

The Afro-Performative Ceiling and the Role of Blackness in “Detroit: Become Human” and “The Walking Dead” Series

By Tamaika Joseph

Abstract

This essay will examine and contrast two popular titles, “Detroit: Become Human” and “The Walking Dead,” approach to blackness, black characters, and important themes to construct feelings of empathy in dystopian worlds. They are praised for crafting diverse worlds and featuring black men, leading others to escape their respective worlds' perils. However, their portrayal of blackness differs. Detroit: Become Human uses black iconography and references, while The Walking Dead interconnects them with its mechanics and gameplay. Are they accurate, and do they truly create empathy? What are the differences, and which is more effective?

Introduction



Gently scenic snow falls and can be seen from outside the window pane. The fireplace emits a crackling sound as the embers burn the wood. Rose sits at the dinner table with her hands folded, inviting Kara to join her. A somber but intimate ballad plays in the background.

“Are you going to tell me what a deviant’s doing with a little girl?” Rose begins. Android Kara has two choices: Should she reply cautiously or **sincerely**?

“Her father was beating her. When I saw what was happening...” She pauses. “All of a sudden, I felt like her life was more important than mine. I had to protect her. So we ran away.”

Rose nods in affirmation, “ I understand.”

Kara has four different options. **“Why help?”**, “Many deviants?”, “Rose”, and “Thanks”

“Why are you helping us? Most humans hate androids.” Kara says.

“My people were often made to feel like their lives were worthless. Some survived but only because they found others along the way.” Rose says empathetically. Who could relate to androids if not black people?

Afropomorphic Androids in Detroit: Become Human

Detroit: Become Human (DBH) (Produced by Quantic Dream) is a stunning interactive role-playing video game with a branching narrative, receiving praise for its graphics, diversity, political and philosophical themes, and dynamic choice-based mechanical gameplay, where players have said they were able to feel agency and the impact of their decisions that ultimately leads to drastically different endings. *DBH* features what I’ve coined as “afropomorphic” androids due to its usage of androids as vehicles for the black experience. As players, we experience and interact with their plight and adversities while trying to obtain civil rights in postmodern Detroit, MI. In the year 2038, the Detroit, most people, are familiar with has vanished instead, replaced with a dystopic subversion where the unemployment rate has

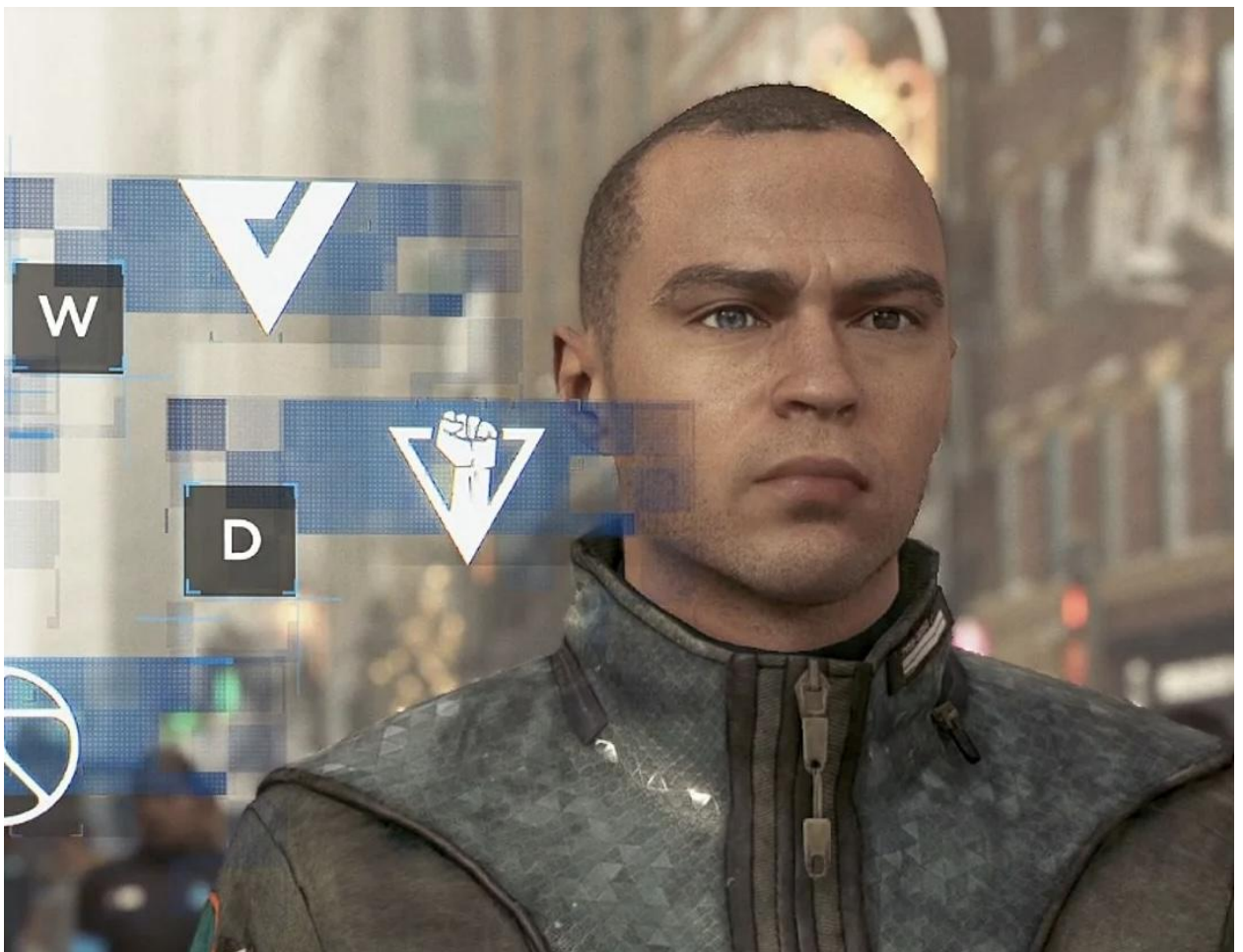
skyrocketed 37%, and human characters regularly express anxieties surrounding artificial intelligence and the automation of society. The game has three playable characters, Markus, Connor, and Kara, where the player makes choices that affect the characters' futures or lack thereof. Despite phenotypical differences, these characters are considered the same 'race.' All androids, like black people, are united in their shared experiences of oppression.

