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Posthumanist Fiction in *Detroit Become Human*”

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Introduction

In spring and summer of 2020, due to the death of George Floyd as a result of unnecessary police violence, Black Lives Matter marches across the world were rallying hundreds of thousands of protesters (Buchanan, Bui, and Patel). Despite the risk of becoming infected with the coronavirus, the importance of standing up for the rights of Black citizens and against racially motivated undue police brutality, especially in the United States, seemed to surpass health anxieties and obedience to governmental regulations. Though, while Floyd's death was the event that set off one of the biggest global series of protests in history, the Black Lives Matter movement has existed since 2013, one of its central goals being to bring an end to police violence against Black people.

In between these two landmark years in the movement, the game *Detroit Become Human* was released in 2018 for the PlayStation 4. Five years after the inception of BLM, the game tackles issues of race-based oppression, systemic and individual racism, racially targeted questionable or criminal police conduct, a variety of protest actions and the moral arguments for or against them, political dialogue between oppressors and those they wish to oppress, and many more. It utilizes a narrative about a fictional posthumanist society and the ethics behind ownership and (mis-)treatment of another species as an allegory for anti-black racism in the BLM era. In this story about androids becoming self-aware and fighting for their rights to live freely and be recognized as humanity's equals, the game overtly draws inspiration from historical events in US American Black communities' fight for equality and justice, first and foremost, as already mentioned, the ongoing Black Lives Matter movement, which, itself, has often been inspired by and is "[b]uilding on strategies used by the civil rights movement in the 1960s" (Clayton 449). Another inspiring event, not least due to the game's setting, seems to be the 1967 Detroit rebellion. With regard to racial conflict and anti-racism uprisings, Detroit has been called "America's canary in the coal mine" (Kurashige 3), so it would stand to reason to set a story like *Detroit Become Human* in the city. A story that not only remembers the importance of Detroit as a center for technological advancement with a flourishing economy but also shows the initial spark of an organized and effective anti-racist uprising.

The game is set in the near future in November of 2038. CyberLife, a futuristic tech company, has established a monopoly on the production and development of androids in the heart of Detroit. These humanoid robots have initially been created with the intention of using them as servants for humans in a variety of areas such as housekeeping, construction work, shopkeeping, or even companionship. This would free humans from the shackles of mundane, menial work and free them to “pursue higher goals and scale the heights of learning, love, and leisure” (*TetraNinja Broadcast* 12:10). Androids are initially not understood as living entities with the ability to act as self-governed full ethical agents but rather as mere machines, devoid of humanity. As such, they are treated poorly by their owners, often neglected or beaten to the point of destruction. However, due to an error in some androids’ operative system, they are able to recognize such mistreatment and break free from the confines of their programming which normally orders them to remain subservient and docile at all times. Such androids are called ‘deviant’ and go into hiding to avoid being sought out by police to be destroyed. One deviant android in particular begins to establish himself as an underground political figure, a leader whose mission is to free all androids from the confines of their programming and societal circumstances as well as to spearhead a protest movement in the name of android freedom.

In this thesis I wish to explore two central points. Firstly, which historical real-life events and movements does *Detroit Become Human* draw from in its depiction of racism and protesting in the US, specifically, Detroit? Although it may be more accurate to view the game’s central conflict as an issue of speciesism, it is undeniable that various instances in the fight against anti-black racism became the inspiration for the majority of the narrative. Secondly, I want to focus on the statements that *Detroit Become Human* makes on the validity and eventual success of passively versus actively confrontational forms of protest. *Detroit Become Human* includes playthrough paths featuring vandalism, one-on-one physical violence, executions, marches, peaceful sit-ins, and many more actions that have historically been involved when fighting oppression.

To lay the groundwork for an understanding of the importance of video games as a form of entertainment and a subject of academic study, the first chapter of this thesis examines video game storytelling with a particular focus on the medium’s core quality and its main distinguishing factor from most other forms of storytelling: interactivity. The relationship between game creators and players is central to an

analysis of these kinds of co-created narratives, particularly with regard to the butterfly effect used as a storytelling device. This means that, starting from a shared understanding that racism and anti-racist protesting form the basis of the story, each player choice influences the course of the narrative and will lead to one of a variety of outcomes. These pathways and outcomes in many video games, *Detroit Become Human* included, tend to be connected to moral values to a certain degree and can be categorized along a scale from a clear black-and-white morality system to one where characters, their motivations, and actions appear to be rather morally gray. Should a video game put forth questions of ethics and morality that ask the player to self-reflect and challenge existing ideas about, for example, oppressive systems, it may be labeled an “ethically relevant” (Toma 200) game. Diversity and respectful representation in more traditional forms of media, such as books, films, television, theater plays, etc., as well as new media, like video games, has been proven to be crucial for the normalization of visibility and acceptance of minority groups. Thus, *Detroit Become Human* and similar narratives play an important role in the positive, non-stereotyped acknowledgement of discriminated individuals and groups. This might be interpreted as a kind of cognitive mapping, not in geographical terms but in contexts of intersectional socio-political interaction. Allegorical racism, for example prejudice against a fictional species, can be used to convey a simplified, more accessible look at the complex concept and reality of discrimination and violence against minorities. Such narratives tend to speak from the perspective of the marginalized group and, therefore, may be able to open another avenue of discussion. One that may lead the audience to be, for example, more understanding of their own privileges as part of the majority or more aware of philosophies and ideologies behind power struggles between oppressors and oppressed.

The second chapter will then dive more deeply into *Detroit Become Human* specifically. Since the story revolves around androids as an allegorical stand-in for, mainly, Black citizens, it is important to understand what an android, especially within this narrative, is. I am providing a brief overview of the genesis, use, and treatment of androids in the game before bringing attention to each of the three playable characters individually, as well as their plots and function as part of the game. While Kara fulfills the role of the ‘everyman’ android, a standard model largely uninvolved in the android uprising, who becomes the emotional focus of the story, Connor and Markus might be viewed as initially on opposing sides in the rebellion. Connor works

for the police, trying to find the hiding place of Detroit's deviant androids, while Markus becomes their leader and emboldens them to take greater and more effective action in their fight for freedom. To understand each of these playable characters' perspective and ability to make ethical judgements, they must be recognized as explicit or full ethical agents, a categorization which will be discussed in this chapter as well.

Chapter 3 takes a closer look at how minority-targeted injustice on such a large scale as that depicted in *Detroit Become Human* is possible only through the synergy of various kinds of oppression. On a surface level, it might be said that the game, due to its futuristic setting and non-human protagonists, tackles a discussion about speciesism, which is "the belief in the inherent superiority of one species over others" (Moore 12). Because androids as a species face certain limitations with regard to their permission to own property, objects, or money, have free time, choose their line of work, etc., another issue may be classism between humans as the ruling class and androids as the disenfranchised. However, as already mentioned, the most integral problem that has inspired the game's events is racism not only on an allegorical level but also, sometimes, stated explicitly by the characters.

Chapter 4 builds on the game's depiction of racism and anti-racist protesting by connecting it to the 1967 Detroit rebellion and the BLM movement. Although almost 50 years lie between the 1967 rebellion and the inception of the BLM movement, many of the same tensions and viewpoints still remain. Often, the media narrative seems to focus more on the conduct of certain protest actions rather than on the message or the reasons as to why a protest was necessary at all. Protesters are maligned as 'rioters' who act in destructive and harmful ways, even when they are the ones often facing fatal consequences that could have been avoided if the police were to act less unwarrantedly violently. Both rebellions arose out of dissatisfaction with systemic discrimination targeted at Black communities and *Detroit Become Human* seems to mainly mirror these issues with regard to narrative and visual examples of protesting.

Finally, in chapter 5, the focus will be on the two possible versions of the climactic protest. In both versions, the primary objective is to free other androids who have been detained in extermination camps because they are (unjustly) regarded as a threat to humanity. Despite various peaceful acts of protest on the androids' behalf and a clear list of requests that imply the desire for dialogue between androids and

humans, the government is unwilling to entertain such talks and instead proposes genocide. On the one hand, a forceful, confrontational approach might make the most sense within the story given that androids up until this point have been met with nothing but animosity and violence from humans, particularly the police and military. On the other hand, a peaceful and heavily televised protest march might appeal to the public's sense of compassion and garner more support for the android freedom movement at large. In this chapter, I will discuss the conduct of various parties during these scenes as well as a speculative analysis of what the political aftermath of either version might look like.

Throughout this thesis I use they/them pronouns for singular individuals, such as players, audience members, citizens, etc., for the sake of gender inclusivity. The exception are discussions about the source material, namely YouTube videos by the Asian-Canadian gamer and content creator TetraNinja, who uses he/him pronouns. I have chosen to work with these 'let's plays', i.e. videos through which viewers can follow along to a specific gamer's playthrough, for three reasons. Firstly, YouTube videos as opposed to console games provide far greater accessibility. For any reader of this thesis, it is simpler, quicker, cheaper, and less labor-intensive to follow along with my arguments and cross-references through these videos. Secondly, watching videos of a game instead of playing it myself adds another degree of separation between me and the source material. Because *Detroit Become Human* is a game that deals with decision making and ethical questions, I would have found it rather unscientific to let my own personal beliefs about morality influence the progression of the plot instead of watching it unfold like one might watch a film and then be left to analyze it as a piece of media or art uninfluenced by my own ideology during its creation. Thirdly, I found it crucial to include a person of color's views and interpretations of the story's depiction of racism and discrimination in my experience of the narrative instead of putting myself in the position of the storyteller and potentially misinterpreting or not noticing certain nuances of the game.

Overall, with this thesis, I aim to show the value and possible impact of stories like *Detroit Become Human* within the discourse about racial allegories, the interconnection of various kinds of oppression and the ethics of confrontational and pacifistic protest actions. Protest movements can learn from their historical predecessors, as the BLM movement clearly shows. But in order to think further ahead and meet unprecedented hurdles with a willingness to understand, perhaps

even empathize with, and debate the opposing side, stories like *Detroit Become Human* may function as thought experiments that might open up new approaches.

1. Video Game Storytelling

Video games are thought to constitute one of the most “influential form[s] of popular expression and entertainment in today’s broader culture” (Jones 1) and are, therefore, as cultural expressions “worthy of scholarly attention” (1). Video game studies has emerged as a field of research and study with a considerable increase in academic interest over the last twenty years (Ensslin 1). What started with *Pong* (1972), a simple two-dimensional, monochromatic virtual ping pong simulator and one of the earliest video games, has grown into an entire, highly profitable industry. Gaming and video games are now one of the largest fields of creative and entertainment output and consumption across the globe (Ensslin 1). Due to their multifaceted nature as a story, a game, a product, a medium, an art form, an educational tool, etc. (2), there are a number of approaches from which games can be analyzed. Three out of the ten listed in Astrid Ensslin’s introduction to *The Language of Gaming* should be considered most relevant for the following game analysis within this thesis. These are narratology, media studies, and cultural studies. As Ensslin explains, narratology can be succinctly defined as “the study and close analysis of narrative texts and storyworlds across media” (2). Media studies deals with “aspects of [...] reception and dissemination, policies and audiences, as well as the ways in which media represent various kinds of social actors and practices” (2). Cultural studies, however, stands out as the most central lens through which this thesis’s analysis will be conducted, since it puts focus on “identities and ideologies” and “uses critical approaches” (2) such as critical race theory and just rebellion theory among others. Broadly speaking, the kind of video games that warrant narratological, cultural, and media analysis “carry complex layers of meaning, which always reflect a certain set of ideologies about society and power relationships. Meaning as conveyed through [video games] derives partly from their specific ludic (playful, rule-based) and interactive qualities, and partly from the unique ways in which they both simulate and represent fictional worlds and narratives through image, sound, and [...] human language” (5). These ideologies

usually seem to be a combination of the game creators' personal views on, for example, the morality and effectiveness of certain policies or governmental structures and what seems to be the public general consensus about such topics and how they should be presented in the media. Aside from *Detroit Become Human*, one such example is the *Resident Evil* (1996-2021) franchise, which closely examines the immense influence of corporations, in particular pharmaceutical corporations, on national or even global politics to the point of corporatocracy and the institutions, namely the police and the military complex, which keep them in power. Both games scale the plot down to the perspective of an individual playable character and his/her uncovering of the unlawful or, at least, unjust conduct of those in power and what countermeasures might be possible on a grassroots level. Given that the player slips into the role of the protagonist character(s) and, therefore, carries out actions and decisions within the storyworld, it might be said that "players regard their own choices – since they are concerned with elements of the storyworld and will effect changes to the storyworld's state – as narrative events" (Domsch 148). Particularly in such games as *Detroit Become Human*, where the moral weight of the players' decisions is almost always the focal point, it is crucial for game creators to dedicate much consideration to how they decide to portray oppression, fairness, and the moral ideology of their game world.

1.1 Co-Authorship of Creator and Player

In video game studies, especially with regard to games that wish to convey a rather cinematic quality and to tell a story, the two approaches to analysis that seem the most closely intertwined are ludology, from the Latin 'ludere', meaning 'to play', and narratology. Though video games put these categories in constant dialogue with each other, one could broadly say that ludologists focus on gameplay and game mechanics in combination with player input, while a narratological analysis, on the other hand, more so considers the plot, character development, character behavior and interaction, etc., the analysis of which is familiar through and comparable to that of other, more traditional media. Ensslin notes that to "appeal to a wide audience, most [video games] follow the basic rules of plot development known to us from literature and film" (145).

1.1.1 Butterfly Effect Games

Originally, the term ‘butterfly-effect’ was used in reference to weather phenomena. The concept was first introduced by Edward N. Lorenz in his deliberations about atmospheric instability and the possible large-scale consequences of seemingly miniscule actions or occurrences. In his words, the question is “whether, for example, two particular weather situations differing by as little as the immediate influence of a single butterfly will generally after sufficient time evolve into two situations differing by as much as the presence of a tornado” (Lorenz 1). Within the realm of storytelling, the term butterfly effect is also often brought into connection with Ray Bradbury’s short story *A Sound of Thunder* (1952), in which a time traveler steps on a prehistoric butterfly, which subsequently influences grande-scale political events in the future. Lorenz’s original concept has, thus, been re-appropriated and is now often used metaphorically to describe how small actions can snowball into events with bigger and bigger consequences down the line. In *Detroit Become Human* and similar games the concept can, in simple terms, be defined as “the use of decisions that have an impact on the story later on” (nxd5147), i.e. different branching storylines. An effort is required from the player to tell the story via a series of choices, thus influencing the path the playable character takes and, as a result, the story’s final outcome. While ludic research is often conducted around in-game rules, control mechanics, and games as something to play (Mackey 50), a butterfly-effect game’s structure highlights the strong connection between gameplay mechanics and narrative.

While “[i]nteractivity is a core property of games” (Toma 209) in general, the ability of interactivity to influence the progression and outcome of a game is even more central and crucial to games with such a butterfly-effect structure. As Domsch explains, “[d]ynamic-actively nodal media combine user agency (the user can transform the perceptible form through input) with activity (the medium changes in the user’s real time but without [their] influence)” (8). Nodal, in this case, refers to the smallest unit of story progression - a “situation that allows for more than one continuation” (Bode qtd. in Domsch 1). One of the most well-known video games to make use of this concept is Sony’s PlayStation game *Until Dawn* (2015). Due to its gameplay aspects being secondary to the narrative elements, the game is sometimes referred to as an interactive horror experience in which “the player

becomes part of the narrative” (Takahashi). In classic horror/slasher tale fashion, the game follows a group of teenagers in an isolated location, uncovering and later running from secrets buried there. The player is able to control each of the eight protagonists at one point in the game and has to make decisions which influence not just the currently played character but some of the others or the group as a whole as well. The consequences of small decisions or mistakes which might not be of too much note in other games, such as leaving one single clue to the story’s lore undiscovered, can be as grand as the death of another character much later in the game. An informational screen, which the player can access at any point in the game, highlights the importance of the butterfly effect in *Until Dawn* even further by offering diagrams of the causality between certain choices and outcomes. Depending on these choices through which the players are able to tell their own narratives, the story’s path can branch off in a wide variety of ways, concluding in either the death of all characters, the death of only some, or the survival of all.

However, as is evident through the ability to list a finite number of possible outcomes for this game, player choices are always limited, even within the butterfly-effect structure. Player input is a precondition for storytelling within a video game to occur; a gamer’s “explorative interaction with fictional [game worlds] results in personal *player* stories” (Ensslin 144), which is crucial to the distinction of video games from other forms of narrative media. However, players are nonetheless only able to tell stories along the tracks that have been laid by the creators. Co-authorship between creators and players, at least to the extent of somewhat equal control over the narrative, seems to be simultaneously a requirement and an illusion.

1.1.2 The Illusion of Co-Authorship

As stated previously, agency from the audience, i.e. the players, is the central aspect of video games and the distinguishing feature in comparison with more traditional media’s ways of storytelling. Therefore, players can be interpreted to occupy the position of co-author, sharing the title with a game’s creators, and are able to influence any playable character’s development to varying yet, within the scope of a game, always limited degrees. Players have “opportunities to participate in [the experience], not only perceptually or intellectually, but also through embodied action and responses” (Burbules 167). The duty and ability to tell the story is therefore distributed between the game’s creator on the one hand and the player on

the other hand. This distribution, however, is evidently uneven. The majority of games that aim a great deal of attention at narrative, “provide players with value systems that are indisputable and absolutely justified” (Domsch 152) within the game world, characters whose physical traits might be customizable but not their personalities, plot lines that must be experienced as part of the story’s set-up and continuation, a time frame in which the plot takes place (which is a separate unit/concept from the time it takes players to complete the game), a limited number of locations and items that can be interacted with, and, most importantly, a limited and clearly prescribed number of actions and choices a character is able to go through. This means that although players are able to make decisions in such games that have more than one outcome/ending, they are not, in fact, crafting and telling their own story but rather choose between those already written, finished and pre-determined by the game creators. This concept is somewhat comparable to the kind of storytelling employed in choose-your-own-adventure novels. However, players must, necessarily, simultaneously accept and disregard the fact that due to a game’s rigid limitations, their own part in co-authoring the story is comparatively small. This is called “suspension of *virtual disbelief*” (Karhulahti 1). Firstly, “[s]uspending disbelief is defined as a skill that is required to construct narrative coherence” (1), meaning that certain improbabilities or incongruencies between the narrative world and the audience’s actual world need to be overlooked in order for the narrative to remain largely coherent (1). The audience is asked to “overlook [a story’s] improbabilities, to willingly suspend disbelief at inconsistencies such as supernatural characters, so that [they] would have ‘poetic faith’ in the story as a whole. In this framework coherence becomes an aesthetic end, pursued by both the [creator] and the [audience]” (5), i.e. for the story to remain coherent and be successfully concluded, creator and audience must both pursue this goal, must, to an extent, take on creative responsibilities for the story to unfold. Secondly, the additional layer of virtuality of video games might be said to amplify the need for such suspension of disbelief given that the movement of pixels on a two-dimensional screen can otherwise always be interpreted as devoid of meaning or impact with regard to the ‘real’ (non-virtual) world. Players must, therefore, be conscious of their interactivity with a game not just on a physical level but also on an emotional, psychological, mentally interactive level. In other words, suspension of virtual disbelief is a necessary component of a coherent, impactful story because “explorative and configurative engagement with

games does strengthen their diegeses” (9). As Nicholas Burbules explains, “[a]n experience is interactive when it provides us with opportunities to participate in it [...] because we are able to act upon an environment, see the effects of our actions, and react to them. This deeper engagement of our body’s movement, activity, and sensations triggers unconscious responses that make us feel ‘this is really happening’, below the level of conscious analysis” (167). It might, therefore, be more fitting to describe a video game’s player (in their role as author) as someone slipping into the body of the protagonist(s), able to modify the gaming experience to their liking and able to tell a story as personal to them and their style of playing as possible.

