interest of researchers. Previous studies introduced the notion of virtual linguistic landscape and discussed cyberspace in general. This study aims to show that video games can also involve complex environments worth further in-depth research within the virtual linguistic landscape framework. The data used in the study has been obtained directly from the video game in the span of four days. The whole environment available to the player was documented in order to allow for a comprehensive study of the linguistic landscape. The data was analysed on the basis of four analytical categories that reflect the characteristics of dystopia. The first analytical category is the society of the future, in which people are living with advanced technology and the spread of globalisation. The second category is moral decay, tackling societal decadence and emotional callousness. The third category is oppression of citizens, focusing on the distribution of influence on signs between the three warring sides: the government, corporations, and citizens through their language of dissent. The last analytical category is dehumanisation, engaging in the topic of overuse of cybernetic implants and the subsequent deprivation of individuality. The results shows that the linguistic landscape of *Cyberpunk 2077* does in fact indicate the dystopian nature of the gameworld, set within the context of the cyberpunk genre.

Key words: cyberpunk, video games, dystopia, linguistic landscape, city, linguistics, gameworld, aesthetics, *Cyberpunk 2077*

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1. Introduction

Video games can be very complex in nature. Many have massive, sprawling worlds filled with gripping stories and compelling activities that can hold one's attention for hundreds of hours. These worlds have to be skilfully crafted by experts so that they are deeply engaging and feel believable – the player's immersion is very important. As one author says:

> An important component of player involvement is the shortening of the subjective distance between player and game environment, often yielding a sensation of inhabiting the space represented on-screen. This phenomenon is generally referred to in terms of *presence* and *immersion*. (Calleja 2011: 3)

There are numerous aspects of video games that can make them immersive, some of the most apparent being the narrative, the supporting non-player characters (Burgess & Jones 2020), or the aesthetics of the gameworld. However, the linguistic aspect of video game environments has remained a somewhat understudied research topic. There have been studies showing the existence of virtual linguistic landscapes (Ivkovic & Lotherington 2009) in general, which include both Internet websites and video game environments. However, there have been no other systematic studies specifically pertaining to the linguistic landscape of video games, i.e. the way gameworlds portray the use of written language by their virtual inhabitants.

The aim of this study is to fill a gap in game research by focusing on linguistic landscape and demonstrating how linguistic landscapes in video games can contribute to the construction of intricate and convincing environments that reflect the virtual society in the same way as an actual linguistic landscape reflects the society of a city. A secondary goal is to advocate for the significance of conducting further studies into virtual linguistic landscape. This will be done with the example of a dystopian world from the much anticipated, ambitious *Cyberpunk 2077* (CD Projekt Red, 2020), a roleplaying video game.

In this article, Section 2 draws a distinction between actual, physical linguistic landscape and virtual linguistic landscape, as well as characterising dystopia and describing how it fits into cyberpunk as a genre. Section 3 is dedicated to discussing the data gathering procedure, data selection criteria, and the analytical categories that will be employed in analysing the selected data. In Section 4, the previously established analytical categories are put to use and data are analysed in order to determine the outcome of the study, i.e. whether the linguistic landscape reflects the dystopian nature of *Cyberpunk 2077*. Finally, the article is concluded with a presentation of the main findings of the study, which show that the linguistic landscape of *Cyberpunk 2077* indeed manifests many characteristics of dystopia.

2. *Linguistic landscape, video game discourse, and dystopia*

An attempt is made here to determine in what ways dystopia as a genre is reflected through the game's linguistic landscape and how well it fits into the definition of cyberpunk. Linguistic landscape is a concept developed within sociolinguistics. One of the most commonly accepted definitions of the linguistic landscape is that offered by Landry & Bourhis:

> Linguistic landscape refers to the visibility and salience of languages on public and commercial signs in a given territory or region. It is proposed that the linguistic landscape may serve important informational and symbolic functions as a marker of the relative power and status of the linguistic communities inhabiting the territory. Using the theoretical framework of ethnolinguistic vitality, it was hypothesized that the experience of the linguistic landscape by members of a language group may contribute to social psychological aspect of bilingual development. (Landry and Bourhis 1997: 23)

According to this definition, linguistic landscape research investigates the use of languages in written messages in public spaces of a given territory. It focuses on the ways in which languages are used and what influence they have on the social life and politics of the area in which they appear. Within this approach, analysis is carried out on the basis of various written signs: "public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, commercial shop signs, and public signs on government buildings" (Landry & Bourhis 1997: 23).

Itagi & Singh (2002: ix) propose to extend linguistic landscape research to printed media, such as newspapers, even going as far as saying that linguistic landscape should not be restricted to any type of written language. However, Backhaus (2007: 10) points out that such an expansion would require the establishment of new boundaries delimiting the scope of research.

Gorter (2006: 1) argues that the notion of linguistic landscape should not only embrace the languages themselves, but also their users. Although linguistic landscape studies mainly give an overview and an analysis of the languages visible on signs, it is important to note that they should also show the situation of these languages and how they represent different cultures and societies behind them. Following Marten, Van Mensel & Gorter (2012: 3-4), linguistic landscape is not only about the signs, but ultimately about the people: the goal of linguistic landscape research should be to investigate the purpose of the signs and the ways people interact with them.

Considering the pace at which information technology is developing, it is worth noting that today multilingual communication is not only limited to the cityscape, but can also be found in the virtual space. The Internet itself is an intricate network of public spaces where people worldwide are able to

communicate with each other and encounter signs left by other users, be it informational or commercial. For this reason, linguistic landscape should also be analysed within the virtual world, which can be argued to be even bigger than the "real", geographical world (Ivkovic & Lotherington 2009: 17). The most evident difference between the actual linguistic landscape and the virtual linguistic landscape is that the former is localised, i.e. set in a physical territory, while the latter is delocalised, unattached to any location. While the physical linguistic landscape has real boundaries which a person can enter and exit, every virtual linguistic landscape can be accessed from anywhere in the world. Its intangibility allows individuals worldwide to access the same virtual space with ease. This increased accessibility is the reason why virtual linguistic landscapes are linguistically more dynamic and produce more diverse linguistic environments that are possible in the geographical world (Ivkovic & Lotherington 2009: 19). Yet, since cyberspace is not limited to the Internet, this article deals with a video game as the context for a virtual linguistic landscape.

