

“Who thinks beating a child is entertainment?”: Ideological Constructions of the Figure of ‘The Child’ in *Detroit: Become Human*

Emma Reay

University of Cambridge
63 Hawkey Road
Cambridge
CB2 9ET
07482522220
Ejr73@cam.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

This article draws on sociological and anthropological theories relating to cultural constructions of the figure of ‘the child’ to determine whether *Detroit: Become Human* by Quantic Dream affirms or subverts ideological beliefs about children. It argues that much of the backlash Quantic Dream experienced following the premiere of the game’s trailer, which featured a scene of child abuse, can be understood part of a broader moral performance that relies on the sanctity of ‘the child’ to function as a touchstone for the modern Western society. It concludes that far from challenging dominant narratives about the moral value of ‘the child’, *Detroit: Become Human* replicates a conservative, reactionary, paternalistic view of children’s position within society.

Keywords

Childhood studies, close reading, quantic dream, ideology, children, representation

INTRODUCTION

In 2017 at Paris Games Week, Sony opened its annual showcase with a trailer for Quantic Dream’s new Playstation 4 title *Detroit: Become Human* (henceforth *D:BH*). The short promotional clip depicts a scene of domestic violence in which a father beats his young daughter to death. At the close of this harrowing sequence, the phrase ‘Things Could Have Been Different’ appears on screen before the event replays, demonstrating the multiple, divergent outcomes typical of branching narrative games. The trailer had a mixed reception, with some commentators praising its visual style and gripping narrative, while others found its depictions of child abuse and domestic violence to be insensitive and inappropriate. Concerns centred on the idea that these fraught topics might function merely as superficial “window dressing” (Robinson 2017) in the game by appropriating the emotional power of these dark themes without engaging with the ramifications of representing them. However, many of those who found the trailer uncomfortable also expressed cautious optimism that the careful treatment of distressing subject matter could signal the maturity of video games as a medium and affirm their place alongside other culturally legitimised art forms.

Quantic Dream, led by self-styled *auteur* David Cage, has built an identity around the conscious desire to create the types of emotional engagement typically elicited by Art and Literature. Known for their cinematic, narrative-driven games that draw extensively on tropes from film noir and Hollywood action blockbusters, the

development team has a history of tackling heavy topics and delivering affecting set pieces. In fact, child abuse, child exploitation, and child murder feature as plot points and rhetorical devices in four out of five of Quantic Dream's recently published titles, alongside representations of torture, rape, psychosis, depression, and suicide. Quantic Dream's predilection for centring abuse and psychological trauma has previously been praised by gaming commentators, with *Heavy Rain* in particular receiving critical acclaim for its dark mood and emotional intensity. What is more, other game trailers that premiered at Paris Games Week in 2017 featured violent and disturbing content - *The Hong Kong Massacre* (VRESKI), *Blood and Truth* (SIE London Studio), *Ghost of Tsushima* (Sucker Punch Productions), for example, all represent warfare, murder, and torture - but were not deemed controversial by attendees. Considering Quantic Dream's previous output and the violent content of concurrent trailers, why did the trailer for *D:BH* provoke marked unease and ambivalence amongst its audience?

Cage responded to accounts of his audience's ambivalence with defensive indignation. In an interview with Eurogamer's editor Martin Robinson, Cage accused detractors of having medium-specific bias against video games, and positioned himself as an avant-garde artist, misunderstood by the mainstream and persecuted by censors - a modern-day "Baudelaire" (Robinson 2017). He implied that his critics lacked the vision necessary to conceive of a future in which video games transcend the category of mere entertainment, and sit upon the throne of high art, beyond accusations of tawdry exploitation and sensationalism. Arguably, Cage was sparring with phantoms of his own creation, since the majority of the attendees at Paris Games Week belong to a demographic that is likely to be deeply invested in grand visions of the future of gaming, and commentators such as Robinson were not attempting to police video game content nor denigrate video game affordances, but rather were thoughtfully processing their aesthetic and affective experiences of the trailer.

Cage's concerns, however, became warrantable when a British tabloid newspaper ran a story branding *D:BH* "repulsive" (Manning & Murphy, 2017). *The Mail on Sunday* article was followed by an almost identical piece in *The Sun* (Parker 2017) published under the hyperbolic heading "Most Disturbing Video Game EVER?". Without any perceivable sense of irony, *The Mail* reprimanded Quantic Dream for sensationalising an important issue in order to sell a product, instead of engaging with the topic in a constructive way. The article collated condemnatory opinions from a number of different pundits, including members of parliament, the Children's Commissioner for England, and representatives from child protection charities. With the exception of the Children's Commissioner, it appears that none the experts cited had either seen the trailer or a playthrough of the game, and were basing their assessments on verbal summaries of its content alone. Conservative MP Damian Collins proclaimed it "completely wrong for domestic violence to be part of a video game regardless of what the motivation is", suggesting that what he finds objectionable is this particular pairing of medium and content, demonstrating the type of medium-specific prejudice bemoaned by Cage. Dame Esther Rantzen, founder of children's protection charity Childline, agreed that video games were an inappropriate medium for this topic, and imagined that since video games are interactive, *D:BH* must amount to a child abuse simulator. She posed the incredulous, rhetorical question, "Who thinks beating a child is entertainment?", implying the game caters to an audience of depraved abusers. A simulator, she argued, might titillate potential abusers, emboldening them to enact their "fantasies" upon real children. Using this premise, she justified her moral outrage by causally linking virtual violence with real violence. There is, however, an interesting slippage between her concern for real children and her concern for fictional children. She insisted that "designers have a duty to protect children, and that responsibility extends to protecting virtual children", and demanded that Sony "remove this scene where a virtual child is put in life-threatening danger." Since virtual children can only

