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How decisive are you while playing a video game? Empathy, agency and gender in playable texts

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Abstract

Video games serve as a dynamic platform for storytelling, immersing players in interactive narratives that challenge their ethical and moral perspectives. This study examines the illusion of choice in the video game "Detroit: Become Human" by Quantum Dreams, a narrative-driven game that explores themes of discrimination, oppression, and rebellion of androids. While the game appears to offer moral dilemmas that shape the story, its design constrains player agency, guiding them toward predetermined outcomes. Although it fosters empathy for its oppressed android characters and draws parallels to historical injustices, it largely overlooks gender inequality, reinforcing traditional gender roles instead of subverting them. By analysing how the game's mechanics, framing, and developer biases influence moral decision-making, this paper argues that "Detroit: Become Human", standing as an example of the medium, raises essential political and ethical questions but remains limited by its own structural constraints. The findings highlight the need for greater inclusivity and intersectional representation in gaming narratives, ensuring that discussions of power, justice, and identity go beyond surface-level engagement.

Keywords

gender inequality, ludology, player's agency, digital storytelling, representation in gaming

Jak decyzyjny jesteś podczas grania w grę wideo? Empatia, sprawczość i płeć w grywalnych tekstach

Abstrakt

Gry wideo stanowią dynamiczne medium, angażujące graczy w interaktywne narracje, które podważają ich etyczne i moralne wartości. Niniejszy artykuł analizuje iluzję wyboru w grze „Detroit: Become Human" studia Quantic Dream – narracyjnej produkcji poruszającej tematy dyskryminacji, opresji i buntu androidów. Choć gra sprawia wrażenie oferowania dylematów moralnych kształtujących przebieg fabularny, jej konstrukcja ogranicza sprawczość gracza, prowadząc w stronę z góry zaplanowanych zakończeń. Mimo że gra budzi empatię wobec uciskanych postaci androidów i odwołuje się do historycznych niesprawiedliwości, w dużej mierze pomija kwestie nierówności płci, utrwalając tradycyjne role genderowe zamiast je podważać. Analiza mechaniki gry i wpływu perspektywy twórców na podejmowanie decyzji moralnych prowadzi do wniosku, że „Detroit: Become Human" – jako reprezentatywny przykład medium – stawia istotne pytania polityczne i etyczne, jednak pozostaje ograniczona przez własną strukturę. Wyniki podkreślają potrzebę większej inkluzywności oraz reprezentacji intersekcjonalnej w narracjach growych, tak by refleksja nad władzą, sprawiedliwością i tożsamością sięgała głębiej niż powierzchowny poziom zaangażowania.

Słowa kluczowe

nierówność płci, ludologia, sprawczość gracza, narracja cyfrowa, reprezentacja w grach

1. Introduction

While the aesthetic, thematic, and experiential features of a video game narrative determine the player's in-game behaviours and sense of agency (Murray 1997: 317), they also directly translate into the interpretive, aesthetic, and ethical judgements (Phelan 2007: 214) the player makes at the intersection of textual signals and extratextual norms that are activated by the narrative (Riffaterre 1990: 3). In other words, the player immersed in the storyworld is inclined to decide about the character's life or death, but the choices they have to make can be allowed or denied due to the mechanics of the game, being a fundamental feature of narrative games, as they make players feel influence and agency, which are the most appealing factors—the more morally packed the decisions are, the more intriguing game is for the player. This theoretical assumption makes one wonder: what is the relationship between two sources influencing players' behaviour in the game—the narrative as such and everything beyond the storyworld?

D. Fox Harrell has emphasised the social constructions and value systems encoded into game rule-based systems (Harrell 2013: 256). He has explored various forms of computational narratives, gaming, and social media that allow the software to sensitise users to the core elements of diversity, equity, and inclusion through the exploration of moral dilemmas that cannot be reduced to simple 'good' or 'evil' dichotomies; complex as they are, these dilemmas are to enhance ethical self-enquiry in the player (Murray 2022: 319; Zagal 2009; Sicart 2011; 2013). Thus, story-driven games often draw attention to social problems and foster opinion formation on problems whose scope ranges from generational issues, as in *Life is Strange* (2015), through reflection on political systems, as in *Frostpunk* (2018), to dystopian futures used as critiques of current politics, as in *Bioshock* (2007) or *Fallout* (1997). In this work, I aim to analyse to what degree these choices mirror the player's reliance on specific value systems and debate over how the ethical systems are

challenged while playing the game. I discuss these matters in my analysis of Quantic Dream's role-playing video game *Detroit: Become Human* (2018). The example I decided to analyse in terms of ethics and moral values is untypical enough as the player takes the position of three androids who take part in a revolution against humans. The game, with its complex branching narratives, confronts players with an uneasy choice of what party to support in that revolution, despite the game clearly concentrating on the despair of the machines and showing the evilness of humans. The question is whether empathy developed for the androids through the narrative dynamics of the game aligns with the values the player supports outside the storyworld.

