

Chapter 13 - The First Perks

As Oliver recounted the troubling circumstances at his workplace, I found myself plummeting down a rabbit hole of fragmented recollections, desperately trying to reconstruct the elusive timeline of the OriginTech incident. It was a monumental task, considering that even the wiki from my previous world had only provided scant few details on the subject.

To make matters more complicated, I had never paid much attention to this specific incident in my former life. I'd only perused the wiki page a handful of times, usually to corroborate some minor detail about the incident or company's origin that popped up in a specific game playthrough or a Let's Play episode I happened to be watching at the moment.

It was akin to attempting to solve a jigsaw puzzle where half the pieces were missing, a few were gnawed on by a dog, and the rest had been marred by splashes of random paint—absolutely ludicrous, to say the least.

After nearly an hour of mentally wrestling with the scant bits and pieces of information I could recall, frustration welled up within me. *'Damn it, old-world Sera! Why didn't you pay closer attention? This would have been so useful now,'* I internally chastised myself.

However, almost as quickly as the thought had manifested, I recognized the absurdity of my self-reproach.

'No, I couldn't have known this would be relevant. Even if someone had told me I'd end up isekai'd into Neon Dragons, I would have dismissed them as delusional. I'm sorry for the unfair blame, old-world Sera,' I thought, trying to mentally reconcile with my past self.

The strangeness of having a sort of inner dialogue with my previous incarnation struck me, prompting me to swiftly shift my focus elsewhere.

Armed with the fragments of information I had managed to cobble together, I understood that the incidents had unfolded over an entire year's time.

During this period, OriginTech's founders had meticulously gathered the necessary components for their initial prototype of groundbreaking military tech. Upon completion, they sold this prototype to MillField, one of the region's major military contractors, using the proceeds to fund their hiring blitz and establish their corporate headquarters in Neo Avalis.

However, the critical, foundational detail that I had been looking for, still eluded me: Had there been any casualties at the companies from which OriginTech had sourced their materials?

In all honesty, I hadn't cared much about the virtual lives at stake in the game before. Who could've foreseen that Sera's father would be a foreman at one of the companies caught in OriginTech's unscrupulous web?!

The uncertainty surrounding Oliver's safety gnawed at me more than I would've expected, considering I barely knew him.

I couldn't entirely chalk it up to hormonal shifts or some biological predisposition for familial attachment from Sera's body either; I had genuinely enjoyed my, albeit brief, interactions with Oliver, who came across as an exceptionally loving and attentive father.

In a world shaped by the darker themes of the cyberpunk genre, such genuine goodness seemed rare, almost like a precious commodity. This made the concern for his well-being all the more unsettling.

Lying in bed, my thoughts swirled in a restless dance.

'I need to escape this apartment's confines sooner rather than later if I'm serious about protecting Sera's family and keeping my promises to her. Oliver's situation is a wild card I hadn't accounted for. If OriginTech is still meddling at his workplace, then his life could be in serious danger, for all I know. I can't afford to be powerless; I need more Skills, more Perks, and most importantly, more options. The stronger I am, the better I can protect my family. Only then can I be free to explore my own desires and aspirations within this world...'

The room was dark, the apartment silent, save for the distant hum of the city outside.

Gabriel and I had gone to bed only a few hours after Oliver returned, each of us lost in our thoughts about the unfolding drama. Determined, I reached for the SPG-01 shard on my nightstand and carefully inserted it back into the port at the base of my neck.

It was time to level up; I had a Skill that desperately needed grinding.

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Submerged once again in the virtual expanse of the data-shard's cyberspace, I zoomed toward the beginner's guide section with purpose.

That day, I was dead-set on exploiting the guide's instruction on Cyber language, programming, and Quick-Hacks to the fullest—God knows Gabriel had shelled out a small fortune for this educational tool.

My main aim was to glean foundational tips and follow-up resources for my [Programming] Skill while snatching some low-hanging experience points. Even if I wasn't doing the heavy lifting myself, I was still learning, so that should merit some experience gains, shouldn't it?

As I navigated into the introductory tutorial, I found myself greeted by an all-too-familiar, digitally constructed, face and voice.

"Welcome, student. My name is Kill Joy, but you may refer to me as Mr. Joy, Teacher, or Sensei—whichever you find most comfortable. I will be your guide through the labyrinthine world of Cyber language and Quick-Hacks, and I'm here to answer any questions within the scope of the SPG-01 shard. Please, manifest a seat for your avatar and let's begin."