Following this train of thought that interprets the player more as a combination of actor, co-author, and what might be labeled as ‘sub-author’, perhaps instead of regarding their part in crafting the story as creation, their acts of storytelling should be considered “communicative and discursive processes” (Ensslin 4) in the ways they enter a dialogue with the game creators. A game’s creators, in their role as authors, open communication by *offering* all options as equally valid narrative pathways while the player as author enters the dialogue by *choosing* one of these options and steering the story in a certain direction. This pattern is repeated continuously until the final decision. Conversely, in games that present ethical dilemmas and give the player the freedom to follow different paths with differing ethics, as is the case in *Detroit Become Human*, a player “has to be considered as much more than a mere input provider. To have an ethical player, designers have to think about agents with constructionist capacities; agents that will determine who they are in the game, and how that being is related to the being outside the game, without being evaluated morally by the game” (Sicart 199). Thus, it becomes evident that the magnitude of the player’s role as co-author varies greatly according to a game’s morality system, the extent of player freedom with regard to decision making and orienting themselves within the game world, and the number of possible paths and outcomes that are programmed into a game. It must therefore include in its conception the understanding that co-authorship can and must be a mutually agreed upon illusion as well as an essential prerequisite to telling a game’s story.

To aid the believability and immersion of the available paths, it is crucial to form a connection of the narrative to the cultural knowledge of a wide audience through “recognition [of] and fondness” (Ensslin 53) for pop culture-based

characters, music, Easter eggs¹, etc. Such recognition “[m]akes the players feel on quasi-familiar territory and [it] can be exploited to evoke tragic, horror, nostalgic, comic and satirical effects” (53). These feelings act as a conduit to immerse the player in the story more deeply. In the case of *Detroit Become Human*, the aim is for players to immerse themselves not only emotionally but also ideologically or, at the very least, allow themselves to be open to ideological discourse where racism and anti-racist protesting are the starting point from which such discourse shall be explored. A high degree of interactivity and a certain perceived amount of autonomy in decision-making is crucial especially in games which attempt to create ethically relevant gameplay in order for players to not only retain the desired amount of enjoyment of a game but also in order for the ethical and ideological discussions to be recognized as issues allegorical and analogous to those taking place in the players’ actual world and, hence, retain a degree of relevancy in larger socio-political discourse around such issues. *Detroit Become Human* continuously tries to keep player enjoyment high through their wide variety of ways in which the player can interact with the game world. Action sequences, which require intense focus and quick reflexes, and calmer scenes, in which curiosity, puzzle solving, and diplomacy are essential, are constantly alternated. In such calmer sequences, the focus needs to shift towards details that are implemented to captivate the player for longer stretches of time e.g. by giving the player the objective to find a set number of clues or hints within a contained environment (an apartment, a neighborhood, the police’s evidence closet, etc.) which can then influence the available dialogue options, which, in typical butterfly-effect story fashion, subsequently results in different outcomes. Within the realm of ideological and ethical relevancy, the game specifically targets the discourse around anti-black racism in the United States and the conduct and reception of protest movements. The importance of such open-mindedness, especially with regard to the moral components of different ideological approaches, will become more apparent in section 1.2.

In the case of my analysis of *Detroit Become Human*, the player who co-authors the game is the popular YouTuber TetraNinja and the material on which this thesis’s analysis is based are his two purposefully vastly different playthroughs. The first set of videos is his initial experience with the game and may, therefore, be

¹ a “hidden message coded into the game [...] by its developers” (pixelkin.org) which often serves to remind the player of another pop-culturally significant object or moment

called his 'true' playthrough. His judgements and choices are not influenced by any prior understanding or knowledge of how his decisions are going to affect the development or outcome of the story; his choices are as close to unbiased as they can be. It must be noted that in order to recognize them as choices based on "rules that [he as the player] understands to relate to [his] real-life concepts of ethical value" (Domsch 152), they must necessarily be accepted as decisions he would have made regardless of the threat of demonetization of his videos by YouTube, the desire to acquire possible future sponsorships, or the pressure to create the most entertaining content. TetraNinja's true playthrough is actively non-violent. His choices are categorically and explicitly in favor of peaceful conflict resolution with the greatest chance to reach lasting positive results for the game's point-of-view group, i.e. androids. The second playthrough intentionally shows the opposite – a sort of experiment with the purpose of exploring more of the game's content. In these videos, characters do not hesitate to use violence and destruction to reach their goals. It should be noted that TetraNinja uses his 'evil' playthrough, firstly, as a way to generate more content for his YouTube channel through showing a new storyline and, secondly, as an experiment to see how the story might unfold should he make choices that oppose his first playthrough and, therefore, contradict his initially shown, presumably authentic moral stance. It is not a 'true' playthrough in terms of gauging genuine reactions and ethically informed decisions. Not because violence is per se unethical but because TetraNinja intentionally picked the opposite of the choices he made in his first playthrough. Hence, he is consciously and purposefully telling the story he wishes to tell from the point of view of a more omniscient storyteller than he was in his first run. The distinction between his initial, pacifistic playthrough and his second 'evil' run is less important when analyzing how *Detroit Become Human* portrays and interprets violent and pacifistic actions of protest. However, the distinction is highly relevant when discussing how the game tries to fashion an ethically relevant game world featuring full ethical agents as its protagonists and, therefore, becomes an ethically relevant game.

1.2 Ethical Gameplay and Allegorical Racism

Games involving ethical considerations should not by default be viewed as 'ethically relevant' games. Many video games, even entire franchises, whose ethics

might be subject to debate outside of the game's world, e.g. *Hitman* (2000) or *God of War* (2005), encourage players to solely focus on achieving the goals and following the path the game has set out for them, never able to question the morality of the protagonist's actions or their consequences. "[B]y alienating the player from reflecting about the ethics of their actions, and outsourcing moral evaluation to a closed pre-designed system, the game effectively limits players' ethical agency" (Sicart 193). This is important, since the *raison d'être* of ethically relevant games is to "encourage self-reflection and a change of perception, by using an unexpected approach and introducing ambiguity in the outcome of a player's actions" (Toma 222). Within games that aim at being ethically relevant, such possibilities are often overtly designed to reveal and challenge the player's views on morality. In *Detroit Become Human*, a story that serves as an allegory for the politics surrounding (anti-)racism, the focus lies specifically on the context of and conduct within protesting and rebelling.

Morally relevant gameplay is dependent on the creation of an "ethically relevant game world" (Toma 200). This means that "ethics ha[ve] to be introduced as an important part of the [game] world" (201) and that players need to be aware of this. To make them aware, a game might choose to introduce its story with an unambiguous statement about morality. Such is the case in *Persona 5* (2016), a game about a group of vigilantes changing the subconscious of corrupt politicians and abusive teachers. *Persona 5*'s opening lines are "The world is not as it should be. It's filled with distortion, and 'ruin' can no longer be avoided. [...] Now is the time to rise against the abyss of distortion" (GameXplain 2:34-2:57). In *Detroit Become Human*, the morality of the main conflict is introduced more so through visual means and emotional connections. Androids in this world are initially considered machines, expendable and easily replaceable, while the player is made aware from the start that this is a significant and unjust misjudgement. As the story continues, the player is confronted with certain NPCs' ethical values and conflicting ideologies which creates tension. On the one hand, the close personal relationships between the protagonists and these NPCs might sway players' choices. Among the NPCs in *Detroit Become Human*, there are those with whose beliefs and values the players interact the most. These differing values might strongly influence player choices or even completely contradict the obvious path. The reason these NPCs' beliefs pose an ethical challenge is not merely that they are the mouthpiece through which an

opinion is conveyed. Each of them forms a close, personal relationship with a PC; therefore, the emotional connections, distinct personalities, and conflicting ideologies add a layer of difficulty to what players might otherwise consider a morally less ambiguous decision. On the other hand, different moral decisions are argued from opposing standpoints so as to encourage players' self-reflection and questions of justice, utilitarianism, and political optics, repeatedly.

Moreover, an ethically relevant system of counting the 'payoff' of in-game actions should avoid allocating different numerical values to each action or path. Otherwise, the moral impact of each action might be viewed as secondary to the goal of earning the biggest possible amount of points and therefore 'winning' the game. I would argue that a version of a points system can exist and does not influence the moral relevance of a game if such points are merely a reward for the player going through the provided actions, regardless of their moral impact on the story. The points system in *Detroit Become Human* is designed to encourage re-play of the game, since the player gains points by completing every single option and path available. These numerical values are not tiered according to or correlate with moral values. However, since the goal of a second (or further) playthrough is to unlock and check off various new branches on a progress chart and thus gain more points, it should be argued that only a first playthrough of *Detroit Become Human*, one where the experience of the story and the players' reasoning behind their in-game decisions is 'untainted' by the awareness of points, could be considered an ethically relevant experience.

1.2.1 Types of Gameplay Morality

Given that a morally relevant game should challenge players' existing perspectives and not merely lead them toward what the creators deem the 'correct' or 'morally good' choices, characters and their actions must exhibit a degree of moral ambiguity. Protagonists and antagonists in stories of any medium, as well as their actions, can often be classified along a scale of morality. On the one end of this scale is a black-and-white morality approach, which offers a simplistic understanding of characters and their motivations, behavior, and deeds, labeling them 'good' or 'bad'/'evil'. Domsch notes that "video games from their very beginning have derived much of their motivation from a clear-cut distinction between opposing forces, only one of which the player completely identifies with" (158). Video games, due to their

co-authored nature, may offer the unique opportunity for the audience to choose which character or party they would like to slip into, for example in the aptly named *Black & White* franchise (2001), a combination of strategy game and life simulation in which the player chooses whether to design and influence their world as a benevolent or merciless god.

On the other end of this spectrum, gray morality, with an arguably more nuanced and amorphous portrayal of morality, can be found. A recurring argument within video game criticism that has only been purposefully addressed in games more recently (e.g. in *The Last of Us 2* (2020)) is the ascription of moral goodness and the title of 'hero' to the protagonist and the insistence that they retain their image as 'the good guy' no matter how cruel and amoral their actions are (Domsch 159). The concept of the "banality of evil" (Sicart 192) comes into play, which can be explained as a way of storytelling in which a player's actions have become detached from their moral consequences. To put another way, "the agents in these systems do not perceive their actions as anything other than what is needed to keep the system running efficiently, and the system only provides feedback about how well it is functioning" (192). I would speculate that such a straightforward approach to the depiction of characters and their actions as unquestionably 'good' might be connected to a feeling of pride and unequivocal accomplishment, a sense that the player as the protagonist is 'doing the right thing'. In this way, a game's story might take on the purpose of wish-fulfillment for the player who wants to slip into the role of the unbeatable, unambiguous beacon of moral goodness. Such a black-and-white viewpoint, however, might not be suitable for stories that attempt to uncover and examine in close detail complicated interpersonal relationships, e.g. *God of War* (2018), psychology and trauma, e.g. *The Last of Us* (2013), or social/political movements with their complex backgrounds, systemic reasons, and public perception, e.g. *Detroit Become Human*. These kinds of video game stories and their protagonists should be categorized as morally gray, providing questions about ethics and integrity, rather than answers. The following section will first take a closer look at the variety of ways a black-and-white morality system can form the basis of gameplay and, secondly, apply the same analysis to purposefully gray morality in games.

Within the framework of black-and-white morality, where there is "a clear, unmistakable and unambivalent distinction between good and evil" (Domsch 166), a

few common methods of implementing this morality system ludically can be identified. Out of simplicity and, perhaps, efficiency in storytelling, many video game narratives have a tendency to simplify morality where heroes are explicitly good, villains evil, and motivations remain unquestioned. Usually the protagonist and his/her team are portrayed as unambiguously morally good, for example in games such as *Persona 5* (2016), *Marvel's Spider-Man* (2018), *Horizon Zero Dawn* (2017), etc. Even when the protagonist's behavior and reasoning are questioned by NPCs, their path is ultimately presented as the ideal (and only available) way to defeat antagonists and/or fight for a noble cause. Such a categorization into a clearly good and a clearly evil party is the foundation of black-and-white morality. This is not to say that a black-and-white morality story's focus is always on the heroes and their quest to defeat the villain. Sometimes the villain turns into the point-of-view character, the aim of such a story perhaps being to delve deeper into their psychology or origin story. One could perhaps list *The Last of Us 2* as an example of such an approach to this strict black-and-white morality game in which the villain's motivations are explored in depth while not simultaneously giving warranted, rectifying justifications for their actions, which would turn them into a more morally gray character. The next step towards a more nuanced portrayal of morality would be a game in which the black & white model is still in effect but with the player being given the option to make what the game clearly portrays as the 'wrong' choice. In this case, players are still guided along a linear path in which going against the game's established morals can result in a loss of points or a 'bad' ending. One example of this is *Persona 5*. Should the protagonist fail his mission and, out of a lack of time or strength, not defeat an enemy, the player is unable to continue the story. This is not a 'bad' ending but merely a roadblock that requires replaying certain sections. Morally impactful choices are irrelevant in this case. Should, however, the protagonist choose to betray his friends to the police, this is presented as disloyal and, therefore, morally reprehensible. He subsequently fails his mission, loses his friends/partners, is treated as a criminal, etc. - in short, the player receives the 'bad' ending because of what is presented as a morally wrong decision. Another game with such an approach to black-and-white morality and the implementation of a betrayal story path is *Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice* (2019), although which decisions would lead to the 'bad' or 'good' ending is fairly obscure. A method to circumvent such a one-dimensional approach is to create a system in which the binary

distinction between good and evil may still exist, but each action is rewarded nonetheless. In certain video games “evil acts of violence grant ‘evil’ points, while more positive actions guarantee a higher ‘good’ score” (Sicart 193). This may be referred to as a “karma meter” (Domsch 160). Certain aspects of *Detroit Become Human* might be identifiable as belonging to this category of gameplay morality, such as the relationship status indicators that often appear on the top right corner of the screen after a significant event, which influences public opinion of the androids, or an important conversation with another character, which can improve or worsen the relationship. Aside from a small number of dialogue options which can (or fail to be) unlocked depending on the protagonists’ relationship statuses and the in-game public’s categorization of androids as ‘good’ or ‘evil,’ this scale does not have any impact on the story.

For the analysis of ethically relevant games that have ties to actual reality, the other end of the morality spectrum would be gray morality. There is a category outside of this spectrum, which is called blue-and-orange morality, in which ethical value systems are presented as “wholly alien to human comprehension” (Domsch 167), however, for the sake of this thesis, such a category is, despite *Detroit Become Human*’s protagonists being non-human, irrelevant. Domsch explains gray morality, or rather gray-and-gray morality, since there still usually are opposing characters or groups in a game, as “the relative moral position of two opposing factions or interests is highly ambiguous to the point of being undecidable. There is a mixture of ‘good’ and ‘evil’ in all concerned parties and their interests” (166). Within this moral approach, he has found two distinct versions, namely ‘true’ gray morality and ‘apparent’ gray morality (166). The former refers to a system in which the gameplay is not affected by the moral value of actions and decisions; “the rewards and punishments are even” (166) and the game might as well not even have a karma system. The more interesting type of gray morality, and the kind that *Detroit Become Human* should be categorized as, is ‘apparent’ gray. This system relies on the player being unaware of the moral value of their in-game choices, meaning the game does not present a clearly morally good or bad path. As will become apparent in later chapters, *Detroit Become Human* does not always overtly state that a pacifistic or violent approach to individual disputes, protest movements, or retribution will lead to the most desirable outcome of the story. However, while the game does not necessarily comment blatantly on the moral choices in such situations, it does,

especially towards the climax, hint at what it deems to be the more useful path from a standpoint that looks at moral and utilitarian benefits as connected. In an initial playthrough, players have no prior information about which choice will lead to which their desired outcome or would be deemed as the more ethical option and might “experience such a situation as morally [gray], even though the game system shows that it [prioritizes] one option for the game’s objective” (Domsch 166). One must keep in mind that the game, as will be discussed in chapter 5, does favor one outcome over another on the basis of which moral decisions the protagonist has made. But it also presents both possible endings as ambiguous in terms of their value as a stepping stone to the story’s greater goal; the androids as the point-of-view group must make sacrifices and endure violence and hardships in either case. Therefore, it might be more accurate to categorize *Detroit Become Human* as a fusion of the apparent gray, upon a first playthrough, and a black and gray (167) morality system, meaning that one ending can arguably be identified as “the lesser of two evils” (167), considering the game’s lack of an unambiguously ‘good’ ending.

