

Games

Feature

How Quantic Dream defended itself against allegations of a 'toxic culture'

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David Cage of Quantic Dream, creator of Heavy Rain, Beyond: Two Souls, and Detroit: Become Human.

Image Credit: Dean Takahashi

Quantic Dream has had a couple of years of nightmare publicity surrounding its alleged "toxic culture." From the company's perspective, the French game studio has been the victim of unjust slander perpetrated by sensationalist media outlets. And from the perspective of a few French journalists and one of its accusers, it's the company's leadership that's the problem.

That's a sad state of affairs for the Parisian game studio that David Cage and Guillaume de Foundaumièrè lead. Their company has won 250 awards for games since its founding in 1997. Quantic Dream has created deeply emotional stories that elevate video games to an art form, such as The Nomad Soul, Fahrenheit, Heavy Rain, Beyond: Two Souls, and Detroit: Become Human. On the strength of that history, NetEase invested in Quantic Dream earlier this year, and the studio announced it would move beyond Sony's PlayStation consoles to self-publish games on different game platforms.

But this success allegedly came at a cost, as three publications reported on an internal dispute at the company a couple of years ago. After the completion of one investigation, a French labor court cleared the company of the most serious accusations and any large financial liability related to them. And Cage is now speaking extensively via email with GamesBeat about the facts and outcome of the case so far. Quantic Dream's own defamation lawsuits against media outlets that wrote about the alleged toxic culture are still pending, and a hearing was postponed (as a result of French labor protests) until 2021.

The dispute centers on one incident, but the open question is what it's actually like to work at the company. Media outlets reported that the company had a toxic culture based on interviews with a number of current and former employees, while Cage said that third-party investigators have found no problems and that the company has many employees willing to vouch for its professionalism.

The irony of the incident is that, at that time, Quantic Dream was finishing the work on *Detroit: Become Human*, which had a story about human androids and hammered home what it was like to be treated like a second-class citizen. Quantic Dream's games are about moral dilemmas, and the media expressed moral outrage about how the company was run.

For this story, we spoke with 16 current members of Quantic Dream's staff and conducted email interviews with Cage and de Foundaumièrre. We are open to speaking with more people and have made queries about that. But this story is what we know.

An unfortunate incident

A real-life emotional story has distracted the studio. The long legal fight began with a triggering event. A lead programmer at Quantic Dream entertained himself by creating photo montages during his lunch break. He put the heads of his fellow employees on the bodies of various celebrities or other images. He shared these images with friends and managers, including Cage. Cage said that the employee honored requests by employees who didn't want to be in the images, which were sometimes posted (often by the photo subjects themselves) at the coffee machine.

"The intention was never to mock or to humiliate anyone, otherwise we would have stopped this right away," Cage said, regarding the benign beginning of the altered-image sharing. "Of all the images I saw, none were shocking. It is important to mention that no one in the team ever reported any issue about this activity: over three years, there were zero complaints, internally or to any official institution."

For three years, none of Quantic Dream's 200 or so employees complained about being included in the images. But on February 27, 2017, the employee editing these pictures shared all 600 of them with the entire company. He evidently forgot that 12 of the images were entirely inappropriate, and he shared them by mistake. The company's IT manager at the time told management that the image of him was unacceptable. His face was pasted on a famous reality TV show character, *Supernanny*.

"The image had no specific angle (not homophobic, racist or misogynist, as the Labor Court confirmed), but it was definitely not acceptable," Cage said. "We also discovered other images that were never shared and that we had never seen before, which were totally unacceptable."



Above: Quantic Dream's Detroit: Become Human pushed the edge on face animation.

Image Credit: Sony

Cage said that management met with the creator of the images, and ordered him to stop making them. They asked him to apologize to the IT manager and gave him a formal warning (a disciplinary sanction that goes on record and can lead to contract termination). The company provided records for this disciplinary action and three different investigating bodies verified it.

The former IT manager, who declined to be interviewed for this story and referred GamesBeat to the articles already published, allegedly accepted the apology. But then he later informed the company that he wanted the creator to be dismissed immediately, and that he wanted to be compensated with one year's salary (plus 40%), otherwise he would "tell the whole story to the press," Quantic Dream said.

To the company, this sounded like blackmail, Cage said.

"We tried to talk. We offered a neutral mediator, which he accepted first then refused. We tried to find solutions, but he rejected all options," Cage said.