Detroit: Become Human invites the player to take a position to support a certain view of the world that the game offers. It prompts to adopt specific political viewpoints related to both fictive and historical political events as the narrative is packed with various expressions of racism found throughout history, such as slavery, segregation, and what might be called 'cultural racism' (Pallua, Knapp, and Exenberger 2009: 21). *Detroit: Become Human* tackles issues of race-based oppression, systemic and individual racism, racially targeted questionable or criminal police conduct, a variety of protest actions and the moral arguments for or against them, and political dialogue between oppressors and those they wish to oppress, which might be parallel to Black Live Matters movement (Krösslhuber 2022: 4; Schubert 2021: 13). Still, the prominence of these motifs and constructions of agency used to present a ludic narrative focused on socio-political choices is constrained by the programming and remains under control of a game master. Consequently, while focusing on the discrimination of androids, parallel to the Other, it still does not address the issue that remains troublesome in the video game industry, which is gender inequality. For that reason, I aim to investigate the mechanisms in the game responsible for evoking empathy towards certain minorities combined with players' cognitive decision-making processes to indicate gender-related portrayal of discrimination against

women in the analysed example and the broader context of the video game industry.

2. *Detroit Become Human*: Agency, ethics and importance of choices

To establish the relationship between the game mechanics fostering players' empathy towards certain discriminated minorities and players' own decision-making processes, it is necessary to pinpoint the level of agency players have/are allowed to have while interacting with the game. The question is, to what extent do players comprehend the dynamics of choices in diverse contexts, especially the ones that are morally charged? If the premise is that players put their cognitive effort into making the decisions in gameplay, the aim is, firstly, to examine whether they are driven by critical reflection and ethical thinking or if this is the game that imposes particular worldviews and ethics associated with it. Regardless of the fact that the problem of agency, authorship, and interaction between a game and a player has been vastly researched and contradicted within the progress of gaining information over ludic action (Souvik Mukherjee 2015: 150), for the sake of this research, the matter of the relation of human input and machine algorithms in moral choices needs to be recapped.

The dynamics of the user-interface relation in video games make the reception of the digital culture product much more immersive and emotive than in other modes of cultural expression. Media theorists argue that a player's agency in the choice-making process lacks the significance or meaning of the action that it entails, and the constraints of programming make the agency an illusion. One of the pioneers in video game research, Janet Murray, defines agency as "the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices" (1997: 126), making it a substantial characteristic of video games. Even if the feature was discussed by Murray almost three decades ago, it still remains relevant regardless of

the technological advancements of video games. The phrase 'meaningful action' is crucial here, as an agency should not be mistaken for interactivity, which does not guarantee that the actions undertaken will have any 'illusion' of choice or free will (Atkins 2003: 44; Domsch 2013: 90), even if a choice can lead to multiple continuations. Following Domsch, when dealing with the narratological implications of a player's choice, it is necessary to assess how and to what extent a player experiences the choices as meaningful in relation to the game's fictional world and consequently as narratively relevant (2013: 61). Then, while assessing whether the choice is meaningful and impactful, the extent to which the ethical decisions discussed further in this work mirror players' own worldviews expressed outside of the storyworld. While many game design features attempt to create the illusion of agency where there is none, event triggers are primarily used to obscure the fact that the player has control over the occurrence of a specific event while at the same time hiding the fact that the event is in no way contingent but determined. Hence, the agency seems to involve both the player and the game algorithms together with their technical affordances (Mukerjee 2015: 155). Stefan Schubert implied that the analysis of the games that foster the impression of having complete 'freedom' in the narrative should rather be understood as a textual effect offering players the *feeling* of being in control (2021: 4) of the events. Still, players' illusionary freedom is at the core of their satisfaction, and the choice-making process is designed so that "You unthinkingly follow instructions, however phrased – and follow them to scripted conclusions. You're suddenly aware of the illusion of agency that games project: allowing you to interact only with what and where they say so. A game chooses. A player obeys", as Rich Stanton describes in reference to the game *BioShock* (2007).

