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An Examination of the Historical Symbolism and Embodied Empathy in Detroit: Become Human

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Résumé de l'article

This article examines the rich historical subtext in the future-focused storylines of Quantic Dream's 2018 release Detroit: Become Human (PS4) and illuminates many of the thematic continuities in racial issues between the past and the future. Much of the subtle historical symbolism appears to have went unnoticed by many reviewers who maligned the videogame and its creator David Cage for relying on lazy tropes that clunkily connect the African American civil rights movement to the narrative of woke androids engaging in a struggle for greater equality in society. Following scholarship that has examined the development of racialized thought in the past, this essay recognizes "race" as a powerful, yet malleable social construct, that sometimes changes over time. Racial concepts in the game do not perfectly align with historical or contemporary understandings of "race" in the United States. Androids, in short, all belong to the same "race." This article then contends that the storylines of all three playable characters in the game resonate with well-crafted historical parallels and that the narrative geography in the gameworld often closely tethers to the historical geography of Detroit. The characters Markus, Connor, and Kara have intertwining stories that represent different elements of minority life in the United States with the clearest parallels to the historical experience of African Americans. Detroit: Become Human, nonetheless, is a science fiction game about androids. Framing the struggle for equal rights in the future with a group of beings that do not yet exist has the potential to disarm gameplayers of latent biases that may otherwise color their view of contemporary racial issues. The article asserts that the wedding together of past and future through experiential gameplay nurtures an empathic understanding of minority concerns that may carry over to the present to impact understandings of contemporary racial issues.

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Acts of Becoming: An Examination of the Historical Symbolism and Embodied Empathy in *Detroit: Become Human*

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Abstract

This article examines the rich historical subtext in the future-focused storylines of Quantic Dream's 2018 release *Detroit: Become Human* (PS4) and illuminates many of the thematic continuities in racial issues between the past and the future. Much of the subtle historical symbolism appears to have gone unnoticed by many reviewers, who maligned the videogame and its creator David Cage for relying on lazy tropes that clunkily connect the African American civil rights movement to the narrative of woke androids engaging in a struggle for greater equality in society. Following scholarship that has examined the development of racialized thought in the past, this essay recognizes race as a powerful, yet malleable social construct, that sometimes changes over time. Racial concepts in the videogame do not perfectly align with historical or contemporary understandings of race in the United States. Androids, in short, all belong to the same race. This article then contends that the storylines of all three playable characters in the videogame resonate with well-crafted historical parallels and that the narrative geography in the gameworld often closely tethers to the historical geography of Detroit. The characters Markus, Connor, and Kara have intertwining stories that represent different elements of minority life in the United States, with clearest parallels to the historical experience of African Americans. *Detroit: Become Human*, nonetheless, is a science fiction videogame about androids. Framing the struggle for equal rights in the future with a group of beings that do not yet exist has the potential to disarm gameplayers of latent biases that may otherwise color their view of contemporary racial issues. The article asserts that the wedding together of past and future through experiential gameplay nurtures an empathic understanding of minority concerns that may carry over to understandings of contemporary racial issues.

Author Keywords

Detroit; history; politics; race; gender; justice; symbolism; representation

Introduction

The opening credits of *Detroit: Become Human* (Quantic Dream, 2018) follows the journey of a recently repaired AX400 android named Kara from an Android Zone store in the suburbs through the heart of the city to her home in Corktown. Much of Detroit's iconic architecture remains intact in the near future. An aerial view shows a length of Woodward Avenue framed by the Ally Detroit Center on the right side and the Guardian Building on the left. The camera drops

to street-level, panning past the Fist, the iconic sculpture commemorating the victory of African American boxer Joe Lewis over the athletic Aryan posterchild Max Schmeling, and the Spirit of Detroit, a monument erected in 1958 to symbolize progress and hope in the Motor City (Staes, 2015; Spirit of Detroit, n.d.). The sun creates a halo of light around St. Mary's Cathedral as a man suffering from technological unemployment begs for help. Significantly, the brief introduction to the city shows that writer-director David Cage and his design team studied the geography of Detroit, indicating that they intended the future events in the videogame to interweave with the actual place and its storied, sometimes tumultuous, past.

Historical inequalities and struggles for justice in the United States, and Detroit more particularly, form a rich symbolic subtext in the future-focused narrative; yet some of the allusions are so evident that reviewers have criticized the videogame for its seemingly lazy references to Black history. Christopher Byrd (2018) complained about the "lack of subtly" in the references to slavery, segregation, and the civil rights movement. Evan Narcisse (2018) characterized the videogame's engagement with racial issues as being "simultaneously heavy-handed and light as feather." Timothy Seppala (2018) said that the "puddle-deep reproductions" of certain events in the civil rights movement offer a "tone-deaf look at race" in America and Yussef Cole (2018) concluded that "paper-thin allusions to America's civil rights struggle" and "Martin Luther King Jr. quotes" made *Detroit* "an uninspired story about the tension between a group of androids who desire freedom and the reticence of their human masters to provide it." Some of the symbolism, particularly the near exact quote from King's speech, is perhaps too direct; yet some of these references arguably help frame the narrative for gameplayers who have a relatively shallow understanding of race and Black history in America. Ironically, most critics appear to have missed the videogame's subtler, more artful nods to the past that demonstrate that the design team possessed a place-based understanding of the city and approached the topic of race with greater care than they are credited.