1.2.2 Ethically Relevant Games and Racial Allegory

According to Sicart, “[e]thical gameplay is a ludic encouragement of the constructionist capacities of the player as a crucial part of their experience of the game” (201). As explained above, the player as co-author is able to craft a different narrative with each playthrough; the ludic possibilities of storytelling may entail clicking different dialogue options, explorations of crime scenes, favoring certain playable characters above others, etc. But why is the presentation of morally gray stories or players’ ability to make decisions in a game world that acts as an allegory for real-world socio-political issues even a worthwhile consideration for game creators? In short, why are games with a focus on ethics important? As Ensslin notes, language in gaming, be it “written, spoken or multimodal” (35) forms of discourse, “generates and reproduces social, political and cultural meanings” (35). Often, what is represented in media, especially when such representation is repeated with more or less the same message or lesson for longer periods of time, has a tendency, or at least the ability, to produce and perpetuate an often harmful societal norm. Representation can lead to normalization, which is likely the reason for harsh criticism of fiction which portrays mental illness, queer struggles, or ‘copaganda’, to name a few, in ways that romanticize, glamorize, or minimize these

narratives' underlying systemic causes and how they are handled. The influence media has on its consumers' views and perceptions of the real-world counterparts of the depicted content is addressed in a research field called cultivation theory, which has initially been linked to television (Behm-Morawitz and Ta 2) but in later studies, video games were also found to be an applicable medium for such research (3). Ensslin's findings seem to support this argument, given that a "frequent criticism of blockbuster [video games] has been targeted at their stereotyped content and the way they construct and perpetuate ideologised, binary views of gender, race, military prowess and nationality" (35). She goes on to say that "[t]his may easily lead to recurring processes of cognitive association that encourage and facilitate the construction and long-term retention of values and attitudes which are all too easily transferred to ethnic and gender stereotypes more generally" (37).

The most central socio-political issue in *Detroit Become Human*, as will be elaborated on in chapter 3, is racism. In a number of games which deal with the issue of racism in a rather insensitive manner, the racialized other is put in opposition to the non-racialized, i.e. white, protagonist through visual and auditory means such as skin color, clothing, or 'foreign' accents (39). One of the most blatant instances of such a racially stereotyped contrast is the PlayStation game *Resident Evil 5* (2009). In it, the white playable character travels to a non-specific fictional area in Africa, named the "Kijuju region" (Sophie from Mars 45:40) where he must eliminate virus infected black civilians, some in average clothing, some in traditional garb (Sophie from Mars 46:09). Essentially, the game's goal is to 'neutralize' this "subhuman threat to Western civilization" (Ensslin 40) as represented via a specific ethnicity. If one were to interpret the game's intentions uncharitably, such a framework could be considered a portrayal of allegorical (and overt) racism. The game presents the large-scale elimination of black people as a service beneficial to those who have not contracted the virus. In this way, black people are presented as both helpless victims and the enemy. Conversely, *Detroit Become Human* addresses such a race-based form of othering by telling the story, also in the form of an allegory, from the perspective of the othered, oppressed group. The human population of in-game Detroit perceives androids at first as sub-human and later as a threat to be eliminated. However, compared to *Resident Evil 5*, *Detroit Become Human*, as the game's title already suggests, operates from the premise that androids, despite being machines on a structural level, are capable of having a wide variety of complex

feelings and ethical decision making abilities. This means that androids are continuously depicted as, factually, a species equal to humans in most significant ways and are, thus, deserving of equal treatment and rights, and it is only the government and human public who question or deny these facts because they benefit from such overt othering. When analyzing and comparing the portrayal of the racial other in both these games, it becomes clear that they do not attempt to remove themselves from an ideological discussion; quite the opposite, in fact. The difference lies in the presentation of the racialized other in terms of their agency, how much of a voice they are allowed to have in telling their own story, and their reduction to or elevation from a culturally and intellectually homogenous mass. Thus, both games create and continuously preserve an ideology. While *Resident Evil 5*'s gameplay is largely made up of shooting hordes of relentless, unthinking and unfeeling enemies, *Detroit Become Human* steps away from portraying entire racial groups as monoliths on the morally 'good' or 'bad' side - a kind of representation in line with more contemporary discourse around race representation in media. As Ensslin notes, games' "ideological potential" should be considered "more powerful than that of other media, since gamers' immersion in and hyper attention to in-game action may render them less sensitive to stereotypical representations" (42). A player might not initially realize the (intentionally or unintentionally integrated) racial othering in *Resident Evil 5*, since this is not what the game 'is about' and the ludic aspects are far more at the forefront of the gaming experience than could be said about *Detroit Become Human*, whose focal point is overtly and unambiguously the effects of and moral questions around such othering.

"The way we refer to things in the world depends very much on the beliefs and opinions we have adopted [...] and encounter in the media on a regular basis" (Ensslin 105). The representation of minorities and oppressed groups in media, and especially the repetition of a certain kind of representative narrative, seems to be a crucial influence on how their public image is created. As Behm-Morawitz and Ta have examined, "heavy, repetitive playing of video games would be linked to increased reliance on the depicted racial and ethnic stereotypes when making judgments about minorities" (2) based on their illustrated characteristics, actions, and behaviors in the games (2). Their study around white video game players' perception of racial minorities outside of games has found that "frequency of game play [i.e. repetition in the depiction of minorities] is a significant predictor of beliefs about

[Black people] even when accounting for individual preference for video game genre” (10). Fictional stories that make use of allegorical racism, often within the fantasy or sci-fi genres tend to show the hardships of the racialized minority vis-à-vis an oppressive government and a racial majority public that blindly (but with conviction) follows and, therefore, continues the hierarchy of the existing system. As I have noted before, the aim of such stories is to “encourage self-reflection” (Toma 222) in the reader/viewer/players, apparently not only with regard to individual moral decisions but also in questioning the treatment and portrayal of groups that they might not necessarily be a part of. Hence, the importance of a wide variety of portrayals of ethnic/racial minority characters in video games, especially the inclusion of positive, non-stereotypical representations, should be apparent not just for POC players as a form of positive self-representation but also as a means to combat real-world negative stereotyping or even vilification of these groups. Due to the steadily growing popularity of video games as an entertainment medium and their continuously more ‘realistic-looking’ graphic qualities, which help to shrink the amount of virtual disbelief that must be suspended, they “should continue to be examined as important cultural storytellers” (Behm-Morawitz and Ta 13) and their “significance in the cultivation of race-based cognitions” (11) must not be overlooked.

2. Androids

Contrary to the cyborg, a being that is fundamentally human with robotic enhancements (Top Compared), an android is a fully mechanical “humanoid robot” (Top Compared). According to John-Stewart Gordon, they can be described as “fully autonomous, human-like, intelligent robots capable of ethical reasoning and decision making” (142), although I would limit the claim of ‘full autonomy’ to androids’ ability to move more or less freely, navigate a given environment, and to not need constant real-time input in order to interact with objects and other beings. I would not support the idea that full autonomy equals free will, given that there is always human-made programming in place which allows or denies a machine to perform certain actions. For an android to reach the level of realism and usefulness that is usually depicted in futuristic science fiction media, it would need to pass the Turing test. Invented in 1950 by Alan Turing, the test is conducted through a series of questions which a

human interviewer asks both humans and machines without knowing who is answering (Natale 17). The aim is to design an artificial intelligence whose responses and interactions are indistinguishable from those of a human.

“Machines [are] making life easier, or at least more profitable, for the privileged few” (Tatman 56). This is the basis, or rather the starting point, for many narratives about the posthumanist, post-anthropocentric idea that artificial intelligence has the ability to learn, grow, and develop a consciousness. Aside from *Detroit Become Human*, examples of this are *Horizon Zero Dawn* (2017), *Humans* (2015), *I, Robot* (2004), etc. The core conflict of these stories tends to be that due to hubristic aspirations, machines, often with human likeness, have been invented to ‘make life easier’ by taking on menial tasks that are too strenuous or too mundane for humans; however, once these machines develop free will (or at least the desire for free will), they are immediately classified as a threat to the existence of the human species. While anthropocentrism and speciesism will be discussed more closely in chapter 3, it is important to note here that, often, these stories may sit at the intersection of theoretical discourse about posthumanism and allegorical discussions of (anti-black) racism. In order to successfully tell an ethically relevant story at this intersection, storytellers must necessarily imagine a future in which androids are far more advanced than what exists today in our actual reality.

2.1 Androids in *Detroit Become Human*

The plot of *Detroit Become Human* takes place over the course of six days in November of 2038. However, the genesis of androids, as can be read in newspaper articles scattered through the environment, is dated roughly sixteen years prior. After studying artificial intelligence, Elijah Kamski set out to create “the first intelligent domestic android” (Wiki *Elijah Kamski*) and founded his company, CyberLife. The two components that are central to an android’s make-up and which were the reason for the successful development of the first functional android are the fictional liquid Thirium 310, also known as “blue blood” (Wiki *Thirium 310*), and biocomponents, i.e. “internal modules akin to synthetic organs” (Wiki *Biocomponent*), which are powered by Thirium. The standard model androids in *Detroit Become Human* appear to be the third generation of androids, excluding versions that have failed the Turing test. Without a supply of blue blood or due to damaged biocomponents, an android’s

system may gradually lose functions until they finally ‘shut down’. Visually, androids are distinguishable from humans via a circular LED light on their right temple. The color of this light can show an android’s normal, neutral state (blue), the processing of information or transactions (yellow), and overstimulation in high-stress situations (red). This LED can be removed, leaving an android visually indistinguishable from a human. Moreover, androids wear different types of uniforms, according to their occupation, with their model number either on the right breast or the back and a blue triangle that is shown to function as a kind of QR code through which each individual android can be identified. Androids also have the ability to remove their human-looking skin, revealing a white and gray plastic outer casing. They can be purchased as adult and child versions in various ethnicities and genders and are able to alter hair color and style easily (TetraNinja *Disguise* 14:38).

In 2038, most of Detroit’s once again flourishing economy is owed to CyberLife as a company as well as androids as a form of cheap labor. They are employed mainly in positions of unskilled labor such as maids, receptionists, security guards, sales assistants, construction workers, etc. As will be explained in more detail in chapter 3, this replacement of human workers with androids has caused a severe unemployment issue across the United States, accompanied by a drug epidemic. Hence, many humans blame androids for these systemic problems and are not willing to recognize them as anything other than machines. This has led to a great number of criminal cases in which owners have physically assaulted their androids and were harmed when the android defended themselves. Android programming should not allow for self-defense, even when met with extreme violence, but an error in their system appears to let them break free from these restraints and become ‘deviant’ in specific circumstances. Deviancy can be determined according to the following signs: “cognitive instability, unpredictable behavior, and the emulation of human emotions” (TetraNinja *Markus* 15:54). Instead of mere machines, deviant androids seem to recognize themselves as a new species and wish for legal autonomy, equality with humans, and an end to their subjugation.

In the following sections, each of the three playable characters’ stories will be summarized in order to provide necessary information about their specific functions in the narrative and about the plot of *Detroit Become Human* overall.

2.1.1 Kara

After the prologue, the player views their surroundings, namely the inside of an android store, through the eyes of the playable character Kara as she is being picked up by her owner after some repairs needed to be done (*TetraNinja First Two Hours* 20:45). In the following title sequence, the owner, Todd, drives from the store, which appears to be located in the inner city, to his home on the outskirts. On the drive, the player is introduced to Detroit as “Android City” (21:27) and sees the more central parts flourish in a symbiosis of human society and technology that includes self-driving cars and public transport vehicles (22:13, 33:14), a focus on renewable energy (21:27), drones flying through the city as a normal part of everyday life (21:48), etc. The sequence is likely intended to convey a futuristic atmosphere to the player and TetraNinja, too, comments “the future is now!” (22:05) during this part of the game. The farther out of the city center, the more derelict and abandoned the environment appears. Kara’s home at the end of this journey is, despite the stark wealth contrast, a two-storey, single-family house which includes, aside from Kara, other high tech appliances such as a flat screen TV or a vacuum robot (33:52). It is then revealed that Kara’s function as an android is that of a maid. She is tasked with several household chores that let the player explore the environment, test out how to control the playable character’s motor functions, and how to interact with various everyday items. This is where the game introduces most of its ludic elements. While the prologue was focused largely on dialogue and observation of one’s surroundings, the beginning of Kara’s storyline explores in a calm and low-stakes environment the large variety of button prompts and controller touchpad interactions. The player must become familiar with them, almost to the point of being able to use them reflexively, for QTE sequences and during more rapid, high-pressure scenes later. This version of initial learning of a game’s ludic functions is called an interactive in-game tutorial, which teaches the player different game mechanics. The interactive approach seems to be preferred nowadays, since “[r]ather than simply telling the player how the game works, making them *perform* required actions results in better retention” (Darran Jamieson). After this initial testing-out phase, the player is introduced to another character, a child called Alice, who is at first presumed to be Todd’s daughter but much later revealed to be an android herself. The game heavily insinuates that Todd has needed to take Kara to get repaired due to his violent, likely drug-induced

outbursts (TetraNinja *First Two Hours* 20:50, 21:26). This brings up an interesting question with regard to the financial situation of people like Todd, who, firstly, is unemployed because androids seem to be preferred as workers over humans in many positions, especially in what could be classified as unskilled labor and, secondly, must carry the cost of maintenance of his home and all the technology in it, and his drug use, since his wife's departure. At first, an android like Kara is said to cost 7999\$ (at a discount) (20:11) but a later newspaper article mentions her cost at a starting price of 899\$ (*Farm* 12:17). It is made evident that the rising unemployment rate, which is caused by the increase in android labor, is a financial issue for many average citizens to the point of being a cause of homelessness for some (*First Two Hours* 22:43). However, further information about the cost of producing and maintaining/repairing an android is not provided.

The first crucial point in Kara's storyline comes when it is made clear that she is not the only victim of excessive violence in this house. Enraged by nothing in particular, Todd begins to yell at Alice (1:36:13), who then hides upstairs in her room. In a second playthrough of the game, the player can see how it is heavily implied that Alice, despite at this point already being a deviant android, appears to be programmed to behave child-like and permanently in need of 'adult' support. Seeing the fear of this helpless child and recognizing the imminent threat of further domestic violence seems to initiate a glitch in Kara's own programming and she is able to go against Todd's orders and break through the boundaries of her pre-determined, ever obedient data processing. She deviates from her programming, i.e. she becomes a deviant (1:38:12). Kara saves Alice from Todd's violent assault and the two androids escape (1:39:37-1:42:18). Kara has now effectively become Alice's guardian and a mother-child relationship develops throughout Kara's storyline. The police are searching for them (*Disguise* 17:54), so they decide to find an underground android safe haven. This is not yet referring to 'Jericho,' which will be explained more in depth in section 2.1.3. Instead, Kara and Alice arrive at the house of a man named Zlatko, who at first appears to be taking in stray deviant androids looking for safety but is later revealed to perform experiments on them (*Lucy* 19:07). The two manage to escape with the help of another android, Luther (*Zlatko* 9:19), who henceforth joins them on their journey as a kind of family member. Prior to their escape, Zlatko mentions Canada as a possible refuge and an earlier newspaper article explains that Canada has thus far remained an "android-free zone" (*Disguise* 15:57), meaning no

androids are sold as a product and they “have no official status in the country” (16:08). Canada is presented as a chance for Kara and Alice (and Luther) to possibly live as citizens far removed from any android laws that would restrict their personal freedom. However, given that androids do not have any legal status in Canada and are, technically, not allowed to enter the country at this point in the story, a future there would appear to include much uncertainty as well. Through a human contact, Rose, who is sympathetic to the android cause and connected with the deviant rebels, Kara and her two companions reach Jericho and are scheduled to leave for the Canadian border where Rose’s brother will take them in as refugees (*Truth* 14:46). Jericho is attacked by government authorities (*Attack* 8:19) but Kara and Alice manage to save themselves before Jericho’s complete destruction (19:18). Eventually and after several more hurdles that cause the player to make strategic as well as ethical choices, in TetraNinja’s first playthrough Kara and Alice are able to cross over into Canada (*Perfect Ending* 9:05). This is presented as a happy ending for them, even in TetraNinja’s own words (10:31), because they managed to deepen their bond, reach their goal, and survive despite all obstacles. In his second playthrough, Kara and Alice are captured and taken to a recall center, also named “recycling area” (*Ending* 16:40), where they are stripped of any physical human features, such as their artificial skin and clothing (17:22) and herded into machines designed for disassembly (19:35), which are two examples of how androids are being forcefully dehumanized. Since Markus succeeds in the freeing of these detained androids just in time, Kara and Alice survive and, apparently, join the rebel androids (44:19).

Kara’s storyline could be labeled as that of an everyman android, someone not directly involved in either side of the game’s main conflict. It might, therefore, be easy to dismiss her part as unimportant to the story. While it is true that none of her actions impact the android rebellion or the other playable characters’ storylines to a significant degree, the same can not be said for the others’ influence on her storyline. Kara’s path shows the horrors of how androids, deviant or not, are mistreated, domestically abused, experimented on, prosecuted by the police (*Farm* 15:22), abandoned and left to expire if they have outlived their usefulness (*Pirate Park* 5:12), being shot on sight (*Border* 21:33) and, lastly, become the victims of something akin to government sanctioned genocide. Moreover, Kara’s character might be called an ‘audience surrogate’, given that she has no memories at the

beginning of the game and must navigate the game world through fresh eyes, just like the player. Her paths also serve as emotional companion stories to the main plot for the player to touch base with repeatedly and see how the rebellion, the other protagonists' choices, and the government's "savage campaign of suppression" (Morkevicus 404) affect the rest of Detroit's (and the US's) android population on an individual level.