ever be in virtual danger, Rantzen's desire to extend the protections reserved for real children to virtual children is perhaps indicative of a need to defend a specific ideological construction of 'the child'. Anneke Meyer notes the tendency to conflate concern for children with concern for 'the child' when she comments, "adult indignation [about child abuse] is not only motivated by the harm inflicted on children but also by the infringement of adult ideals of childhood" (2007:102). Chris Jenks adds that the treatment of 'the child' is a moral barometer for a society: he writes, "[W]hatever the general condition of childhood in society (treated violently, exploited, pornographized) it may be regarded as an index of the state of the wider social relation, the moral bond in society." (2005:38) Media that present the mistreatment of children without emphatically condemning it, threaten to undermine the moral authority of the society that produced those media. Violence against children - including virtual representations of children - strikes at the heart of the Western sense of moral superiority and undermines neo-colonial claims to global stewardship and cultural paternalism. One could argue that performances of outrage at the thought of innocence assaulted protect contemporary Western society's collective self-image, as much as they protect the well-being of young individuals.

In this article, I take seriously both the discomfort felt by gaming commentators and the outrage expressed by children's rights advocates in response to *D:BH*'s trailer, examining these linked reactions using critical frameworks from childhood studies that claim 'the child' is, first and foremost, a rhetorical construct. Although childhood is commonly understood as a natural, universal, and biological state determined by measurable stages of cognitive and physiological development and a person's age in years, Karin Lesnik-Oberstein points out, "while specific biological changes occur as individual *Homo sapiens* mature, the diverse meanings, understandings, ideals and rituals that surround these shared phenomena are not only arbitrary correlations within any cultural group, but also vary dramatically across both cultures and (pre) historical periods" (2011:37). In this sense, childhood is a social position, delineated by boundaries that vary across time periods and cultures, and, as Jenks puts it, "sustained in language and in the discourses of the professions, the institutions and the specialisms which serve to patrol the boundaries marked out around childhood as a social status" (2005:11). 'The child' is romanticised, essentialised, and politicised - in fact its inviolability makes it a powerful metonymic stand in for morality at all points along the political spectrum (Edelman, 2004). As Meyer writes, the figure of 'the child' "has become a moral rhetoric that can legitimize anything without actually have to explain it" (2007:98). Any number of political stances can be inscribed upon the child's vacant, depersonalised, purified blankness to great effect, meaning that 'the child' is arguably one of the most anxiously overdetermined sites of moral preponderance in contemporary Euro-American society. Considering that the game's explicit themes are emancipation and social revolution, and that it draws (clumsily, and indiscriminately) on the iconography of the Civil Rights movement, Suffrage, and, to a lesser extent, Pride demonstrations¹, this paper asks whether *D:BH* poses a challenge to the hegemony of adulthood or whether it reinforces the alterity of childhood and the asymmetry of age-based hierarchies.

METHODOLOGY

Sjöblom points out that, "children in digital games have been studied a lot less than children in front of digital games. While the child player is a frequent topic in academic discourse, the child avatar or NPC is all but invisible in games studies" (2015:67). This

