

Chapter 26 - Speedrun Strats

After wrapping up my comprehensive morning routine, which included a rather extensive jog around the 43rd floor, I re-entered the apartment, unable to suppress the wide grin spreading across my face. *'What a productive session! Today's grind has been absolutely off the charts!'*

Heading towards the shower to wash off the layers of sweat and gradually relax my muscles—I really didn't want to risk any injuries before heading to Mr. Shori's—I casually flipped through the long list of System notifications accumulated from the morning's activities.

Opting not to check them in real-time had resulted in an impressive, consolidated summary of my accomplishments—a neat little feature of the System that I always appreciated when it showed up.

[System]: *800xp (+400xp Bonus) gained for Body Attribute. Available Bonus left: 500xp.*

[System]: *600xp gained for [Athletics] Skill.*

[System]: *[Athletics] Skill has reached Level 2.*

[System]: *400xp gained for [Stealth] Skill.*

[System]: *[Stealth] Skill has reached Level 1.*

[System]: *300xp gained for Edge Attribute.*

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

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

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

Aside from all the massive level ups, which in themselves had been amazing drops of extra knowledge and muscle memory downloads, I had even unlocked the much coveted [Acrobatics] towards the end of my training regimen.

To be fair, I had mostly just jumped around the hallway a lot, looking a bit like an overly zealous child, but I didn't really know any other way to unlock it. In the game, players just unlocked it by doing exactly that: Jumping like absolute madman.

I was really looking forward to the Level 1 knowledge-drop of [Acrobatics], eager to understand what the Skill entailed in this reality—especially any potential, alternative training methods.

My current method, while effective, wasn't exactly dignified, and I wasn't too keen on the idea of perpetually bouncing around like a human pogo stick to level it up.

Don't get me wrong, I was fully prepared to do whatever it took to enhance the Skill, considering the valuable Perks it promised. However, I couldn't say I was thrilled about the prospect of looking like a hopping lunatic in the process.

Getting my [Athletics] Skill to Level 2 had once again given me a slight improvement to my form, as well as a fairly sizable stamina improvement, which were both very welcome.

[Stealth] at Level 2 had come with a surprisingly massive amount of knowledge, further deepening the understanding I had gotten about the process of becoming, and more importantly remaining, invisible to other people's attempts at finding me. A hefty chunk of muscle memory had also been included, which was always very appreciated.

Honestly, the best part about this whole System-thing was the fact that I didn't really need to spend hundreds upon hundreds of hours trying to understand how to properly move—I just *knew* it, the second I reached the correct Skill Level to unlock that knowledge and muscle memory.

The oddest part of my morning escapade, however, was ranking up my Edge Attribute from 1 to 2. Edge was now an intrinsic part of both my body and mind, and was a peculiar Attribute indeed.

In the game, Edge governed the realm of skills that were considered less than honourable or those that didn't neatly fit into conventional categories—they were the "cool" skills, if you will. Skills like [Stealth], [Poisons], [Ganger], and [Deception] were all under Edge's domain, either fully or partially.

What made the experience particularly strange was the sensation that accompanied the Attribute's rank up. When the System decided to grant me the benefits associated with Edge's increase, it was an unusual, almost surreal moment.

It wasn't just a straightforward boost to physical or mental faculties, but something more nuanced and intricate. Edge seemed to sharpen my instincts, enhance my intuition, and give an edge—pun fully intended—to anything regarding my overall 'cool factor', qualities that were hard to quantify but undeniably present and influential in the way I approached challenges.

The shift that came with my Edge attribute reaching level 2 wasn't about honing the sort of instincts and intuition that fell under the purview of the aptly named Intuition attribute. Instead, it honed specific elements of these faculties, but with a focus squarely on aspects that embodied the essence of being 'cool'.

Describing the change was a bit elusive, yet the effects were unmistakably tangible. The moment the System worked its magic, I felt a subtle yet distinct alteration in my demeanour.

My walk adopted a more confident swagger, and my thought process edged slightly towards strategies and solutions that leaned on the more cunning or, for lack of a better word, cooler aspects of any situation. It wasn't a fundamental change in how I thought, but more like being attuned to nuances and ideas that hadn't occurred to me before.

