

Morality, AI, and Humanity in Detroit: Become Human

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Abstract

This paper was originally written for Professor Michael Filimowicz's IAT 210 course *Introduction to Game Studies: Theory and Design*. The assignment asked students to submit an approximately 2000 word research essay related to a particular video game. The video game must be avatar/character-based, have a narrative premise or backstory, and have a virtual world. The paper uses APA citation style.

This paper does a deep dive into how the choose-your-own-adventure video game *Detroit: Become Human* actively encourages players to choose what they deem is the most moral choice within the context of the game and allows players to contemplate the moral and philosophical consequences of their choices.

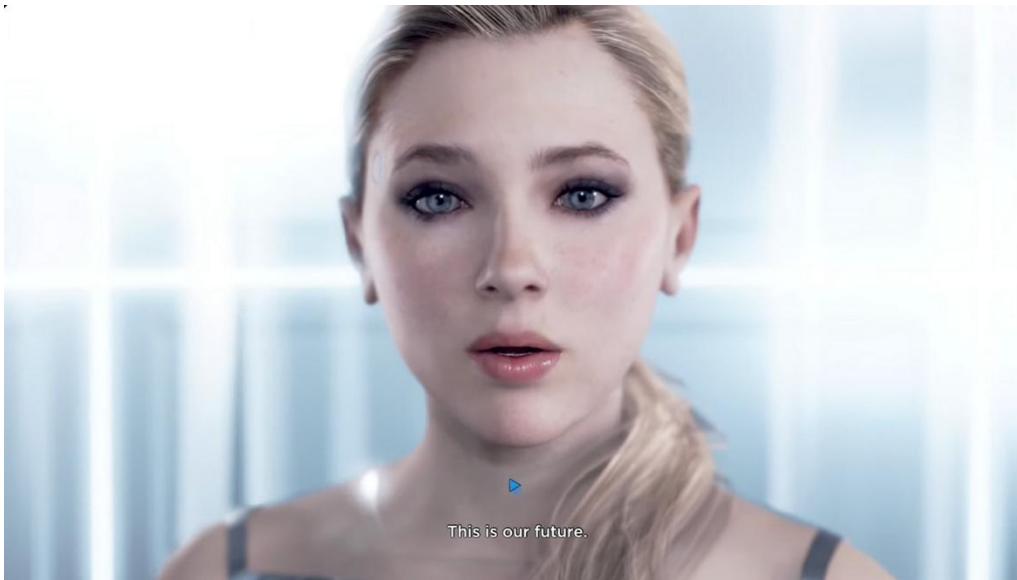
Introduction

Detroit: Become Human (2018) is an immersive choose-your-own-adventure game and is the fifth and latest game developed by the Parisian company *Quantic Dream*. The game is broken up into numerous different chapters, with each having a unique ending that is the consequence of the player's actions and choices. Set in the year 2038, the game follows the intertwined stories of three androids, each of whom have been forced to become deviant as a circumstance of their environments. The first android players are introduced to is Conner, a special detective model designed to be a helping hand to law enforcement officers. Conner is helping detectives handle the ever-increasing cases of deviant androids.

Deviant androids, also called deviants, are androids who have developed human emotions. These are androids who have broken through the programmable wall separating the androids from humans. In many cases, these are androids who were forced to fight back against their owners because they felt threatened, scared, and vulnerable. The next playable android in the game is called Kara. Kara is hired as a housekeeper and caretaker for Todd and his daughter, Alice. Todd, a down on his luck single father, often tries to drown his anger and

emotions through drugs and alcohol. However, he often spirals down an even darker path and takes out his emotions on Alice and Kara. Players are also able to play as Markus, a caretaker for a kind-hearted elderly artist, who emerges as a leader for the deviants.

Throughout the game, every choice the player makes as one character greatly impacts the others as well. This offers players an incredibly high degree of agency. However, with this increase of player agency, the game very often presents players with moral quandaries that are also applicable to the real world. All of this, combined with each player's unique positionality and history, results in *Detroit: Become Human* actively encouraging players to choose what they, the players, deem is the most moral choice and contemplate the consequences of their choices.



Chloe, the game's guide, saying "This is our future" (Vorde3x, 2024).

Moral Dilemmas and Bringing out the Best in Players

Many of the choices that players must make are inspired by very real moral dilemmas that many humans face each and every day. The nature of the choices players face influences players to actively explore the moral and ethical boundaries they are willing to cross in the game. In many cases, players will often contemplate their choices and act accordingly with their moral compass. For example, the phrase that a "parent would do anything for their child" is commonly used to express the love many parents have for their children. However, if given a choice

between robbing a store to help a little girl sleep soundly, sleeping in a rundown house with unstable deviant androids, or sleeping in a broken-down car, which option is morally sound? Moral dilemmas such as this one are ones that players often have to overcome in *Detroit: Become Human*. While one could argue that given the nature of *Detroit: Become Human* as a form of entertainment, players wouldn't care too much about their choice. However, Engels and Evans (2022) argue that *Detroit: Become Human* is a philosophical platform that actively encourages players to practice their moral reasoning. Through its "philosophically rich narrative" (Engels and Evans, 2022, p. 20), the moral dilemmas the players continually face, many of which don't have a right or wrong answer, prompts players to weigh the pros and cons of their choices.

