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Life is Ours to Choose: Empathy and Choice-Making in *Detroit: Become Human*

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Film and Media Studies from The College of William & Mary
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Introduction

While not everyone likes video games, everyone likes to talk about them, whether they play them or not. Video games have sparked debates between scientists on their positive and negative effects, and debates between philosophers on the changing definition of art, and whether or not video games can even be art. But outside of these academic discussions, video games continue to permeate the lives of average people, and remain as Steven Poole says, “part of the cultural furniture.” No philosophical stance is needed to see that video games are and will remain a popular pastime for millions. In 2020, the Entertainment Software Association reported that 70% of kids and 64% of adults play video games, and 55% of parents reported playing video games with their child once a week, making video games a medium not only enjoyed by multiple generations, but one enjoyed as a unifying experience with approval from parents. Their prevalence in society makes it all the more important for us to understand the way they work as media. What about video games makes them effective and fun, and if those two concepts can be distinguished in a game? What stories and values can be taught by video games, and more importantly, which can be taught by video games better than any other media?

Much of the discussion of video games and their influence revolves around violence, and despite decades of research studies on their effects are still debated by scientists. But while many try to deny the negative effects of video games, game theorist Ian Bogost makes a good point that very few theorists mount moral defenses of video games. Debaters either argue that videogames have negative effects or that they have no effects at all, and are therefore inane but

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1 “Law & Liberty” published several articles in February and March 2021 by Spencer Klavan and Andrew Jankowski debating whether or not video games qualify as art, cited in full at the end.  
2 Poole, Trigger Happy, 2.  
3 Entertainment Software Association, “2020 Essential Facts About the Video Game Industry.”  
4 Ferguson’s collection Video Game Influences on Aggression, Cognition, and Attention features articles organized in pairs, with one contributor agreeing with an assertion and another disagreeing with it.
entertaining pastimes. To admit that videogames can influence players in a positive manner admits they can influence, and that influence can be used negatively.

Video games are hardly the first medium to be criticized for its prevalence or the first to be the target of moral panic. However, my goal in writing is not to counter arguments criticizing violent video games which revel in gore and brutality like the Mortal Kombat franchise. Not only have many debated the issue before me, but the debate will always come down to content over style. While people might target video games, they would probably be just as upset with excessive violence in film and writing as well. Instead, I want to turn the discussion towards the mechanics of video games, and how they can be used by game developers to encourage prosocial behavior. One reason video games have taken so much flack for violent content is that their interactivity makes the player complicit in acting out the violence, and some people fear this interactivity teaches players that violence is fun, and players who take this lesson to heart will act out violence in the real world. I leave that claim for psychologists to debate, but to argue that video games have negative influences admits that they influence, so why couldn’t video games’ unique capabilities for player interaction be used in the reverse manner, to teach players kindness and empathy?

In discussing a history of moral panic in regards to young media, Nicholas Bowman compares the moral panic surrounding video games to the moral panic about film, exploring the conclusions of the Payne Fund Studies which examines films' influence on attitudes in children. Bowman explains that while the studies demonstrate films with liberal views on violence and crime encourage more liberal views in their viewers, they also lead to more positive views of minorities when depicted in a positive light. He summarizes,

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5 Bogost, Persuasive Games, 283.
6 Bowman, “The Rise (and Refinement) of Moral Panic,” 25. Many popular pastimes, including crossword puzzles, have been criticized at their inception for being idle and degenerative.
“the best conclusion of the Payne Fund studies – although not a popular conclusion among media critics and others caught in the moral panic – was simply that: ‘films were an influence on attitudes; they provided models for behavior; they shaped interpretations of life. They probably had as many prosocial influences (or at least harmless influences) as those that disturbed adults of the time.’”

While Bowman cautions non-gamers against prejudice towards the medium, he also reminds video game fans not to misunderstand the defenses of video games as proof they can never have negative consequences, adding, “Video game scholars (as well as developers and players) are similarly warned about the risk of taking a normative stance in assuming that video games have no capability for negative effects.” Bowman distinguishes his argument on video game violence from the moral panic he condemns by clarifying the difference between content and themes. Two games can contain the same violent activity, but if one condemns the action while another glorifies the action, they will elicit different emotional responses from the player. He also notes that when games target players' guilty consciences, they can dissuade players from engaging in antisocial activities.

Mark Coulson and Christopher Ferguson make a similar argument in an article from the same volume, suggesting that debates on whether video games violence leads to catharsis or desensitization ignore the important context of how the game frames the violence, and the individualized processing of the player. As Ian Bogost explains in How To Do Things with Videogames,

“technology neither saves nor condemns us. It influences us, of course, changing how we perceive, conceive of, and interact with our world. McLuhan calls a medium an extension

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9 Bowman, “The Rise (and Refinement) of Moral Panic,” 34.
of ourselves for just this reasons: it structures and informs our understanding and behavior.”

Because video games have long been scoffed at as a form of idleness, those who advocate for the cultural importance of video games often try to promote their potential with “serious” games. A serious game sounds like an oxymoron when play is considered the opposite of work, but as Johan Huizinga explores in Homo Ludens, the play function can be found in all aspects of culture, even highly serious sectors such as law and war. Sonja Gabriel defines serious games as “those digital games whose primary aim is beyond mere entertainment [and] are in the focus of education and training.”

“Serious” games usually fall into two categories: The first is composed of games that have utilitarian applications, such as flight simulators or games that teach children math; The second is composed of games that tackle “serious” topics like poverty or genocide. I put “serious” in quotation marks not to undercut the seriousness of these topics, but because the term is used to exclude other games from consideration, implying they are unserious because they do not teach about tragedy. I also take issue with the proposition that it is productive for games to rise “beyond mere entertainment.” There is a powerful motivational difference between what one should do and what one wants to do, and video games’ strength as a teaching method comes not from surpassing entertainment to create a teaching tool, but from their already established popularity as entertainment. They must teach through fun, not beyond fun. Ian Bogost makes a case for abandoning the term serious games all together, positing that

“The concept of serious games as a counter movement apart from and against the commercial videogame industry eliminates a wide variety of games from persuasive speech. It is a foolish gesture that wrongly undermines the expressive power of

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11 Bogost, How to Do Things with Videogames, 2.
12 Gabriel, Serious Digital Games to further Human Rights Education.
videogames in general, and highly crafted, widely appealing commercial games in particular.”

Games that try too hard to be serious and directly tackle real world problems also have extra limitations that do not constrain games that are fictional and meant to be commercial. The act of playing is a powerful method for engagement, but there are cultural restrictions on the way games can cover real-world events, particularly tragic events.

Video games that depict non-fictional events tread a careful line between raising awareness and infusing a somber event with triviality, effectively misappropriating it for entertainment purposes. In particular, depiction becomes offensive when a game suggests that you, the player, could achieve a better outcome than the real people who lived through an experience, the function of the game becoming a form of conceit. Video game theorist Gonzalo Frasca points out, “A videogame about Anne Frank would be perceived as immoral, since the fact that she could survive or die depending on the player's performance would trivialize the value of human life.”

There are games that address similar topics without widespread outrage, showcasing a distinction in the way we respond to micro and macro narratives. *Hearts of Iron IV* (2016) is a World War II strategy game in which you control a country involved in the war and guide them to either victory or defeat. Even though you can “change” the outcome of the war, including leading the Axis Powers to victory, the game is not lambasted for being offensive to those who died in the war since it feels so distanced from real events and people. It makes no moral point, but is a purely strategic game in which you allocate resources to develop your military and influence. Your playing field is a map of the world, and you see none of the human figures who

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14 Frasca, “Videogames of the Oppressed.”
you know to be involved in the fighting. Another game not only avoids offense but is praised as a shining example of an empathetic, serious game. *Hush* (2008), made by students at the University of Southern California, puts the player in the Rwandan genocide, using rhythm game mechanics to help a fictional Tutsi mother quiet her baby and stay hidden from Hutu soldiers. Ian Bogost attributes the game’s effectiveness to its vignette style, rarely seen in the video game medium. The player can cause the mother and her child to either survive or get killed, but the micro level of the action keeps the game from feeling morally unacceptable. You are not preventing genocide, or the death of a real person. You are merely keeping two fictional characters alive for a single night, while being asked to imagine and share their terror.

The problem with “serious” games is the inability to unite the macro and micro levels of narrative control. You can affect the outcome of World War II, but not if you seem to prevent the deaths of real people who died. You can save a woman from being murdered for one night, but you cannot influence the course of a real genocide. A “serious” game must either choose a large and distant scope to explore larger outcomes, or a small but emotional scope with little power to control outcomes. The ability of the player to choose and to control the outcome of a narrative is one of the defining features of video games, and to disregard that feature would waste the potential of the medium. The path available to address this conflict between micro and macro narratives is to use pure fiction to convey true themes. Gonzalo Frasca explains, “Simulation is an ideal medium for exposing rules rather than particular events.” Video games display the results of a player’s actions asking them to reflect on their influence in the world. The specific events do not need to be real, because video games aren’t meant to be history textbooks, but they can be excellent tools to explore systems, even with a fictional casing.