In "Becoming the Other: Examining Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Detroit: Become Human," Rebecca Leach and Marco Dehnert argue, "Given the diverse racial representation of androids in DBH, the androids are arguably the symbolic vehicles for any race that has experienced discrimination." Although there are two references to another historically marginalized identity in the game, this argument fails to consider the several primary references to black struggles and oppression—for example, the racial setting of Detroit. Detroit, MI, is known as the place where many racial riots ensued during the 1960s, as the location where the first major civil rights march began, and where activist Martin Luther King Jr. gave the famous "I Have a Dream speech." A speech that spoke of his hope for African Americans to be able not only to coexist and be granted equality with their racial counterparts. A dream shared by Markus, the phenotypically black android whose name resembles the iconic figure, leads the android revolt. The androids can co-opt the famous phrase "I have a dream" and alter it to "We have a dream," a slogan for their movement.

Markus is also a victim of police brutality. He gets shot by the police when they mistake him for being an intruder, even though he's the one who called them. When the android revolt begins, the player must decide which symbols should be used to identify the cause. The player is presented with four options, one being a reworked version of the black power symbol. The raised fist iconography represents the long unyielding in the face of injustice and advocates for Black

Americans's rights. The Black Panther Party, formed in 1966, was enacted to help protect African Americans from being victims of police brutality. Later, the same raised fist symbol was adopted by them.

During a demonstration, players have to decide whether to opt for a pacifist Martin Luther King demonstration or a violent Malcolm X one where he can kill police officers, commit arson, and tear down statues. Leach and Dehnert note, " Though the game developers' motivations for providing so many opportunities for a violent Markus are unclear, it begs the question of whether violence is being pushed as an aspect of Markus's Black masculine identity and Blackness in general."



In addition, the game has American Android Acts that are directly taken from slave codes and segregation laws. Androids are not allowed to own guns and must stand in small compartments in the back of the bus. Black people were prohibited from owning weapons because their oppressors feared a revolt and were relegated to sit on the back of the bus. This makes the intention to characterize and proposition androids as being a pseudo-black race clear.

David Cage, a *DBH's* writer denies any real-world connection or his usage of the events he misrepresented in his game despite putting them in there albeit heavy-handily. "The story I'm telling is really about androids. They're discovering emotions and wanting to be free. If people want to see parallels with this or that, that's fine with me. But my story's about androids who want to be free. (Cage)" This statement is incredibly disingenuous. Co-opting black history, iconography, and movements to make a game and then denying taking inspiration from them is a form of cultural appropriation.

