

4-2022

"What if We're on the Wrong Side?": Police Brutality, Protest, and Player Culpability in Heavy Rain and Detroit: Become Human

Karmann E. Ludwig
Northern Michigan University, kludwig@nmu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.nmu.edu/theses>



Part of the [African American Studies Commons](#), [Digital Humanities Commons](#), [Other Film and Media Studies Commons](#), and the [Race and Ethnicity Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Ludwig, Karmann E., "What if We're on the Wrong Side?": Police Brutality, Protest, and Player Culpability in Heavy Rain and Detroit: Become Human" (2022). *All NMU Master's Theses*. 707.
<https://commons.nmu.edu/theses/707>

This Open Access is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Works at NMU Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in All NMU Master's Theses by an authorized administrator of NMU Commons. For more information, please contact kmcdonou@nmu.edu, bsarjean@nmu.edu.

“WHAT IF WE’RE ON THE WRONG SIDE?”
POLICE BRUTALITY, PROTEST, AND PLAYER CULPABILITY IN *DETROIT: BECOME
HUMAN* AND *HEAVY RAIN*

By

Karmann Elsa Ludwig

THESIS

Submitted to
Northern Michigan University
In partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Office of Graduate Education and Research

April 2022

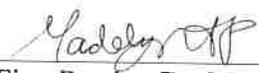
SIGNATURE APPROVAL FORM

“WHAT IF WE’RE ON THE WRONG SIDE?”
POLICE BRUTALITY, PROTEST, AND PLAYER CULPABILITY IN *DETROIT: BECOME HUMAN* AND *HEAVY RAIN*

This thesis by Karmann Elsa Ludwig is recommended for approval by the student’s Thesis Committee and Department Head in the Department of English and by the Dean of Graduate Studies and Research.



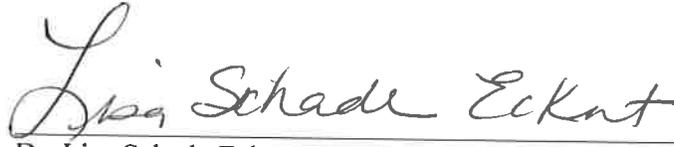
Committee Chair: Dr. Lesley Larkin 04/04/2022
Date



First Reader: Dr. Madelyn Palowski 04/04/2022
Date



Department Head: Dr. Lynn Domina 04/05/2022
Date



Dr. Lisa Schade Eckert 5/3/22
Date
Dean of Graduate Studies and Research

ABSTRACT

“WHAT IF WE’RE ON THE WRONG SIDE?”
POLICE BRUTALITY, PROTEST, AND PLAYER CULPABILITY IN *DETROIT: BECOME HUMAN* AND *HEAVY RAIN*

By

Karmann Elsa Ludwig

Choice-based video games have often been called “interactive movies” for their unique position as a genre that lets players craft a unique story by making decisions that alter the game’s narrative. Two well-known examples in this genre, Quantic Dream’s *Heavy Rain* and *Detroit: Become Human*, offer a variety of possible story lines and outcomes for players to experience. However, because these two narratives are steeped in themes of police brutality, systemic racism, and protest, the way a player shapes a story does not exist in a relatively “moral-free” vacuum. Rather, the legal and social precedents that are often used to absolve police misconduct of blame by indicating an absence of choice are accentuated in these two video games. Through the lens of ludonarratology, which emphasizes both the played experience and the narrative of a video game, I will explain how both *Heavy Rain* and *Detroit: Become Human* demonstrate both the presence of personal choice and the institutional frameworks which inhibit agency in order to maintain power. In addition, the racial tones of *Detroit: Become Human* offer at times subversive readings of police brutality while maintaining dominant narratives of protest that protect white comfort.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to Kendall Ludwig, Karl Ludwig, and Amber Kraft, for all the fun we had playing these games.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author wishes to thank her thesis director, Dr. Lesley Larkin, for her continued encouragement and support; her reader, Dr. Madelyn Pawlowski, for her feedback and support during this program; Caden “Biz” Bissland for the joy he brought her this year; Lena Nighswander, Emma Vallandingham, and Joelle Stiles for their loving commiserations; and her family, Ken, Kristine, Kendall, and Karl, for their extensive love and support. Without the help of these people, this project could not have been completed.

This thesis follows the format prescribed by the *MLA Style Manual* and the Department of English.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Tables	(vii)
Introduction.....	1
0.1 Prologue.....	1
0.2 Ludology, Narratology, and the Choice-Based Game.....	2
0.3 Summary of Games and Ideological Positions.....	7
Chapter One: <i>Heavy Rain</i>	14
1.1 Unneutral Ground: Player Sympathies.....	18
1.2 Player Agency I: Investigative Practices.....	21
1.3 Player Agency II: Corruption, Reform, and Futility.....	29
Chapter Two: <i>Detroit: Become Human</i>	37
2.1 No Androids Allowed: <i>Detroit: Become Human</i> and The American Civil Rights Movement.....	40
2.2 American Mythology: Whitewashing the Protest Narrative.....	42
2.3 To Flee or Not to Flee: The Public Opinion Question.....	46
2.4 “I’m Whatever You Want Me to Be, Lieutenant”: Connor and Making the Ethical Decision to Be Bad at Your Job.....	51
Conclusion: Misremembering History: The White Played Experience.....	59
Works Cited	62

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Impact of Markus' Decisions During "Freedom March"	48
Table 2: Impacts of Connor Capturing a Deviant	57

INTRODUCTION

0.1 Prologue

As the final act of Quantic Dream's *Detroit: Become Human* opens, the city of Detroit is on the brink of civil war between humanoid robots and humans. Lieutenant Hank Anderson of the Detroit Police Department asks: "What if we're on the wrong side, Connor? What if we're fighting against people who just want to be free?" The player, who controls Connor, a robot police officer, must respond, selecting from a series of short prompts which represent the broader idea of the response Connor will give. In a choice-based game like *Detroit: Become Human*, there are thousands of lines of dialogue, many of which are dependent upon the player's choice. This is one of the possible exchanges that can occur:

HANK. What if we're on the wrong side, Connor? What if we're fighting against people who just want to be free?

CONNOR. They're not people, Lieutenant. They're defective machines.

HANK. "They're not people." That's what we say every time we want to oppress someone.

In a culture in which many of its news outlets, films, television series, education systems, and politicians glorify the role of the police officer as hero, what does it mean for a fictional police officer like Hank to openly acknowledge historical precedents of oppression? What does it mean when it occurs during video games in which the player is explicitly told their actions will have consequences?

0.2 Ludology, Narratology, and the Choice-Based Video Game

Though a relatively recent medium, video games have earned a spot in academic discourse that, while not as prevalent as the study of literature, film, and television, has legitimized the genre as worthy of extensive and unique study. Scholars like Espen Aarseth¹, Jesper Juul, and Ian Bogost have written extensively on the theoretical study of video games, otherwise known as ludology. The primary conflict in video game studies exists between the aforementioned ludology and narratology; while ludology examines “the pleasures of video games,” which “are not primarily visual, but kinesthetic, functional, and cognitive,” narratology analyzes video games through almost exclusively their narrative (Aarseth, “Genre Trouble” 52). Though many, if not most, contemporary video games include storytelling as an integral part of the “text,” it is clear that video games, due to their interactive nature, must be interpreted in light of its unique differences from other narratives. For example, the visual (lighting, actors, sets) and aural (music, voice) elements within a film are (typically) absent from written texts, such as novels and poems, and to analyze a film without including these variables as genuinely impactful aspects of the “viewed” experience would be remiss and otherwise limit the scope of the analysis. Similarly, many video games have qualities that overlap with film and television: actors, music, lighting and scenic design, and cinematography. However, gameplay itself, or the “played experience” as I will be calling it for the duration of this project, is a variable unique to video games that warrants a separate approach to the genre.

That is not to say, however, that the narrative of a video game is unimportant. Many scholars of ludology have sometimes opted to dismiss a game’s narrative in favor of its played

¹ For further reading on ludology, see Aarseth, *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*; Juul, *Half-Real: Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds*; and Bogost, *Unit Operations: An Approach to Video Game Criticism*.

experience: Aarseth, for example, suggests that “the story in these games is superficial, like a bored taxi driver whose only function is to take us on to the next ludic event” (“Genre Trouble” 52). He ultimately postulates that video games are more valuable for what they communicate ludically than narratologically, and that their storylines do not include the sort of depth and complexity found in literature, film, and television. In his words, “the aesthetic problem in these games is a conflict between the opposing goals of gameplay and storytelling” (51). Since this particular piece of Aarseth’s work was written in 2004, countless games with especially rich and complex narratives have been created that complicate his perspectives on the conflicting realms of gameplay and narrative: video games such as *Mass Effect*, *Red Dead Redemption*, *It Takes Two*, and *Horizon: Zero Dawn* include narratives on par with film, television, and literature. It is also worth noting that, prior to this article’s release, story-rich video games were on the market, though Aarseth is correct in noting the increased presence of lackluster ludic stories in the early 2000s and late 1990s, often caused by the technological limitations of those games. However, games such as *The Legend of Zelda: Majora’s Mask* (2000), *The Legend of Zelda: The Wind Waker* (2002), and *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind* (2002) featured complex stories that interacted with, not against, their gameplay elements.

At the same time, the narrative elements cannot be the only element addressed. A game with a story is not an inherently more developed piece of art than one without a story, or with a poorly developed one. In their piece “Video Games and Meaningful Entertainment Experiences,” Mary Beth Oliver, et al., suggest that “games not only *allow* for meaningful entertainment, but they may be particularly *able* to be meaningful when the story is compelling and engaging” (391). Oliver’s approach is arguably narratological: the meaningfulness of the video game as a text stems from its written components, including the elements often attributed to what we call a

“good story,” such as a “wide variety of emotional experiences, from basal arousal to pain and poignancy” (391). In fact, Oliver’s article even describes the participants in their research as “viewers,” rather than using the term players, further aligning the article’s ideological framework with narratology (392). Ludologists like Aarseth would argue against Oliver’s point, suggesting an analysis and, perhaps, its meaningfulness, comes not from its story, but rather from the act of playing the game itself and the complex interactions between avatar and player, screen and controller. Are video games psychological, entertainment, or art?

The conflict between ludology and narratology in video game studies is the place from which I develop my argument: though video games cannot be exclusively analyzed for their narratives, as they are fundamentally and mechanically different from other types of media, the narrative also cannot be completely, or even mostly, ignored, as the latter is a crucial aspect of the played experience. Many gamers play video games for their rich stories, and developers are aware of this. Bioware’s *Mass Effect* Trilogy, for example, which allows players to change the game’s combat difficulty, includes this in-game description for “casual” difficulty: “This difficulty is intended for players who are not experienced with shooters and RPGS or *who are more interested in story than combat*” (Bioware, emphasis mine). Though many play *Mass Effect* for both its exciting combat and interesting story, it is clear that the narrative is an increasingly important aspect of gameplay; while a player can remove combat difficulty to become more engaged in the narrative, the player cannot remove the narrative to become more engaged in the gameplay—because the story is integral to the gameplay. Moreover, I postulate that a contemporary analysis of video games must integrate both the ludic and narratological aspects of

the specific text and genre as a whole, in what some scholars have called “ludonarratology.”²

“Choice-based” video games, a relatively recent subgenre, are especially relevant to the use of ludonarratology as a theoretical frame. Choice-based games, as I will define them, are games in which the outcomes of the game are based largely, or almost entirely, on player choice. Typically, these games are story-dense, to the point of resembling film, both artistically and visually, with the added ludic element of the player making choices warranting the distinction of their genre. While the choice-based game may include ludic elements, such as puzzle-solving and eye-hand coordination skills, that are featured in most video games and yet independent of the narrative, the choice-based game transforms the narrative into a ludic activity. The story (narrative) is played (ludic), hence the importance of the ludonarratological lens. Games like *Life is Strange* (Dontnod Entertainment, 2015), *Until Dawn* (Supermassive Games, 2015), and *Catherine: Full Body* (Atlus, 2019) require players to make decisions and choose between dialogue options in order to progress the story and game simultaneously. Though some decisions are arbitrary, with no real effect on the outcome of the game, many player decisions seriously impact the narrative. Often, these decisions are moral in nature. In *Mass Effect 2*, the player is confronted with the decision to save or destroy research obtained by unethical means. Should the player save it, a character in *Mass Effect 3* will live; should the player destroy it, the same character will die. Decisions also may be somewhat arbitrary, in which moral elements may be at play, but their consequences are largely unknown. For example, in the horror game *Until Dawn*, the player must decide whether one of the characters (Chris) chooses to spare his best friend, Josh, or to spare Ashley, his friend in whom he is romantically interested. Regardless of the player’s decision, Ashley will be the one who is spared. If, however, the player chooses to try to

² See Pugh and Toh for further reading on ludonarratology.

save Josh instead of Ashley, Ashley will later refuse to save Chris's life when given the opportunity. In both instances, choice-based video games transform story into gameplay, and gameplay into story in ways that demand a ludonarratological analysis.