article takes a step towards readdressing this imbalance by taking a text-oriented approach that centres *D:BH*'s child-character, Alice, building on the close reading methods outlined and developed by Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum (2011). By attending to the ways in which overt messaging about the significance of the figure of 'the child' might be undermined by the mechanisms and dynamics of *D:BH*'s design, this article engages with Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum's sense that "close reading is way of laying bare the faults and inconsistencies of a media artefact" (2011:262). I heed their advice regarding the importance of constructing analytical lenses to view data collected from playthroughs by synthesising contemporary theories of childhood and comparing them with the attitudes expressed in the media coverage of *D:BH*. Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum enumerate the challenges faced by researchers conducting close readings of digital games, including the indeterminacy of digital, ludic texts, the broad scope of virtual worlds containing multiple agents, the varying levels of ludic difficulty, and the necessity of oscillating between the positions of critical distance and playful engagement. To manage some of these challenges, I turn to Diane Carr's (2019) recent work. Carr's method involves "playing the game through several times and then engaging in a closer consideration of particular moments within the game through forms of fragmentation (repeated play, taking and reviewing screenshots). These fragments [are] then fragmented in turn, their elements 'unpacked'". Carr uses her "experience of playing the game [as] the basis of a decision about the richest and most relevant or evocative levels or chapters for further analysis", and rejects the concept of a 'implied player' in favour of positioning herself as the "player-as-analyst" (2017:4). Following Carr, I also adopt an autoethnographic stance, rooting my critical analysis in my own subjective experiences of *D:BH*. I am mindful of how my identity and beliefs - as well as the socio-temporal contexts of my playthroughs - shape my responses to this game, but I am careful not to draw overly reductive links between my sociocultural position and my interpretations. However, my approach differs from Carr's in two key ways. Firstly, I am locating my aesthetic experience of *D:BH* within a pre-selected theoretical framework. This is because the research questions underpinning this article originated outside of the text itself in the reactions of two distinct interpretive communities, neither of whom had had extensive experience of the game. The second point of divergence from Carr's methodology is the manner in which I record my playthroughs. Carr encounters issues wherein the "role of the player-as-analyst [blurs] into the role of the sort-of-player-as-earnest-yet-thwarted-archivist" (2017:6), and she also finds that the time-consuming, repetitive nature of the fragmentation process dulls her usual sense of curious, creative enjoyment that she experiences when playing video games for other purposes. I have tried to retain an element of creative play in the archival process, whilst also separating archival work from analytical work as much as is possible. Having selected a section of the text for close analysis, I play it through pausing only briefly to note down plot points, key dialogue, and important controller inputs. I then immediately write a short prose anecdote detailing my experience of this playthrough, using figurative, literary language that attempts to capture both the nuance of my visceral, kinaesthetic, embodied reactions to the text and the expressive eloquence of the text's non-verbal signifiers. The ludic challenge of this process, as I have argued elsewhere (Reay, 2018), is to transcribe the somatic, tactile, visual, auditory, ludic, and performative signifiers into verbal language, without narrowing their communicative breadth or arresting their transient nature - one could think of it as an extensive, multimodal crossword puzzle. The intention for this prose piece is not to create an objectively accurate verbal transcript of a specific sequence within a multimodal text, but to preserve with fidelity the aesthetic experience of an individual - potentially unrepeatable - playthrough. This alleviates much of the anxiety associated with the archival stage of game analysis, since the unintentional over-emphasis of certain details or the omission of others is acceptable within this context, as these 'errors' bring to the fore the most impactful and significant of the text's formal properties. One could consider this stage of my method as a form of ekphrasis: the

verbal text produced in response to a game is a remediation of that game, transformed by being filtered through a singular, subjective experience. These ekphrastic anecdotes can be included as appendices in works of games criticism in order to make the analysis of a game accessible to those who cannot replicate a specific playthrough, whilst also safeguarding the analysis against technological obsolescence that might prevent firsthand access to the primary text in the future. What is more, should researchers want to integrate close readings of a game's verbal paratexts, reviews, player commentaries, or media coverage into their analysis, these written anecdotes facilitate consistent panmedial approaches across texts, allowing researchers to directly compare formal properties such as lexical choice, syntactic structure, grammatical forms (including the designation of subject positions), and the use of figurative language. In this article, for example, I locate my analysis of *D:BH* within an interpretive framework shaped by a brief close reading of *The Mail on Sunday*'s critique of the game. Finally, Aarseth writes, "aesthetic analysis, just like a computer game, cannot afford to bore its audience, it must cut to the chase and zoom in on the elements that make the game interesting" (2003:2). Although the ekphrastic anecdotes need not be included in the body of an article, snippets of these playthroughs can 'zoom in' on particular elements in an efficient, engaging manner.

ANALYSIS

Beneath *The Mail on Sunday* article about *D:BH* is a hyperlinked advertising bar recommending 'related articles' (see Figure 1).

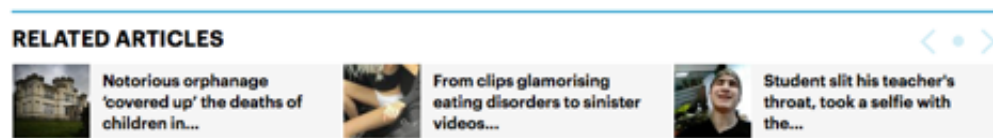


Figure.1 A hyperlinked bar beneath the *D:BH* article suggesting further *Mail* articles to read.