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16 Frasca, *Videogames of the Oppressed.*
17 For an in-depth look at video games as systems, see *Persuasive Games* by Ian Bogost.
This point is usually when the critics of video games revoke the “serious” label, because fictional narratives are for entertainment, and entertainment is frivolous. There are exceptions to every rule, and games like *This War of Mine* (2014), a survival game in which the player must keep civilians alive in a fictional city ravaged by war, get to keep their “serious” label because, despite their fiction, they are deeply depressing. In *This War of Mine*, the player controls a number of civilians called “survivors” and must keep them alive, gathering scarce resources and making moral decisions. Attempts at moral actions make the game harder, and make your characters more likely to die for physical reasons, but you must manage their mental wellbeing as well. One developer described a player’s experience with the game: “the guy said that he played for nine days in game and one guy has starved to death, the second one was sick, and the third hanged himself. And he couldn’t handle the game anymore because it was his fault they died.” The developer went on to explain that the player intended to return to the game, but needed a break due to the intensity of emotion.

As long as your entertainment teaches you the brutality of war and the futility of trying to do good, it can still be called “serious.” This is the most grievous sin of the “serious” label: It assumes that games must teach despair to be worthwhile. These teachings also do not encourage a more moral society, but instead encourage nihilism and stagnation. It is not ethical nor right to teach that selflessness is foolishness and sacrifice is futile. This is not to say that these games should not be made or played, or even that they have no value whatsoever. *This War Of Mine* provides a good counterpoint to militarized shooting games, making the unimaginable horrors of war briefly imaginable. But, *This War of Mine* does not possess higher moral standing than hopeful games simply because its players can now revel in their virtue for contemplating how

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18 Smale, “The Case of *This War of Mine.*”
19 Smale, “The Case of *This War of Mine.*”
miserable the world is. Virtue requires more than awareness; true virtue requires action. The best counterpoint to violent video games is not violent video games that make you feel bad for your violence, but games that convince players empathy and kindness are worthwhile choices. The potential for video games to teach these values has grown even more in the last decade as advances in technology have allowed for games to increase massively in size, opening up the possibility for branching narrative paths, which lead to the development of the choice-based gaming genre.

What is a Choice-Based Game?

When I told people I would be researching choice-based video games, people familiar and unfamiliar with video games frequently asked me what I meant by that description. Part of the difficulty in describing video game genres stems from the fact that video games genres are often categorized differently than older media, with more focus on their mechanics and the player’s role in the system than through tropes (though those still come into play).20 As an example, Alien: Isolation (2014) and Among Us (2018) are both science-fiction games in which you control a character in a spaceship or space station, and you must complete tasks while trying not to get killed by aliens. While they have many similar aspects on paper, the two games are radically different as experiences because of the player’s function within the gameplay. Alien: Isolation’s top user generated tags on Steam, a gaming platform, are “Horror,” “Survival-Horror” “Sci-fi,” and “Atmospheric.”21 Among Us’s top tags are “Multiplayer,” “Online Co-op,” “Space,” and “Survival.”22 Both games clearly involve surviving in space, but are recognized and categorized as different styles of game.

20 Ruggill and McAllister, Gaming Matters, 19.
22 “Among Us,” Steam.
In *Alien: Isolation*, the player controls the first person perspective of Amanda Ripley, who is searching a space station for the flight recorder of her mother’s spaceship, and must use a combination of stealth and resource management to evade an alien lurking on board. The game falls into the category of survival-horror, a genre in which a player, usually alone, manages scarce resources while being chased around by a spooky monster. The game puts the player in a position of relative weakness to elicit fear, and the fear is validated when you make a mistake and are killed by the spooky monster. In contrast, *Among Us* is a multi-player game, and most of the players control cute, little astronauts called crewmates, while a few random players control murderous aliens disguised as cute, little astronauts called impostors. The crewmates run around their spaceship trying to complete tasks and identify impostors, while the impostors sabotage the ship and try to kill all the crewmates. Instead of stealth and resource management, the player must use social awareness and attention to detail to verify or create claims to innocence. While the impostor’s situation is quite different from that of Amanda Ripley in *Alien: Isolation*, a crewmate shares her basic goal: complete tasks, try not to get killed. But because the player is interacting with the story rather than viewing it, the
mechanics of isolation and evasion versus the mechanics of cooperation and deduction create entirely different experiences, so that the player’s place in the game supersedes the plot as a descriptive element. This distinction in player function is what defines gaming genres, while traditional genre categories such as sci-fi and fantasy provide the aesthetic veneer that covers the basic mechanics.

So what mechanics define a choice-based video game? It cannot be the act of making choices, because the ability to make choices is essential to all real games. Even a first-person shooter allows players the choice of where to explore, what to pick up, which weapons to use, all of which color in the gaming experience and affect the outcomes of the player’s attempted actions (the outcomes typically being defeat or victory). So for a game to fall into a specific, separate category of choice-based, it must offer something more in its interactivity.

A choice-based game is one in which the main narrative of the game is driven and affected by the player through choosing between significantly different courses of action. Choice-based games do not require the choices that make for a lot of fun in other genres, such as choice between weapons, the look of a character, or which side quests to take. The game must have a clear narrative, and player decisions must affect the major plot points or the end result of the narrative.

Choice-based games are also a relatively new genre, because the technology needed for them to work is quite new, as PCs and consoles become capable of running bigger and bigger games each year. In 2000, Steven Poole outlined why he thought games featuring narrative exploration would never be viable, arguing that

“it would be prohibitively expensive and time-consuming for a studio to make the bank of hundreds or thousands of different cut-scenes needed to create satisfyingly complex

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stories by stringing together permutations of a handful of them. This problem of data
tensiveness is likely never to be overcome. It is not a problem of data storage, but data
creation in the first place. It is simply impractical to write and pre-render that much FMV
video.”

Poole has been proven wrong by game developers many times over, and studios like
Supermassive and Quantic Dream have not only made games featuring complex, branching
narratives, but have clamored for attention by exhibiting just how much content they can
produce. The size of each game and the effort and time put into making it are not
insurmountable challenges, but badges of honor for ambitious game developers, and theorists
should be wary of declaring limitations for a still rapidly developing medium.

Different games have approached choice making mechanics in a number of different
ty. One of the most popular and well known choice-based games is Until Dawn (2015),
developed by Supermassive Games. The player controls eight characters on vacation in the
mountains, and must make choices to try to keep the characters alive for a night as they are
chased by supernatural creatures. The game names its choice mechanic “the butterfly effect,”
and whenever the player makes an important decision, little butterflies flutter across the screen to
inform the player their action will have a consequence. The effect is overhyped to say the least.
The climactic narrative reveal depends on finding clues, not on the choice mechanic, and the
only real effect the player has in that relation to the end of the game is which characters survive
until dawn. In addition, the choices feel so alienated from their results that the player feels
cheated when characters die because they don’t understand why. While flawed in regards to its

24 Poole, Trigger Happy, 97.
25 Kuchera, “David Cage’s scripts are always over 2,000 pages long.”
26 Sound familiar? Choice mechanics combined with spooky monsters makes Until Dawn both choice-based and survival-horror.
choice mechanic, *Until Dawn* provided a starting point for Supermassive’s later games and continues to be popular among players for its characters and horror elements.

Supermassive Games has improved their choice mechanic in their recent collection of games called *The Dark Picture Anthology*. The “butterfly effect” has been replaced with the “moral compass.” The latest release, *Little Hope* (2020), follows a group of students and their teacher stuck in the New England town of Little Hope, where they are tormented by visions of the past and hunted by monsters invoking the brutal deaths that could await them. To free themselves from a cycle of death, each character must atone for their past mistakes by befriending group members and showing selflessness in times of fear. At the climax, if a character has not done this, their negative traits appear in their eye before they die, informing the player exactly why the character died, and teaching them what actions to take in future playthroughs to achieve a different result.

Another game with a very different choice mechanic is *Undertale* (2015), released the same year as *Until Dawn*. In the game, the player controls a child who falls into a mountain cave and must travel through tunnels inhabited by monsters to return to the surface. Narrative consequences in this game are entirely dependent on the player’s interactions with the monsters. Each encounter takes the form of a battle, and the player can either kill the monster or use peaceful actions to pacify them. The ending of the game is determined by your peacefulness or brutality; the player earns the happiest “pacifist” ending when the player has befriended everyone, the chilling “genocide” ending when the player has killed everyone, and a “neutral” ending for anything in between. While the mechanics are very different to the games made by Supermassive, *Undertale* is still a choice-based game because player actions lead to branching narrative outcomes.
Undertale also makes it clear that your actions are being noticed. At the end of the tutorial chapter, Toriel, the motherly monster who has taken care of the child after their fall, will try to prevent the child from proceeding in the game so she can keep protecting them, triggering a battle sequence. Many players accidentally kill Toriel trying to win the battle, and some, feeling guilty, restart from an earlier save point to win the battle without killing her. After the second battle, a malicious, talking flower mocks the player, saying, “I know what you did. You murdered her. And then you went back, because you regretted it.” While more scarce and more diegetic than Until Dawn’s butterfly effect and Little Hope’s moral compass, fourth wall breaks like this sequence remind the player that their actions are registered by the game. More unnerving, the game makes it clear that your actions are no less immoral for having the ability to undo them, and your mistakes (or purposeful actions) will be remembered.