Though *Mass Effect* and *Until Dawn* are well-known choice-based video games, among the most famous are Quantic Dream's contributions to the genre. A French-based company with director/writer David Cage at the helm, Quantic Dream has produced five story-intensive video games: *Omikron: The Nomad Soul* (1999), *Fahrenheit: Indigo Prophecy* (2005), *Heavy Rain* (2010), *Beyond: Two Souls* (2013), and *Detroit: Become Human* (2018). Each of these games is quite story-rich and, importantly, each game contains some form of choice-based mechanisms (with the exception of *Omikron: Nomad Soul*). While *Fahrenheit* and *Beyond: Two Souls* each feature some choices and dialogue options that do effect the game in minor ways, both *Heavy Rain* and *Detroit: Become Human* offer the player a plethora of possibilities and decisions that create a unique played experience. Whereas the presence of player choice in *Fahrenheit* and *Beyond: Two Souls* is something of a novelty (i.e. will your character pursue a brief romance, what will your character cook for dinner, etc.), making decisions in *Heavy Rain* and *Detroit: Become Human* can have more significant consequences that include the death of one or more characters, the inclusion or omission of certain "chapters",³ and the outcome of the game's ending. It is because of the games' variability that I choose to write about them. That is, though other choice-based games, including Quantic Dream's other titles, are worthy of analysis in their own right, the extensiveness of player choice in *Heavy Rain* and *Detroit: Become Human* offer

³ *Detroit: Become Human* and *Heavy Rain* refer to what are normally known as "levels" in video games as "chapters."

especially unique experiences of player agency⁴. The intense levels of decision-making a player must do that affect the played experience and the story itself render both games distinctly and especially ludonarratological.

0.3 Summary of Games and Ideological Positions

Heavy Rain (2011) is a game for both Sony's PlayStation 3 and PlayStation 4 consoles. During the course of the game, the player plays as four different protagonists: Ethan Mars, Private Investigator Scott Shelby, journalist Madison Page,⁵ and FBI investigator Norman Jayden. When Ethan's son is abducted by the "Origami Killer," who drowns his victims in rain water, Ethan must solve a series of grueling psychological and physical tasks (such as cutting off his own finger, driving through traffic on the wrong side of the road) in order to receive information from the Origami Killer about his son's whereabouts. At the same time, FBI agent Norman Jayden is tasked with assisting the Philadelphia Police Department in catching the Origami Killer. Depending on the player's decisions and actions, Ethan can save his son from death, though it is also perfectly possible to fail to find him; additionally, player-choice also can cause any of the four protagonists to die, removing them permanently from the story.

Detroit: Become Human (2018) is in many ways topically similar to *Heavy Rain*, featuring extensive depiction of police work and the ability to play as multiple protagonists. In the near future of 2038, Detroit, Michigan is the center of "Android" production by Cyberlife, a tech company. Androids are hyper-realistic humanoid robots who have replaced humans in workplaces such as retail, manual labor, and sex work. Though their economic usefulness has

⁴ For the purposes of this project, I am defining agency as the ability to make decisions and the belief that one is able to make decisions of their own free will.

⁵ Though Shelby and Page are important to *Heavy Rain*'s story and gameplay, they are largely beyond the scope of the purposes of this thesis.

been beneficial for those whose jobs cannot be completed by an artificial intelligence, the working classes of Detroit and beyond have suffered at the influx of Androids occupying the jobs they used to have. As a result, animosity towards Androids is rampant, and during the course of the game the player witnesses physical and verbal abuse against Androids. This animosity is brought to the forefront when Androids begin “deviating” and harming humans who have previously harmed them. The “Deviants” break free of their programming, become self-aware, and, eventually, seek recognition as sentient beings and freedom from their servitude to humans. The player controls three different characters in *Detroit: Become Human*: Markus, the Android of an elderly but famous artist; Kara, a domestic servant Android who takes a young girl away from her abusive father;⁶ and Connor, a prototype Android whose programming demands he hunt and capture Deviants.

These games overlap at a specific crux: policing. Both games feature police culture, police brutality, and crime as central parts of the plot and gameplay. Additionally, the characters Norman Jayden and Connor are highly similar: both are analytical, driven, and have similar in-game abilities that allow them to better investigate crime scenes. It is from these similarities that I begin my analysis of the two games. As choice-based games, *Heavy Rain* and *Detroit: Become Human* offer unique experiences on what it means to have agency as a member of law enforcement, to act upon that agency as a player, and to be subjugated by law enforcement. I choose to frame these games within the context of policing because the rhetoric of law enforcement and police brutality are mired in discussions of who has agency and choice. Anecdotally, instances of police brutality are often met with denials of culpability and personal

⁶ Though Kara is an important character in *Detroit: Become Human*, her storyline does not engage with policing, police brutality, agency, and race at the same level that Markus and Connor’s stories do; moreover, her narrative, while important, is not within the focus of this project.

agency. Phrases in support of an officer who has committed misconduct such as “they’re just doing their job,” and “that’s what they’re trained to do” are commonplace, especially on social media. Simultaneously, responses to victims of police violence, especially when people of color are the victims, tend to place responsibility on the victim: “They shouldn’t have run.” “They should have cooperated.” In the news media, culpability is also often cathected from perpetrators of police violence onto its victims, especially victims who are people of color. Local and national news has historically “[presented] Black people as responsible for violence against themselves through overrepresenting Black people as criminals from whom heroic White police officers protect society” (Shrikant and Sambaraju 1196). Sociologically, this phenomenon of removing police from culpability also has backing via “The Blue Code,” which “manifests itself as a refusal to offer information that might incriminate or embarrass a fellow officer” (Skolnick 8). With support from common rhetoric, media, and fellow officers, law enforcement have historically been institutionally⁷ absolved of culpability for their misconduct. Policing has been sociologically and politically constructed in ways that imagines personal and institutional agency as absent, while shifting all agency to the victims of police brutality.

Moreover, when playing as Jayden or Connor, the gameplay places players within a situation that intentionally highlights the presence of personal agency. Importantly, both characters are white, and they are both members of law enforcement. The intersection between the interactivity and the narrative of the games provides a played experience in which players become responsible for their character’s use of violence and brutality in ways that passive entertainment (literature, film, theatre) cannot. The point of *Heavy Rain* and *Detroit: Become*

⁷ I say “institutionally” because I do not want to underplay the work organizations like Black Lives Matter and the American Civil Liberties Union have done to hold accountable police officers and the institution of law enforcement.

Human is to make choices. The player *must* make choices in order to advance the plot; they *must* exercise their own agency. Situating players into social and institutional circumstances in which their personal actions have consequences is where Quantic Dream's games are at their most subversive. It is the very purpose of all video games to give the player some form of agency; in highlighting the ludic and narratological intersections in *Heavy Rain* and *Detroit: Become Human*, we can see that the impact of having agency in a specific social and political context provides a unique opportunity that deconstructs institutional and individual responsibility.

Yet, both games also acknowledge the institutional powers at play that work to limit personal agency. Jayden, Connor, and Markus⁸ are not all-powerful; though their actions do matter in the scheme of the game, they are constrained by the social and political world of the script. As I will establish in the body of this project, Jayden is not always able to stop fellow police officers from committing misconduct; Connor is directed by his programming to accomplish his task; and Markus is often the victim of police brutality regardless of the choices the player makes. Just as the player is not always capable of making substantial change via the actions of one character, "the responsibility to address police misconduct or corruption rarely rests solely on an individual, but rather, rests with the entire law-enforcement institution" (Simmons 376). *Detroit: Become Human* and *Heavy Rain* illustrate the weakness of the "bad apple" theory, "which relies on removing the anomalous officers engaging in corruption and violence...However, because these are often systemic issues rather than isolated incidents, simply removing the bad apple often does not alleviate the issue" (Levan and Stevenson 96). That is, even if the player chooses exclusively non-violent actions as Connor, Jayden, or Markus,

⁸ Though Markus is not an agent of law enforcement like Connor and Jayden, he does frequently interact with police.

the systemic problems of police violence are not remedied. Though the player almost always has choices, they do not always have agency. The implications of this fact suggest a widespread need for extensive police reform or abolition.⁹ This is not to say that personal choice and responsibility is unimpactful; however, both games emphasize the potential of personal choice by making it the ludonarratological center of the game, but restricting it in ways that challenge the player to consider why their personal efforts do not affect the greater ideological landscape of the game.

However, *Detroit: Become Human* and *Heavy Rain* are not entirely subversive texts. While they draw attention to the systems and institutions that absolve police of their misconduct, they do not offer or imagine a viable solution like abolition or reform. In *Detroit: Become Human* especially, protest against police and state violence is also becomes a largely whitewashed pseudo-historical landscape, in which BIPOC characters are rewarded for their passivity, and white characters are afforded the most agency. Yet, I use *Heavy Rain* and *Detroit: Become Human* as the texts through which I explicate my argument because of these imperfections. It is through complicated and imperfect texts that players can question their own ludic and narratological position. It is in recognizing the parallels between fictional and real injustice, players can begin to think in the patterns that are so crucial to deconstructing both a text and the real world with theoretical frameworks. Literary scholar Paula M. L. Moya speaks to the power of literature and literary thinking (for my purposes, I will be considering video games a type of literature) in her book *The Social Imperative*:

⁹ For further reading on police abolition, see McDowell and Fernandez, “‘Disband, Disempower, and Disarm’: Amplifying the Theory and Practice of Police Abolition” and Purnell, *Becoming Abolitionists*.

...a close reading of a work of literature is not merely an encounter with the self; depending on how careful the reading is, and how willing readers are to have their received ideas challenged, it can also be an encounter with the other—even a radical other. A close reading of a work of literature can thus serve as an excavation of, and a mediation on, the pervasive sociocultural ideas—such as race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality—of the social worlds, as well as the worlds of sense, within which both authors and readers live. (9)

These video games, though flawed in many ways, serve as incredibly useful artistic, entertaining, and ideological vessels that use the mechanisms of literature and culture to encourage thinking on larger scales; without necessarily the training in literary or cultural theory, players can engage with a text that exemplifies cultural and institutional patterns that represent, and oftentimes deconstruct and challenge, the sociology of the real world.

I also write this at a time in which discussions of policing, police brutality, and race are at the forefront. The Black Lives Matter protests of 2020 elevated the ongoing and historic discussions of police brutality, systemic racism, and police abolition to the public eye. Additionally, as the past year has witnessed many states seek to ban discussion of Critical Race Theory from public schools, it is more important than ever to illustrate how frequently themes relating to complex cultural depictions of race appear in our media and art. To understand how texts connect to cultural moments, both historical and present, is an invaluable skill. Moreover, I compose this project using Critical Race Theory extremely deliberately, as it is a lens integral to an understanding of American culture and media.

For this project, I will first begin by examining *Heavy Rain* and the position the player

takes as Norman Jayden, a member of law enforcement within a corrupt police department. I will illustrate how, through giving Jayden the option to try to stop another officer from using excessive force, but by revoking its effectiveness, the game illustrates to players the futility of the “good cop” fallacy. That is, no matter how “good” and “by-the-book” a player tries to police people as Jayden, the social, legal, and political frameworks in place work to maintain police power, making it impossible for the player to engage in ethical policing without real institutional change.

In the second chapter, I will examine the ways in which *Detroit: Become Human* makes explicit parallels to the American Civil Rights Movement as a way of indicating to players that their choices have political ramifications; however, in adhering to a mythologized protest narrative that glorifies individuals as saviors of entire movements and privileges passivity and sacrifice over revolution, the game does not upset historical narratives of race that demand white comfort above all. However, I will also indicate where the game is subversive: it gives players the opportunity to play as—and to make choices as—a police officer. Like *Heavy Rain*, *Detroit: Become Human* offers the player the choice to either “do their job” and apprehend and harm “criminals,” or to show mercy and spare them.

CHAPTER I

HEAVY RAIN

Quantic Dream's 2010 video game *Heavy Rain* was marketed with the game's unique mechanics in mind. One of its official trailers¹⁰ ends with the following slogan: "Make choices. Face consequences." This paradigm is integral to the manner in which *Heavy Rain* is played: unlike many popular video games, in which trial-and-error is the path to success, the story of *Heavy Rain* unravels as a direct result of diegetic¹¹ player involvement. Choice-based gameplay differs mechanically (and ludically) from traditional video games because the narrative continues to move forward regardless of the choices the player makes. In more traditional video games, such as Nintendo's *The Legend of Zelda* series, players must solve puzzles and fight battles in order to prompt the continuation of the game's narrative and gameplay. Should a player fail to solve a puzzle, they will simply not progress until they solve it; should a player "die" during a battle, they will have to retry the battle until they succeed. In *Heavy Rain*, however, each decision, whether or not it has prolonged consequences, advances the narrative in some capacity. The most crucial part of the played experience of games like *Heavy Rain* is that although the player cannot stop the narrative from moving forward, the player's decisions affect how the narrative will unfold. There are multiple instances in *Heavy Rain* during which one or all of the protagonists can perish as a result of player choice. When one dies, the course of the narrative is altered, and the gameplay in which they would have otherwise participated moves forward without them. There is no ability to "try again," unless the player turns off the game and tries again of their own accord; however, attempting to alter player decision for a better outcome is

¹⁰ The trailer can be viewed here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fMK6sTnMxBI>

¹¹ "Existing or occurring within the narrative world." *Merriam-Webster*

not the “point” of a game in which one is supposed to, by virtue of its genre, “make choices” and “face consequences.” As discussed in the introduction, the choice-based game exists in a liminal space between the narratological and ludological lenses through which video games are often studied; as the characteristics of gameplay and narrative become indistinguishable, a ludonarratological approach to video games becomes far more apt a tool. Indeed, playing *Heavy Rain* is the act of playing its story. This unique, genre-specific experience opens up possibilities for players to experience both the gravity of personal choices, but also the social and ethical limits of personal agency.