Interestingly enough, Quantic Dream Co-CEO Guillaume de Fondaumière appears to have disagreed with Cage in a now-deleted tweet that states, "Racism, in any shape or form, is shameful, stupid and must be fought against everywhere and always. All lives matter & are equal regardless of skin color, religious belief, sex, sexual orientation, or else. @detroit_game is PRECISELY about that." This response contradicts Cage's, who implied that *DBH* had no racial allegories. His usage of All Lives Matter is also ironic because it's a slogan that detracts from the importance of black lives. It appears that *DBH* is not just about androids, after all.





Guillaume#becomehuman
@GdeFondaumiere

Racism, in any shape or form, is shameful, stupid and must be fought against, everywhere and always. All lives matter & are equal regardless of skin colour, religious belief, sex, sexual orientation, or else.

[@Detroit_Game](#) is PRECISELY about that.

1:08 AM · 6/1/20 from Garches, France · Twitter for iPhone

4 Retweets 2 Likes



With all these references to the African American experience, it becomes difficult not to view several characters as stereotypes, and they do not stray far from them. Connor is an “Uncle Tom”. He is introduced as a more advanced android sent by the android production company CyberLife and aids the Detroit Police Department in catching deviants. He works alongside humans who degrade him. If he is very computer-like, his partner Hank will despise him. If he is kind and compassionate, Hank befriends him. In his subconscious, he meets with Amanda, a phenotypically black AI who aligns with the sapphire stereotype. She has a mentor-like relationship with Connor. She scolds him for showing emotion. She is cold, uncompassionate, and domineering. In the end, if players choose to have Connor join the revolution, she attempts to usurp control of Connor’s program to assassinate androids.

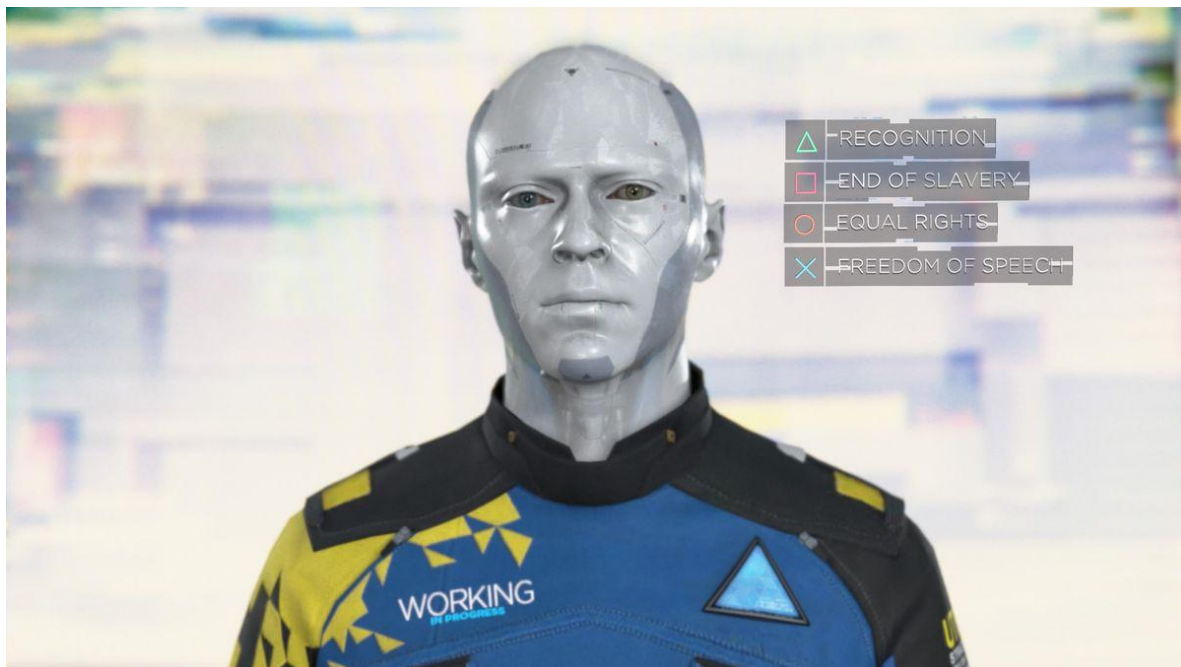
Markus is reminiscent of the “Magical negro”. He exhibits abilities no other android models seem to possess, such as voice mimicry, musicality, and artistic skills. He can make people deviant just by touching them. Unlike all the other Androids, Markus appears to be more singular. Multiple Connors and Kara’s exist, but only one Markus is shown. When he is thrown in a dump and damaged, he is surrounded by other dismantled androids trapped there. In a Christ-like fashion, he scavenges for his missing parts. He becomes reborn and dawns two different colored eyes and a new jacket.