Androids, who now fill the ranks of unskilled or low-status occupations, exist as the racial other in the videogame, not African Americans or other people of color. Consequently, all androids should be understood by the gameplayer as belonging to the same race regardless of skin complexion. Allegra Frank's (2018) criticism that "the main character's (Markus) blackness in the story is never addressed, like it doesn't matter" without equally due attention given to Connor and Kara as part of the racialized other suggests that she and other critics did not sufficiently consider the variant construction of race in the videogame; perhaps assuming that racial categories are immutable. Countless scholars have demonstrated that race is a cultural construct that changes over time and can vary from one place to another. Ibram Kendi contended that "race is fundamentally a power construct" and that this process of race-making "creates new forms of power: the power to categorize and judge, elevate and downgrade, include and exclude" (p. 38). The boundaries of the racial majority occasionally shift to bring previously excluded groups into the fold. Historian Nell Irvin Painter's (2010) comprehensive examination of a racial construct, for example, identified four expansions of Whiteness in American history. She asserted that "statutory and biological definitions of white race remain notoriously vague" (p. x) and that criteria for racial belonging "constantly shift according to individual taste and political need" (p. 383). Labor, Painter (2010) maintained, figures centrally into race-making "because the people who do the work are likely to be figured as inherently deserving the toil and poverty of laboring status" (p. xi). Historically, racialized understandings of Whiteness counterpoised against

constructions of Blackness, but that is not the racial binary in *Detroit: Become Human*. Androids, made to be servile, have become the racial other in Cage's 2038 gameworld.

The videogame does not examine this seemingly postracist human world in which Black and White Americans appear to share an equal position in the majority; but rather it tells an antiutopian story of racialized oppression manifesting in a new form. In his examination of the history of Black utopian and antiutopian thought, Alex Zamalin (2019) contended that both groups used speculative fiction as a means to explore the consequences of racism, but Black antiutopian writers often "lamented mechanized instrumental reason, simple progress, and science unchecked by moral authority" (p. 14). In *Detroit*, some androids have become woke, deviating from their original programming to develop into rationale free-thinking beings with a human-like capacity to hope, dream, and love; however, they encounter a reactive human opposition that treats their evolving consciousness as a threat that needs to be suppressed so that androids remain in an unquestioning servile state. Science fiction, Isiah Lavender (2011) argued, is "uniquely suited for the critical study of race because of its postcolonial depiction of aliens, artificial persons, and supermen in subordinate positions…[and] its imagination of exotic landscapes and alternate histories where our cultural memory of past events can be changed" (p. 188). This proves true in near-future Detroit, where the past echoes through the future, providing ample opportunity for contemplation about racial inequality and struggles for justice in the United States.

Gameplayers become deviant, assuming the identities of three androids who represent minority experiences in different ways. Deviant, by definition, means straying from the norm and adopting different views and behaviors. The construction of the interactive drama around quick time events controls the in-game experience to a much greater degree than play in open gameworlds, yet framing the narrative in this way ensures the cultivation of a common set of understandings about the characters and the videogame environment. Nonetheless, *Detroit* still provides ample opportunity for "shared authorship" (Chapman, p. 34) between the player and the game developer. Furthermore, the gameplay, as Adam Chapman argued, has the potential to "establish resonance between the virtual (and global) world of the digital game and the real" (p. 35). The act of crafting a narrative through "a form of embodied movement in a virtual world" fosters an empathetic understanding "inside and outside the [game] system" (Gee, p. 82). The evident historical touchstones in the videogame direct the gameplayer to see the long-contested terrain of rights and equality in the United States from a position of marginality. Assuming the characters of three racial others in the videogame encourages the gameplayer to embrace an empathetic understanding of issues historically faced by minority groups in the United States. These acts of becoming hold forth the potential for the gameplayer to become more humane, if not more human.

Become Markus, Movement Leader

If the character of Markus is viewed as analogous of the African American experience in the United States, his narrative progresses from slavery through to the 1960s, though it connects best to the Black Freedom Struggle, the fight for greater rights that encompasses both the civil rights and Black Power movements. His story begins with an outing to buy paint for his owner, a disabled artist named Carl. The gameplayer encounters varying degrees of human hostility when completing the errand and may even receive a gut kick from a protester who views Markus as a "tin can." Carl, though, treats Markus respectfully, encouraging him to strengthen his mind and

develop an identity by exploring his emotions. Foreshadowing events to come, Carl says: "One day…[y]ou'll have to protect yourself, and make your choices, decide who you are, and wanna become." Soon thereafter the gameplayer begins navigating Markus on a path towards liberty and justice.

Carl's behavior would have troubled many White Southerners, who recognized the risks of slave literacy, before the Civil War. Abolitionist Frederick Douglass (1846) recalled that his former master cautioned his wife that the slave "should know nothing but to obey his master" (p. 33) and that a literate slave would become malcontented and unmanageable. Literate African Americans, both slave and free, planned the most notorious slave rebellions in the 19th century (Cornelius, 1991, pp. 30-32). Markus' political consciousness similarly grows out of education and experience. A botched police response to a break-in call leaves Markus alone in the world; though he eventually follows cryptographic images to a community of deviant androids living in Jericho, an abandoned ship on the Detroit waterfront. Easy comparisons can be made between Jericho and maroon communities of runaway slaves in the Old South. Coded symbols, with meanings that the majority population could not discern, helped the oppressed find hidden sanctuaries of liberty, often in swamped areas, on the margins of the dominant society (African American spirituals; Grant, 2016). Like runaway slaves who spirited away goods from plantations under the cover of night (Grant, 2016), Marcus leads a small team of deviant androids on a supply raid at the Cyberlife warehouse. From this point forward, narrative developments better align with the modern Black Freedom Struggle than the period of slavery in American history.

In the Stratford Tower chapter Markus emerges as a leader, telling his compatriots that they must speak against injustices. The choices made by the gameplayer have significant impacts on the fate of Markus and the movement. Three non-player characters, representing archetypes within political movements, react differently to Markus' rhetoric and tactical decisions. Josh embodies the philosophy of non-violent civil disobedience; whereas the female deviant North is the opposite, always pushing Markus (and the gameplayer) to take more confrontational action. Simon is typically risk-averse and skeptical of the group's ability to win any tangible gains. Despite these differences, the three of them assist Markus in a risky takeover of a news broadcast center in hopes of better communicating their grievances to the public. Once the group is in control of the newsroom, North advises Markus to choose his words wisely because his message will "shape the future of our people." It is here that two movement trajectories, one nonviolent and the other more directly confrontational, begin to diverge. Importantly a flowchart at the end of the chapter (and every other game chapter) shows gameplayers how their decisions impact future possibilities within the narrative, a game element that visualizes the concepts of critical junctures and path dependency in political movements.