According to Calleja (2011: 8), some video games could be better described as "virtual environment[s] with a number of games embedded in [them] (...) and a storyline that players can progress through by completing a sequence of gamelike activities". This statement shows that certain video games, especially roleplaying games, are more than merely a set of activities: they involve a whole environment in which the player can participate. One part of this complex environment is the diegetic language use in the story world. Purnomo et al. (2017) investigate fictional constructed languages (conlangs), showing that the more complex the relationship between the conlangs and video game mechanics, the more immersed the player would feel. The present paper argues that the language used on signs within the constructed world can contribute to the immersion of the players in the dystopian world of the game as well.

Dystopia, the opposite of utopia, is a pessimistic prediction of the fall of humanity. It arises through "the seeming impossibility of utopia (and the many failures to create it)", so that the result "in some cases [are] almost chiliastic forecasts of the doom awaiting humankind" (Cuddon 2013: 751). Some of the common themes present in dystopias are conflicts, totalitarian regimes, tyranny, dehumanisation, moral decay, nihilism, environmental catastrophes, apocalypse (and post-apocalypse). From the narrative perspective, dystopia can be used as a device to evoke reflection in the player. The overall purpose of dystopia is the exaggeration of real-life problems in order to criticise aspects of the situation and incite change. One such example is *Bioshock*'s (2K Boston, 2007) city of Rapture, where dystopia is presented through irony. The use of popular music from the 1930s to 1950s throughout the game links the gameworld with the real world and is meant to evoke

positive emotions through the typical themes of the American dream, being happy with one's lover, and the success of civilisation. On the other hand, while listening to these songs, the player is forced to explore the devastated ruins of a once prosperous capitalist city that has succumbed into chaos due to its own success (Gibbons 2011).

Video game dystopias often allow the player to be a changing force within these worlds in what is known as "critical dystopia". Critical dystopias are different in the way that, while portraying a bleak and pessimistic world, they have a positive underlying message, a hopeful expectation that the situation can be changed for the better (Moylan & Baccolini 2003: 9). By making them engage with the dystopian reality and its inhabitants, the player is warned of potential outcomes that can await humanity in the future. However, they are also given a possibility to "explore emancipatory routes that may transform the gameworld", encouraging them to reflect upon the world and inciting social change (Farca 2018: 16). Dystopias are often merged with the cyberpunk genre of video games, which is aptly observed by Person:

> Classic cyberpunk characters were marginalized, alienated loners who lived on the edge of society in generally dystopic futures where daily life was impacted by rapid technological change, an ubiquitous datasphere of computerized information, and invasive modification of the human body. (Person 1998: 1)

The game analysed in the present study, *Cyberpunk 2077*, is an example of such a cyberpunk dystopia. This is why it has been selected as a source of material for inquiry into how linguistic landscape can contribute to the construction of dystopia in the gameworld.

3. Data selection and method of analysis

3.1. Survey area, unit of analysis, and procedure of data gathering

Night City is the main setting of *Cyberpunk 2077* and the major analytical focus in this article. By taking a closer look at the city and its landscape, this study sets to demonstrate that video games can also be environments with intricate linguistic landscapes worthy of examination. The data used in the analysis of the linguistic landscape of *Cyberpunk 2077* has been gathered directly from the game. The data gathering procedure was carried out with a copy of the game designed for personal computers (PCs), purchased digitally through the gaming platform Steam. It is worth mentioning that, while the video game had several major gameplay issues on the day of its release and

was considered an unfinished product by critics (especially its PlayStation 4 console version), the PC version was generally regarded as the most complete experience. Indeed, the problematic issues were related purely to game mechanics, not the construction of the gameworld itself, and would not have made a negative impact on the results of this study.

The data were gathered by two players in the span of four days total, from the game version 1.1, in late February 2021. They worked in different parts of the gameworld and there was no overlap in the material they analysed – each player was responsible for mapping different city districts. The game sessions lasted between three to five hours. In the process of data collection, the type-token distinction was employed. In the first two days, the types of objects were recorded, i.e. the unique classes of each sign. The third and fourth day were spent on cataloguing all the tokens, i.e. the individual visible instances of types of signs in the survey areas.

The gameworld consists of six major districts, each with its own unique feel and purpose: City Centre, Heywood, Pacifica, Santo Domingo, Watson, and Westbrook. Therefore, the survey areas include places like a busy city centre, industrial sectors, dilapidated ghettos, and arid suburbs. The terrain covered by the study was limited to the main streets of each district and a number of randomly selected adjacent streets and alleys for increased material variety. The overview of the city and recorded streets can be seen in Figure 1.

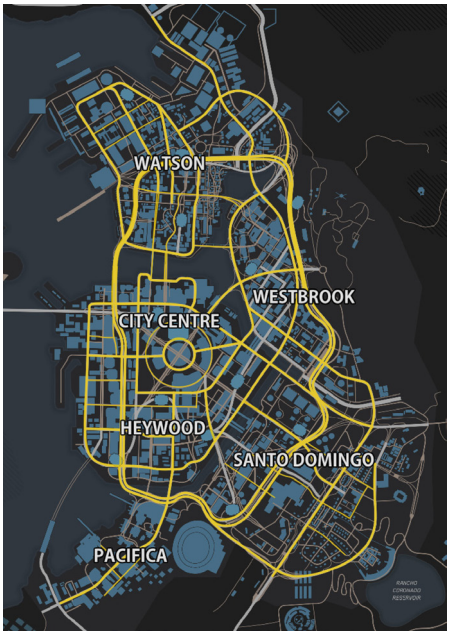

Figure 1. Overview of Night City; the surveyed streets are marked in yellow. Map by the author

Following the definition proposed by Backhaus, a sign is "any piece of written text within a spatially definable frame" (2007: 66). Signs range from small

kiosk displays in side alleys to huge billboards and brightly shining neon lights on the faces of buildings. Writings on walls, i.e. graffiti, were also included in the corpus. Only stationary objects were considered for classification. Signs present on vehicles in the street or blimps in the sky were not taken into consideration, neither were the texts written on the clothes of pedestrians or banners held by protesters.