Lucy, the phenotypically black battered android, is reminiscent of the same trope. When she meets Markus, she heals him by welding him together, holds his hand, closes her eyes, and mystically relates to him a prophecy. “Your choices will shape our destiny.”

Rose Chapman is a black woman who was widowed years ago. She raises her temperamental son, Adam, and struggles to make ends meet as a single mother. Due to her name and role in the android rebellion, she is an amalgamation of two historical black figures, Rosa

Parks and Harriet Tubman. Believing Androids are alive and human despite her son Adams' retorts, she hosts deviants in her house seeking asylum from the unjust outside world. When Rose meets Kara, she explains her reasoning for helping androids, alluding to her people's plight and the android revolution being comparable. She assists deviants in getting to Canada because their policies on androids are less restrictive.

DBH's attempts at Empathy



DBH demonstrates a surface-level understanding of African-American oppression. Not only is it dehumanizing and comparing black people to objects, it is akin to the same racist rhetoric that justified slavery in the first place, i.e, the 3/5ths compromise. Black people were considered 3/5ths of a person. The lack of distinguishable features between humans and androids shows this. The oppression of black people is tied to being othered and looking different from the white race. Neither Androids nor humans can recognize the other. Kara doesn't realize Alice isn't human, and neither do other humans. Kara painlessly removes her circular LED, cuts her hair, changes her clothing, and quickly passes for a human. "As David J. Leonard observes, by

affording players the ability to "try on" marginalized identities," these games elicit pleasure and play on White fantasies while simultaneously affirming White privilege through virtual play,TM raising the question of how an already othered audience might experience DBH." (Leach) Black people cannot alter their phenotypic features so easily to be accepted as members of their society. This assimilation is not equivalent to chemically straightening, adopting a more American dialectic and style, plastic surgery, and skin bleaching black people had to endure to gain more acceptance; all of which still have adverse effects on the community today. Presenting difficult topics in such a manner waters down the subject.



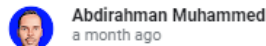
Another issue is the decolonization of the mind. Before becoming deviant, the playable androids must enter a traumatic situation and break through their commands. The player must press a couple of buttons on their controller and gain the ability to think for themselves. Markus and Connor can free androids from oppressive software just by touching them. Decolonization is recounted as a harrowing experience by Frederick Douglass. In his narrative, he talks about the

anguish he experienced when he learned to read because it gave him insight into his condition. That was simplified to pressing three buttons at once.

In the good ending, Markus gives a speech about how the rebellion is solved and how “racism” is a thing of the past for them. This implies Racism no longer exists at the end of the game with the abolishment of slavery. However, this is not true for African Americans. Years of systematic oppression precede years after slavery. There is a common misconception that racism no longer affects black people and that everything is jovial. This idea is invalidating and allows for the stagnation of progress.

DBH attributes humanness to empathy and individuality, but most characters presented are rather “robotic” one-dimensional tropes, and all harbor the same opinions regardless of experiences. Androids may have blood and a core similar to a heart, but at the end of the day, they still aren’t human. Players are constantly reminded of this by allowing Connor to become replaced after breaking and androids communicating in a way a person would connect a speaker to their phone. It stumbles narratively, and does not address critical philosophical questions. How can the androids establish individuality when several other hundreds of models look exactly like them? Why do the androids never discuss the difference between them and humans? In the end, one can only pose the question: how empathetic is *DBH*?

The only way to determine this is through measuring its impact. After looking through reviews from sites like IGN and Google, it becomes clear that many of the messages it’s trying to convey get lost in translation. Very few reviews even mentioned the game’s politics; they focused on graphics, gameplay, and choice. There were even some reviews that were very troubling, considering the racial allegory.



This is the top notch games all of the world.