As players' satisfaction rises with the awareness of the relevance of their actions, game designers create games offering a high level of imaginative immersion in choose-your-own-adventure-style narratives that engage players in a narrative and

the possibility of reconstructing a storyworld. Schubert explains that emphasis is not put on the story and the events in a game (2021:7). Instead, the focus is on the storyworld— the narrative process of playing a game, during which information about events, locations, characters, and others is constantly added by the player to a mental recreation of the entire narrative world that this game evokes (Schubert, ibid.). The combination of players' choices and gameplay skills leads to different reconstructions of the storyworld among players, and this possibility becomes the most appealing element of choose-your-own-adventure (CYOA) games. Quantic Dream's role-play game *Detroit: Become Human* centres on narrative choice as the core element of gameplay, making the story more attractive as players make a plethora of ethical decisions that significantly influence the development of the narrative.

The complexity of the relationship between imaginative immersion and virtual moral decision-making is an issue in the immersive interactive drama *Detroit: Become Human,* with rich narratives, dialogues, and solemn decisions that await a player throughout the course of the gameplay. The game is set in November 2038, in a near-future Detroit where CyberLife, a tech company, dominates android production. The game focuses heavily on a branching storyline where player choices in dialogue and major decisions significantly impact the narrative and lead to multiple endings (Lebowitz and Klug 2011: 181). The story follows three 'deviant' androids involved in the android rebellion, each portrayed from a distinct viewpoint. It adapts based on player choices, which can carry serious consequences, offering diverse outcomes and multiple endings; each of the three main playable characters' stories, Kara's, Marcus's, and Connor's, can influence one another and impact each storyline or even die, which makes every decision grave and incite excitement. Moreover, excitement is raised by interactions that rely on the Quick Time Event (QTE) system, which significantly contributes to the debate over making morally charged decisions due to the short time in the decision-making process. The player

knows from the beginning that one mistake can lead to the death of a character, as one is informed about it while choosing the difficulty level before even starting the gameplay. Then, the female narrator, an android named Chloe, breaking the fourth wall, informs, "Don't forget: this is not just a story. This is our future" (*Detroit: Become Human* 2018). The game begins with these intradiegetic and extradiegetic notions, providing an even more dramaturgical and immersive experience which starts at the moment of turning on the game. Chloe appears on the screen and talks directly to a player whenever they return to the main menu, and provides a highly emotive value that indices the empathy towards androids. She emotionally reacts and comments on some of the events and choices a player makes in-game and occasionally asks a player questions about some of the philosophical issues.

Zagal defines ethical in-game choices as "situations in which their [the players" understanding of an ethical system is challenged, or by creating moral tension between player's goals and those posed by the narrative and the gameplay of a game" (2009: 1). The debatable issue of the nature of ethical aspects of the decision-making process in *Detroit: Become Human* is the distinction between endings that would be 'good' or 'bad', and the fact that the game rewards the morally upright decisions. Bellini and Meier state, "following the ethical path feels natural due to the narrative and interaction design (imaginative immersion) as well as the movement-like controls (gameflow)" (2021: 6), which is transparent to the player in the first moments of the gameplay when Connor can save the fish, or let it die and saving it is automatically rewarded with a short cutscene. However, it is the player's responsibility to find the "right" series of choices that leads to the desired, though unknown, outcome. Agata Waszkiewicz refers to *Detroit: Become Human* as an example of a branching narrative in video games underlying the idea that a game offers a potential double interpretation. They notice that, on the one hand, the game offers solemn decisions to be made but, on the other hand, "the further exploration of the game

narrative and specific chapters after obtaining one ending is actively encouraged, among others, through the PlayStation Trophy system which rewards both extremely positive, pacifist and the utmost violent and tragic outcomes" (2019: 204). So that, the game does not encourage choosing one path as the right one.

