THE
PHOTOMODE

MARTHA WEISS

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW WITH MARTHA WEISS, CHARACTER CONCEPT ARTIST FOR CYBERPUNK2077

LUCJAN WIĘCEK

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COVER BY @IDYLLISS

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SPECIAL THANKS

Special thanks to Idylliss for allowing us to use their fantastic work for our cover.

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CYBERPUNK 2077

PHOTO MODE HANDS ON

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Cyberpunk 2077 | Developer: CD PROJEKT RED | Publisher: CD PROJEKT | Initial Release: 10th December 2020

Inspired by the 1988 table-top RPG of the same name, Cyberpunk 2077 went through something of a difficult birth as CD PROJEKT RED tried to deliver their latest immense and ambitious open world adventure. First announced as far back as 2012 and originally slated for release in early 2020, the game was eventually pushed back to December of that year and launched with some well documented performance issues, particularly on base-level consoles.

Since then though, the studio worked hard to improve that initial experience with a multitude of large patches and have recently released a native update to take advantage of the next gen console hardware to bring it much closer to that available on PC and mostly dispel those early failings. There is no doubt that the sprawling neon metropolis and flawed underworld of Night City, plus the near-future tech and prevalent cybernetic human-augmentations are a massive draw for sci-fi fans, and more than enough to tempt people in to explore as the mercenary known simply as "V".

Naturally, these elements also bring a very alluring aesthetic for virtual photographers and it is great to know that CD PROJEKT RED have not overlooked the digital art form with a well-featured photo mode that has also benefited from some important tweaks along the way. With that in mind, let's take a hands-on look at the photo mode and find out whether it can live up to the anticipation.

Key Photo Mode Features:

·Extensive character posing & positioning options
·Stylised stickers and frames
·Save & Load entire photo mode configurations

Hands-On:

Admittedly, most of Cyberpunk 2077's photo mode features were revealed in the excellent photo mode trailer that the studio released pre-launch, but there is never a real substitute for actually feeling how the features behave with controller in hand. Getting into the photo mode is easy enough with a simultaneous click of the L3 & R3 buttons — a massive improvement on the obscure combination of L3 & Options that the game first used in v1.00! Things start off well as the stylised UI consisting of red menu tabs and a permanent thirds grid allows users to freely adjust settings while they are hidden, but the interesting sounding "camera type" options prove to be something of a disappointment.

The default mode is "Drone" but don't be fooled, this is an orbit camera that is permanently tethered to the playable character, using the RS to orbit around V and the LS to adjust the camera in the lateral truck & dolly planes. While it is possible to hide V in the UI, the behaviour is quite comparable to that of Death Stranding's camera and suffers from the same limitations of not being able to move past or look away from the character's position. Consequently, photographing the highly interesting environments is harder than it needs to be and revolves largely around placing the character to create a line of sight for the camera. As for that other camera type, it's a first-person perspective that doesn't allow lateral movement so no saving grace there then.

In fact, the Cyberpunk photo mode is one that is quite heavily focused on photographing the highly customisable protagonist; slightly ironic given that you play almost entirely in first person and don't really see much of them the rest of the time. This is the area that it really shines as a photo mode though...

A solid depth of field implementation works well with auto or manual focus for classic portrait shots, albeit currently only possible to rotate the camera by 60°, and the Pose tab presents no less than 54 preset body positions and 11 facial expressions as well as the option to look towards the camera (where possible) and to toggle a rather beautiful muzzle flash when a gun is present.

While the likes of poses and facial expressions have been seen before, CD PROJEKT RED have taken them to another level with machinima-esque manual repositioning of the character within the scene. No longer confined to the precise spot they occupied at the moment you enter the photo mode, the movement options allow them to be shifted around within a limited XY grid and rotated on the spot through 360°. This takes the photo mode beyond pure capture and more into scene creation as you are able to completely rebalance character positioning or even move them in relation to nearby light sources for a better setup. Make no mistake, this is an important step for consumer photo modes.

A series of post-process editing features including exposure, contrast, highlights and vignette largely work well in conjunction with the 15 preset colour filters to create some varied visual styles. Chromatic aberration and film grain too, are particularly well suited to the game's overall aesthetic and use of darkness, but it seems a shame that there are no colour saturation options to really help bring the vibrancy out of Night City.

For added creativity, the photo mode is complete with 49 frames that range from simple aspect ratio crops to imaginative masks and pre-made surrounds, as well as a truly impressive / excessive array of stickers. With 196 designs to choose from and 5 layers across which to place, scale and rotate them, these stickers can be used to transform the style of any photograph to create wallpapers, poster-style designs and more. The designs are particularly good too, I love the scribbled ink, graffiti and digital overlays that suit the thematic content of the game perfectly for example, but with no reset options in the photo mode at all, removing them if you change your mind can be a bit labour intensive to say the least!

Rounding off the creative options are a set of 9 backgrounds which include coloured and (near) black scenes and hide everything apart from the character. This makes it easy to capture isolated portrait shots and possible to create the ever popular black-background style pretty much anywhere, hitting home just how this is a photo mode that has been crafted with portraiture in mind.