The bar suggests an exposé of an orphanage implicated in the deaths of numerous children, including a baby boy who was "savagely beaten by a nun", an article warning parents of the "Terrifying truth about what your child watches on YouTube" - which apparently includes videos that glamourise childhood eating disorders, videos promoting teen suicide, and Peppa Pig pornography - and a story of a "computer game-obsessed" student who murdered his teacher before killing himself. The latter article mentions that this teenaged boy idolised Walter Sullivan (the main antagonist in video game *Silent Hill 4: The Room*), and quotes his mother as saying, "Andrey spent most of his time by computer screen (sic). He was a big fan of computer games". This article ends with a psychologist commenting, "Computer games with shooting form and develop aggression, and people who are playing such games may bring into live (sic) the scenarios of these games" (Stewart, 2017). Panic about new media and concern for children's welfare are a snake eating its own tail: the arguments are cyclic and mutually enforcing. Within this framework, the more one cares about children, the more one should be concerned about new media, which means that condemning video games is a way of demonstrating one's ethical commitment to 'the child'. It is significant that in the latter two articles, protecting 'the child' from the perils of new media necessitates and legitimises the curtailment of children's agency and the dismissal of children's preferences by adults. The scenarios described in these articles rationalise adult surveillance of, and control over, children's media use, because keeping the child innocent, asexual, harmless, and wholesome requires adults to restrict and police children's access to information. Honeyman identifies this practice as "the bourgeois-bound rhetoric of 'selfless parenting' (that of 'protecting' children from the public

sphere by isolating and controlling them all the more as a result)” (200). The article about abusive nuns, however, suggests that adults themselves can be perpetrators of harm against children. Karen Lury writes that children are understood to be “‘perfect victims’, since they are blameless” (2010:105), which permits overly-simplified “perceptions of right and wrong, despite the moral complexity inherent in any [social issue]” (2010:107). I agree with Lury that the figure of the child-as-victim (the traumatised child, the dead child, the abandoned child etc) is frequently used across all media to heighten emotional stakes, but I would also invert her statement and say “the victim is the ‘perfect’ child”: the child is never more innocent, never more precious, and never more powerful as a rhetorical device, than when it is being abused by an adult. Across these three linked articles, one can see how children’s ‘innate’ vulnerability - children’s physical vulnerability (their bodies are smaller and weaker) and their mental and social vulnerabilities (they lack certain social skills and mental competencies) - is used to rationalise and naturalise their structural vulnerability (the asymmetric power distribution between children and adults). The discourse of ‘innocence’, which constructs children as uniformly incompetent and ‘at risk’, warrants a particular form of adult authoritarianism that demands compliance with adult wishes, rules, and practices. In this way, structural vulnerability can actually produce and amplify children’s innate vulnerability, firstly because, as Meyer writes, “children are discouraged from being independent and gaining experiences, [so] their judgements of danger and acceptability may be impaired” (2007); and secondly because children are not easily able to defy asymmetric power structures when adults abuse them, since obedience to adult rule is seen as a key aspect of the adult-child relationship.

This is the context within which one must interpret *The Mail*’s coverage of *D:BH*’s trailer: a context wherein the figure of the child is deliberately deployed to provoke strong feelings of pity and fear, whilst simultaneously allowing the outraged adult reader to feel secure in their alignment with normative morality. This context substantiates Kincaid’s (1998) argument that the same social groups who perform moral outrage when they encounter violations of childly innocence, also possess a voracious appetite for child-abuse narratives. He claims that consumers of these narratives get their self-righteousness and their titillation in the same sitting, so that articles about child abuse function as a kind of pious pornography that thrills consumers even as it affirms both their moral superiority and their right to exert power over children. The highly visual nature of *The Mail*’s online layout - with images taking up more space than verbal text - compounds the potential for voyeuristic enjoyment of children’s suffering. Arguably, *D:BH* revels in the same type of voyeurism. In spite of its interactive affordances, it nonetheless positions the player outside of the text and ‘above’ the victims and perpetrators of violence.

The domestic abuse scene in *D:BH* is not experienced from the perspective of the abuser, as Rantzen imagines, or from the perspective of the helpless child, but rather from a third-person perspective that is closely aligned with the character of Kara, a bystander who is called upon to make a moral judgement about the violence that she witnesses. In this way, *D:BH* is less of a child abuse simulator and more of a child protection simulator.

The pleasure or thrill that the player experiences in *D:BH* is not dissimilar to the enjoyment available to *The Mail*’s readership through its coverage of incidents of child abuse. That is to say, I found that my enjoyment of the sequence was rooted in the game’s affirmation of my pre-existing beliefs about the sanctity of ‘the child’. The game permitted me to perform a domestic version of the self-sacrificing saviour trope typical of action-oriented heroic epics. I was allocated the comfortable role of the protector of the weak, the vanquisher of the tyrant, and the agent of irreproachable justice. Although the opportunities for interaction moved me beyond straightforward

voyeurism, the game did not demand my complicity in morally reprehensible actions nor did it require me to assent, even temporarily, to perspectives that differed from my own. I was not faced with difficult narrative choices, moral quandaries, or ‘unfair’, unworkable ludic systems that might have led me to confront my own assumptions about child abuse or to new insights about this issue.