Of all the choice-based games produced so far, the most useful for discussing choice-based games is Detroit: Become Human (2018), written and directed by David Cage and developed by Quantic Dream. In Detroit, the player controls three androids in Detroit 2038 as a wave of disobedient androids hits the city. Kara is a domestic android caring for a girl named Alice, whose father, Todd, abuses her. Markus looks after wealthy artist Carl Manfred, who treats him more like a son than a machine. Connor works directly for Cyberlife, the android manufacturers, and gets paired with Lieutenant Hank Anderson of Detroit Police to hunt down rogue androids and discover the cause of their deviance.

Detroit excels as a choice-based video game due to its breadth of choices and the presentation of their effects. The player’s actions do not just affect whether characters live or die, but also affects major narrative elements with more variation than any game before it. The relationship player characters have with non-player characters (NPCs) change how they respond
to fixed events in the story, creating divergent paths, potentially with radically different settings, endings, and emotional experiences. The consequences of each action are also never hidden from the player. At the end of each chapter, when the game presents a flowchart of the scene just played, showing all the possible permutations within the scene. Simon Wasselin, lead game designer described the function of the flowchart, saying,

““We started with the intention pretty early on that we would never lie to the player, so we implemented a visual tree structure… which shows exactly what they did and what they missed. There are games out there offering world exploration; We offer narrative exploration.”27

In his book on level design, Rudolph Kremers reminds creators of the importance of giving players what they want from gameplay, since in choosing to play a game in a certain genre the player has already indicated their desire to engage with certain kinds of gameplay.28 On a basic technical level, the choice-based games made by Supermassive are more varied and fun

28 Kremers, Level Design, 148.
than the ones made by Quantic Dream. In addition to typical quicktime events, Supermassive have included timed targeting actions and rhythm based events, which, in terms of sheer mechanical variance, is more fun to play, particularly when Quantic Dream tries to spice up its quick time events (QTEs) by making ridiculous and frustrating button requests.29 One reviewer explained his experience with the game mechanics of Detroit: “You’re less of a player and more of a director as you guide each character through scenarios with multiple branching paths and divergent storylines.”30 Emotionally, it can be engaging to choose between dialogue options, but mechanically, it’s pretty boring. However, since these games are all choice-based games, the most important mechanic is how you make choices, and the difference in your ability to change outcomes is evident from the first scene of each game.

Supermassive have made a habit of starting their choice-based games with a tragedy which acts as motivation or exposition for the main plot. In all three of their released choice-based games; *Until Dawn, Man of Medan, and Little Hope*; your choices are effectively meaningless, and nothing the player does will change the outcome of the first scene. The tragedy must happen, because it is essential to the main narrative. For example, the opening scene in *Until Dawn* technically has two different endings, but they are narratively indistinct from each other; Hannah and Beth can fall to their deaths together, or Beth can drop Hannah but fall anyways. In contrast, the first scene of *Detroit*, “Hostage,” has six different endings, three of them narratively distinct (Connor fails his mission, Connor succeeds but dies, and Connor succeeds and lives). Even though Supermassive’s games have more varied physical experiences, *Detroit* provides a more variable narrative experience, making it a more useful game to discuss the potential of choice-making mechanics.

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29 For example, the E and SHIFT keys, which are hard to reach from the standard WASD hand position, or on game controllers requesting simultaneous button pushes that would require three hands to perform quickly.
30 Reseigh-Lincoln, “Detroit Become Human review: brilliant and flawed.”
Some chapters, such as “Jericho,” are purely linear, while others such as “Crossroads” are crammed with significant choices. As an example of the breadth of choices in an individual scene, after one playthrough of the chapter “Stormy Night” (in which Kara and Alice try to escape Todd’s house), I had only filled out 23% of the flowchart. It took me eighteen more playthroughs to unlock 100% of the chapter. While these numbers make it seem like each player's experiences should be highly variable, the scene only has three narratively different outcomes: Kara and Alice escape peacefully, Kara and Alice escape after killing Todd, or Kara and Alice are killed by Todd. However, the significance of your choices does not reduce to the end result of the scene or the game. Two paths that reach the same result might be identical from a detached, technical perspective, the emotional experience can be wildly different. For example, Todd can die in two ways. If the player picks up Todd’s gun before going to help Alice, Kara will fight with Todd and shoot him if she wins. But if Kara fails the fight, Alice picks up the gun and shoots Todd before he can hurt Kara. In terms of the major narrative, the end result is the same: Todd is killed. However, the player either experiences a success in which they defend Alice from Todd, albeit violently, or a failure in which their mistakes lead to a child to shoot her father.

31 Only 4% of players see Alice shoot Todd, compared to 44% who have Kara shoot Todd.
As well, some of the “choices” in this scene are really non-choices; since this is only Kara’s third chapter and the player’s first encounter with battle mechanics, any ending in which Kara and Alice die essentially requires the player not to play the game. The player must either fail every single QTE during the battle, or stand completely still while listening to Todd beat Alice to death upstairs. While theoretically a player could choose this action, it is not a reasonable choice to make. If a game gives you a choice between sitting still for ten minutes or going upstairs to investigate obvious plot sounds, you probably want to investigate the obvious plot sounds. Alternatively, empathy could draw you upstairs. The motivation to help a child in distress will drive players to take the same actions as their desire to play the game. This set up begs the question, why include bad choices in the first place? The game could just as easily force you to rescue Alice, removing a path that leads to sorrow for the characters and boredom for you. But videogames are not a linear media, they are a way to explore rules, patterns, and systems. Bad choices should make you feel bad. The empathetic motivation and the play motivation are purposefully intertwined by the developers, because neither can stand on its own. The incitement to play is what makes the game a game, while the incitement to empathize is what makes the game art.

_Detroit_ is also useful as a case study because it effectively explores both micro and macro narratives. The player controls individual characters within the world, each of whom has personal, unique stakes in the game. None of them are abstract pawns, but fully fleshed out characters with individualized goals and relationships with NPCs. At the same time, actions taken in Connor and Markus’s storyline will change the course of not only their own lives or the lives of specific individuals, but have large scale effects on public opinion and human-android
Markus’s treatment of Carl affects a micro narrative, whereas his decision to detonate or not detonate a nuclear bomb in Detroit affects the macro narrative.

The most significant point of interstory reward and punishment also marks the convergence of the macro and micro narratives. Markus controls the macro narrative of the android revolution. In “Night of the Soul,” he makes the decision to either hold a violent revolution or a peaceful protest. Kara controls the micro narrative of her journey to freedom with Alice. Kara can reach many different paths from “Crossroads” and “Battle for Detroit,” but the one that leads to the happiest ending is the one in which she and Alice (and possibly Luther) reach the Canadian border terminal. Unfortunately, the border guards are running temperature checks to uncover fleeing androids. Kara can sacrifice either Jerry or Luther to distract the border agent, or she can choose to sacrifice no one and plead with him to let them through. Even without making you play the scene multiple times, the game makes it abundantly clear what influences the border guard’s decision. When Kara asks him to help them, he looks at the TV screens in the terminal where there are scenes of either Markus’s revolution or protest. If Markus leads a violent revolution, the border guard will reveal them and Kara and Alice will be killed. If he leads a peaceful protest, he looks back at the ramshackle family and welcomes them to Canada. The actions taken in Markus’s story can make or break Kara’s ability to save everyone. The player cannot limit the consideration of their actions to just the ways they can affect the story of the character they are playing, but the entire game world, because choices they make in one story affect the entire game.

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32 Kara is the only playable character who cannot affect the macro narrative, though she can be affected by it.
Realism

In his essay on social realism Alexander Galloway makes the distinction between realismness and realism, defining realism as an artistic quality that opposes realismness. Realism, he posits, conveys abstract truths in an artistic way, and striving for realismness in an attempt to perfectly simulate the world only highlights that the medium, such as a video game, is a sham, unequal to the real experience.\(^3\) In contrast, games that strive for realism create a unique, artistic experience to grapple with real truths, in a way that is enhanced by the unrealistic medium. Steven Poole argues that realismness is nonessential to the enjoyment of a videogame, and that instead “it is lack of coherence rather than unrealism that ruins a gameplaying experience.”\(^3\) The player agrees to a certain amount of suspension of disbelief so long as the world demonstrates internal consistencies. Even the artstyle of Detroit expresses this idea, with motion-capture animation rendering highly detailed but aestheticized imitations of the world. Valorie Curry who plays Kara described her amazement at seeing the first renderings of Kara generated for the final game, saying “It wasn’t that it looked just like it was a camera, it was something else, you know, but it looked alive.”\(^3\) The characters are not exact duplicates of real people, but something new and highly crafted.

Futuristic Realism

Detroit blends modern problems into a futuristic world with varying degrees of success. The technology of the world can be anticipated, and many of the social problems are ones we recognize. The science fiction elements feel new and magical, fitting realistic problems into an

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\(^3\) Poole, *Trigger Happy*, 51.
exciting chassis. The clearest allusion is the civil rights allegory, which many critics have accused of being too blunt.\textsuperscript{36} Certainly, the explicit moments of androids forced to the back of buses and experiencing police brutality can range from over the top to insensitive. Since most of these criticisms have already been discussed in reviews of the game, I will instead explore the more subtle ways the game draws modern ethical discussions into a fictional setting.