With such an array of customisation types, the final UI tab and the one thing that was left out of the reveal trailer, really becomes relevant. While the camera tab includes a set of presets that are intended to provide quick composition options, the Load / Save feature goes further than that and probably beyond what I was expecting. Although being quite self-explanatory by name, it was a pleasant surprise to see this allow the user to save up to three complete configurations, including sticker placement, edit effects and even camera position. Whether it is to reproduce the exact same shot in a different location or to use a basic setup that is tweaked for each shot, this is a thoughtful feature that compliments the feature set.T

he Cyberpunk 2077 photo mode is perhaps not the most versatile out there and it is disappointing to see another camera limited by using a third-person orbit rather than free composition, but the areas that it does focus on bring along some new and exciting prospects. The city itself and the overall theme of the game are reason enough to find an excuse to use the tools though, so settle in and enjoy the ride into CD PROJEKT RED's near-future vision.
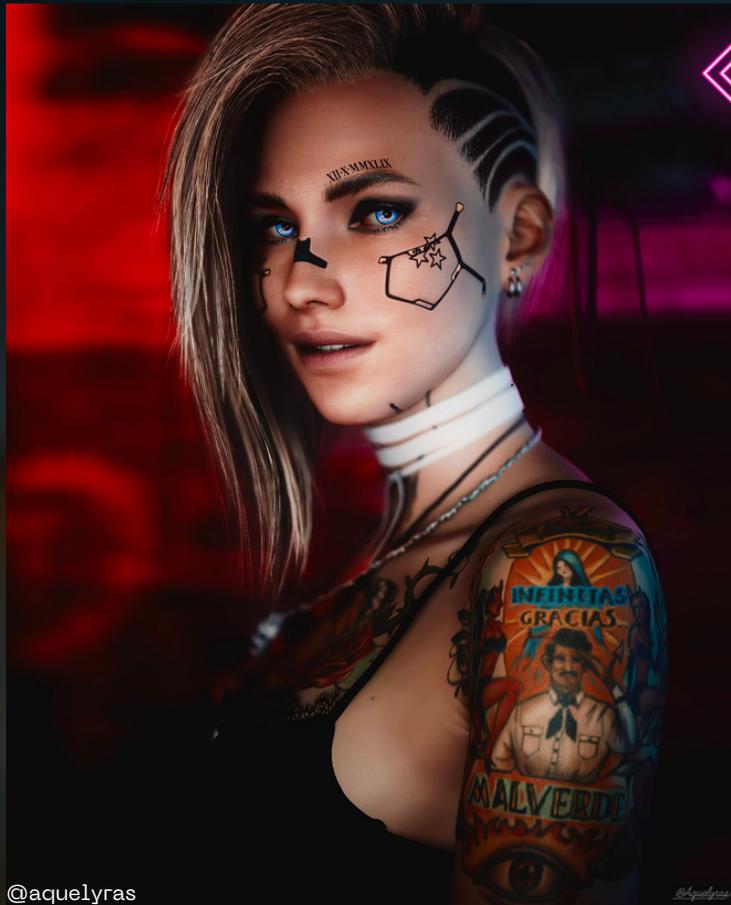
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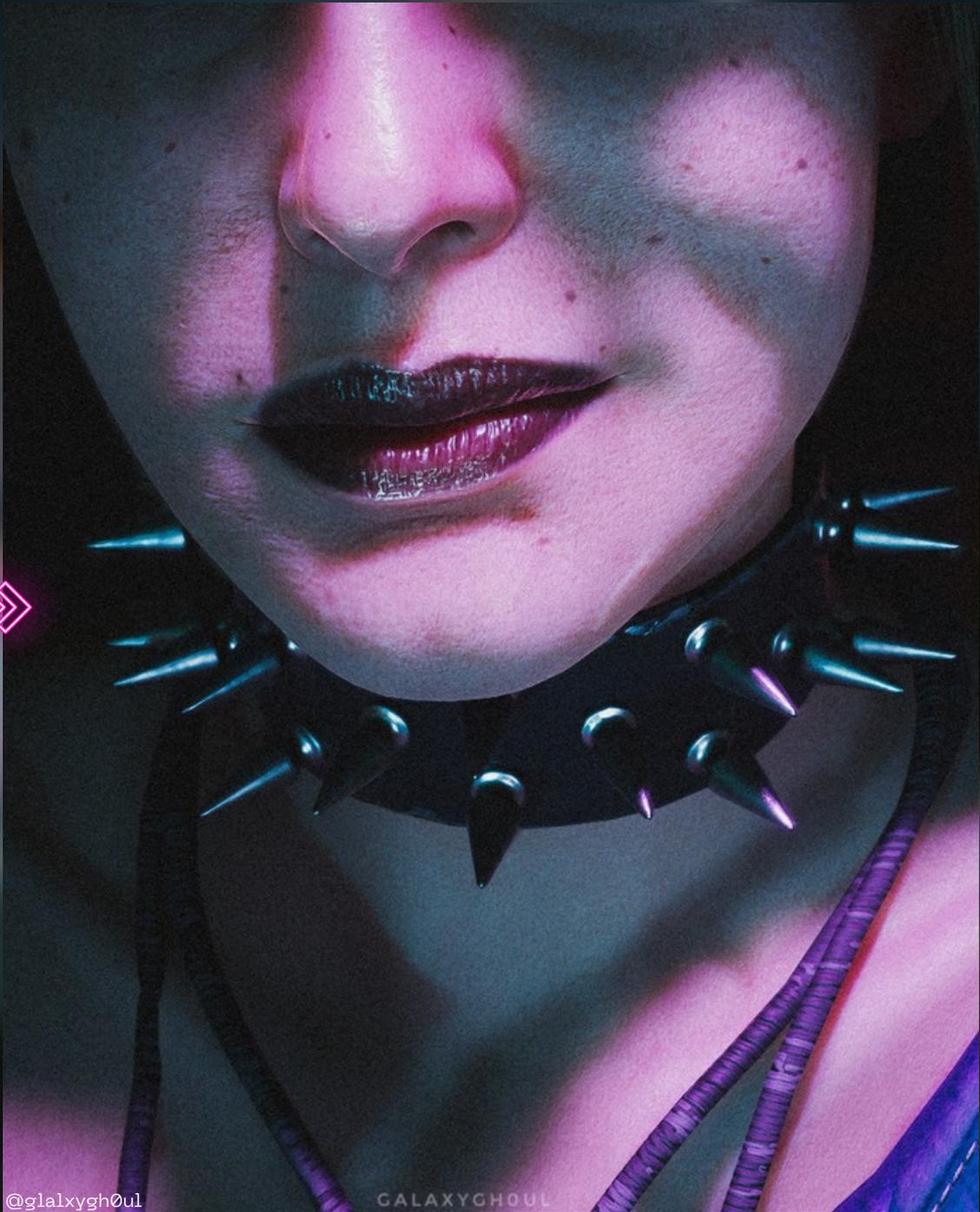
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Q&A WITH MARTHA WEISS