Despite my best attempts to grasp what exactly had happened to me, I immediately knew that I was going to need to rank up Edge further to really get a good grasp of what this Attribute actually did for me, on a fundamental level.

Its Skills were undeniably going to be a big part of my life either way, so ranking up the Attribute wasn't exactly a choice, but rather an inevitability anyway.

Focusing back on the task at hand, however, I couldn't help but note a certain peculiarity. Under the shower, as the water rinsed off the sweat from my vigorous morning workout, I noticed a particular change in my body.

It was something that made me pause and spend a considerable amount of time in front of the bathroom mirror, pondering the implications.

"I swear to god, if you two get out of hand, I'm not going to hesitate to take drastic measures!" I half-jokingly warned, looking down at the modest mounds that had gradually become more pronounced as my Body attribute progressed from "*technically* alive" to "fully functional human being."

The thought of going through a similar kind of puberty as my last life—where my overly generous breasts had caused endless back pain and discomfort—was not a pleasant one.

I had serious doubts whether even the almighty Rest Function could alleviate the kind of chronic discomfort they had caused me previously.

'*Good riddance... Just... stay manageable, okay?!*' I mused, assessing their size with my hands. They were a comfortable, hand-sized proportion now, which I could definitely live with. But much larger, and I'd have to consider other, more drastic options.

A sudden, amusing thought then struck me—one of the perks of this new life was the sheer amount of customization available.

If they ever *did* become a nuisance, I could always visit a Ripper-Doc or a Slicer to swap them out for some advanced cybernetic alternatives.

The idea of having high-tech, possibly laser-shooting cyber-boobs brought a smirk to my face. '*Now, wouldn't that be something?*' I thought, chuckling to myself as I finished up my shower, already contemplating the wild possibilities this world could potentially offer in this department.

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When I arrived at Mr. Shori's food stall on the bustling 16th floor, I was greeted by the familiar sight of him bustling about, much to my relief. I had harboured a niggling worry that something might have gone awry after my data-shard delivery to Vega the day before, but everything appeared to be business as usual.

Mr. Shori, in his usual fashion, didn't waste time on formalities.

He had come to trust my understanding of the daily grind over the past days—slicing algae, concocting broth, and honing any knives he passed my way. These tasks had become a sort of comfortable routine, the bread and butter of my self-coined "apprenticeship".

With little ado, I slipped into the clean, neatly arranged kitchen outfit Mr. Shori had laid out for me—his attention to detail never ceased to amaze me.

I headed over to my regular spot at the cutting board and picked up the Nakiri-style knife. Thanks to the insights from that Level 1 [Cooking] knowledge drop, I now knew the proper name of this culinary blade; it was a niche detail not covered in [Knives], being a specific cooking tool.

The day at the stall zipped by as I immersed myself in my tasks, each action reaping its own little harvest of experience points. I couldn't help but feel a rush of excitement with each new chime that rang in my ears—it was likely never going to get boring.

All the while, I kept a discreet eye on Mr. Shori, watching for any signs of distress.

Despite the seeming normalcy, I couldn't quite shake my distrust of Vega. Until I heard directly from Mr. Shori that everything had indeed gone smoothly, my guard remained up—it was a matter of safety for both of us, after all.

As my shift was winding down, Mr. Shori finally caught a break from the day's unexpectedly heavy customer traffic—it seemed like today was busier than any other day since I started working here—speaking of which, what day was it even? I quickly checked my cerebral interface's time module and figured out that it was, in-fact, Tuesday.

There was no such thing as a weekend in Neon Dragons, so I hadn't really been able to keep track of things that way, considering that both my parents and Gabriel were going to work every single day they weren't literally dying—and sometimes even then, as evidenced by Gabriel's actions this very morning.

With a rare moment of respite, Mr. Shori beckoned me to our usual secluded spot behind the stall, a little nook reserved for confidential conversations.

He seamlessly transitioned into Japanese, offering me a respectful bow as he began, “{Thank you, Ela. I've been informed that your delivery was exceptionally successful. Vega seemed quite taken with your work, even his courier inquired extensively about you—your origins, our acquaintance, and such. Naturally, I kept it vague as you had requested. I can't begin to express how grateful I am. The task was far from straightforward, yet you handled it with an ease and professionalism that exceeded my wildest expectations. My deepest thanks to you once again, Ela.}”

The earnestness and depth of his gratitude for what I had considered a “simple” delivery mission left me feeling oddly fulfilled. It was a strong confirmation that I was indeed making significant strides in repaying my debt to Mr. Shori.

