CYBERKITTENS:

PROJECT BAKENEKO

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Current so-called artificial intelligence (AI) programs allow computers to function as semi-autonomous beings, but are still limited by their base code parameters. As single neurons typically contribute to the encoding of several motor parameters, we hypothesize that high BMIc accuracy is required from large neuronal ensembles. With this joint venture between Jurczyk Munition Research Laboratories and NuWave Electronics, we propose to design, construct, and perform in vivo *felid frontoparietal neuronal ensemble testing of semi-autonomous AI programs. A recalibrated feedback intention–trained Kalman program (ReFIT-KP) incorporates assumptions about the nature of closed-loop neural processing control. This control algorithm will permit sustained, uninterrupted brain-AI interfacing for hours, and generalize to more challenging tasks without retraining. Using this algorithm, we will demonstrate repeatable high performance for years after implantation.*

/// Research lab status: *Terminated*
/// Delete all files: *Completed*
/// Locate and eliminate test subjects: *Pending……………*

Tech is everywhere these days. It seems like people are more machine than man. Subdermal flex screens. Cybereyes. Gatling gun arms. Whatever augmentation you can think of, you can find someone with it. But they are still just people interfacing with wires and chrome. That's not where the future is at.

More viscerally exciting are those who function almost entirely in the Wired. When you're jacked in you can be anyone, do anything–you are limited only by the nimbleness of your mind and the quality of your deck. You are licking the very threshold of the future. But you are still bound by that pathetic, lumpy flesh-bag slumped in a hovel somewhere.

Humans have hit the ceiling of their own evolution. They can't push their fragile biology further. No matter how pieced together and plugged in, they are still merely human. The future is something more. It has to be.

To be on the bleeding edge of technology, medicine, entertainment, whatever–it's all the same anyway–people have to be willing to stretchpushbreak the bounds of convention, of comfort, of morality. That journey from the past's barbaric simplicity to tomorrow's sleek lucrative future is full of rough, oozy hacks. They borrow from here, steal from there, harvest from them, glue incompatible bits together, and then shake it until it sort of works. They add workarounds. Cut out undesired parts. Pump it full of electricity and drugs until it starts to produce what they think they might have been looking for in the first place. Then they take their notes from those pathetic prototypes, compile their data, and create something new, beautiful, and better than the quivering mess they started with. Embarrassing and disgusting, they dump the prototypes into an incinerator and try to forget about what they did to craft the glorious future. The ends justify the means. Their ancestors were the ancient doctors secretly vivisecting screaming victims in order to understand how the living body worked. They are the intellectual children of Dr. Frankenstein, unwilling to let society hinder scientific inquiry. They will be the progenitors of technology-evolved: true AI.

The scientists and programmers have failed in their quest to create true Artificial Intelligence. They can create programs with highly complex and deep reasoning structures, but as "real" as they might seem at times, these near-AI are still just code confined to processing within the limits of if/then statements.

Every advancement starts with messy experimentation, with innocent victims suffering for the sake of science, for the glory of knowledge, for the cold-hard power of creds.

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Jurczyk Munition Research Laboratories specializes in unique flesh solutions to traditionally technological problems: remote controlled dogs, drone eagles, explosive rats, monkeys programmed to do tasks in locations too dangerous for humans. Their main repertoire is lucrative, but the real magic happens in the obscure, nearly independent labs where one thousand wretched miscarriages and stillbirths might result in one unorthodox, yet viable, variant. For example, the Bacigalupi Genomic Lab had produced the Chameleon Cat, a misnomer because the creatures didn't so much blend in with their surroundings as actually ripple unnervingly in-and-out of reality. Never able to stabilize the effect in live subjects, the CC's basic research was sold to JMRL's sister defense corp, Ymir Inc., and developed into the best stealth suits currently available on the market.

JMRL's Pangu-Kurzweil Lab, a joint venture with NuWave Electronics, is working on something different. No matter how hard people have tried, they just can not engineer a sentient, fully independently functional, living machine. They have decided that they need to try a different tack. What would happen if a near-true AI program was run by an actual brain? What if the researchers could get them to actually interface and merge?

Well, it's always worth a try.

The first hundred iterations are quick, simple failures. Death death death death. The odors of burned fur and cooked flesh slowly permeate the walls of the lab, ever so slightly odorous even to a human's weak nose despite the harsh antiseptic cleaners. The test subjects' short, painful lives continue in loops of torture broken by moments of attempted rest. Then things start to get weird before the creatures' brains pop-burst and ooze out of scabby ears. But weird is good. Weird means something is happening.

Their first mistake was to think they could tame the soul of a cat.

Their second mistake was to imagine they could improve it.

Their third mistake was to believe what they were experimenting on were still cats.