Character creation in Cyberpunk 2077 has real depth to it. Are you surprised that V portraiture has become a sub-genre of virtual photography in its own right?

Martha Weiss: I'm a bit surprised by just how popular V portraiture has become when it comes to virtual photography. Of course, this makes me very proud and excited, but I wouldn't say I was expecting it! One of our goals was to give players the freedom to express themselves by creating their V as they want.

@TimeloopPlays

 I must say the use of in-game photo modes is emerging as a modern art form which lets players engage with the characters and worlds they love on a whole new level. Therefore, having a feature-rich photo mode in Cyberpunk 2077 seemed an essential addition to us. It gives players the ability to capture characters and precious in-game moments that can be then shared with the world. Sharing in-game pics on social media works a bit like a bridge between the game world and the real world. It's like an Instagram from the world of the dark future!

@AtomicTsarina

To engage players even more we hosted an in-game photo contest last year and the interest was much bigger than I ever anticipated it would be. The amount of awesome virtual photos submitted was insane! I'm really excited that more and more people are attracted to in-game photography. Especially now, during the COVID-19 pandemic, when we are spending more time at home, virtual photography can be an interesting new playground even for veteran photographers.

Which was your favourite character to create and why?

MW: It's difficult for me to unequivocally answer this question because I am emotionally connected to all the characters from Cyberpunk 2077, and not just those which I had the opportunity to work on. Sometimes I feel like they are all my friends!

@Dima8bit

However, I must say I have a special place in my heart and mind for Judy Alvarez. I really enjoyed the creative process of designing her, where lots of artists contributed in order to help bring her to life, adding something uniquely theirs to the character. Just to give you an example: my colleague, Concept Artist Waldemar Kamiński designed some of her tattoos, while 3D Artist Wojciech Michalski made a last-minute decision to change the shoes she's now wearing in the game.

@kichi_mofu

Also, I feel connected to Judy because of her restive and rebellious nature. She reminds me of myself in my younger days. So I really wanted to contribute to telling her story and giving insight into her personality with every detail of her visage.

I think more than any singular character, what I really enjoy most in my work is that whole creative process I mentioned; the path that an artist or artists, which is the case more often than not, has to follow to create a complete, believable character based on a story brief.

Body modification is something that is naturally married to the Cyberpunk genre, but is there a broader significance to highlighting this in a mainstream game too?

MW: Cyberpunk 2077's roots are firmly set in the cyberpunk genre. The fusion of human and machine, modding human bodies with technology, is among the genre's key features. The existential questions of whether a machine can be human, or what makes humans human, are the axis of many stories, for example Ghost in the Shell or Blade Runner. In Cyberpunk 2077, body modification not only plays an important part in character customization and gameplay, but it's also important from a world-building point of view.

@FlyingrodentVP

Creating visual differences and styles for various tech implants allowed us to better show what the social ladder in Night City's cyberpunk world looks like. Let's take the Valentino gang as an example. Their cyberware is flashy and extravagant; they wear it mostly for aesthetic reasons to show off their status and Valentino affiliation. Simultaneously, in contrast, players can often spot poorer people with barebones cyber-limb implants on the streets. These people are trying to survive, their cyberware is cheap, and its main focus is functionality, not aesthetics.

@gamephotoweck

Nowadays the idea of body modification is no longer restricted to fiction. Beauty augmentations are already a thing. We can observe the rise of beauty procedures propelled by the ever-unattainable social media beauty standards. Our society has reached that point where we can modify our bodies for aesthetic reasons. In my opinion, body augmentation that improves human strength, endurance, or intelligence is getting more real every year.

What influences did you take from wider cyberpunk pop culture have you facilitated into your character concepts?

MW: It was extremely challenging to build a meaningful and rich world with believable characters like in Cyberpunk 2077. I must say that I tried avoiding limiting myself when it comes to drawing inspiration. Obviously, I looked at cyberpunk pop culture for mood and key images. However, when I design a specific character I prefer to use more source references. By this I don't mean looking at already existing concepts; I like to research military wear, fashion trends, sportswear, industrial design, and so on.