Though the story is scripted in certain ways, preventing the player from having absolute freedom, it is through the juxtaposition of narrative limits and potential freedoms that *Heavy Rain* is most impactful. That is, while having agency in a fictional narrative may seem to initially be liberating, *Heavy Rain* is not a “god simulator,” like *The Sims* or *Minecraft*, in which players have very few restrictions placed on the decisions they can make and the things they can create. Rather, *Heavy Rain* exists in an already lived-in world, providing for the player a complicated agency. As the marketing suggests, a player’s choices do have consequences, but they are not choices unrestricted by the narrative; and, no matter their decisions, the game will have an ending. So while there are choices, they are inherently limited by the structure of the narrative. Thus, the played experience is one in which players have choice, but not always agency.

It is the limitations of the game’s ludonarrative that allow it to resemble more closely the actual lived experience of making decisions. According to Wegner, though free will is illusory, “it is only with the *feeling* of conscious will that we can begin to solve the problems of knowing who we are as individuals, of discerning what we can and cannot do, and of judging ourselves morally right or wrong for what we have done” (342, emphasis mine). That is, though no person

truly has free will, feeling as though one has free will allows people (and gamers) to make decisions that help shape a person's sense of morality because they believe these decisions are uniquely their own. Therefore, *Heavy Rain*'s choice-based narrative is emphasized not solely through the presence of player agency, but also through its limitations: feeling as if choice is present, when it is otherwise illusory, allows players to feel as if they are an agent of their own will and capable of making in-game decisions that reflect their personal sense of morality. In other words, *Heavy Rain* presents players with a simulation of reality that reflects reality in its feeling of having choice, all the while being constrained by limiting factors—sociologically limiting in real life, and sociologically *and* ludically limiting in the gameplay.

Establishing this difference between complete free will and the feeling of having free will is crucial not only because it serves as a parallel to the ways in which choice-based video games are structured, but also because of the specific narrative themes *Heavy Rain* employs. The main plot of the game follows Ethan Mars, a man who overcomes grueling and elaborate physical and psychological tests set up by the “Origami Killer” in order to prove he is a worthy enough father to save his kidnapped son, Sean. Simultaneously, two other playable characters, journalist Madison Page and FBI agent Norman Jayden, each make their own attempts to identify the killer. Private Investigator Scott Shelby is also a playable character who is seemingly also trying to solve the mystery of the Origami Killer, though it is later revealed that this is only a ploy in order to shake the investigation off his trail: he is, in fact, the Origami Killer. Each of *Heavy Rain*'s chapters alternates between the four playable characters, and each chapter requires extensive decision-making that shapes the course of the game. For example, As Madison Page, the player can choose to either accept or decline a drink from a mysterious doctor: if it is declined, Madison can find the information she needs from the doctor when he steps away for a

moment; if it is accepted, Madison must fight her way out of the doctor's house after being drugged and, should she die during this encounter, she will be unavailable as a playable character for the remainder of the game. As the game is played, encounters like these communicate to players that their choices can very often have dire ramifications for the players. As a choice-based game, it is necessary that players are faced with a multitude of choices, many of which have direct and immediate ramifications. However, the instances in which players are presented with choices, but these choices are unable to create immediate change, communicates something to players about the limitations of their own agency: just as they are not the "god" of *Heavy Rain*, in which each and every small choice creates the desired effect, they are also bound by sociological and psychological parameters in the real world that inhibit the breadth of their personal agency.

The experience of having choices but little actual agency is seen most often when playing as FBI agent Norman Jayden, whose role as an investigator and member of law enforcement raises complicated questions about the purposes and extent of choice and personal responsibility. As I will illustrate in this chapter, the choices with which the player is presented while playing as Jayden, in tandem with the reduced effectiveness of the choices, demonstrates to players a potentially subversive narrative of traditional American policing. It suggests the problem of police brutality lies in the institution of policing itself, something not remedied by the presence of one "good cop." In a narrative entrenched with police work and investigative practices, playing this choice-based video game offers a surprising commentary on personal responsibility, de-escalation, and the role of police authority in American culture.

1.1 Unneutral Ground: Player Sympathies

I will be focusing specifically on FBI agent Norman Jayden and his identity within local and federal law enforcement structures as a guarantor of both mercy and state violence, depending on the player's choices. Jayden, who is assigned to the local police department to investigate the Origami Killer after the former is unable to solve the case on their own, is continually presented with choices during his investigations that pertain specifically to the player's self-perceived moral makeup. Extraneous to this morality is Norman's diegetic position: as a federal agent, the other officers look down on him and see him as an outsider, incapable of the "real work" it takes to be a police officer. Lieutenant Carter Blake, whose role as a foil to Jayden will be explored extensively, offers the following rebuttal to the agent's psychological profile of the Origami Killer: "Tell me, Agent Jayden, did you get your vast experience on the job, or did you just fuckin' read about it in some schoolbook?" The job vs. schoolbook dichotomy upon which policing in *Heavy Rain* is predicated structures the moral binary the player will act and play within: so-called "real" policing, which involves action, violence, and aggression; and "schoolbook" policing, which is intellectual and self-regulating. During the course of the game, Jayden is constantly under scrutiny by Blake and other police officers for his school-book policing: he is verbally and sometimes physically abused by other officers, and his ideas are frequently discredited. Later I will expand upon the thematic role the conflicting policing styles (Blake's affinity for violence and Jayden's more peaceful routes) play in *Heavy Rain* in the sections to come. First, however, their conflicting policing styles represent a place from which players can derive their sympathy for and identification with Jayden, something absolutely crucial in communicating the game's potentially subversive ideas.

Because Jayden's style of policing is outright shunned and ridiculed, he is not a self-

reflecting avatar that is intended to mimic a player's own image; rather, he is positioned situationally within an already moving and living discourse, one with which the player may or may not agree in non-diegetic circumstances. However, the player's ability to choose not only what Jayden says but how he says it, followed shortly thereafter by verbal berating by an NPC¹² like Blake, allows the player first to see Jayden as a representation of, at least, aspects of themselves, and second to reflexively and defensively sympathize with him. In order to create this link between the player and character, "video games (partly) override the distance between media users and media characters" through interactivity (Christoph et al. 353). Story-rich games like *Heavy Rain*, more specifically, "create compassion, foster sympathetic identification, and emotionally appeal" to players (Gerund and Paul 17, cited in Schubert). A narrative like *Heavy Rain* is then predisposed to the narrative techniques that align Jayden with player sympathies; that is, when they witness Blake's abuse towards Jayden, not only will they first identify with him by virtue of controlling his movements and speech, but they will also sympathize and identify with him as a result of the narrative compassion they feel.

The choices a player makes are ultimately an unknown variable, as not all players will make the same decisions. However, the presence of sympathetic characters and a familiar three-act narrative structure influence player decision making in a way that prevents *Heavy Rain* from being an entirely neutral experience. The game is framed in a way that places players into an area of conflicted interest; the game may "frame the 'correctness' of a choice in narrative terms, compelling their players, for instance, to empathize with a certain character and thus make decisions that might be favorable to him or her" (Schubert 4). Likewise, it becomes rapidly clear that the player/Jayden is under personal attack from Blake, almost entirely irrespective of their

¹² Common gamer jargon for "non-playable character."

actions. The continuous berating indicates to players that the plural “we” that represents both themselves and Jayden, is an entity in need of defending from antagonistic forces; in short, there is nothing more powerful than collaborative defensiveness in allying a player with their character. Thus, even if a player were to enter *Heavy Rain* with little sympathy towards FBI agents or Norman Jayden himself, Blake’s immediate verbal and physical disdain towards Jayden encourages players to identify and sympathize with the latter, increasing the likelihood that they will make future decisions that not only benefit Jayden, but also those which simultaneously disadvantage Blake. The orientation of the player’s sympathies as they play the game highlight in-game and real-world instances of police corruption and brutality, as well as the inefficiency of having “good cops” who might otherwise “save” policing institutions by way of personal intervention.

In allying the player with Jayden through self-identification, player decisions—though never made in a “vacuum”—are further contextualized and given motivation. As Jayden and Blake search for suspects in the Origami Killer case, their relationship remains extremely tense, and it seems unlikely that the player would at least initially sympathize with Blake, given their already terse first meeting¹³. The two distinct styles of policing postulated by the game, “schoolbook” and “renegade,” as I will call them, become even more apparent when the Jayden and Blake investigate a potential lead in the chapter “Nathaniel.” The formative alliance between the player and Jayden, I will argue, is ultimately crucial in establishing a player’s sympathy towards “schoolbook” policing and highlighting an extremely negative image of local American policing and police violence, as well as the difficulties in combating such widespread

¹³ In the chapter “Kick Off Meeting,” regardless how calm and professional the player/Jayden is towards Blake, Blake will always stand up, kick a chair, and call Jayden a “fuckin’ asshole.”

institutionalized abuses of power.

1.2 Player Agency I: Investigative Practices

When Blake and Jayden investigate the namesake of the chapter titled “Nathaniel,” the player not only witnesses a violent abuse of power but is also forced to make decisions in real time that affect the outcome of the chapter. Even before meeting Nathaniel, Blake, sans warrant, breaks down Nathaniel’s door with a forceful kick after it remains unanswered. When Jayden objects to Blake’s behavior, the latter responds snidely with: “Call the cops.” Though Blake’s behavior is reprehensible, it is hardly an exaggeration. By indicating to Jayden that he effectively has legal immunity via his identity as a police officer, Blake is making reference to a common policing phenomenon: the blue wall/code of silence. This unwritten “code” is the “refusal to report misconduct to proper authorities, or to claim no knowledge of misconduct” (Skolnick 8). The Blue Code ensures that no officer will implicate another in corrupt activities, even when faced with consequences. Blake likely knows that, as a member of law enforcement, his fellow police officers, and perhaps even Jayden, will never see him punished for his misconduct. In a later scene, Captain Perry, the police chief, even refuses to condemn Blake for beating a suspect when Jayden brings the incident to his attention. Blake’s disregard for the rules and regulations to which he is supposed to subscribe provides the context for, first, how he behaves towards suspects, and second, the policing obstacles the player, as Jayden, will face if they choose to placate Blake.

Shortly after entering Nathaniel’s apartment, the player discovers that Nathaniel is a religious fanatic. The walls are covered in Biblical verses, and hundreds of lit candles and crucifixes fill the room. If the player chooses to “listen” to Jayden’s thoughts while exploring the

apartment, Jayden will verbalize them: “You don’t have to be a profiler to see he’s not a killer. We’re wasting our time here.” After a few moments of exploration, Nathaniel returns, and Blake wastes no time in tormenting him. While Jayden introduces himself politely, Blake interrupts to ask Nathaniel if he “still hear[s] the voices” and accuses him of listening to voices that tell him to “take that boy and drown him.” Nathaniel, who, in his delusions, believes Blake to be the Anti-Christ, is in obvious distress and begs him to stop. The player, still in control of Jayden, has several options that appear on screen while Blake’s tormenting plays out. While some choice-based games allow an infinite amount of time to make decisions, *Heavy Rain* functions on an in-game timer, limiting the amount of time Jayden has to make a decision to the length of Blake and Nathaniel’s interaction. With the pressure of the scene’s immediacy, the player has to decide quickly what, if anything at all, Jayden will do. If “leave him alone” is selected, Jayden will think: “Maybe Blake knows what he’s doing after all.” Similarly, if “watch” is selected, Jayden will think: “Better just stand down and leave Blake to it.”

The game, on some levels, pressures the player into complicity. Though Jayden, depending on the player’s choices, might already have expressed doubts about Nathaniel’s lack of criminal capacity, there is no evidence to indicate that Nathaniel is entirely innocent, and his implied mental illnesses and fanaticism render him, at least in the genre of crime dramas, suspicious. This stereotypical correlation between mental illness and criminal propensity is supported in other forms of media: a study of television crime dramas from 2010-2013 (around the time of *Heavy Rain*’s release) found that “mentally ill characters were more likely than other characters to commit crimes and violent acts,” informing the media lineage from which *Heavy Rain* stems and the stereotypical thinking that Blake endorses (Parrott and Parrott 651). Without knowing if Blake is capable of extracting a confession that may be useful later in the game, the

player might be compelled to let Blake continue his verbal and—eventually, if the interrogation lasts long enough—physical abuse of Nathaniel, in order to garner information. The game, moreover, “uses ambiguity as a mechanism to encourage complicity” (Mawhorter, et al.). When paired with a narrative already rich with police work, it is clear the game is interacting with a culture of American policing, specifically the “Blue Code of Silence” that prioritizes the punishment of “criminals” and the production of a confession over holding police officers accountable for their misconduct. What makes *Heavy Rain* so exemplary of this phenomenon is that the consumer of the particular media has a say in how the narrative unfolds in ways that films, television, and theatre about policing cannot typically demonstrate.

While the player might choose not to interrupt Blake’s violent interrogation, the option to intervene still remains, and doing so produces interesting results that challenge the ways in which agency is considered in policework. If, during the confrontation between Blake and Nathaniel, the player chooses “Act,” Jayden will express the following: “Shit, Blake is totally out of his mind. I can’t just stand here and do nothing!” Jayden’s noble attempt, however, is ineffective. The player has the opportunity to attempt to intervene a maximum of three times, all of which Blake will either dismiss or ignore. Ultimately, whether or not Jayden chooses to “intervene,” the result will always be the same: Blake will push Nathaniel to the ground, after which Nathaniel will pull a gun on Blake. In discussing *Detroit: Become Human*, a thematically and strategically similar game and the focus of this project’s second chapter, Stefan Schubert states, if “two possible dialogue options that a player can choose from are very different in their content but eventually lead to the same result, this would not constitute a *meaningful choice* (4, emphasis mine). In the case of the player/Jayden’s complicity in “Nathaniel,” whether or not an intervention is attempted, by this logic, is not meaningful. I would argue, alternatively, that

while, from a narratological perspective that focuses only on how the game's plot unfolds it may not be meaningful, a ludonarratological analysis would otherwise find it impactful to the player's experience. The player can potentially attempt an altruistic intervention three separate times and can be ignored three separate times, revealing a corruption of such magnitude that it ultimately places the player in a position of helplessness, regardless of their efforts.

