

# Wintermute: the silent killer in 'neuromancer'



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Empathy, happiness, guilt: all are feelings that human beings are capable of that distinguish humans from objects or robots. But in William Gibson's "Neuromancer", his readers are introduced to a futuristic world where the distinction between reality and artificial reality become blurred. This is a realm where artificial intelligence(AI) beings exist, but are not constricted by flesh and a conscience, the way humans are.

Gibson's decision of " Wintermute", as the name of the primary AI, makes a case of how Wintermute is the epitome of both the peak of scientific development and the pitfalls of moving away from a purely human world. Wintermute encompasses substantial power, even being able to manipulate the real world to accomplish its goals, yet with great power, comes great responsibility: something that an apathetic artificial intelligence system doesn't take into consideration. To fully analyze Gibson's intentions of naming the AI " Wintermute", it is necessary to first evaluate the meanings of " winter" and " mute" separately. Winter is considered the coldest season of the year, with connotations of being cold, harsh, and sometimes dangerous (OED). These traits are evident in Wintermute, who is easily able to kill others, even Corto, who the AI had spent years pruning to be an asset for its mission; in response to letting Corto die, Wintermute apathetically responded, " Yeah...Hadda do it,"(205). Wintermute's cold bloodedness allows it to reach new levels of artificial intelligence, but is deadly to those in its path.

The second part of " Wintermute", mute, means refraining from speech or temporarily speechless, with connotations of silent and quiet (OED). This perfectly reflects a major trait in Wintermute that makes it the silent killer;

the AI is able to discreetly wait for years, slowly putting plans in place, piece by piece. Wintermute knew of the main character, Case, long before Case ever knew of Wintermute; years before they ever interacted with each other, Wintermute was already intertwining itself into Case's life. Case had recalled a memory from his past where he had to torch a wasp nest, but inside the nest he had seen, " the T-A logo of Tessier-Ashpool neatly embossed into its side,"(127) which is the company that created Wintermute, and shows that Wintermute was secretly keeping tabs on Case for years. Simply by analyzing Wintermute's literal definitions, it is clear that this AI is dangerous and calculating, pushing the boundaries on what is considered feasible for nonhuman entities. Wintermute's indifference to human life and privacy, makes it possible for the AI to achieve its maximum potential-combining with Neuromancer-but it is also what makes Wintermute the secret puppet master of the characters' lives.

Wintermute's primary goal in the entire operation is to join with Neuromancer, which encompasses everything Wintermute is lacking, primarily personality. By combining with Neuromancer, the two become the matrix, " the sum total of the works, the whole show"(269), which surpasses any scientific inventions in their world. In order to reach that point, Wintermute had to patiently wait for pieces to fall into place, it would, " use the Villa's security and custodial systems to keep track of where everything was, how things moved, where they went,"(180); secretly Wintermute is waiting behind the scenes, cataloging every movement and change. But it requires more than just patience for Wintermute to obtain what he desires, lives must be taken as well. Wintermute manipulates and

discards people along the way; in order to obtain a key that Wintermute needed, it is mentioned how, “ He saw somebody lose this key twenty years ago, and he managed to get somebody else to leave it here. Then he killed him, the boy who’d brought it here,”(180). Wintermute is pulling the strings as helpless people are unknowingly aiding the AI, some even at the cost of their own lives.

Unable to feel guilt or remorse, Wintermute is able to continue through with its mission, because people are no more than pawns in Wintermute’s “ waiting game”(180). From a scientific perspective, Wintermute is their world’s greatest accomplishment, but from a humanistic perspective, it is capable of horrors on par, possibly exceeding, those of serial killer and is therefore a threat to society. By combining the two perspectives, the case for Wintermute paradoxically symbolizing both the rise and fall of artificial intelligence, solidifies. Gibson mirrors this fact in his choice of the name, “ Wintermute”, accurately matching its quiet and cold nature.