

*Neuromancer* is the excellent, witty game based on William Gibson's book of the same name. As explained in the Sneak Preview (CGW #51), the plot is similar to the book, yet is different enough so the game can be enjoyed even if one has already read the novel. In fact, reading the book beforehand primarily enables the player to get a handle on some of the lingo and terminology of the *Neuromancer* universe and to appreciate some of the in-jokes in the game.

In many ways, this game can be seen as somewhat of a departure for **Interplay**, the creators of *The Bard's Tale* and *Wasteland*. The graphic interface bears no resemblance to the previous games and the graphics themselves are more interactive, consisting of a third-person cartoon-like representation of the room in which the character is located, the characters in the room, and the player character himself. In addition, the game has virtually none of the "traditional" role-playing elements, such as character attributes, professions, or other trappings. The only real carry-over is the use of "Skills" as seen in *Wasteland*. By implanting chips into a player's brain, it is possible to instantly gain knowledge in specified areas. A skill-based adventure is still a very strong concept and works just as well in *Neuromancer* as it did in *Wasteland*.

### Three Worlds

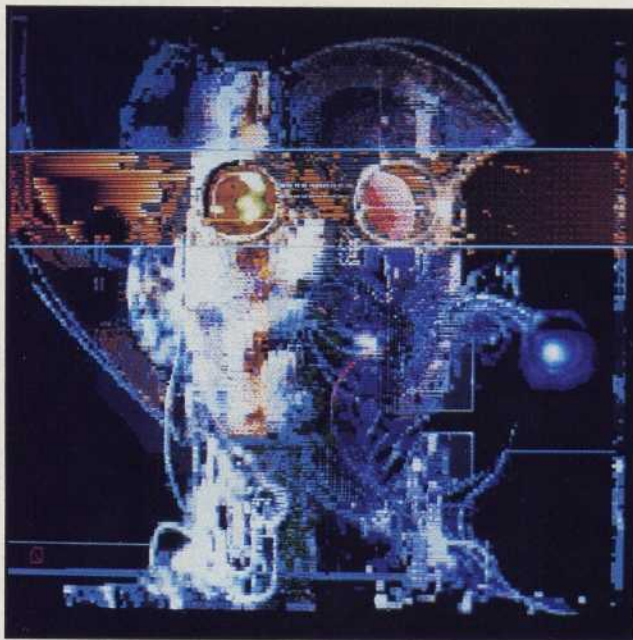
The setting of the game is Chiba City, a rough town where the "streets" have their own use for technology and the "neighborhood" is full of interesting characters. Actually, the game environment could be said to be composed of three distinct "worlds" where the action takes place.

The first world which the player must explore is, appropriately enough, the "real world." This is Chiba City itself. Mapping should not be necessary since the number of locations is not overwhelming, although each location has been thoughtfully presented. There are a number of stores, bars, restricted areas, and other places to visit. The city is basically divided into the low-life section, where the player begins, and the high-tech area, a location carefully guarded against illegal entry. In addition, there is even a launch terminal where the player can explore several locations off the earth. The primary activity to undertake here, as well as in the other two worlds, is the gathering of information. There are many people to talk to and all have something to say, if they are asked the right questions. Conversation itself is conducted through the

# Cyberspace Rider

## Interplay's "Neuromancer"

by Douglas Seacat



TITLE:	Neuromancer
SYSTEMS:	Apple (w/ 128K) and C-64/128
# PLAYERS:	1
VERSION	
REVIEWED:	C-64/128
PRICE:	Apple (\$44.95) C-64/128 (\$39.95)
DESIGNER:	Bruce Balfour, Brian Fargo, Troy Miles, and Mike Stackpole
PUBLISHER:	Interplay Costa Mesa, CA

use of "word-bubbles" through which the player is given a choice of different "appropriate" responses.

In addition, there are a few PAX terminals located in the real world. These public access booths are very useful in providing information, especially in the early phases of the game. They are composed of a bank network, a newspaper, and a bulletin board for messages to and from different characters. By reading the newspaper and bulletin board, it is possible to gain useful clues and leads to explore later. The PAX terminal should be accessed immediately at the beginning of the game, if only for the use of the bank option.

The real world is somewhat limited, however, when it comes to finding useful information for the player. The other characters are usually canny when it comes to giving away secrets, so the other "worlds" must be explored as soon as possible. Both are accessed by computers and are only available to the player under certain conditions.

Resembling the computer networks of today is the Database network of *Neuromancer*. These stores of information are accessed by plugging a special computer called a "deck" into certain "jacks" and using communications software. Because most databases contain sensitive or secret information, it is necessary to

go through several levels of security to access their information. First of all, there are different levels of information software which the player must locate. The more important databases require a higher level of software just to contact them. Also, it is necessary to know certain code words in order to actually view the information a database contains. In fact, most databases have several passwords, each of which gives access to more information. For example, a database may actually give the user a certain low security password to use to "tour" the base, but another password is actually needed to view critical information.

By following the leads of some of the characters in Chiba City, as well as the PAX bulletin board, the player should be able to access several databases right from the start. Careful notes are essential in the boards, since clues can be found everywhere, as well as red herrings. The first priority of any player is to get higher levels of communications software in order to be able to enter the more secure databases. When level six communications software (called Comlink 6) has been found, the player can enter the third world, Cyberspace.