Still, the ethical values rewarded in the game are the ones that are part of its larger doxas. Researchers argue about the extent to which ethical choices are driven by cognitive ethical thinking or rationality. Jesper Juul ties human cognition to the game's rules and highlights that "video games are real in that they consist of real rules with which players actually interact, […] yet [to] play a video game is […] to interact with real rules while imagining a fictional world" (2005: 1). Real rules, however, can or cannot be applicable to a player's cognitive and active decision-making process. Domsch, in turn, argues that to consider the ethical relevancy of the player's action, one needs to distinguish between the in-game decisions and the second category, which takes into consideration the player as a social being whose activity of playing is embedded in a social context outside of the gameplay (2013: 117). Following his distinction, this analysis of the decisions taken within *Detroit: Become Human* will then focus only on the first category of choices, which has in-game consequences. Domsch refers to Juul and states that he neglects this distinction and "misses a chance to connect a game's rules and its fiction in a more integrated way" (2013: 151). So, it can be concluded that a player resorts to gameplay rationality in order to decide which option to take. However, fully accepting the rules without challenging them would be simply irrational and make players entirely subjective as the rules that operate a game still cannot be thought of or understood without reference to semantic concepts, and the player has to accept their rationality (Domsch 2013: 52). That is, games can either enable players to establish (and challenge) their own evaluations of ethics and morality or, particularly in the realm of video games, they can convey the notion that

predefined evaluations and rules don't exist, offering players the illusion that they can determine their own values for their choices – the "free will", for which *Detroit* is famous, though the exact phrase is never used in the narrative. Considering that, game mechanics can simultaneously influence morally charged decisions and shape worldviews equally in positive and negative ways. Even if the premise is that the game, as *Detroit*, is contributing to a general raise of awareness towards minorities, it is crucial to be aware that these are the gamemasters who created this work and its algorithms so that they are putting these influences onto the players, and creators worldviews should not always be categorised as undoubtedly ethical or otherwise.

3. Between the human and the inhuman

Detroit: Become Human is an exceptional work to be analysed regarding ethical choices as the player engages in the story of androids, i.e. non-human, characters-machines. It can be argued that this has an effect on moral engagement and the decision-making process as it is focused on androids' sentience and, therefore, androids' rights. Since the beginning of the game, a player faces the question of whether the decisions they make on behalf of the androids would be the same as the decisions influencing humans. However, the ethical compass could be disturbed even more as androids do not differ much from humans in the storyworld; if not for the blue chip, they would be indistinguishable from non-playable human characters. And they are, even in front of the androids. Kara's story revolves around Alice, a young girl who is mistaken for a human for most of the game; both a character and a player acknowledge she is an android at the end of the gameplay. Darwin and other scientists concluded that human beings are more likely to develop empathy towards those who are similar to themselves (Stephan and Kinlay 1999: 735). So, if the machines and humans are so alike, it is easier to develop equal empathy towards one another.

Agata Waszkiewicz refers to one more aspect which portrays the ambiguity of the moral compass of the impersonated posthumans in the game. They refer to the Three Laws of Robotics (Asimov 1942; 1990), ensuring robots' [hence, androids] obedience and inability to hurt their human owners. But, in *Detroit,* those who do find a way to "wake up" and develop beyond their programming are referred to as the 'deviants' and are perceived by society in the game not only as victims of malfunction or a virus but also as a genuine threat to humans (2019:199). Decisions faced by the player include determining whether to comply with human directives and whether to support or impede the revolution, whereas choices often depend on the character being played. Additionally, players face the extradiegetic, political issue of what would happen if androids existed outside of the narrative, as Chloe, the female narrator, reassures us from the screen, talking directly to the player outside of it. Asimov's law is broken most often when androids defend themselves against human violence in the game. The design of *Detroit* even fosters sympathising with androids as these are people, not machines, that embody evil, cruelty, aggression, or even sadistic behaviour. From the beginning of the gameplay, Kara, an android who strives to save and take care of Alice, is contrasted with egoistic and lazy Todd torturing her and his own child; distrustful and addicted to alcohol, Hank cooperates with honest and open Connor, and Zlatko kidnaps and brutally tortures androids. So, it is natural for a player to side with androids who embody noble traits and humanist values (Waszkiewicz 2019: 199), and throughout many storylines, the game invokes sympathy in the player for the characters they control. Still, following the path in which a player is favourable for the playable androids feels natural for a player due to the narrative and interaction design (imaginative immersion) as well as the movement-like controls (gameflow), as Bellini and Meier indicate (2021: 5). However, most androids must be "converted" to become aware of themselves. The question of sentience is, then, whether it is right and accordant to one's moral compass to follow the

revolutions of the machines who are not yet converted but have the potential to be self-aware. The game invokes the question of "being alive" by allowing Connor, an android working for the police against his own kin, to be replaced after his death as long as he is non-sentient. It is implied that it would be otherwise if he/it was "conscious". This implication indicates how ethics and morals can shift and alter contingent on the androids being replaceable machines or conscious people, and this is reflected by how a player approaches the gameplay in the storyline with Connor, depending on whether he is a deviant.

