

Chapter 12 - Hello World

Disconnecting from the aerial vantage point that I had started out with—a simple mental flick of a lever was all that it took—and seamlessly integrating into my avatar's digital skin, I found myself positioned at a considerable distance from the towering marvel that was the IDE.

The shard's design was evidently crafted to steer users toward its introductory guide sessions before funnelling them toward the grand monolith at the cyberspace's core. A calculated path of enlightenment, so to speak.

But my curiosity couldn't be tamed that easily.

I *needed* to make a beeline for the IDE before even contemplating the guide sessions.

For the sake of my own peace of mind, I had to verify whether this unorthodox interface would serve as a helpful tool or become a cumbersome hurdle in my digital odyssey. I wanted to know if it would work as my imagination dictated or if I'd have to adjust my plans going forward, should it prove to be more of an obstruction than the asset I hoped it would be.

In the standard gameplay of Neon Dragons, the IDE was just another application you'd use on your computer, complete with a physical keyboard and all the familiar trappings. But for me, now fully integrated into this digital universe, the experience promised to be radically different.

Instead of manually typing out each line of code, I'd essentially be having to will my thoughts into textual form—a mental gymnastics routine I suspected would demand a period of rigorous adjustment.

As I approached the neon-lit coliseum of a dome at the virtual heart of the shard's cyberspace, awe and a touch of nervous excitement overwhelmed me.

Cyberspace and netrunners had been a staple of the cyberpunk genre for decades, but actually stepping foot—well, mental foot—inside this fantastical realm was nothing short of surreal. It was a dichotomy of the real and the imaginary, the tangible and the ethereal. It felt as if I were walking inside a lucid dream encoded in binary.

The scale of the digital world inside the shard was utterly jaw-dropping.

The dome, the cathedral of my soon-to-be digital endeavours, was gargantuan—its footprint alone could dwarf several football fields side by side. Yet despite its size, the landscape accommodated physics that would make the real world jealous.

My virtual self glided across the datastream-paved ground below with a velocity that could give high-performance sports cars a run for their money.

Initially, I tried to correlate this experience with real-world metrics, but I swiftly recognized the futility in that. Here, in this byte-sized cosmos, traditional notions of time and space were more loose guidelines than ironclad rules.

As I neared the radiant dome, every fibre of my being—every byte of my code?—tingled with the thrill of imminent exploration.

Crossing the threshold into the monumental dome through its garish, neon-hued gate—an ostentatious slab of colours that practically bellowed "cyberpunk" despite lacking vocal cords—I found myself instantaneously teleported to the dome's epicentre.

Here, the walls were transformed into a 360-degree panorama of customizable digital windows. The sheer scale of informational possibilities that could flood these screens was nothing short of mind-boggling—potentially even paralysing to a novice like myself if not approached judiciously.

To my relief, the IDE wasn't cluttered with random default settings that could've triggered sensory overload. Instead, it awaited my customization, offering a blank slate devoid of chaos. Sure, setting everything up to my preferences would be a severely time-consuming endeavour, but at least I wasn't thrown into a digital cacophony the moment I set foot within this virtual sanctum.

"Okay, let's see here. Just a simple program to test out the interface," I muttered to myself.

Navigating the IDE's offerings was akin to operating an elaborate spaceship cockpit—buttons, levers, dials, and touch-screens presented themselves within the faux reality of the cyberspace, each begging for my avatar's tactile interaction.

Almost immediately, I was struck by a revelation.

I had very likely underestimated the power of even this 'simple' IDE packed within the SPG-01 shard. Contrary to wiki descriptions that labelled it a "poor imitation of the real thing," what stood before me was already dizzyingly complex.

Armed with this newfound understanding, I charted my next steps.

'I'll need to invest a considerable amount of time fiddling with all these settings before I plunge deeper. This IDE could be far more valuable than I initially gave it credit for. Hell, it might even save me a substantial pile of creds if I can forgo splurging on a physical laptop and its corresponding external IDE for the foreseeable future...'

And so, I embarked on a painstaking exploration, fine-tuning the intricate settings and evaluating the myriad potential applications this surprisingly robust IDE offered.

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I was genuinely relieved that the shard featured a built-in timekeeping function. Otherwise, I would have been completely oblivious to the passage of time as I delved obsessively into the intricate maze of the IDE's customizable options and settings.

By the time I had finally orchestrated everything to my satisfaction, five hours had evaporated.

Yet, surveying the now-personalised digital screens filled with precisely the e-books, documentation, and references I'd need to start, I felt a profound sense of accomplishment.