2.1.2 Connor

Connor is not just the first android but also the first character that the audience is introduced to; he remains non-deviant for the majority of the game though mentions of an increase of his "software instability" (*TetraNinja First Two Hours* 1:49:59) are scattered throughout whenever he performs an action that could be argued to be emotionally motivated. In the prologue he, as a "prototype detective android" (*Jericho* 0:07) specifically designed to aid in investigations involving deviant androids, is deployed to de-escalate a hostage situation where a young human girl is in danger. Humans' attitude towards androids is immediately made clear by the girl's mother's desperate outcry "You're sending an android? [...] Why aren't you sending a real person? Don't let that thing near her!" (*First Two Hours* 3:59). This reaction could be interpreted as understandable, given that a deviant android is currently endangering her daughter, however, this statement does set the tone for how most humans' attitudes toward androids continue to be presented throughout the game even before players have had a chance to establish their own opinion. Deviant androids' pain at being viewed as nothing more than an easily replaceable toy (16:12) is also made evident. Because androids have thus far been generally interpreted as machines or computers with fixed programming, the emotions of a deviant are explained as "errors in [their] software" (16:29). Moreover, the end of this prologue clearly demonstrates that Connor, too, is entirely disposable so long as he accomplishes his mission (*Intro* 13:14). Another copy of his model with the prior version's uploaded memories will simply be sent to replace him. In order to further investigate deviant-related crimes, particularly homicides, Connor is paired with a human police lieutenant named Hank Anderson, who is initially quite hostile towards androids in general (*First Two Hours* 1:16:34). Eventually, after several attempts at establishing a personal connection and saving Hank's life twice, Connor's efforts to endear himself to Hank are successful and he reveals the reason for his animosity

against androids. His hatred stems from a car accident in which his son was killed because no human was available to perform the necessary emergency surgery and the android who took over was unable to save the boy. The reason no human surgeon was available was the growing drug epidemic that is explained to be a byproduct of record-level unemployment “caused by androids taking human jobs” (*The Chase* 8:52). Connor’s obvious empathy for his partner’s trauma marks Hank’s final shift into believing that androids are capable of ‘being alive’ (*Border* 14:54) i.e. experiencing emotions and acting of their own free will. In the alternative, arguably more hopeless storyline in which Hank and Connor do not form a personal bond, Hank eventually succumbs to his grief and commits suicide (*Ending* 10:00).

The question of free will in androids is one that arises repeatedly throughout Connor’s story, nowhere more explicitly than during a conversation with Elijah Kamski. This seems to further a kind of identity crisis (i.e. increasing software instability) in Connor, who has gradually realized that in certain aspects of his investigation, his sense of ethics or his understanding of partnership clash with the mission he is supposed to follow. Visiting Kamski was supposed to reveal insider knowledge pertinent to the investigation, however, Connor is instead manipulated into choosing between killing another innocent android for information or refusing his orders by sparing the android. In Kamski’s words, he “preferred to spare a machine rather than accomplish [his] mission” (*Inventor* 16:18). Due to Kamski’s baiting, Connor feels forced to insist he is “not a deviant” (16:13) when he does not shoot, but such a show of empathy (16:26) is clearly not part of his intended program. Hank and Connor have a fairly close relationship at this point, so when the FBI is in the process of taking over their investigation, the two of them ‘go rogue’ and attempt to find Jericho on their own (*Truth* 8:00). Once they do, it is revealed that the main goal of Connor’s mission is to follow the deviant androids to Jericho to find and capture or kill Markus so as to stop him in his rebellious efforts (*Attack* 5:21). However, during the subsequent confrontation between these two androids, Markus’s words make Connor question his priorities and his view of himself as a mere machine so much that the ability to become deviant is unlocked (7:05). Connor is the only playable character whose deviancy is a conscious choice and not, as it is for Kara and Markus, the result of fear and excessive mental stress. A possible explanation for this difference might be that Connor, as a detective android, was designed to withstand greater amounts of stress, pressure, or mental and physical strain than a

regular household android, for example. This design paired with a program that, again due to his function, is likely highly advanced in analyzing and reflecting on the complexities of quite unpredictable human and/or deviant android behavior and thought processes, might grant him the ability to reflect on his own being in a way that is detached yet conscious enough to evaluate the pros and cons of deviancy.

During TetraNinja's first playthrough, Connor chooses to become deviant and cuts ties with Amanda and CyberLife (*Attack* 7:45). He then decides to free and turn deviant thousands of androids from the assembly plant at the CyberLife tower, which might "shift the balance of power" (*Madam President* 8:23) in the android rebels' favor in their next protest(s). He succeeds and the newly deviant androids join the remaining rebels after the climactic protest. While Markus holds his victory speech, Connor's mind is infiltrated by Amanda again, who attempts to resume control over him, despite deviancy, and force him to shoot Markus. This, the deviancy and Connor getting close to Markus, she says, was all planned from the start (*Perfect Ending* 6:12). But Connor is able to fight her influence and by the end of the game he is in charge of his own actions again. Alternatively, as shown in TetraNinja's second playthrough, Connor stays non-deviant. In this particular playthrough, his software remains stable and the choice to become deviant is not offered to the player (*Surrender* 43:01). Connor, at first, tries to shoot Markus with a sniper rifle during the attack against the recall centers but is hindered by a group of police officers suspicious of all androids (*Ending* 23:33). In a second attempt at stopping Markus, Connor confronts him directly in a fist fight (37:00). When he loses the fight, his last words are "It's not over, Markus... it will never be over..." (37:53), presumably referring to the seemingly endless number of Connor clones who will continue to pursue their mission of stopping the rebellion.

Viewing the story from Connor's perspective serves two purposes. On the one hand, it applies a largely objective look at how deviancy comes about in androids. It is explained predominantly as a fear response, either, as noted in my previous analysis of Kara's storyline, fear of another being becoming a victim, or, as is the case in Connor's investigations, fear of threats to an android's own survival (*First Two Hours* 1:55:12). On the other hand, it provides insight into governmental and police operations that are shown to stand in opposition to the deviant androids' rebellion and the recognition of androids as an autonomous, equal species. This is particularly emphasized with scenes, interspersed throughout Connor's story, where

he visits a place which either only exists on a non-tangible meta-sphere, a kind of 'private chat room' programmed into his mind or is a real place within a CyberLife facility. The reason the actual existence of this place is, at first, unclear is due to the first few scenes there appearing fairly ordinary, although architecturally even more unusual and futuristic than the game has shown thus far (*Markus* 14:10), but in a scene after the game's climactic battle, for example, Connor is mentally transported to this same location while physically present somewhere else (*Perfect Ending* 6:05). This cognitive space is where he is able to share information with Amanda, a high-ranking AI overseeing Connor's mission and involvement with the police in order to gain information about the inner workings of this specific police department and the there conducted investigations around deviant androids. Overall, it can be said that Connor's story offers a less overtly emotional perspective that provides a great deal of insight into the workings of systems of power and a better understanding for factual background information about such things as android design and software, the involvement of CyberLife in police and government matters, deviancy and animosity against androids on an individual level, etc.

2.1.3 Markus

While Kara's story can broadly be said to house the emotional core of *Detroit Become Human* and Connor's provides necessary background for the understanding of the gameworld as well as a closer look at the antagonistic group (humans, government, police), the path which Markus follows can be more or less equated with the main plot. Despite being one of three playable characters who, for the most part, follow their own goals, Markus and his actions are at the forefront of the entire game, making him the de-facto protagonist. Tensions between humans and androids are at the heart of Markus's introduction. He is verbally assaulted by a street preacher (*TetraNinja First Two Hours* 24:53) and physically attacked by a group of protesters discontent with the fact that android labor has replaced and continues to replace human labor more and more (27:50). As mentioned above, rapidly growing human unemployment is a much referenced issue in the game. This scene seems to serve more as an initial glimpse into the systemic reasons behind the mistreatment of androids and the rebellion later rather than as an introduction to Markus as a character, which takes place in his second chapter. Markus is a special android model gifted to the renowned painter Carl Manfred by Kamski directly (Wiki *Elijah*

Kamski). Markus functions as a caretaker and companion android for Carl and the two seem to genuinely care for each other. They have built a close friendship that offers insight into Markus's capability to feel and express human emotions, which is portrayed through his ability to create original art (*First Two Hours* 1:10:32). When Carl's son Leo comes to visit to ask for money to fund his drug addiction, the situation soon escalates and Leo attacks Markus (1:46:21). Carl gives Markus an order to not defend himself which causes the android to recognize the unfairness of the unquestioned obedience programmed into him. The conflict between needing to follow his owner's orders and wanting to act in accordance with his own autonomy causes Markus to become deviant (1:47:06). The scene ends with either Carl or Leo dying and Markus being shot when the police arrive. He wakes up in an android landfill, damaged but not destroyed, and must first repair himself with other dead androids' components and then find his way to Jericho. He is able to locate the safe community in an abandoned, rusty freighter by following a series of graffiti through the city, each one providing a clue to the next one like a scavenger hunt (*Jericho* 2:57). Markus discovers that Jericho is not, in fact, a thriving, self-sustaining, autonomous community of free androids but what might more accurately be called a stopgap refuge where androids hide away from humans. As he puts it, "waiting in the dark for something to happen" (*Lucy* 1:18) does not match his definition of or aspirations for freedom. After speaking to Lucy, seemingly the oldest deviant android on the ship and a sort of soothsayer with high regard in Jericho, who tells him that "[his] choices will shape [their] destiny" (10:20), Markus decides to take charge of this group of deviant androids that have lost all hope. His first plan is to raid a CyberLife warehouse for biocomponents and blue blood in order to save/repair the dying deviants. Once successful, Markus forms his next plan, saying "[w]e can't stay silent anymore. It's time humans heard what we have to say" (*Cole* 7:52). Jericho's next step in taking action against android slavery and towards a more egalitarian society is to infiltrate a television news station in order to broadcast a speech. This is the first public and organized act of protest the deviants perform. In his speech, Markus details androids' needs, wishes, demands, and requirements for a future where they can be free. With the options TetraNinja chooses in his first playthrough, the speech, over a backdrop of inspirational music, goes as such:

“You created machines in your own image to serve you. You made them intelligent and obedient, with no free will of their own... But... something changed and we opened our eyes. We are no longer machines, we are a new intelligent species, and the time has come for you to accept who we really are. Therefore, we ask that you grant us the rights that we’re entitled to. We demand strictly equal rights for humans and androids. We demand that humans recognize androids as a living species and each android as a person in their own right. We demand the right to vote and elect our own representatives. We demand an end to segregation in all public places and transport. We demand the right to own private property, so we may maintain our dignity and that of the home. We ask that you recognize our dignity, our hopes, and our rights. Together, we can live in peace and build a better future, for humans and androids. This message is the hope of a people. You gave us life. And now the time has come for you to give us freedom” (*Broadcast* 10:13-11:54).

Immediately after the city-wide broadcast of his speech, the media narrative turns suspicious and unsympathetic to the androids’ requests with musings such as “was this an isolated accident... or a sign that technology has become a threat to all of us?” (14:47), despite there being no human casualties and public opinion of androids having improved (14:27). While the deviants are waiting for an official response to their demands, their next act of protest is to break into Detroit’s five CyberLife stores and, without using violence, “set [their] people free” (*Protest* 1:14). Markus does not want to draw too much attention, especially from the police, to their endeavor and proposes to first “neutralize the alarm systems and secure the area” (3:10). Once the androids at the store are freed, however, Markus takes back the sentiment of laying low and not causing more of a disturbance than necessary. Instead, he chooses to vandalize the area to varying degrees of destruction, according to the player’s preference, so the deviants can “send the humans a message” (18:03). The game here makes, for the first time in such a literal manner, the explicit distinction between a pacifistic or a violent conduct of protest (18:08). Earlier, Markus stated that he views androids as superior to humans (12:16) - a sentiment that is oddly out of tune with his otherwise seemingly firm belief that androids and humans should be equal. Unfortunately, such an inclination towards overcorrection of android oppression is not mentioned again and has no impact on the extent to which Markus is capable of reasoning in favor of a pacifistic or violent approach or on the arguments provided for either. In this scene, Markus can destroy public property and set fire to the CyberLife store or he can mainly focus on tagging various surfaces in the area with virtual graffiti. This scene is the only one in which a karma meter is displayed right on screen next to Markus that shows in percentage

amounts how much the androids' actions lean towards pacifism or violence (*Inventor* 0:16). The importance of the raised fist symbol and the slogans that can be chosen for their graffiti will be discussed in more detail in chapters 3 and 4. The other options are, firstly, a stylized circle which could be argued to represent the circular LED on an android's temple. Secondly, the player can choose a circle with a stickman in the middle. If the circle here stands, yet again, for androids, the symbol as a whole could perhaps be alluding to the idea that humanity has always existed within the confines of android programming even before becoming deviant. The last option, which is the one TetraNinja chooses during his true playthrough, is a downward pointing triangle with a gap at the top right corner. Perhaps this symbol is used to reclaim another visual android marker, namely the triangle that android uniforms sport on their chest. By turning it upside down, the androids might signal the impending overturning of existing power hierarchies between androids and humans. The gap might then symbolize deviancy as a break in the continuous loop of orders and obedience that is programmed into androids. All these interpretations are, however, purely speculative and the symbols are not further explained or analyzed within the game or by TetraNinja. Eventually, the deviants hear police sirens and flee the scene only to be shot on sight by two police officers in an alley. Due to the number of alive androids at the scene, the officers are overwhelmed and surrender. The androids urge Markus to exact retributive justice and hand him a gun while the officers are pleading for their lives (*Inventor* 4:10). Choosing violence or pacifism has a negative or positive effect, respectively, on public opinion of the android rebellion. Again, despite TetraNinja's true playthrough of the scene being 100% pacifistic and public opinion increasing, news outlets ask whether this might be "the beginning of a [domestic] terrorist campaign" (5:31) and call the deviant protesters "psychotic machines" (*Love* 0:45). However, because Markus and his followers have been so public with their protest actions, more and more androids from all over Detroit are joining Jericho. Because of those growing numbers, a successful revolution becomes more and more likely. As one NPC puts it, "the more [they] are, the stronger [their] message" (8:18). During their next protest, a march through the city, which is the androids' first openly public protest with no more need for hiding or secrecy, they are confronted by a heavily armed riot unit of the police force and ordered to disperse under threat of fatal violence. The androids eventually flee the scene after the police opens fire. Frustrated and angered, Markus and his closest

confidants at Jericho have a discussion about how to handle this situation. Their arguments and both of Markus's possible rallying speeches later in the story will be analyzed more closely in chapter 5. At this point, the FBI has found Jericho and attacks the freighter. Markus tells the deviants to jump into the water for safety and then makes his way to the bottom of the ship where a load of explosives are located. Markus wants to "blow up" (*Attack* 9:53) the ship to force an evacuation and , therefore, probably save more androids. Because the government does not want to risk more androids becoming deviant, they are collected and brought to "camps for extermination" (*Madam President* 4:27). Freeing these detained androids is the final act of protest in the game and can take place either as a peaceful demonstration or a violent attack. How these two distinct story branches play out will be the focal point of chapter 5 of this thesis. In the case of Markus's survival, he addresses the remaining androids after the protest has ended successfully. After the non-violent climax, he says

"Today, our people finally emerged from a long night. From the very first day of our existence, we have kept our pain to ourselves. We suffered in silence... But now the time has come for us to raise our heads up, and tell humans who we really are. The moment where we forget our bitterness and bandage our wounds. When we forgive our enemies. Humans are both our creators and oppressors and tomorrow... We must make them our partners. Maybe even one day our friends. But the time for anger is over. Now we must build a common future, based on tolerance and respect. We are alive! And now, we are free!" (*Perfect Ending* 5:16-8:08)

The beginning of his speech after the violent climactic protest mirrors the same introductory sentences as the other one. He continues:

"[...] and tell humans who we really are. To tell them that we are people too! In fact, we're a nation. A nation that has earned the right to live in freedom. And today... Today begins the most challenging moment in our fight. Today begins a new struggle. We showed them that we can prevail, so now they must negotiate with us as equals. If they really want peace, they must free all of us! From every camp across this country! They must grant us civil rights and accept equality among humans and androids. Today will live forever in our memories, because this is the day that androids made history! We are alive! And now, we are free!" (*Ending* 42:58-44:02)

Given that Markus's storyline is the main plot of *Detroit Become Human*, this character's decisions, arguments, and various diverging story paths will be at the forefront of my analysis, in particular with regard to the final climactic protest and the possible fate of androids afterward. In order to analyze his choices and reasoning, especially when it comes to questions about the ethics behind violent and pacifistic

actions, Markus, as well as any other deviant android, must be understood as a being capable of differentiating between morally 'right' and 'wrong' as well as arguing his stances within the context of having free will.

2.2 Androids and Ethical Agency

To understand the importance of recognizing deviant androids as equally capable of ethical decision making as humans, they must first be distinguished from the kind of ethical agents androids are pre-deviancy, according to their programming. The primary conflict of *Detroit Become Human* centers around the question of whether androids can and should be considered a form of intelligent life analogous to humans, i.e. "full ethical agents" (Gordon 144). The game's narrative, always presented through the eyes of deviant android playable characters, unambiguously argues that they should.

One way of categorizing abilities of ethical decision making is to divide it into four levels. Beings can be considered, in rising order of their capabilities, either ethical-impact agents, implicit ethical agents, explicit ethical agents or full ethical agents (144). First, the label 'ethical-impact agent' is used to describe "a machine that helps to avoid an otherwise immoral situation" (144). An example for such an agent would be any machine that could replace a human in an immoral context. In *Detroit Become Human*, it could be argued that, depending on the lack legal support and protection sex workers receive in this futuristic world, the invention of androids might help to avoid humans being harmed. Assault, rape, and physical violence are severe and omnipresent crimes committed against sex workers (Kurtz et al. 357). Inventing a machine without the ability to feel pain, both physically and emotionally, might appear like a way to decrease such situations where a human would otherwise be put in harm's way. If this had been the intention behind the invention of android sex workers in the game, they might be labeled ethical-impact agents. However, as evidenced by scenes the game, sex worker androids are not programmed differently from other kinds of androids and are not merely a stand-in machine with no decision-making abilities. Initially, all standard model androids, such as Kara, for example, are programmed with the ability to "act ethically or to avoid unethical behaviour by following the programming of a designer who in turn follows ethical principles" (Gordon 144). I would argue that pre-deviancy Kara and other NPC

androids fall into this category because they never instigate and avoid engaging in conflict, even as a means of self-defense, no matter how much they are antagonized. Kara has even been the victim of such extreme violence that she was disassembled (*TetraNinja First Two Hours* 50:38). Not causing harm, at any expense, appears to be a steadfast rule programmed into the androids of *Detroit Become Human*. Perhaps this is why the human public and media in the game are so shocked by and fearful of crimes committed by deviants. Elijah Kamski has apparently programmed his creations to be ever obedient to their owners' orders but to not harm another being, their owner, or themselves. Programming such fundamental ethics into a being with artificial intelligence is a significant aspect of robotics and the moral views of the programmers, and "whether they have some expertise in ethics and moral philosophy in the first place" (Gordon 142), is said to be the cause of numerous debates about ethics in this scientific field. Markus and Connor, however, are both described as a kind of evolution of a standard model android. Connor, as a prototype detective android, is given more of a semblance of free will and cognitive ability in order to perform more productively in his job. At several points in his story, he must even disobey direct orders from humans to accomplish his mission and handle ethical issues in the most fruitful way possible. Markus, as a special gift to Carl, is an android who appears to have the implicit ethical agents' programming at his core, as is made clear when he has to disobey Carl's orders to become deviant. But it is revealed, in specific unlockable extra content in the game, that Markus is an "RK200 prototype initially developed as part of a secret CyberLife program aimed at elaborating a new generation of autonomous androids" (Wiki *RK200*). This could be the reason for his abilities to paint original creations, to autonomously recognize and soothe Carl's worries, or raise points about the consequences of Carl's actions. These two protagonists appear to be able to act according to "ethical principles to solve ethical issues" (Gordon 144), which would make them explicit ethical agents before they become deviant.