This is the area of the game where all the real action and suspense takes place. Cyberspace is a computer simulation of all

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# Cyberspace Rider

the data in the world. By traveling through Cyberspace, the player can attempt to force entry into any database, whether he knows the passwords or not. In addition, there are some databases which cannot be accessed through normal databases at all, yet can be found in Cyberspace. The best thing about Cyberspace is the fact that, once a database is penetrated, the player has access to *all* the information in the base, at *all* security levels.

Naturally, there are drawbacks, as well. The most obvious is that Cyberspace is not initially available. Until Comlink 6 is found, Cyberspace cannot be entered. Also, it is necessary to use a more expensive "deck" called a Matrix Simulator to access Cyberspace. One real drawback to Cyberspace is that, at least initially, where the player "jacks in" will determine what databases he may access. Not all databases can be reached from the same jack, so exploration in the "real world" is necessary in order to locate other places to "jack in."

Finally, when accessing databases directly, there is no real danger, either a password is known or it is not. If the player does not have the password, he cannot enter the database. It is that simple. In Cyberspace, however, things are different. Since most legal computer users *never* even attempt to use Cyberspace, all entry is considered illegal. So, safeguards have been imposed. Each database is protected by a special "security guard" called ICE (Intrusion Countermeasures Electronics), determined to keep people out. Before the information in the databases can be seen, the ICE must be broken. By using certain software (prosaically named such things as Blowtorch, Drill, Injector, Depth Charge, etc.) along with skill chips, the ICE can be brought down. It is a skill which takes practice and patience, though. Needless to say, the ICE tends to fight back against the player and can even kill the unwary.

In addition to the ICE, some databases have a second line of security, Artificial Intelligences. These individuals are extremely powerful and are completely impervious to the software used to crack ICE (in fact, they actually design the ICE itself). Each AI has its own personality, weaknesses, and information. Beating an AI is the most difficult feat in the game.

Through the exploration of the interesting and extremely varied details of these three "worlds," it is possible for the player to gain a grasp on the convoluted plot in the game and, as a result, form some purpose and goal. The game is, in many ways, a detective story with the detective's life on the line and only his clues (and skill) to protect him. Information is definitely worth more than money in this game, a fact which should be remembered at all times.

## The Zen of Cyberspace (Positive Thoughts)

While *Neuromancer* is far from perfect, this is an engaging and genuinely enjoyable experience. The concept itself, outlined by William Gibson in the novels, is an original and infinitely gameable one. The use of the different worlds to explore, with a well-developed plot line are definitely positive factors in the game's favor. While the game contains much more humor than the more hard-hitting novels, the humor is cleverly presented and works well in a gaming atmosphere.

In addition, I enjoyed the subtlety of pacing which the game's authors display. Initially, I would have been prepared to state that

the non-linear nature of this game is a plus. On further reflection, I realize that the game is, in fact, *very* linear. It is simply that the designers were smart enough in plotting and placing their clues that the player feels little confinement in his actions. Either the player has the information and intelligence needed to advance or he does not. In a way, this approach made the game an easy and enjoyable experience. I found myself stuck on several occasions, but was able, within the large scope of the plot, to find another clue to lead me further along. If a player gets genuinely stuck, it is simply because he has not tried everything or thought things through carefully enough.

The Cyberspace battles with the ICE were also a plus. This approach to combat was, at once, more exciting and more intellectually stimulating than systems of combat used in more "traditional" role-playing games. The player character's life is on the line, providing an element of suspense and there is a compelling reward (information) at the other end of the "monster." Finding additional threads of plot after combat is better than "gold" any day.

## Jack Range Limits (Negative Thoughts)

My main concerns with the game involve cosmetics rather than the concept. I found the "Talking Bubbles" method of character interaction to be rather crude. The player cannot ever really have a conversation with the characters in the game, since he is just making choices between certain predetermined responses. While this does not really detract from game play, it does make the game world seem a little less "real."

Further, the disk swapping gets to be frustrating. Of the four disk sides, all get extremely heavy use. This is especially prevalent in Cyberspace, where sometimes the disk must be changed three times! This might be understandable, due to the amount of information found in the databases, but it still becomes tiring. A slightly better organization on where the information is stored might have been in order. Perhaps, it would have been useful to use off-line paragraphs for this information a la *Wasteland*.

In the novels, matters were simultaneously brought to a climax both in the real world and in Cyberspace. The action on both levels became more and more intense until the conclusion was reached. The game departs from this in what seems to be an intentional focus on Cyberspace as one approaches the climax. The "real world" becomes less and less important as one progresses in the game until it can almost be ignored at the conclusion. This may have been the thematic intention of the designers, but the game may have been more enjoyable and truer to its roots had the action continued at a fast pace in the "real world," as well as Cyberspace.

Further, and perhaps this will occur in a sequel, it would have been interesting to have some actual interaction with the AIs. In the game, contact with these creatures was limited almost entirely to combat, where it was either kill or be killed. In the Gibson interview (CGW #51), he certainly expressed the hope that any *Count Zero* product would involve interaction with the voodoo entities. Conversation with the AIs would certainly have been welcome in this one.

## Turing Registry (Recommendation)

*Neuromancer* is an extremely enjoyable game. By using the backdrop of William Gibson's Cyberspace universe, the designers have been able to create a very good, very different sort of role playing game. This game is an excellent example of how the genre *can* be improved for the better. With consummate pacing, a witty sense of humor, and the excitement of Cyberspace combat, **Interplay** has created one of the best CRPGs ever.

The game deserves the highest recommendation, both for novice and experienced players.

**CGW**