The gameplayer crafts Markus' speech, choosing to be either "calm" or "determined" in tone. Decisions must also be made about the sort of reforms to demand: legal recognition, an end to slavery, equal rights, or freedom of speech. The gameplayer makes two selections before the menu refreshes to include a new host of issues: legal equality, segregation, fair compensation, civil rights, property rights, reproductive freedom, and android sovereignty. In closing, the gameplayer again chooses between being "peaceful" or "determined." If the "peaceful" option is chosen, Markus looks forward to a day when humans and androids will "build a better future" together. Conversely, a "determined" Markus ends with a "warning" that "no human will live in

peace" until androids are free. The chapter ends with most, if not all, of the dissidents base-jumping from the building as competing television stations make emergency interruptions to their programming. The correspondents assess the situation, expressing varying degrees of concern about the future of relations between humans and androids. Markus's rhetoric and tone significantly effect the public reaction to the stunt, which may range from skeptical to indifferent to hostile.

Detroiters, in 1963, received messages from Black leaders with tones as variant as the ones that the player chooses from in the videogame. Two months before the renowned March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, Martin Luther King, Jr. led the Great March to Freedom rally in the Motor City (see *Figure 1*). In an address at Cobo Hall, he roused the crowd with the harmonious language of integration, predicting that "we will be able to go on in the days ahead and transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood" (King, 1963). King urged Detroiters to confront problems of employment discrimination, unfair housing practices, and de-facto school segregation. Closing his speech in a manner akin to "calm" Markus, King said: "I will go out with you and transform dark yesterdays into bright tomorrows" (1963). Malcolm X spoke at the Northern Negro Grass Roots Leadership Conference, a gathering held at the King Solomon Baptist Church, less than six months later and pointedly critiqued the philosophy of non-violence embraced by many civil rights activists. He urged Black Detroiters to "realize here in America we all have a common enemy…blue eyes and blonde hair and pale skin—same [White] man" (X, 1963) and added: "whoever heard of a revolution where they lock arms [with the White man]…singing 'We Shall Overcome'? Just tell me. You don't do that in a revolution. You don't do any singing; you're too busy swinging" (X, 1963). The confrontational tone of his rhetoric goes beyond that of "determined" Markus at the Stratford Tower, but aligns well with the progression of "determined" Markus later in the game. The integrationist character of Martin Luther King Jr. and the Black nationalist thinking of Malcolm X manifested in local movements as well. Reverend C.L. Franklin, chair of the Detroit Council of Human Rights, embodied the philosophy of King; whereas the thinking of Reverend Albert B. Cleage Jr., founder of the nationalist Shrine of the Black Madonna, tracked more closely to Malcolm X. The NAACP, Black Panthers, Freedom Now Party, and the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement also represented Black Detroiters who fought for better housing, jobs, safety, and community in the Motor City during the 1960s (Smith, 1999, pp. 4, 56; Sugrue, 2014, pp. 87, 263).

Figure 1. The 1963 Great March to Freedom proceeded along Woodward Avenue (Detroit News Staff, 1963a). Image courtesy of Walter P. Reuther Library, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University

When Markus leads a raid on a Cyberlife store that spontaneously develops into a large demonstration, the gameplayer chooses a representative symbol for the movement (see Figure 2) and controls its messaging. L.A. Kauffman (2018), a veteran grassroots organizer and journalist, maintained that "you need to know how to read a protest" (l. 83) to understand it and that "an excellent place to begin is by looking carefully at the signs that demonstrators carry" (l. 83). The same holds true in near-future Detroit, so this sequence is a decidedly important opportunity for the androids to craft an argument and image that will variably foster public support or widespread animosity. An on-screen meter weighs the cumulative effect of the gameplayer's choices and the degree to which Markus' actions are pacifist or violent. Representative movement symbols range from a circle formed out of three interconnected parts to a fist emerging from a triangle. The circle is a variation of the LED light on the right temple of Cyberlife androids, which as an emblem suggests a peaceful and cooperative future for humans and androids. Cyberlife uniforms bear a triangle logo on the left breast, so the addition of a fist to that emblem, in contrast, communicates a more militant posturing of the movement. Slogans range from the conventional "We Have a Dream" to "I Think Therefore I Am" to "Not Your Slave Anymore." The demonstration may turn destructive with options to overturn cars and destroy a statue commemorating the invention of androids. Regardless of whether Markus

chooses the path of peace or violence, the police arrive on the scene and kill nine of Markus' compatriots, reminding the gameplayer that change does not often come easy. The gameplayer must decide whether to exact revenge on two officers or to embrace the philosophy of non-violence. Subsequent news reports refer to the androids as terrorists, though the public will grow more supportive of the cause if the officers were not killed and property damage proved minimal. Markus later leads a demonstration down Woodward Avenue (see Figure 3), following roughly the same route that the Great March to Freedom took seventy-five years earlier.