As an added boon, the activity netted me an unexpected 500xp towards my Intellect Attribute—a delightful bonus for a task I was obligated to undertake in any case.

In Neon Dragons, the lingua franca of programming was an amalgamated high-level language imaginatively dubbed "Cyber."

A cocktail of various real-world programming languages that I remembered from my past life, Cyber also incorporated its own proprietary terminology to account for the game world's unique mechanics.

The language was predominantly English-based but sprinkled liberally with terms and syntax from languages that had originated from countries across the globe—a testament to the game's all-star development team from all across the world, who had laboured for nearly a decade to get this masterpiece of a game finished.

As I pored over the documentation, refreshing my understanding of programming in this new reality—a subject I had previously only skimmed through during my wiki exploration, courtesy of the fact that I couldn't exactly try my hands at programming in the game itself—I found my [Polyglot] Trait unexpectedly advantageous.

While I knew I was essentially starting from scratch, with a lengthy learning curve ahead of me, the Trait helped me intuitively grasp the non-English vocabulary woven into Cyber's fabric. Of course, this didn't alleviate the need to master the correct syntax, debug errors, or delve into the intricacies of programming logic.

Nevertheless, simply having a head start in comprehending the specialised terminology provided an unanticipated yet significant edge, making me all the more grateful for my choice in picking the [Polyglot] Trait previously.

After finally completing my preparations, I willed my avatar to commence typing on the virtual keyboard that hovered in the IDE's immersive dome.

The instant I did, the keyboard anchored itself securely in front of my avatar, remaining steadfast even as I manoeuvred through the voluminous 3D expanse. At first, the sensation was peculiar, but I quickly realised the brilliance of the design: I could fluidly navigate to various sectors of my IDE setup to cross-reference information while maintaining uninterrupted access to the keyboard.

It didn't take long for me to understand the enormity of the challenge that lay ahead, however.

My previous life had not prepared me for programming in Cyber; my knowledge was limited to a smattering of wiki pages focused on Quick-Hacks and subroutines that appealed to my favourite content creators.

The task of coding in this digital landscape was staggeringly complex.

In addition to mastering the standard syntax, logic, and language-specific quirks, there was an entirely new layer to consider: The Netscape.

This daunting fourth layer determined the existential nature of a program within the greater Cyberspace, specifying whether it would manifest as a Daemon, a Quick-Hack, a subroutine, or something else entirely.

Although there were other elements to consider, grasping the nuances of the Netscape layer was the most overwhelming part. Even for my rudimentary first program—a mere display of words in the IDE's 3D dome—I had to expend hours poring over Netscape documentation to get the desired behaviour.

Intriguingly, this quest for knowledge felt almost like a game to me. There was a clear objective, a path to reach it, and the onus was on me to discover the optimal combination—or build—to make it function.

After a taxing but fulfilling seven-hour total stint within the shard, I managed to compile and execute my very first program written fully in Cyber.

Before me materialised a vast, free-floating text, proudly proclaiming "Hello World" in a vivid shade of cyan that seemed almost luminescent in the cybernetic atmosphere. And yes, it was rendered in Comic Sans—believe it or not, Neon Dragons had Comic Sans. This was likely a residual feature from the game's compatibility with ordinary computers, giving it access to all the pre-installed fonts.

But this trivial detail stirred some rather intriguing questions about the world I now called home: How did Comic Sans come to be part of this universe's lore?

Neon Dragons wasn't just a game anymore; it was an expansive world with its own intricate history, evolutionary patterns, and cultural norms. Did the existence of Comic Sans in this realm imply that the font was some kind of universal constant in any world where human-like evolution had taken place?

It was a quirky, fascinating but deeply troubling thought that I quickly tried to bury in the depths of my subconscious. I did not want to go down that rabbit hole of existentialism today.

Seeing the program function before me felt like a seminal moment, the first footfall on my journey towards mastering this newfound aspect of Neon Dragons. The capability to craft my own programs, subroutines, and Quick-Hacks was bound to be a total game-changer in this world.

As if on cue, a symphony of chimes reverberated in my consciousness, heralding the well-earned gains that were now mine to claim.

[System]: *200xp gained for Intellect Attribute.*

[System]: *[Programming] Skill unlocked.*

[System]: *300xp gained for [Programming] Skill.*

'Only 300xp for all that effort?' I couldn't help but groan internally, a flicker of disappointment flashing through my mind. But almost as quickly, I realised that the situation wasn't as dire as it initially seemed.

Reaching Level 1 from Level 0 only required a total of 700xp, which meant I had already gotten nearly halfway to my first substantial knowledge boost—a boost that would no doubt ramp up my coding proficiency tenfold.