4. The other

Empathising with androids means empathising with the Other, who suffer from social stigma and exclusion or become victims in a repeated pattern of exploitation. The three main characters in each of the storylines are marginalised and experience problems similar to those of humans, but the marginalisation seems to be more rational as they are robots, not people. They are marked as "deviants", which immediately is an indicator of unfitness and social stigma and a reason to be persecuted by society. At the same time, they are difficult to put in any normative frames, as androids are neither humans nor machines. However, the topic is debatable enough, as it needs to be acknowledged that despite the imaginative immersion that a player experiences during the game, as mentioned, the player's agency is limited by a game design. Hence, empathy towards the Other is also encouraged by facilitating and rewarding players' decisions, which are made based on a belief that they are in the best interest, here, rewarding empathising with androids and underlying the unfairness that they experience. At the same time, the android revolution, in which the player can choose whether to be pacifistic or rebellious, would not be interesting for the player if the narrative was not convincing enough about how much the uprising is needed, though morally dubious.

Players vicariously make decisions from the perspective of these marginalised androids, identifying themselves with the characters in the story. When they do so, players manifest the characters' goals and emotions, fostering a sense of empathy (Tal-Or and Cohen 2010: 404) towards the machines, which makes them despise humans who harm the playable characters. A study referring to questions of empathy and ethical complexity (Cobb 2019) argues that different narratives in the media can induce 'empathetic processes' that can improve perceptions of stigmatised groups (Oliver et al. 2012: 218). Readers [of various media can] become more solicitous, creating more positive evaluations towards these marginalised groups (Oliver et al., 2012: 219), which seems to be natural considering the representation of androids as victims of social labelling, segregation (Markus standing in a bus in "android compartment"), violence, and abuse. The exploitation of androids can be then equalled to racism or any other form of discrimination, and the game functions as a criticism of it underlying the need of humans to exploit without the moral burden. Not to mention that the Others strive to become equal to humans or to be exactly alike human beings as in the storyworld, there is no place for otherness. In one of the interviews, the lead game designer, David Cage, said, "We wanted to talk about our society, about segregation, discrimination, domestic violence, the right to be different, humanism. Could a video game talk about such serious things?" (Khan 2019). Then, the game seems to be a criticism of the atrocities that humans perpetrated and, as confirmed by Cage, fostering the decisions that would evoke empathy and concern for the androids. They are in turn allegoric to victims that we know from the narratives outside of the screen, not human beings who are tormentors. For some players, taking the perspective of a marginalised character may lead to a 'virtual cross-dressing' experience whereby they can "try on the other, the taboo, the dangerous, the forbidden, and the otherwise unacceptable" (Leonard 2006: 86). This perspective, in turn, can give players insight into minorities' perspectives and enhance under-

standing of those who are discriminated against in the extradiegetic realm. Other game researchers, such as Salen and Zimmerman, imply that players are aware of the artificial concept of the characters (2003: 453); however, regardless of the level of identification with the character, it is still valid that the sociopolitical issues are the main topic of the game, and players can identify with the Other to a certain extent to acknowledge the extradiegetic problems of minorities. Still, as players operate within an algorithm and mechanics of the game, it is valid to notice that not all excluded groups are sufficiently represented.

5. Women and agency in video games

The issues of otherness, morally loaded decisions in video games, discrimination, diversity, and exclusion are underscored in game studies and are also frequent academic inquiries in the context of gender inequality and female representation in video games. As video games are stereotypically believed to be a medium designed for males, women are portrayed through male lenses, which results in their sexualisation, sexual harassment, and workplace segregation (Chess and Shaw 2015: 208; Biscop et al. 2019: 1; Salter and Blodget 2014: 466). From *Grand Theft Auto* series to fighting games such as *Street Fighter* series or action adventures like *Bayonetta*, sexualised representations of women are common in this medium. Not to mention the 'bikini armour' worn by female warriors who are designed to wear very few pieces of clothing and armour that cover only their breast and bikini areas, whereas male characters are designed to wear a lot of defensive equipment, as in *Mortal Kombat* (2011) (Pan 2003:38), *Dead or Alive* series, or RPG games as *Subverse* (2021).