Figure 2. Messaging for the movement. Screenshot taken from Detroit: Become Human
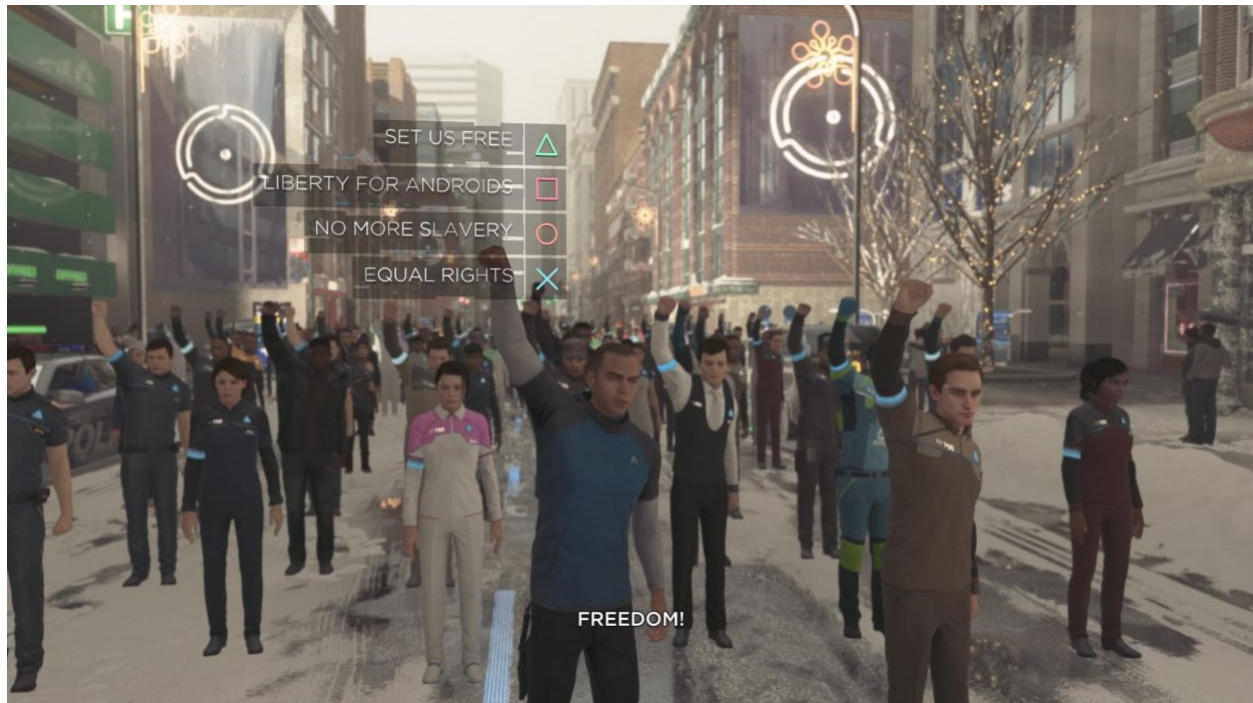
Figure 3. Markus leads a demonstration down Woodward Avenue. Screenshot taken from Detroit: Become Human

Organizers of the Great March to Freedom also carefully crafted the message that they wanted to communicate to the public and political leaders. Photographs show most marchers dressed nicely, many in suit and tie, hoisting professionally printed signs emblazoned with the names of progressive organizations like the NAACP and United Auto Workers. The text of many of these signs focused on the struggle for civil rights in the South, where the movement regularly drew national media attention. Hand-painted signs brought by individual activists, however, often focused more on local issues relating to housing and de facto segregation. One participant hoisted a sign saying "Lets move to Grosse Pointe," while a nearby man carried a placard stating "Dearborn KKK is Michigan's 'Mississippi' KKK", both making obvious reference to the color line in the Detroit (Detroit News Staff, 1963). The "small print" of hand-drawn signs showed that some participants wanted to address racial issues in the urban North even as the organizers' signage tried to direct most of the attention southward. Organizers acknowledged local race problems by scheduling the march on the twentieth anniversary of the racial unrest that exploded amidst rumors that White Detroiters threw a Black woman and her baby off the MacArthur Bridge to Belle Isle. This connection, however, was not overtly illuminated by most protest signs nor in King's speech at Cobo Hall (Race riot of 1943, n.d.). Instead, the racially mixed throng of 150,000 communicated a powerful progressive message of racial unity with King leading the march procession along with Walter Reuther, the president of the United Auto Workers, Mayor Jerome Cavanagh, and Reverend Franklin. Detroit, in the public eye, appeared to be a model city with cooperative, respectful police who permitted a diverse mix of orderly and courteous demonstrators to express their grievances and hopes (Hansen and Mann, 1963, p. 1A; Kieliszewski, 2017). The press reports would have likely differed if co-organizer Reverend Albert Cleage garnered majority support for his more nationalist proposal that only African Americans be allowed to participate in the event (Smith, 1999, p. 27).

The Great March to Freedom ultimately left a less lasting impact than the unrest that rocked the city in July 1967. Frustration with the lack of racial progress—particularly in regard to housing segregation, job inequality, and police violence—four years after King's rally boiled over at 12th Street and Clairmont. (Kieliszewski, 2017; Smith, 1999, pp. 193-195; Sugrue, 2014, pp. 257, 261). Some Black Detroiters, observing a police raid of a Blind Pig, an illegal bar, began lobbing taunts and bottles at officers on the scene, expressions of discontent that spiraled into widespread looting and property destruction. When police proved unable to restore order, federal troops descended on the city (see Figure 4) with tanks and other military vehicles (Kieliszewski, 2017). Violence reverberated for days, ultimately leaving forty-three people dead and over seven hundred wounded. Many Black Detroiters remember the unrest as a revolt more than a riot, referring to it as the "Great Rebellion" or the "July Rebellion of 1967" (Smith, 1999, p. 195).

Figure 4. Detroit experienced a heavy military presence during the 1967 civil unrest. (Photo id: 26017, 1967) Image courtesy of Walter P. Reuther Library, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University

Police actions may cause the gameplayer to feel compelled to revolt when controlling Markus, even if the militant path is not initially followed. A SWAT team assault on Jericho, part of a citywide roundup of androids, drives the surviving deviants into the temporary refuge of the abandoned Woodward Avenue Presbyterian Church. The gameplayer then chooses whether to launch a demonstration or a revolution. A militarized police force, replete with tanks, fires on the androids even if the path of non-violence is followed, which makes Markus question the soundness of his decision. Faith, song, and strong resolve can still steer Markus to victory, but a final act of destructive desperation can win freedom as well. Neither victory scenario mirrors the

experience of Black Detroit, though the one that results in people abandoning the city to androids could perhaps be loosely compared to the phenomenon of White flight that accelerated after the unrest in the summer of 1967.