Ah, yes—Kill Joy. A name that could only be the concoction of a designer bent on toying with players. Visually, he was a bizarre hybrid of Gandalf the Grey and some more flamboyant, cyberpunk sibling, with all the neon-accented accessories that came with it—neon glasses, vibrant neon-coloured hair and beard; the whole works.

And despite the absurdity of his looks and moniker, which was in-fact his *legal birth name*, by the way—a fact I verified multiple times in my past life through obsessive wiki deep-dives—there was no escaping him.

Kill Joy was ubiquitous for a reason: He was the godfather of Cyber and Quick-Hacks in this universe. He, or mentions of him, kept popping up in various modules, guides, and questlines, each reappearance another reminder of his inescapably ridiculous name.

However laughable his name might have been, Kill Joy's expertise in the realm of Cyber was nothing short of awe-inspiring. Naturally, he hadn't *invented* the language, but he had been the revolutionary force that propelled it into mainstream use within the Neon Dragons universe.

Moreover, he was the genius behind the term 'Quick-Hacks,' a concept nonexistent before he re-imagined and came up with a whole new implementation for the 4th layer to permit pre-written subroutines to breach secured, wireless networks across the Cyberspace.

His in-game persona had always been exuberantly eccentric, but encountering this digital colossus face-to-face—or avatar-to-avatar—was a completely different level of bewildering.

I found myself temporarily stupefied.

"Cat got your tongue, girl?" Kill Joy's digital visage queried, a look of annoyance painted across his face.

Snapped back to reality—or whatever passed for it here—I remembered my purpose. I glanced around and discovered the first obstacle in this lesson, an obstacle Kill Joy had subtly laid out: I didn't have a seat. 'Right, he mentioned manifesting a chair...'

I won't lie; I took an embarrassingly long time to decipher what that entailed—well over an hour, to be precise. When the solution finally struck me, it was almost frustratingly simple.

To manifest objects in Cyberspace, you needed permission from the server owner—in this case, Mr. Joy—and then you had to access your cerebral interface through your avatar.

Yeah, you heard that right.

Opening it *through* your avatar. As in: Imagining yourself, opening it, but detached from your physical eyes and mind, moved over to your avatar, which, in turn, was the physical representation of yourself within the Cyberspace.

It made no fucking sense, when I tried thinking about it in-post, but all that mattered was that I managed to do it.

Once that hurdle was cleared, the rest was practically child's play. You could pick from a menu of object models you had access to; for the chair, Mr. Joy had so graciously provided a model under the 'shared assets' category.

From there, all that remained was to drag the chosen object into the 'physical' realm of Cyberspace. As I did so, the chair materialised almost instantaneously, its form emerging in a burst of code decals typical of the cyberpunk aesthetic.

All that effort was not for naught however, as I was immediately greeted with a surprising variety of chimes from the G.E.M.A. System.

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

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

[System]: *100xp gained for [Netrunning] Skill.*

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

[System]: *100xp gained for [Manifestation] Skill.*

My eyes widened in astonishment as a torrent of notifications flooded my interface, sending a jolt of elation coursing through my chest.

'*Yes! There are new Cyberspace-related Skills!*' I exulted internally, my digital fist triumphantly cutting through the digital air.

While the [Netrunning] Skill had been a part of the game's original construct, [Manifestation] *certainly* had not been. It probably existed in this reality for the same reason my [Juggling] Skill did—it simply made logical sense here, independent of any original coding by the game developers.

The potential applications of a Skill named [Manifestation] eluded me, as did the possible Perks it might unlock. Yet, to say I was merely 'excited' about its future possibilities would be a *gargantuan* understatement.

Just as I was revelling in my new Skill, the gravelly voice of the old man cascaded over my jubilant thoughts like a bucket of icy water.

"You don't have to look so pleased with yourself for finally manifesting a mere chair, girl. Sit down; we have much to cover, so stop wasting my time," Kill Joy admonished, snapping me back to the task at hand.

I quickly obeyed, settling into the chair with a sense of renewed urgency. After all, every second counted, although, with my recent Skill acquisitions and experience drops, I couldn't exactly claim any of this time was *wasted*, exactly.