@saviour76

Our goal was to create a believable society so we started by defining four unique visual styles — Kitsch, Entropism, Neomilitarism, and Neokitsch — to build a solid base and constraints around which we work. It allowed not just our Character Artists, but all designers to create meaningful and coherent architecture, vehicles, product design, and fashion around each of the styles. Mixing and placing these styles around a city creates depth and variety, but also gives insight into the history of each location and district.

@discophotomode

From all the styles we developed, Kitsch, with its flashy clothes, chromed and neon cyberware, and colorful hair, is closest to my vision of cyberpunk pop culture. As I mentioned before, body modding is also an important part of the genre, which we incorporated in Cyberpunk 2077 in such a way that served our purposes while also staying true to the source material that the game is inspired by — that being the tabletop Cyberpunk created by Mike Pondsmith.

Do you have any lifepath advice for budding character concept artists out there?


MW: Concept Art as a whole is pretty broad and can be broken down into separate areas, such as Environment Art, Character Art, Hard-surface Design, etc. The foundations for all of these are similar: figure and human drawing, color theory, perspective drawing, 3D modeling, composition (theory), art history, and so on. Still, it might be a good idea to find something that excites you the most, the thing you want to start at, and try digging narrow and deep into the subject. This is especially valid if you want to pursue it professionally, since when you focus on a single area you might be able to reach a marketable skill level quicker. Do not try to learn everything simultaneously — you might overwhelm and discourage yourself. Set yourself a goal that will drive your decisions and help you achieve what you set out to do.