This "played" experience, rather than the actual narrative that commences, is critical in understanding the political and cultural components of *Heavy Rain*. In a game where agency and player choice are so crucial they make up most of the gameplay, *Heavy Rain* suggests that cultural constraints such as the "Blue Code" can be so strong as to prevent agency from being realized. It is important to note that lack of agency, as depicted by Jayden's inability to intervene, is separate from the narrative and mechanical restrictions on agency present in all video games, choice-based or otherwise. It is accepted that "video games want their players to *feel* like they are in control of what happens but, of course, cannot offer complete 'freedom'" due to the limitations of the narrative and gameplay (Schubert 3). (e.g. You cannot suddenly decide to leave Nathaniel's apartment, or interrupt Blake's interrogation with a passionate kiss.) However, the lack of agency within the established gameplay conventions reveals an absence of agency that largely affects the player's experience of the game, unlike the invisible "illusion" of agency in real life.

Though the player will likely be frustrated that their interventions are ineffective at stopping Blake's behavior, they will not necessarily be frustrated at the game itself for the aforementioned ineffectiveness: that is, the illusion of choice has not been broken. Instead, *Heavy Rain* indicates to players that systemic corruption and misconduct are often (but not always, as we will later see) out of the control of the individual. When paired with the in-game

narrative context of policing and police brutality, it is clear that a lack of perceived agency and ineffectual interventions ultimately reflect for the player the Blue Code of Silence and other support structures of systemic police brutality.¹⁴ The game reenacts, through Blake’s brutality and Jayden’s complicity or ineffective intervention, an “internal culture that not only [gives] rise to scandal, but tolerates it” (Skolnick 10). When a player learns their choices (in a choice-based game featuring policing, no less) sometimes are irrelevant, it suggests to players that larger systemic issues and institutions work to control what does and what does not happen. Though a video game is a relatively risk- and consequence-free space (that is, no bodily harm will come to a player as a direct result of the choices they make in-game), there emerges from the repeated ineffectiveness of Jayden’s choices an opportunity for player complicity or to at least understand the mechanisms of complicity. When a player believes their choices have no effect—when they believe they have choice, but no agency—it reveals to players the complex power structures that cause people, in situations not as controlled as the digital landscape, to become complicit. In short, just as a player grows weary of trying to stop Blake but to no avail, a police officer, upon learning (either implicitly or explicitly) about the code and the silence surrounding misconduct, might be pressured into being complicit.

Police brutality, complicity, and resistance to intervention have far-reaching implications beyond the theoretical and the ludonarrative. The 2020 Black Lives Matter protests responded to rampant police brutality accompanied by complicity from politicians, the general public, and a culture of police solidarity. Though there are many examples of excessive police force and

¹⁴ Though Black characters are distinctly absent from *Heavy Rain*, it is impossible to discuss police brutality without including information on the disproportionate amount of violence Black people face as a result of individual and systemic racism in policing institutions. For statistics regarding disproportionate instances of police brutality against Black people, see DeAngelis, *Systemic Racism in Police Killings: New Evidence From the Mapping Police Violence Database*. For further information on racism and mass incarceration, see Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*.

violence before, during, and after 2020, one well-documented instance saw a 75-year-old man in Buffalo, New York, pushed down by police officers after standing in their way. One officer begins to kneel down to check on him, and another pulls him away. There are a few shouts for a medic as the man lies on the ground, bleeding from his ear, but all of the officers leave the scene as a unit (CBC News). While vastly different in scope and impact from the narrative of a video game, this event, captured and distributed on video, reflects the policing practices and use of agency depicted in *Heavy Rain*. The officer who attempts to bend down to help the injured man is ushered away by another officer and, most strikingly, does not make another attempt to help the man. This incident depicts not only police misconduct, but the social frameworks, specifically the “Blue Code,” in place that prevent other officers from attempting to either remedy the issue, or hold their peers accountable.

Though the “Blue Code” exists as an invisible social law, complicity is also encouraged legally. McLeod cites multiple Supreme Court cases, such as *Utah v Streiff*, *Scott v Harris*, and *Mullenix v Luna*, in which the subsequent acquittal of officers gives legal precedent to encourage continued excessive use of force. She writes:

In the process [of acquitting officers], the Court has normalized and constitutionalized a set of practices that consign the most vulnerable citizens, especially those in low-income communities of color, to a condition of virtual statelessness, characterized by the simultaneous over-enforcement and under-protection of the law. (“Police Violence” McLeod 169)

Moreover, both the culture of American policing and the legal precedents that discourage intervention and render nearly invisible the presence of choice—for both officers and

bystanders—have far-reaching implications that result in violence in which others feel it is fruitless to intervene. When playing as Jayden, one is both bystander and law enforcer, amplifying feelings of helplessness already constructed by historic and constantly-reinforcing institutions that demand complicity.

However, *Heavy Rain* does not suggest that choices are never present. No matter how much Jayden protests, the player cannot prevent Blake from shoving Nathaniel to the ground, resulting in the latter pulling a gun on the former. Yet the player has the opportunity, shortly thereafter, to engage in what closely resembles de-escalation techniques or to shoot Nathaniel, per Blake's instructions. With Nathaniel's gun aimed at Blake, Jayden can use his skills as a criminal profiler to placate Nathaniel; as a result, Nathaniel will live, but he will be arrested. Even if the player gets this far, Nathaniel will always, provided he is alive, reach into his pocket and pull out a crucifix. When Nathaniel reaches for the crucifix, the player, who does not know it is a crucifix and not a gun, has yet another, split-second opportunity to shoot him. In the event that the player chooses to shoot Nathaniel, Jayden is horrified by his actions, while Blake comments crudely that he "can't say [he'll] miss him."

Heavy Rain makes explicit that having a weapon gives you agency. While Jayden's words have no effect on how Blake chooses to treat Nathaniel, as soon as he holds a gun, he can decide, with the press of the "x" button, whether a suspect lives or dies. The enormous amount of narrative power suddenly given to the player when provided with a weapon speaks volumes about the policing power dynamics the gun and its implied violence represent. While de-escalation with Nathaniel can ultimately be effective, it can all relatively easily be undone if the player is "trigger happy" and chooses to shoot Nathaniel.

This particular chapter in *Heavy Rain* emblemizes how choice functions in the game: though choices are always present, actual agency is sometimes absent, leading players to believe they are powerless in a system that prioritizes physical action and violence over speech and compromise. By denying the player a sense of “closure, the game encourages the player to feel vaguely uneasy about their role,” thereby complicating the role of agency within the safety of complicity (Mawhorter et al. 16). A similar event occurs in the chapter “Shrink and Punches,” which sees Blake and Jayden visiting Ethan Mars’s psychiatrist for information. When the psychiatrist won’t breach his patient’s confidentiality, Blake begins punching him and strangling him with a telephone cord. As with Nathaniel, Jayden has multiple opportunities to try to talk Blake out of beating the psychiatrist to acquire information. However, it isn’t until Jayden either threatens to report Blake and get him removed from the case, or until he pushes him off the psychiatrist, that Blake stops the assault. In both cases, agency is only afforded to Jayden when he either: 1) threatens an integral part of Blake’s identity (being a cop), or 2) uses physical force.

Thus, *Heavy Rain* orients a player to situations in which being a member of law enforcement places them in a social position that limits the types of agency made available to them. Agency is only returned in the instances in which the player is armed, painting a bleak picture of police work in which misconduct is rampant and unchecked (Blake) and peaceful interference is largely ineffective (Jayden). An abusive, violent character like Carter Blake is placed in conflict with Jayden as a way to simultaneously situate him and that which he represents against the player. The player is led to believe that the promise of player agency so central to the marketing and gameplay of *Heavy Rain* is, without the presence of violence, ineffectual against police brutality. Though protagonists in many texts are capable of enacting profound narrative change, often on the basis of their narratological position, the player,

especially when playing as Jayden, does not experience a similar agency. *Heavy Rain* puts the player in a unique position, where the ever-present “illusion of choice” is amplified by the fact that the game is predicated on the presence of choice. The absence of choice, therefore, is accentuated: at the forefront of playing *Heavy Rain* are the implications of not experiencing agency in a choice-based game that so heavily features police brutality and institutions that beg for silence and insist upon complacency.

1.3 Player Agency II: Corruption, Reform, and Futility

The chapters “Nathaniel” and “Shrink and Punches” are both integral to the plot, and there is absolutely no way the player can avoid them and the way they communicate the player’s lack of total agency. In contrast, there is a chapter in *Heavy Rain* that, under certain circumstances, can be skipped entirely, should certain decisions be made during gameplay, and that, when played, amplifies the presence of choice and agency as a non-violent weapon against police misconduct that is otherwise absent from the game. There are two opportunities, in different parts of the game, for Ethan to be arrested during his quest to save his son, should the player make an “incorrect” decision: first, during the chapter “Fugitive,” Ethan and Madison can get caught by police in the train station; second, during “On the Loose,” Ethan can be arrested if the player is not successful in escaping police in the motel. Ethan can be arrested twice, but it is only the first time¹⁵ he is arrested that the player, as Jayden, can assist Ethan in his escape. When arrested, a more-or-less “secret” chapter, known as “Under Arrest” becomes available to the player. The premise of the chapter, which includes Blake abusing Ethan during an interrogation and, should the player be successful, Jayden breaking Ethan out of jail, depicts player agency as

¹⁵ For clarity’s sake, if Ethan is arrested a second time, he will be held in police custody for the rest of the game. The player can, therefore, experience “Under Arrest” either by getting caught during the chapter “Fugitive,” or by escaping during “Fugitive,” but getting caught during “On the Loose.”

finally within reach. Previously, chapters that included Jayden presented his attempts at maintaining the “schoolbook” approach to policing as fruitless and humiliating. However, the chapter “Under Arrest” allows and, in fact, encourages the player to take matters into their own hands and exercise agency previously withheld. It also indicates to the player that non-violent anti-police activity by police officers is possible, but it must come at the “price” of explicitly disobeying the laws and conventions of police work.

When Ethan is arrested, it is because he is suspected of being the Origami Killer, kidnapping and killing young boys in an effort to rid himself of the guilt he has felt since his eldest son, Jason, died two years prior. Ethan is not actually the Origami Killer, but because of his frequent black-outs and sudden and inexplicable possession of origami figures, he in fact believes himself to be the killer, and the challenges he faces are, by his logic, convoluted tests he has unknowingly prepared in order to prove to himself that he is an adequate father. Though Ethan is ultimately not the killer, he has informed his psychiatrist, the same one that Blake previously beat for information, about these episodes of memory loss,¹⁶ rendering him the main suspect in the hunt for the Origami Killer.

Importantly, however, Jayden does not believe Ethan to be responsible for the killings. Thus, if Ethan is arrested, Jayden will take it upon himself to free him from the police station. Both Jayden’s actions, in this chapter, and the enforcement and perpetuation of the Blue Code by Blake and other police officers, indicate to players that, while personal action and agency are important in subverting police misconduct, the real issue lies within an extensively and internally

¹⁶ If this premise seems absurd, that’s because it is: in earlier versions of the game, Ethan’s blackouts were indicative of a psychic link between him and the Origami Killer, per deleted scenes released by *Quantic Dream*. Though this idea was eventually scrapped, Ethan’s blackouts nonetheless remain and are never explained in the final release.

corrupt system. First, in the interrogation room, Blake will begin beating Ethan in order to extract information from him. If, as he may have done in previous chapters, Jayden chooses to interfere, he is met with heavy resistance. When chastised by Jayden, Blake will shout some variation of: “This guy’s got no rights, do you hear me? No rights at all!” Blake can also defend the institution of policing, asking Jayden “whose side are you on,” building a connection between the aforementioned Blue Code maintained within the “brotherhood” of policing and his actions; if Jayden objects to Blake’s methods, by Blake’s logic he objects to the institution of policing entirely.

Just as in “Shrinks and Punches” and “Nathaniel,” the player can only truly interfere with police misconduct if Jayden chooses to transform his verbal objections into physical ones. However, if the player punches Blake, the latter will threaten him with a gun, and it becomes clear that, no matter the extent to which the player tries to stop the abuse and with what means, there is no reasonable or effective way of stopping Blake personally. The extent to which Blake is corrupt is not within Jayden’s power to remedy; the social position within which the character is placed and the (non)present “illusion” of choice perhaps suggests to the player that profound change cannot come from so-called “good cops” who, even within the face of the Blue Code, attempt to stand up to their coworkers. After leaving the interrogation room, Jayden has the option of reporting Blake’s behavior to Captain Perry, the police chief. Captain Perry’s response supports Blake, further alienating Jayden in his quest to bring justice to the police department: “Which is more important, Norman? Finding little Shaun Mars or sparing that lowlife a few bruises? You can’t make omelettes without breaking a few eggs.” Furthermore, even when Blake later asks Perry if the press conference should wait until there is an actual confession, the Captain will respond with the following: “No point. We’ve got him dead to rights. That’s all the

press wants to know.” With Captain Perry supporting Blake’s misconduct, the problem seems largely out of the player’s hands: it is not just Blake, a “bad cop,” or a “loose cannon” with whom the player must contend, but an entire institution that allows and encourages misconduct as a means to accomplish their goal.