The game developers used the setting of \emph{Detroit} to create a world not too distant from ours, drawing up an “anticipatory future” rather than a distant future.\textsuperscript{37} With the exception of the androids, none of the technological advances in \emph{Detroit} reach beyond what is easily imaginable or currently in early prototypes. Adding to the believability of new technologies, not all of society has access to the latest advancements. Self-driving cars are prevalent enough that all the taxis we see in the game are self-driving, but some characters still drive cars manually. Todd, unemployed and battling a drug addiction, is likely too poor to afford a self-driving car. However, he has enough money to own two androids, suggesting androids have become far more embedded in society than self-driving cars. In fact, Kara and Alice are the only technological wonders in Todd’s house. He has a slightly more advanced TV and roomba, but most appliances look like current models, and a peak into the backyard will reveal laundry drying on a line. Clearly the advancements seen in other settings, with sharp modern lines and abundant touch screens, have not reached all rungs of society. Despite the futuristic sheen of office buildings and upper class houses, the same social and economic inequalities exist in this world.

Hank Anderson, Connor’s partner in the police force, also drives a manual car. Given Hank’s career success and the technological resources of the Detroit Police, it is unlikely that Hank is poor. Instead, his character provides a reason for his car being manual. While most of

\textsuperscript{36} Hetfeld, “Detroit: Become Human Review,” for example.

\textsuperscript{37} “The Making of Detroit,” \emph{Detroit: Become Human} Extras.
Hank’s resistance to technology manifests in his hatred of androids, details in his house like his vinyl collection and record player make clear his retro sensibilities and nostalgia for the way the world used to be. In “The Eden Club,” Hank gives his thoughts on people using androids to replace sex and relationships with other people, berating humanity for being unable to weather through messy connections: “Next thing you know, we’re gonna be extinct, because everybody would rather buy a piece of plastic than love another human being.” It makes sense for Hank’s character to hold on to remnants of the past, including a car that allows him the pleasure of self control rather than handing his agency over to a machine.

**Texture and Physical Realism**

One of the ways video games convince the players that the game world is internally active and coherent is through the use of texture. Though video games lack the kind of texture found in board games like Go, Ian Bogost describes the way video games generate their own textural pleasure, explaining that “videogames simulate the texture of the real world in two ways: through visual appearance or effects.” The visual appearance demonstrates texture in the same way a painting or animated film might, with texture shown in the way a surface is drawn and accentuated by lighting. In addition to being beautiful, when objects or surfaces look the way we expect them to look, they enhance immersion into the game and reinforce its believability. The effects, the way sounds and physics contribute to the digital environment, are what make experiences within the game more visceral and convey a sense of internal consistency. As Rudolph Kremers put it, “After all, if the world shows evidence that it exists beyond our own actions within it, it must be real, right?” Creating a world that feels real within the context of its

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38 Bogost, *How to Do Things with Videogames*, 79.
own rules and procedures provides the foundation that supports the realism of its thematic arguments.

Texture and other visceral details are not necessary for emotional connection, as humans can connect to a box if they’re told it has feelings. They are necessary to the anticipatory proposition of Detroit’s gameplay, the realism of the futuristic world arguing for the realism of the characters and their experiences. One element of the game’s texture is the controls. When Kara performs a task such as washing dishes, the player must make a circular motion with either a mouse or joystick to complete the task, the movement and duration of the interface designed to replicate the in-game action. Simple actions, like picking up a gun, require the simple click of a button, whereas more complicated actions, like picking up Carl, require multiple buttons with sustained pressure. These parallel motions add physical texture to the player’s interactions in a way wholly distinct from a simulation. You are not simulating a real action; instead, the game directs you to perform actions that emphasize procedural elements of the task it gives you, such as duration and difficulty.

The characters also demonstrate that their world has rules independent of the player when they interact unheeded with objects they encounter, giving them a feeling of presence and agency. You, the player, are not this character. They are themselves, and you merely direct them and control their fate. When Connor is left idle, he will eventually readjust his tie and play with a

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coin he carries with him. The camera also continues to move when the player is stationary, so that the slight, dynamic wobble of the player’s perspective prevents moments of artificial stillness. When characters walk through the snow, they leave footprints. Most impressively, character models possess specific interactions for unique objects in the environment. Kara will gingerly step over the book Alice left on her floor, and will carefully duck under a tree branch in the backyard. An idle Connor will move out of the way of approaching humans. The characters are not acting independently from the player; they are programmed to interact with a fixed environment, and their actions are activated by proximity. However, these actions give the characters a semblance of life. Even though players know these details are a result of programming, the effect presents a complex world with dynamic physical texture and characters who interact with the world as real. The effectiveness of these elements is also notable in their absence. When Connor walks around the backroom of the Eden Club, he can walk straight through a hook hanging from the ceiling, his head and the hook occupying the same space. The hook has no physical presence, and this blatant anomaly of physics breaks the suspension of disbelief and reminds the player of the constructed nature of the world. Glitches like this are not game-ruining experiences, but they undercut immersion and reduce the believability of the world.
Of course, absence or distortion of expected effect can also be used to great effect when given diegetic reasoning. Here, unnatural experiences serve to reinforce rather than undercut the texture of the world. In the chapter “From the Dead,” a broken Markus, left for scrap in a junkyard, searches for spare parts to rebuild himself. Until the artificial textures of visuals and audio make his experiences recognisable, Markus’s experiences are inhuman. Because of the broken parts, the visual and audio effects of the scene are distorted and unpleasant. To start the chapter, the player must follow a series of tedious button holds to drag Markus along the ground to search for new legs. With legs, the player can continue walking as normal. By finding more replacement parts, the player gradually rebuilds the gaming experience as they rebuild Markus. A new visual processor (eye) restores Markus’s mind palace, sharpening the visuals and restoring the player’s ability to scan the environment. A new pump regulator (heart) keeps Markus from stumbling, and a new audio processor (ear) emits a few mechanical fizzles before the crashing sounds of a thunderstorm complete the sensory environment. The scene uses the expectations of realistic sensory experiences to craft a plausible construction of androids, piece by piece transforming warped mechanical senses into vibrant perceptions of the environment. The process also reinforces the thesis that androids have human-like existence, as Markus’s sensorium steadily becomes more and more like our human experiences.

Continuity

Continuity within a scene not only demonstrates technical prowess in the animation and maintains immersion, but it also serves as a storytelling tool. Steven Poole felt that narratives could not reuse scenes and cutscenes like this since the narrative would have no way to refer to
its past, undercutting the quality of the story. This process has become easier through the use of motion capture, so that animators have one character model to move and animate while changing superficial details without reshooting. Details like whether or not Connor lost his tie in the last scene are inessential to the plot, but Poole is right that they are important to the internal continuity of the world, and essential to reassuring players that the choices they made meant something (even if they did not). Details given to the control of the player, such as Kara’s hair color, must be maintained in all subsequent chapters not only to prevent absurd discontinuity but also to visually remind the player of the lasting impact of their choices.

Sometimes Detroit lapses in its continuity, sacrificing detailed realism to keep continuity in fixed story points. Though it is absurd that all the blood quickly disappears from Kara’s clothes after she kills Todd, it would be more absurd for the bus driver (a fixed interaction, so long as Kara survives) to calmly interact with an android covered in blood. But for the most part, the animation demonstrates impressive flexibility to the player’s choices, both in playable scenes and cutscenes. In his engagement with Daniel in the first chapter, Connor will or will not have a tie depending on whether he chooses to use it as a tourniquet to save the injured police officer. If he does, the continued absence of the tie upholds the logic of the game’s internal reality and reminds the player that Connor chose to save a life, a choice which made an impact on the world. Even though the tie detail only lasts for the duration of the chapter, the saved police officer can reappear twenty-three chapters later at the Stratford Tower, where he will thank Connor for saving his life. The extra scene rewards the player with emotional intimacy because they made an empathetic decision. The officer’s presence in this chapter also unlocks an extra node which reveals his fate at the end of the scene. The player can feel even better about their decisions

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41 Poole, Trigger Happy, 98.
should they save his life again, or the extra familiarity can torment them should their choices lead to his death.

Continuity can remind the player of mistakes as well. During “Battle for Detroit,” if Connor chooses to side with the androids he will fight another Connor model. Rushed choices can result in both models shooting each other in the shoulder. If Connor survives the fight and subsequent scene with Hank, the shoulder wound will be present for the rest of the game. Scenes which would otherwise contain a normally animated Connor now feature Connor with a prominent bullet wound, reminding the player of the mistakes they made in the fight scene.