Become Connor, A Cop Struggling with Double Consciousness

W.E.B. Dubois (2005) described the "double-consciousness" of African Americans, writing "one feels his twoness—an American, a Negro: two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body" (p. 7). Black officers working within agencies composed largely of White men sometimes felt this tension acutely when policing Black communities. Detroit patrolman Percy Hooper said in 1970 that a Black cop "gotta to be two people, gotta remain Black, and gonna remain Black, so what [they] do here is gonna live with the fact that [they are] a policeman" (Bennett, 1970). Hooper's statement makes clear that sometimes two core components of his identity seemed at odds with one another. The gameplayer experiences a comparable double-consciousness when playing Connor, an android detective helping the Detroit Police Department (DPD) track down deviant androids. Decisions made in the game have the potential to bring the two warring identities into such conflict that the gameplayer must choose between becoming deviant or remaining a cop committed to stopping the android movement.

Connor partners with a washed-up alcoholic detective named Hank who does not hide his animosity towards androids (see Figure 5). Hank calls Connor a "plastic asshole" and tells him to "be a good lil' robot and get the fuck outta here." While seemingly extreme, the exchange parallels the experience of a Black cadet who joined the DPD in 1965 and heard his sergeant gripe: "Jesus Fucking Christ, I'm working with a nigger" (Kieliszewski, 2017). White police officers sometimes even refused to share a patrol car with Black colleagues. Such everyday discrimination adversely impacted the work environment of African Americans on the police force. Inspector Frank Blunt said that he often felt like a "man on the outside" and that a lot of African American cops "washed by the wayside" because of the prejudice they encountered within the department (Bennett, 1970). When Connor first faces this hostility, the gameplayer decides whether to antagonize Hank or, like many Black police in the 1960s, let the affront slide and remain professional. This is the first of many choices throughout the game that will either feed Hank's vitriol or, conversely, create an opportunity for respect—begrudging at first—and possibly even friendship to develop.

Figure 5. Detective Hank Anderson complains to his captain about being partnered with an android as Connor stands silently in the background. Screenshot taken from *Detroit: Become Human*

Connor then meets Amanda, his Cyberlife handler, to discuss the reason for his assignment with the DPD. She informs him that failing to identify the cause of deviancy would have disastrous consequences for all androids. A meeting with the police captain affirms an association of criminality with free-thinking androids. African Americans, in comparison, have also suffered (and continue to suffer to some degree) from an embedded racialist thinking in American society that falsely correlated criminality and color. (Forman, 2017, p. 97; Muhammad, 2010, p. 93; Felker-Kantor, 2018, p. 3). White officers historically swelled the ranks of precincts in Black neighborhoods and often brought with them assumptions about Black criminality (Balto, 2019, pp. 41, 43-45, 124-125). Critics of DPD in the 1920s accused the department of deliberately hiring White officers with Southern roots to patrol and control Black neighborhoods (Detroit police department, n.d.). In the mid-1960s, African Americans constituted forty-five percent of city's population, yet representation on the police force trailed far behind at sixteen percent (Forman, 2017, p. 106). This often made Black communities feel "overpoliced and underprotected," (US Commission on Civil Rights, 1993, p. 24) because predominantly White police forces "symbolize[d to them] white power, white racism, and white repression" (National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, 1968, p. 93). Whereas Cyberlife wanted androids on patrol to protect company profits, African Americans wanted more Black police officers for reasons of personal and community safety.

Still, in the videogame, violence pervades interactions between police and deviant androids. After Connor takes a deviant into custody, Detective Gavin Reed suggests that they "rough it up a little…[since] it's not human." Peaceful protesters are gunned down by police in multiple game chapters, and when a coordinated assault on Jericho is finally launched, the antipathy of law enforcement towards deviants is shown in words and actions. Following a long historical

trend in which the dehumanization of a particular group of people is facilitated by the likening of the group to a pest species (Kendi, 2016, pp. 70, 291; Painter, 2010, pp. 69-70, 135), FBI agent Richard Perkins disdainfully observes that the deviants trying to escape Jericho are "like rats in a maze." Those androids not lucky enough to escape are mercilessly killed in the attack, even if they try to surrender peacefully.

African American communities have long faced a systematic institutionalized violence at the hands of the police, albeit typically different in form from the raid on Jericho. The NAACP recorded approximately 150 incidents of police violence against Black Detroiters (see Figure 6) between 1956 and 1960 (Spletz, 2016, p. 63). African American police in Detroit sometimes witnessed the brutality against people in the Black community. One officer recalled that the White officers in a group called the "Big Four" would verbally and physically abuse African Americans with impunity. Rotation Slim, he said, carried "half a pool cue and you just got hit every time you were stopped by him" (Kieliszewski, 2017). Systemic racism in the DPD rationalized the use of violence against African Americans. Jesse Ray, a retired Black police officer from Detroit, testified before the US Commission on Civil Rights in December 1960 that White cops felt that they "have to be rough to be effective" (US Commission on Civil Rights, 1961, p. 372) when policing the Black community, and that police had to "keep them [Black Detroiters] down or they'll get out of hand" (US Commission on Civil Rights, 1961, p. 372).

Figure 6. Police violence was pervasive enough in Detroit that the NAACP felt it necessary to document the cases. (Photo id: 24852, circa 1960s) Image courtesy of Walter P. Reuther Library, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University

Many people argued problems of police violence would decrease if the ranks of officers more closely mirrored the ethnic and racial composition of the neighborhoods that they policed. While many young African Americans shied away from careers in law enforcement because past experiences shaped their impressions of police, others joined the force hoping to positively impact the Black community (Forman, 2017, pp. 79, 104-106; Balto, 2019, pp. 117-118; Bennett, 1970; Bolton & Feagin, 2004, pp. 5-6). In some cases, though, African American police followed the practices of their White counterparts. Detroit Black Panther spokesman Chuck Holt complained in 1970 that African American cops were "still torturing us, and still brutalizing us, and the conditions in the Black community haven't changed at all" (Bennett, 1970).