This is not to say that *Heavy Rain* is suggesting that personal action is entirely futile, but that the presence of one, as it were, “good cop” is not a sufficient force to combat misconduct in law enforcement. Indeed, many scholars agree. Allegra McLeod, for example, envisions abolition democracy as the solution to police brutality and misconduct, a framework that “calls for a constellation of democratic institutions and practices to displace policing and imprisonment,” as opposed to reform work within already-corrupt systems that might suggest the benefits of a “good cop” as a viable solution (“Envisioning Abolition” 1618).¹⁷ Though Jayden’s failed efforts in stopping misconduct exemplify the corrupt system for which he works, it is important to note that *Heavy Rain* does not offer solutions like abolition to begin to remedy brutality and corruption. Instead, it gives the player agency in ways not present in most video game genres, but in allowing this narrative agency, it draws attention to the moments in which agency is either revoked or ultimately futile. Moreover, though the player can attempt to remedy what the game positions as gross injustice and misconduct through actions, both verbal and physical, it is abundantly clear that working within the confines of law enforcement practices, including seeking assistance from the police chief, has the potential to be largely ineffective in a system that seeks the inefficacy of reporting and remedying misconduct. With personal (stopping/attacking Blake) and institutional (reporting the misconduct) attempts unavailable, the player is tasked with freeing Ethan from the police station so he can continue to search for his

¹⁷ For further reading about systemic police brutality, see Zimring, *When Police Kill*, and Ruth, *Police Brutality*.

son. With the social and institutional parameters of policing preventing an appropriate process, *Heavy Rain* suggests misconduct can only be appropriately dealt with by explicitly disregarding the institution of law enforcement. By tricking the guard into leaving, stealing his keys, and disguising Ethan with a raincoat, Jayden is able to free him from the police station.

Though “Under Arrest” highlights the lengths to which Jayden must go in order to fulfil his agency against the local police department, there is very little actual player agency in this chapter. No matter what the player does, there is no way to “fail” this chapter; it is only complete when Jayden has helped Ethan escape. While, superficially, it is a means to continue to move the plot, it also emphasizes the narrative’s sympathies, which are crucial to how it establishes meaning. Importantly, Jayden is not a non-diegetic avatar, suddenly thrust into the world of *Heavy Rain*, designed and created by the player to suit their own preferences. Rather, Jayden is a complex character already equipped with lived experience and moral alignments. The player is thus implicated in a “fourth person” perspective that “collaps[es] the narrator-narratee relationship into the plural ‘we’” (Papazian 454):

The narrative perspective expands beyond the conventionally crafted ‘you’ of second person. ‘Your player,’ ‘your character,’ is both a ‘you’ that is you, and a ‘you’ that is not perhaps yet you but is instead an idea put into circulation by the game designer or designers. The character (you and not-you) and the story narrator (also you and not-you) are a ‘we’—an ‘I’ who plays the game, and an ‘I’ designed by the game makers. The point of view is the fourth person. (Papazian 456).

I have included a description of this unique “fourth person” perspective to assist in specifically distinguishing the character’s morality from the player’s morality. Games such as *Skyrim*,

Cyberpunk 2077, and *Mass Effect*, whose character can be created from scratch and even in the player's own image to actually reflect "you," differ from games like *Heavy Rain*, in which a playable character, like Jayden, is a "you" in the sense that you control their movements and speech, but is also, more so than an avatar, a "not-you" that represents an identity with which a player may identify, but will not assume. Identification with a diegetic character spawns an unstable entity. According to Christoph et al., "video games thus seem to facilitate a...user-character relationship in the sense that players do not perceive the game (main) character as a social entity distinct from themselves, but experience a merging of their own self and the game protagonist" (354). The player is not distinctly themselves, and they are not distinctly Jayden; rather, the merging of the two allows for a subversive experience of empathy that is not possible in non-interactive media; a player empathizes, sympathizes, and feels compassion for Jayden and his sense of ethics not because they necessarily feel a sense of shared lived experiences, but because they share the played experience.

Moreover, Jayden's will is inextricably tied to the player's will, and because it is his prerogative to enforce justice, the player is not only obedient to, but also in favor of his decisions. Because of this characterization, there is no way to complete the chapter without freeing Ethan; yet, the lack of "true" agency does not lessen the impact of this chapter's associations within and around policing. Rather, *Heavy Rain* establishes the impact of player agency most explicitly by initiating action on the part of the character rather than the player. Jayden exercises true agency by acting out against the police department because the player's offerings of agency, those which are limited to vocalizations and brief bursts of violence, are not enough. *Heavy Rain*, through specifically Jayden's narrative over the course of the story, indicates that although the "illusion" of choice is strengthened by political institutions and social

pressure, actively working around and outside of these constructions is more effective than pleasantries and diplomacy may ever be, once an institution has become corrupt to the extent which *Heavy Rain* imagines American policing to be.

By orienting its choice-based narrative towards depictions of policing and, most specifically, police misconduct, *Heavy Rain* paints a picture of agency that challenges both the extent to which we are agents of our own will and the level of agency necessary to alter the course of a “story” within social and institutional parameters that are built to withstand dismantling action. While *Heavy Rain* makes this explicit by revoking effective agency in situations where, usually, a protagonist would have story-altering power, a playthrough of the game does not suggest that all action is futile; rather, the institution of policing is not easily or effectively dismantled within the parameters of its own construction: Blake does not respond well to requests, and Captain Perry actually supports Blake’s methods. Though a game written and directed by a French studio, *Heavy Rain* supplies a surprisingly subversive depiction of corruption and brutality within American policing. While some American media, including television shows such as *NCIS*, *Law and Order*, and *Criminal Minds* do occasionally interrogate the legal and cultural frameworks that enable continued abuses of power, the prerogative of most episodes of these series is to demonstrate and glorify the kind of narratological agency the characters and institutions have. The crime show episodes typically end with the arrest or death of the perpetrator by the members of law enforcement, whose relatability and charm result in a clean and seamless ending in which the institutions and culture are reinforced. By contrast, *Heavy Rain* uses the ludonarrative genre to exemplify the revocation of agency in a game predicated on choice.

At the time of this writing, it has been nearly two years since the May 2020 murder of

George Floyd by Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin, an event which has continued to draw further public attention towards police brutality, systemic racism, and the militarization of American police forces. The subsequent protests, speeches, petitions, and memorials have served as some of the most recent markers in a long history of pushback against police brutality. In writing this project, though I am deeply interested in the subversive possibilities of the ludonarrative, I am also aware that *Heavy Rain* does not take an active stance against police brutality or systemic corruption. It sees these institutional and cultural failures as simply a trope of American culture, one so pervasive it emerges almost lifelike in a fictional text about Americans, for Americans, by a non-American studio. However, it can draw attention to the institutions which shape laws and culture; institutions which limit the possibilities for agency, maintaining power by suggesting there were no other choices. *Heavy Rain* suggests there are always other choices, but they are often suppressed by those in positions of power. Future ludonarratives can, I believe, harness a tremendous power in blurring the lines between action and narrative to explicitly indicate the injustice of cultural and political patterns that lend agency to those empowered and emboldened by institutions like law enforcement, and revoke it from those most vulnerable.

CHAPTER II

DETROIT: BECOME HUMAN

In response to claims by players and journalists that *Detroit: Become Human* took inspiration from the American Civil Rights Movements and other narratives of protest and subjugation in American history, director and creator David Cage stated that there “is no big message to humanity in this game” and that the story he is “telling is really about androids... If people want to see parallels with this or that, that’s fine with me. But my story’s about androids who want to be free” (qtd. in Schubert). Cage is certainly correct in asserting that his game, on its surface, is about androids (extremely lifelike humanoid robots) seeking their freedom. What Cage fails to recognize is that *Detroit: Become Human* interacts with vast cultural and historical precedents of race, religion, and ethnicity in ways that are inseparable from American history and politics.

As an undeniably political game, mired in the language of protest, abolition, and enslavement, *Detroit: Become Human*’s many political and ideological “signposts,” represented by imagery, dialogue, and symbolism, carelessly misappropriate Black American and Jewish experiences, creating a tension between the game’s potentially subversive nature and its naïve whitewashed version of Black American history. *Detroit: Become Human* is a text that, from the earliest segments of gameplay, forges parallels between the events of the game and the American Civil Rights Movement, Jim Crow, and enslavement in ways that cannot be seen or interpreted as politically neutral, especially by an American audience. As I will illustrate, it takes clear and indisputable inspiration from well-recognized moments in American Civil Rights history, such as Rosa Parks’ refusal to sit in the back half of a segregated bus; language associated with Dr.

Martin Luther King Jr., and Jim Crow Era segregation by depicting separate infrastructures for Androids and humans (i.e. Androids must use stairs while humans may use an escalator). While the purpose of this section is not to prove Cage's assertion of his game's apolitical stance incorrect, *Detroit: Become Human* indicates early on to players they are dealing not just with a political text (as all texts are inherently political), but rather a visibly and identifiably political text that "compels or enables its players to think about how life in society is organized and structured, especially in relation to questions of power or difference, democracy and representation, morality and ethics, (in)justice and (in)equality" (Schubert 5). However, it is not only the narrative that allows for a deliberately political reading of *Detroit: Become Human*. If this game were instead a film or novel about Androids whose subjugation clearly resembled that of people of color throughout American history, it would certainly have a similar affect: viewers/readers would be compelled to identify the parallels between a fictional text and real world events, prompting them to perhaps think more critically about their historical and contemporary conceptions. However, as a choice-based game, *Detroit: Become Human* is a distinctly interactive text, one with ludic elements that allow players to experience moments of political embodiment that other forms of media cannot. Similar to that which is experienced in *Heavy Rain*, players encounter the limits of their own agency in situations specifically surrounded by police violence, accentuated by the specifically choice-based nature of the game.

Where the game is ludically subversive, it is in many ways narratologically problematic. *Detroit: Become Human* is a game with a "protest narrative" that represents the transformation of complicated subjugation into whitewashed mythological symbols that prioritize the comfort of white, racist institutions that control historical and educational narratives. In what Schubert calls "a quasi-historical misrepresentation," *Detroit: Become Human* uses these political signposts of

oppression to indicate injustice to the player through a “severe simplification” of the “complicated, protracted, and multi-agential process” of protest and revolution (11). In exploring agency, depictions of policing, and protest in *Detroit: Become Human*, I am certainly not claiming that the game does a spectacular, or even necessarily good, job of understanding oppression, political subjugation, and human rights violations, but rather I hope to examine how these narrative symbols inform a player’s experience of ethical decision-making. One of the main choices to be made in the game is whether the Androids will lead a peaceful protest or violent rebellion to achieve their freedom; though the decision is ultimately up to the player, in-game variables such as “public opinion” and the deaths of non-playable characters suggest the end of subjugation—both in game and real world—is best achieved through passive, peaceful protests that often require the deaths of those subjugated to win the favor of the oppressor. Simultaneously, another playable character, Connor (a white Android police officer) is both oppressor and oppressed, further complicating the game’s political position.

Therefore, there is an ideological tension between the game’s ludic elements (the presence of choice and lack of agency that illustrates for players a political and legal system predisposed to violence) and the game’s narrative elements (a story that glorifies peaceful protest and dying a martyr’s death). A ludonarratological analysis of *Detroit: Become Human* is therefore capable of examining these two rather oppositional readings of the text. It is an unstable text with misplaced historical narratives, but with enough recognizable moments of political injustice that its choice-based elements and played experience can render it potentially quite subversive. Moreover, I propose that the most potentially impactful parts of *Detroit: Become Human* are those which the player actually experiences: the rhetorical choices involved in protest and revolution, and the conflict between enforcing the law and allowing room for

mercy.

2.1 No Androids Allowed:

Detroit: Become Human and the American Civil Rights Movement

Contrary to Cage's assertion of authorial neutrality, *Detroit: Become Human* extensively identifies with and misappropriates commonly known markers of Jewish and African American history; in doing so, the game generates a political, racial, and ethnic environment that American players, specifically, are unable to avoid due to cultural symbols, such as "MLK Day" and the recognition of Black History Month in corporate, political, and educational settings. As a result, the "played experience" is anything but apolitical. The choice-based focus of *Detroit: Become Human* grants players a unique experience in which they are given agency in situations they will recognize as specifically and historically political, transforming the decision-making process from personal and individual to broad and cultural. The parallels to historical and current subjugation of Black and Jewish people, although these signposts are not manifested in a thorough manner, act as signposts to players that directly affect how they will play the game.

One of the most easily recognizable occurs during the game's second chapter: "Shades of Color." The chapter title itself, supposedly a reference to the Android Markus's owner Carl, who is a painter, already orients the player to racially charged rhetoric by using the word "color" in a setting which is quickly revealed to be segregated. During this chapter, players witness the many ways in which Androids are subjugated by humans: they are sold for high prices in stores, barred from entry into certain establishments, and are the topic of numerous protests due to the number of jobs, specifically in retail and manual labor, in which they have replaced human workers. In the same chapter, upon walking past a preacher, the player can overhear his sermon

in which he declares “We built these androids to be our slaves, but the slaves are becoming the master!” Though this is certainly not the last time a character will explicitly mention a parallel between enslavement and androids, establishing it so early in the narrative creates an inescapable racial and political framework for the player’s future decisions.