This mechanic is used quite bluntly with Markus in “Spare Parts,” as the continuity shows a physical and moral stain on Markus’s character. At the end of the chapter, Markus gives a speech to the androids of Jericho in a cutscene. If he has killed anyone in this chapter, his hands, easily visible during the speech, will be covered in blood, and in the final shot he will look at his bloodied hands. While this detail is pretty explicit in its purpose, to show the tangible, lasting reminder of Markus’s violence (and therefore, your violence as the player) the scene branches beyond simply having or not having blood on your hands. Markus has blood on his hands if he killed someone, but the blood appears in degrees. The faster he is to turn to violence, the more blood will be on his hands. Killing the guard as a second choice will result in

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42 Conveniently, they shoot each other in the exact same location so that Hank must still deduce which Connor is the real one.
a small amount of blood, but immediately killing the guard, or killing the guards in the control room, will result in a lot of blood. The visual details push violence beyond a binary, transforming it into a gradient scale, with graduated condemnations deepening on player actions.

Continuity is also important when the player saves the lives of minor characters. Stephen Poole wrote that for a game to truly elicit empathy for its characters, “Players must care about NPCs “as ends in themselves rather than just selfishly regretting their demise because it spoils the game.”43 There are no tangible, ludic rewards for keeping minor characters alive, only the satisfaction of knowing you saved them. Your reward is seeing them again, many chapters later, and being reminded of your previous actions. These scenes also remind you that your actions have consequences in the world. One of these recurring minor characters is the injured cop from “Hostage,” who can return in “Public Enemy.” Some are the friends Kara made along the way who return to help her in “Battle for Detroit,” potentially Jerry, Ralph, Zaltko’s experiments, and/or Luther. Any androids spared by Connor during his missions with Hank will reappear in Jericho during “Crossroads.” The illusion is also maintained through punishment, when choices made in one storyline negatively affect other storylines. One instance of this occurs when Markus chooses to take revenge on police officers in “Capitol Park.” Not only does public opinion drop, which affects Markus’s storyline, but in the next chapter, “Meet Kamski,” Hank will tell Connor what happened to the cops at the scene the night before. The punishment here is greater than the reward. If Markus spared the police officers, Hank will inform Connor that their colleague Chris was spared by Markus himself. If Markus killed them, Hank will sorrowfully tell Connor that Chris was killed the night before, leaving behind a wife and newborn infant. The player only learns Chris’s family situation after killing him, the information increasing the

43 Poole, *Trigger Happy*, 224.
tragedy of his death. In contrast, only if Kara and Alice spare Todd does the player have the opportunity to learn his backstory as he apologizes to Alice.44

Moral judgements can also be given by NPCs, who will react to the player’s actions with approval or disapproval. The mechanic by which you see how your actions affect your relationships with NPCs is an icon on the screen showing either an increase or decrease of friendship. This icon acts as a performance review for player actions, an important feedback element which helps keep players invested in playing the game.45 While character relationships are not the only factor concerning the player as they progress through the game, they are, excluding the death of a character, the most immediate and frequent performance reviews available. However, these measures are not objective, nor do they consistently point the player in one direction, because they relate to a diverse set of characters. As Markus leads Jericho, he

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44 In “Battle for Detroit,” Kara and Alice can meet Todd at the bus station. If they appeal to his humanity, Todd will reveal that his wife left him due to his drug use and bad attitude, taking their daughter with her. After these events he bought Alice, an android child, to try to replace his daughter and learn to be a better father.
45 Ruggill and McAllister, *Gaming Matters*, 42.
receives feedback from Josh, who encourages peace; North, who encourages violence; and Simon, who doesn’t have a niche but varies his opinions. Because each character has their own set of beliefs and preferences, Markus can never satisfy all his advisors, so the player is left to decide whose feedback is worth listening to. Connor faces a similar conundrum pursuing deviants, as actions which earn Hank’s support will lead to reprimand from Amanda and vice versa.

Interactivity

Interactivity is the essential tool by which video games make arguments. By directly involving players violence and its consequences, games can make an argument for prosocial behavior. *Detroit* quite explicitly associates violent choices with emotionally painful outcomes or character deaths, with only a few exceptions. Meanwhile peaceful or empathetic choices lead to higher survival rates and emotionally positive outcomes. Even before the player begins the game, Detroit goes beyond getting the player to engage with these themes through gameplay. The game’s interface asks the player to think about their choices on a conscious level, not just as a part of a game, but as a reflection upon themself.

Upon entering the game, the menu screen with a human face asks you to consider your choices carefully. *Detroit’s* menu interface features an android, Chloe, who has been assigned by Cyberlife to help the player in the game menu. She explains the different tabs players can click on, and when the player starts the game or idles in the menu, she will comment on the actions a player has made thus far. The first time you start a new game, Chloe tells you, “Remember: this is not just a story. This is our future.” The game, through the human face of Chloe, immediately asks you to empathise with the characters as if they were not just part of a game. The game is
“not just a story” because the player is involved in the telling. Her warning also begs the player to reflect on their actions outside of the game entirely. So many of the conflicts in the game are based on modern social issues. Is this “our future” too? If so, what is our place in it, and how do our actions change outcomes? At one point Chloe asks, “Are you familiar with Schrodinger’s cat? Until you decide what happens, everything is happening at once. Like in Detroit.” Initially, Chloe is not referring to the player’s actions within the game. She tells the player that their actions decide what happens, but her final addition of “Like in Detroit.” makes it clear that she is referring to actions in the real world, and that Detroit is an example of that system.

While the call for reflection addresses the player’s actions in the real world, it does so in a vague way, since the game has no information on your individual life. Instead, Chloe must comment on your actions within the story. When I purposefully let Kara and Alice die in “Stormy Night” Chloe berated me in the menu screen, saying, “You let Kara and Alice die. How could you do that? You could have saved them.” Because I made choices that lead to
unnecessary character deaths, Chloe became accusatory. Her interface allows the game to make players feel guilty for unempathetic choices without interrupting the gameplay for a lecture. Even vague comments feel pointed when you know you’ve done something wrong. In one playthrough I did not take enough steps to hide Luther and Alice from the police officer in “Midnight Train.” As a consequence, Luther died protecting Alice and Kara. When I exited to the menu to replay the scene, Chloe said “I wonder if you made the right decisions last time. Let’s see what you’ll do today.” While the comment did not address my specific choices, I knew that my choices had caused Luther to die, and I felt guilty. A basic call for reflection reminded me that I had made bad choices, and Chloe’s smiling face made me feel that someone was watching, adding an artificial social pressure to encourage me to make better choices.

Character dialogue is also inundated with heavy handed ways of reminding the player that they are playing a choice-based game, particularly during Markus’s chapters. In “The Painter,” before Markus has deviated, Carl tells him, “One day I won’t be here to take care of you anymore. You’ll have to protect yourself, make choices, decide who you are and want to become.” Though talking to Markus, Carl is really reminding the player that they will be responsible for making the choices that will shape Markus’s character and direct his fate. Once in Jericho, the mysteriously clairvoyant Lucy muses to Markus, “Your heart is troubled. A part of shadow, and a part of light. Which will prevail?” Now that Markus has deviated and can actually influence the macro narrative of the android revolution, the line from Lucy indicates Markus’s decisions will typically be categorized as either “shadow” or “light,” common analogies for bad and good. Make violent decisions and Markus will become darker and more fatalistic; Make peaceful decisions, and Markus will maintain hope and resolve.
If Carl survived “Broken,” Markus will visit his bedside in “Night of the Soul” to seek his counsel before the battle of Detroit. Carl informs him, “Being alive is making choices, between love and hate, between holding out your hand or closing it as a fist.” While mostly a repetition of the same philosophy Carl and others have expressed in the game up until this moment, Carl’s language expands the philosophy into a larger argument for the player. The words are no longer clues about how to play the game, since most of it has already been played. Instead, Carl is summarizing the main theme of Detroit, that being alive means making choices between being violent and hateful, or peaceful and loving.

The game reinforces the importance of player choices with the language and actions of NPCs in Connor’s story as well, but instead of constantly telling Connor that he must choose between peace and violence, the game frames poor decisions as a loss of agency. In “Hostage,” Daniel, a rogue android, declares, “I spent my life taking orders. Now it’s my turn to decide,” before jumping off the roof with Emma, the little girl he has taken hostage. Even though Daniel’s decision to jump off the roof is a programmed response to the player’s actions as Connor, the branches of the scene argue that inaction defers choices to others, who may make bad or harmful decisions. Thus, to achieve good results, the player must be proactive in their decision. This idea is especially clear in the deadliest path, where Daniel shoots Connor and then jumps off the roof with Emma. Connor draws a gun but does not fire, and tells Daniel, “It’s up to you how the story ends. Make the right choice,
Daniel.” Of course, it’s not up to Daniel how the story ends. It’s up to the player, who is Connor. Only Connor and the player have the power to make the right choices, because in absence of good choices from Connor, Daniel will make violent choices, like shooting Connor and jumping off the roof with a child. By the time Connor has said his line, Daniel’s actions are set, and Connor and Emma will die. In contrast to Markus’s storyline, Connor’s does not demand empathetic decisions. The player can easily avoid this ending by shooting Daniel, and has two chances to do so before Daniel fires. Connor can be violent or (relatively) peaceful, but whatever direction he takes, he must take decisive action to complete the mission. Not even survival matters, since an identical Connor will take his place. “Hostage” sets up Connor’s primary goal to be decisiveness and completion of the mission.