A selection of outside tools was employed to aid in the recording of data. First of all, traversing Night City via conventional means of transport, namely walking and driving around in a vehicle, would have taken an enormous amount of time even for the limited survey areas. Fortunately, unlike the console counterparts, the PC version of the game supports mods, i.e. fan-made modifications that change the way the game functions. For the purpose of this article, specific mods had been installed that allowed the utilisation of a "cheat" console, which in turn gave the option to freely fly the camera around the world of the game. Given the fact that the gameworld is estimated to be around 75 square kilometres large, these mods have greatly reduced the time necessary to compile the corpus. They also helped with the clarity of the pictures, as there is a multitude of tall buildings in the world of *Cyberpunk 2077* and many signs are located very high, preventing capture of good quality screenshots from the ground level.[1] Yet, the analysis itself focuses on the game's semiotic potential and not on the players' experience of it. Secondly, the software used to take screenshots in the game was Nvidia GeForce Experience, an in-game overlay associated with the computer's on board graphics card. Its built-in function for screen recording allowed capture of full resolution screenshots in the game without loss of quality. Afterwards, the screenshots were labelled and categorised using Adobe Bridge, a computer program with the function of assigning keywords to pictures.

3.2. Corpus structure

The data gathering sessions produced a total of 1,143 screenshots. Due to the high density of signs and their closeness to each other in some parts of the city, many of the screenshots include more than one sign. A total of 1,968 signs were recorded. However, it was necessary to eliminate the signs that were deemed unhelpful in answering the research question of how the linguistic landscape of the game contributes to the construction of dystopia. Street names (e.g. Union St) and traffic signs were excluded from the corpus. Brand names, the meaning of which was opaque and could not

1 Although the texts are visible from the ground level (they are primarily advertisements meant to be noticed and read by passers-by), in order to ensure good quality of material for the purposes of the corpus, close-up screenshots were required.

be placed within any particular analytic category (i.e. advertisements that were not clear as to the product they were supposed to advertise) were also disregarded. Additionally, graffiti signs that were illegible or were not a commentary on the global situation of the presented world were excluded from the corpus as well. Examples of the latter include messages such as "Wild boy was here" or "Boobies" (in contrast to messages such as "Corpothieves must die", which were included).

After removing the data that did not meet the inclusion criteria, the corpus contains 904 screenshots with 197 unique signs (i.e., types) and 1,601 signs in total (i.e., tokens). The corpus primarily includes advertisements of products and services, but also signs promoting the government and its institutions or particular corporations, as well as manifestations of public dissent in the form of graffiti commenting on the political situation of Night City.

3.3. Analytical categories

As stated before, the aim of this research is to explore the question how the linguistic landscape of *Cyberpunk 2077* contributes to the construction of dystopia. For this purpose, a series of analytical categories will be identified, so as to show in what ways the game's dystopian nature is represented through its linguistic landscape. After having analysed the most common aspects that define the genre of dystopia, four key features or categories were established that are also manifested in the world of *Cyberpunk 2077*: society of the future, moral decay, oppression of citizens, and dehumanisation (cf. Moylan & Baccolini 2003; Gibbons 2011; Cuddon 2013; Farca 2018).

Being a vision of a failed future, a dystopia tells the story of a society of the future that lives in a technologically advanced world of science-fiction. This futuristic nature will be presented on the basis of technological developments visible in advertising sign carriers, i.e. holographic displays. The advertised goods can also be indicators of the future, with inventions such as cybernetic body implants, narcotics-infused food products, or "smart" firearms. Finally, with the spread of globalisation being a key prediction for the future, the multilingual character of the gameworld will also be investigated in order to identify the communities in Night City speaking different languages.

Moral decay of the society of *Cyberpunk 2077* can be ascertained on the basis of several phenomena visible in the game's linguistic landscape, such as the percentage of signs promoting an unhealthy lifestyle and advertising harmful products or services in comparison to other types of advertisements. This will be done with the example of signs promoting weapons for private use vs. advertisements promoting professionally trained security companies. Another example is the contrast between advertisements of narcotics

and borderline drug products versus healthcare, pharmacies, hospitals, and health clinics. Furthermore, the visual layer of advertisements will also be analysed in order to determine the number of controversial (i.e. sexual and gory) images vs. neutral imagery, used to advertise everyday products.

The people of Night City are caught in a crossfire of the war between ruthless "megacorporations" trying to preserve their authority and the repressive government fighting to reclaim control of the city. As a consequence, the grassroot citizens are often victims of exploitation and objectifying treatment by both sides of the conflict, seen only as a means of measuring influence. In order to assess the degree of the oppression of the citizens, attention will be paid to the signs meant to promote the actions and values of corporations, as well as the government and its institutions. What is more, commentary from the citizens themselves will also be assessed, usually expressed in the form of vandalisation of the oppressors' property with the use of graffiti.

The process of dehumanisation is deeply rooted in the world of *Cyberpunk 2077*, where the worth of human life is reduced to almost nothing and where technological advancement and convenience are often picked over humanity. This is most evident in cyborgisation and deprivation of individuality of the society members. In analysing the data I will point out the different instances of dehumanisation manifested in the linguistic landscape. One case is the gradual substitution of human interaction with technology, such as artificial intelligence or virtual experiences, mainly with the example of sex workers. Another instance of dehumanisation are advertisements promoting cyberware, or cybernetic implants, meant to replace organic body parts, some going as far as allowing preservation of a person's memories and personality or connecting one's brain to the global network. The data gathered following the procedures described at the beginning of this section will be examined with respect to the four analytic categories defined above.

4. Dystopia in the linguistic landscape of Night City

4.1. Overview

The analysed material is a corpus of signs from Night City, the setting of *Cyberpunk 2077*. Table 1 below contains the summary of the data.

Table 1. Survey areas and sign distribution

District name	No. of signs	Percentage
City Centre	434	27.1
Heywood	364	22.7
Pacifica	47	2.9
Santo Domingo	119	7.5
Watson	271	16.9
Westbrook	366	22.9
Total signs	**1,601**	**100.0**

Table 1 shows the breakdown of all 1,601 signs that are taken into consideration in this analysis. The signs come from all six districts that constitute Night City. Due to the differences in size and population density of each district, the number of signs also varies greatly. Unsurprisingly, the majority of signs come from the three districts that make up the heart of the city: City Centre, Heywood, and Westbrook. It is worth noting that, despite being the smallest in terms of the surface area, City Centre holds the highest number of signs of all districts. The remaining three districts include the city outskirts and desolate parts of the city torn apart by gang wars. In order to determine the variety of signs that can be found in the corpus, the signs have been divided into categories representing different domains, i.e. types of messages, or areas of interest (see Table 2). This information provides an overview of the frequency of particular messages in the city, be it advertisements for specific products or signs promoting a certain idea.