Moreover, players are implicitly prompted to empathize with the characters, to openly reflect on their choices, and to "trace and critique both their decisions and their consequences" (Engels and Evans, 2022, p. 20). Through this immersive philosophical awakening, many players, as much as 62.24%, preferred morally sound decisions as opposed to their immoral counterparts even though there were approximately equal amounts of both moral and immoral choices (Holl & Melzer, 2022). Furthermore, Pallavicini et al. (2020) argue that the strong and immersive narrative of the game allows for the involvement and cultivation of emotional intelligence. It is through this involvement that players are able to partake in moral and ethical reasoning through various different perspectives to foster empathy. Holl and Melzer (2022) further argue that eudaimonia, the notion that humans are able to strive for a divine state of being with the utmost kindness and humanity, is a key concept to the entertainment experience and that meaningful play, such as that seen in *Detroit: Become Human*, "involves a complex interplay of contextual factors that can either promote or prevent moral behavior" (Holl & Melzer, 2022, p. 296). Building on this, Mortensen (2012) states that ethical games and systems "are defined by player agency, by the degree to which the player can act in the game" (Mortensen, 2012). This further suggests that a high degree of agency is needed in order for players to be morally conscience of their in-game actions.



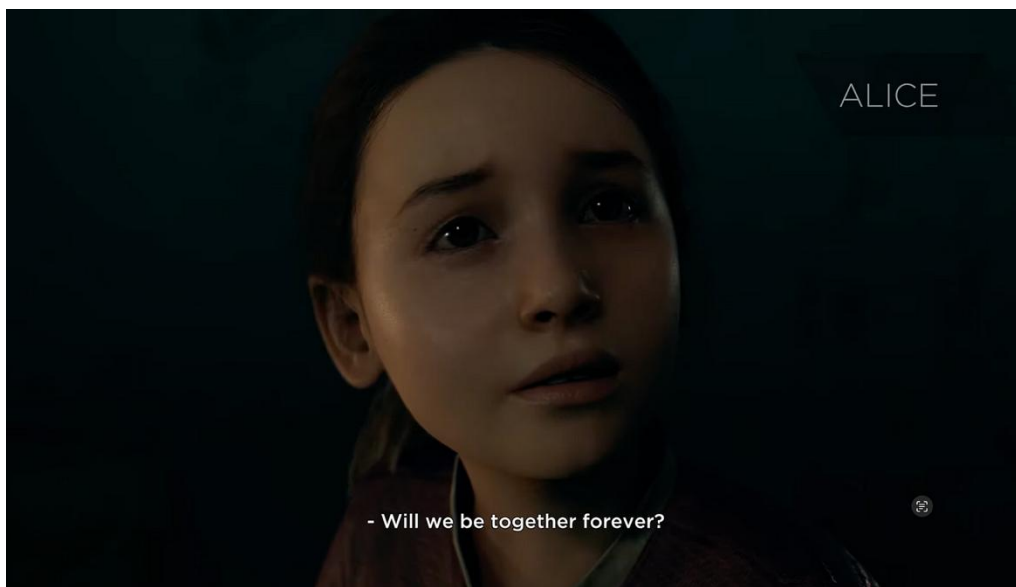
Conner has the option to pick up a gun or put it back. An Android act in the back states that “Androids are strictly forbidden to carry or use any type of weapon” (4K no HUD Gameplay, 2023).

Agency as a Catalyst for Moral Reasoning and Retrospection

Player agency is a catalyst for moral reasoning and retrospection. Games like *Detroit: Become Human* give players an incredibly high degree of agency due to the various meaningful choices that are presented to players, and this high degree of agency could be a factor in helping players be morally mindful of their in-game actions and choices. However, games must first acknowledge that a player is a moral agent (Stang, 2019). According to Engels and Evans (2022), a moral agent is a person that has “some control over their behavior” (Engels & Evans, 2022, p. 6), that possess the ability to act with intention, and that is able to rationally reflect on their actions. Drawing on Sicart’s (2009) study of ethics in video games, Stang (2019) argues that games who succeed at acknowledging players as moral agents don’t label players’ decisions as “good” or “bad.” Through her evaluation of Sicart’s (2009) study, Stang (2019) further builds upon this idea by acknowledging that games that label players actions as either “good” or “bad” take away the moral responsibility of the player and does not allow the player to partake in deep moral reasoning. One reason that *Detroit: Become Human* does not fall into this category of games that trivialize players’ decisions is that the “choices made in the game have an additional level of seriousness to them” (Engels & Evans, 2022, p. 5-6). One clear example of this is the fact that the protagonists of the game, i.e. Conner, Kara, and Marcus, can be killed off because of players’ choices. If this

happens, players will continue playing the game only through the perspective of the protagonists that are alive.