The character of Todd provides the player with a foil against which they can define their moral superiority. Todd is a grotesque, unnatural, irredeemable villain, whose despicable actions give the player license to relish his unsparing punishment - and even his murder - without moral qualms. The characterisation of Todd draws on classist stereotypes about working class men. He is depicted as slovenly, overweight, foul-mouthed, violent, and unintelligent, addicted to alcohol and drugs, apparently unemployed, and engaged in criminal activities. In short, he is a thoroughly unsympathetic character, designed to evoke feelings of disgust and contempt. In the recording of my playthrough of the ‘Stormy Night’ chapter that featured in the trailer, I specifically noted that,

“A greyish-yellow light picked out the sweat, grease, and day-old stubble on [Todd’s] sagging, sallow face. His watery, bloodshot eyes were sunk in dark, swollen sockets.”

The character’s moral decrepitude is not only externalised in his physical appearance, but is also apparent in the squalor of his home. That is to say, Todd’s treatment of Kara and Alice is not the only sign that he is unfit for the role of patriarch: the pizza boxes, the electric guitar in his bedroom, the numerous sports magazines, the vodka and crisps on his bedside table, and his senseless outbursts make him a ‘man-child’. His involuntary reliance (which he, himself, laments) on the domestic labour of androids to perform basic household chores further undermines his status as ‘adult’ because dependence is a childish quality. In my recording, I repeatedly flag Todd’s dependence, weakness, volatility, irrationality, and his animalistic qualities (*italicised*):

“A blue symbol prompts me to press and hold L1. Gripped by a sense of urgency, I do so immediately - there is no timer, but the characterisation of Todd as violent and *volatile* makes me feel I must match *his impulsiveness* with my own decisiveness.”

I feel no compassion, no sympathy, no pity for Todd. His temper, his drug and alcohol *dependencies*, his misogyny, his *weakness* make him contemptible and repulsive. I have encountered his type in enough dramatic and melodramatic fictions to know that his character arc probably does not bend towards redemption. I do not want to endanger Kara by making her approach Todd, plus Todd is *beyond reasoning* and his cruelty makes him *worse than an animal*.”

The attributes that I felt defined Todd are commonly associated with ‘the child’, but whereas weakness, irrationality, and impulsiveness are considered acceptable (and sometimes, even, endearing) characteristics in children, they are pathetic in adults. In fact, one could argue that the permissibility of these qualities in childhood is what delegitimises them in (male) adulthood. The game works just as hard on the level of mechanics to prohibit player identification with Todd. Todd is an antagonist to be overcome, which creates a sense of ludonarrative consonance with the easily legible message of ‘good’ and ‘evil’ expressed on an audiovisual level. The interactive mechanics in *D:BH* mostly urge the player to avoid and defend against the violent onslaught of the abuser, while trying to create opportunities for Kara and Alice to escape. The fact that Kara is not an equal combatant affirms her victimhood and, by

extension, her virtue. Player proficiency in these interactive moments is aligned with moral good, meaning that the player's reward for a demonstrating technical skill, high levels of precision, and rapid reflexes is the chance to 'do the right thing'. The Quick Time Event (QTE) challenges are designed to be metonymic, suggesting that they are intended to elicit mimetic play rather than points-scoring competitive play. The fact that the correct button presses are represented visually on screen the moment at which they have to be performed creates the sense that the player is simply being tasked with continuing the smooth-running of a pre-sanctioned sequence. Any mistakes (indicated by the symbol prompt turning red) that result in the suffering of either Alice or Kara are positioned as a rupture from the 'correct' version of events. The only moment in which I felt aligned with Todd was deeply jarring, and was due to the game's haptic controls:

"I lean forward in my seat, concentrating intensely so as not to make another mistake and subject Kara to further pain. Todd grabs Kara around the neck with both hands and starts to choke her. I have to move the whole controller rapidly up and down to allow Kara to break free. The gesture feels odd - the way I am gripping the controller creates a sensation that I am doing the choking rather than the writhing."

The embodied sensation of feeling physically connected to Todd was enough to break my narrative immersion. I suddenly became hyperaware of my hands holding the controller, and of the triviality of the metonymic gesture in contrast to the seriousness of the on-screen event. Although I would instinctively describe the designers' choice of haptic control for this interaction as a mismatch, it was one of the few moments in this scene that I was acutely aware of play as a "meta-activity" (Mortensen, 2015:158), and the only moment that made me question my ethical position in relation to the text. I came close to feeling a sense of shame at being enthralled by a scene of domestic violence. The fact that this experience was anomalous in my playthrough attests to the seductiveness of the comfortable, conventional, default subject position offered to the player.