Furthermore, I had spent the lion's share of this session painstakingly setting up the IDE and wrapping my brain around the enigmatic Netscape layer—tasks I wouldn't have to repeat in future sessions.

Starting tomorrow night, I could dive straight into coding, thereby accelerating my experience gains in a way that would make tonight's labours look trivial in comparison.

In retrospect, I was immensely satisfied with my initial journey into the realm of [Programming]. The prospect of further delving into this digital world filled me with excitement.

But for now, I had more immediate skills to continue to grind—namely [Throwing] and [Knives].

Exiting the cybernetic environment of the shard proved to be as straightforward as willing my avatar to leave. The sensation jolted my consciousness abruptly back into my physical form—a disorienting experience, but one that thankfully dissipated swiftly.

"That was so freaking cool," I found myself muttering under my breath, still slightly awestruck by the realisation that I was truly existing in a world awash with cyberpunk aesthetics and technological marvels.

To remove the shard from my neck-port, all it took was a gentle press—akin to ejecting a micro SD card in the world I once knew. Except, this device authenticated my biometrics in a nanosecond, ensuring it was actually me attempting the removal before granting permission.

Safely securing it back in its sleek, carbon-fibre case, I stashed the whole thing underneath my pillow. It was hardly the Fort Knox of hiding spots, but it would hopefully serve to deter any would-be thieves. After all, I doubted that many burglars in this world made a habit of rifling through pillows.

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Glancing at the time displayed on my cerebral interface, I noticed I was roughly 40 minutes ahead of both Gabriel's and my regular wake-up schedule.

'Today's the day. I'll max out [Throwing] and [Knives], so tomorrow I can finally upgrade my Body to Level 1. No more wheelchair for me,' I thought with palpable excitement. *'Exploring Neo Avalis might still be off the table for a bit, but I'll be able to supercharge my grinding sessions. And hey, roaming around this floor of the megabuilding will become a real possibility. Man, I can hardly wait!'*

With that enthusiasm fueling me and nothing else to do before Gabriel's typical knock on the metal partition that divided our living quarters—his way of officially kick-starting my day—I decided to engage in a few moments of [Meditation].

My Skill was already maxed for the time being, but there was still room for growth in the governing Attributes.

Just as I was about to snap out of my meditative state, mere minutes before I expected Gabriel's knock, I was pleasantly surprised by an unexpected XP boost for both the Ego and Intuition Attributes that influenced my [Meditation] skill.

[System]: *100xp gained for Ego Attribute.*

[System]: *100xp gained for Intuition Attribute.*

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The day itself unfolded like most of my prior ones since I had started my sleep-based experiment, filled with relentless [Throwing] of sock balls—which seemed to multiply like rabbits, as I kept discovering more of them every time I went to retrieve the misfired ones—and intense shadow fighting to improve my [Knives] Skill, which left my muscles aching as if they were staging a revolt.

Approximately two hours before Gabriel was due to return, I achieved my primary objective for the day: Maxing out both [Throwing] and [Knives], at least for the time being!

I also scored another 500xp for my Reflex Attribute, edging me closer to Level 4 at 2600 / 3000xp. Hitting that next level would be downright monumental—it would allow me to further hone all three of my top Skills: [Juggling], [Throwing], and [Knives]. Furthermore, it would finally put me above the general baseline for an Attribute for once.

While I already stood head and shoulders above the average person in Neo Avalis when it came to these specialised Skills, my Reflex Attribute, which also governed speed, accuracy, and the nimbleness of my hands and muscles, was still hovering around the norm.

But not for long. I had a slate of thrilling milestones looming on the horizon!

One such milestone I'd already attained: Reaching Level 3 in my newest Skills, which meant more Perk choices were now at my disposal. Later that night, after levelling up the Skill once and perusing the [Programming] Perks, I'd finally be in a position to chart a more concrete course for myself.

I could select a whopping *four* Perks to enhance my abilities!

To say I was excited would be a colossal understatement.

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The atmosphere that evening shared much in common with previous nights; Gabriel and I were comfortably ensconced on our worn-in couch, engrossed in the hallucinogenic visuals and mind-bending plotlines of cyberpunk television.

But this night deviated from the script in a significant way that caught both me and Gabe completely off guard: Oliver, our father, finally made his return home.

Just an hour shy of our customary bedtime, the apartment door slid open with a mechanical whir, and a visibly drained Oliver made his laborious entrance. The weight of the world seemed to hang heavy on his shoulders.

"Dad?! You're back!" Gabriel practically leapt from the couch, his voice tinged with relief and surprise as he rushed to greet our wayward father.