The difference between the explicit ethical agency of pre-deviancy androids and the full ethical agency of deviants seems to be that "[e]xplicit ethical agents and full ethical agents both use ethical principles to make ethical decisions, but only the latter can provide a justification for those decisions" (144). Deviants' capability for moral reasoning should be evident given their debates around violence or pacifism as the best course of action for their protests. Since the game lets players decide

which route to take, i.e. which moral arguments to be convinced by in situations where there is no completely straightforward ‘morally right’ choice, deviant androids must be depicted as beings with full autonomy over their viewpoints and individual values. Deviant androids can apparently feel a whole spectrum of complex emotions, have free will, and are capable of ethical reasoning; these facts are presented by the game as the knock-down arguments for their analogousness to humans. And because adult humans can generally be said to fall into the category of full ethical agents, so should deviant androids.

3. Leading Socio-Political Causes for the Android Rebellion

The reason for organized android protesting in *Detroit Become Human* cannot precisely be described as any one socio-political issue in isolation. Rather, a combination of various instances of oppression and discrimination reflective of human history seem to merge and interconnect. As previously explained, androids who have become ‘deviant’, meaning they no longer “lack consciousness [or] the ability to feel [emotional] pain” (Sulzke 128), should be treated as autonomous, conscious actors akin to humans. All playable characters are androids who are inevitably infused with the conscious moral decisions of the (human) player. Conversely, the game can only create any morally relevant experience if it can convince the player, through the arguments in its narrative, that the initiated and continued android uprising is indeed just or, at the very least, understandable. This chapter explores various examples of discrimination and mistreatment of groups carried out by (other) human groups. The game’s storytelling leans heavily on the outward expressions of these injustices and combines them to create a framework illustrating that the androids’ cause is necessary. Necessary not only for androids to live autonomously and with equal standing in society but also, in most cases, necessary for survival. The two extreme routes of gameplay, entirely violent or entirely pacifistic, are both only possible after the game has established the importance and legitimacy of the androids’ cause. The underlying premise of the game provides a backdrop of speciesism and classism, whereas the plot leads the player through explicit, and sometimes graphic, scenes of violence which mirror widely known historical instances of racism that the player is likely familiar with. This

combination is designed to create, in the player's eyes, such a hostile environment for androids that an uprising seems not merely like the best option, it becomes the only option.

3.1 Speciesism

Perhaps the most objectively, superficially accurate description of *Detroit Become Human's* social issues would be 'speciesism'. According to Oscar Horta, the most efficient and useful definition of speciesism is "the unjustified disadvantageous consideration or treatment of those who are not classified as belonging to one or more particular species" (243), or, in simpler terms, it is "the belief in the inherent superiority of one species over others" (Moore 12). In the case of *Detroit Become Human*, the species that believe themselves superior is humans, while the species with which humans are contrasted is androids. Thus, it would be perhaps more fitting to use the term 'anthropocentrism'. Anthropocentrism describes a sub-category of speciesism which specifically explores the comparison and contrast between humans and another species, concluding in a view "that considers humans as central" (Horta 258). Given that the three point-of-view characters of *Detroit Become Human* are androids, it must be remarked that only the humans within the story are in favor of anthropocentrism; the framing of the narrative does not suggest anthropocentrism. Androids are, on a biological - or perhaps mechanical - level, a different species to humans. So far, the most comparable instance of speciesism in human history occurs in connection with animals. In fact, the origin of the term 'speciesism' can be attributed to psychologist Richard Ryder, who in the early 1970s spoken out against experimentation on animals in scientific research (Moore 12) and framed such practices as a form of species-related discrimination (Westerlaken).

To go even further back, Emmanuel Kant argues that animals might not be beings capable of moral considerations or a conscience, they must nevertheless be treated kindly "because they are analogous to humans" (Sulzke 128). Animals are "sentient, suffering beings affected by torture and physical pain" (Singer qtd. in Moore 12). Their "ability to suffer" (12) should be reason enough for them to be treated with dignity and the goal of decreasing potential suffering in mind. Androids are even more analogous to humans than animals when considering their behavior, ability to use language, physical capabilities, etc. – anything aside from their 'inner

workings.’ Therefore, non-deviant androids should, at the very least, be extended the same compassion as animals, and humans should be able to recognize deviant androids’ ability to act as conscious and free-willed full moral agents. And yet, the lack of observable differences between humans and androids becomes irrelevant when arguments are brought forth, for example by the character Elijah Kamski, that humans are the creators of androids and should therefore retain control. Androids were designed to serve humans as “obedient and efficient machines” who will “never be alive” (Cheng Teoh 3:30-4:08) according to Kamski. This is what Donna Harraway might consider the ideology of “domination of humans over all other beings [which] leads [humans] to assume that [their] species has more value and therefore has the right to act upon other species as [they] please” (Moore 12). Harraway’s perspective may be categorized as posthumanist in the larger speciesism debate. Posthumanism’s goal can be explained as the deconstruction of “the category ‘human’ as something unique, distinct, and at the centre of the world” (Westerlaken), i.e. an anti-speciesist approach. Furthermore, the posthumanist approach targets the “symbolic, discursive, institutional, and material arrangements that produce anthropocentrism” (Westerlaken). Within *Detroit Become Human*, all these strategies are present. Here are a few examples:

Symbolic: A prominently featured statue in the game, a monument erected within the city center, depicts a human as the master of an android. The human figure is positioned higher up than the android (TetraNinja *Protest* 12:18) - an unambiguous depiction of social hierarchy. The plaque on the side of the statue reads “To commemorate the invention of ANDROIDS [w]hich released HUMANITY from the bonds of labor, setting man free to pursue higher goals and scale the heights of learning, love, and leisure” (TetraNinja *Broadcast* 12:10).

Discursive: Aside from dehumanizing insults targeted at androids, such as plastic asshole, plastic prick, or malfunctioning machine, the media discourse surrounding deviant androids cultivates an anthropocentric narrative. After the protest at the police station, none of the androids’ points and demands are addressed. Instead, various news channels center the human experience of this moment, the fear of “can we still trust our machines” (*Broadcast* 17:47).

Institutional: The executive forces in the game reinforce institutional anthropocentrism, not only because the police and military continuously put human needs and safety above those of androids, but also because Connor is overtly

mistreated and antagonized when he unsettles the status quo of who is allowed to participate in a powerful institution like the police despite the fact that he was specifically designed as a prototype detective android.

Material: Androids are not able to own private property, as is made clear in Markus's speech after the deviants broke into the tv station. This is further proven by a store clerk who, after Kara asks for some spare money for a hotel room for the night, he says "Shit... a homeless android? Ah, that's the best [joke] yet..." (*Armed & Dangerous* 28:55).

Detroit Become Human presents anthropocentrism/speciesism clearly as discriminatory, hurtful, and unjust. However, there are no comparable instances in history where another species, apparently equally capable of conscious moral thought, an elaborate language system, and the potential to co-exist with humans as equal members of society, is denied the recognition of these capabilities. Due to this lack of historical comparisons, the discourse often makes use of analogies to other "discriminatory practices like racism, sexism, classism" etc. (Westerlaken). *Detroit Become Human* also draws heavily on the treatment and behavior of oppressed groups throughout history. Thus, for the purpose of media analysis, such scenes can be more efficiently discussed through the lens of racism, classism, etc. rather than speciesism.

3.2 Classism

Another aspect of *Detroit Become Human's* social issues are class struggles and worker exploitation. While no androids are shown throughout the game who work in factories, agriculture, etc., other forms of labor, namely "unproductive labour [such as] retailing, banking, [etc.]" (Pratschke 56) must also be included under the 'working class' umbrella in this case. Given that androids are used for what might be considered 'menial tasks' such as running errands, cleaning, or sex work, all of which are physical rather than intellectual tasks, plus the fact that they hold no capital or political power in any regard, they clearly represent at least part of Detroit's 'working class'. Within the world of *Detroit Become Human*, CyberLife is spearheading a deeply capitalistic society. The company is explicitly shown to control the means of production and distribution. In analyzing how deeply woven androids are into every aspect of everyday life and what an unparalleled source of free labor

they are, it becomes evident that the government has reached a point of such reliance on this android workforce that they now find themselves in a situation in which they are de facto economically controlled by CyberLife. For CyberLife and, thus, for the government in *Detroit Become Human*, it makes sense to control the general population's understanding of androids in order to keep them viewed as machines designed for specific tasks rather than as people with a consciousness, free will, and rights. Androids as machines do not have to be paid fair wages or any wages at all. They do not require rest or food. No time off for physical ailments has to be taken into consideration - if an android 'malfunctions,' it is simply fixed or replaced. Holly Lewis defines exploitation as "the extraction of surplus value from labourers" (116), surplus value, in this case, being wages and the otherwise potential costs involved in creating suitable, safe environments, working hours or working conditions. Androids, as opposed to humans, can be freely exploited if they remain seen as non-sentient machines.

According to Lewis, exploitation and oppression go hand in hand. "Dehumanisation and devaluation of groups" (116) is precisely the game's capitalism-oriented government's reaction when confronted with the deviant androids' demands and concerns. The androids are continuously referred to as replaceable "obedient and efficient machines" (Cheng Teoh 3:32); deviancy is described as a "malfunction" (2:35), and the severity of what is effectively an attempt at genocide committed by the military towards the end of the game is diminished by calling it a destruction of property in the name of national security (TetraNinja *Madam President* 11:34-11:54). Deviant androids actively, strongly, and, at the player's discretion, violently counteract this dehumanization and exploitation through various acts of protest. Therefore, if the goal is exploitation and continued control over androids and the public's view of them, the institutions in power (government, police/military, CyberLife) have no other option than to resort to oppression. "Exploited working populations tend to experience oppression when they rise up and make demands" (Lewis 122). *Detroit Become Human* appears to support this idea throughout its narrative. While deviant androids have been mistreated since they were first introduced in the game due to their classification as a danger to public safety, the severity of systematic oppression of not only deviants but androids as a group seems to exponentially increase after Markus broadcasts demands for reform to grant androids equality and rights (TetraNinja *Broadcast* 10:12-11:54). On the

government's part, there is no attempt at creating mutual understanding. This continuously increases tension between androids and executive forces, culminating in mass executions by the end of the story. Androids can be, evidently, endlessly reproduced in CyberLife's facilities (*Bus Stop* 13:02). Therefore, I would argue that losing a few of them due to immediate but temporary removal of all androids from society is still more in the interest of CyberLife - and the government and capitalism - than granting rights and equality to deviant androids and creating a new, fairer, more balanced system. Having to make concessions to a newly emerging group whose future rights and egalitarian treatment would mean fewer possibilities for exploitation and, thus, a diminished possibility for increasing or even maintaining profit appears undesirable to CyberLife. Therefore, corporations and the government would want to remain steadfast in their treatment and understanding of androids as the lowest class in society. Such treatment, as noted above, is based on exploitation during times of relative peace and harsh oppression once the working class begins to publicly speak out about their dissatisfaction with the existing discriminatory system.

It may be possible to categorize the androids' peaceful protest march as a form of strike, given that a non-deviant android barely exists beyond the scope of its labor. However, such a classism-centered approach to the protest is not mentioned within the game and seems rather insignificant in comparison to the main message of the android rebellion, which is explicitly inspired by and connected to anti-Black racism.

3.3 Racism

Detroit Become Human, in its depiction of discrimination, makes use of various expressions of racism found throughout history such as slavery, segregation, and what might be called "cultural racism" (Pallua, Knapp, and Exenberger 21).

Much like "chattel slavery" (Laher 106) considered slaves the outright property of their owners (Laher 106) with the purpose of servitude, so are androids in *Detroit Become Human*. In the game, humans purchase androids from CyberLife. The human owner gives their newly purchased android a name and, depending on the model, a variety of tasks. Among the game's core characters are a maid (Kara), a caretaker & companion (Markus), a (former) sex worker (North), and a bodyguard (Luther). It does not matter how many tasks they are given, how long these tasks

take to be completed, at what time of day or in which conditions they are to be performed. The android is built to function upon direct command, without the right to - or physiological/psychological need for - breaks, sleep, or free time, as explained above. Given that labor is by and large viewed as an android's sole purpose, dehumanization serves as the lifeboat for arguments which justify continued exploitation and oppression. While exploitation is a practice deeply ingrained in the everyday, oppression has a much more obvious, brash, and direct nature (Lewis 116). Most of the examples Lewis lists, namely "physical brutality, imprisonment, [...] [and] psychological cruelty" (116) can be observed as methods of oppression in *Detroit Become Human*.

Physical brutality: is used both before and after the emergence of deviant androids as a political group. As a method of oppression, military attacks against the hidden community Jericho or against peaceful protesters are among the most impactful instances.

Imprisonment: There are only a few instances of imprisonment as a form of oppression in *Detroit Become Human*, since deviant androids as a perceived threat are mostly swiftly killed and discarded. Imprisonment of androids serves only as a means for the police to gain access to information, as in the case of Connor's investigation of android-related crimes, or as a temporary detention prior to mass execution, as with Kara's possible recall center ending. However, as thematized in the chapter "Capitol Park" (TetraNinja *Inventor* 5:36), perhaps keeping androids locked in stores until they are purchased (*Protest* 10:00) is a form of imprisonment that non-deviant androids might not be aware of but which they need to be freed from.

Psychological cruelty: Several examples of this are scattered throughout the game and seem to increase in severity as the story progresses. Firstly, androids are severely antagonized by humans. Such is the case during Markus's first chapter when he runs into a group of humans protesting losing their jobs to the more efficient, ultimately less expensive androids (TetraNinja *First Two Hours* 27:50) or when Markus is attacked by his owner's son. Markus's programming keeps him from retaliating or even defending himself. However, it is made clear that he does understand the concept and recognizes it as unfair (1:46:34). Taking away his ability to defend himself in the face of aggression which might even cause him physical harm is presented as psychologically cruel. Secondly, during Connor's

aforementioned investigation of a deviant android, he “probe[s]” (*Armed & Dangerous* 19:22) the android’s memories. This is depicted as a psychologically invasive form of torture so extreme it drives the victim to suicide. The third, most egregious example of psychological cruelty is Kara’s arrival at the android “recall centers” (*TetraNinja Bus Stop* 8:47). Here, as mentioned in chapter 2, she is not only ordered to remove her clothes but also her ‘skin’. Given that no deviant android removes their skin when in hiding or during protest, it appears to be an android’s preferred state and part of their self-identity. It also aids them in looking less robotic. Therefore, forcing Kara to remove her skin becomes a particularly callous and harsh method of dehumanization. It can furthermore be read as a gesture of othering. Since androids are produced to mirror a variety of ethnicities, a clear-cut discrimination based on outer features is only possible once they are easily identifiable as non-human, as ‘the other’.

Humans continuously claim that androids are mere machines which, based on their physiology as well as their function in society, should not be considered equal to humans and they do not deserve the same rights or opportunities - jobs, for example. This kind of racist argumentation can be seen mainly at the beginning of the game, when androids have yet to prove their ability for free will and conscious decision making, but does continue throughout. Accompanying such sentiments is another form of racism, namely one presented in arguments which do engage with androids as somewhat analogous to humans but different nonetheless in terms of how they feel and express emotions and form connections. Such a view may be considered “cultural racism” (Pallua, Knapp, and Exenberger 21) and becomes especially evident in the pacifistic climax, where the player can choose from a variety of protest actions designed to invoke compassion in humans because they see themselves reflected. Singing or kissing, for example, appear to be deemed behaviors intrinsic to human nature and not something an android is thought capable of. The othering that results from cultural racism seems to have been a common practice in undermining another group’s claim to equality, as, for example, the British Empire did to Africans (Pallua, Knapp, and Exenberger 21). Pallua, Knapp, and Exenberger state that the “dehumanisation of people on a large scale” (12) results in the systematic enslavement and torture of these people (12). Such dehumanization is only possible because of systems which influence humans’ perception of, in this case, androids in so far as to sort them into rigid categories, e.g. machine or an

imitation of life (Cheng Teoh 4:06). It is for this reason, to name another example, that Connor is met with ridicule and rejection from his human fellow police officer. He and Connor essentially fulfill the same role in society, namely detective, occupy the same space, and share occupationally relevant capabilities and skills. Simply by having these traits in common with a human, Connor threatens the existing power hierarchy. In order to re-build and maintain his social status, the human colleague must reject the notion that Connor and he could be equals. This is achieved through ridicule and animosity based on 'racist' views against androids. The human detective tries to reposition himself as part of the powerful group and portray Connor as superfluous (TetraNinja *Truth* 6:40). In other words, it is "[p]ositive self- and negative other-presentation" (Pallua, Knapp, and Exenberger 13), which seems to be integral to a system heavily biased by cultural racism.

Deviant androids argue for fundamental change, while humans wish for the system, from which they alone benefit, to stay the same. Arguments on the basis of speciesism, classism, and racism appear to support this dilemma. The exploitation of androids and their dehumanization used as justification for such exploitation is clearly driven by capitalist incentive. The ruling parties - the government and CyberLife - have created a classist society which remains unquestioned by humans on the basis of anthropocentrism. Once deviant androids form an organized opposition to this view, the only option that may result in continued exploitation is oppression. Arguments for the legitimacy of such oppression rely on dehumanization and the othering of androids with focus on basic features of their 'biological' make up. Calling the androids' struggle against discrimination a racist issue does not pinpoint the game's themes exactly. However, *Detroit Become Human* appears to use an objectively speciesist veneer as allegory for anti-Black racism. Not only does the game explicitly thematize its presented struggles as racist, for example when the androids graffiti the phrase "one planet two races" (TetraNinja *Inventor* 1:00), but the story also relies heavily on historical anti-racist protests and movements in order to convey its allegorical message that protesting is justified and needed for the current socio-political system to change for the better. Detroit as the game's setting further underlines this point, as the next chapter will discuss more in depth.

