

I parked my new truck in the large parking structure attached to the Megabuilding and paid the first month's fee in full, despite the fact that it was more than halfway through the month, before making my way back up to my room. I went through my evening routine of refilling the Elerium generator and the AA smelter before setting an alarm and collapsing into bed.

It felt like I had just closed my eyes when I was awoken by my alarm. I bolted upright and slapped the alarm interface, turning it off. A quick shower and a nasty burrito later, I was sitting at my workroom table, slowly spinning in my chair with my eyes closed, trying to figure out how I would spend my last four days with my current tech tree. I had intended to spend a chunk of the time finishing off the weapons branch so I would have access to everything, but as I had discovered, they were already pretty clear. Between completing plasma weaponry and having a solid understanding of every level of XCOM weaponry, I could pretty much design all of the other weapons in my head without using the blueprint.

Sure, it wouldn't be exactly the same, but at this point that hardly mattered. What did matter was the fact that I could check them off my list of things to do, leaving me completely open to other things.

The first on my new list was the fusion blade. It would be a relatively easy build and surprisingly cheap when it came to Elerium and AA. I wasn't at all satisfied with how it looked or functioned since it was only a one-sided blade that didn't even have a pointed tip, but that would be a problem for later. I would build the original blade and deal with using it until I had the systems in place to make customizing it a short and easy project.

Beyond that, I also wanted to build two of the many explosives on the tree, the plasma grenade and the frost bomb. As far as I knew, neither of them had any equivalent in Cyberpunk, and both were pretty powerful tools in my arsenal. They would also easily be converted to grenades. I could launch out the magnetic grenade launcher, which would be even easier to make without a blueprint than the mag sniper rifle. Both of the explosives would take special materials, especially the frost bomb, so they would have to wait for my next delivery to arrive.

The skulljack, a tool to hack into a brain chip, almost made it to the list as well, but I quickly realized it was way too specific to be useful. There were hundreds of different types of neural links alone, and each one would require a slightly different tool. Not to mention, if I wanted to hack into someone's brain, I could just use the access point on their neck. Or tear the link out of their skull if I was really desperate.

So far, I had a list of three things, only one of which I could do today. The fusion sword would hopefully only take me half a day, and the grenades even less. I also wanted to take a crack at the bluescreen rounds, which were EMP bullets. Unfortunately, those two would take some specialized parts and materials, even if I was only going to build them for my mag rifles.

Realizing that I was running out of things from the game that were worth making and that I could feasibly make in four days, I started pushing around the edges of the tech tree, trying to uncover anything that I missed. Then I remembered the gremlins.

I focused for a moment and brought up what I had on the small flying drone. As far as I could tell, it was a pretty simple device. It was built on a steel frame, mounted with cameras, gyroscopes, a decently powered computer that allowed it to brute force hack some simple alien systems, and a straightforward payload system that could do a couple of different simple tasks. I was also pretty sure I could skip over at least the first iteration, which was basically just an all-around minor upgrade.

Initially, I had ignored the Gremlin because the simple drone didn't solve any of my current problems. I knew in the game they could be used to replace engineers in some of the rooms, but according to everything I was picking up from the basic information I had access to now, that was just gamified crap. They didn't seem nearly as precise or advanced enough to perform any sort of complicated function beyond what they were already made to do. At least not without constant input from a human controller. Which was unfortunate because a few extra drone workers was exactly what I needed to step up production.

Now, on second thought, I realized that the gremlins might be worth the time to build. Not because of what they could do but because of their flight system. They were surprisingly nimble, ridiculously fast, and functioned off completely human tech. Or at least completely understood technology, rather than the half-and-half combination the majority of XCOM tech seems to have.

Even if the lift system was utterly impossible to upscale in size, it would still be incredibly useful. The idea of a fuelless thruster system was still science fiction in Cyberpunk, and having such a nimble, robust, and simple system in my pocket could be incredibly useful.