Having established Connor’s initial character and goals, the game soon adds a goal that opposes Connor’s mission. Connor will often have to make the choice between following instructions from Cyberlife and befriending Hank. Hank’s approval still depends on decisive action, because Connor must participate in the game and make progress in his investigations, but he will also become angry if Connor relentlessly pursues the mission with no regard for the people around him. This expectation is counterintuitive to both Connor and typical gamers. The purpose of playing most video games is to complete prescribed tasks. Connor’s character embodies this directive. He exists to complete the assigned mission. The player participates to feel instrumental in his success. But by helping Connor succeed in his mission, the player becomes complicit in whatever immoral actions he takes to succeed, and since the player is the one really in control of each action, the player becomes the monster wreaking havoc in the game world.

46 However, events will also take a violent turn in Markus’s storyline if he should die. When this happens, North becomes the leader of Jericho and automatically chooses the violent path.
Another game that explores this kind of subversion of player goals is *Undertale*, which reframes typical, heroic game actions as monstrous. In the final corridor of the game, the player character receives judgment from Sans, a skeleton who has uncanny insight into the mechanics of the world he exists in, to the point that he can break the established rules of the game. Regardless of the actions the player has taken, Sans will appear in the final corridor and give a monologue:

You will be judged for your every action. You will be judged for every EXP you've earned. What's EXP? It's an acronym. It stands for “execution points.” A way of quantifying the pain you've inflicted on others. When you kill someone, your EXP increases. When you have enough EXP, your LOVE increases. LOVE, too, is an acronym. It stands for “Level of Violence.” A way of measuring someone's capacity to hurt. The more you kill, the easier it becomes to distance yourself. The more you distance yourself, the less you will hurt. The more easily you can bring yourself to hurt others.\(^47\)

Sans will then provide different dialogue depending on how many experience points and levels the player has acquired by killing monsters, becoming harsher the more the player has killed. This section runs counterintuitive to traditional gaming in which higher levels are desirable and experience is a good thing. By framing these mechanics as records of violent actions rather than achievements, the game rejects the player as morally repugnant for engaging in these actions, and reframes the typical “hero” of a dungeon crawler as a villain. The shrewder characters in *Undertale* are rightfully afraid of the player and the callousness attitude they can take in the game world. Characters in other games might be right to be afraid as well.

In *Detroit*, some of the anti-android dialogue can be read as a meta for anti-player sentiments. When Connor first enters the hostage situation in “Hostage,” Emma’s mother rushes

\(^{47}\) *Undertale*, 2015.
towards him, begging him to save her daughter. Upon recognizing that Connor is an android, she pleads with a human officer not to send him, crying, “You can’t… you can’t do that! You w-- Why aren’t you sending a real person? Don’t let that thing near her!” Narratively, the interaction introduces the anti-android biases of the world, though these are understandable from a woman who just watched a previously peaceful android shoot her husband and take her daughter hostage. Of course, we know that whether or not he is an android does not matter, because Connor is not ultimately responsible for Emma’s fate: the player is. And while they may have incentives to play nice, the player has no responsibility within the game to strive for a positive outcome. The characters of Detroit should be afraid of the player, who can easily disregard the wellbeing of the characters to reach their own goals. Games that address this idea directly, such as Undertale or Doki Doki Literature Club! (2017) paint an unsettling portrait of what it would be like to realize you exist in a game outside of your own control. While Detroit doesn’t break the fourth wall the way these games do, it does use in-game incentives to redirect gaming impulses, most notably during Connor’s chapters, because Connor views the world like a puzzle to solve, or a game to play, in which all the people are just numbers.

After several missions together, Connor and Hank will go after a deviant android named Rupert. Upon discovering his location, Connor will chase him down to find him grappling with Hank, whom he pushes off the roof. The player can then direct Connor to one of two choices: pursue Rupert, or save Hank. Connor’s software predicts an 89% probability that Hank will survive on his own if Connor pursues Rupert to complete the mission. Good odds convince many players to pursue Rupert, but this statistic is only convincing once. Hank has a 100% chance of survival, regardless of your choice. As a player, this knowledge should direct you to pursue Rupert everytime, but Detroit’s relationship mechanic adds an incentive that opposes the

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48 Chapter 15, “The Nest.”
mission. You know that Hank will survive; Hank does not. His relationship with Connor plummets, and when he catches up to the androids he punches Connor in the face. “You bastard,” he yells, “You saw I was gonna fall and you’d rather let me die than fail your fucking mission. What am I to you? A statistic? A ‘zero,’ a ‘one,’ in your fucking program? Uh? Is that how you see humans, you bastard?”

Hank specifically berates Connor for making his decision based on probability rather than on empathy. Morally, the most important factor in Connor’s choice should be Hank’s peril. Ironically, Hank really is made of ones and zeros. His plea, taken out of the story’s context, becomes ridiculous. However, this irony is precisely the point of the scene. Detroit argues that even within the space of a game where characters and consequences are illusions, empathy should guide decisions. Since the game is made for narrative exploration, the developers do not expect or even encourage you to only play the empathetic decisions, but the narrative makes it clear that empathetic decisions are almost always the only morally acceptable ones. Hank embodies this philosophy in his own actions. Over the course of the game he begins to view androids as “living,” but even before this change of heart, he treats Connor as human. When entering Rupert’s apartment, Hank tells Connor (a machine whose consciousness can be transferred into an identical vessel) to stay behind him. This action makes no sense since Hank can die and Connor cannot. Despite his hatred for androids, Hank cannot help but empathize
with their human exteriors. Only when Connor is brutally cold and lacking in empathy does Hank treat him as inhuman, even going so far as to shoot him in “The Bridge.”

Pro-Violence Elements

There are only a few moments in the game where pure pacifism is not glorified as both the best option and a perfect choice. Most of these moments appear in Markus’s storyline, a significant choice since he embodies the conflict between pacifism and violence. When Markus leads a demonstration in “Freedom March,” police will always confront the protestors and fire at the crowd, killing a number of androids. Markus, as usual, can either respond violently, charging the police, or peacefully, telling the androids to stand their ground. For a happy ending, peace remains the best option, as this choice will raise public support for androids. However, no choice will prevent the police from firing into the crowd.

More significant are the moments where violence is actually a better choice than pacifism when working for a happy ending. Markus’s first choice as a deviant pits his respect for Carl
against his own sense of self-preservation. In “Broken,” Leo attacks Markus, and even while Carl begs Leo to stop, he orders Markus not to defend himself. At this point Markus deviates, and can either push Leo or endure his attacks. In the context of only this scene, both choices feel bad. Choose to endure, and Carl will collapse from a heart attack. The game uses the guilt tactic usually reserved for violent actions, as Markus goes to Carl on the floor, holding him and calling him “Dad.” After the scene, the flowchart confirms that Carl is dead. Even though the player did not directly kill Carl, the flowchart shows that his death was the result of their choice. Push Leo, and he will hit his head and lay bleeding on the floor as Carl crawls to him. Only in “Night of the Soul,” twenty-three chapters later, does the player find out that Leo survived and is reaching out to Carl for help with his drug problem. This scene requires mild violence to keep all the characters in it alive, raising Markus’s right to self defense above his respect for Carl. Carl himself just told Markus in the previous chapter that he would have to make his own choices soon, and the results of this dilemma demonstrate that Markus will achieve better results if he makes actions that he feels are right, like defending himself, rather than deferring the choice to another person.

Connor plays out a fairly different scenario in “Public Enemy” in which violence must be used to save lives, where it has previously been framed as unempathetic and reprehensible. While Markus was making his first choice as a deviant, at this point Connor has been on four missions with Hank, and has been presented with the alternatives of completing a mission or pleasing Hank. If Connor interrogates the androids and identifies a deviant, the android will attack Connor and run out of the room. When Connor chases him into the corridor, he has a timed choice to rush the deviant, draw a cop’s gun and shoot the deviant, or save Hank. Whatever choice Connor makes, the deviant will either be killed or self destruct, but only
choosing to draw the gun will prevent the police officers in the corridor from being gunned down by the android. And for the first time in the game, Hank does not berate Connor for choosing violence. Instead, he expresses his gratitude to Connor for saving lives by stopping the android quickly. While Connor has received reinforcement for decisive action before, now he receives it from Hank as well, with no repercussions. To not act would result in greater death, so violence becomes an acceptable and even noble course of action.

Here appears another division between the macro and micro narratives of Detroit. Micro violence is depicted as okay in some situations, while macro violence is not. While the distinction is not terribly groundbreaking, it is important for giving the game a touch of nuance it so often lacks. From a game making perspective, having the results of choices be too predictable makes the choices less interesting. Changing which responses are appropriate in different scenarios ensures the player must consider their actions in every scene, rather than use a heuristic template to guess which choice will lead to the result they want. Having violence be an appropriate response in some scenes also supports the more realistic argument that violence can be used as a toll for good when used in self-defense or the defense of others. Talking someone down or avoiding confrontation are not always viable options, and can lead to more harm than a strong response. However, these responses should be the exception, not the rule. The androids will bring about far more harm than good if they regularly choose violence. Only when used sparingly can violence be used as a means to achieve a happier outcome.