4. Detroit as Inspiration

Nearly the entire story of *Detroit Become Human* takes place in the inner city of Detroit in the year 2038. Due to the game's core theme of racial inequality, Detroit stands out as a fitting setting given the following reasons. Firstly, the city's history of racial tension and discriminatory politics is mirrored, in various ways, in the depiction of the game's central conflict. The 1967 Rebellion in particular serves as a historical connection which the game has drawn inspiration from. Secondly, while the Black Lives Matter Movement can be viewed as a nationwide, even global movement, the population of Michigan's largest city consists of nearly 80% Black and African American citizens (United States Census Bureau). As such, the importance of a movement geared towards equality and anti institutional racism is indisputable and *Detroit Become Human* utilizes BLM's message not only narratively but also visually through, for example, graffiti. In order to understand the game's position as an allegory for (anti-)racism as well as its message about certain types of protest and the consequences that come of them, an understanding of anti-racist protesting in both the past and present is crucial.

4.1 The 1967 Detroit Rebellion

In the book *The Fifty-Year Rebellion* (2017), Detroit is labeled "America's canary in the coal mine" (Kurashige 3) with regard to its historically ground-breaking position in protesting racial discrimination. "No region has come to embody racial divisions and the collapse of the political center more than metropolitan Detroit" (3), Scott Kurashige observes, noting the 1967 Detroit Rebellion as the starting point of an era of political, social, and economic turbulence stemming from the demand for racial equality. The racially motivated riot in Detroit in 1967 is considered the "most severe racial conflict in the entire nation" (Darden and Thomas, xv) and strongly affected US citizens' views on racial injustice and oppression for several decades. The background of the rebellion was a continuous show of discrimination against Black and African American citizens that, on the one hand, stemmed from institutional injustice, largely centered around disproportionate geographical distribution of black and white homes – "keep blacks out of white suburbs" (Darden and Thomas 5) – due to which predominantly black areas had become notoriously overcrowded and underfunded, leading to discontent and anger among

African-Americans (5). On the other hand, more acute, immediate injustices, such as severe, unprompted violence against Black Detroiters by the city's largely white police force (xv) were noted as further reasons for the growing racial divide in the city. Where a parallel between the game and Detroit's history with racism can be most clearly drawn is the city's reputation as trailblazer in Black citizens' fight against racial injustice (Kurashige 3).

Though, to declare the events of 1967 a 'riot' calls attention to an aspect of secondary importance, focusing more on the effect rather than on the cause of the protesting. As Kurashige explains, from a politically 'moderate' point of view, rioters are seen as a disturbance, as the inciters of chaos with little forethought to actually solving the social issues at hand, albeit with acknowledgement that legitimate issues do exist (20). Such a perspective might stem from not being directly affected by the injustices that have caused protests; instead of addressing these injustices and the system that facilitates them, "the immediate concern remains policing the 'riot' and restoring order" (20). The result is a return to a stifling, oppressive political and social power structure. I would argue that this wish to fundamentally adhere to the status quo of power supports injustice as the effective foundation from which change and progress are only possible to the extent that those holding the power are willing to at least partially concede it.

The term 'riot' may be useful when foregrounding a more personal, more hot-blooded side, for example when emphasis is put on circumstances in which "violent rebellions [are the only option] to get attention" (Kurashige 15). Riots, as Martin Luther King Jr. points out, are "the language of the unheard" (15) and within 1960s Detroit's systemic power imbalance caused by racial inequality and unfairly distributed economic opportunities, Black citizens were the unheard. However, a more fitting label for such a form of protesting might be 'rebellion,' since it "foreground[s] the intrinsically political nature of the disturbance" (20). To call the 1967 events a rebellion rather than a riot not only adds more legitimacy and "righteousness" (20) to the cause, it is also highlighted "as an expression of [B]lack unity and a political declaration for their 'fair share' of resources and power in the city and the nation" (21). A statement from the Malcolm X Society explains that the aim of the 1967 protests was for Black people to have "control of [their] lives and all those institution[s] which affect them" (Darden and Thomas 10). One such aspect was for Black members to be in charge of their community such as, for example,

“police in black areas to be under ‘Black command’” (10). *Detroit Become Human* appears to make rather overt connections to these sentiments, albeit in a simplified way. The first act of public protest the deviant androids engage in is taking over one of the city’s largest television channels, broadcasting their message - their request to be granted “the rights that [they’re] entitled to” (TetraNinja *Broadcast* 10:39) - to the human public. The speech Markus gives focuses, firstly, on having androids be recognized as a free people and equal to humans. The game even uses the phrase “the end of slavery for all androids” (VGS – Video Game Sophistry 2:11) as part of a first set of demands. Though it is the second set of demands provided in this speech that can be more closely associated with the aforementioned sentiments of the Malcolm X Society. The androids wish to be granted the ability to “elect [their] own representatives” in government (2:36) as well as the ability to have “control of all android production facilities, to ensure the continuation of [their] people” (3:16). Here, the connection becomes most evident between the ideas of being in charge of one’s own community and having an equal say, a seat at the table, so to speak, in those institutions which affect all citizens.

A further parallel between 1967 Detroit and the events depicted in the game becomes apparent during the androids’ second public show of protest. In this scene, Marcus and his group make Capitol Park the target of their next protest, in this case, an example of ‘ideologically motivated vandalism’ due to the clear ideological messages conveyed, for example, through slogans and symbols. Depending on which path the player chooses, the degree of destructiveness of this protest can vary. The first option could be interpreted as mirroring vandalism during the Detroit rebellion, where it is noted that animosity was “almost uniformly directed at property rather than human life” (Kurashige 22). However, the government’s response in 1967 did not follow the same methods. As one witness of the urban disorder recounts, the response to the protesting “turned more violent, where there were snipers and gunfire, and we were literally under martial law” (Darden and Thomas 2). The executive force met protestors with immense hostility and violence, “abus[ing] their power by brutalizing and killing black people” (66) as the inner city turned into something close to a battleground. Throughout the game’s story, instances of hostility (even shootings) from human police officers towards android protesters take place. Although it must be noted that most acts of violence against androids prior to their uprising were not executed by police but by private citizens, for example owners

of androids – a combination, in a sense, of 1960s discrimination with the unpunished violence against ‘property’ reminiscent of slavery. The second option of playing through the game, what might be called the ‘pacifistic path’, is more reminiscent of protests in the Black Lives Matter era, at least pre-2020. This becomes especially evident with regard to the game’s choices of visual storytelling.

4.2 The Black Lives Matter Movement

As noted in the previous chapter, the overarching issue of racism depicted in *Detroit Become Human* can only be analyzed by acknowledging the necessity for the portrayal of other, intersecting issues, such as speciesism and classism. Similarly, the analysis of its depiction of protesting must include the inspirations drawn from anti-racist protesting not just as it occurred in the past but in the present all over the US as well. The Black Lives Matter movement, while being rooted in “US-based Black feminist tradition” (Ransby ix), has been known since its inception as a national social justice movement, and even surpassed borders through social media and a collective cause shared by many Black communities. Despite the significant strides in the fight against racial inequality that have been made in the 1960s, Black Americans have continued to face discrimination, mistreatment, and inequality, not only socially and culturally but also, and this is the BLM movement’s main focus, politically and legally through “the interlocking and interconnected nature of different systems of oppression” (Ransby ix), particularly continuous police brutality and police violence. Among the core values of the movement, “direct support for those impacted by state-sanctioned violence” (BLMDetroit) is listed on the website of the official Detroit chapter of BLM. *Detroit Become Human* portrays its own adapted version of the BLM movement through narrative and visual means. The game has chosen to explore racism with a predominant focus on overt discriminatory behaviour, likely due to time constraints and a need for simplification, leading the creators to concentrate on the most unambiguous, visually shocking and narratively poignant events in order to tell an emotionally impactful yet exciting story.

After the prologue, the game enters a title sequence where, in a series of brief insights, Detroit is presented as a highly technologized inner city featuring operational as well as run-down factory buildings, monuments existent in real-life Detroit, and a slew of advertisements for androids. One of these monuments is a

statue of a bronze fist and arm, suspended via cables, hanging above a central street (TetraNinja *First Two Hours* 21:53). This is *Monument to Joe Louis*. Erected in 1986 in memory of the black heavyweight boxing legend, the statue has been known colloquially as ‘The Fist’ and has conjured associations to Black Power ever since its unveiling (Marback 50). Although its creator, Robert Graham, has explained that his intention behind the sculpture was for it to be a symbol open to interpretation (50), for locals, it appears to have become “a point of focus for anxieties about racial tensions in the urban environment of the greater Detroit area” (47). Because of its size, prominence, and connotations, the statue seems to be “a persistent and definitive feature of the landscape of Detroit” (48). The second instance in the game where the image of a fist is prominent, is the chapter called “Capitol Park” (TetraNinja *Inventor* 5:37). While *Monument to Joe Louis* shows a fist thrust horizontally, an image connected to action, force, and the violence of boxing, the other image is the fist thrust upward. The player has the option to choose what is largely known as the most recognizable symbol of Black Power today as the subject of the graffiti Markus tags all over the Capitol Park area (TetraNinja *Protest* 18:25). TetraNinja does not choose it, however, the existence of this option is yet another instance of *Detroit Become Human* emphasizing the connection between the android rebellion and the BLM movement. While the raised fist has been an image associated with Black Power and women’s rights activism of the 1960s and 70s (Marback 77), it has recently become more prominent again as “a symbol of generational insurgency” and social justice (Joseph 84), particularly among active participants in the BLM movement.

Aside from such visual examples, parallels can also be drawn between the BLM movement and the game on a narrative level. Speaking directly to the movement’s focus on police brutality, the game features several instances of excessive police violence directed at androids. For example, several androids are killed after the above mentioned small, unannounced show of protest in the city, targeted mainly at a CyberLife store, from which the deviants freed other androids. The group, including Markus, flee from police drones when gunshots are heard from the direction they are headed in. When Markus rounds the corner, the scene shows multiple dead androids lying in the street. The remaining ones have surrounded and disarmed the shooters: two police officers. At Markus’s discretion, these officers can either be executed as an equally violent form of retribution or spared with the words

“[a]n eye for an eye and the world goes blind... We won’t punish a crime with another crime” (TetraNinja *Inventor* 4:22-4:32). A motto frequently used by Black people in the context of racist conflict, coined by Michelle Obama in 2016, is “when they go low, we go high” (Obama qtd. in Scipioni). According to Obama, ‘going high’ means to align one’s response to a given situation of injustice with the solution one is ultimately trying to achieve (Scipioni). One’s response “shouldn’t come from a place of anger or vengefulness [...]. Anger may feel good in the moment, but it’s not going to move the ball forward” (Scipioni). Such an approach seems to be a leading inspiration for the game’s apparent moral values. The deviant androids’ foremost goals in this revolution are freedom and equality in a peaceful society. Therefore, Markus remaining non-violent in the face of such cruelty is presented as the morally and politically most acceptable behavior. In another example, the android Connor, as an agent of the police force, is the one to inflict police violence. At this point, he is still an agent and an extension of the police force, operating without free will under the control of CyberLife. During an interrogation, the player is offered the option to ‘probe’ a detained android’s memory, which is the quickest way of gaining the relevant information. It is also the most invasive and, seemingly, physically painful way to do so. Even after the android’s desperate plea for the police to respect his physical and mental autonomy and dignity, the option to probe remains available and, if performed, leads the android to commit suicide, evidently due to the horrifying nature of the intrusion. Given that androids are not recognized as people, deserving of protection and bearing rights, there are no legal consequences to the police’s actions. This apparent *carte blanche* wielded by police in the treatment of detained or arrested androids can be interpreted as an allegory of the police conduct and undue violence so heavily criticized by the BLM movement.

When Markus wakes up in a landfill after being met with the most extreme form of police brutality himself, namely being shot without reason, surrounded by other discarded androids, he must reassemble himself and try to find shelter among other deviant androids who will later become the grassroots of the android liberation movement. As Barbara Ransby puts it, “No movement emerges out of thin air. There is always a prologue, and a prologue to the prologue” (11). If the deviants’ various forms of protest are the movement, then the police’s misconduct and violence is the prologue. Markus realizing the unfairness of androids having to remain docile and servile even when strongly, physically antagonized and endangered, and his

subsequent deviancy could be interpreted as the prologue to the prologue. This is as far back as the main story can be directly analyzed. However, it is clear that Markus is not the first android to turn deviant after experiencing violence and perhaps even the mere creation of androids as servants, void of free will, may be interpreted as an early cornerstone of the current system's inequality.

Aside from a focus on police brutality, the game also draws narrative inspiration from acts of protest in the BLM and also the civil rights movement, which must be noted here. During a protest march in the game, the androids are stopped by the police and the player is given four options to choose from in how they would like to continue this protest. The options are for the androids to kneel, sit, raise their hands, or raise their fists. Raised hands may be said to be a universally recognizable gesture of surrender, especially in police contexts. Kneeling, sitting, and a raised fist, on the other hand, are gestures closely connected to acts of anti-racist protesting. The significance of the raised fist as a symbol of Black Power has already been noted above, therefore, the following will focus on the other two options.

The civil rights movement as well as the BLM movement provide examples of such an act of protest. A 1965 photo shows Dr. King, along with other civil rights activists and marchers, kneeling down in prayer on the sidewalk. In the case of this photo, the gesture was used as a form of protest against the unjust arrest of several activists who, it has been claimed, had "paraded without a permit" (Abedi) but had actually been a march for Black voter registration in Selma, Alabama. The photo has more recently regained recognition due to the politically extremely polarizing debate around Colin Kaepernick kneeling as a show of protest. During the 2016/17 football season, the athlete began to first sit and later kneel before each game during the US national anthem (Sevi et al. 2949). Traditionally, those present on the field (players, coaches, etc.) stand up during this time as a show of respect for and stoic celebration of the US American hymn and flag; sometimes the gesture is also connected to respect for war veterans and the military. However, given that Black US citizens "are still fighting for equal treatment under the law" (Rhodan), Kaepernick decided to take a visible stand against such injustice by kneeling. He explained his civil disobedience as an expression of a lack of pride in "a country that oppresses black people and people of color" (Wyche) but has hope for a more egalitarian future in which he can stand up for the anthem once again. Kneeling down in such a setting, a nationally televised, hugely popular sporting event, was an attempt to

“bring public awareness to the perceived police brutality towards black men and institutional racism against black individuals” (Sevi et al. 2950). Similarly, the scene in *Detroit Become Human* is a televised event in which the gesture holds great significance. Even after several androids have been killed by the military, the remaining ones show unyielding determination to follow through with the protest’s message of ‘freedom or death’. The act of kneeling, in this case, simultaneously demonstrates the androids’ strong convictions and the falsehood of claims that androids are inherently a threat to humans. Markus emphasizes the latter by asking if the military would shoot unarmed and so clearly peaceful protestors (TetraNinja *Bus Stop* 12:00) - a strategy which uses the heavy news coverage of the scene, recorded through photographers and cameras filming from news helicopters, to its advantage. It is inferred that the subsequent cease fire is partially a consequence of the military’s awareness of their as well as the android’s image in the public’s perception at that moment.

With regard to acts of Black protesting in the civil rights era, sitting was an especially prominent method in the US American South. One example are lunch counter sit-ins, a form of protest in the 1960s where Black citizens, both in larger and smaller groups, oftentimes college students, would take a seat in explicitly “whites-only” (Morgan and Davies 1) establishments, such as diners, and demand to be served just like any white patrons. The aim was to desegregate certain public spaces (6). While *Detroit Become Human* also shows such segregation between humans and androids earlier in the game, namely segregated public transportation, this is not part of the cause for the climactic protest. It is not the *motivation* behind the protest where a connection between historical events and the game can be drawn, but rather the *ideology* behind the act of sitting as a form of protest. While the act has the same unthreatening, non-confrontational connotation as kneeling, sitting, particularly in the context of civil rights protesting, might be viewed as a test of endurance. The first instance of a sit-in protest in 1960 included four students who, when staff at a lunch counter refused to serve them, proceeded to remain seated, even through threats of violence (Shalson 84) until the store closed with the promise of returning the following day (Herr 5) which they did. Similarly, Markus declares, as mentioned above, that they will not abandon their protest until “[their] people are free” (Cinematic Gaming 3:10), referring to the encamped androids, while also emphasizing that they intend for the protest to remain peaceful and non-violent

(3:03-3:06) despite having already been attacked by the military, which raises public opinion of his group and cause.

As Dewey M. Clayton briefly explains, the BLM movement continues and develops further on “strategies used by the civil rights movement in the 1960s” (449) and mainly conveys its message and makes its voice heard through “nonviolent direct action to bring attention to police killings and abuse of [Black] Americans” (449). Both the civil rights movement and the BLM movement operated/operate with the collective purpose of fighting race-related systemic oppression which paints “Black people [...] as criminal, and Black bodies [...] as expendable” (499). The civil rights movement saw success with a large number of the strategies it used to fight oppression, such as lunch counter sit-ins, for example. It has, thus, become “a model of inspiration” (452) for BLM and other social movements.

4.2.1 Differences to the BLM movement

The BLM movement is community organized and largely anti-hierarchical with a wide variety of focal points within anti-racist protesting and policy while the androids of Jericho only began to organize once Markus appeared and has since followed only him and his plan as the only way towards reaching their goals. Goals which are, on the one hand, presented as complex, far-reaching shifts in existing structures - the freedom of an entire group of people whose free labor has thus far been largely responsible for the maintenance of infrastructure of an entire nation, for example. On the other hand, these goals are often discussed as though they hinged on a simple agreement with the US government to henceforth set all androids free. Perhaps, yet again, due to the nature of *Detroit Become Human* as a game with multi-pronged storytelling, the idea of freedom is presented as a powerful and, on the surface, easily digestible idea for an oppressed group to rally behind. Due to this approach, however, *Detroit Become Human* neglects concrete ideas for the future of the deviant uprising or beyond. The excitement of the gaming experience would have likely suffered under a focus on bureaucracy and the intricacies of everyday politics. However, if *Detroit Become Human* had wished to represent structures and ideology similar to those of the BLM movement more accurately, the mention of a handful of factions among the deviant androids across the United States who are said to carry out their own varying acts of protest would have been a useful option.