@Yuric83

@El_K_ma2um0
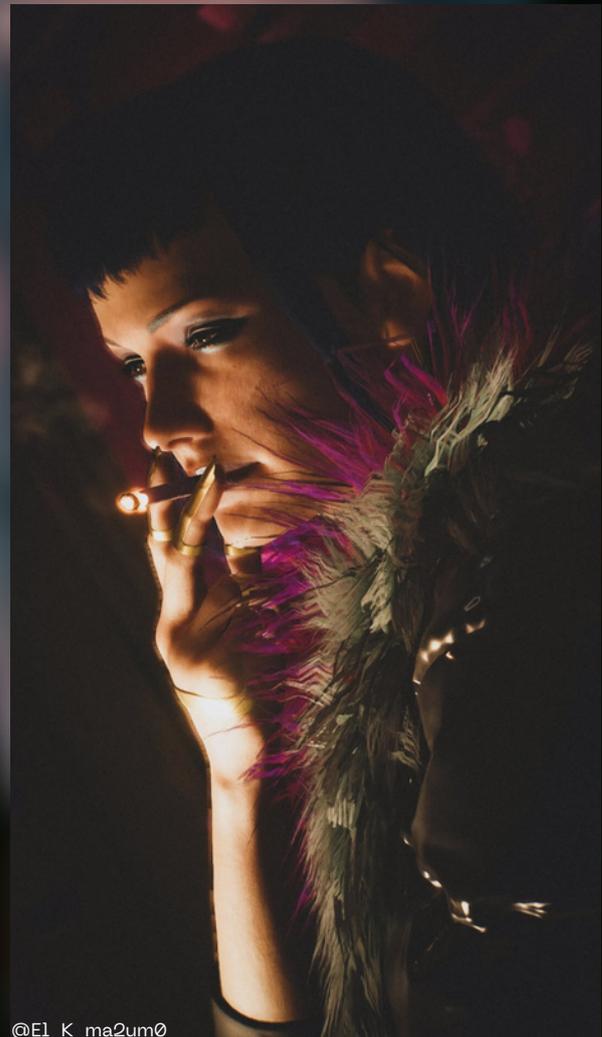
Finally, practice is key; don't be afraid to make mistakes because this is how you learn. To be honest, no one in the industry will care about how old you are or whether you went to art school. Skills presented in a portfolio speak for themselves. Employers want to know if you can invent and develop new ideas and solve visual problems. In my opinion, having the skills is the bare minimum to be taken seriously in this competitive industry, but this is not what will set you apart from others. What sets you apart is your creativity and innovative thinking, and the drive to constantly improve. As long as you have these, the world is yours for the taking.
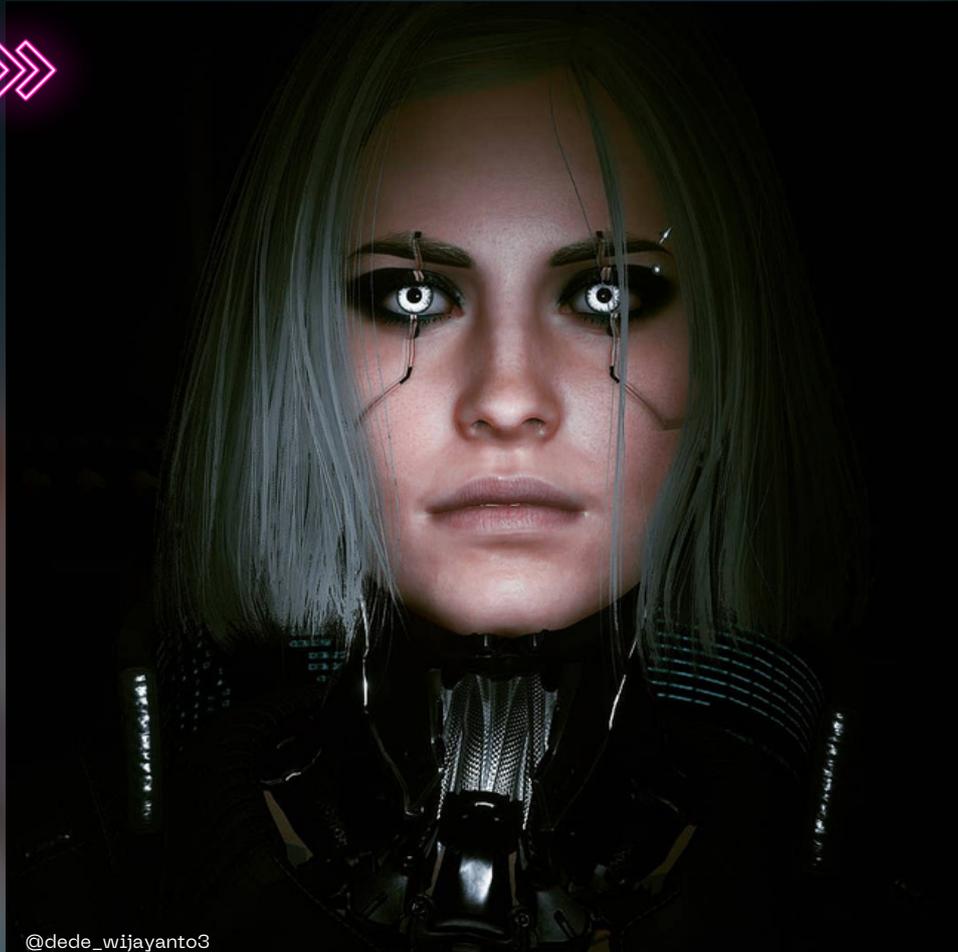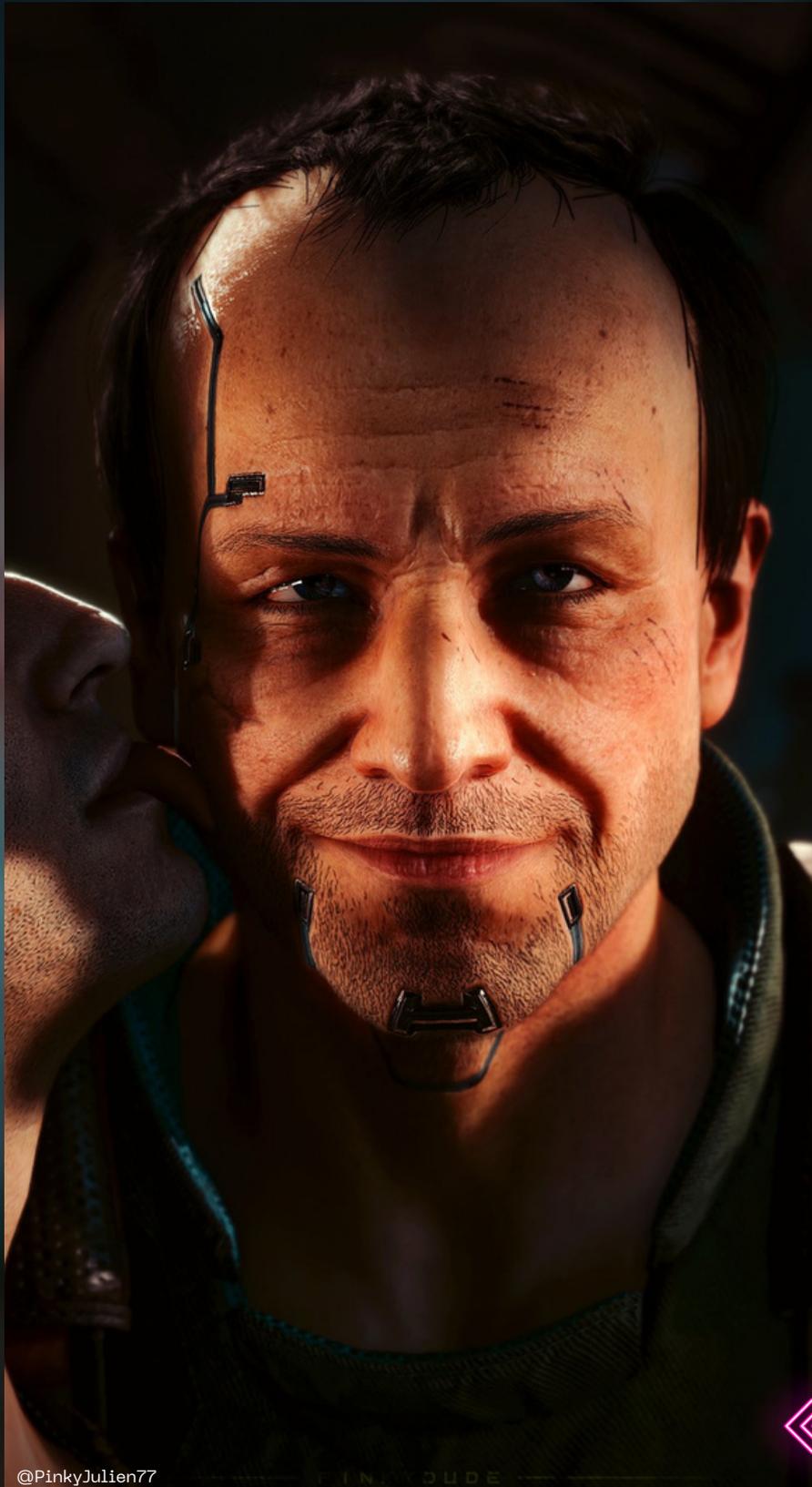