Ample opportunity exists for the gameplayer to shape Connor's policing style. Over the course of the videogame, he may develop into the type of minority officer that many people hoped would be a panacea to poor police-community relations in Black neighborhoods; or, conversely, he may become more like the police warned about by the Panther spokesman. At least three woke androids intimate that Connor should empathize with them, and act compassionately, rationalizing that he understands the predicament of androids better than humans. Yet Connor has the opportunity to kill more androids than any single human NPC. If the gameplayer makes Connor into a hardened mission-driven cop, even Hank will grow disgusted with Connor's cold insensitivity, reinforcing his idea that androids are less than human. If, however, Connor consistently chooses to act humanely, his double-consciousness will become apparent as his identity as a police officer wars against his identity as an android. When Connor attempts to apprehend Markus, he is made to consider whether he, too, is more than a machine (see Figure 7). Slow pulsating music builds as doubt grows in his mind, and the gameplayer weighs which of Connor's conflicting identities should become dominant. If the gameplayer chooses to become deviant, the tempo of the music accelerates, and the tone deepens as a shadow of Connor's being steps outside of itself to pull down a wall of code instructing him to stop Markus. Rather than make the arrest, he joins the movement.

Figure 6. Connor wrestles with his two identities throughout the videogame. Screenshot taken from Detroit: Become Human

African American police officers sometimes faced a similar dilemma, at times to the point that they felt compelled to choose one aspect of their identity over the other. Though Black activists occasionally accused African American officers of being race traitors (Starkley, 2013, p. 40), Detroit patrolman Percy Hooper expressed the opinion that "all Black folks are militant," (Bennett, 1970) a statement intended to include those who worked in law enforcement. Another Black policeman asserted that "white officers sometime have trouble understanding that Black officers have Black pride" (Bennett, 1970). Black police officer organizations proved attractive vehicles for African Americans in law enforcement to address civil rights concerns. Leonard Weir of the Society of Afro-American Policemen said that the organization's members "don't meet as policeman...[but] as members of the black community" (Kronholm, 1972, p. 296). Many Black officers in Detroit mobilized against the STRESS (Stop the Robberies, Enjoy Safe Streets) police unit, which essentially functioned as an assassination squad in poor Black neighborhoods from 1971 to 1974. Black police in the Guardians of Michigan pledged to oppose STRESS, likening the unit's escalating number of fatal shootings to a form of genocide. The group promised to defend the Black community by policing the police (Black police will join in protest). Their identity as African Americans compelled them to break through the blue wall of silence and speak against wrongful police actions that put Black Detroiters at risk.

Yet other Black officers proved to be much more complicit in the abuse, despite expectations of fair treatment by the Black community. A sociological study conducted in 1966 revealed that twenty-eight percent of the Black officers in Boston, Chicago, and Washington, D.C. harbored anti-Black attitudes and used the same stereotypical descriptors of poor Blacks as racist White officers (Forman, 2017, p. 108). Ronald Martin, an African American STRESS officer patrolling Black Detroit, remarked that "we deal with trash…you can't turn it off like hot and cold water" ('Stress', 1971, p. 2A) after he and two other Black STRESS officers mistakenly killed an off-

duty African American deputy (Neubacher & Griffith, 1972, p. 2A). Many municipal police departments, often in coordination with the Federal Bureau of Investigation, enlisted Black agents to surveil, infiltrate, and undermine Black activist groups that were deemed radical in the 1960s and 1970s (Donner, 1990, p. 172; Conlon, 2017). Perhaps most famously, five African American police officers, using information provided by a Black FBI informant, participated in the raid of a Black Panther apartment that left Chairman Fred Hampton dead, a killing that many people have characterized as an assassination (Blau, 1990; Officers involved in panther raid, 1969; Gottlieb & Cohen, 1976).

Connor's story follows a comparable path if the gameplayer choses to resist Markus' attempts at suasion. When the gameplayer selects the option to "remain a machine," Connor is unable to make the arrest, but he will eventually try to assassinate Markus from a rooftop location, a task that he cannot initially complete. When he finally encounters Markus on the ground though, the gameplayer chooses which character to control. If a long series of quick-time maneuvers as Connor is completed, Connor will defeat Markus in hand-to-hand combat, snap his neck, and fire a bullet into the head of the lifeless body. In a different scenario, deviant Connor, standing at the front of a crowd of supporters, can betray Markus as he delivers an inspirational victory speech to throngs of supporters. Cyberlife and the DPD effectively accomplish their mission when Connor fires a single lethal shot at the unsuspecting leader, and presumably then brings a quick end to the androids' movement for greater equality.

Become Kara, A Revolutionary Mother

Kara is unique among the three playable characters, because forces beyond her control impact her fate more than Markus or Connor. She must put an inordinate amount of trust in people that she does not know, and this sometimes causes her trouble. Kara is not an overtly political figure like Markus, who is attempting to change the law, or Connor, who is attempting to enforce the law. The gameplayer, in fact, may easily overlook her politics. Reviewer Yussef Cole (2018) commented that Kara was "pigeonholed into cloying maternal behavior" without recognizing that Kara embodied the spirit of revolutionary mothering in Black feminism. Sociologist Patricia Hill Collins (2008) contended that motherhood is an "empowering experience for many African-American women" (p. 214) and that the "child serves as a catalyst for her movement into self-definition, self-valuation, and individual empowerment" (p. 214). Loretta Ross similarly asserted that "rethinking mothering from a radical point of view leads to considering survival as a form of self-love, and as a service and gift to others whose lives would be incalculably diminished without us" (2016, p. 2). Black feminist Alexis Pauline Gumbs argued that "in a world that teaches us to hate ourselves" (2016b, p. 13), the "radical potential of the word 'mother' comes after the 'm'…[in] the space that 'other' takes in our mouths when we say it" (2016b, p. 15). Politics, for Kara, is personal as she struggles to survive and lay claim to a basic human desire to parent and make a better life for herself and Alice, a young girl that she is mothering.

