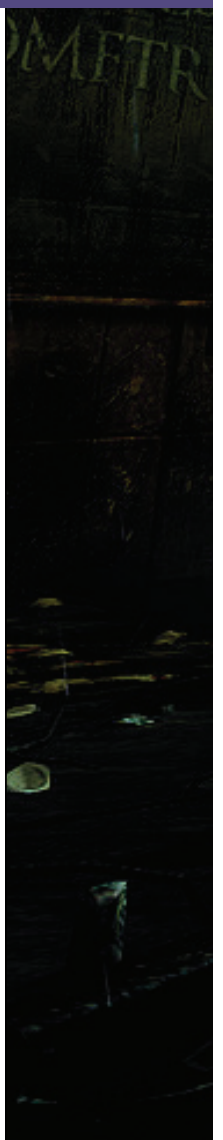


The Dark Side of Data

By Khee Hoon Chan

I've seen things you people wouldn't believe. Attack ships on fire off the shoulder of Orion. I watched C-beams glitter in the dark near the Tannhäuser Gate. All those moments will be lost in time, like tears in rain. Time to die.

The soliloquy of the replicant Roy Batty in the cyberpunk film, *Blade Runner*, is one of the most poignant monologues in cinematic history, for it speaks of the replicant's love of life in a universe that would not let him live. What makes the scene even more bittersweet is that as a replicant – a synthetic human constructed in a lab – the memories he spoke of were implants. His recollections of these events might not be real, but his emotions of joy, anguish and wonderment at life are plain to see.



Like *Blade Runner*, many cyberpunk works delve deep into the meaning of being human through the metamorphic impact of science and technology. A speculative look into our troubled near future, the genre explores how incredible scientific achievements and advanced technologies have outpaced our morality and capability to cope with them. In these stories, technology is not merely an essential part of us; we've embedded it directly under our skins. Molly Millions, from cyberpunk classic *Neuromancer*, for example, has retractable claws underneath her fingernails, had her eyes replaced by



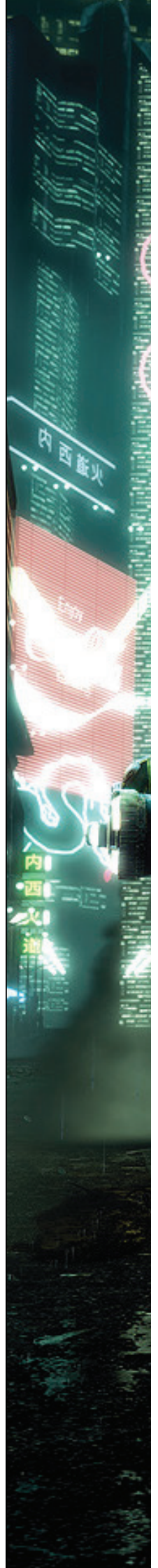
shiny black lenses, and her tears ducts re-routed to her mouth. On a very bad day, you might catch her dribbling with misery.

The cyberpunk setting is a post-industrial dystopia, resembling the chaotic urban streetscape of East Asian countries like Hong Kong, China and, of course,

Japan. This is in no small part due to William Gibson's influence; the godfather of cyberpunk once remarked that "modern Japan simply was cyberpunk." Dwindling resources, environmental degradation and moral ambiguity are also staples of cyberpunk fiction. However, its central tenet is the density of data and the disastrous consequences of the abuse of information. This abuse that allowed megacorporations in fictional works to monopolize control over not just markets, but also countries and laws; omnipotent governments to monitor citizens' every move in the guise of protecting them; and lifelike killer cyborgs to run amok amidst an endlessly neon cityscape.

This careless abuse of information was what plagued 2016. It's the year that data was dragged down a deserted alley, beaten to a pulp and left to die. That is most telling in how [Oxford Dictionary](#) has christened "post-truth" the word of the year: an adjective that denotes "circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion that appeals to emotion and personal belief." Consider Donald Trump, a man so far estranged from facts that he regularly espouses lies, like promising to make Mexico pay for the border wall and that global warming was a hoax fabricated by China. It doesn't matter that he is not right – people already believe him.