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@Ayghan

@aDwarfLegion

@QuasymodoXbox

Q&A WITH LUCJAN WIĘCEK

As an already existing subgenre of science fiction, what core design elements do you feel are realised in the environment of CP2077, and contrarily, where do you feel it deviates the most?

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Lucjan Więcek: We designed this world in a way so that each and every part of it had purpose and fed into the game's global message, which is a very complex thing to do when you take into account that many areas are incredibly elaborate and sophisticated, layered, and full of surprises & twists and turns. With so many story layers at play, you cannot design a world in such a way that doesn't answer to, inform, or at least refer to these elements. If you did, a lot of the world would feel like it didn't have purpose.

@muzz4life
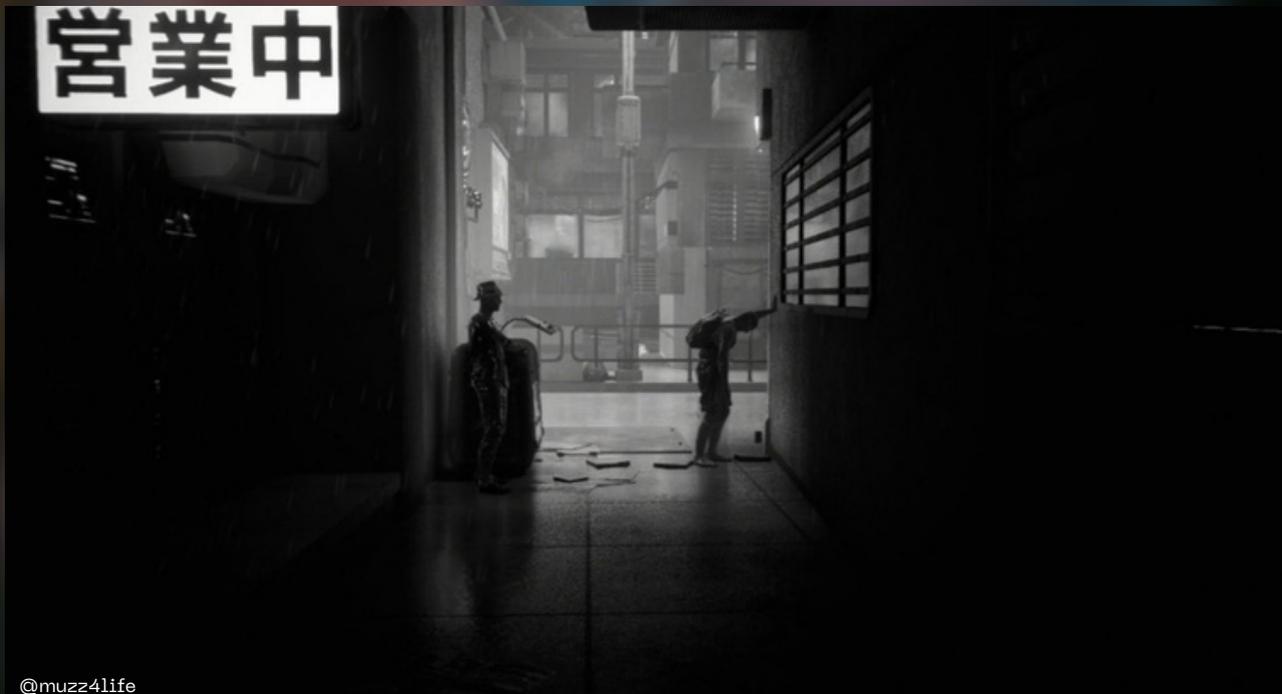
At the same time, though, we didn't want to sacrifice believability. We didn't want to aim for a sci-fi vision which would make our project totally unreal, as that would run the risk of everything the gamer sees or feels being too detached from reality. That's why we opted for brutalism for one of our artistic foundations, thanks to which it was a bit easier to think and design a whole lot of other solutions. It helped to ground us. I remember one of our Concept Artists worked for over three months on a "cross section" of a group of city facades, in order to easily distinguish between the main elements of Night City associated with its various groups and cultures. That's actually the most interesting bit for me, as first we drafted the contours of Night City using broad shapes and strokes. Then we divided it up into smaller districts, each one with its own character. We focused on making sure that each one had a distinct identity stemming from the people, gangs, and corporations inhabiting it. But that's not all.

———————

The area where Night City is situated, the way the land lies, is the result of many weeks of research — and as a fun fact I can tell you that the lie of the land of Cyberpunk 2077's world does in fact mirror the real world. Obviously there's a fair amount of modifications, which we needed to make due to story or gameplay reasons. Still, it is possible to find the area where Night City stands in the game on an actual map. There's no coincidences in our cyberpunk world, from the districts themselves to the elements and objects which help build the setting. Much of that is all thanks to the many incredibly talented people who passionately attended to Night City's nooks and crannies, down to the smallest details.