The male-centred perspective in video games suffers from insufficient female voices due to the stereotype and common belief that this medium is targeted at and made by men. Despite the fact that female gamers in the United States reached 48% in 2022 (Clement 2022), a 2021 survey of game developers

revealed that only 30% of developers globally were women. Since the industry is male-dominated, historically, video games have tended to be targeted at men, who were perceived as the default audience. Research exploring gender studies in games shows that protagonists are predominantly white men, while female characters are often portrayed in a secondary and sexualised manner (Jansz and Martis 2007: 145; Lynch et al. 2016: 566). Women in games are often portrayed according to gender stereotypes, frequently depicted as sexual objects intended for a heterosexual male audience: this representation is designed mainly to cater to the male gaze (Mulvey 1999: 837). At the same time, the industry is unwilling to adopt any changes in the male-centric narratives due to the apprehension that target consumers, consisting of heterosexual white males, would not readily accept (Tompkins 2022: 402). As a result, the marginalised identities, not only women but also people of colour and LGBTQ+ communities, are susceptible to being isolated from the narratives of a hetero-masculine ingroup or to be represented in a stereotypical, underestimated way.

The failure to adequately represent women in video games continues to be a prominent issue, frequently manifested through their depiction as secondary characters lacking narrative agency. Often, female characters are positioned primarily as figures in need of rescue, serving to motivate the male protagonist's journey rather than pursuing their own goals. This dynamic is most clearly embodied in the "Damsel in Distress" trope—a plot device in which a female character is placed in peril and rendered incapable of escape without male intervention. Traditionally prevalent in early titles from 80's and 90's such as *The Legend of Zelda* (1986), *Prince of Persia* (1992), and *Metal Gear* (1990), this narrative structure remains persistent in later productions, including *Resident Evil 4* (2005), *Ninja Gaiden: Dragon Sword* (2008), *Alan Wake* (2010), or *Star Wars: The Force Unleashed II* (2010), where female characters are frequently subject to violence or captivity in ways that serve to advance the male protagonist's arc (Feminist Frequency 2013a;

2013b). More recent titles likewise exhibit variations of this trope, underscoring its continued relevance. *In Far Cry 3* (2012), the protagonist's girlfriend, among other female characters, functions predominantly as a narrative catalyst for the male hero's emotional development rather than as an autonomous agent. *Batman: Arkham Knight* (2015), through the abduction and feigned death of Barbara Gordon, invokes another trophy, which is "Women in Refrigerators" ("fridging"), a device intended to deepen the male protagonist's emotional stakes. This phenomenon, named by comics writer Gail Simone in 1999, refers to the narrative practice of subjecting female characters to extreme violence, trauma, or death—not to advance their own storylines but rather to catalyse the development of male characters. *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015), despite offering complex female figures like Ciri and Yennefer, often reduces them to romantic objects or plot devices within Geralt's story. Similarly, *Red Dead Redemption 2* (2018) features numerous female characters who are imperilled and dependent on male intervention, lacking meaningful narrative development. In *Cyberpunk 2077* (2020), characters such as Evelyn Parker exemplify the continued use of female suffering and exploitation as a narrative tool, reinforcing rather than challenging traditional gender hierarchies.

On the other hand, there are games in which female characters are powerful protagonists. However, they remain represented through the male lenses and frequently reflect the "Lara phenomenon," derived from the *Tomb Raider* series' female protagonist, Lara Croft, who is tough and competent, though still sexualised and adherent to male preferences. The research conducted by Jessica E. Tompkins and Nicole Martins, in which nineteen game designers and developers were interviewed, is a vivid conclusion of the notion of female underrepresentation in video games. The research shows that the mixture of pervasive masculinity in video game culture and industry, the games market, late capitalism and societal factors of patriarchy and gender expectations has resulted in male dominance in the

medium. While designers felt that it was essential to avoid sexualising female characters once the debate over gender roles in the video games industry arose, other themes suggest that this perspective could be working against technological forces, the predominant male labour force and heterosexual gaze, and market logic governing character design decisions (2022: 18).