My first project selected, I turned back to the computer, quickly opening up the several shopping services that I had been using so far. I had a long list of special chemicals, materials, and parts that I would need for my last few projects, so I wanted to get most of the shopping done as early as possible.

When my shopping was complete and scheduled to arrive over the span of the following day, I got to work on the CAD program, starting to build out the specific parts I would need. I planned on skipping the first level of Gremlin and going straight to the Mark II model since the only difference seemed to be better energy generation in the form of four Elerium nodes and a better computer system and hacking assistant.

I would have tried the mark III, but it seemed to depend on understanding alien systems that I hadn't fully absorbed yet. Fortunately, with some AA paneling and a few more upgrades, which were easy to source in this world, I could make a significantly improved version once I finished Mark II. It probably wouldn't count as the Mark III, and definitely wouldn't be done anytime soon, but I knew it was possible.

It took three hours to finish designing all of the pieces and getting the frame and casing all set. Both my 3D printer and the fabricator were working on parts while I started preparing everything. Funnily enough, the four paddles that were responsible for the Gremlin's ability to float did not actually require any new parts, though I did have to modify some of the electromagnets and a few of the extra X-ray emitters, which I did while watching the parts print out.

The general principle of the Gremlin's lift system was ionizing air. The system used an advanced charging method to ionize the air around each of the four lift paddles, giving it a strong negative charge. The system would then flip, using a strong electromagnetic field to push against the negatively charged air. It would then flip again and repeat the process. This would happen hundreds of times in a second, each flip causing a minor amount of force, which would accumulate into enough thrust to hold up the Gremlin. The constant flipping back and forth was the source of the small drones' easily recognizable sound, the air getting yanked back and forth many times in a second. Even better, the system naturally evens out the ionization with each pulse, meaning it could be used indoors without having to worry about filling a room with ozone.

When all four paddles were finished, most of the metal fabrication was also complete, so I started working on other projects, getting as much done as possible so I could focus on putting everything together as my materials arrived. I spent the rest of the day designing the parts for my fusion blade and getting the fabricator running on it. While that was going on, I started working on the Gremlin's programming.

The next morning, I woke up to my front door ringing and the first wave of materials being delivered. The first batch, the parts for the Gremlin, all arrived between seven and eight-thirty in the morning, and the small drone was assembled by eleven AM. There were some small bits of modifications to the parts that I had to make, but for the most part, everything was smaller and better than what I required. Thankfully, the Tinker of Fiction seemed happy to accept things built that were as good or better as the original as counting towards an item creation. I assumed this was because having to dumb down every aspect of my creations, just so they would count, would be a pain in the ass when my tech got more advanced.

Once I was done with the assembly, I quickly downloaded the programming I had completed the previous night and flicked it on. It took a second for the cute little robot to boot, but when it did, it floated off from the ground. It bobbed in the air, looking around the main room of my apartment, scanning a bit before focusing on me. What little knowledge was left from the process filled my head, and before I could regret it, I immediately grabbed the droid and deactivated it, going as far as to pull out its battery. I quickly unscrewed its shell and started pulling things out.

There was a lot to be paranoid about in this world, but one of my biggest fears was having my tech turn against me. When every gonk could pop down to the store and buy a fistful of premade hacking systems, and AIs stalked the web, any tech open to connection was at risk.

So I would have to make everything closed.

I finished disconnecting the radio system before moving on to the WIFI connection system, carefully removing the small antenna and leaving the small droid completely cut off from the outside world, save its cameras and microphones. I then added a more complicated voice and body language recognition system so it would have an easier time parsing verbal and hand signal commands. I also replaced its battery with a single Elerium node, nearly doubling its available power and removing its need to recharge.

If I couldn't guarantee that my software was strong enough to deal with even the best Netrunners, then I would make it impossible to wirelessly interact with my creations at all. Even if that did drastically reduce their effectiveness for now, it was better to take it slow and deal with the reduction than to open myself up for a massive infiltration. There was no way to hack through an air gap. I still had a way to access its programming and a way for it to interface with a computer, but it was a physical connection only, and it was hidden behind a trick panel.