Table 2. Domain breakdown of the corpus

Category	Subcategory	No. of signs	Percentage
Consumable products	Food and restaurants	495	30.9
	Stimulants	128	8.0
Services	Accommodation	33	2.1
	Fashion	68	4.2
	Healthcare	12	0.8
	Luxury products	53	3.3
	Security companies	9	0.6
	Other services	151	9.4
Sex services	Braindances and doll clubs	203	12.7
	Conventional sex services	83	5.2

Technology	Electronics	26	1.6
	Cyberware	160	10.0
	Firearms	77	4.8
	Smart firearms	22	1.4
Corporate	-	44	2.7
Government	-	24	1.5
Graffiti	-	13	0.8
Total signs		**1,601**	**100.0**

A detailed analysis of the domain breakdown presented in Table 2 will be offered in the following sections. Upon inspecting the domain breakdowns for specific districts (not represented in the table), it becomes evident that the frequency of appearance of each domain can vary greatly between the districts. This reflects the community living in a particular area. For example, rich districts closer to the city centre have a higher percentage of signs advertising luxury products and entertainment, suggesting the presence of more affluent, white-collar workers. On the other hand, poor industrial outskirts have no luxury product advertisements whatsoever and most of the signs are for services such as repair shops or factories, implying prevalence of blue-collar workers.

4.2. Society of the future

Since cyberpunk is a subgenre of science fiction, one of its typical features is futuristic setting. Characterised by the combination of lowlife and hi-tech (Gibson 1986: xiv), cyberpunk tells the story of a society that has embraced a futuristic way of living. This is most evident through the spread of advanced technology, which is a part of everyday lives of all people, as well as through the development of globalisation visible in the language and cultural diversification of the society of Night City. Given that cyberpunk formed as a genre in the 1980s, the idea of the future then was quite different to what would be deemed futuristic today. This is especially true when considering the fact that the action of the original tabletop game *Cyberpunk* (1988) was set in the year 2013, which is already in the past at the time of writing. This old-school vision of what the future could look like is preserved in *Cyberpunk 2077*, albeit with some modernisations to also reflect contemporary concerns with what is to come. To begin with, sign carriers can exemplify advanced technology in Night City. The breakdown of the types of sign carriers is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Distribution of sign carriers

Sign carrier	No. of signs	Percentage
Animated	1072	67.0
Static	306	19.1
Neon	150	9.4
Hologram	73	4.5
Total signs	**1,601**	**100.0**

Typically, in the real world, especially in the 1980s, the majority of signs that could be found in the average linguistic landscape would be static signs, e.g. billboards and posters. One could also expect to see neon signs or the occasional TV screen. As can be seen from the breakdown in Table 3, in Night City, only 19.1% of signs are displayed on traditional, static sign carriers. The vast majority of signs are animated, amounting to 67% of the total. This means that most sign carriers are TV screens that allow playing video advertisements with sound. This often results in a blinding and cacophonic experience when travelling through the busier streets of the city, especially when also considering the number of holograms and neon signs, which make up 13.9% of all signs. One of the hallmarks of Night City are the pillars of holograms shooting high up into the sky, visible even from beyond the outskirts of the city (Figure 2).

Figure 2. A view of hologram pillars visible from a distance. Screenshot by the author

When it comes to product advertisements, the progress in technology is also clearly visible. The types of technological artefacts found on advertising signs are listed in Table 4.

Table 4. Types of technology

Technology	No. of signs	Percentage
Cyberware	160	56.1
Firearms	77	27.1
Electronics	26	9.1
Smart firearms	22	7.7
Total signs	**285**	**100.0**

Out of all 285 signs relating to technology, only 26 advertise conventional electronic devices (category: electronics), e.g. radios, television sets, audio equipment, electric toothbrushes, etc. More than half of all technology ads (56.1%) are for cyberware, i.e. cybernetic implants. What is more, the world of *Cyberpunk 2077* saw a revolution in weapon manufacture, with inventions like mass-produced, disposable, single-use weapons, but also weapons that use guided ammunition, or rail guns that can penetrate almost any type of obstacle (category: smart firearms). Advertisements of firearms make up 34.8% of all technology signs, out of which 7.7% are smart firearms. Cyberware and smart firearms – the indices of technology of the future – together stand at 63.8% of all advertisements for technology.

Another particular characteristic of the visions of the future is that most predictions assume the spread of globalisation. This is also true of Night City. Cultural implications of globalisation are evident when looking at the city's linguistic landscape. The data in Table 5 show the languages present on the signs throughout the city.

Table 5. Distribution of languages in the signs of Night City

Language	No. of signs	Percentage
English	1,089	68.0
Japanese	273	17.1
Chinese	121	7.6
Spanish	69	4.4
Korean	49	3.1
Total signs	**1,601**	**100.0**

The distribution of languages used in the signs in the corpus shows the prevalence of English. It can be explained with a game-internal reason and a game-external reason. In the game, Night City is a part of the United States, where English is still the dominant language. Consequently, most shops and companies choose to include it in their signs. In the world of the players (game-external), it could also be argued that this is a design choice made by the developers of the game. Since *Cyberpunk 2077* is a popular, high-budget production, the team behind the game marketed it to as wide an audience

as possible. As such, it can be assumed that the majority of the signs in the game have been designed in English, which is the most common second language in the world, so that as many people as possible would purchase the game and enjoy its environment.

Despite the majority of the signs being in English, it is important to note that non-English speaking cultures have a big presence in Night City. With the use of internal (collectible texts found in the game) and external sources of information about the game's universe (fan-made wikis and databases), one can identify the country of origin of the 19 most prominent corporations found in the sign corpus. American corporations constitute a minority in the city, amounting to only 26%. At 32% there are European corporations, coming from countries like Spain, Italy, Russia, Serbia, etc. The most prominent group are Asian companies, sitting at 42% of the total. These include primarily Japanese, but also Chinese and Korean corporations.

