

SENSE AND SENSIBILITY AND ANDROIDS

Review by Beata Gubacsi

***Detroit: Become Human*. Quantic Dreams, 2018. Video Game.**

Over the years Quantic Dream has created itself a niche genre/style which makes their games easily recognisable in the growing and competitive market of narrative driven games. Their still most remarkable game, *Heavy Rain* (2010) put Quantic on the map and solidified the features so typical of the French studio: film-like graphics and camera angles; quick action sequences to ensure a relatively seamless transition between cutscenes and gameplay; emotive storytelling; a decision-making system which affects the relationships between characters; and the outcome of their story resulting in a diverse set of plausible playable scenarios. *Detroit: Become Human*, released in May 2018, follows in the footsteps of the previous Quantic titles as every aspect of the game pays homage to writer and director David Cage's *Beyond: Two Souls* (2013) and the already mentioned *Heavy Rain*. *Detroit* surpasses its predecessors, shamelessly flaunting the strongest components of Quantic games with its outstandingly immersive graphics, facial animation, and acting. The downside of enforcing the film-like storytelling with constantly changing, dramatic camera angles is that the characters are often difficult to control in certain situations—especially so in the previous games. However, it has significantly improved compared to previous practice and *Detroit: Become Human* offers new features which make the gaming experience much more seamless.

Detroit channels even more Quantic (or more precisely David Cage) in its worldbuilding and storytelling. The setting and atmosphere of futuristic Detroit rely on the neo-noir of *Heavy Rain* alongside the tedious attention to the small details and, more importantly, references to Science Fiction classics. *Detroit* goes back to the multiple plot structure of *Heavy Rain* but it remains a strictly linear narrative as is the case in *Beyond: Two Souls*. The three playable characters are Connor (Bryan Dechart), Markus (Jesse Williams), and Kara (Valorie Curry). Connor is the latest android model, designed to assist the police to investigate violent crimes committed by deviant androids – androids that develop subjectivity by overriding their programming. Markus and Kara are earlier models, programmed for domestic and care work, who are becoming deviants.

While all the actors provide a phenomenal performance in their roles regardless of how well or poorly their respective character is written, Connor is the most enjoyable character as he has the most potential in the game. Kara does not seem to develop despite becoming a deviant. Similarly, Markus does not have a real character arc, and his motives are unclear. His life, after being caught up in a violent family dispute, falls into pieces - quite literally, as he wakes up in a junkyard, missing an eye and limbs. The hellish scene in which he scavenges the heaps of android body parts, some reaching out to him in agony, is one of the most touching moments of his story because it feels real and not staged. In the following chapter, the player can decide whether Markus follows a path of

peaceful demonstration or starting a civil war. Technically, it is the *Mass Effect 3* (2012) syndrome: the player gets to choose the 'colour' of the ending in Markus's story while he remains the same despite the trauma of being dismantled, his changing role, and the tremendous responsibility for potentially sacrificing his people.

The occasionally illogical plot, cliché character development, and clumsy dialogues are mistakes that can be overlooked in a game as massive and immersive as *Detroit*, as it has a lot to offer with its stunning visuals and amazing performances. The problem is that while the game satisfies all of its ambitions in those two departments it fails to convey the message it very clearly intends. This is the first time that David Cage gets involved deeper in philosophy, ethics, and politics. *Detroit: Become Human*, speculates whether androids dream of electric sheep, and seemingly, has a Mission, a Message: it seeks to draw attention to social anxieties and inequalities, and spark conversation on domestic abuse and institutional racism. David Cage would deserve a B for realising the problem and a D for execution as he clearly has not done his history homework.

Detroit with its wide range of references and allusions to classic Science Fiction novels and film – such as *Blade Runner* (1982), *The Matrix* (1999), *Total Recall* (1990), and *I, Robot* (2004) – creates the perfect origami unicorn of metatext which could have helped to unfold the philosophical problems and social issues that Cage's narrative is so desperate to incorporate. Issues that the game's problematic title itself suggests. "Become Human" remains an empty imperative. The game –through familiar and predictable scenes – sets empathy and creativity as the key aspects to human subjectivity. Yet, most of the human characters fail to show compassion, love, or imagination; they are depicted as selfish, sadistic, and merciless in following orders. Markus and his followers also make it clear that they do not intend to "become human," they just demand the same rights be granted for them. However, later in the game, it is revealed that the "deviant bug" is preprogrammed, depriving the characters' and the players of a real decision, and leaving the game without tension.

Moreover, though the game calls out socio-political narratives of patriarchy and white privilege, it also subtly reinforces those structures and perpetuates the status quo. It does a great job of showing both female and male characters as victims of domestic violence but it depicts gendered roles in a very stereotypical way. Kara and Markus are similar models destined for domestic and care work but their exposition at the beginning of the game is very different. While Kara has to clean up beer bottles and pizza boxes for her owner and the player can also enjoy some quick action dishwashing, Markus is not depicted doing similar chores, and his quick actions are playing the piano and painting. This results in subtly maintaining patriarchal labour division and defining the domestic sphere as feminine.

The game has also been criticised for its portrayal of race despite the otherwise positive reviews. *Detroit: Become Human* references slavery, segregation, and the civil rights movement from the very beginning of the game, especially so in Markus' story. His first mission is to pick up some paint for his owner. While the player gets to enjoy the amazing autumn scenery of the pristine futuristic cityscape, more sinister images start to rise: a bus stop for androids who obediently get on

the back of the bus; android stores with androids, objects to be bought, smiling in the windows like mannequins; a group of protesters who harass Markus for “taking their jobs.” Later, when Markus begins his own demonstrations, the player gets to choose their slogan, one of them, “we have a dream,” obviously references Martin Luther King Jr., which is not the only parallel between him and Markus that the game establishes. The comparison of the civil rights movement and the androids’ cause in the game is problematic for various reasons. First and foremost because race as such is not addressed in the game any other way. The diversity of androids suggests some sort of post-racial world where the androids’ appearance is only dictated by normative conventions of attractiveness. In addition, Markus himself appears as a person of colour yet his racial identity is not addressed at all throughout the game whilst the androids are constantly conflicted with armed white men in police or military uniforms representing authority, law, and normativity. Effectively raising the problem of racism in the current heated political climate surrounding the Black Lives Matter movement would have required a more tactful approach from the developers, and possibly consulting with activists and historians.

Quantic Dream’s games have always been, and will remain, divisive. While *Detroit: Become Human*, in my opinion, is not a contender for ‘game of the year,’ it certainly lives up to the pre-release hype, and it can easily bring gamers to the edge of their seat whilst playing. Despite its flaws, *Detroit* plays very well and offers a gateway into more elaborate discussions of what it means to be human. *Heavy Rain* seemed to be a successful novelty at the time, and *Detroit* still manages to keep the working elements and improve some of the least favourable ones. Unfortunately, the ambition and innovation missed the writing and directing aspects, leaving the internet to meme David Cage into the Nicholas Cage of the gaming world. It will be interesting to see what Quantic Dream does next. It would be refreshing to see a less emotionally and more critically engaging story.

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