This successful mission was a definite step in the right direction, and that realisation alone brought a sense of pride and accomplishment—much more so than paying for a fan-favourite character in a video game ever could.

“{I'm relieved to hear that all went smoothly, Mr. Shori. It wasn't exactly a walk in the park, especially with some initial challenges on the 21st floor, but it all ended up working out alright. Speaking of which... Vega is quite the character. Do you really trust him, though?}” I inquired, my tone laced with curiosity yet edged with caution. I was acutely aware that in situations like these, words could carry meanings deeper than their surface value.

Mr. Shori paused thoughtfully before responding. “{Trust is a strong word... No, I wouldn't say I trust him. But what I *do* trust is his reputation. He's known for his honour, particularly in business dealings. He's assured me that he will oversee the necessary adjustments regarding my stall's protection. It's a considerable load off my mind, not having to second-guess whether the protection I'm paying for will be effective. The Clawed Beasts have a vastly superior reputation for being dependable than those damned Red Snakes.}”

His response was measured, reflecting a blend of pragmatism and wariness typical of someone who had navigated the tricky waters of Neo Avalis' underworld. It was clear that in this world, trust was a luxury few could afford, and reliance was often based more on reputation and necessity than genuine faith in another's intentions.

This was definitely an answer I could work with.

It spoke of the fact that Mr. Shori did not feel intimidated or feared for his well-being, that he was so openly speaking about his distrust for Vega as a character. I felt my muscles relax a bit at that, having been on-edge since I had entered Mr. Shori's stall this very morning, always ready for any potential issues to crop up out of nowhere.

“{While my thanks are sincere, I know they won't fill your belly. I'm acutely aware of that,}” Mr. Shori added, his eyes momentarily flashing yellow as he initiated a transfer. A notification promptly pinged in my cerebral interface.

[Yan Shori has transferred {c}220 to your account with the note: “{Delivery successful.}”]

I was severely taken aback by the amount—220 Credits was a small fortune for someone in my shoes, and I suspected it wasn't exactly a trifling sum for Mr. Shori either.

Before I could even voice my astonishment or attempt to refuse, another notification chimed in.

[Yan Shori has transferred {c}40 to your account with the note: “{Stall assistance payments.}”]

Mr. Shori, with a knowing chuckle that seemed to embody the wisdom and kindness of an elder, said, “{Now, you should be able to afford a decent meal. That is unless you're already full from the take-away boxes from the stall.}”

His laugh was one of those uniquely comforting sounds, a blend of experience and good humour that could instil a sense of warmth and reassurance in anyone fortunate enough to hear it.

“{I... Thank you so much, Mr. Shori. I'm not sure if my delivery efforts justified such a generous reward, but I truly appreciate it,}” I stammered, overwhelmed by a mixture of gratitude and surprise.

The amount I had received was significant, especially when I considered the cost of the SPG-01 data-shard that had wiped out Gabriel's savings from years of work. That shard had cost 570 Credits, and here I was, having earned 260 Credits in just a few days.

It dawned on me that while this rate of earning was definitely not sustainable, it was an incredible boost to my current situation. This windfall opened up new possibilities for me. I could now afford some essential items for my planned retribution against the scum lurking in Neo Avalis' underbelly...

Mr. Shori and I shared a few more words, his gratitude evident as he thanked me for my help at the stall. He particularly noted how Tuesdays usually left him exhausted due to the surge of customers, but with my help today, he felt significantly more invigorated after the mid-day rush.

It was genuinely fulfilling to be appreciated for something so seemingly minor. I hadn't performed any heroic feats, like saving the world or vanquishing a demon lord.

My contributions were simple: Slicing algae, brewing broth, and sharpening knives. Yet, sometimes, these small acts could make a meaningful impact in someone's life, especially someone as genuinely kind-hearted as Mr. Shori. It made the efforts feel worthwhile.

Or so I rationalised my incessant experience grind at his stall. It was definitely for the pride and accomplishment of helping a kind soul, not for the assortment of 1,500xp I was able to gain from it during the rush-hour. Nope. *Definitely* to help out.