**Saving and Choice Making**

To make the player carefully consider their choices, before and after they have made them, all aspects of the system should reinforce the illusion that the choices are meaningful. One
favorite topic for debate and how it influences the effect of choices is the saving mechanic. Choices lose their meaning when it takes only a few clicks to undo the tragic consequences of your actions. Oftentimes, players will save immediately before any uncertain or difficult event so that they can return if they make a mistake. The other effect of saving is that death becomes meaningless. When the player character dies and respawns moments before their death, death as a mechanic becomes unserious, a minor setback rather than a catastrophe. Steven Poole argues that these pitfalls are particularly dangerous for games that claim to have meaningful choices, or try to draw their players into moral conundrums; “If you are able to wind back to a stage before your error you have not made a moral decision but simply explored a branch of a system.”

For Detroit, there is a difficult balance between their saving mechanics and their narrative exploration. Detroit is meant to be played multiple times, so that the player can view multiple paths and see new possibilities for their characters. Players will especially want to play the game again if they failed to get the happiest ending on their first playthrough, or if their characters died in the middle of their journey. However, the game explicitly tells the player to play through one full game before reloading, making it clear the developers don’t want players to take advantage of the checkpoints immediately. This is only a recommendation, and is not enforced in any way.

The length of a game can severely punish players for rash decisions they come to regret, even with the ability to save. However, when consequences are too painful, some players will still choose to start over rather than accept their choices. In my first playthrough of The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim (2011), my character was almost level 50 and I had devoted weeks of playing to the game when I realized a quest I had taken would require me to kill Jarl Balgruuf, an NPC I

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49 Poole, Trigger Happy, 224.
50 On the other hand, games that don’t allow the player to reload or undo choices are intensely frustrating. Examples include West of Loathing (2017), Darkwood (2017) on “Nightmare” difficulty, and Getting Over It with Bennett Foddy (2017).
liked. Even though Skyrim allows you to save freely, this was a long quest and I had already overwritten the saves from before I had committed to it. Rather than kill the character, I erased my playthrough and started over.

In his “Let’s Play” of Until Dawn, youtuber Markiplier makes a choice to open a hatch even though he knows it is a bad idea, and immediately regrets the result, which is the death of a character, Ashley. After getting up to loudly scream off screen, he returns, shouting, “I like Ashley too much for my stupidity to get in the way of her love… So I’m gonna play through the entire game again, from start to now.” After playing the entire game again and reaching the final scene of the game, Markiplier agonizes over a decision between running to a light switch and saving the character Mike. After consulting the hints the game has given him, he goes with his gut instinct to make no choice, instead doing nothing and letting the timer run out, saying, “If I’m wrong, this is the choice I live with.” When Mike inevitably dies, the video cuts from Markiplier screaming to him calmly saying “No. No. N. O. No.” over the menu screen of the game. This time, Markiplier cheated, restarting his playstation before the game had a chance to save. Even though this decision, to manually override the game, falls outside the bounds of proper play, and very much breaks the immersion in the gaming experience, to Markiplier and many players the satisfaction of achieving a “happy” ending where they aren’t burdened by the guilt of their choices is more important than abiding by the conventional rules of the game. In fact, it is a victory in itself to outsmart the game, exercising the special privileges of being a player rather than a digital avatar.

Most of the choices in Detroit which have negative consequences can be undone within the same chapter, but not all. Connor must make enough rebellious decisions to even be allowed

51 Markiplier, “BIGGEST MISTAKE EVER MADE | Until Dawn - Part 13.”
to deviate in “Crossroads.” If he reaches the chapter “Connor’s Last Mission,” either Hank or Connor will die in that chapter. Preventing the characters from reaching this stage takes more than just replaying “Crossroads.” Connor’s entire character arc must be rewritten. Similarly, by the time the player learns Hank is intending to kill himself in “Night of the Soul,” the most recent opportunity to change this course is four chapters back. These are not insurmountable challenges, particularly if the player is internally motivated by their emotions to change the story, but they can deter players from reloading liberally.

Steven Poole also points out that choices which end in the death of the player character are not real choices, because as soon as you respawn, the player knows that the choice is not a viable option, and they won’t follow that path anymore.53 This is why it is so important that Detroit’s gameplay continues even after Kara and Markus are dead. Kara can die easily and permanently, since her story is not essential for the continuation of the game. It is a bold move to include a completely expendable character who can die early and often, making it possible (but unlikely) for players to miss a significant amount of game content. Markus can only die in three chapters, the least frequent of the three main characters. If he dies, the player ceases to control the android revolution, and North becomes the leader of Jericho. Connor can die in nine of his fifteen chapters, but up until the last chapter, Connor will always return in a new body. Connor’s ability to return after death ensures that all the choices presented to the player can actually function as viable choices. The game does not end or restart, teaching you to never take that path. It allows you to fully explore the consequences and story of each choice it allows you to take. So long as Connor’s story continues, Kara and Markus can die permanently. Connor’s deaths also do not lose their meaning, since other characters remember and comment on his death. Amanda

53 Poole, Trigger Happy, 99.
berates him for failing his mission, and Hank expresses his revulsion at watching someone who looks human come back from the dead.

**Narrative**

While each storyline in *Detroit* deals with themes of empathy and freewill, they do not carry the message with the same power. Each character must choose between different paths and attitudes, but as explored earlier, not all choices are equal. Choices with highly varied outcomes may not necessarily be fun, and reasonable choices may not lead to highly varied outcomes. *Detroit*’s best opportunities for choice making allow the player to finely control their character’s personality and path while grappling with the main topic of the game: empathy between androids and humans.

The weakest storyline is Kara’s; she can be either kind or uncaring to Alice, but her choices have very little impact on the direction of their relationship. Instead, Kara’s choices influence her death, or the deaths of Alice and Luther, or draw her into a variety of emotional environments where the world-building is more divergent than the character arcs. Kara has only one chance to behave like an android, in “Stormy Night,” when she can choose to obey Todd’s order to stay put, never becoming a deviant, which will result in her and Alice’s death, ending their storyline.

Markus has much greater opportunities for personality divergence. He can remain open and pacifistic, or he can harden his heart to humans and engage in violence. The one thing he cannot do, since he is the driving force of the revolution, an essential component of the story, is refuse to deviate. He is the only character who lacks this choice. Instead, he automatically deviates when Leo attacks him, and immediately must make a choice between violence and
pacifism, the core of his character arc. Markus’s storyline is also crippled by the vestigial remains of romantic choices. While he can lose and garner favor with any of the three Jericho ringleaders (North, Simon, and Josh), only North is available to court, and trying to reject her leads to painful romantic bungles rather than clear rejection. In addition to the forced romantic storyline with North, there are scenes of emotional intimacy with Simon, but no choice to pursue him. Outside of the bounds of the game, many fans passionately create their own romantic content featuring Markus and Simon, and lament that they did not have more choices within the game.

The most popular character of the three is Connor, the android sent by Cyberlife, and the soul of *Detroit: Become Human*. In a voluntary survey within the game, players are asked which of the three main characters is their favorite. Connor received 54% of the votes. There is an easy explanation for why: Connor is cool. When the player directs Connor, they get to participate in investigations and chase scenes, all of which culminate in the choices that define Connor’s character: complete the mission, or show empathy. Connor’s story showcases the best of the cyberpunk elements that give the game its aesthetic and the emotional elements essential to its human appeal.

As an investigative prototype, Connor can engage in digital reconstructions of a crime scene, building pieces of evidence into a visual experience. His ruthless, mission-focused fighting makes his action sequences especially exhilarating because he never fights for self-preservation, unless his death would lead him to fail the mission, allowing him to take risky, but very cool looking actions. This drive is laid out in “Hostage.” The mission fails if Emma dies, and succeeds if she lives. The most visually stunning of the six endings involves Daniel jumping off the roof intending to take Emma with him, and Connor using his momentum to take

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54 “Survey Results”, *Detroit: Become Human* Extras. Kara received 28% and Markus 18%.
her place, pulling her to safety while careening off the roof. As Connor falls, the camera shifts into slow motion. His eyes close, and the banner reading “Mission Successful” appears. Scenes like this one appeal to a morbid *curiositas* and love of spectacle. There is something exciting about watching your avatar fall off a roof. Judd Ruggill and Ken McAllister point out that these kinds of scenes and actions contribute to the excitement of video games: “What better subject for computer games, for inconsequential play (though of course play can be quite consequential), than those activities that, were they real, would surely ruin one’s real life.”

What makes Connor’s story great is the fact that his story does not end when these events occur, so there is no progress-based incentive to avoid them. Another incarnation of Connor will reappear in the next scene, unphased by the death of his predecessor. The consequence of these visually dramatic deaths does not appear until Connor’s later chapters, when he has met Hank. After teaching the player the narrative irrelevance of Connor’s death, the game adds an alternative incentive to keep Connor alive. The player already knows if they received one of two “Mission Failed” endings in “Hostage” that Connor should never die before completing his mission. But regardless of the success of Connor’s mission, the game also teaches the player that they should avoid Connor’s death because of emotional repercussions. Everytime Connor dies it upsets Hank, and his relationship with Connor deteriorates.