This also results in numerous and vastly different outcomes for each player and each playthrough of each player. These “radically different outcomes” (Engels & Evans, 2022, p. 5) of the game aid players in the “exploratory potentials of this game for philosophical ideas so worthwhile” (Engels & Evans, 2022, p. 5). According to Engels and Evans (2022), this can further prompt retrospection on one’s actions and choices in the game. Holl and Melzer (2022) found that it is because of this moral reflection and retrospection that players, or media users in general, are “motivated to spend many hours with eudaimonic entertainment”, such as *Detroit: Become Human* (Holl & Melzer, 2022, p. 295). Even though players are presented with violent and often “inhumane” actions, players will mainly choose the good, i.e. moral, option regardless of in-game factors incentivizing them to act in a certain way (Holl & Melzer, 2022). However, one must keep in mind that a choice that may be morally sound to one player could be the exact opposite to another player, with the reasoning behind this circling back to the players themselves.



Alice, after escaping Todd, asks Cara, an Android, if they will “be together forever” (4K no HUD Gameplay, 2023).

Positionality and What it Means to be Morally Right

A players unique understanding of the moral dilemmas in a game are a result of many different factors. Positionality refers to how “one’s personal viewpoint,

social identity, and life experiences color one's overall worldview” (Filimowicz, M., personal communication, November, 2024). A player’s positionality will greatly affect what choice they deem is the most morally right one. For example, a significant chapter in the game is one called “Stormy Night”, in which Kara, the android that takes care of Alice and Todd, is able to break through her programmable barrier and become deviant. In the chapter, Todd, who is extremely intoxicated, gets mad and decides to take her anger out on Alice, his young child, by whipping her with his belt. Players have numerous options on how to approach the situation. One option is to simply listen to Todd and stay put, while the other is to become a deviant and intervene. To some players, staying put is the most moral choice because of their unique positionality within the world. However, other plays may think the opposite and be in favour of intervening. This is once again due to their own unique positionality and history.

If a player intervenes, they are once again met with a myriad of choices. They can approach Todd with a gun or simply go in empty handed. Perhaps players who may have gone through a similar situation as Alice in real life would go in with the gun in order to save Alice because to them that is the morally obvious choice. However, other plays with a different positionality may intervene empty-handedly. If players choose to threaten Todd with a gun, Todd will inevitably be shot and killed. However, if players go in empty-handed, they might not be able to rescue Alice, however, no one is killed. It is choices like these that players are forced to take as they play through the game. According to Engels and Evans (2022), *Detroit: Become Human* poses questions that relate to all areas of moral reasoning, such as the requirements for moral reasoning and personhood. Players are also prompted to “reflect on conceptions of moral patency or considerability” by reflecting if androids are worthy of moral concern. Engels and Evans (2022) further argue that “by posing various moral scenarios throughout the game that offer different outcomes, players are prompted to ponder competing values or frameworks through which to judge our moral decisions” (Engels & Evans, 2022, p. 3). However, a player’s answer to all of these reflective opportunities solely relies on their own positionality, with Engels and Evans (2022) arguing that one’s capacity to develop moral agency and reflect on our desires is strengthened through “struggle and suffering” (Engels & Evans, 2022, p. 3).

Conclusion

Detroit: Become Human is an extraordinary work of art that challenges players' moral reasoning by plunging them into a game world with an incredibly high degree of player agency. Throughout the chapters in the game, players are put through many moral dilemmas, with each one challenging their capacity for moral reasoning and ability to be a moral agent. Numerous studies have found that while players are free to make the most inhuman and immoral decisions in the game, they will very often act in a way that closely represents eudaimonia, a divine state of being in which humans strive to be the best (i.e. benevolent) they can. The game's high degree of agency also allows players to use their moral reasoning and be reflective of their choices and actions within the game. While many games tend to label players' actions as either "good" or "bad", Detroit: Become Human raises the notion that there are no "good" or "bad" choices, only the ones that we deem to be the most morally right. Although, the meaning of "morally right" will greatly vary from player to player. This is vastly due to each player's positionality and their unique take on the game and the real world. Even so, Detroit: Become Human is a game that acts as a philosophical platform that encourages moral reasoning, retrospection, and reflection, especially when it's most needed today.

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