The moment my avatar touched the seat, Kill Joy launched into an exhaustive, intricate lecture. He wove through the genesis of the Cyber language, delved into his own beginnings and journey to become a programmer, and navigated the complexities and nuances of the field.

Finally, he reached the climax of his discourse, expounding on his, at the time, ground-breaking ideas for Quick-Hacks and his revolutionary redesign of the 4th layer of Cyber, which had led to him becoming a known figure across the entire world of Neon Dragons.

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Describing the lecture as dull wouldn't be entirely inaccurate, but it had the saving grace of intermittent System notifications that confirmed my hope: I didn't have to be the one grinding away at the keyboard to earn experience points, just being engaged in the learning process sufficed!

By the time Kill Joy's monologue finally wrapped up—a staggering five hours later—I was both mentally drained and surreptitiously grateful. Yes, enduring his self-aggrandizing 'Greatest Hits of Cyber' compilation was an exhausting ordeal, but on the upside, it meant I had completed the first segment of the guide.

I looked forward to the subsequent sections, which promised to focus more on the nitty-gritty of programming, netrunning, and Quick-Hacks, rather than meandering through a historical self-portrait of the man himself.

If I had to hazard a guess, the ego-driven Kill Joy had likely mandated this introductory section as a prerequisite to any guide concerning Cyber that dared to use his name and likeness.

Ultimately however, what truly mattered the most were the notifications that had stacked up!

[System]: *400xp gained for Intellect Attribute.*

[System]: *Intellect Attribute has reached 2.*

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

[System]: *200xp gained for [Manifestation] Skill.*

[System]: *500xp gained for [Programming] Skill.*

[System]: *[Programming] has reached Level 1.*

That's goddamn right! Somewhere in the midst of Kill Joy's marathon lecture, both my Intellect Attribute *and* my [Programming] Skill had surged significantly.

The uptick in my Intellect Attribute was a peculiar phenomenon.

It didn't necessarily make me more "intelligent" per se, but it fine-tuned my cognitive functions, facilitating quicker and more seamless logical connections between disparate thoughts. It was like receiving a software update for my brain—one that enhanced its operational efficiency without making me feel overtly smarter.

Now, the [Programming] Skill—that was an entirely different beast, a veritable waterfall of information. The moment it hit Level 1, my mind became a torrential downpour of data: Cyber fundamentals, general programming logic, syntax intricacies, the rudiments of Quick-Hack subroutines—though notably, not specifics on *actual* Quick-Hacks, which I suspected fell under the separate [Quick-Hack] Skill.

It was as if I had been granted instant access to an expansive digital library of all things programming, much of which would undoubtedly be covered and end up being extremely useful in the upcoming guide sections with Mr. Joy.

Even an hour after this deluge of insights, my mind was still swirling, trying to assimilate the immense volume of new information. I couldn't help but think how wise it had been to dedicate my nighttime hours to this [Programming] grind.

The last thing I wanted was to interact with someone while my brain was in this frenetic state; there was a real risk I might blurt out something regrettable as my thoughts tried scurrying to coalesce.

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After disengaging from the digital labyrinth of Cyberspace, feeling mentally exhausted and utterly unequipped for any further cerebral endeavours, I found myself back in the familiar comfort of my bed.

I carefully stowed the data-shard back into its sleek carbon-fibre case and tucked it discreetly under my pillow. Closing my eyes, I braced myself for the impending series of crucial decisions that loomed ahead—not menacingly, mind you.

I was very excited about this next part!

First on my agenda was to scrutinise the long-anticipated Perk list for my [Programming] Skill. Even though I was still a few days away from actually being able to select one, understanding my options was going to be indispensable for planning my other Perk choices. There was always the slight possibility that some Perks from different Skills might synergize or overlap in some way.

Given that [Programming] was poised to become one of my main pursuits—especially during the nocturnal hours when engaging in other activities would risk arousing my family's suspicion—it was imperative that I had a comprehensive grasp of my available Perk choices ahead of time.

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[Debugging] [Requirement: Level 3 [Programming]]

Figure out exactly where you went wrong! You gain the ability to immediately pinpoint the exact lines or segments of code responsible for issues in any program you're examining.

[Programming Maestro] [Requirement: Level 3 [Programming]]

Never get stumped! You gain the ability to continuously find creative solutions when programming, ensuring you navigate around obstacles with ease and never hit a roadblock while coding.