"Gabriel. Good to see both you and your sister hale and hearty. I apologise for my extended absence; work has been... challenging, to say the least," our normally exuberant father responded. His words, although carefully chosen, were tinged with an unmistakable fatigue that hung in the air long after he'd spoken.

Gabriel's face contorted with worry, a sentiment I found myself sharing. The circumstances at Oliver's workplace must have been extraordinarily severe to have kept him away for nearly a full week. Something substantial had transpired, enough to tether him to his responsibilities and away from home.

Manoeuvring my wheelchair closer to the unfolding family reunion, I put on what I hoped was my most empathetic "concerned daughter" expression. "What exactly happened? I ventured cautiously, "If you're up for it, we're all ears. Sometimes venting can help, you know?"

I steered clear of addressing him by any name, caught in a mental tug-of-war. Using the term "dad" still felt premature for me, yet calling him Oliver might strike the wrong chord.

I couldn't shake the memory of the initial heartbreak that had clouded his features when we first met at the hospital, and I had no desire to rekindle that pain, especially not when I was trying to extract some information about the going-ons of the outside world from him.

Oliver sighed deeply, as if mustering the strength to delve into the labyrinthine chaos that had consumed his work week.

"Well," he began, looking as if the weight of the world rested on his shoulders, "I oversee the transport lanes at the company, as you know. Lately, we've been dealing with an inexplicable series of glitches in our systems—trucks veering off-course, deliveries and their respective manifests missing, data breaches, you name it. We thought it was an isolated issue at first, but now..." he paused, his eyes narrowing as if debating how much to disclose.

"It's beginning to look a lot like sabotage. Whoever is doing this is not only technically sophisticated but also seems to have inside knowledge of our operations. As the foreman at this location, it's my responsibility to keep these things straight, so I've been trying to play catch-up with the problems—trying to figure out what is going on—but to no avail. I'm still completely in the dark, but at least the incidents have stopped, for now."

Gabriel's eyes widened perceptibly as he absorbed the weight of Oliver's words. The tension in his shoulders seemed to ratchet up another notch. "Sabotage? Insider knowledge? Data breaches?! Dad, that's... that's some serious stuff. Are you sure you're safe?"

The concern in his voice was unmistakable; it transcended the usual banter and teenage angst to reach a level of genuine worry. "Have you reported this to the authorities? What are they doing about it?"

Oliver grimaced, a mix of frustration and regret clouding his face. "The authorities are involved, but the whole situation is delicate. You know how these corporate intricacies work; even a whisper of this getting out to the public could wreak havoc on the company's reputation. But rest assured, it's being looked into by the right people. I hope."

Gabriel shook his head, obviously still trying to wrap his mind around the gravity of the situation. "Wow, dad, that's... intense. Be careful, okay? Whoever's doing this is clearly not messing around."

Oliver nodded, appreciating his son's concern but also visibly carrying the burden of responsibilities he couldn't fully share. "Thank you, Gabriel. I'll do my best, and that's a promise."

My mind was awash with speculations, tracing the lines of connection through the murk of what I knew and what I'd heard.

'Hold on a minute,' I thought, 'Wasn't there an event in Neo Avalis about six years prior to the game's main quest line, something similar to this...? An event that had rattled multiple companies through sabotages and technical issues? If memory serves, it was a watershed moment that led to the rise of a fledgling manufacturing firm called OriginTech.

'They were hell-bent on innovating military tech using blueprints stolen from one of the juggernaut corporations within Neo Avalis itself, Rockefeller Inc. In the game world, this had all been relegated to the annals of "ancient history," so the details were frustratingly scant. But could what Oliver is going through be a precursor or even a cog in that same historical wheel...?'

As my mind whirled with a cascade of thoughts, the synchronicities felt too conspicuous to dismiss as mere chance. To the uninformed observer, it might seem like nothing more than a tangle of corporate politics and operational snafus.

Yet for me, armed with the fragments of knowledge gleaned from my deep dives into the game's lore and wiki, the time frame and sheer gravity of Oliver's situation seemed to align uncannily with past events I was aware of regarding OriginTech.

It was as if I were a detective in a noir film, poring over a complex jigsaw puzzle under a dim light. Many pieces were elusive or altogether missing, and the picture remained frustratingly incomplete. Yet the potential ramifications pulsed through my thoughts, simultaneously unsettling and electrifying, like a current running down my spine.

Was this the embryonic series of incidents that would pave the way for OriginTech's meteoric rise as the next corporate behemoth within Neo Avalis in the game's timeline?

Or was I simply reading too much into it, fabricating elaborate connections out of sheer boredom and the confining monotony of my one-apartment life...?