Similarly, fake news stories that reportedly have higher engagement rates than real news from reputable sources inundate Facebook. One consequence



was an alarming standoff at a Washington pizza restaurant, last December, where a man discharged an assault rifle; he was investigating the baseless rumors that Hilary Clinton and her campaign chief, John Podesta, were running a child sex ring from the restaurant's back rooms.

Finally, the US intelligence report released to the public in January and based on the findings of 17 intelligence agencies, revealed an irrevocable truth: Russia had staged cyber attacks during the 2016 US Presidential Election to undermine the efforts of Hilary Clinton. Yet Trump has repeatedly resisted the findings of the report, flippantly dismissing it as a political witch hunt. The implications of this finding and Trump's indifference chill the blood.

What is uncanny about these developments is that we are seeing quantum leaps in technology at the same time. Virtual reality, which was once a fantastical element of science fiction, is now a worldwide phenomenon. Artificial intelligence is already beginning to replacing human labor, with

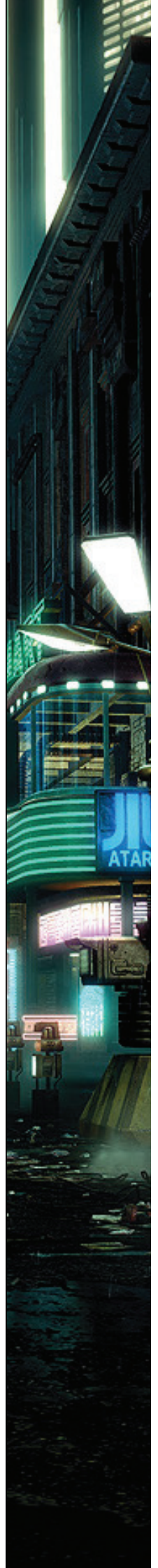
an [insurance company in Japan](#) planning to lay off more than 30 employees to make way for an artificial intelligence system (looks like Gibson was right). Talks of uploading our consciousness into a computer are already taking place. Real life is shaping up to be a pastiche of cyberpunk tropes.

Many bemoaned 2016 as one of the worst years in recent memory, but underlying the fear of what 2017 might bring besides a Trump presidency, the repercussions of Brexit and growing Islamophobia, racism and sexism is an uncontrollable explosion of data growth, so much so that the data appears to have taken on a life of its own. Much like cyberpunk, which delves into the negative impact of technology on society, our increased intimacy with technology has

failed to help us make sense of our world. It complicates how we gather and analyze information. As a result, the global village, as predicted by Marshall McLuhan, has fragmented. We are now more divided than ever.

We won't start implanting chips into our brains for another few years. Why rush? Let's look instead to cyberpunk's prophetic discussions of societal issues. In many cyberpunk stories, wealthy corporations hoard data to the detriment of human lives, which are cheap commodities. This is a warning of what our world might become. Take *Johnny Mnemonic*, in which the titular hero, Johnny, had to hide sensitive information in his cybernetic brain implant so that the Yakuza had no way to get hold of it – other than killing him, of course.

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And, much like the second half of the portmanteau, cyberpunk is often rebellious, telling stories about the soullessness of power and mutinies against long-established conventions.

Cyberpunk is a disquieting call to action, a reminder that hegemony can be poisonous and cultural ennui even more so. If we are already hurtling towards an era of real cyberpunk, then there is no better time to pick up the mantle of its protagonists: the genius hacker, the errant policeman or the lone rebel. Stand out. Be different. Let your voices be heard. The only difference between cold, hard data and the stories we tell may be the meaning we ascribe to them – but that is precisely why storytelling can go a long way in challenging enshrined beliefs and stirring action. 🍷

Time to die.