This is the best game ever created in the history of games. It's a masterpiece that even after two years of its release stays deep in your heart, wanting to play more and missing terribly the Detroit Universe and the characters. It makes you think, it makes you feel, it motivates you and makes you cry from pure emotions. I loved everything about this game, the story, the characters, voiceover, graphics, soundtrack, gameplay, multiple choice, beautiful sceneries, and the ending... Wow, what an ending it was! Actually you have more than 40 different ways to end this game but in the best case scenario and when you see the last after credits scene, you gasp. I just want to hug the characters, especially Connor and Hank, so real and human they seem. And also each and every person in the incredible team that worked on this masterpiece. I love you, Quantic Dream. Thank you, David Cage! I never read a book, saw a movie or played a game that made such a big impact on me! It helped me to fight depression after the death of my grandmother, it made me want to believe in myself again and to start writing a science fiction book, learn how to draw and compose music. All because the game had such a powerful effect on me!

And please remain true to your games, never let the influences or politics interfere with your games. As you always said, "you (the fans) are the reason we make our games". So please give us another masterpiece like this one, though it will be very hard to beat your own impossibly perfect creation!

8 people found this helpful.

 Helpful

 Unhelpful


Here, this user praises David Cage for not letting politics influence his very political game.



I didn't appreciate being forced to wash the dishes by my meth head unemployed owner when I was there Kara. I felt the Markus Android was unappreciative, he had a good owner who cared for him and taught him a lot. I found it ironic that he was such a hater of humans. He should have been crushed, melted down and turned into a toaster. I did like the calmness of playing the police androids Connor. And as for Carlos...well didn't he have a chip on his shoulder?

Was this review helpful to you?

 Helpful

 Unhelpful

User Shane Taylor's review is especially troubling and lacks empathy. To him, Markus should've enjoyed being enslaved because he had a good owner. Interestingly enough, he enjoyed playing the police android and hunting them down.



John Barber
2 weeks ago



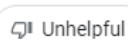
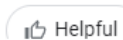
Detroit massively disappointed me. I had seen the pretty neat trailer that released in late 2015 and I felt like we could have been getting one of the best PlayStation titles ever made - oh boy, how wrong I was.

The game starts off promising with nice introductions to each character, however the writing quickly devolves into bland political, seen-before, cliché territory. It's crazy how different the final product is from that original teaser trailer. It mainly just became a buddy-cop crime-drama that I've seen done before various times more fun and investing decades prior.

Now let's mention the characters. I was really excited to play as Kara, she looked promising from that original trailer and just became an uninteresting, poorly-acted character that had no real reason to be in the game - the final twist makes her whole arc inconsequential. Markus just felt like the stereotypical human rights activist - but he was pretentious - I really didn't enjoy how they handled his story arc. He had a lot of corny/cringeworthy sequences like when he broadcasted himself across the city LOL. Now for the two best characters, (which isn't saying much) Connor and Hank; this was the buddy-cop android thing I was talking about earlier and it really isn't interesting - yeah I mean Bryan Deckhart and Clancy Brown are good actors, they attempted to carry a pretty uninspiring screenplay that I just felt became more and more bland and just bad after the first few scenes.

I know a lot of people love this game, and good for you, I'm glad you love it but I just... didn't. Compared to Quantic Dream's three previous titles, which are all great, this just felt underdeveloped and boring. In fact, the main issue the game has is that the way the story is told is that it's painfully boring. Even though the game is well-directed it's just eehh.

6 people found this helpful.



This person was able to recognize themes but calls Markus a “human rights activist” but didn't enjoy his story, finding it “corny” and “cringeworthy”. Markus was the least favorite character. He also enjoyed hunting down the androids.

Blackness and Criminality



The Walking Dead features the protagonist Lee Everett (voiced by Dave Fennoy), a black professor who is trying to survive a post-apocalyptic zombie-plagued world and raise the orphaned child named Clementine. The game begins with Lee Everett in handcuffs in the back of

a police car. He's going to jail for murdering the mayor after catching him sleeping with his wife. Immediately, Lee is presented as a stereotype. We begin to see how other characters fuse his blackness with criminality, impacting our play.