Despite that fact, I immediately opened the stored of System Notifications as I left Mr. Shori's stall, unable to contain the urge to get that massive hit of dopamine, seeing them all arrayed in a neatly condensed way—thank you, System!

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

[System]: *300xp gained for Reflex Attribute.*

[System]: *Reflex Attribute has reached 4.*

[System]: *[Throwing] Skill has reached Level 4.*

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

[System]: *[Cooking] Skill has reached Level 2.*

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

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

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

Elevating my Reflex Attribute to level 4 had brought a notable enhancement in my fine-motor skills. This improvement was particularly evident when I was slicing algae at Mr. Shori's stall. My movements had become remarkably swift and assured – I was almost matching Mr. Shori's pace, which was a bit alarming yet exhilarating. With a few more increases in Reflex, I could very well equal or even surpass his speed.

The rate at which the G.E.M.A. System was enhancing my physical capabilities felt completely otherworldly.

This advancement in Reflex had another immediate benefit: it led to a level-up in my [Throwing] Skill, where I had invested the System Task Skill Point. Each new level in a skill brought a reduced volume of knowledge downloads, but I noticed something different with Level 4 in [Throwing].

The downloads felt more substantial; more intricate. Although the quantity of information was less, the complexity was significantly higher. For the Level 4 upgrade in [Throwing], I received detailed insights into projectile trajectories and the physics behind them. These elements alone were more profound and nuanced than everything I had learned at Level 1.

It was challenging to articulate, but I sensed that the higher-level Skill knowledge downloads were laden with insights and techniques that would typically require years of dedicated study and practice to acquire. It was undoubtedly an incredible advantage. It felt like a cheat code for life and I couldn't help but feel excited about what future upgrade might hold.

The progression in my [Cooking] Skill to the 2nd level brought with it an enlightening deluge of culinary knowledge that nearly floored me. Cooking, it turned out, was far more intricate and nuanced than I had ever imagined, even with my previous life's experiences.

This new level introduced me to a plethora of preparation methods for various foods. I learned about achieving the perfect cooking temperatures, advanced searing techniques, and the art of sautéing to extract optimal flavour and texture from ingredients, among a host of other, similarly more in-depth techniques when compared to what the first level had wrought.

Additionally, I was introduced to an array of cooking tools and gadgets I had never known existed. While I was uncertain how this newfound knowledge of obscure kitchen equipment would benefit me in the future, I was nonetheless grateful.

After all, any knowledge gained was a step forward, and I wasn't one to dismiss a boon, no matter how unexpected it might be.

But the real game-changer was the upgrade in my Tech Attribute.

Advancing from rank 1 to rank 2 was an experience so intense that it actually *did* knock me off my feet momentarily. Fortunately, it happened at a moment when Mr. Shori was swamped with customers, his attention completely diverted.

The upgrade in my Tech Attribute to level 2 hadn't just been a minor step forward; it had been a deluge of intricate knowledge that had flooded my mind, leaving me reeling with its intensity and breadth.

The information I received was extremely comprehensive, delving into realms of physics, chemistry, and even certain aspects of biology. It was like an academic course compressed into an instant, yet somehow retained with crystal clarity.

I had gained insights into various materials, understanding their properties, strengths, and weaknesses as well. I had learned how to identify the right material for a specific purpose, whether it be for crafting a sturdy component or a delicate, intricate piece.

The nuances of combining different materials, ways that I had never even considered before, had been laid out before me like a well-organised toolbox, each piece of knowledge fitting perfectly into its place.

The knowledge extended to the fundamental principles of physics, unravelling the secrets behind force, motion, and energy in ways that were directly applicable to crafting and creation. Chemistry concepts illuminated the interactions of substances, offering me the tools to predict and manipulate chemical reactions for various crafting processes.

The aspects of biology that had been covered, provided insights into how different organic materials could be utilised or modified in crafting.

This newfound understanding spanned from the macroscopic to the microscopic, allowing me to consider biological materials in ways that were previously beyond my comprehension in any future crafting endeavours.

The intensity of this knowledge download had been such that, even hours later, my head was still throbbing with the echoes of the information. It felt as though I had crammed for the most challenging end-of-year exam over the course of a week, all condensed into a single, overwhelming moment.