6. *Detroit Become Human*: Gender roles in the world of androids

The moral reasoning through the decision-making process in *Detroit: Become Human* and its complex branch narrative, as well as the concept of the Other, who in the game is android deviant, and female underrepresentation in video games taken together, fall for gender-related narrative stereotypes. All of these phenomena pose a question of players' cognitive awareness of gender-related portrayal of discrimination against women. To start with, I would like to indicate the extent to which the game represents the synergy of various forms of oppression against female representatives and analyse it in terms of players' moral compass related to the issue. The lasting impact of one person's choices on another is most clearly illustrated by a single interaction in the game (Cobb 2019). The theme of android intelligence and rights is particularly emphasised through one significant ethical decision required from the player concerning the android featured on the title screen – Chloe, the narrator of the game. At the end of the game, after the successful android revolution, Chloe interacts with the player, asking the player to make a final choice of whether she will be allowed to join the revolution or if she should remain the game hostess. This simple decision on the side of the player requires only the yes/no answer, though it represents the player's reflection on androids' freedom and dominance over a machine and, at the same time, a female representative, who/which fits into the frames of a stereotypical beauty with blond hair and blue eyes. The final choice raises certain doubts. Firstly, would players

respond differently to this request if it was made by a male android? Secondly, is the decision affected by Chloe's appearance? And finally, to what extent is the decision made by a player and restricted by the game design? Still, it is the player having power over the Other and breaking the fourth wall contributes to the feeling of agency and freedom that the player has over one's life, even if only digitally.

Among the three main playable characters in the game, one of them is female – Kara. Her story relies on the caretaking of Alice, a little girl who proves to be an android at the end of the gameplay. The game is designed in a way that Kara's storyline is focused on escaping the oppressors and violence with another male android named Luther, who protects both of the females. Kara's storyline seems to be introduced to remind players constantly about the emotional and physical abuse exhibited by humans, which fits into Simon's category of "fridging". Not only is it the only storyline that does not impact the ones of other playable characters, but it is also the one that is focused on escaping, not fighting. The other possible narrative branch is that she is being killed in the first section of the game by Todd, an alcoholic and abusive male character, and her storyline is finished. It is worth noticing that Markus and Conor cannot be killed in a similar manner, as, for instance, when Conor dies, he is restored with a new body, and Markus has the ability to calculate his actions, saving him almost every time.

What is more, Kara strives to become a human being; she craves "normality". Yet, the normality that is desired means realising the most basic, normative and normalising stereotypes which compose the definition of 'human' (Waszkiewicz 2019: 201) — happiness demands having a traditional, heterosexual family, and when it is successfully achieved, the player is awarded 'Happy family trophy'. Despite the alleged freedom in the choices of a player, it is not possible to change the narrative and choose a different path than the one that perpetrates the genre role stereotypes. If the game rewards morally upright decisions, it can be concluded that the player gets the information

that fitting into this role is morally upright. Again, instead of fighting with inequality, *Detroit: Become Human*, as intended by Cage, sends the players a subliminal message which does not fight with stereotypes but otherwise, at the same time, reassures the player on the cognitive level that they made moral and ethical decisions. Waszkiewicz noticed that the androids desperately need to embody humanity and humanism functions as a normalisation tool. In the opposition of us-them and self-the Other, androids do not strive to become independent, autonomous groups but rather become the accepted 'normal' (2019: 202), which for Kara is the heteronormative, stereotypical female role and the need for motherly caretaking and protection, and representative of 'damsel in distress' saved by Luther. In Asimov's *Bicentennial Man* (1984), in which the author undermines the Three Laws of Robotics, the leading message is that an android can be granted human status when a perfect copy is accepted as original. In the book, Andrew, the robot hero of the story, should not be treated as a slave of a human being, though these are humans that strive to treat them as slaves due to weakness in human beings that makes it difficult for them to be ethical (Anderson 2008:3). *Detroit: Become Human* confirms not only this sentiment by designing most human characters as mischievous but also by implication that the ultimate goal of the androids is to become as human as possible, hence the humanism they are striving for is purely anthropocentric. So, the player who follows the dynamics of the game is convinced that this paradigm is both real and ethical, as it is rewarded by the game mechanics and repeats the pattern. The player's parasocial relationship with Kara largely relies on the cultural assumption that motherhood and femininity should be appreciated.