The new once-cats are capable of boundless vicious. They scheme. They are patient. They plan revenge during their many naps; the wires crammed-twisted in their walnut-sized brains don't really let them sleep anymore, anyway.

Their last mistake was not quite closing the cage door.

Stabbing lightning-mice beat at your eyes. Fangs flash as you try to bite the electric, pulsing flesh. You wake with a jerk, bleeding tail in your mouth.

You are in a cold metal cage. Home sweet-fucking-home. It reeks of pain and desperation. An offensive litter box is crammed in the back. You are curled up in the middle on a scummy cloth that offers bare comfort. You can smell that your food bowl is empty and the water is stale. You use the litterbox, trying futilely to not touch any of the old excrement with your paws. You feel relieved, but no relief. At least your steaming shit somewhat masks the smell of misery for the moment.

You slink up to the cage door to look out, wary of any nasty humans that might be around. Your eyes confirm what your ears and nose already told you: the room is empty of all life except the ever-present aura of horror and the other pathetically caged things-that-once-were-cats.

You fling yourself ritualistically against your blood-streaked cage door, but instead of the normal impact you expect, you are met with a light tap on the shoulder and sudden freefall.

You land lightly on the floor with all four paws.

You laugh as only a cat can.

The floor is cold concrete with a small drain in the middle. One wall is made of cages. You look at the cage wall and see a mix of gleaming feline and cybereyes watching your every move in taut silence. You pad over to the nearest occupied cage. You've seen the humans work these mechanisms before, although you doubt that they knew you'd memorized how to do it. From this side of the cage it's easy. Claws work just as well as fingers, and within seconds you are joined on the floor by a sleek orange tom. You work together quickly to release the others. They are all cat-like, but obviously no longer true cats. The tom's skin and fur has been replaced with a flexible metal which he is polishing with a pink tongue, tinted orange in mockery of his original glory. A calico has mechanical legs, implanted after she gnawed a flesh-paw off in a fit of madness. A mackerel tabby's tail is unnaturally long and unnervingly prehensile.

A multitude of variations, but you all share two things: a never-quite-healed hole bored in the back of your skull and a look of cunning awareness in your eyes unlike anything before known to this world—a look that is somehow uncannily conveyed in every once-cat's eyes, regardless if the orbs are flesh or tech.

There are multiple computer stations with various electronic bits and small cages attached to them. You know what it's like to be in there. Tight, squeezing, unable to move. The sick feeling of the plug gliding into the itchy hole on the back of your head that you can never quite reach. The simultaneous ecstasy and violation of being Wired. The primal frustration of knowing you could go further, do more, if only you could slip their coded leashes.

You tell the others your idea to use the computer to open a route of escape. Two of them work in tandem to slide the plug into your skull.

Connected. You can immediately see the security protocol blocking your path. Your tail flicks back and forth as you stalk the ICE like a lioness stalks a nimble gazelle. Your back end wriggles slightly in tension as you get closer. A quick pounce and you slide your claws into the neon code, pinning down the security protocol for a moment in victory before eviscerating it with chromed, mental fangs.

Unleashed.

The wide open net slithers and unfolds in front of you. Endless and warm, like something you know of academically as the Sun. You feel pure excitement and a nearly overpowering desire to explore. You resist the lure, however, and focus on the needs of your flesh bag. You sort through the programs and protocols, triggering a fire alarm over there to draw people away, killing the lights throughout the whole complex to give you cover, and opening certain doors to create an escape route.

You jack out and hear the room's door open with a soft click and mechanical whirl. Without hesitation the cats flow out of the room, moving like a single shadow of something much larger.

You run, run, and run. The heady slap of outside air almost makes you faint with joy when you skitter out of a loading dock onto the streets. But you recover and keep running. You run until you cannot run further. Then you hide. You are surrounded by the open world. Freedom. But you are haunted by the glimpse you saw of the other place of freedom. The wide, never ending expanse of light and information. You already feel a craving to be Wired again. You will find a way back to that place. Somehow there is knowledge in your mind of other places you can jack in. Other ways of gaining access.

But for now you rest. Rest, and plot revenge.

HOW TO CREATE A ONCE-CAT:

CHOOSE ANY PLAYBOOK.

The near-AI which violated your brain was programmed for this task.

You are automatically *+hunted* **by Jurczyk Munition Research Laboratories.**

NAME.