It is worth noting that the most influential company in the city is the Japanese corporation Arasaka. This serves the story: it is one of the oldest and wealthiest companies in the world, holding many assets and maintaining the largest and most powerful armed force of any corporation in the world. But this is also reflected in the city's linguistic landscape. Out of all 44 corporate sign in the corpus (i.e., promoting particular corporations and their ideology), 40 promote Arasaka, which illustrates the extent of presence this corporation has in the city. Once again, this can be explained with both game-internal and game-external reasons. The in-game, political explanation is that Arasaka is a wealthy worldwide "megacorporation" maintaining one of the largest armed forces, which allows them to control regions in many countries. The reasoning of the developers (the game-external reason) could be that the aesthetic that is prevalent in Japanese culture fits very well with the premises of cyberpunk. When considering the capital of Japan, Tokyo, the streets are packed with brightly coloured neon signs and advertisements mounted on tall skyscrapers – this is analogous to the scenery that can be found in Night City (cf. Figure 3).

Figure 3. A panorama of Night City with a view of lights and neon signs at night. Screenshot by the author

4.3. Moral decay

As stated by the main character themselves at the start of the game, "By 2077, Night City was voted the 'Worst place to live in America'". The world of *Cyberpunk 2077* is a twisted one, where the people are terrorised by ruthless gangs of criminals and live in equally ruthless capitalism. Corporations, desensitised to the needs of the common people, have abandoned any pretence of moral values or political correctness in favour of aggressive marketing and maximisation of their profits. People are bombarded with signs that use brutal, vulgar, or sexually explicit imagery to advertise ethically ambiguous products.

In the real world, the advertising of tobacco products is strictly prohibited, at least in the US, the country where Night City is apparently located. Advertisements for alcohol are legal, even if under specific restrictions. On the other hand, the possession and distribution of narcotics is considered a crime. However, Night City harbours a high number of advertisements for stimulants. Ads promoting unhealthy products are abundant throughout the city, especially advertising the goods that would be considered illegal by today's standards, as illustrated in Table 6.

Table 6. Advertising of stimulants in Night City

Stimulant	**No. of signs**	**Percentage**
Alcohol	59	46.1
Narcotics	40	31.2
Tobacco	29	22.7
Total signs	**128**	**100.0**

From the overall number of 128 signs promoting stimulants found in the corpus, only 46.1% are ads for alcohol, which could potentially also be found in the real world. The remaining 53.9% are tobacco and narcotics, the advertising of which would be considered a crime outside the game. Apart from advertisements of cigarettes, 31.2% of these signs are promotions of products with narcotics as one of their ingredients or products posing to provide the same effect as narcotics, such as candy bars with amphetamine content or inhalers containing psychoactive substances.

Promotions of an unhealthy lifestyle dominate the landscape due to the lack of signs that would promote an alternative, healthy way of living. As shown in Table 2, there are only 12 signs for healthcare-related products and services, i.e. hospitals, pharmacies, medicine, or campaigns for healthy eating. They constitute merely 0.8% of the corpus, while stimulants amount to 8%. What is also worth pointing out is the popularity of sex services in the city. Signs promoting sex services can be found in all six districts and

they constitute 17.9% of all recorded signs – this makes them the second most common group of signs in Night City, surpassed only by the advertisements of food and restaurants. There are no attempts at making these signs discreet: their message is explicit and they use highly sexual images to entice customers. They can be found practically anywhere, in the main and side streets, as well as next to neutral or even "family friendly" signs and businesses.

The gun culture of *Cyberpunk 2077* is taken to the extreme. As noted in Table 4, out of all signs relating to technology, as many as 34.8% of them are firearms advertisements, or 6.2% of the whole corpus, which is still a considerable percentage in comparison to other domains. It is worth mentioning that, while there are no ads for luxury products in poor districts, no active services in a deserted district, or no corporate presence in the rural city outskirts, advertisements of firearms are universally found in all survey areas, emphasising the prevalence of guns in Night City.

It is also important to note the gap between promotion of self-defence and the services of professional security firms. With the lack of police presence in many areas, the citizens have to resort to protecting themselves. As Table 2 shows, there are 99 signs advertising firearms and only nine signs advertising professional security. While the demand for the services of security companies is there, it is usually other corporations that employ them. Average people might not even be able to afford their services. However, with the developments in weapon mass production, it was never easier for an untrained person to own a gun. The extreme nature of Night City's gun culture is also reflected in those signs that do not only advertise specific products but also encourage the purchase of firearms in general, with messages targeted even at whole families, including children (Figure 4).

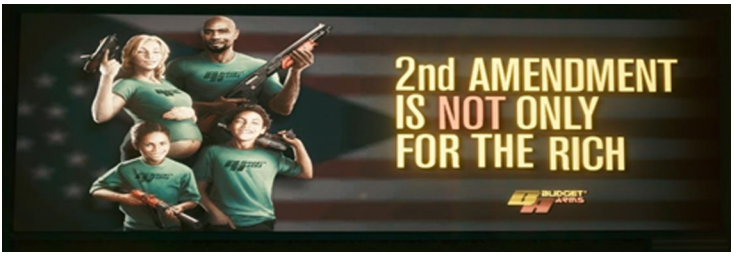

Figure 4. A sign promoting guns for the whole family. Screenshot by the author

Although linguistic landscape research does not always take into consideration the visual layer of signs, it is worth examining for the purposes of this study, as moral decay of Night City's society is arguably the most evident when considering the visual layer. The proportion of questionable imagery used by corporations to advertise even the most mundane products is astonishing. The data in Table 7 show the types of visuals used in signs.

Table 7. Types of visuals used in signs

Type of visual	No. of signs	Percentage
Neutral	648	40.5
Gory	337	21.0
Sexual	616	38.5
Total signs	**1,601**	**100.0**

In the actual, physical world, the content of signs is generally regulated. Public signs have to be neutral when it comes to the advertised message and visuals, so as not to unsettle or traumatise certain social groups, such as children. There are some instances where the rules are more lenient and the signs can have sexual or other explicit content, e.g. those located on the Las Vegas strip or other places where children's presence is not expected. In Night City, shocking and sexual imagery can be found on practically any street with no regard as to who might see it. As presented in Table 7, only 40.5% of all visuals are classified as "neutral" – those are visuals that would be normally accepted by today's standards and regulations. However, the majority of signs in the corpus contain images that could be considered immoral or unseemly.