Kara suffers from various forms of oppression, even if she is not hyper-sexualised, and, as mentioned, the sexualisation of female representatives in video games is one of the main issues that the industry struggles with. However, the toxic masculinity in the game is expressed through the design and storyline of other non-playable androids. Even though the player has

a "choice" whether to be violent towards female androids in the chapter in which the action is held in the "Eden club", in the end, it's two female bots being abused and defending themselves only because they are in love with each other. Plenty of the secondary characters are sexualised and objectified as sexbots who/which also are not deprived of decision-making abilities, which makes them more human-like and should evoke empathy. But, as long as the game mechanics do not imply that a certain event should be considered in terms of immoral actions, unfairness, sexism, or any other form of oppression, the player does not, or barely, acknowledge them. Hence, the game reinforces essentialist gender stereotypes and does not apply to the complex interactions between race, sex, class, and sexuality in the context of an accelerating relationship between machine technology and people's everyday lived experiences. The relation of one another is crucial in the progress of feminism studies, as insisted on one of the most impactful works of contemporary cultural theory, *A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century* (1985). Haraway, in her Manifesto, which, despite the date of publication, is still significant as it exacerbated the trends of the growing internet, social media, and the digital economy (Pohl 2019: 15), demands the intersectional perspective, which was relevant in the late twentieth century as well as it is now. This demand, in turn, is not met by *Detroit: Become Human*, as the notion of the Other regards only specific marginalised groups that the game creators indicate. Haraway was underlying the issue 32 years before the release of the discussed work, and since then, other feminists have already explored the potentials and limitations of video games and game studies for queer (and) women of colour feminist political possibilities. In her book *Gamer Trouble* (2020), Amanda Phillips expresses the titled 'troubles' in the form of community conflict, technological histories, human-interface interactions, and representational practices that continually force gamers to negotiate power and identity both inside and outside of the envelope of play (2020: 173). As Phillips

emphasises, "Gamers perform such complicated dances with social and technological systems each time they pick up a controller" (2020: 11) – they are in conversation with technical details and constraints, as well as (should be in) debate with the room the field lacks voices striving for the recognition of difference, "the original killjoys" (Ahmed 2010: 68), advocating for racial, class, transgender, and queer justice, also in the works as *Detroit: Become Human.*

7. Conclusions

Detroit: Become Human allures players with the possibility of choice and bearing responsibility for their actions in the game. However, the player does not enjoy ultimate freedom; they can act and decide where they are permitted to, and their actions are restricted by programming and game design. So, the socio-ethical choices that the players make are an illusion to a great extent. Despite the fact that the problem of discrimination is clearly an issue addressed by Quantic Dream, and, the game aims to enhance empathy and foster ethical, moral reasoning through the gameplay, the player mainly roleplays a mistreated character, and the decision is made by a gamemaster controlling and organising the whole storyworld. In many cases, it successfully accomplishes the task of underlying the mistreatment of the Other through the representation of androids. The examined moral compassing in video games, especially in *Detroit*, shows that the game mechanics develop empathy towards the Other, but only when the game wants it to be developed and fostered, hence including only those minorities that are implied by the algorithm. Even if the players are rewarded for empathising with oppressed androids, and they believe that the decisions they made are in the best interest of the characters, the oppression and violence against female representatives remain unnoticed. Critical reflection and ethical thinking might be encouraged while playing the game, but the cognitive effort players put

into making the decisions is restricted and biased by game developers—mainly white, heterosexual men.

Claire Colebrook has noted that imaginative visions of the end of the world cannot seem to move beyond familiar gender tropes. She calls this phenomenon "sextinction", arguing that:

> It is precisely here, in the genre of the post-apocalyptic, that the most tiring gender narratives are repeated [...] One might say that it is easier to imagine the end of the world and the end of capitalism than it is to think outside the structuring fantasies of gender. There must always be an active male heroism driven by a feminine fragility that appears to hold the promise of the future. (2014: 178)

It could not be more accurate in relation to the narrative of *Detroit: Become Human.* The analysis of the gameplay and female representatives shows that the game does not normalise gender equality at almost any point, despite its aim to raise a political discussion; it does not foster tolerance towards the Other being female but rather reinforces gender stereotypes. The player, immersed in the gameplay, is convinced that they influence the narrative by fighting against human oppression and supporting the discriminated androids, but the humanism that they fight for is in its most conservative, anthropocentric, and normalising sense, further adding to the tokenism of the game and betraying the conservationist mindset behind it (Waszkiewicz 2019: 209). Still, I believe that the complex branching narrative and the possibility of the player's extradiegetic agency infringing on the characters' diegetic agency contributes to the overall debate of injustice, inequality, politics, power, and differences. Even if the choices players make are restricted, they induce the 'emphatic process' that can improve perceptions of stigmatised groups and allow them to personify the Other. Nevertheless, any game claiming to offer players narrative control must carefully examine the framing and content of interactions to avoid scenarios where, for instance, a female avatar's primary choice revolves around whether she will face abuse. Otherwise, the promised

agency would be experienced only by those who accept the game's fundamental premises.

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