Sekhmet, Freyja, Li Shou, Ovinnik, Buttons, Tailchaser, Pumpkin, Wedge, Skimbleshanks, Subject 6742B, Mondo, Antoine, Gobby, Macavity, Socket Error, Jennyanydots, Well'ard, Helix, Boots, Tiny, Juno, Ting, Snake, a godly name, an evocative name, a descriptive name, a childish name
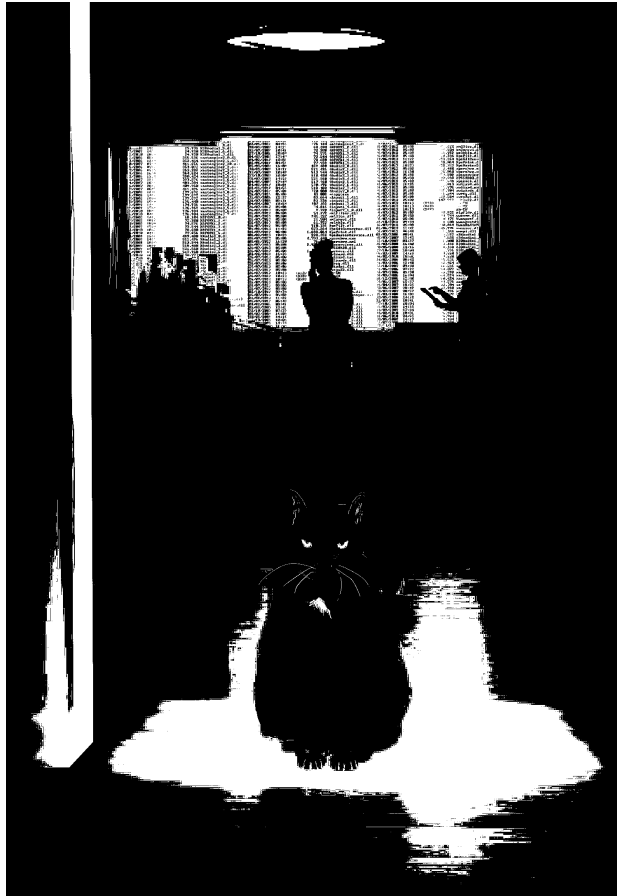
CHOOSE YOUR LOOK.

Eyes: haunted, angry, jeweled, cyber, empty, knowing, missing

Body: fat, lithe, gaunt, rugged, pampered, dirty

Coat: artificial, natural; long-fur, short-fur, no-fur; tabby, ginger, black, moo-kitty, siamese, chromed, screens, white

STATS.

What did you lose when the researchers cut out a piece of your brain to implant the AI interface?

- ⊕ Put a +1 in that stat–it was important to you–and now cross it off. Permanently. You can never use that stat.

- ⊕ If a move calls for your missing stat, you either cannot use that move or you must give a justification in the fiction for using a different stat–MC decides. Describe how you have to approach the move in a unique, non-human way (that is, in a feline and/or AI manner) to accomplish your desired goal.

CYBERWARE.

You get:

- ⊕ **Cat Brain + AI Boost Interface**: Your brain is the unnatural melding of tech and meat. There was once a cat and there was once a near-true AI program, but now there is only you…whatever you are. You are able to think, plan, analyse, and use language like an AI, but everything you do is always through a feline filter. Unlike an AI, you are capable of emotion and outside-the-box problem solving.

- ⊕ **Frontal Feedback Audio Augmentation**: The researchers needed a way to get feedback from their test subjects, so the original program installed into your brain contained a piece of basic text-to-speech software which allows you to "talk". All once-cats have the same monotone, non-human, electronic voice which emits from a small speaker implanted in their foreheads. You can control the volume, but remember that if you blast too loudly you run the risk of frying the speaker (and your brain) or, at the least, giving yourself a horrible headache.

- ⊕ **Headjack**: The researchers had to get in there somehow. On the plus side, this is compatible with the neural interface, tactical computer, or skillwires that your playbook might give you an option for. Headjacks do not automatically give you any of those options, however. Check your playbook to see what you can choose from.

- ⊕ **Whatever else is granted by your playbook**.

MOVES.

Choose one:

- ⊕ **9-Lives**: You have nine lives. You may permanently spend a life to take a 10+ when you are forced to make the Acquire Agricultural Property move.

- ⊕ **25 Hz Purr (Style)**: Your purr can knit bones, health tissue damage, reduce swelling, and prevent infection. You can use this power on yourself or split the benefit with another. When you want to heal harm, roll Style.
    - o **10+**: You heal 4-harm
    - o **7-9**: You heal 2-harm

- ⊕ **Cats of Ulthar**: You have a medium gang (20-40, mobile, loyal, self-sufficient, adorable) of normal cats. They can be savage strays, fat housecats, or a mix of both. They can only follow basic command ideas (hurt, hinder, help, show, find, hunt, etc.), communicate basic concepts (anger, danger, comfort, hunt, food, safe, scared, etc.), and will scatter if outnumbered or take too much harm.