The opening scene with the officer staring at Lee through the rearview mirror. He tauntly speaks of Lee's innocence, saying, "Well, I guess you didn't do it then." He continues to drive Lee to jail. As a player, we notice the police officer has a shotgun in the passenger seat as Lee is handcuffed. The tip of the shotgun barrel is always in the frame throughout their entire conversation. It serves as a reminder of the danger black men face within society at the hands of policemen and builds tension. This shows that even while he is in a submissive position, the officer still sees him as a threat and keeps his gun close and in view so that Lee can see it.

Players are presented with a choice to make Lee disparage the policemen. When players choose that option, Lee grunts in disgust and doesn't say anything because Lee knows as a black man, doing so would not be inconsequential. The officer talks to him and pays no attention to the road while driving. He hits a zombie, causing a collision on the highway. If the player makes Lee interact with the gun, he asks, "Why did he have his gun out?"

Later, Lee finds Clementine, a little girl, in a tree house after her babysitter becomes a zombie. As they travel together, people mistrust Lee without knowing his criminal past. Herschel Greene, the owner of the Greene farm, asks Clementine, "Do you know this man?" She answers yes, but Herschel refuses to wipe the suspicion from his face. Another example of interesting interaction is between him and Kenny, a character from Florida who seems decent, but his prejudice rears its ugly head. The two share an interesting dynamic. When Lee's survival group comes across a family that owns a dairy farm, tensions are high when Kenny alludes to the Johnsons hiding something. Together, they are in front of a paddle-locked door they try to think

of ways to unlock, hoping to uncover what the farmers are hiding. Kenny boldly assumes that Lee knows how to pick a lock. To which Lee is astonished, and Kenny says it's because of Lee's "Urban," which is another way to allude to his blackness.

Blackness alters Narrative

Lee's Blackness is integrated with the mechanics and interactions of the games in several ways. In "Dystopian Blackness and Limits of Racial Empathy in The Walking Dead and the Last of Us," Russworm remarks, "exchanges between Lee and Kenny that reflect the game's critical dramatizations of racial bias occur regardless of the player's choices. One narrative cutscene in episode 2, just after Kenny mockingly calls Lee "professor," satirically conveys some of the game's critical awareness of US race relations." Their relationship is one with many challenges because Kenny is threatened by Lee's "fancy job" and black exceptionalism they are not able to get along unless Lee pretty much supports him in every action. If Lee disagrees with Kenny when he is later bitten, Kenny will refuse to help him.

Another way his blackness adds to the narrative is through his interactions with Christa. Christa is a black woman, they meet after stopping the train due to a blockage. She is the only character able to recognize Clementine is not his daughter. The only plausible explanation is that she can discern this is due to their blackness. This level of detail creates an authentic black character.

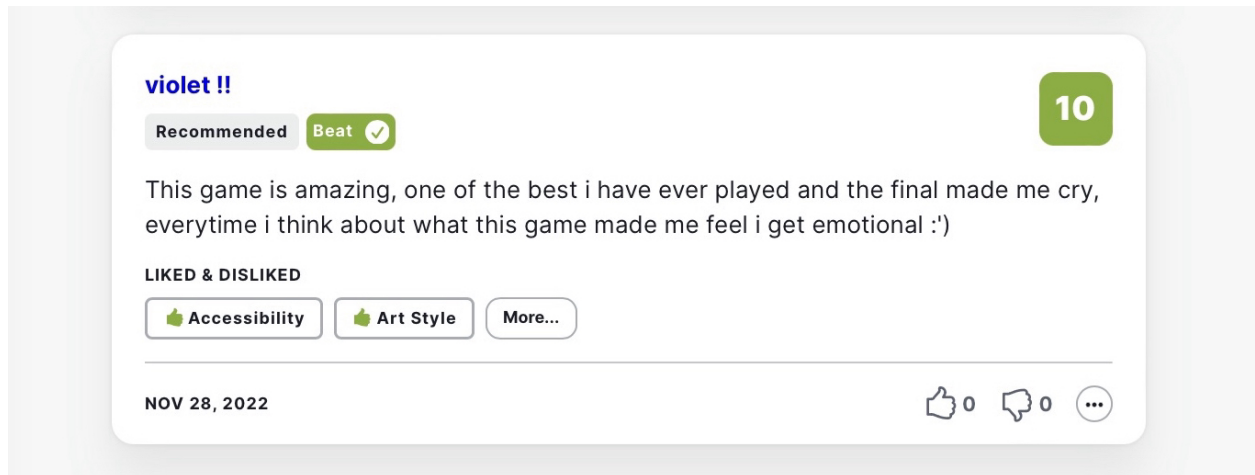
Telltale's Subversion



Lee's interactions with Clementine humanize him and display a positive image of black paternity. Lee has several opportunities to teach, care for, and protect her physically and emotionally, from killing zombies on her pathway to preventing her from eating human meat. He also teaches her how to protect herself from the zombies. Russworm says,