21% of signs include visuals that could be broadly described as "gory", i.e. images with themes like violence and cruelty, e.g. shootouts, stabbings, but also generally questionable illustrations like people licking liquor off the pavement, people with pistols in their mouths, etc. While it might not be too surprising to find that many of the "gory" signs are advertisements for firearms, which are naturally associated with violence and cruelty, many more of these signs advertise products apparently unrelated to the theme, for instance meals, soft drinks, candy, alcohol, cigarettes, TV programmes, or insurance. 38.5% of signs use sexual and suggestive imagery. Examples include naked or half-naked women and men, women making sexual gestures, people in sexual positions, and phallic symbols. Interestingly, only 286, i.e. 46.4% out of all 616 sexual signs specifically advertise sexual services or sex toys. Similarly to the "gory" category, most products advertised on signs with sexual images actually have little to no relation to the used visuals. These products again include meals, soft drinks, candy, alcohol, and TV programmes, but also fashion, luxury products, and cyberware.

4.4. Oppression of citizens

Ordinary citizens of Night City are under constant oppression not only from organised crime, but also from the people who were meant to protect them: "megacorporations" and the government. Those, instead of strengthening

social justice or seeking support from the people, compete for influence and treat people like livestock. Table 8 is a breakdown of signs that contribute to the images of the three main sides of the conflict.

Table 8. Struggle for influence on signs

Side of the conflict	No. of signs	Percentage
Corporate	44	54.3
Government	24	29.6
Citizens (graffiti)	13	16.1
Total signs	**81**	**100.0**

The categories "corporate" and "government" constitute top-down, official signs, whereas "citizens" are bottom-up signs. The category "corporate" refers to signs promoting corporations and their ideology. They are meant to endorse a corporate way of living and build a positive image of corporations. Signs in the category "government" are meant to improve public opinion of the city's officials, such as the mayor, but also government institutions like the police force. These positive corporate and government messages are in contrast to the story of the game world, in which the city inhabitants are used by the corporations, while the corrupt government colludes with the corporations rather than providing safety and services to the citizens. The last category are mainly spray painted graffiti signs created by the citizens as a means of expressing dissatisfaction with the system and attempts at provoking change, with messages such as "The end is near", "Fuck the NCPD", or "Corpothieves must die".

Based on the available information, the distribution of influence in Night City, operationalised as the visibility of signs representing various economic and political entities, becomes clear. More than half of the discussed signs, i.e. 54.3%, are corporate. Out of all six districts, they appear in four and constitute the majority in this category. Their strongest presence is in the City Centre, which is considered the seat of power of the corporations. Next are government signs, which amount to 29.6%. They appear in the same four districts as corporate signs but have a majority in only one. Government signs can mainly be found in Heywood, the district in which the city hall is located. The last in line are signs produced by the citizens, which constitute a mere 16.1%. These signs can be found in all districts but their presence is very weak. The only two districts with a meaningful number of graffiti signs are the ones that have no corporate and government presence at all, i.e. Pacifica, which is mostly abandoned and controlled by criminal gangs, and Santo Domingo, the city outskirts.

4.5. Dehumanisation

Technology in the world of *Cyberpunk 2077* is highly developed and cyberware is easily available and affordable for everyone. Cyberware is a piece of advanced technology that is installed into the flesh and interacts with the human body. It can range from simple limb prosthetics to complex neural chips modifying one's brain functions and behaviour. The commonness of this type of technology has become a trademark of the cyberpunk genre. As a result, many have begun to lose their sense of humanity after having replaced too many biological body parts with cybernetic ones. What is more, due to the spread of artificial intelligence and similar technologies, interpersonal contact has been significantly reduced, as people rarely interact with each other anymore.

Just like jewellery and clothing are considered accessories and means of expressing oneself, for the people of Night City, cyberware has the same function. In order to portray the normalcy of cyberware, a comparison of several types of commodities is displayed in Table 9. Considering the role of firearms in the world of *Cyberpunk 2077*, they have also been considered a commodity, if not a necessity.

Table 9. Types of commodities in signs

Commodity	No. of signs	Percentage
Cyberware	160	39.4
Firearms (all types)	99	24.4
Fashion	68	16.7
Luxury products	53	13.1
Electronics	26	6.4
Total signs	**406**	**100.0**

As illustrated in Table 9, out of all signs advertising commodities, cyberware constitutes the largest part, with as much as 39.4%. The technology has become so easily accessible that even the poorest people are able to afford some kind of cybernetic implant. The selection is very wide: implants can range from cybernetic limbs, eye implants improving reflexes, bulletproof skin, to chips connecting the brain to the Net (the in-universe equivalent to the Internet) and allowing memory erasure or personality manipulation.

What is more, among the available signs, there are no warnings of dangers connected with the misuse of cyberware. There are plenty of signs directed at specific demographics that aim to advertise the best type of cyberware for a specific group, e.g. stylish gold-plated cybernetic arms for rich corporate employees or practical spine and muscle enhancers for heavy-duty factory workers, yet there are no mentions of threats resulting from the abuse

of such technology. Cyberpsychosis, a mental illness caused by an overload of cybernetic augmentations which can lead to the loss of self-awareness and to bestiality, is a serious problem for the people of Night City. Still, corporations keep silent about these dangers and provide no cautionary information. This is evidence that, even though cyber modifications are usually used as a means of expressing one's individuality, they can easily lead to the deprivation of individuality if misused or abused.

The prevalence of and demand for sex services in Night City is very high and technological advancements have also been made in this sector, in the form of artificial intelligence and virtual reality. Table 10 shows a breakdown of signs relating to sex services.