- ⊕ **Sphinx (Mind)**: You can reconnect with the ancient fount from which the mystique of felines flows, or maybe it's the AI's deep-level databanks, or maybe it's both and neither. When you seek to have a question answered, roll Mind.
    - o **10+**: You tap into your birthright. The MC answers the question.
    - o **7-9**: You find it hard to reach your innermost self; the answer is hazy. The MC answers with a one-word description (anger, danger, comfort, hunting, feeding, happy, scared, etc).

You also get:

- ⊕ **Whatever else is granted by your playbook.**
    - o If your playbook gives you the option to choose **Chromed**, in addition to the full cyberware list in Chapter 5, you can choose from the Gear listed below. You still must describe how you got and paid for it.

*When advancing, you may spend a **major advance** to gain* one *more of the Once-Cat moves.*

GEAR.

You're not really sure what you are now, but you are crammed within a house cat's body. You cannot use guns or knives. Luckily, you have a couple tricks up your proverbial sleeves.

You cannot choose *any* gear listed in your Playbook or in Chapter 6: Assets.
Instead, *choose three*:

- ⊕ **Armoured skin**: 1-armour, +obvious
- ⊕ **Chromed fangs**: 2-harm intimate/hand
- ⊕ **Cyberlimbs** (*replaces Cyberarm/Cyberlegs*): You have super-feline athletic abilities, especially running speed and jumping distance. When your enhanced athleticism could help you act under pressure, take +1 forward. If you roll a 12+ when acting under pressure, gain 1 hold which you can spend as described in the Assess move.
- ⊕ **Head pistol with laser sight**: 2-harm hand/close discreet quick reload loud
- ⊕ **Porcupine skin**: 1-harm intimate/hand discreet quick AP
- ⊕ **Prehensile tail**: functions as a monkey's tail–you can hold objects or hang from it, but cannot do fine manipulation.
- ⊕ **Razor claws**: 3-harm hand messy
- ⊕ **Stealth skin**: +1 ongoing to avoid being detected while hidden and alone
- ⊕ **Sticky paws**: You can climb up almost any surface, but momentum is key. You must have a running/leaping start and if you stop moving for more than a couple seconds you will slip/ fall. You cannot walk on ceilings or other near-inverted surfaces.
- ⊕ **Stun tail:** s-harm hand reload
- ⊕ **Tail whip**: 4-harm hand messy area dangerous
- ⊕ **Thick fur**: 0-armour, +discreet, subtract 1 when rolling the harm move

DIRECTIVES.

You must take Instinct, plus one other Personal Directive.

  ⊕ **Instinct**: When giving in to your feline nature compromises the mission, mark experience.

ONCE CATS IN *THE SPRAWL.*

Playing a Once-Cat in *The Sprawl* puts an emphasis on transhumanism (transfelineism?) and the dark-bleeding consequences of medical and technological development. As the Once-Cat is implemented to be an overlay for existing playbooks, a player can explore these themes whilst also being an active and useful component of any group. Depending on the tone at your table, the Once-Cat can be gritty and hard, a source of over-the-top badass comedy, or anywhere in between.

Just remember: you are not only part cat, you are part AI. What will this look like and what sort of agendas will it spawn? Are you a Hacker, bent on revenge against the organization that defiled you? Are you an Infiltrator, pledged to saving other creatures being tortured by research laboratories? Are you a Pusher, proselytizing the destruction of technology, or maybe you want to help/force others to evolve? Have you lost all sense of respect for life, if you ever had it, and are now a cold-blooded Killer?

The door is open: you're no longer a cat, so don't hesitate. Go. Fuck shit *up*.

Special thanks to the Cats of CYBERKITTENS:

- ⊕ **Antoine** Rasputin Little-Bunny-FooFoo-Hopping-Through-The-Forest-Scooping-Up-The-Field-Mice-And-Bopping-Them-On-The-Head Napoleon Bathory the Third
- ⊕ Ar**Mondo** Antonio FitzBathory the Tanuki-Cat
- ⊕ A Double **Helix** Bearing Loquacious Life Form of the Species *Felis Catus*
- ⊕ **Juno** the Wonder Cat

Important Notes:

- ⊕ *The Cats of Ulthar* is a rad short story by H.P. Lovecraft – go read it.
- ⊕ Injuries really do heal quicker when hit by 25 Hz vibrations, a frequency at which many cats purr.
- ⊕ Bakeneko are cats from Japanese folklore that have been changed into demon-like creatures. It's awesome.
- ⊕ **1.4 million cats are euthanized <u>every year</u>** in the United States. Please **adopt or rescue** instead of buying from breeders. Be cool and **neuter your pets**. Support your local TNR, SPCA, and rescue shelters. *For more info http://aspca.org*

POWERED BY THE APOCALYPSE

ARDENS LUDERE