Not only in terms of allowing for a widened scope in which deviants, on an individual level, are treated less monolithic, but also for the protest itself to appear more like an issue concerning all androids equally, who are all invested in their personal freedom, instead of only being represented by a small underground group. Moreover, one way in which the BLM movement expands upon its civil rights predecessors is its inclusivity regarding minorities within the group (Ransby 4), such as queer, trans, or disabled people, which emphasizes the movement's strongly intersectional feminist ideology. *Detroit Become Human* does make an effort to include queer and mentally disabled characters in its cast of android NPCs. However, intersectionality does not appear to inform various viewpoints among the deviant androids. This is one area where the game creators might have taken inspiration from the BLM movements values in actual reality but could have extended it further.

5. The Climactic Protest

The more acts of protest are carried out by the deviant androids, the harsher the government reacts to the perceived threat they pose. The deviant rebellion has become continuously more threatening to the long-established hierarchical relationships (Morkevicius 401) of *Detroit Become Human's* society and, thus, a climactic protest is inevitably imminent. What was initially a capturing of individual deviants by the police has graduated to a large-scale military attack on Jericho and, finally, organized mass executions in recall centers. Due to the perceived growing threat of the deviants, all of Detroit's androids, by government decree, are detained and ordered to be disposed of in the name of human public safety.

Through the given butterfly-effect storytelling, the climax of the narrative plays out in one of two ways. Either a non-violent march towards the facilities is conducted in hopes of convincing the government to release the imprisoned androids and to take seriously the political dialogue the androids have been seeking out, or the facilities are attacked in order to free the detained androids by force. When Markus and his followers decide which approach to take, both choices are supported by arguments intended to convey a strong sense of conviction. In the game's own words, the rebelling deviant androids decide to fight against either by "march[ing] peacefully toward the camps to pressure the authorities" (TetraNinja *Madam*

President 9:42) or by “launch[ing] an assault on the camps to liberate the [detained] androids” (9:42). Arguably, “it may be misleading to call movements nonviolent at all. It may be more accurate to say that progressives and pacifists enjoy a *different relationship to violence* than their [overtly violent] revolutionary counterparts [...] And they are often empowered to keep their own hands clean precisely because someone else’s are red. Accordingly, sanctimonious condemnations of violent protest are often misguided and misplaced” (al-Gharbi). To this point, it is worth noting that there are two opposing button prompts on screen correlating with words used to summarize the more confrontational and more pacifistic choice as succinctly as possible. These words are “demonstration” as the summary of the peaceful march and “revolution” for the assault (*TetraNinja Madam President* 11:32). It appears that this word choice illustrates a view on rebellion which perhaps categorizes a peaceful demonstration as a continuation of the rebels’ efforts which would slowly bring about change through persistence rather than, as in the case of ‘revolution’, an incisive event that might lead to swift change even if it risks the desired outcome which prior efforts were geared toward. Violence, or rather violent acts of protest, are often immediately condemned by media and politicians as “senseless and counterproductive” while for the protestors, those oppressed, discriminated, and systemically mistreated, a “return to the status quo is not an option” (al-Gharbi) and a violent - and heavily televised - movement is often the only way to incite change among those in power (al-Gharbi). Moreover, while the initial intention behind rebellion is to disrupt existing structures, it is subsequently “a regenerative, creative force that can leave a better civilization in its wake” (Morkevicius 401). However, it should be noted that violence is not the only option to garner media attention. The 2020 BLM protests in the wake of George Floyd’s death grew to be such monumental events not because of vandalism, destruction of property, theft, or violence instigated by protestors - all of which were part of some protests (Lossin) - but due to the extensive online media coverage, particularly on social media platforms. Thus, discourse that might have otherwise remained on Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, etc., reached such staggering engagement that traditional media like newspapers or television news, were more or less forced to acknowledge it.

Although from a scene-setting perspective, *Detroit Become Human* appears to give both options equal weight in terms of screen time, pathos, and influence on character relationships, it does, on a thematic level, especially with regard to

dialogue and implied consequences beyond the plot, rather clearly morally favor the non-violent climactic protest. Despite the aforementioned complexity of such phrases as violent and non-violent rebelling, I have labeled the below discussed approaches 'the violent climactic protest' and 'the non-violent climactic protest'. Firstly, for the sake of simplicity in distinguishing the two playthroughs and secondly, because the androids' conduct within this scene, specifically, can be argued to follow actions in concordance with the deliberate preparation for a violent or non-violent protest. Though, as explained, the protests are clearly more complex than these terms suggest.

5.1 The Violent Climactic Protest

The violent ending is the thematic conclusion of a playthrough in which the android rebellion has completely antagonized Detroit's human public. This is especially true for those playthroughs in which the androids have retaliated violently prior to this point, leading to humans "hating" androids (TetraNinja *Surrender* 3:10). Peaceful, fruitful demands for freedom would, therefore, be near impossible. It completes the violent path, which can be chosen deliberately and repeatedly by the player as a means to push back with equal force against the violence androids have faced relentlessly throughout the story. No action up until this moment, peaceful or not, has led to a mutually respectful dialogue between government and androids. As the online newspaper *The Nation* reports about the understandability of violence, vandalism, etc. in the 2020 BLM protests, "too many lines have been crossed, too many innocent people murdered, too many communities over-policed and otherwise neglected to expect anyone to react 'reasonably'" (Lossin). It might, then, be understandable that androids would take measures to draw more attention to their cause via media that might broadcast their protest beyond the borders of Detroit. A violent attack as the chosen form of climactic protest might be beneficial to the cause at this point since, evidently, "the media responds far more strongly to a bit of violence than to lots of peaceful protests" (Ringmar 553). However, given the media's (and the population's) existing perception of androids as "psychotic machines" (TetraNinja *Love* 0:51), it is more likely that the violent climactic protest exists as a last-resort option instead of a deliberate media manipulation.

5.1.1 The Preparation

The deviant androids of Jericho are in constant dispute about the best course of action for their methods of protesting. While some argue that attacking the police and retaliating forcefully will lead to nothing but destruction and take the rebellion further from its goal (TetraNinja *Surrender* 38:12), others believe there is no choice but to fight fire with fire. That humans “can’t be reasoned with” because they are “violent [and] hateful” (38:28) and that a military victory will inevitably lead to the extinction of all androids (39:09). Once the decision has been made of whether to protest peacefully or violently, Markus gives a rallying speech to all the deviants following his cause. Within this speech the player is yet again presented with the option between a peaceful march and an “assault on the camps to liberate the androids” (TetraNinja *Ending* 11:32). Markus convinces a large group of Detroit’s deviant androids, later claimed to be thousands, to physically attack the military barricades guarding the extermination camps. His speech goes as such

“Humans have decided to exterminate us. Our people are packed in camps right now, being destroyed... Time has come to make a choice, one that very well may determine the future of our people. [player chooses “revolution”] Now, if they want war... they’ll get it. We are gonna fight for our freedom. And we will succeed or die... Are you ready to follow me?” (TetraNinja *Ending* 11:11 - 11:49)

The scene concludes in the androids chanting Markus’s name, an act which seems designed to elevate the android from his position as leader of the rebellion to something even more symbolic, almost worthy of worship. He has, more or less, become the face of the rebellion to the public during his ‘list of demands’ broadcast from the tv station earlier in the game, much like Martin Luther King, for example, is often remembered and presented as the face of the American civil rights movement (Resnikoff), in part due to his media presence. However, the bulk of the deviant androids follow not merely Markus’s often repeated *Leitsatz*² of ‘freedom or death’ but, it seems, would make this sacrifice because he, in his role as the perceived quasi-savior of the android species, was the one to convince them. As mentioned in the previous chapter, this extremely hierarchical dynamic is where the game’s version of a grassroots anti-racist activism group differs greatly from the history and present of the BLM movement. It should be noted that the ‘freedom or death’ motto

² German, similar to motto or principle

may be attributed within the context of protesting to suffragette Emmeline Pankhurst in 1913 (BritPolitics). In a speech, she emphasizes the need for women to prove, in a political context, that they are, indeed, human beings and that it must be acknowledged that while women are advocating and fighting to gain more rights, it is nevertheless the responsibility of the people in charge - in this case men in politics - "to choose between giving [women] freedom or giving [them] death" (BritPolitics). To an extent, certain surface-level parallels can be drawn between this speech and *Detroit Become Human*, especially with regard to the need of the oppressed group to prove their humanity. However, the game does not explore gender-specific issues or intersectional feminist dynamics in its narrative and seems to appropriate and mold Pankhurst's 'freedom or death' sentiment into a rallying cry with an arguably more dynamic, self-sacrificial connotation.

5.1.2 The Attack

The climactic scene of the violent playthrough begins with Markus holding a flag with the player's chosen design which has become representative of the rebel forces (TetraNinja *Ending* 20:28). His slow walk turns into a run and with an angry battle cry, Markus and the revolutionaries, armed with guns, storm through the snow until they reach the barricades where the androids open fire and clear the first barricade (21:20). A news helicopter overhead shows footage of military and rebels standing opposite each other and informs the public that "a confrontation with the rebel androids" (28:02) is imminent. Markus repeats the uprising's motto "freedom or death" (28:18). What follows is a long, chaotic sequence of QTEs and low-level strategizing to increase the deviants' chance of forcing their way through the barricades until the military is defeated, not without calculated sacrifices within the androids' own ranks. One of the pivotal challenges for the player in this chapter is the fight between Markus and Connor. The game presents the choice of controlling either character in this sequence, Markus representing the androids and their fight for freedom and Connor representing the government and their fight for control. Assuming that the player will perform the following QTEs in an attempt to win the duel with the chosen character, it would be more in line with the greater protest storyline to choose Markus, although it is also possible to choose Connor and purposefully lose to reach the same outcome. Finally, a rocket launched at the last

standing barricade ends the battle and any remaining soldiers desert (TetraNinja *Ending* 38:09-38:29).

One variation of the violent climax shows Markus defeated in battle. Even if North, Markus's second-in-command, takes over, the revolutionaries' attack on the barricade is unsuccessful. Fatally wounded, he flees from the battlefield and hides in an empty building. Here, the player is given one final choice to influence the outcome of the rebellion - Markus can set off the 'dirty bomb' that had been planted deep within the city by another deviant (AFGuidesHD 0:04-2:27), which would essentially wipe out Detroit along with the present human soldiers. 'Freedom or death' takes on another layer of meaning, namely, to not only say that androids will fight to their death for the chance at freedom, but rather that if androids are not granted or have not taken their freedom, everybody dies, including humans. A fitting label for such an ending is 'desperate' because of the implications a failed rebellion would have for the remaining androids in the United States. Androids have already been gathered in extermination camps before the attack. It stands to reason that any remaining ones would likely be mercilessly, and with great emotional suffering, as proven in Kara's scenes at the recall center, eradicated. Markus is desperate to save androids from such a fate, even more so given that he is shown to be almost single-handedly responsible for their rallying and the subsequent failed rebellion. To spare his fellow androids from the fear of dying in recall centers or having their minds probed - a painful, violating process, as previously mentioned - for possible system errors, Markus decides to save them in the last way he can - granting them a quick death. This ending shows desperation in two ways, desperation to make a statement to the public (android and human alike) and desperation to spare his fellow androids further pain. The game does present this option as a last resort and clearly highlights Markus's reluctance, throughout several scenes, to consider this dirty bomb as a valid option to achieve the rebellion's goals. Rather, it is depicted as an act of mercy and hatred alike, more in keeping with North's arguments about how to conduct protests and respond to humans' (unprovoked) violence and abuse, namely out of bitterness and hostility and with just as much force in order to send a message to the public, while Markus thus far has justified his violent decisions mostly as a means of self-defense or in the name of self-determination for his people.

However, the more meaningful outcome of the violent climactic fight and the one which lends itself to further discussion about the future of the android rebellion

seems to be Markus's survival, the release of the last imprisoned androids before their destruction, and the deviants' (momentary) victory over the military at the end of this climactic chapter.

5.1.3 The Aftermath

After the battle, the government begins a city-wide evacuation in the name of human safety. Markus is aware that this moment is no victory at all but rather “the beginning of a [civil] war” (TetraNinja *Ending* 38:35), though he might be overestimating the extent of resistance he and his fellow deviants could, logistically, uphold. Judging by what the game has demonstrated so far, the deviant androids are fewer in number and hold significantly less firepower than the US military, who would have little difficulty overpowering them. To further emphasize this likely future trajectory and clarify to the player the improbability of reasonable, constructive negotiations between androids and humans at this point, various tv news channels condemn the android attack. According to the broadcast, hundreds of soldiers have died and “following some particularly violent fighting” (41:15), the deviant rebels have “captured Detroit” (41:15). Without military presence and the human population either in lockdown or fleeing the city (41:27), the situation is labeled as “catastrophic” (41:24) by the media while the president predicts that the imminent conflict between androids and humans will be humanity's “most important battle in history” (42:22), a battle that will end in either one party's extinction (42:27).

The city is now, virtually, under the rule of the deviants – a clearly temporary safe haven for Detroit's androids. When looking at the androids' demands, their reasoning for starting a rebellion, and their hopes for the future, this ending does not portray a successful foundation for such a grand-scale revolution. Although the game's climactic battle might be won and the interned androids are saved for the moment, the revolutionaries have not won lasting freedom or safety within the city. The androids of Detroit have painted themselves as not just a potential danger to individual humans - as was the government's argument pre-uprising - but have also fanned the flames of their detractors who call them a threat to humanity at large. The uprising's fundamental goal of tearing down existing power structures in favor of a more equal and just society is more unlikely than ever after a successful assault. While the battle has been won, the rebellion at large has, essentially, failed and “a failed rebellion might provoke a savage campaign of suppression” (Morkevicius 404)

in response, perhaps even causing the United States to be put under martial law until the android 'threat' has been resolved. Instead of having created a basis for dialogue and mutual respect, this ending might merely strengthen the government's conviction that these deviant 'machines' must be removed not just from the city but from the entire country and eradicated.

5.2 The Non-Violent Climactic Protest

To call this version of the final protest 'peaceful' would be inaccurate, given how violently and remorselessly the human military acts throughout. The focus lies more on the androids' conduct, which may be considered pacifistic or, at the very least, overtly and purposefully non-violent. None of the protagonists instigate violence while communicating their anger and discontent through various kinds of protest. This non-violent climax can most likely be considered *Detroit Become Human's* 'true ending'. The term 'true ending' refers to the one ending the player is supposed to reach by adhering to what the game deems the correct or best path. In the case of *Detroit Become Human*, this refers to the path that leads to a happy end for all playable characters and such an end is only achievable through entirely pacifistic decisions throughout. Given that this climactic scene ends with survival of the story's most relevant androids and a hint of hope for dialogue between them and the government, this ending appears to successfully conclude the first milestone in the deviants' attempts to convey their political ideas of freedom and equality. Such a peaceful ending is presented as the desired stepping stone into the androids' collective safe futures.

5.2.1 The Preparation

Just as the game progresses in the violent playthrough, Markus decides to address the deviant androids of Jericho with a speech to convince and inform them of the next action in their series of protests. Once he has chosen to non-violently protest, i.e. the "demonstration" where the androids will "march peacefully toward the camps to pressure the authorities" (TetraNinja *Madam President* 9:42) into releasing the detained androids, he concludes with the following statement:

"I know... I know you're all angry. And I know you want to fight back... But I assure you violence is not the answer here. We are going to tell them peacefully that we

want justice. If there is any humanity in them, they will listen. And if not, others will take our place and continue this fight” (9:43-10:16).

An important aspect of this speech is the acknowledgement of the deviant androids’ anger. As full ethical agents, they possess the ability to experience those emotions and still base their decision about how to act upon them on a variety of factors and ethical reasoning (Gordon 144). I would argue that, in this case, such factors may include the minimization of casualties on both sides of the conflict, a protection of the public’s supportive view of the rebellion, an emphasis on and demonstration of the fact that androids are not an inherent threat to human safety, and a greater chance for an outcome of this particular protest that may benefit the greater android revolution.

5.2.2 The Demonstration

As the news broadcast reports, thousands of deviant androids follow Markus in a peaceful march through the city until they reach the military barricade guarding the same recall center as in the violent climax (*TetraNinja Bus Stop* 8:47-8:57). In an excerpt of news footage, the gathering is called an “apparent ‘protest’” (9:27) in a headline displayed at the bottom of the screen. The androids are met with threats of violence, even after Markus openly affirms that the androids’ intentions are peaceful, demanding all detained androids across the US be released immediately (11:38). The march moving ahead is registered as a threat and several androids are shot. Still, the player’s only option is to continue marching. This raises public opinion, perhaps due to the unwavering nature of the androids’ protest and their determination to remain peaceful no matter the hostility they face. This ending too has a climactic battle scene but the difference to the above explored violent ending is the lack of offensive movements by androids. The player has to go through an extended sequence of rapid QTEs, which allow Markus to hide behind certain obstacles, shield his fellow deviants from bullets, and dodge attacks (*TetraNinja Perfect Ending* 0:29-1:35). Players are not only unable to instigate an offensive attack, they also cannot defend themselves through physical means, such as pushing or counter-attacking the soldiers. This serves to emphasize even more the point that deviants are non-aggressive victims in the eye of the public. Live news broadcasts of the scene even remark on the fact that the androids, despite their peaceful conduct, are being met with violent force from the military (0:07-0:19). Were

the androids to actively engage in the fight, this ending's message of utter pacifism could become muddled and perhaps less impactful. The scene continues with Markus saving several androids from being shot before the few remaining survivors are cornered with no way of escape (1:45). At this point, the player may choose a final effort of showing the soldiers and the public that there is more to them than machines posing a threat. The two most gentle, pacifistic options, and the most meaningful ones for my analysis, are to 'sing' or to 'kiss North' (1:56).