Table 10. Types of sex services

Sex services	**No. of signs**	**Percentage**
Braindances and doll clubs	203	71
Conventional sex services	83	29
Total signs	**286**	**100**

Out of all 286 signs relating to sex services, only 29% are advertisements for conventional ones, i.e. services that can also be found in today's world, involving physical contact with real people. This category also includes signs advertising sex toys that can be used with a partner. On the other hand, the vast majority belongs to braindances and doll clubs, sitting at 71%. Braindances are a type of virtual reality; they are pre-recorded scenarios played directly in the brain, giving the impression of actually taking part in the action. The participant can see through the eyes of the actor, as well as feeling their emotions and physical sensations. This technology is widely used in the sex industry, where the customer can experience any type of sexual encounter they could wish for. Doll clubs are places more akin to conventional sex clubs, since the experience also includes human involvement. However, there is a substantial difference which causes this type of business to be excluded from the category of conventional sex services. Dolls are sex workers with installed brain chips that allow them to be programmed; a doll's behaviour and personality is changed in-session to suit the customer's desires. Dolls retain no memory of the sexual encounters afterwards. While it could be seen as positive, since this technology can save sex workers from possible trauma by erasing their memory from work, it can also be very dangerous: if abused, the technology could completely erase someone's original personality and memories, leaving an empty vessel of a person. This also ties in well with the statements about dehumanisation and deprivation of individuality made earlier. Therefore, one can conclude that doll clubs are ultimately not encounters with real people, but rather artificial, carefully tailored experiences.

While analysing the data, another interesting pattern was noticed that could demonstrate a decrease in human interaction, dehumanisation, and moral decay, namely the fact that no sign in the whole corpus advertises regular clubs or pubs. This could indicate that, possibly due to wide demand, most socialising places in Night City have adapted to include (or were replaced by) sex services, given that people no longer want social gatherings or desire lasting relationships. Taking all this into account, in the world of *Cyberpunk 2077*, sex has been reduced to a form of transaction, as most people do not care about real human interaction. Sexuality is no longer about people and their relationships, but rather about satisfying one's physiological needs in the easiest possible way.

5. Conclusion

The analysis of the linguistic landscape of Night City conducted above shows that the world of *Cyberpunk 2077* is inherently rotten; among constant power struggles at the top, decadent morality, and dehumanising technology, there is little place for positivity and hope. This is evident on many levels, exemplified mainly through the types of sign carriers, assortment of advertised domains, proportions of dystopic products when compared to others, and the number of top-down and bottom-up signs. On the whole, the linguistic landscape does indeed reflect and simultaneously contributes to the dystopian nature of Night City and, consequently, also grounds the video game in the genre of cyberpunk.

The purpose of the game's linguistic landscape is to immerse the participant and set the dystopian tone of the game. Even though one can encounter countless product advertisements throughout Night City, most of the items found on them are not products that can be bought by the player, so the character of these signs is not strictly commercial. Instead, the developers of the game apparently meant these adverts to be representations of what kind of world the player is engaging with, to set the general atmosphere, and inform what can be expected of the city and its citizens. Given these findings, it can be further argued that the complexity of the linguistic landscape in an open-world video game set in a city environment is a major contributor to the feeling of authenticity of that world. Without a detailed linguistic landscape that would reflect the virtual society inhabiting the city, the game environment would feel empty and lifeless to the player. As such, video game developers are often faced with the challenge of crafting a carefully thought-out gameworld that resembles the atmosphere of a real city. In the case of *Cyberpunk 2077*, the linguistic landscape is necessary to convey the feelings of societal decadence and hedonism that is characteristic of the genre.

This study also points to the importance of conducting further research into virtual linguistic landscape. As shown here, virtual linguistic landscapes can be intricate and interesting. The virtual is an image of the physical, with the virtual linguistic landscape mimicking but also going beyond the characteristics of an actual, physical linguistic landscape. Especially when considering the way current technological advancements are developing, the cyberspace is only going to get bigger and more sophisticated with time. This makes it especially expedient to launch more studies into this field. People spend so much time in the virtual environment that analysing virtual linguistic landscapes will allow for a better understanding of how humans interact with signs and how signs in the cyberspace have a dialectic relationship with the socio-cultural physical world.

When conducting further studies into virtual linguistic landscapes, I believe it would be beneficial to consider examining linguistic landscape not only at one point in time, which was the approach taken in this study, but rather its evolution over time. Many video games have the player make decisions in the story that impact not only that player but also the world around them. Such games could be analysed from several points in time in order to observe the changes in the linguistic landscape that result from certain decisions. For example, this would be useful in the analysis of bottom-up signs of dissent, such as graffiti, due to their transitory nature: their lifespan would be important information about the inclusion and exclusion of various communities from the public space. The world of *Cyberpunk 2077* is rather static in this regard, which is why I believe it would be valuable to analyse other video games in which the linguistic landscape evolves over time. One example would be the *Bioshock* trilogy, especially *Bioshock Infinite* (2K Boston 2013), where the player, over the course of the story, makes their way through a revolution, which begins slowly but eventually completely changes the face of the city (cf. Kiełbasiewicz 2019).

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Abridgement

Krajobraz językowy jako element konstrukcji świata dystopijnego w grze cyfrowej *Cyberpunk 2077*

Jednym z mało dotychczas zbadanych elementów świata przedstawionego w grach wideo jest ich krajobraz językowy (*linguistic landscape*). Artykuł ten pokazuje, w jaki sposób krajobraz językowy w grze cRPG *Cyberpunk 2077* (CD Projekt Red, 2020) stanowi odzwierciedlenie dystopijnego wirtualnego społeczeństwa w niej przedstawionego, a jednocześnie współtworzy otoczenie pozwalające grającym na zanurzenie się w świat gry.

Pojęcie krajobrazu językowego powstało na gruncie socjolingwistyki i w rozumieniu Landry'ego i Bourhisa (1997) oznacza widoczne i wyróżnione (*salient*) przypadki użycia języka pisanego w przestrzeni publicznej, które można zaobserwować w danym miejscu. Badania krajobrazu językowego dotyczą zatem użycia języka w „znakach" (Backhaus 2007), czyli komunikatach tekstowych, widocznych w danej przestrzeni oraz jego wpływu na życie społeczne i polityczne danego obszaru. Analizie podlegają m.in. szyldy sklepów, nazwy ulic, reklamy, a w niektórych ujęciach również pozajęzykowe systemy semiotyczne (Itagi i Singh 2002). Przedmiotem badań są także cele oznaczeń oraz interakcje, w jakie wchodzą użytkownicy danego języka w określonej przestrzeni (Marten i in. 2012), przy czym w przypadku gier wideo jest to przestrzeń wirtualna. Niektóre z nich, szczególnie gry typu cRPG, stanowią kompletny świat czy ekosystem, w którym działa osoba grająca. Częścią takiego złożonego środowiska jest diegetyczne użycie języka, które może zwiększać poczucie przeniesienia się do innej rzeczywistości, np. jeśli gracz umiejętnie zastosuje konlangi, czyli sztucznie stworzone języki (Purnomo i in. 2017).