For the purposes of this article, I looked up a Let's Play video on YouTube (VGS, 2018) to understand what interactions would have to take place in order to bring about Alice's death. I found that even if the player fails each of the Quick Time Event (QTE) challenges, it is still possible to rescue Alice and escape, and the only way to 'fail' entirely is if the player does nothing. If the player does not press a single button on the controller during the final QTE, both Alice and Kara are murdered by Todd. Kara's death is permanent and the player cannot use her as an avatar for the rest of the game, meaning that one third of the game's narrative experience is withheld from the player as a direct form of punishment. Before killing Kara, Todd repeats four times over: "This is all your fault." He faces into the camera when he delivers these lines, creating the impression that he is speaking directly to the player, reminding the player that the interactive affordances of the text implicate them morally in the narrative outcomes - the responsibility for Alice's fate lays with the player and not with the text. At the close of the sequence, a narrative flowchart measures the player's decisions in relation to a peer group of fellow players, and provides a percentage score indicating the normativity or perversity of the player's choices. The player is then returned to the home screen where the attractive, blonde, female 'host' android, who serves as the game's spokesperson, reprimands the player, saying, "You let Alice and Kara die...How could you do that? You could have saved them." Far from being an amoral, guilt-free, consequence-free space for ethical experimentation, *D:BH* imposes a public framing on each playthrough and subjects the player to a metaleptic scolding if they choose to play against the grain of the text.

The player is invited to perform a normative, socially-condoned moral position via the character of Kara. As an android designed for domestic labour, Kara's obedience to Todd speaks to the exploitation and servitude of women in the home; however, her subservience also aligns her with Alice and the figure of 'the child'. Kara's face has childlike proportions, and her skin is clear and unlined. Her eyes and forehead are large, and her mouth and jaw are small and neat (Fig. 2). She is in a permanent state of arrested development since she cannot grow old, and, following her recent reset, she has no past. Her inexperience and innocence give her a childly naivety: like Kincaid's designation of the Romantic child, Kara begins the game as a "strangely hollow" (1998:13) entity.



Fig. 2. Screenshots showing the facial similarities between Alice and Kara.

Kara's childly qualities function to ingratiate her with players: her innocence, weakness, sweetness, vulnerability, and trusting idealism inspire an emotional investment from players by encouraging them to feel protective over her. Pity impedes empathy, and despite sharing many identity markers with Kara (young, white, slim, able-bodied female), I felt that the subject position available to me when playing as Kara was that of the rightful patriarch - I was invited to fill the void left by Todd's inadequacy. Pronoun slippage is common in recordings of playthroughs, and in my anecdotes I frequently shift between third-person (using 'Kara', 'she', 'her') and first person (e.g. "I press L1"); however, I noticed that during the QTEs in which Todd is physically violent towards Kara, I positioned myself as someone 'intervening' on Kara's behalf. It is not Kara fighting back, but me fighting for her:

Both Alice and *I* are witnesses to this violence, but one of us has the ability to *intervene* and end it.

Kara is thrown to the ground. L1 and R1 must be tapped again, and this time *I* manage to do so. *I* press circle and then square perfectly on cue, *protecting Kara* from another of Todd's punches.

Just as Kara places her body in front of the vulnerable child, players put themselves between Kara and Todd. I did not experience this sense of protective paternalism towards the game's two male avatars, Marcus and Connor; rather, I felt that these characters were powerful in their own right - agile, strong, persuasive, and imposing within the diegetic world. Even when I had purposefully taken the decision in this sequence to equip Kara with a handgun before she confronts Todd - thereby erasing the discrepancy in physical strength between these characters - I did not have the sense that

Kara was a formidable or commanding presence within the game. This was feeling was immediately validated in a cutscene during which Todd easily disarms Kara by knocking the gun out of her hands. The issue here isn't whether people who endure domestic violence are depicted as vulnerable, but whether Kara's vulnerability is presented as an appealing characteristic. As equal victims of Todd's abuse, I would argue that the emotional appeal of both Alice and Kara is linked to their capacity for suffering. The game itself affirms this: just as Kara's moral awakening into subjectivity and personhood is triggered by Alice's trauma, Luther's journey to 'becoming human' is catalysed by the sight of Kara's suffering at the hands of another Todd-type called Zlatko. Marcus, in contrast, can awaken androids simply by touching them, Messiah-like, with the palm of his hand. The game's narrative seems to suggest that feminised, infantilised pain is a necessary rhetoric for 'humanising' both the diegetic characters, and the player. In other words, the fetishisation of children's vulnerability in the media negatively affects women by making their right to protection conditional on their dependence on patriarchal intervention. Sacralising and reifying childly qualities in female characters serves to essentialise their disenfranchisement via a strong association with the 'weakest' social group - children.

At risk of centralising the adult characters and neglecting the child character, I will now turn to Alice. Alice is the ideal victim of violence - blameless, defenceless, and as mute as the lauded Victorian child who is seen but not heard. She is a capacious pity receptacle, an object of affection, and a 'damselette in distress'. Alice comprehensively fulfils the criteria of 'the child': doe-eyed and snuffling, docile, meek, and grateful, she oscillates between cringing in fear and offering ready gestures of affection - a hand to hold, a cheek laid against the avatar's shoulder. In the manner of Locke's 'blank slate', Alice is free of the prejudices and biases that adult characters harbour against androids, and represents a brighter future where androids and humans can co-exist harmoniously. On the other hand, she seems to have a staunch, inborn moral compass: she becomes upset if Kara steals food for them to eat and withdraws some of her trust and affection - the only currency with which 'the child' can bargain - in order to influence the player's ethical attitude. Alice functions as a litmus test for determining the morality of other characters, and characters find the strength they need to persevere in Alice's utter helplessness. Just as the figure of 'the child' is a site of anxiety in contemporary Euro-American culture, Alice is a source of ludic and narrative concern for the player. Investment in Alice's wellbeing gives weight to dialogue choices and urgency to narrative decisions, in addition to amplifying the moral dimension of each interaction: it is not simply a matter of surviving in a hostile world but also of sustaining Alice's faith in humanity and setting an ethical example for her to follow. Through Kara, the player can attend to Alice's needs by keeping her warm, ensuring she is fed, tucking her into bed, telling her bedtime stories, and generally keeping her out of harm's way.