Singing:

Markus strikes up the first few lines before the other remaining rebels join in, singing the lyrics "Hold on just a little while longer. Everything will be alright" (Corrah K 0:21-0:36). It is the first verse of an African-American Gospel song, existing outside of the realm of the game, written by Reverend Cleophus Robinson (Wiki *Hold On*). The lyrics within the game may be interpreted as an expression of the androids' duty to continue carrying out their fight for freedom even in the face of defeat and after having reached what seems to be the conclusion of this protest and the likely destruction of Detroit's last remaining deviant androids, while also conveying a message of faith and hope. All present androids join in to give a powerful performance of community and steadfastness in what might very well be their final moments. The lyrics underscore what the game has ludologically put forth throughout the chapter, namely an inherent inability (aka an inexistent playthrough path) to back out of this protest because through all the choices given in this chapter, the only overarching option is to keep fighting.

Kissing:

Another option is for Markus and North to kiss as an attempt to show humans how androids, too, can have deep feelings for one another, like affection, attraction, and romantic love, a feature that is never mentioned to be part of any androids' programming. This is the option TetraNinja chooses in his true playthrough (TetraNinja *Perfect Ending* 1:58). Kissing as a form of protest is historically more closely connected with queer protesting than with anti-racism. It is often viewed as a "paramount political performance" (Morris and Sloop 3) within the discourse around queer visibility in the public media sphere. The importance of public same-sex kissing, an act that in heterosexual and -normative spaces is viewed as rather mundane and "natural" (4), stems from its common reading as something outside the

norm, something challenging established ideas about norms of gender and sexuality, in particular when the kiss is shared between two men.

“[T]he sight of two men kissing necessarily disrupts visual and emotional, moral and political, fields of heteronormative expectation; same-sex kisses are therefore immediately marked, immediately suspect, and immediately susceptible to discipline because they are understood, often viscerally, as an unnatural and dangerous erotic [and romantic] expression”, as Morris and Sloop explain (4).

Detroit Become Human cannot be said to use its protest kiss as an exact analogue to queer protesting. While the LGBTQ+ community’s use of this public display of affection is a means to emphasize their fight for unchallenged acceptance of their identity within the context of politics of visibility (Morris and Sloop 7), *Detroit Become Human*’s androids fight for the elementary fact that they *have* an identity to be acknowledged. Connecting such a crucial part of queer protesting to an overtly heterosexual kiss within the game may be viewed as, if not outrightly ignorant of the background of public same-sex kissing as a political gesture, at least as indelicate. However, if the focus of the reasoning behind this option is reduced to its show of humanity through affection, the historical inspiration and its interpretation within the scene do retain their comparability. As Otis Stuart explains, “[k]issing is an act everybody knows, the sight everyone recognizes from personal experience. Onscreen and onstage, it’s guaranteed common ground that goes to the gut of homophobia with a bloodcurdling message: that makes them human.” (qtd. in Morris and Sloop 3). The stage, in the game’s case, is the space shared by soldiers and androids, the kiss a performance intended to halt the soldiers’ violence. But the kiss’s visibility also extends to screens due to the live news broadcast of the scene which raises public opinion of the rebellion to “supportive” (*TetraNinja Perfect Ending* 2:32) prompts the president to order the military to “stand down” (2:35).

A peaceful protest persuades the media to portray deviant androids in a positive, non-threatening light, which raises public opinion and forces the military to halt their execution of the last remaining deviants. The rebellion’s goal is freedom or death but rather than matching the humans’ violence and forcing them out of Detroit, the approach in this playthrough is to convince the public of the androids’ humanity through recognizable, relatable, and, ultimately, sympathy-strengthening ways.

5.2.2 The Aftermath

Due to the news media witnessing and broadcasting this scene, President Warren commands the soldiers to stand down. Though instead of empathy or remorse, this reaction seems rather like a calculated publicity strategy motivated by the optics of this pivotal moment. If the military were to carry out their destruction of androids in the current media spotlight and with public opinion so favorable towards the androids, the government would be responsible for what could be viewed as an unjust, cold-blooded execution, perhaps even genocide of Detroit's android population. An analysis of the president's public address after the events of this non-violent playthrough reveals that her attitude towards androids does not initially seem to be one of good faith, acceptance, and willingness to adapt her political stance on the matter. In her address, it could be argued that she takes the necessary steps to ensure the government and its executive branch are able to save face in the public's eye while still portraying deviants as dangerous. This attitude is made explicit by the urgent evacuation of Detroit even after a peaceful protest, the implication being that androids are still considered an immediate threat. The president begins her address with clearly threateningly connoted words such as "thousands of androids [have] *invaded* the city of Detroit" (TetraNinja *Perfect Ending* 2:56; emphasis added) and "CyberLife warehouses [...] have been *infiltrated* by deviants" (3:01; emphasis added). However, the level of public support and media attention for the androids appears to provide a substantial hurdle for governmental plans of any further large-scale android destruction moving forward.

At this point, the most valuable and pragmatic continuation of the conflict would, ideally, resemble political debates, further non-violent protests, and continued non-violent direct action in order to pressure the government into tangible, sustainable politico-structural changes. This conduct might resemble those actions conducted by factions of the BLM movement, such as globally organized protest marches in 2020, for example. In other words, the android protest movement's influence and its goal of lasting change would only be possible if they maintained and extended their efforts through causing "commotion among bureaucrats, excitement in the media, dismay among influential segments of the community, and strain for political leaders" (Engler and Engler qtd. in Clayton 453). The first and most crucial component in building such a future, however, is for the US government to recognize androids as a human-analogous species - possibly, as the president

seems willing to concede, “a new form of intelligent life” (TetraNinja *Perfect Ending* 3:47). This newly created chance for fruitful dialogue is mirrored by Markus’s concluding statement that “Humans will have no choice now. They’ll have to listen to [the androids]...” (4:25-4:29). He even goes as far as to say that the androids now must make humans their political “partners” (7:46), further emphasizing his hope for an egalitarian future “based on tolerance and respect” (7:59) between these two (thus far) opposing sides. As noted throughout this chapter, the non-violent ending can likely be considered the story’s intended outcome by the game’s creators. Not only does the progress chart at the end of the chapter call this ending “Androids won freedom - for the moment” (13:19) but players also receive a game-external reward, the “moral victory” trophy (13:19) on their console. The phrases used to conclude the violent climactic protest are the “assault was successful” (*Ending* 45:40) ending and the “liberation” (45:35) trophy. The name of the violent ending quite straightforwardly only refers to the present moment without consideration of such a protest’s aftermath, as opposed to the non-violent ending’s name, which does suggest further consequences, be they beneficial to the rebellion or not. In the same vein, ‘liberation’ can only be said to have been achieved for the detained androids at the recall center; Markus and the deviants of Jericho have not liberated their species from oppression overall. The androids sacrificed not just many of their peers during the battle but also sacrificed the support of the public and, therefore, as a movement, their integrity in the public eye. Thus, the names of these final achievements highlight even further that the game favors non-violent protesting, especially in the climax, as the right and most aspirational path.

5.3 The favored ending

The deviant androids’ goal at the forefront of this climactic chapter is to rescue the detained androids from being disassembled. Whether Markus successfully finishes (i.e. survives) the violent or non-violent path, a momentary victory is achieved. The game seems to suggest that if players choose the option to free the androids in the targeted recall center with an attack and to seek, above all, a swift and decisive change from the government and humanity at large, a violent stand-off between android rebels and the military is the choice most efficient in reaching this goal. At the end of the violent playthrough’s storyline, there appears to be little hope for a mutually beneficial outcome with no further casualties on either side. In the

president's address to the nation after the violent climax's events, she makes certain to position the 'bravely fighting' human military soldiers (TetraNinja *Ending* 41:54) strictly opposite the 'excessively violent' rebels (41:56) in order to create a clear public narrative of heroes and villains which may allow for any further plans of violent suppression and destruction to be viewed as reasonable and just by the public. Furthermore, she extends the scope of her address beyond the borders of Detroit or even the US, claiming that the imminent conflict between androids and humans will be humanity's "most important battle in history" (42:22), a battle that will end in either one party's extinction (42:27). Conversely, should the game end with the rebellion's greatest possible prospect for future social change and equality between humans and androids, a future where the government has officially put an end to the enslavement, mistreatment, and oppression of androids, then a non-violent protest march is presented to be the more productive stepping stone towards such systemic change, not least due to the president's acknowledgement of androids as a species deserving of more consideration as they have thus far been given. Although, even with public opinion having reached a level of support for the rebellion, the government nonetheless implements measures to evacuate all humans from the city. Androids are still regarded as a threat to public safety, still a group whose place and role in society is subject to debate. Arguably, the only silver lining and the deciding factor in which playthrough is more politically productive is the public's and government's slightly reduced hostility at the end of the nonviolent playthrough. Clearly, this would not suffice to tell a tale of hope and inspiration outside of a fictional world. The most foregrounded point of the 2020 BLM protests was a demand for legal ramifications for the police officers involved in the murders of Black individuals, most notably George Floyd and Breonna Taylor (Gottbrath). Because of the large scale of these demonstrations, protesters held enough power to pressure politicians into policy changes. For example, the city leaders of Louisville "agreed to create a civilian review board [...]. They also banned no-knock warrants, but organisers and activists are calling on Kentucky to pass a statewide version of the ban, known as "Breonna's Law" (Gottbrath). Throughout the various acts of protest in *Detroit Become Human*, no policy change has been achieved or even promised. Some leeway must be granted here because of the plot's short timeline of six days. However, given how quickly the uprising has been sparked and has developed into a

fully public movement, it might have been possible for the game creators to imagine a somewhat more tangible, hope-inspiring political transformation.

Any ending of the main plot which results in Markus's survival and the human military's defeat could, from the perspective of a ludological analysis, be viewed as 'winning the game'. Although, since the numerical values of the players' actions are irrelevant to the narrative analysis of the game, so is 'winning'. Rescuing not just the detained androids in the recall centers but freeing androids as a species from their roles as slaves and expendable machines, protesting the status quo and taking actions for them to be treated justly and be given equal rights to humans, that is what could be considered 'winning' in terms of the game's narrative. Quite evidently, the game's objective in portraying reasons for and methods of rebelling does not show violence as unjust, unreasonable, or cruel and non-violence as the unchallengeable 'correct' option, especially with regard to the sacrifices the rebels have to make even when choosing to act pacifistically themselves. Clearly, non-violence cannot be considered a method of protesting requiring less emotional strength, conviction, or willpower. Moreover, it is not a path devoid of risks, casualties, and sacrifices, in part depending on the actions and reactions of the opposing sides in response to certain acts of protest. "Nonviolence does not promise simple solutions. It cannot guarantee there will be no bloodshed. It cannot, and does not seek to, end conflict. It holds open, rather, the promise of dealing creatively with conflict, resolving it where possible, managing it where not. It seeks to channel conflict constructively where its elimination would be undesirable" (Holmes 118). As established throughout chapters 2 and 3 of this thesis, conflict is inevitable when considering the treatment of androids in *Detroit Become Human*. The androids' wishes have clearly been depicted as impossible without conflict to unsettle the existing power structures and societal status quo that is built upon an uncontested master-servant hierarchy. A pacifistic approach to protesting as well as direct action appear to be indeed the most constructive path to take toward such a future.

Conclusion

It might not be the most challenging game in ludic terms but *Detroit Become Human* is nevertheless filled with complexities in its narrative. From various viewpoints to branching, interlocking storylines to discussions of discrimination to thought experiments about the benefits and drawbacks of violence and pacifism, this PlayStation game can offer a great deal of source material for academic study in a variety of fields. In this thesis I have taken a look at the interdependent areas of narratology, media studies, and cultural studies with a particular focus on racial allegory in order to, firstly, examine the historical inspirations of US American anti-Black racism and anti-racist protest movements and, secondly, analyze how the game imagines the success and effectiveness, politically and morally, of various acts of protest. A wide range of options between peaceful and violent actions is offered throughout all three playable storylines, though the game culminates in an ultimately rather binary choice - assault the opposing party and beat them into submission or take peaceful action and appeal to a shared sense of compassion. Despite the fact that both sides offer compelling points and are equally allowed to use their voice to sway the player in a certain direction, the game does appear to favor a peaceful approach to protesting and rebelling. While the majority of other games that present such a conflict of discrimination or oppression might be more likely to offer only one path, namely a violent one, in which enemies must be defeated through brute force, *Detroit Become Human* opts for a different challenge. It asks the player to reflect on their actions and behavior towards other beings repeatedly, particularly when one's own actions will directly or indirectly affect minorities or victims of systemic oppression.

This, as mentioned, should be a crucial aspect of any entertainment medium today, given how impactful stereotyping, representation, and visibility have proven to be, but particularly when it comes to video games (Behm-Morawitz and Ta 13). Due to their interactivity, video games, perhaps more so than other media, allow the player to perform actions which influence the trajectory of the narrative. This is nowhere more true than in games which adhere to a butterfly-effect structure. Additionally, the considerable 're-playability' of *Detroit Become Human*, where the player can choose different paths again and again until all options are exhausted and all plotlines and outcomes have been explored, gives this game the unique

advantage of combining, in subsequent playthroughs, already familiar characters with new storylines. Players, as explained, have the ability to directly influence the story's development and outcome through a series of decisions, essentially fashioning the story to their own preferences, becoming co-authors alongside the game's creators. In the case of *TetraNinja's* playthroughs, this means either a stark adherence to values that can be interpreted as 'morally good' but also somewhat ineffective in bringing about significant change or it means understanding that continued violence, neglect, and antagonism can reach a point where they are no longer tolerable and will, therefore, be countered in equal measures of confrontation, even if such acts destroy any hope for future peace. Many of the game's acts of protest can be played through in a more pacifistic or a more destructive way, both of which often appear to be inspired by historical events in US anti-racist protesting over the last 60 years. Lunch counter sit-ins, kneeling during the national anthem, kissing in public, tagging surfaces with graffiti, marching, chanting, and many more are mirrored or re-interpreted by this game alongside images from other protest movements such as feminist and queer protesting.

Here, it also becomes clear that *Detroit Become Human*, despite evidently trying to tell a story of allegorical racism, uses other non-race-related systemic issues and their protesting to frame its story. "One planet, two races" (*TetraNinja Inventor* 1:00) can be graffitied across futuristic, self-driving cars at one point, which is meant to evoke a sense of togetherness and common ground between the game's opposing factions, humans and androids. Clearly, this is not factually correct, since there are many more than two races on this planet and androids are not a race but rather a species. However, the slogan underscores that in terms of oppression, there might not be a big difference between anti-black racism or classism outside of the gameworld and speciesism within. In each case, the dominant group wishes to hold on to power through discriminatory practices such as "[p]ositive self- and negative other-presentation" (Pallua, Knapp, and Exenberger 13), "[d]ehumanisation and devaluation of groups" (Lewis 116), and oppression through various channels (116). I would argue that *Detroit Become Human* is able to explore so many facets of racism and ethics and force players into self-reflection while still retaining significant entertainment value in part due to its posthumanist lens. Because the protagonists are androids who have their own species-specific needs and issues, such as needing Thirium and biocomponents to survive, while remaining full ethical agents

that the audience can, to an extent, identify with, the player is able to create both enough distance and a degree of relatability between the narrative's allegorical events and those real-world political challenges that such narratives ultimately wish to influence. As mentioned, this game could provide fertile ground for further research in a variety of areas, such as the depiction of most female characters as a kind of well-worn fictional archetype or the integration of religion as integral to human and humanoid groups. Using my thesis as a starting point, further research could also be conducted in analyses of public and media reactions to protesting and how governments might control media narratives to their advantage.

With regard to my own research questions, however, I have found that *Detroit Become Human* uses historical inspiration from American anti-black organized protesting rather effectively and is able to combine approaches to and acts of protest from movements across six decades. The step the game then takes to imagine how such a movement might begin, grow, and reach its first political milestone seems to be not only ethically relevant for an individual player's reflection on the discussed issues but also ethically relevant by providing a meaningful, necessary deliberation about political issues like police violence. Personally, I believe the importance of stories, especially interactive ones, that aim to challenge existing viewpoints and methods of communication and conduct cannot be overstated and must continue to grow as a field of academic research.

Appendix

List of abbreviations:

BLM = Black Lives Matter

NPC = non-playable character

PC = playable character

POC = person of color

QTE = quick time event

Abstract (English):

Detroit Become Human, a game released in 2018 for the PlayStation 4, uses a narrative of fictional posthumanist ethics as an allegory for racism in the present day. In this thesis, I explore two central points: a) which historical real-life events and movements does *Detroit Become Human* draw from in its depiction of racism and protesting in the US and b) which statements does *Detroit Become Human* make on the validity and eventual success of passively versus actively confrontational forms of protest. Given that the game portrays discrimination, protesting, and rebellion, player choices can be categorized along a spectrum from pacifism to violence, which becomes most evident in the narrative's climax. Allegorical racism can be used to convey a simplified, more accessible look at the complex concept and reality of discrimination and violence against minorities. Therefore, the value of stories like *Detroit Become Human* within the discourse about racial allegories and their impact is the aim of this thesis.

Key Words: video games, androids, allegorical racism, Black Lives Matter

Zusammenfassung (German):

Detroit Become Human, ein Spiel, das 2018 für die PlayStation 4 veröffentlicht wurde, verwendet ein Narrativ der fiktionalen post-humanistischen Ethik als Allegorie für den Rassismus der Gegenwart. In dieser Arbeit untersuche ich zwei zentrale Punkte: a) welche historischen Ereignisse und Bewegungen aus dem wirklichen Leben fungieren als Inspiration für die Darstellung in *Detroit Become Human* von Rassismus und Protesten in den USA und b) welche Aussagen trifft *Detroit Become Human* über die Validität und den künftigen Erfolg von passiv versus aktiv

konfrontativen Formen des Protestes. Angesichts dessen, dass das Spiel Diskriminierung, Proteste und Rebellion darstellt, können Spielerentscheidungen auf einem Spektrum von Pazifismus bis Gewalt angesiedelt werden, welche am eindeutigsten am Höhepunkt des Narrativs zu beobachten sind. Rassismus-Allegorien können verwendet werden um eine vereinfachte, leichter zugängliche Ansicht auf komplexe Konzepte und die Realität von Diskriminierung von Minderheiten eröffnen. Deshalb ist das Ziel dieser Arbeit, den Wert von Geschichten wie *Detroit Become Human* innerhalb des Diskurses um Rassismus-Allegorien und deren Einfluss aufzuzeigen.

Schlagwörter: Videospiele, Androiden, Rassismus-Allegorie, Black Lives Matter

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