But despite the temporary discomfort, the excitement of wielding this newfound knowledge was undeniable. The possibilities it opened up for me in the realm of crafting and creation within the world of Neon Dragons were vast and thrilling to contemplate—although they would likely have to wait until I could secure a more substantial source of income.

Crafting was after all, while extremely powerful, similarly expensive.

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Back at my apartment, I resolved to spend the remaining hours of the evening diving into the SPG-01 data-shard. The generous sum of credits Gabriel had invested in this tool for me loomed large in my mind—especially after Mr. Shori's payment put into perspective just how much money he had spent on me—reminding me of the slightly guilty feeling that I hadn't yet fully explored its potential.

Gabriel, with his usual selflessness, probably didn't expect any immediate results from his investment. In his mind, mastering the shard's contents was a marathon, not a sprint. But here's the kicker: I wasn't just any typical user. I had the G.E.M.A. System on my side, making me an unabashed cheater in the best possible way.

And boy, did I revel in that edge.

After two solid hours of intense focus and learning, my brain felt like it had run a marathon of its own. The mental fatigue was palpable, signalling it was time to call it quits for the day. Carefully, I removed the shard from my neck-port and placed it back into its case, eager to see the fruits of my labour.

A quick glance at the System Notifications revealed a satisfying list of accomplishments. Even this comparatively brief session with Kill Joy's virtual persona had proved immensely beneficial.

[System]: *700xp gained for [Programming] Skill.*

[System]: *[Programming] has reached Level 2.*

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

[System]: *[Netrunning] has reached Level 2.*

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

Today's progress had been nothing short of a speed-run through various level-ups, and the sense of achievement was immensely gratifying. The initial phase post-coma had been a rapid cascade of advancements, primarily fueled by quick gains in Skills like [Throwing], [Juggling], and [Knives].

Those initial bursts of progress, with their accompanying dopamine highs, had set a thrilling pace. However, as expected, things had started to level off as the low-hanging fruits were picked.

But now, the fruits of the meticulous routine and strategy I'd put in place for effective experience grinding were beginning to show. The realisation that all the effort and planning were paying off was exhilarating, akin to discovering a highly efficient farming route in a game that ultimately had turned out to be guide-worthy.

The [Programming] Level 2 knowledge download had expanded my understanding into realms that were both intriguing and vastly more complex than the general overview that the first level had granted.

Firstly, it had introduced me to the world of algorithm optimization.

The subtle art of making code not just functional, but efficient and elegant, was a fascinating puzzle. I learned about time complexity, how to reduce processing time for complex tasks, and the importance of writing clean, maintainable code. In a world where a lot of Crowns were heavily limited on RAM, keeping your algorithms as small as possible was also a massively important consideration.

Next came the intricate subject of data structures.

I was now familiar with not just arrays and linked lists, but more advanced structures like trees, graphs, and hash tables. Understanding these structures, their uses, and how to implement them efficiently opened up a whole new dimension of programming possibilities.

Then, the download had delved into the concepts of more Object-Oriented Programming, or OOP for short.

The principles of encapsulation, inheritance, and polymorphism were no longer just abstract terms. I could visualise and implement them, seeing how they could transform a maze of functions and data into a clean, organised system of interrelated objects. This was particularly important when combined with the fourth-layer of coding that existed within Neon Dragon's Cyber language, as these principles could be used and further elevated when combined with fourth-layer optimizations.

Moreover, I was also introduced to database management, learning about different databases, their structures and the languages associated with them—as they were not exclusively written in Cyber. The intricacies of creating, maintaining, and querying databases

effectively were now also at my fingertips, allowing me to manage or sift through large sets of data with newfound ease.

Lastly, the realm of cybersecurity had begun to unfold before me as well.

Basic principles of securing code, understanding vulnerabilities, and the importance of ethical hacking practices were now part of my mental toolkit. Not that I intended to be ethical about any of this, of course.

I was primarily learning [Programming] to spring-board into [Quick-Hacks] for my own purposes, after all. No ethical considerations would be part of that equation.

Each of these new areas of knowledge wasn't just simple information for me either; they were *tools*, just waiting to be wielded in the digital landscape of Neo Avalis going forward...