[Spiritus Machina] [Requirement: Level 3 [Programming]]

Be a literal Ghost inside their systems! You gain the ability to code your programs and Quick-Hack subroutines with additional stealth layers, allowing them to remain undetected for far longer than usual.

[RAM Buffer] [Requirement: Level 3 [Programming]]

Just download more RAM! You gain the ability to code your programs and Quick-Hack subroutines with advanced compression techniques, making them accessible on Crowns, Netdecks, and Implants with more limited RAM capacity.

[Rudimentary Sentience] [Requirement: Level 3 [Programming]]

Not quite Turing Test-ready, but it's a start! You gain the ability to code your programs and Quick-Hack subroutines with additional, extremely basic AI capabilities. These AI layers can autonomously adapt to a single obstacle that would otherwise impede their normal function.

As I pored over the list of Perks, I had to exert considerable willpower to prevent myself from drooling in sheer amazement.

'Wow, these are fucking incredible... I want half of them right now and the other half later,' I thought to myself, my mind buzzing with the tantalising potential each Perk offered.

Regrettably, at first glance, none of the [Programming] Perks appeared to have any immediate synergies with other Perk options I'd been considering. That meant the caution I had exercised, delaying my other Perk selections just to check these out, had been somewhat in vain.

However, I couldn't bring myself to feel too disappointed about it.

After all, had the situation been reversed—if these Perks had actually aligned perfectly with my other options and I'd missed out—I would've been completely and utterly gutted. So, in the end, I found solace in the old adage: *'Better safe than sorry.'*

Yet, this revelation also meant I had the green light to go all out with my remaining Perk selections!

With a sense of excitement that was borderline euphoric, I flung open multiple windows within my cerebral interface, channelling the vibe of an 80s sci-fi hacker fervently typing away at a retro computer terminal.

First up on the chopping block were the [Meditation] Perks.

[Zen State]

Nothing can faze you! You gain the ability to remain completely calm in the face of fear or panic effects.

[Emotional Balance]

Become one with your feelings! You gain the ability to resist urges more naturally, regardless of their origin—rage, hatred, love, fear, pain; all of them will seem two stages less severe.

[Astral Projection]

Walk the spiritual lands to scout ahead! You gain the ability to briefly enter a state of detachment, while you are meditating, allowing you to scout ahead without being seen or heard by anyone within a 10m radius.

[Serenity]

Your body purges what it cannot take! You gain the ability to instantly cleanse yourself of any negative ailments, such as poison, bleeding, etc. by meditating for at least one minute.

Out of all of these, I still hadn't picked my favourite, but I had a good guess. [Zen State] was really good, but there was a similar Perk available in one of the Edge Attribute Skills, which I was more inclined to pick up.

As for the rest of them, they were a real toss-up and too difficult to choose right at that moment—not when I had more Perks to look at and compare!

Next up were the [Throwing] Perks.

[Gravity Defiant]

None of your thrown projectiles make any physical sense! You gain the ability to have your thrown projectiles defy the pull of gravity with increased ease. While not entirely unbound, their range is greatly extended.

[Homing Beacon]

Tag and Hunt! You gain the ability to have your thrown projectiles create a beacon on-hit, revealing the hit enemy with an outline through walls and other obstacles. This beacon lasts for 1 hour or until more than five targets have been marked at the same time.

[Piercing Projectile]

Did that hammer just pierce through him?! You gain the ability to have your thrown projectiles pierce one additional enemy target in a straight line, regardless of other projectile properties.

[Ricochet]

Master the art of calculated bounces! You gain the ability to ricochet any object you juggle or throw up to one additional time, without it breaking, shattering, or losing momentum, regardless of the object's inherent properties.

[Ricochet] was definitely a double-up from the [Juggling] tree, so a potential miss on this Perk tree. However, considering that [Juggling] had the [Ambidexterity] Perk, I was more inclined to opt for that one on the [Juggling] tree than [Ricochet] at immediate first glance.

The [Homing Beacon] Perk caught my eye for its sheer versatility; it didn't specify any particular type of projectile. That meant I could, theoretically, flick a minuscule pebble at someone and effectively turn it into a homing beacon that would provide wall-hack level information for a solid hour.

If that wasn't game-breakingly powerful, I couldn't imagine what would be!