Similar to the historic role played by African American women as domestic caretakers, Kara is expected to dutifully raise the child of another person. Yet these women, oftentimes, did not have their own rights of motherhood properly recognized (Gumbs, "Introduction," 2016a, p. 109). The roots of this phenomenon extend back to slavery. Dorothy E. Roberts (1993), a scholar of race and gender, asserted that the historical stereotype of the Mammy cast her as "the perfect mother and the perfect slave…[but] placed no value in Black women as the mothers of their own children" (p. 12). Claiming the rights of motherhood—the right to love and raise

one's own child—indirectly challenges a problematic historical stereotype and its reverberations into more recent decades. Unlike human domestic caretakers, Kara cannot give birth to her own child. Nevertheless, it is the impulse of revolutionary mothering that causes her to become deviant. The gameplayer experiences the radical transformation of character over the course of the game as Kara strives to realize her dream of a better life.

Kara's initial vulnerability and helplessness show in the videogame's introduction when an Android Zone employee appears to notice signs of abuse but does not adequately address it. Like many victims of domestic violence prior to the mid-1970s, she bore visible marks of abuse that were made invisible by a society that characterized violence within the home as a private matter (Schechter, 1982, p. 158). Todd has complete control over Kara and his violence goes unquestioned. It becomes apparent that he purchased Kara primarily for domestic service, and not companionship, as the gameplayer completes mundane household chores: washing dishes, bagging garbage, general cleaning, and laundry. The gameplayer learns to be servile while finishing these tasks, fetching beer for Todd when ordered to do so, but otherwise trying to remain unseen. Nevertheless, the cycle of abuse within the home inevitably begins anew.

The domestic work done by androids in the near future had previously been completed by African American women who moved to the urban North during the Great Migration of the 1910s. Black women found employment as domestic caretakers to be one of the few economic opportunities available to them. Like Kara, these women understood that employment etiquette required deference to the typically White household. Domestic workers of the past, like Cyberlife androids, often completed their chores in uniform, which subtly reinforced the hierarchical relationship within the home. Further, New Deal labor legislation exempted domestic workers from protection, making them a vulnerable, and largely invisible, part of the workforce. Detroit's domestic workers during the interwar years, unlike Cyberlife androids, had the freedom of contract and did not typically reside in the homes of their employers (Collins, 2008, pp. 62-64). This, however, did not necessarily make them immune from the threat of physical or sexual abuse (Boehm, 2009, p. 66). Systematic inequalities remained a defining characteristic of the work relationships, and those elements of the job are evident in the videogame.

The explosiveness of Todd's temper shows a few times before he threatens Kara with extreme violence for attempting to intervene in his physical abuse of Alice. The gameplayer's decision to disobey Todd causes Kara to step outside of herself and break through a metaphorical wall of constraint. The transformation bears comparison to an episode in Zora Neale Hurston's classic *Their Eyes were Watching God*. After being hit by her husband, the heroine Janie remained in place "for unmeasured time…until something fell off the shelf inside her…she had an inside and an outside now" (Hurston, 1990, p. 67). In this awakening of her twoness (or deviance in the language of androids), Janie pictures her husband's body "tumbled down and shattered," (Hurston, 1990, p. 68) but she does not kill him. She is a different person afterwards though. Victims less restrained than Janie occasionally appeared in newspapers, like the *Detroit Free Press*, after a history of unaddressed domestic violence culminated in the murder of an abusive spouse (Wife says she killed her husband, 1960, p. 6; Wife tells of slaying husband, 1957, pp. 1A, 3A). The abuse of Alice is a breaking point for Kara (see Figure 8). She flees the house with the girl, sometimes, depending upon the gameplayer's actions, mortally wounding Todd in the process.

Figure 8. Like Janie in Hurston's classic novel, "something fell off the shelf" inside Kara so that "she had an inside and an outside now." Screenshot from *Detroit: Become Human*.

The gameplayer soon realizes that there is no safe place to go after escaping the house. Kara and Alice cannot go to a shelter, nor can they go to the police even though they are victims of intimate pattern violence. This bears some likeness to the situation that domestic violence victims in the United States faced prior to rise of the battered women's movement in the 1970s (Tierney, K.J., 1982, pp. 208, 211). Kara must, instead, find a way to survive the night while providing reassurance to Alice that everything will be alright. A cheap hotel offers the best option, but the gameplayer must rob a convenience store to secure money for the room. Less criminal options include spending the night in a junk car or in an abandoned house inhabited by an unstable deviant android. Each possible decision seems to put Kara and Alice in a potentially unsafe position. This chapter (and ones that follow) makes the gameplayer feel a degree of unease, though in the game Kara consistently tries to mask her anxiety while offering stability and comfort to Alice. The emotive gameplay—to a degree—mimics the act of mothering described by Dani McClain in which "black women especially know fear—how to live despite it and how to metabolize it for [their] children so they're not consumed by it" (p. 5).

Their vulnerability is felt even more after Kara trusts an unscrupulous android who offers directions to a supposed safe house. The place looks foreboding, but the two have no other options. Zlatko, the owner, promises that he can escort them across the border to the haven of Canada, but first, he says, he must remove Kara's tracking device. As he directs her to the basement for the procedure, Alice voices unease. Desperation overrides hesitation though. The gameplayer soon confronts the dangerousness of the situation, as Zlatko reveals himself to be a sadistic man who pleasures in caging and torturing deviants.