Shortly after this direct reference to slavery, Markus is verbally and physically assaulted by a group of humans protesting the prevalence of Androids in the workforce. Though the police stop the protesters from harming Markus, it is with the threat of fining him for property damage; Markus then boards the bus to return home and is stored in the “Android Compartment” in the back of the bus, from which a parallel is easily drawn to Rosa Parks. The parallels with the Civil Rights Movement are not exclusive to Markus: during Kara’s story, her goal becomes to escape to Canada by way of help from sympathetic humans, a very obvious Underground Railroad parallel. When Connor visits a bar during “Partners,” he is met with a “No Androids Allowed” sign on the door; when Kara attempts to stay at a motel in “Fugitives,” she remarks “they’ll never give a room to an Android.” In both instances, the language and iconography are easily identifiable as reminiscent of Jim Crow segregation used to prevent people of color from entering establishments.

Though *Detroit: Become Human* is text steeped in American Civil Rights imagery, it would be remiss to omit the presence of Holocaust imagery, which also functions to further illuminate the ethical and political nature of the choices the player makes. For example, the Androids are required by law¹⁸ to identify themselves in two ways: one, a circular LED light on their temple, and two, a glowing blue armband and inverted triangle on the breast of their

¹⁸ During the chapter “The Hostage,” the player can receive information about the “American Android Act” of 2029 that outlines the legal parameters of an Android’s existence. It also specifies they are not allowed to carry guns.

clothing, strikingly and uncomfortably similar to the armbands and triangles used to identify Jewish people in Nazi Germany. Additionally, toward the game's climax, the U.S. army attempts to quell the Android rebellion by placing all Androids into what even the game identifies as "camps," where they wait in line to be "recycled" in a large trash compactor. If Kara is caught by the army during one of the later chapters, instead of escaping to Canada, she is forced to take off the clothes she is wearing and "remove" her skin, a process which instantaneously retracts her human features and reveals the white, mannequin-like body beneath. I do not take these parallels lightly, and neither does a player who has been taught in school the history and the imagery of the Holocaust. Furthermore, though an American player may be more attuned to the obvious racial coding of *Detroit: Become Human* and its—albeit shallow—exploration of American history, the game's use of imagery and symbolism that allude to the Holocaust will also indicate to players the historical and ethical ramifications of the decisions they make while they play the game.

The earliest parts of Markus' narrative serve to establish for the player the racial parallels between the Androids and Black history, but as his story continues, his presence in a protest narrative that so easily mirrors a white-washed version of the American Civil Rights Movement complicates the political and agential information the player is receiving, all of which informs their decision-making process during gameplay.

2.2 : Whitewashing the Protest Narrative

Though *Detroit: Become Human* includes imagery and language that closely resemble the American Civil Rights Movement, it is specifically curated and mediated to reflect the "whitewashed" version of it. I use the term "whitewashed" to refer to the transformation of

historical narratives from that which place blame on white people and white institutions, to one that reifies white supremacy through narratological digestibility. The Civil Rights Movement, as represented in the “common knowledge,” perpetuated in educational and cultural settings, is one in which white people emerge feeling comforted and guiltless. In her landmark essay, historian Jacquelyn Dowd Hall deconstructs the popular narrative. She writes: “By confining the civil rights struggle to the South, to bowdlerized heroes, to a single halcyon decade, and to limited, noneconomic objectives, the master narrative simultaneously elevates and diminishes the movement” (1234). Moreover, by employing a specific, living, historical and racial narrative that glorifies freedom but manages to sweep actual justice under the rug, *Detroit: Become Human* becomes a “feel-good” game in which protest is defined by soundbites and protests, martyrism, and a succinct and quick solution to racism.¹⁹

An especially poignant example of this narrative of civil rights occurs during the chapter “Capitol Park,” in which Markus and his companions free Androids who are being sold in a store. After freeing them, the player must decide whether or not Markus and the other Androids decide to peacefully make a statement by marking cars, bus stops, and store fronts with graffiti (known in-game as the “pacifist” route), or to choose violence, in which the player can destroy the aforementioned objects with bats, crowbars, and Molotov cocktails. The graffiti is particularly interesting; though it very clearly takes inspiration from the American Civil Rights Movement, it does so in ways that reflect the “canonized” version of the movement. When choosing the pacifist route, the player may choose from the following four options: “We have a dream,” “I think therefore I am,” “One planet. Two races,” and “Equal Rights for Androids.”

¹⁹ Hall’s remark about the confinement of the Civil Rights Movement to a “single halcyon decade” is especially poignant here: the events of *Detroit: Become Human* take place over the course of a paltry three days.

Though the inclusion of “We have a dream” is a very obvious allusion to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s famous “I have a dream” speech, it is also indicative of a “misremembering” of King’s life as a part of the American Civil Rights Movement; he “suffers from the ‘curse of canonization,’ a symbolic ambiguity perpetuated through a careful disregarding of his career after 1965 and the sound-biting of his speeches into ambiguous aphorisms” (Darda 200). Moreover, while the graffiti options indicate that *Detroit: Become Human* is a text undivorceable from Black American history, it also represents the whitewashing of King’s legacy, whose “name and image can be found everywhere and yet rarely with any *context or complexity*,” (Darda 197, emphasis mine). For the Androids to claim they “have a dream” without acknowledgement of the quote’s “context or complexity,” or even its origin, contributes to an imagined history in which these soundbites and quotes have stable, universal meanings. It also erases by omission the political and economic values for which King stood and which today are still a crucial part of anti-racist practice. Hall writes:

Martin Luther King Jr. is the narrative’s defining figure—frozen in 1963, proclaiming ‘I have a dream’ during the march on the Mall. Endlessly reproduced and selectively quoted, his speeches retain their mastery yet lose their political bite. We hear little of the King who believed that ‘the racial issue that we confront in America is not a sectional but a national problem’ and who attacked segregation in the urban North. Erased altogether is the King who opposed the Vietnam War and linked racism at home to militarism and imperialism abroad. Gone is King the democratic socialist who advocated unionization, planned the Poor People’s Campaign, and was assassinated in 1968 while supporting a sanitation workers’ strike. (1234)

When schools,²⁰ corporations, and other media participate in the rewriting of King's history as a timeless hagiography, the complex legal, cultural, and economic institutions, systems, and histories that cause and perpetuate racism are overwritten with a simplified, digestible history.

It is not only King's legacy that is appropriated for the purposes of *Detroit: Become Human's* civil rights narrative. As previously mentioned, there are multiple moments during the game in which buses and trains are shown to be segregated between Androids and humans. Androids must stand in the "Android Compartment" in the back of the bus, while humans may remain seated. When Markus poses as a human (simply by removing his Android uniform) and stands in the human section, the game's camera lingers on the motionless Androids in their compartment before Markus leaves the train. Like the homage to King's "I have a dream speech," the segregated public transportation is a clear reference to Rosa Parks, another well-known and mythologized person of the Civil Rights Movement.

Rosa Park's famous refusal to give up her seat to a white person for a seat in the back of the bus has been so often reiterated in public education and cinema that she has become, according to Dennis Carlson, a "myth" that "tells her story in ways that are not threatening and unsettling and that reinforce some familiar if reworked tropes of whiteness" (303). The white American mythos, a whitewashing of Civil Rights and Black American history, so prominently featured in education by way of children's literature and school curricula, has transformed an

²⁰ A video commonly shown in schools on MLK Day is the animated short film "Our Friend, Martin," in which several contemporary middle schoolers are transported back to the 1940s U.S. South where they witness Jim Crow segregation and racism first-hand and meet an young Martin Luther King Jr. In an effort to try to save King from future assassination, the students bring him back to the present where they discover that, as a result of preventing King from doing civil rights work in the 60s, segregation and Jim Crow law are still the norm. The film simplifies King into a "savior," whose role in the Civil Rights Movement was single-handed; it imagines an alternate future, in which, if King hadn't been there to "end" racism, it would exist just as it had decades prior. The film can be viewed here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c00kcxAW7M>

integral part of the civil rights movement into a digestible, mythological moment in American history, one that is made to represent an entire history in a single moment. Importantly, it is one that, because of its mythologizing, is especially recognizable to 21st century players. Recognizing Markus's position on the bus as an Android functions as an easily identifiable sign-post of racism and institutionalized discrimination for players, indicating the game's racial and political ramifications. However, the stakes are not high: these are comfortable signs of racism, ones to which players know both the cause and solution because they have already been "solved" by King and Parks decades prior. It creates parallels of a long-gone mythologized racism, but it does not seek to disrupt the deeply-imbedded racist institutions that continue to function today.

2.3 To Flee or Not to Flee: The Public Opinion Question

While all three playable characters have relationships with non-playable characters that are affected by the player's actions, Markus is unique in that a large portion of his actions affect a variable known as the "public opinion," which itself can affect the final outcome of the game. When Markus becomes the leader of the Androids' venture for rights, most of the player's decisions rest on the binary of violence and non-violence; these decisions are directly related to the "public opinion" variable. Each "pacifist" action a player makes as Markus, such as using graffiti in the park, broadcasting a peaceful statement on live television, and refusing to kill humans when the opportunity presents itself, results in a significant increase in public opinion. The opposite actions result in a decrease in public opinion. Importantly, both are visible to the player, identifying for the player the ramifications of their actions and influencing their future decisions.

In particular, the chapter "Freedom March" exemplifies the relationship between

pacifism, violence, and public opinion in a way extraordinarily reflective of whitewashed American racial history. In this chapter, Markus leads a march in Detroit with several hundred other Androids he has recruited. When they approach the end of the street, the police arrive and demand that the Androids, who have yet to do anything violent, disperse. Several interesting things happen here: the player is immediately presented with the decision to either flee, per police orders; attack; or stand their ground. This chart (see Table 1) demonstrates the possible outcomes of the player's decisions, as well as their ramifications on public opinion.

Though it could be argued that all of these three decisions have approximately the same result, an altercation occurring between police and the Androids, the ramifications of each decision on public opinion speak volumes about the racial and historical politics of *Detroit: Become Human*. That is, the increase in public opinion as a result of unprovoked violence against Androids positions the protest narrative as something that is only socially successful when peaceful, a whitewashed misremembering of history that is prevalent in American educational and cultural discourse. *Detroit: Become Human* uses the public opinion variable to communicate to players that protests that prioritize the safety of the oppressor—instead of the freedom of the oppressed—are much more effective. It also suggests that achieving positive public opinion from the oppressor is a necessary step in obtaining respect.

Table 1

Impact of Markus' Decisions during "Freedom March"

Decision	Police Response	Public Opinion
Flee	Police open fire	Increase
Attack	Police fight with Androids	Decrease
Stand Ground	Police open fire	Increase

This dangerous assumption is reminiscent of the rewriting of Dr. King's legacy, and, in particular, it is integral to creating a racial history that provides comfort to white audiences and rejects disorder and revolution as a viable and even crucial option in creating real political change. To protect white interests, Dr. King's life has been given a digestible "'soft' image that has emerged as a result of his 'canonization' and that is often used to critique current protest groups like BLM" (van den Berk and Visser-Maeson 30). Simultaneously, *Detroit: Become Human* reflects and endorses white perceptions of Black protest: in their research, Peay and Camarillo found "white respondents were uniquely apt to perceive heightened potential for violence in explicitly peaceful protests with higher concentrations of Black participants" (199). The game's depiction of police forces who immediately assume aggression and violence from the racially coded Androids demonstrates an acknowledgement and understanding of historic and contemporary police violence against protestors. However, the in-game benefits of an increased public opinion, achieved through exclusively peaceful protest and allowing police violence against the Androids, ultimately suggests political power and respect are lent to the oppressed only if they accept their subjugation within state violence. When applied to real world racial

politics, players are brought to the conclusion that respect for racially coded subjects is only won through peace and passivity, a woefully naïve idea that creates a more digestible protest narrative for white audiences.

If the “peaceful” route is chosen, the game’s final chapter sees the Androids surrounded by heavily armed soldiers and the sanitized protest narrative is most evident. It is at this point the public opinion variable ultimately has an effect on the outcome of the game’s story. With the last remaining Androids surrounded at gun point, Markus’ last decision is one of the following choices: sacrifice himself, kiss another Android (if the player has pursued a relationship with her), detonate a nuclear bomb (if the player has access to it), or sing. Detonating the bomb and sacrificing Markus both result in arguably poor endings, in which most of the characters die; the “best” ending, in which the Androids gain their freedom, is achieved only by choosing “sing” or “kiss,” each the most passive of the options. The “sing” option is especially telling: the Androids will sing the 1980 gospel piece “Hold on a Just a Little While Longer,” by Reverend Cleophus Robinson Jr.. Its lyrics are not inherently in or out of line with political narratives, but in the context of a text that privileges political passivity, they embody a sanitized version of the protest narrative, one in which the subjugated must “hold on” in order to obtain freedom. The first verse, sung first by Markus and later by the entire group of Androids, is sung as such:

Hold on just a little while longer

Hold on just a little while longer

Hold on just a little while longer

Everything will be alright.

Notably, should the public opinion not be sufficiently high during either the “sing” or “kiss” options, the military will not interpret it as an act of the Androids’ “humanity,” and will nonetheless open fire, killing all the remaining Androids. Moreover, the politics of *Detroit: Become Human* envision a world in which freedom is not inherent in subjugated people, but rather earned through the passive act of “holding on” until those in power bestow sympathy and—hopefully—discover the error of their ways.