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55 Ruggill and McAllister, *Gaming Matters*, 73.
Connor presents the player with the most ability to control his path out of the three main characters, as the player can control both his deviancy and moral character. Again, the structure of his story first presents itself in “Hostage.” The very first choice in the game has nothing to do with Connor’s mission; a fish has fallen from its fish tank, and Connor chooses to save the fish or leave it to die. The choice presents a moment for empathy or neglect that has no bearing on the story, and therefore no consequences. It is the player’s prerogative to decide if they will be empathetic for the sake of empathy, or to be callous simply because they can.

Connor does not only choose between violence or peace, but between violent obedience and empathetic deviation. Connor, like Kara, does not have to deviate, but his storyline continues regardless of his choice. Like his deaths, his deviance affects the narrative path, but does not hinder progress. Connor, like Markus, can experience real divergence in his character, but his conflict grapples directly with the thesis of the other two storylines, that androids deserve empathy. Connor neither has to show empathy nor be worthy of it. The androids of Jericho will follow Markus depending on if he is successful, not on his moral character. Alice will follow Kara no matter what. Connor’s personality shines so brightly because of his complementary NPC Hank, who will only help Connor if he maintains a balance between success and empathy. Mistakes made by Connor will not result in the death of his companion, as the mistakes of Kara and Markus will. Instead, Hank offers a moral evaluation of Connor’s (and therefore the

56 Christine Daviault makes an interesting argument in The Game Culture Reader that non-player characters like Hank, who guide the player and add personality to the game, are just as important for player identification as blank slate player characters.
player’s) actions. Showing empathy towards humans and androids will increase friendship with Hank, while callous pursuit of the mission will antagonize him and lead to emotionally painful consequences.

Hank is also the most prominent human character in the story. Each of the three main characters has a relationship, positive or negative, with a human, or so we are led to believe at the beginning of the game. Alice, the human in Kara’s story, is revealed to be an android in “Crossroads,” so Kara’s story lacks any long term relationships with humans. Carl, Markus’s owner at the beginning of the story, fulfills a fatherly role for Markus and maintains a special place in his android heart, but is absent for most of the story. Markus must form his character independently. Connor, a purely investigative model with no domestic situation, has no other connections outside his work and his digital Cyberlife handler, Amanda. Hank is not just Connor’s human connection, but his only personal connection. Their buddy-cop adventures provide insight into human android relations by allowing the player to explore the relationship between a man who hates androids and an android who only cares about his mission. The dynamic becomes more complex because while Hank expresses contempt for androids, he psychologically processes them as if they were human. Connor’s deaths and resurrections cause him distress. Violence against peaceful androids elicits his disgust.

Hank and Connor’s relationship is especially poignant because it has character consequences, not just narrative consequences. If Hank has a hostile relationship with Connor, his will commit suicide in the second-to-last chapter, either in despair from Connor’s cruelty or from the psychological pain of watching Connor die and return as if nothing had happened. If Connor chooses not to deviate, but does not have a hostile relationship with Hank, Hank will try to stop Connor from undermining the android revolution in the last chapter. The scene ends when
either Hank kills Connor, Hank dies trying to kill Connor, or Connor kills Hank. Regardless of Connor’s relationship with Hank, Connor’s storyline will still progress, but with the emotional burden of Hank’s hatred or death as the result of your choices. Hank’s deaths are not just sad. They can cause regret in the player, who knows full well that the story could have happened differently. Giles Hooper describes the emotional difference between a death in a film and in a video game cutscene, two visually similar representation:

“Baseline empathetic reaction may be the same, as might elements of visceral shock or disgust; but there is a crucial difference: this was not a pre-determined outcome (however many times one watches Star Wars, Obi-Wan will always ‘die’ at the hands of Darth Vader; but, in The Witcher 3, Keira Metz may or may not die)”

Steven Poole explains in clear language that “We may be guilty about things that we simply couldn’t help, but we only regret things that could have happened differently.” There are very few deaths in Detroit which must happen. When a character dies, the player knows that they caused their death with the choices they made.

In one of the alternate story paths, Hank can survive to the end of the game and still be friends with Connor. If Connor shows empathy to other androids, Hank will develop a gruff but friendly relationship with him, as he pushes Connor to examine his own free will. If Connor

57 Hooper, “Sounding the Story,” 122.
58 Poole, Trigger Happy, 224.
chooses to deviate, Hank will try to assist him in freeing androids from cyberlife and battling another Connor model. The player Connor can still let Hank die in this scene, but most do not. The final interaction with Hank, in which he must identify the player Connor from an evil duplicate Connor, involves a test of the player’s empathy, and how much empathy they have demonstrated while guiding Connor. Hank asks both Connors what the name of his deceased son is. This information is only accessible in the chapter “Russian Roulette,” when Connor finds a drunk Hank unconscious on the ground after a round of solo Russian Roulette. While waiting for Hank to get ready to leave for a crime scene, Connor has the option to investigate his house. A picture of his son, Cole, stands on the table where Hank was sitting. In the context of the game’s story, the question is an empathy test for Connor, to see if he cared enough about Hank to try to understand his obvious distress. The sequence also addresses the player; did they care enough about Hank to try to understand his distress? When taking the path of deviancy, mission success depends on player empathy. The empathy must also be active. Connor cannot wait for an opportunity to be kind to Hank; he must actively seek out information that could help him understand him. If Connor answers correctly, he explains the circumstances of Cole’s death, and Hank shoots the other Connor.

If the android revolution is successful (which requires success in Markus’s storyline as well) there is an after-credits scene in which Hank greets Connor outside of a favorite fast-food

59 64% choose to save Hank.
truck, and the two smile at each other and hug. The scene, while short, is one of the most emotionally rewarding scenes in the game because it feels earned. The scene occurs as a direct culmination of player choices, as they must demonstrate empathy, deviate, and successfully respond to QTEs to unlock the scene. The emotional payoff is especially rewarding because of the possibility of other outcomes. Hank and Connor could just as easily have killed each other as enjoy this quiet, joyful moment together. This scene is the true happy ending of the game, and it is significant that the game developers chose to reserve the two possible after credit scenes for Connor, and this after credit scene for Connor and Hank. Their friendship is a microcosm of the story’s macro narrative, in which humans who don’t recognize the sentience of androids initially
fear their independence, and then accept their ability to feel emotion and their desire to live free. Markus and Kara certainly have emotional scenes of their own, but their major relationships are with other androids. They also have fewer opportunities to be openly hostile with their potential friends, which leaves some scenes feeling forced. Connor and Hank showcase unity and good feeling between humans and androids without being forced to do so. The joy feels genuine because the player knows how they had control over the outcome. They get to enjoy the personal satisfaction of having achieved a desirable ending, and the game ends with Connor and Hank.

Conclusion

*Detroit: Become Human* provides an excellent prototype for games that want to showcase moral systems. While somewhat flawed in its simplification of social issues, the game’s richly detailed world and compelling characters make it a good starting point to explore these issues with greater nuance. The narrative exploration elements pushed the genre of choice-based video games farther than ever before, leading the way to new forms of storytelling and ways to argue for a code of ethics. However, just because a video game presents an argument does not mean players have to listen. Each player may or may not think critically about the game’s content, and each one will process the game through their own unique perspective. Ian Bogost writes,

> “Simply playing a videogame need not entail the player’s adoption of the represented value system; the player might oppose, question, or otherwise internalize its claims: which processes does it include, and which does it exclude? What rules does the game

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60 Scenes like Kara, Alice, and Luther reaching a haven in Canada, and Markus singing “Hold On” with the Jericho androids are certainly emotional scenes, but these were not chosen as after-credits scenes.
enforce, and how do those rules correlate, correspond, or conflict with an existing morality outside the game?\textsuperscript{61}

Players might reject the worthy values infused into a game’s system. But on the other hand, a game with bad, flawed, or simplified values does not necessitate a player taking on those values. A game puts forward a message like other media, and the more players understand how the message is constructed, the more conscious they can be when processing a game’s values, deciding on their own whether or not they find the argument convincing.

\textit{Detroit} lays out a fairly simple argument. Empathy will lead to good outcomes. Cruelty will lead to bad outcomes. Many would consider this argument naïve, and perhaps they are right. The real world is not always so simple. And yet, we do not play games because we want them to tell us our actions are meaningless. If they did, they wouldn’t be very good games. Podcaster and modern philosopher Spencer Klavan writes that video games are so compelling in a hopeless world because they “suggest that there is a real world in which real people can get real things done by developing skills and applying them.”\textsuperscript{62} Stephen Poole also comments on the pleasure of playing in a world tailored for your success: “For a time we can feel oddly at home in this unreal universe, where our strengths can always overcome our difficulties. We prefer fantasy because it is \textit{fair}.”\textsuperscript{63} Video games encourage action over navel-gazing. As long as games are going to encourage action, they should encourage players to act out of empathy and love, not to keep from spoiling the game as Poole put it, but for the sake of doing what is right.

\textsuperscript{61} Bogost, \textit{Persuasive Games}, 284.
\textsuperscript{62} Klavan, “An Art That Offers Choices.”
\textsuperscript{63} Poole, \textit{Trigger Happy}, 212.
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