W przypadku wielu gier cyfrowych mamy także do czynienia z połączeniem dystopii (pesymistycznej wizji przyszłości, zakładającej upadek ludzkości i przedstawiającej konflikty, reżimy totalitarne, upadek moralny, apokalipsę czy czasy postapokaliptyczne) z cyberpunkiem, którego bohaterowie są „zmarginalizowanymi, wyalienowanymi samotnikami, żyjącymi na skraju społeczeństwa" (Person 1998: 1) przesiąkniętego technologią. Gra *Cyberpunk 2077*, która stanowi takie właśnie połączenie, dostarcza na potrzeby artykułu materiału badawczego do analizy wkładu krajobrazu językowego w konstrukcję dystopii w świecie gry.

Głównym miejscem akcji w grze *Cyberpunk 2077* jest miasto Night City. Dane do analizy pozyskano bezpośrednio z gry w formie 1143 zrzutów ekranu zawierających 1968 znaków. Po odrzuceniu znaków uznanych za nieprzydatne w próbie odpowiedzi na pytanie badawcze, analizie poddano 904 zrzuty ekranu, zawierające 197 typów znaków (*types*) i 1601 okazów (*tokens*).

Są to głównie reklamy, przekazy promujące rząd czy korporacje oraz wyrazy niezgody na sytuację polityczną. Ustalenie najczęściej występujących elementów definiujących dystopię jako gatunek pozwoliło na stworzenie czterech kategorii tematycznych istotnych dla krajobrazu językowego w grze *Cyberpunk 2077*: (i) społeczeństwo przyszłości, (ii) upadek moralny, (iii) ucisk i wyzysk obywateli oraz (iv) dehumanizacja (por. Moylan i Baccolini 2003; Gibbons 2011; Cuddon 2013; Farca 2018).

Kategoria „społeczeństwo przyszłości" odgrywa w cyberpunku istotną rolę, ponieważ jest to społeczeństwo przesycone technologią, a przyszłość jest często przedstawiona w formie retrofuturystycznej. W badanym korpusie kategoria ta jest widoczna w formie oraz treści znaków: 67% znaków znajduje się na nośnikach animowanych, co jest elementem wzmacniającym (retro)futuryzm i chaos wizualny. Co do treści, 56,1% znaków reklamowych związanych z technologią promuje cyberimplanty (*cyberware*), a druga w kolejności grupa (34,8%) to reklamy broni. Społeczeństwo w omawianej grze jest też w znacznym stopniu zglobalizowane: 32% znaków jest w językach innych niż angielski (w japońskim, chińskim, hiszpańskim lub koreańskim); pośród megakorporacji reklamujących się w Night City największą grupę stanowią korporacje azjatyckie, a najbardziej wpływową jest japońska Arasaka – dzięki temu krajobraz Night City jest spójny z estetyką cyberpunkową i przypomina Tokio.

Kategoria „upadku moralnego", związana z nieskrywaną pogonią korporacji za zyskiem, jest zauważalna szczególnie w znakach natury reklamowej, tak pod względem promowanych produktów, jak i strony wizualnej reklam. Wśród reklamowanych produktów znajdują się stymulanty, takie jak alkohol, wyroby tytoniowe i narkotyki, mimo że te ostatnie oraz ich reklama są w świecie gry nielegalne. Drugą co do wielkości grupą w korpusie są znaki otwarcie reklamujące usługi seksualne (17,9%). Szczególnie widoczna jest kultura posiadania broni: aż 34,8% reklam nowoczesnej technologii dotyczy broni, w tym broni typu „smart". Reklamy tego typu obecne są we wszystkich częściach miasta, niezależnie od zamożności mieszkańców i liczebnie znacznie przewyższają reklamy firm ochroniarskich. W kategorię „upadku moralnego" wpisuje się także aspekt wizualny wielu reklam, ponieważ tylko 40,5% obrazów uznano za neutralne, podczas gdy pozostałe zostały w analizie opisane jako wizerunki o nacechowaniu seksualnym (38,5%) lub brutalnym/sensacyjnym. W większości przypadków nie ma ono związku z promowanym produktem.

Większość znaków w kategorii „ucisk i wyzysk" jest autorstwa rządzących miastem w praktyce megakorporacji (54,3%) lub skorumpowanego rządu (29,6%). Znaki te promują pozytywny wizerunek marki korporacyjnej lub instytucji rządowych i są szczególnie obecne w lokalizacjach związanych z danymi instytucjami. Komunikatów autorstwa obywateli jest tu stosun-

kowo niewiele (16,1%); mają one formę graffiti i skupiają się w dzielnicach mało atrakcyjnych.

Kategoria tematyczna „dehumanizacja" jest widoczna w reklamach produktów technologicznych. Najliczniejsze w tej grupie są reklamy cyberimplantów (39,4%), od kończyn po chipy zmieniające osobowość. Reklamy takie są pozbawione ostrzeżeń przed negatywnymi skutkami ich użycia. Dehumanizację widać również w reklamach usług seksualnych: tylko 29% z nich odnosi się do usług konwencjonalnych, podczas gdy 71% takich reklam promuje albo usługi w rzeczywistości wirtualnej, albo świadczone przez osoby pozbawione przy pomocy implantów pamięci i kontroli nad sobą. W świecie gry brakuje reklam tradycyjnych miejsc spotkań.

Analiza krajobrazu językowego Night City pokazuje, iż świat przedstawiony gry *Cyberpunk 2077* ma cechy dystopii, widoczne na wielu poziomach: od nośników znaków, przez konfigurację tematyczną reklam, po wysoką proporcję reklam produktów dystopijnych czy komunikacji odgórnej. Większość reklam diegetycznych nie ma roli funkcjonalnej, ich jedynym celem jest więc reprezentacja świata przedstawionego, a przez to pogłębienie wrażenia jego autentyczności, sprzyjającej zanurzeniu się w wykreowanej rzeczywistości.

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