Yet, the physics-defying traits of both [Gravity Defiant] and [Piercing Projectile] Perks beckoned with undeniable allure. Making this choice was shaping up to be far more challenging than I'd initially anticipated.

Finally, the last of the unknowns, that I had only briefly skimmed over, was the [Knives] tree.

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[Sharpening]

Killed three of them—with a fucking pencil! You gain the ability to instantly sharpen any edged object to its maximum sharpness. Note that this does not alter the object's original properties or durability.

[Double Slice]

Surrounded? More like, impossible to miss your attacks! You gain the ability to execute two simultaneous melee attacks in different directions, showcasing your mastery over your weapon and battlefield awareness.

[Mirror's Edge]

Perfectly timed defence! You gain the ability to flawlessly deflect incoming projectiles from a limited frontal angle while wielding an edged object, with a one-second cooldown between each deflection.

[Silent Takedown]

Wha— — —! You gain the ability to execute a flawless strike on an unaware target using an edged object. Should this attack be lethal, the target will expire soundlessly, irrespective of the situation.

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The treasure trove of Perks laid before me was both tantalising and agonising—I simply couldn't have them all, and that hurt.

The [Mirror's Edge] Perk stood out as a near-automatic choice, especially considering the gun-heavy world of Neon Dragons. The ability to deflect incoming bullets, albeit at a rate of one per second, seemed like an invaluable asset that could save my life multiple times over.

On the other hand, [Silent Takedown] was an outrageous game-changer in the right situations.

Imagine, snuffing out an enemy's life without so much as a peep escaping their lips. No tumbling from roofs, no painful grunts, no loud thuds from their cyber-enhanced, 500kg bodies crumpling to the ground. Their deaths would be as quiet as whispers, allowing me to move stealthily through hostile terrain.

Then there was [Sharpening], equally versatile in its applications.

Even if the sharpened object didn't gain any additional durability, the sheer cutting prowess it offered was staggering. A perfectly honed blade could resolve most confrontations in one slick move—unless, of course, I hit subdermal armour. But even then, as long as the edge remained intact, I could re-sharpen it instantly and try again.

Surprisingly, [Double Slice] appeared the least enticing, despite its blatant defiance of physical laws.

Attacking in two different directions *simultaneously* seemed like pure science fiction. Even with a Kiruyashi Implant, a military-grade cybernetic designed to massively boost overall speed, such a feat was impossible. Speed was one thing—breaking the laws of time and space was quite another.

The Perk, however, could do just that. Because that's how Perks worked—they were completely and utter bullshit.

Lastly, the Perks I had already looked at quite a lot of times before, my [Juggling] ones.

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[Ambidexterity]

Unlock the true potential of both your hands! You gain the ability to wield and use weapons or tools with equal skill in either hand, eliminating any penalties for off-hand usage.

[Predict Trajectory]

Become one with the laws of physics! You gain the ability to visualise the path of any thrown or falling object. This Perk also allows you to fine-tune your bodily movements to intercept and catch thrown or falling objects with greater ease.

[Ricochet]

Master the art of calculated bounces! You gain the ability to ricochet any object you juggle or throw up to one additional time, without it breaking, shattering, or losing momentum, regardless of the object's inherent properties.

[Part Of The Show]

Turn near-misses into awe-inspiring feats! You gain the ability to seamlessly catch a falling object within a certain radius around you that you've juggled or thrown into the air yourself, making it appear as if the moment was scripted and intentional.

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In the end, there was no contest; [Ambidexterity] had to be my inaugural pick for it.

Other Skill's Perk trees that featured it, like [Blades], [Handguns], and [SMGs], were still very far out of my reach, making the ability to wield both hands with the skill of my dominant one an irrefutable and mandatory game-changer.

This choice would pay dividends not just in my day-to-day life but also in the grinding sessions I had sketched out for my near future.

Though the allure of other Perks tugged at me, none could even hold a candle to the sheer versatility and long-term gains that [Ambidexterity] promised. It was a holistic upgrade, impacting everything from weapon handling over skill execution to experience gain.

With that crucial decision settled quickly and easily, I braced myself for the labyrinth of choices that awaited me in the other Skill trees.

Picking [Ambidexterity] may have been a no-brainer, but the subsequent decisions promised to be anything *but* straightforward...