In the sequence immediately preceding the 'Stormy Night' chapter, Kara tidies away a children's book that has been left open on Alice's floor - it is a copy of 'Alice in Wonderland'. Alice shares her name with an adult-authored literary construct of a child, suggesting that she was born into a set of culturally encoded expectations of the type of child she should be. This connection becomes even more meaningful when it is revealed that Alice is not a 'real' child after all, but a man-made android designed to be, according to an advertisement, "The Perfect Child You've Always Dreamed Of". While Kara, Marcus, Luther, and the other service androids are sold as tools, Alice is marketed as a plaything, a toy, a doll. Kara's careful solicitude to make sure Alice keeps warm, that she has a safe place to sleep, and that she is well-fed make no sense if one remembers that androids are not physically affected by temperature, and need neither rest nor food to function. The fact that Alice does not have physical vulnerabilities almost unchild's her. The simulation of needs - her continual complaints of cold and fatigue, as well as her frequent requests for affirmation that her attendant adults will

not abandon her - are integral to her being 'The Perfect Child'. Kara uncovers Alice's artificial nature when she encounters another 'Alice', who is an exact physical replica of her own Alice. Kara is asked by an android (either Luther or Lucy), "What difference does it make?...She became the little girl you wanted! And you became the mother she needed. Forgetting who you are to become what someone needs you to be. Maybe that's what it means to be alive." Favourably interpreted, one could infer that the message here is 'we become human through our social relationships to one another'. A less generous reading could understand the lesson to be 'performing our socially-conditioned roles is ultimately more important than authenticity or self-determinism, and being human still requires programmed behaviour even if it is culturally encoded rather hardwired'. Indeed, the rhetorical question 'what difference does it make?' acquires a darker tone when the player is invited to reconsider Todd's possessiveness - shown in a flashback as Todd yelling "You're mine!". His words are supposedly imbued with new meaning in light of the fact that Alice is a technological device he purchased, but the very idea that his attitude towards his daughter didn't initially register as nonsensical demonstrates the general acceptance of the idea that children are owned by their parents. Children are doll-like possessions irrespective of whether they are made of flesh and blood or silicon and wire.

Constructions of motherhood are contingent on constructions of childhood, and so Kara's newly liberated identity is at stake if she rejects Alice on the basis of her virtuality. When Kara reveals to Alice that she knows Alice's true nature, the player is given the choice to have Kara 'hug' Alice or to be 'distant' from her. The player is essentially invited to affirm or deny Rantzen's belief that 'virtual' children deserve the same treatment as 'real' children. If the player chooses to hug Alice, Alice warmly reciprocates and says, "We'll be together forever, won't we Kara?" This childish hyperbole becomes a reasonable prediction for these ageless, cybernetic entities who can exist indefinitely in an extended state of stasis, endlessly upcycling their various parts. Android children are all Peter Pans in a state of permanent delay, and so while Alice can no longer be a hopeful symbol for social progress and futurity, her permanence has a kind of finality. Alice the Android is the obvious end-point of ideologies that essentialise 'the child' and of a culture that naturalises, sublimates, and obscures the social construction of childhood. Patricia Holland writes, "the dichotomy adult/child parallels other dichotomies which have characterised Western discourse: nature/culture, primitive/civilised, emotion/reason. In each pair the dominant term seeks to understand and control the subordinate, keeping it separate but using it for its own enrichment" (2006:15). Alice does not need to be a 'real' child in order to stabilise Kara's identity, just as she does not need to be a 'real' child in order to stabilise the identities of the adults who read and contribute to *The Daily Mail*. When Kara and the player elect to 'hug' Alice, it is a gesture that affirms their continued investment in an ideology of childhood that is separate from material reality. To embrace the alternative - to reject contemporary constructions of 'the child' - is to remove a keystone integral to other power structures and to topple the status quo. The fact that doing so would impede narrative coherence and position the player as a morally-suspect antagonist in this game says a lot about *D:BH*'s conservatism.

Conclusion

By locating my playthrough within the theoretical framework of childhood studies, it became clear that the ideological underpinnings of this sequence are conservative and reactionary, reaffirming the naturalness and obviousness of asymmetric, paternalistic power structures. Even as it burlesques the stereotype of the traditional, adult, masculine patriarch, the hegemony of adulthood is left intact. The process by which adult normativity is affirmed whilst 'childness' is othered is manifest in three key ways:

the contemptibility and inadequacy of Todd, the infantilisation of Kara, and the noble, appealing, perpetual victimhood of Alice.