Though freedom in this game must be “earned,” the “peaceful protest” narrative is privileged by the game’s story and mechanics. Though the option of choosing the violent revolutionary path nonetheless remains, even if the player has selected exclusively peaceful options up until one of the final chapters, choosing violence makes it impossible to have a “perfect” ending in which all major characters survive. Should the revolutionary path be chosen, Josh, one of Markus’ compatriots and, notably, a black Android who frequently urges Markus to choose peaceful options, will be killed during the battle. Additionally, should all characters survive by the game’s end, the player will be awarded with a gold-level achievement titled “Survivors.” Alternatively, should Markus successfully liberate the camps within which the Androids are being kept and “recycled” via the revolutionary route, the game will reward the player with the bronze trophy “Liberation.” For a successful peaceful protest, the equivalent bronze-level trophy “Moral Victory” is awarded. Although both aforementioned bronze trophies are equal in their worth to the player, it is only through the “Moral Victory” that the gold trophy “Survivors” becomes accessible to the player, further accentuating the game’s moral and ideological prioritization of a passive protest narrative. The establishment of a played experience that is inseparable from American racial history and the whitewashed protest narrative of the Civil Rights movement are crucial not only to the political ideologies *Detroit: Become Human*

privileges as a text, but also to the played experience of the game as both an interactive text and an interactive text with a specific political alignment.

In recognizing real-world human rights crises as cultural and historical inspiration for *Detroit: Become Human* (whether or not Cage agrees), the player's ludic journey is still the object of our analysis but, unlike *Heavy Rain*, its plot is grounded in political events and ideologies that American gamers will likely recognize and consider when making their judgments. Stefan Schubert agrees; his analysis of *Detroit: Become Human* suggests that the presence of politically charged symbolism and rhetoric "encourages its players to make political and not just personal or empathetic decisions" (2). However, *Detroit: Become Human* is not only a political text: rather, it is a text that demonstrates a specific political and cultural matrix in which players are encouraged to adhere to the ideology of passivity, all while believing they are making the choice to do so. While Markus and Kara's stories are predicated both on subjugation and, in the former's case, protest, the third Android the player controls, Connor, actively engages in policing and subjugation, complicating the player's experience. In a game that explicitly rewards passive protest, the possibility of embodying an agent of law enforcement complicates the roles of responsibility and culpability. Players are able to engage with a text that, through choice-based mechanics, recreates the empowering moments of protest and civil rights, but removes the challenges to racist institutions and frameworks that continue to exist and function after the protest ends. The next section of this project will focus largely on Connor in order to establish the game's politics of choice and policing in the wake of its inseparably political nature.

2.4 "I'm Whatever You Want Me to Be, Lieutenant": Connor and Making the Ethical Decision to be Bad at Your Job

Connor's sole function, robotically speaking, is to apprehend Androids who believe they are alive, otherwise known as "deviants." Although they may possess the genuine belief that they are alive, Connor assures other characters that they are no more than the expression of computational errors in programming. When playing as Connor, the player's primary job is to hunt down the deviants, capture them, and interrogate them to learn the processes behind deviancy. Accompanying him (because although Connor is a highly advanced prototype, there are regulations surrounding his activities) is Lieutenant Hank Anderson, a depressed middle-aged alcoholic still mourning the loss of his son. Whereas *Heavy Rain* positioned Norman Jayden against the violent brutality of "bad cop" Lieutenant Carter Blake, Hank is, while volatile and oftentimes angry, uninterested in violence. Instead, the position Blake represented is filled by detective Gavin Reed, who acts antagonistically towards Connor and Hank, but ultimately never works alongside them. Furthermore, though Hank is a police officer in a game full of "bad cops," it quickly becomes clear that Hank has little interest in being punitive. In fact, he is more often than not sympathetic towards those who are committing non-violent crimes. During an early chapter, "The Nest," Hank is seen placing bets with a bookie. If Connor chooses to ask Hank about it, he states that "everybody does what they have to to get by... As long as they're not hurting anybody, I don't bother 'em." This attitude is oppositional to Connor's primary programming, which is entirely predicated on the act of "bothering" those who break the law.

Because video games are, unlike other forms of media, predicated on some form of "winning," the player is likely to identify themselves and, therefore, the character they embody, as the force of "good" while all opposing forces are "bad."²¹ This phenomenon places Connor,

²¹ Although it is possible to play *Detroit: Become Human* and make intentionally "bad" decisions that result in the most character deaths, destruction, etc., an analysis of the decision-based statistics provided in-game revealed that characters made "morally sound" decisions 61.73% of the time (Holl and Melzer 7).

the character with the most playable chapters, in a rather interesting position. Just as Blake's extremely violent behavior is the standard against which Jayden's "good cop" behavior is construed, Hank's lax attitude towards policing both humans and Androids places Connor in the oppositional position of "bad cop" during the game's first few chapters. The player's choices during Connor's missions ultimately reflect whether or not he remains a "bad cop" and supportive of policing institutions.

Most of Connor's missions entail the player solving a brief mystery to reveal where a deviant is hiding, followed by a fight or chase that, if done successfully²², brings the character to a scene in which their choice becomes the deciding factor on: 1) the outcome of the immediate chapter, 2) Hank's relationship with Connor, and 3) long-term consequences of the decision. For example, in the chapter "The Eden Club," Hank and Connor visit an Android sex club after hearing reports of an Android killing a customer. When the Android (known as a "Traci") is discovered, she and another Traci attempt to escape by fighting Hank and Connor. The chapter's climax presents the player (as Connor) with a choice: they can either shoot or spare the deviant. Shooting the deviant lowers Connor's relationship with Hank while providing a specimen to use as a clue later in the game; sparing the deviants raises Connor's relationship with Hank but at the expense of tangible evidence to use in the investigation.

Though, naturally, *Detroit: Become Human* does not need to be played after *Heavy Rain* in order to be enjoyed, as their stories are not in any way connected, it becomes evident in a comparative analysis that they are thematically and functionally similar. While both games employ the "good cop/bad cop" trope while in search of the "criminals," the relative rhetorical

²² As with *Heavy Rain*, *Detroit: Become Human*'s more action-packed scenes require the character to complete "quick-time events" in lieu of precision movement.

and even physical futility Norman Jayden experienced while Carter Blake abused suspects is reversed. Instead of playing as the passive member of the duo, Connor is able to be an agent in ways that Jayden was not: when confronting suspects, it is always up to the player to decide whether or not to shoot the deviant. The conflict arises not from the player's lack of narratological empathy for the Androids, as this is a "given," but rather out of obedience to or defiance against Connor's law-enforcing programming. On multiple occasions, he states, "I'm a machine, designed to accomplish a task," when asked if the deviant situation may deserve more sympathy than he is otherwise capable of harboring.

Connor's aforementioned insistence on his own "machine-ness" is a major source of contention for his own emotional (or, emotionless, depending on how he is played) journey, one that serves as a point on a scale of personal responsibility. His, and therefore the player's, culpability or denial of such, serves as a rather poignant parallel to police brutality and the ways in which police attempt to justify it. Sociological studies into police brutality have established the strains and pressures which create an institutional culture that not only accepts excessive force as a legitimate method of law enforcement, but also encourages it. Moreover, as police "close cases" in an expedited fashion through use of excessive force and are rewarded, "the officer begins to subscribe to a new set of norms that are divorced from society-at-large, and are instead driven by the 'brotherhood' of policing" (Bleakly 428). The subsequent police culture that forms "is potentially the most influential factor in a police officer's decision-making process, and the kind of culture that takes pride in its proactive and aggressive response to crime will almost always lead to higher levels of police brutality" (445). As a result, excessive use of force becomes the expectation through the immediate and ideological pressures of fellow and superior police officers. They believe they are, as is sometimes colloquially said "just doing their

jobs.”

In *Detroit: Become Human*, we can easily make the parallel between Connor’s statement “I’m a machine, designed to accomplish a task” and “I’m just doing my job.” These statements wipe from the speaker ethical responsibility for their own actions, not in spite of, but alongside the sociological forces at play. Connor’s only imperative is to solve the case of the Androids’ deviancy and, the more expeditious he is in his pursuits, the more he is rewarded by the institutions he obeys, just as in a culture that “implicitly rewards violence, it is inevitable that officers would be psychologically primed to respond with force as an instinctive measure” (Bleakly 445). Though Connor literally is a machine, confined to his programming, he is in an especially unique position because the player, who is arguably the only non-machine within the game,²³ controls him and becomes responsible for each decision Connor/the player makes. For each deviant he finds, should Connor choose to spare them, his “software instability” increases, which appears as a small but noticeable blurb at the top right hand side of the screen. As he continues to make decisions for himself that defy his programming and the policing imperative, he can have the opportunity, by the game’s final act, to become a deviant himself, should the player decide to. However, as established with *Heavy Rain*, it is not necessarily the consequences of choices that are most impactful to the played experience, but rather the experience of making the decisions and exercising agency in places analogous to real-world situations in which we are told agency is typically absent. That is, just as Connor is a machine whose sole purpose is to accomplish a task but who can nonetheless still make choices based on his/the player’s own ethical imperative, a police officer whose institutional culture is to employ violence liberally can

²³ For further reading on posthumanism, see Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*; Haraway, *A Cyborg Manifesto*

still act in ways that defy their “programming.”

It is completely possible for a player to use Connor as a means to “kill” each deviant he finds in order to use their bodies for study, though it is at the expense of his software instability (making it impossible to later become a deviant) and Hank’s relationship²⁴ with Connor (making some tasks more difficult when Hank’s friendship is not secured). However, as I established earlier, the very nature of exclusively controlling Android characters indicates to players that they are mostly intended to sympathize with the Androids and to choose non-violent options. In their study of player goals and decision-making in the game *Undertale* (Toby Fox, 2015), Mawhorter et al. separate players into two categories: Power players, and Story players. Power players are “grounded in the ‘achievement’ dimension of player motivation” while the story player is, as the name suggests, “interested in experiencing the story of *Undertale*” (5). *Undertale* is constructed so that in their analysis, “the power player is most likely to pick ‘fight’” in order to gain experience points and understands the game they are playing as a test of skill rather than a narrative in which they are participating (7). Alternatively, the story player, “whose highest-priority goals are to explore [the game’s world] and show mercy, will likely pick ‘spare’” during a confrontation (7). In *Undertale*, the player becomes aware of the “results” of each encounter as they play. While fighting rewards the player with gold and XP (experience points), showing mercy rewards the player only with XP and the knowledge that they have spared the life of the enemy they face (a more personal, intangible “reward,” but nonetheless an outcome). In short, it is only after a fraction of the game is completed that players “will know the true outcomes” of their actions (Mawhorter et al. 7). Knowing the true outcomes of their choices

²⁴ It is worth noting that Hank’s friendship, despite loathing Androids and being himself a decorated police lieutenant, is mostly dependent on how non-violent Connor is towards other Androids.

influences player behavior; that is, they know they are not making choices in a vacuum, with all outcomes unbeknownst to them. Each subsequent decision is impacted by knowledge of the previous.

In *Undertale*, both fighting and showing mercy have results that appeal to the respective player and are immediate (or nearly so), but the outcomes in *Detroit: Become Human* function differently. Whenever Connor makes a significant decision regarding the outcome of a Deviant, the game will, as stated earlier, indicate to the player if his software instability and relationship to Hank have increased or decreased. The only other “reward” for killing a deviant is that their body will be available later as a clue for Connor to use in locating the deviants.

Table 2.

Impacts of Connor Capturing a Deviant

Variable	Capture Deviant	Spare Deviant
Relationship with Hank	Decreases	Increases
Software Instability	Decreases	Increases
Clue to use later in game	Present	Absent

Similar to the outcomes in *Undertale*, it does not take long to make the correlations between the first two variables and Connor’s actions; however, the game does not explicitly ever indicate to the player exactly what software instability represents, nor does it indicate that the deviants’ bodies will be used at any point as a tool until it actually happens in the chapter, “Last

Chance, Connor.” Ultimately, the only known variable to the player, until or if they are able to extrapolate what software instability is, is Connor’s relationship to Hank. As software instability and Hank’s relationship typically increase and decrease almost simultaneously, the player will quickly interpret the “increase” as a positive outcome and each “decrease” as a negative outcome. Assisting this correlation is the color scheme: the arrow that indicates an increase is a light blue, while the corresponding arrow indicating decrease is in red.

While the consequences of player decisions in *Undertale* are “not simply rewards or punishments” but instead “represent divergent worlds,” *Detroit: Become Human*’s known and unknown variables, alongside the color scheme that represents them, indicate to players that sympathizing with deviants (whether the player is interested in “power” or “story”) is correlative with an in-game increase analogous to winning that players will undoubtedly seek (Mawhorter, et al. 8). This, in conjunction with the frequent signposts of racial persecution, renders the Androids sympathetic to most players, who will seek safety in the “known” variables that ultimately lead Connor down a path to becoming a deviant himself and assisting Markus in the revolution.

Though Connor’s role is explicitly, per his own words, to accomplish the task for which he was created, his unique position as a controllable, policing, character offers agency in situations in which social parameters attempt to control personal agency. Though *Detroit: Become Human* misuses and appropriates imagery that is deeply and historically connected to persecution and racism, it does so to illustrate systems of power to which the character/player may belong both in-game and in the real world. Once again, the medium of choice-based indicates personal responsibility in places where we might otherwise think we are only machines accomplishing our tasks.