The emotional and physical staging of the two characters established within the noninteractive cutscenes (which by far outnumber the interactive QTE opportunities in the game) serves as a powerful critical retraction of the dominant negative imagery around black fathers as irresponsible, incompetent, and absentee, making this aspect of the game's design very much in line ideologically with what we might imagine as a critical racial dystopia.

When reading reviews, players focus on that aspect of him. They talk about not wanting to shoot him even though it would preserve her image of him and his humanity. This is important because, as Lee is the character players usually are shooting without mercy in other games.(Ryan Smith, Empathy Games)



PigeonDemigod

10

Recommended 

Broke my ****ing heart.

LIKED & DISLIKED

 Accessibility  Art Style More...

JUL 24, 2023

 0  0 

Spritte

10

Recommended   PC

This review contains spoilers. HIDE

I loved this game so much, and I'm also an idiot because for some reason I love Ben and Lily and chose to let her get away and I protected Ben till the game didn't let me anymore 😭

LIKED & DISLIKED

 Art Style  Characters More...

JUL 20, 2023

 0  0 

ExouKage

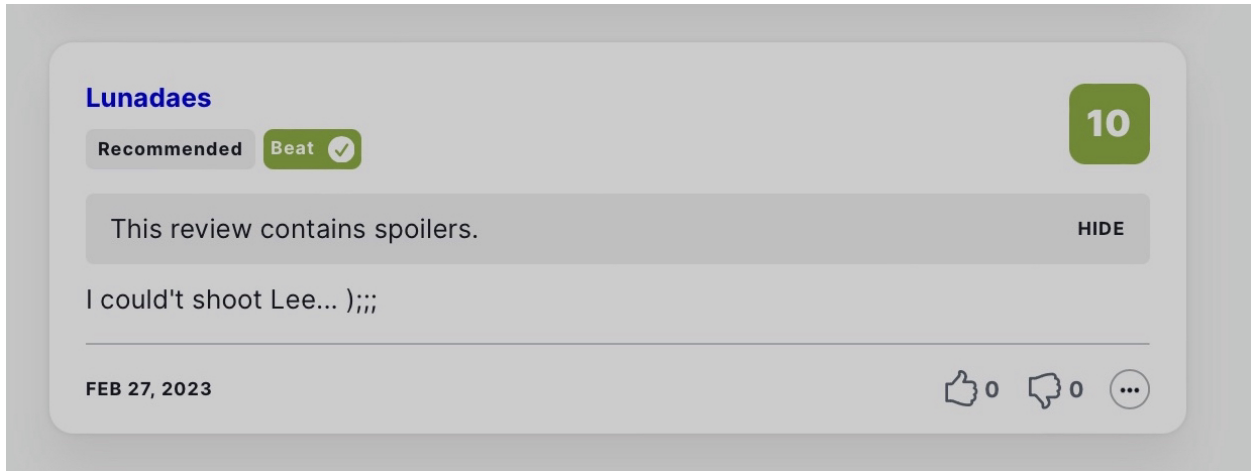
10

Recommended   PC

Love this. rip lee

LIKED & DISLIKED

 Accessibility  Art Style More...



Despite this, Russworm criticizes *The Walking Dead* for being able to make players cry “without engaging with any consequences or allegorical meanings.” She highlights how it presents the common trope in sci-fi. She states, “At the game’s end, we are left with a prototypical image of sacrificial blackness— like we’ve seen so many times before in narrative history. In a game and franchise that self-consciously emphasizes humanity, empathy, and intersubjectivity as a contrast to the moral degradation of society, Lee’s death reveals the limits of that overall project when it comes to the minority characters.” However, Lee’s death is called “sacrificial.” It should be examined because his death does not further his white counterparts. His death develops another black character. He lives on in Clementine's heart as she remembers him and references him. Russworm states, “An ending more attuned to the narrative history of dystopian blackness, perhaps one that radically and critically envisions an apocalyptic future where a black father and daughter survive together—by any means necessary—to fight another day would certainly represent something we have rarely, if ever, seen in visual culture.” Being black has uneven consequences in sci-fi however, this is true in real life, which is why the ending feels realistic. Players still have the memory of Lee and Clementine’s fight for survival, his death

doesn't change the relationship built between the two characters. It would've been nice if Lee survived, as many players, including myself, miss seeing his strong characterization.