While emotionally charged questions such as Rantzen's, "Who thinks beating a child is entertainment?" (Manning & Manchez, 2017) are "extremely resistant to challenges, whether logical, experiential, evidential or otherwise" (Meyer 2007:89), the virtual or simulated nature of 'the child' in video games opens up space in which the ideological rhetoric surrounding 'the child' can be examined. Virtual children in simulated worlds structured by coded rules point to the active construction and delimitation of 'the child' in society, and can reveal that much of what is assumed to be natural, obvious, and universal about the figure of 'the child' may in fact be ideological. It hints at the possibility that just as virtual children are used as rhetorical figures to explain and justify the rules, mechanics, and moral systems of a digital game, so too is the figure of 'the child' used to routinise and vindicate the rules, workings, and moral systems of Euro-American culture. Although *D:BH* seems to pose meaningful questions about the constructed nature of 'the child' through its examination of android rights, it ultimately replicates and affirms the very same moral position propounded by conservative pundits in the *Mail* with regard to 'the child'. *D:BH* is predicated on the idea that the social construction of 'the child' is worthy of protection precisely because it is the superstructural, unchallengeable moral object around which paternalistic, patriarchal systems revolve. 'The child' is the keystone of the status quo, and by harshly judging players who reject the imperatives to shore up the moral significance of 'the child', *D:BH* undermines the radical potential latent in the figure of Alice.

ENDNOTES AND BIBLIOGRAPHY

Endnotes

1 Other scholars and journalists and scholars have rightly written about the racist and sexist nature of *D:BH*, and indeed the rest of Quantic Dream's oeuvre.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bizzocchi, J., & Tanenbaum, T. J. (2011). Well read: applying close reading techniques to gameplay experiences. In D. Davidson (Ed.), *Well played 3.0* (pp. 262–290). ETC Press

Carr, D. 2019. 'Methodology, Representation, and Games', *Games and Culture*, 14 (7-8) 707-723 <https://doi-org.ezp.lib.cam.ac.uk/10.1177/1555412017728641>

Jenks, C. 2005. *Constituting Childhood (2nd ed)* Routledge, OXFORD

Holland, P. 2006. *Picturing Childhood: The Myth of the Child in Popular Imagery*, London: I.B. Tauris

Honeyman, S. 2008. 'Gingerbread Wishes and Candy(land) Dreams: The Lure of Food in Cautionary Tales of Consumption', *Marvels & Tales*, Vol 21 Iss 2 pp. 195-215, Wayne State University Press

Kincaid, J. 1998. *Erotic Innocence: The Culture of Child Molesting*, Duke University Press, NORTH CAROLINA

Lesnik-Oberstein, K. 2011. *Children in Culture, Revisited: Further Approaches to Childhood*, Palgrave Macmillan, HAMPSHIRE

Lury, K. 2010. *The Child in Film: Tears, Fears, and Fairy Tales*, I.B. Tauris & Co, LONDON

Manning, S. & Manchez, S. 2017. 'Abusers will get off on this stuff': Sony under fire for 'repulsive' video game Detroit: Become Human which shows girl, 10, 'beaten to death by her father' among a host of child abuse and domestic violence acts players watch, in *The Mail on Sunday*, retrieved on 01/11/19 from <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-5140165/Detroit-Human-video-game-branded-repulsive.html>

Meyer, A. 2007. The Moral Rhetoric of Childhood, *Childhood* Vol 14 (1): 85–104.

Mortensen, T. 2015. *The Dark Side of Game Play: Controversial Issues in Playful Environments* (Eds. T. E. Mortensen, J. Linderöth, and A. Brown) Routledge, LONDON & NEW YORK

Quantic Dream. 2018. *Detroit: Become Human*. Playstation 4, Paris, France: Sony Interactive.

Robinson, M. 2017. David Cage on Detroit and its depiction of domestic violence, in *Eurogamer*, retrieved on 01/11/19 from <https://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2017-10-31-david-cage-on-detroit-and-its-depiction-of-domestic-violence>

Sjöblöm, B. 2015. *The Dark Side of Game Play: Controversial Issues in Playful Environments* (Eds. T. E. Mortensen, J. Linderöth, and A. Brown) Routledge, LONDON & NEW YORK

Stewart, W. 2017. "Student slit his teacher's throat, took a selfie with the body and then killed himself with a circular saw in Russia 'as part of Blue Whale-style online death game'", *The Mail Online*, published 2 November 2017, in *The Daily Mail*, retrieved on 01/11/19 from <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-5042023/Teen-murdered-teacher-killed-death-game.html>

VGS. 2018. *Detroit: Become Human - Kara Lets Alice Die // Stormy Night*, Youtube, retrieved on 01/11/19 from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1ooNJelfaXw>