When everything was clean, partitioned, and reassembled, I flipped the drone over onto its "back," quickly attaching a pair of simple extending utility arms. I have no idea why the original version didn't have some, but mine certainly would.

When everything was ready, I activated the drone again. It booted up, and once more began to float. It ran another scan of me before letting out a curious boop and bobbing in the air, waiting for me to tell it what to do. Even though I knew it was one hundred percent not an AI, it was hard not to immediately personify the cute little thing.

The drone was something the XCOM universe called a Response Program, or RP for short. This was basically a program designed to respond to and answer questions and requests as fluidly, efficiently, and fully as possible, but it wasn't intelligent, capable of learning or evolving without direct editing of its program. Early versions of Siri and Alexa would have been considered RPs, but AI image generators would not be since they could learn from image scraping without much input from their creators.

"Hey buddy... let's see, the first version of your model ever created was called Rover," I explained, despite knowing it meant very little. "Let's keep with tradition and go with Spot for your designation. Understand?"

The drone beeped and bobbed in confirmation, shifting and gliding around me with its signature sound. I could just barely detect a hint of ozone as it flew by, but only for a second before it vanished.

"Spot, do me a favor and pick up the trash around the apartment and put it in the trash barrel over there," I said, pointing to the can of trash in the corner.

Another beep and the drone started flying around the apartment, picking up empty bags, wrappers, and other bits of trash, all with its new little gripping pinchers. When it caught something new, it would float over to the trash barrel and drop it in before zipping away to repeat the process.

I watched for a minute, unable to stop myself from smiling. Even with how simple the drone was, it would be able to help in plenty of ways. Already, I could think of a few ways to automate something like the AA smelter or the Elerium generator. Unfortunately, I didn't have the time to dabble.

The next project I tackled was the fusion sword. Most of its pieces were already printed, meaning that all I had to do was modify a few parts and assemble it. In all honesty, the weapon was even more disappointing than I would have thought. Whenever you gripped the handle, it automatically turned on, projecting a thin layer of Elerium plasma along the AA blade. There was no on or off switch, it just turned on whenever you gripped it. Not only that, but while the blade was hilariously effective at cutting, it was held in place by a thick, blunt, chunky support brace, which no doubt made cutting through things much harder. I had to assume that the XCOM engineering staff had simply made the blade and then said, "Eh, good enough," because I had only been holding it for a few seconds, and I could already see half a dozen ways to improve the design.

It took a dedicated moment of actual willpower to put the sword down and focus on other things. Thankfully, by the time it was done, the day was more or less over, leaving just enough time for me to set up the fabricator one last time and start up a batch of Elerium and AA. When that was done, I crawled into bed, told Spot to power down, and to wake me up early the next morning.

The following morning was mostly just assembly. Cyberpunk had several methods of generating EMP blasts, one of which matched pretty well with the primary method of EMP generation in XCOM. That meant that creating the bluescreen rounds was as easy as reinforcing an already existing part and adapting it to survive the initial impact. Once I did that, I simply sheathed it in a steel shell and added a charge monitor display on the side. I was definitely *not* going to do that for future rounds since it was a huge waste of parts. Still, the knowledge of bullets, especially the knowledge of what I could put into the simple steel rounds for my mag rifle, was well worth the hour and a half it took to make.

The plasma and frost grenades were even easier. A metal shell, a trigger mechanism, and a timer were more than half the parts. All I needed for the frost bomb was a short list of liquid chemicals stored in two separate vessels and mixed with a tiny detonation of C-6 explosives.

The Plasma grenade was, surprisingly, even more straightforward. Just a tiny chip of Elerium and an X-ray emitter built into an electromagnetic containment vessel. Throw the grenade, and the emitter starts charging the Elerium, which puts off its plasma-like energy. The

electromagnetic field holds it back for a moment before it drops, and Kaboom, plasma explosion.