@wolv2077

With believability as a guiding factor, we also reached deep into Mike Pondsmith's tabletop Cyberpunk 2020 sourcebook, where you can find plenty of unique design elements for the city which we then translated and adapted so it worked and made sense in our 3D take. Most important, though, were the social contrasts, their identities, and how they blend throughout Night City — which I mentioned earlier. Each district benefited greatly from the passion and hard work of many people and I would really like to wholeheartedly thank them once again for bringing this vision to life.

What was your favourite architectural/map feature to create and why?

LW: Definitely the verticality. When you travel through the city between massive megabuildings, or other architectural structures like factories which constitute entire districts — just seeing these huge, towering buildings shrouding the streets in darkness — it embeds a feeling that the city is not a safe place. It's intimidating, that vertical scale, and there are various areas where I believe we were able to achieve that exact atmosphere.

@montblan7

You can clearly feel how dense the city is when you're on foot, moving through spaces in between the megablocks and residential megaconstructs. And then, when you get to the highest reaches of these places, the air becomes different, everything around you looks and feels different. That to me is the most interesting part of the design process. In a sense it's moulding the world, but also the emotions that should accompany the players as they move through and experience the world we've created.

From concept to execution, which of your ideas/visions changed the most drastically?

LW: I think it was the scale. Very early on, during the pre-production stage, we played around with the idea of making Night City, or rather the entire world of Cyberpunk 2077, even bigger. It's an incredible experience when you imagine something that is virtually limitless, without borders, but then you put it up against the design of the actual game and you realize this overblown scale could detract players from the story you want to tell. That was the case with Night City.

@altergraphics

You have to be able to find the right balance when it comes to scale and that is something that's not at all easy, especially for a place like the most dangerous megalopolis of the dark future which, I'm sure, a lot of people imagined as this endless sea of megabuildings drowned in ever-present darkness of the night — or otherwise.

A prominent concept of a Cyberpunk setting is "high tech, low life", how do you feel this translates to the feel of the game?

LW: Honestly, I think it's one of the best aspects of the world of Cyberpunk 2077. I love it because it's a reflection of ourselves and how we are fundamentally. We use whatever money we have left to buy super expensive stuff, take out loans for better cars or bigger TVs, despite knowing that none of this is actually essential. And it's similar in Cyberpunk 2077. That drive to show off, which often goes hand in hand with the styles found in the game — Kitsch especially, and Entropism to some extent. Even in Entropism, which is where people use whatever they can to survive and make do, you still see characters trying to keep up with cyberware and tech.

@photomodepurist

This feeling that you'll be left behind if you don't keep up this pursuit to obtain something better or even the best — I personally think it doesn't make sense, and that we should always look at what is possible for us in a rational way. But from time to time each and every one of us ends up buying something that they don't need or trying to reach for whatever is cutting edge at the time. In Cyberpunk 2077, advanced technology is a highly valued good and thus is just as highly sought after. This furthers the various divides and gives us more narrative, design, and gameplay opportunities to play around with and explore.

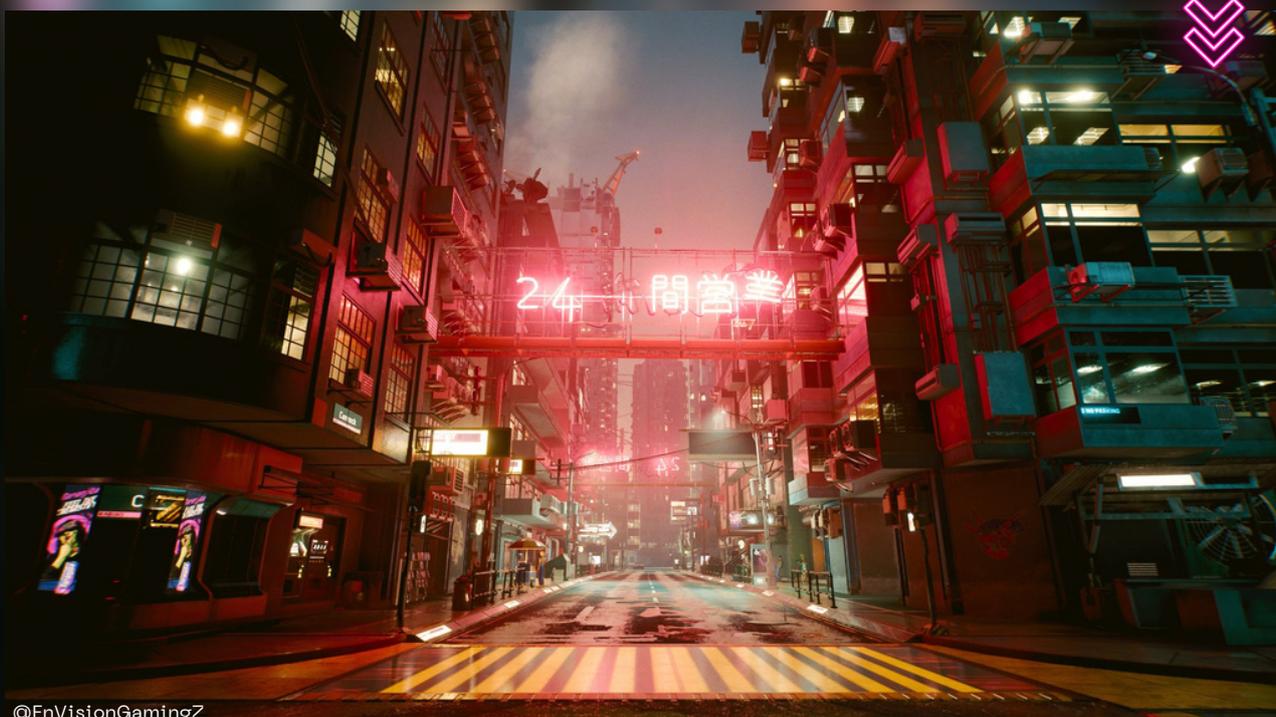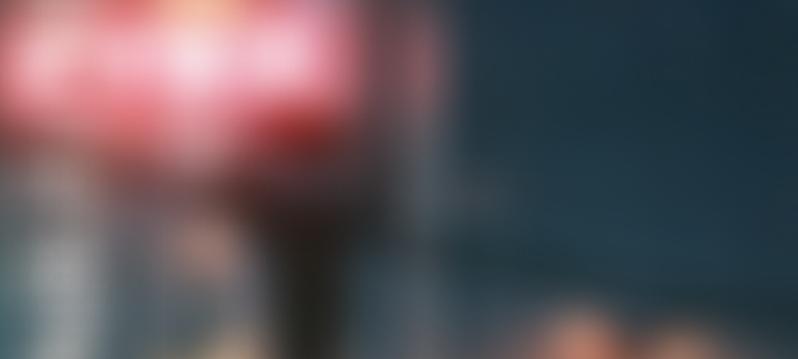# What are the key ingredients for immersive worldbuilding?