CONCLUSION

Misremembering History: The “White Played Experience”

Playing *Detroit: Become Human* provides a uniquely problematic and liberating experience. Its distinctly American racial and cultural imagery indicates to players they are working with a political landscape they recognize and within which they must ideologically and consciously situate themselves, and yet the text’s understanding of an American protest narrative largely relies on a whitewashed version of it. The “success” of Markus’ story is largely dependent on passivity and patience, one that privileges peace, even if it means the continuation of death and suffering. Meanwhile, though a “peaceful” player may spare the Deviants as Connor, his narrative is far more agential, and the survival of other Androids rests in his hands alone as the law enforcer. In the political framework of the game, Markus embodies a “sanitized” version of Black history in which the success of the protest is dependent on white people and institutions, represented here by Connor, bestowing freedom. That is, the text employs a thinly-veiled white-savior complex in which the active work of liberation is done not by the subjugated, whose extensive work in organizing and protest created the movement, but by the oppressive white narrative that envisions itself as the agent and hero of the story.

It is rare to see interactive media in which a player is given the opportunity to stop state-sanctioned violence. War-centric games such as *Call of Duty*, *Rainbow Six Siege*, and *Battlefield 2042* invite the player to kill on behalf of a nation-state (usually) without question, while *Detroit: Become Human* asks the player to choose whether or not to disobey their programming on many

levels: as a player, whose job is to “complete” the game; as Connor the police officer, whose job it is to apprehend criminals; and lastly, as Connor the Android, who is supposedly bound by the ramifications of his programming. In this manner, *Detroit: Become Human* offers a surprisingly subversive point of view on the experience of police and personal agency: the choices are always present.

However, the game nonetheless prioritizes the white narrative and even anticipates a white player. Though the player is clued-in to cultural markers that indicate the political and racial nature of the game, this does not happen in a way that subverts white supremacist American history. Rather, the “white player,” represented by Connor, is intended to learn to increasingly sympathize with all Androids as the events of the game unfurl. The more Markus, the “Black other,” and the deviants continue to suffer, the “public opinion” continues to rise in tandem with the nebulous, unseen “player’s opinion.” *Detroit: Become Human* postulates that it is at the expense of Black suffering that a white collective can only then learn sympathy. Should Connor “deviate” and subsequently use action and violence against humans in order to help the cause, he never once affects the public opinion. Rather than the disturbing image of Markus deciding whether or not to shoot two unarmed police officers in the chapter “Capitol Park,” the deaths Connor causes are simply elaborate and exciting action sequences. In representing the white played experience, Connor becomes an ethically unquestionable hero whose sympathy is earned only through the player watching the continued suffering of other Androids. Moreover, both Connor and *Detroit: Become Human* have unstable meanings. While the sympathetic frameworks of Connor’s narrative implore the player to deconstruct the imperatives of policing, his role when compared to Markus also highlights the stricter social pressures placed on people of color to “perform” for the public opinion. When Connor is violent, it is only Hank who

demonstrates disdain for his actions. When Markus is violent, the entirety of the public becomes aware—and their opinion of Androids collectively lowers. This is the double standard of violence seen when crimes committed by white people are seen as individual failures and tragedies, while crimes committed by black people are seen as representative of the “whole race.”²⁵

Thus, *Detroit: Become Human* rewrites The American Civil Rights movement into one that celebrates the unveiling of white sympathy and fetishizes Black suffering as a means to achieve the aforementioned sympathy. It is a game that does not examine the “difficult racial past, including the accumulative effects of cultural trauma and the state-sponsored collective forgetting, misremembering, and disremembering” (Pelak 324). When it asks a player to disobey their programming, *Detroit: Become Human* does so only insofar as it will continue to adhere to whitewashed narratives of American history. Yet, *Detroit: Become Human* is not ruined by its problematic narratological elements. The ludic elements allow the player the possibility of subversion. Though a player is bound by the confines of the narrative, and a narrative bound by vast social and political matrices, an interactive text in which players are offered the option of mercy—while playing as a police officer specifically seeking out a racially-coded minority—demonstrates the power of personal agency in a culture fixated on increased policing. Even Markus’ narrative, though problematic in its dire promotion of passivity, still offers success through the path of revolution. It is the possibility of choice that renders *Detroit: Become Human* subversive; in cultural and political schemes that suggest there was “no other option,” it is in knowing that other choices are possible that subversive thinking becomes possible.

²⁵ See Pettigrew, *The Ultimate Attribution Error*

Works Cited

- Aarseth, Espen. *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*. Johns Hopkins University Press
Baltimore, Md, 1997.
- Aarseth, Espen. "Genre Trouble: Narrativism and the Art of Simulation." *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, edited by Wardrip-Fruin, Noah, and Pat Harrigan, The MIT Press, 2004, pp. 45-55.
- Alexander, Michelle. *The New Jim Crow : Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*.
New Press, 2010.
- Beyond: Two Souls*. For Playstation 4, Quantic Dream, 2014.
- Bleakley, Paul. "A Thin-Slice of Institutionalised Police Brutality: A Tradition of Excessive Force in the Chicago Police Department." *Criminal Law Forum*, vol. 30, no. 4, Springer Netherlands, 2019, pp. 425–49, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10609-019-09378-6>.
- Bogost, Ian. *Unit Operations an Approach to Videogame Criticism*. MIT Press, 2006.
- Carlson, Dennis. "Narrating the Multicultural Nation: Rosa Parks and the White Mythology of the Civil Rights Movement." *Off White: Readings on Power, Privilege, and Resistance*, edited by Fine, Michelle, et al. Taylor and Francis Group, 2004, pp. 302-311.
- Christoph, Klimmt, et al. "The Video Game Experience as 'True' Identification: A Theory of Enjoyable Alterations of Players' Self-Perception." *Communication Theory*, vol. 19, no. 4, Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2009, pp. 351–73, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2885.2009.01347.x>.
- Cyberpunk 2077*. For PlayStation 4, CD Projekt, 2020.

Darda, Joseph. "MLK at the LA Riots: Civil Rights, Memory, and Neoliberalism in Charles Johnson's Dreamer." *Twentieth Century Literature*, vol. 60, no. 2, Duke University Press, 2014, pp. 197–221, <https://doi.org/10.1215/0041462X-2014-3008>.

DeAngelis, Reed T. "Systemic Racism in Police Killings: New Evidence From the Mapping Police Violence Database, 2013–2021." *Race and Justice*, Oct. 2021, doi:10.1177/21533687211047943.

Detroit: Become Human. Version 1.08 for PlayStation 4, Quantic Dream, 2018.

The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim—Special Edition. For PlayStation 4, Bethesda, 2016.

Hall, Jacquelyn Dowd. "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past." *The Journal of American History* (Bloomington, Ind.), vol. 91, no. 4, Organization of American Historians, 2005, pp. 1233–63, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3660172>.

Haraway, Donna Jeanne. "A Cyborg Manifesto." *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women : The Reinvention of Nature*. Routledge, 1991, pp. 149-181.

Hayles, N. Katherine. *How We Became Posthuman Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*. University of Chicago Press, 1999.

Heavy Rain. For PlayStation 3, Quantic Dream, 2010.

"Heavy Rain Official Trailer." *YouTube*, uploaded by JosPlays, 3 Nov. 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fMK6sTnMxBI>

Holl, Elisabeth, and André Melzer. "Moral Minds in Gaming: A Quantitative Case Study of Moral Decisions in Detroit: Become Human." *Journal of Media Psychology*, Hogrefe

Publishing, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1027/1864-1105/a000323>.

Indigo Prophecy. For PlayStation 2, Quantic Dream, 2005.

Juul, Jesper. *Half-Real: Video Games Between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds*. MIT Press, 2005, pp. ix–ix.

Levan, Kristine, and Kelsey Stevenson. “‘There’s Gonna Be Bad Apples’: Police-Community Relations through the Lens of Media Exposure Among University Students.” *International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy*, vol. 8, no. 2, Queensland University of Technology, 2019, pp. 83–105, <https://doi.org/10.5204/ijcjsd.v8i2.1039..>

Mawhorter, Peter, et al. “Choice Poetics by Example.” *Arts* (Basel), vol. 7, no. 3, MDPI AG, 2018, p. 47–, <https://doi.org/10.3390/arts7030047>.

Mass Effect: Legendary Edition. For PlayStation 4, Bioware, 2021.

McDowell, Meghan G., and Luis A. Fernandez. “‘Disband, Disempower, and Disarm’: Amplifying the Theory and Practice of Police Abolition.” *Critical Criminology* (Richmond, B.C.), vol. 26, no. 3, Springer Netherlands, 2018, pp. 373–91, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10612-018-9400-4>.

McLeod, Allegra M. “Envisioning Abolition Democracy.” *Harvard Law Review*, vol. 132, no. 6, Harvard Law Review Association, 2019, pp. 1613–49.

McLeod, Allegra M. “Police Violence, Constitutional Complicity, and Another Vantage.” *The Supreme Court Review*, vol. 2016, no. 1, University of Chicago Press, 2017, pp. 157–95, <https://doi.org/10.1086/691204>.

Moya, Paula M. L. *The Social Imperative : Race, Close Reading, and Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Stanford University Press, 2016, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780804797030>.

Oliver, Mary Beth, et al. "Video Games and Meaningful Entertainment Experiences." *Psychology of Popular Media Culture*, American Psychological Association, 2015, pp. 390-405.

Omikron: The Nomad Soul. For PC, Quantic Dream, 1999

Our Friend, Martin. Directed by Rob Smiley and Vincenzo Trippet, DIC Entertainment, L.P., 1999.

Papazian, Gretchen. "A Possible Childhood: Video Games, Narrative, and the Child Player." *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, vol. 35, no. 4, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010, pp. 450–58, <https://doi.org/10.1353/chq.2010.0017>.

Parrott, Scott, and Caroline T. Parrott. "Law & Disorder: The Portrayal of Mental Illness in U.S. Crime Dramas." *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, vol. 59, no. 4, Routledge, 2015, pp. 640–57, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08838151.2015.1093486>.

Peay, Periloux C., and Tyler Camarillo. "No Justice! Black Protests? No Peace: The Racial Nature of Threat Evaluations of Nonviolent #BlackLivesMatter Protests." *Social Science Quarterly*, vol. 102, no. 1, Wiley Subscription Services, Inc, 2021, pp. 198–208, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ssqu.12902>.

Pelak, Cynthia Fabrizio. "Institutionalizing Counter-Memories of the U.S. Civil Rights Movement: The National Civil Rights Museum and an Application of the Interest-Convergence Principle." *Sociological Forum*, vol. 30, no. 2, [Wiley, Springer], 2015, pp. 305–27,

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/43654117>.

Pettigrew, Thomas F. “The Ultimate Attribution Error: Extending Allport’s Cognitive Analysis of Prejudice.” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, vol. 5, no. 4, Oct. 1979, pp. 461–476, doi:10.1177/014616727900500407.

Pugh, Tison. *Chaucer’s Losers, Nintendo’s Children, and Other Forays in Queer Ludonarratology*. UNP - Nebraska, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvr43mbg>.

Purnell, Derecka. *Becoming Abolitionists: Police, Protests, and the Pursuit of Freedom*. Astra Publishing House, 2021.

Ruth, Michael. *Police Brutality*. Greenhaven Press, a part of Gale, Cengage Learning, 2016.

Schubert, Stefan. “‘Liberty for Androids!’: Player Choice, Politics, and Populism in Detroit: Become Human.” *European Journal of American Studies*, vol. 16, no. 3, European Association for American Studies, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.4000/ejas.17360>.

Shrikant, Natasha, and Rahul Sambaraju. “‘A Police Officer Shot a Black Man’: Racial Categorization, Racism, and Mundane Culpability in News Reports of Police Shootings of Black People in the United States of America.” *British Journal of Social Psychology*, vol. 60, no. 4, Wiley Subscription Services, Inc, 2021, pp. 1196–217, <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjso.12490>.

Simmons, Kami Chavis. “New Governance and the ‘New Paradigm’ of Police Accountability: a Democratic Approach to Police Reform.” *Catholic University Law Review*, vol. 59, no. 2, The Catholic University of America Press, 2010, pp. 373–426.

Skolnick, Jerome. "Corruption and the Blue Code of Silence." *Police Practice & Research*, vol. 3, no. 1, Taylor & Francis Group, 2002, pp. 7–19,

<https://doi.org/10.1080/15614260290011309>.

Toh, Weimin. *A Multimodal Approach to Video Games and the Player Experience*. 1st ed., Routledge, 2019, pp. 21–33, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351184779-2>.

Tomczak, Izabela. "America's Digital Messiah(s) of Detroit: Become Human (2018)." *New Horizons in English Studies*, vol. 4, 2019, pp. 158–72,

<https://doi.org/10.17951/nh.2019.4.158-172>.

Undertale. For Microsoft Windows, Toby Fox, 2015.

van den Berk, Jorrit, and Laura Visser-Maessen. "Race Matters: 1968 as Living History in the Black Freedom Struggle." *European Journal of American Studies*, vol. 14, no. 1, European Association for American Studies, 2019, pp. 1–22, <https://doi.org/10.4000/ejas.14233>.

"Video at Buffalo protest shows police pushing 75-year-old man." Uploaded by CBC News, 5 June 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QFeewU0HhNE>.

Wegner, Daniel M. *The Illusion of Conscious Will*. MIT Press, 2002.

Zimring, Franklin E. *When Police Kill*. Harvard University Press, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv2524zd5>.