I made sure to carefully put both of the explosive devices in a small draw. Technically both of them were completely safe as long I didn't intentionally fuck with them, but it was the principle. You had to respect the dangerous things you make, or someday they might go off in your face.

At this point, it was about two in the afternoon, and I had already finished my latest list of things I wanted to finish before I lost this tech tree, potentially forever.

Once again sitting in my workshop chair, spinning around with my eyes closed, I explored the vast expanse of my current tech tree. There was a whole chunk of it that I hadn't explored, but all of it was going back in time for that reality, the tech devolving to pre-2000s level almost immediately, which was obviously useless given my current setting. So, once again, I focused on the main chunk of the tree, the one specific to the XCOM project.

There were several things that I wanted to build, but I knew I couldn't, even beyond the Psi Labs. Ghost armor, which was a sort of stealth field, was one, as was its quasi-replacement, Wraith armor, which let the wearer walk through walls. Both of them would have been amazing since I probably could have added at least one to my armor and only activated it when I knew it was safe or in extreme emergencies. Unfortunately, I couldn't make heads or tails out of either of them.

I was beginning to think that higher "leveled" tech wasn't just obscured by my knowledge but by a much more fiat-backed aspect, something that was forcing me to figure out lower-level things before moving on. At this point, I knew plenty about the XCOM universe tech, but I could hardly make heads or tails of even the simple portions of their blueprints.

Either way, I could tell that there was no way I would be cracking either of them in the time I had left, mostly because I didn't even know what I would need to build first in order to start understanding how they worked. From what I could see, I suspected that they lay somewhere on the same path as psionics, strangely enough, but that was all I could tell.

In my exploration of the tech tree, I also managed to parse out the two sub-branches of body modifications that XCOM had access to. I also discovered the reason why I had never mentally spotted it before. Frequently, items all along the branches would refer back and forward along the tree, recalling something like AA metallurgy or production methods or connecting to where a specific advancement would lead. This helped me push around and single out new things to build. The cybernetics and genetic modification sub-branches, however, were *completely disconnected*, essentially free-floating by themselves. They were also apparently impossible for me to make since both sub-branches relied heavily on the alien tech referred to as Meld, which the tree did not provide a black-boxed production method.

It would have been much more annoying if the reason hadn't just popped into my head when I was taking my cursory look at the first genetic mod. Meld was a collection of cybernetic nanomachines, suspended in a neutral goo, created by the aliens to speed up and simplify their attempts to modify the alien races under their control. It also contained *no* exotic materials. No Alien Alloy, no Elerium, no special alien materials at all. This meant that if XCOM hadn't been so pressed for time, they could have studied and eventually, potentially, replicated the substance. That meant I could replicate it, which firmly removed it from the list of materials I could create with black-boxed tinker shenanigans. But since XCOM didn't have the faintest idea of how to replicate it, neither did I.

I barely even knew what it looked like!

While this was disappointing, I was glad it happened now with this tech tree. While I remembered a few of the genetic enhancements being pretty interesting, the game had always presented the Meld options as firmly being "but at what cost?" sort of options. The cybernetics were even more brutal than all but the worst cyberware here, and the genetic mods always came off as changing the individual, making them... off.

On top of that, knowing there could be floating sub-branches to my tech tree was absolutely invaluable information. Had I been in more of a rush, I could see myself missing this for multiple tech tree rolls, missing out on who knows how many useful bits of tech.

After spending a while making sure there weren't any other missing branches and making sure there weren't any interesting bits of tech that I could make, I finally decided that I was done with the XCOM tech tree. There was nothing else I needed, and everything I wanted was either too big for me to reasonably put together or too complicated for me to understand. That, or it was being purposely obscured, though I suspected that was the same thing in my case. It had been a decent place to start, but now, with most of the interesting bits made or at least understood, it was time for me to prepare for my next tech tree. I had no idea what it would be, but it couldn't hurt to cover my bases.