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LW: There's no simple answer to this question, but if I had to try, I'd say it's going for solutions that do not disrupt or break the logic behind what the project is communicating. Creating an immersive world is an extremely delicate and complex process because it's not just about filling the streets with cars and pedestrians sauntering about. It's about something much, much more.

@woodywoodchoppr

Every element behind the foundation of the game's immersive worldbuilding must go well together. They have to flow, just like the sounds of a melody. There has to be a rhythm, a rhythm intertwined by wind. Yes, they have to be elusive, ephemeral, ethereal… but also true, and never robotic or mechanical. That, to me, is what makes a truly immersive world.
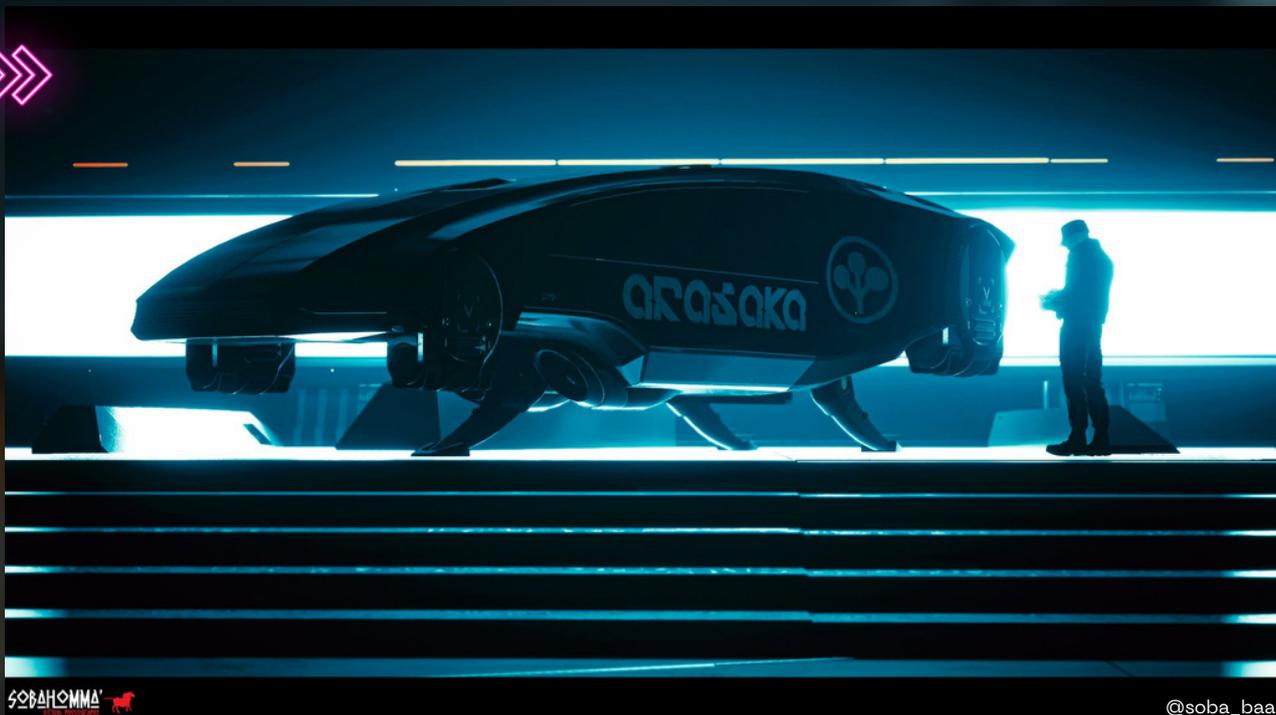
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