In season 2, the racial tensions of the game drop almost entirely. Clementine has no racial awareness of why other adult characters forget she's a child. Black children are often aged up and are treated as more threatening than their counterparts. She almost gets shot by a man named Nick as a result of this. Nick and his group cruelly lock her in a shed for a night due to the uncertainty of the bite on her arm, even though several armed adults would've been able to handle a potential child zombie.

Telltale reliance on stereotypes makes its way to Rebecca. Rebecca is a pregnant "angry black woman" who can't determine who the father of her baby is despite being married. She is cruel to Clementine and argumentative. Later, they do subvert it, humanizing her by showing her to be kinder to Clementine, but she dies shortly after.

Conclusion

White writers are stimulating blackness, and there are limits to which their portrayal becomes accurate in truly identifying a black experience. Blackness performs stereotypically in many narratives. Cage tries to create empathy for androids using the black experience but misrepresents it, which is saddening considering that, visually, Detroit includes many realistic black characters. In misrepresenting characters, players empathize with androids disconnected from their blackness. There is no empathy for black people or their experiences. Many are unable to recognize the racial allegories present. Telltale has good visual representation but suffers from the reliance on introducing stereotypes to subvert many of its black characters and also eliminates diegetic narrative opportunities in the later renditions games centered around Clementine's blackness. It is important that we critically analyze games with black

representations so that we can avoid previous mistakes and advocate for a more inclusive and empathetic industry.

Works Cited

Burgess, Melinda C. R, Dill, Karen E., S. Stermer, Paul, Burgess, Stephen R. & Brown, Brian P. (2011) Playing With Prejudice: The Prevalence and Consequences of Racial Stereotypes in Video Games, *Media Psychology*, 14:3, 289-311, DOI: 10.1080/15213269.2011.596467

Leach, Rebecca & Dehnert, Marco (2021) Becoming the Other: examining race, gender, and sexuality in Detroit: Become Human, *Review of Communication*, 21:1, 23-32, DOI: 10.1080/15358593.2021.1892173

<https://issues.digitalpatmos.com/vol5issue4/vol5issue4/the-experience-of-social-stigma-beyond-racism-a-critical-analysis-of-detroit-become-human/#site-header>

Pallavicini, F., Pepe, A., Caragnano, C.C., Mantovani, F. (2020). Video Games to Foster Empathy: A Critical Analysis of the Potential of Detroit: Become Human and the Walking Dead. In: Antona, M., Stephanidis, C. (eds) *Universal Access in Human-Computer Interaction. Applications and Practice. HCII 2020. Lecture Notes in Computer Science()*, vol 12189. Springer, Cham.

Pettersen, Tanya Laolapha. “‘More Human than Humans’ – How Video Games Play an Important Part In ...” *UIA* , 2019, uia.brage.unit.no/uia-xmlui/bitstream/handle/11250/2617211/Pettersen,%20Tanya%20Laolapha.pdf?sequence=1.

Russworm, Treaandrea M. “DYSTOPIAN BLACKNESS AND THE LIMITS OF RACIAL EMPATHY IN THE WALKING DEAD AND THE LAST OF US.” *Gaming Representation: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Video Games*, edited by Treaandrea M.

Russworm and Jennifer Malkowski, Indiana University Press, 2017, pp. 109–28. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt2005rgq.11>. Accessed 13 July 2023.

Ryan Smith, “Empathy Games: Finding the Virtues amid the Violence of Telltale’s The Walking Dead,” Gameological Society, May 13, 2013, <http://gameological.com/2013/05/empathy-in-the -walking-dead/>

Schubert, Stefan ' Liberty for Androids!": Player Choice, Politics, and Populism in Detroit: Become Human", European Journal of American Studies (Online), 16-3 | 2021, Online since 09 September 2021, connection on 17 September 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/17360>; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ejas.17360>

<https://www.ign.com/games/detroit-become-human/user-reviews>

<https://www.ign.com/games/detroit-become-human/user-reviews>

Detroit: Become Human (Quantic Dream/Sony Interactive Entertainment, 2018)

The Walking Dead (Telltale Games, 2012)