I spent the next day and a half preparing. I spent a big chunk of change and half a day on a used circuit board printer. It was an impressive-looking machine that could take circuit board blanks and rapidly lay down circuits before attaching chips, diodes, resistors, or any number of parts onto the board before soldering and finishing it all off. It did so with an absolute flurry of miniature arms and whirring servos. It used a program similar to CAD but significantly more complicated. That said, once I got the hang of it, I would be able to create much more compact and customized systems, something that I had a feeling would become necessary for certain tech trees.

Spot and I spent two hours combing over the program's programming, as well as the CB printer, looking for backdoors and watching programs. While there weren't any active feeds, we did find several back doors that would have made it child's play for Arasaka, the company that

made the printer tap into its records should they want to. We obviously removed them, but since they were only being attached to my own air-gapped network, it was just a precaution.

Several deliveries, including a basic chemistry kit, were also purchased and delivered. Once again, I was happily surprised by how easy it was to purchase random and potentially dangerous things. As long as money could be made, people were happy to sell me whatever I wanted, even set up express deliveries. Most of my last day with the XCOM tech tree was spent setting up a relatively advanced vacuum hood from the world, hooking it directly up to my air venting, and using several filters to keep really dangerous fumes from escaping. The hood was only about two feet wide, but it would make dealing with any chemicals much safer.

The chunk of information I got about filtration systems and using air pressure to control the flow of gasses wasn't bad either.

By the end of my shopping spree, I had spent everything I earned clearing out the scat den, plus a significant chunk of my remaining funds from selling the three sets of AA underarmor. I was starting to run low again, but hopefully, I would be well-stocked and prepared for whatever my new tech tree was.

When I was done working on my new workshop additions and received all my deliveries, it was about seven PM. Rather than repeat the rather dramatic experience of my tech tree switching happening while I was asleep, as I had seven days ago, I told Spot to wake me up at eleven-fifty PM, before heading to bed. This way, I would get at least some sleep, so when my excitement made it impossible to go back to sleep once I switched, I could start working immediately.

Assuming my next tech tree had anything I could build immediately.

I woke up to Spot nudging me awake, the little drone flying away as I started to sit up and stretch. Unsurprisingly, it was dark outside, or at least what counted for darkness in Night City. With the shifting imminent, I could feel the nervous energy flowing through every inch of me. I tried to sit down on the couch, only to jump up a few seconds later to pace around the room.

The next ten minutes were the longest ten minutes I had yet experienced in my life. I managed to burn a few of them, starting some AA and Elerium going, mostly out of habit, but other than that, I couldn't do anything other than pace around and worry about how I had done with the XCOM branch. I felt it had been a good start, providing me with some decent bits of tech and knowledge, but I couldn't help but question my choices. Should I have focused on psionics? Should I have tried to create a full AI? Maybe tried to make some spark units?

I shook my head and did my best to drive those thoughts out of my head. If I held on to every little bit of regret and spent my time worrying about what I could have done better, I would always be miserable. I looked around my room, seeing some of the weapons I had made, then



over to Spot, who was hovering a few feet away. I had made some solid progress, made some really cool stuff, and learned a whole lot. It might not have been perfect, but that was okay.

Finally, after what felt like forever, it was eleven-fifty-nine. I sat down on my couch, closed my eyes, and leaned back, waiting to feel the transition.

Just as before, as midnight approached, I could feel the specialty pulling away. This time, however, I could feel that nothing I could do would stop it. It grew more and more distant until, eventually, the connection snapped completely. On instinct, my mind ran through what I had learned, and, sure enough, the knowledge I had earned stuck with me, but I couldn't feel anything else through the connection to the XCOM tech tree.

With the old connection gone, I took a deep breath and waited for the new one to settle in.

A minute passed...

Then another...

Five minutes passed, and I was quickly falling into a full-blown panic. I anxiously searched my mind, finally stumbling on something. There was a connection, but it was so small I hadn't even noticed.

Rather than any new tech, all I could feel was a mental timer, one slowly counting down. Six days, twenty-three hours, and fifty-four minutes.

A full week. That was how long I had to wait for my new tech tree.