Zlatko's house represents the threats of kidnapping, sexual violence, and human trafficking faced by young women on the run. Disturbed men in seemingly random places—Syracuse, Cleveland,

Auburn—have kept women captive in cages or basements (Jacobs, 2003; Three missing women found in Cleveland, 2013; Cops, 2018). Sex trafficking is a much more common phenomenon, but it was not well-tracked prior to feminists injecting it into the public discourse in the 1980s. Consequently place-based historical data about sex trafficking is difficult to ascertain (Hughes, 2013). Traffickers, according to the US Department of State, target marginalized people who are vulnerable and sometimes live in the shadows hoping to avoid unnecessary encounters with the law. Kara and Alice, in other words, represented ideal prey. If the gameplayer manages to escape the house with Alice, one of Zlatko's androids, Luther, will become deviant and assist them. Once again Kara has little choice but to put her faith in a stranger's words in an effort to survive.

After Kara accepts Luther's offer of help, a familial bond begins to develop between the three characters. Yussef Cole (2018) contended that the character of Luther is a version of the insulting Magical Negro trope, a deviant that "steps out of the role of serving a human master only to switch to serving Kara and Alice." When the gameplayer first encounters Luther, he appears to fit the historic "default mode for Black characters" in videogames that Uchenna Nwaogu (2019) described as "loud, aggressive, enormous dudes whose athleticism, strength, and masculinity are their defining traits." Luther breaks that cliché when he becomes deviant. From that point forward, a growing paternal love for Alice guides his actions. Characterizing Luther as a manifestation of the Magical Negro misrepresents his role in the videogame. While in some plotlines Luther will sacrifice himself for Kara and Alice, Kara and Alice will similarly risk their lives to save Luther because that is what family would do for their loved ones. As the story progresses, the bonds between the three characters grows stronger. The gameplayer feels the importance of fictive kinships, a social phenomenon of historical importance in the Black community (White, 1987, p. 23) that persists in a variated form that Dani McClain characterizes as a "village-oriented approach to child rearing" (2019, p. 57).

The three characters must seek refuge in an abandoned amusement park, during which time the developing family dynamic is evidently clear. Alice gazes at an advertisement of a family and asks Kara if they will ever be that happy. The gameplayer chooses the response's tone, but all the replies express hope for a shared future. Kara then tells Alice a bedtime story of the gameplayer's creation that is a parable for their harrowing experiences and quest to build a better life anew. The function of this storytelling is important to revolutionary mothering. Children, as June Jordan asserted, "are the ways that the world begins again" and revolutionary mothers nurture their young into their "own freedom" (2016, p. 6). Luther listens approvingly to the story that casts him as protector—a father figure to Alice. He then kisses Alice good night and tucks her in to bed. Before leaving the amusement park, Alice has the chance to enjoy a carousel ride while Kara and Luther look on as contented parents.

The three eventually arrive at a house that functions much like a station on the Underground Railroad. An African American "conductor" named Rose offers temporary refuge to the fugitives. She implicitly makes the connection to the Underground Railroad when asked why she is helping androids, stating: "My people were often made to feel their lives were worthless. Some survived but only because they found others who helped them along the way." In one of Kara's narratives, the gameplayer navigates the fugitives across the Detroit River to Canada in the dead of night (see Figure 9), following a route traveled by thousands of runway slaves before the Civil War (Finkenbine, 2016, l. 4414). The scene bears comparison to the harrowing episode in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* where runaway mother Eliza, determined to win freedom for her son,

scrambles across an ice-capped river to escape a slave catcher (Stowe, 1879, pp. 66-67). Kara must make a potentially self-sacrificing move after a fateful encounter with the river patrol, jumping into the frigid water to push the boat to shore. If the gameplayer does not swim quickly, Kara's biocomponents will shut down, and she will die so that Alice may live.

Figure 9. The sanctuary of Canada is visible across the ice-capped Detroit River. Screenshot from Detroit: Become Human.

Kara's story ends more often at the Canada Border Inspection Station. By this time, the gameplayer has learned that Alice is also an android and the familial bonds have strengthened even further, developments which make the gameplayer feel more deeply connected to the storyline. The narrative encourages the gameplayer to imagine the android family, conventional in form, finding happiness and security in the sanctuary of Canada. For Kara, becoming a mother in a family of her own making is empowering because it affirms that she is a person and her life has value. Hence, the loss of any member of this family unit is arguably more wrenching for the gameplayer than the death of any other characters in the videogame. The gameplayer, in effect, understands what it means to be a revolutionary mother who struggles to survive and foster a better future for her children.

Conclusion

The Detroit of the future indelibly bears the imprint of its past. André Carrington (2016) maintained that "racialized language and imagery suture the hypothetical forms of marginalization envisioned in speculative fiction to the lived situations they invoke" (Coda, Section 1, para. 4). That holds true in *Detroit: Become Human*, a videogame that artfully interweaves historical symbolism into the narrative, sometimes in subtle ways. The design team also recognized that place is important (even going so far as to only use Detroit-based musicians for the soundtrack). An often precise historical geography underlays storylines that engage

potential social, economic, and political concerns related to advances in artificial intelligence. While robots displaying a modicum of self-awareness are relatively new technological developments, struggles for equality, justice, and opportunity are not. Detroit—in many ways defined by its generations of hope, promise, and occasionally strife—makes an ideal setting for a contemplation of race, social movements, justice, and politics through play.

The gameplayer considers otherness from at least three different perspectives, an experience that has the potential to affect their understanding of issues in real life. With stories set in otherworldly environments, Isiah Lavender (2011) argued that the otherhood in science fiction "attempts to change how racial difference is viewed by exposing the history and practice of discrimination" in the actual world. Future-focused storylines about androids in *Detroit: Become Human* arguably disarm the gameplayer of latent biases and encourage a less burdened consideration of historical and contemporary issues relating to marginalization and inequality. Through play the videogame fosters greater empathy and understanding in an era increasingly wrought by social divides.

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