Three of the IT manager's other colleagues in the IT department resigned and also asked for compensation. The IT manager sought help from government institutions, but Cage said that Quantic Dream provided explanations and documents. In each case, the investigating bodies either closed or resolved the investigations. Then the IT manager reached out to French journalists, sending the 12 inappropriate pictures, and three journalists responded.

Media investigation



Above: David Cage is the co-CEO of Quantic Dream.

Image Credit: Quantic Dream

The newspaper Le Monde, video game site CanardPC, and media investigation site Mediapart wrote articles about Quantic Dream's culture, based on the outreach from the IT manager. But the stories weren't just about the incident involving the edited images. They were looking into what was wrong with game companies.

During the process of investigating the game industry, Mediapart decided to focus on Quantic Dream for its first article "because we were gathering a lot of information, and precise testimonies, about its work culture and work practices," Mediapart writer Dan Israel said in an email to GamesBeat. "We also learned that Le Monde was doing a very similar job, so we teamed with them, only for this first article," Israel said.

The journalists teamed up and sent questions to the company. Quantic Dream said that the initial questions were alarming. On December 26, 2017, the journalists sent Quantic Dream a list of questions that the company thought was "surreal." They included

- We found an invoice of \$10 for room service in a hotel in Las Vegas. Was this for a prostitute?
- We heard that one of your employees had a mouse pad with a sexy female character. Do you think this is acceptable?
- One of your employees had a heavy metal T-shirt that someone found offending. Do you encourage this?
- You are known to work a lot. Are you aware that some people who work less may feel bad about you working more?

(The journalists said they sent many more questions and even published both the questions and answers. They said their tone was professional).

“Quantic Dream’s co-CEO, Guillaume de Fondaumière, and I were absolutely stunned. We have met hundreds of journalists during the course of our careers, but we never encountered such questions,” Cage said. “We quickly realized that these journalists actually had ‘their own angle.’ They wanted to show that a successful company had to be toxic and they were looking for any piece of proof to support their theory.”

The journalists met with Cage and de Fondaumière on January 4, 2018.

“We stayed calm and answered their questions, but they ignored all our answers because these were not in line with their own personal theories. In their articles, they rearranged and truncated my answers in order to make me say what they wanted,” Cage said. “Then they sent their questions to our Employee Representatives, who answered in all honesty that they never heard any complaint and that the allegations were complete nonsense to them.”

Cage added, “The story they wanted is very simple: Quantic Dream and their top managers are very successful ... but this success was built on a toxic atmosphere and perverted management.”

Cage said the company has dozens of formal testimonials from employees and former employees saying they had no issues with the company.

The articles ran in mid-January 2018. Dan Israel and Mathilde Goanec wrote three articles in Mediapart about labor culture in the video game industry, and it partnered with CanardPC on those articles. CanardPC published its own, longer version of those stories. Cage said he invited the Le Monde journalist to spend a week at Quantic Dream, but the journalist declined.



Above: Guillaume de Fondaumière, the co-CEO of Quantic Dream.

Image Credit: Quantic Dream

But the journalists said they were being fair. The articles recounted the IT manager's story, and they also mentioned the other issues at Quantic Dream.

"In this first piece, Mediapart tackled the issue of the edited pictures, but also a lot of other things: the crunch culture and the way a lot of employees were discouraged and exhausted; the fact that some former employees didn't like working with Quantic Dream; some suspicious administrative customs (in particular regarding the relationships between Quantic Dream and the national unemployment agency)," Israel said.

But Cage said he believed the journalists didn't understand the way game companies worked, nor the tight controls that the company was required to meet.

"We were really surprised, because we are very strict about the company's management," Cage said. "We have internal and external accountants, lawyers, administrators and shareholders, and doing anything illegal in a small company like ours would be hard to hide. We seriously investigated internally again and questioned third parties to understand if we had done anything wrong, but again we couldn't find anything."

Cage said three different authorities backed up the company. These included a Tax Control audit in 2018, which was a complete audit from three major audit companies, one American and two French, who did due diligence about the company in the context of an investment from a company listed on NASDAQ. And it also included a government body (called "URSSAF"), which sent two people onsite for three weeks to check all the employees and directors' contracts, salaries, taxes, financial accounts, and transactions — including the contract and transaction of the director that was described as illegal in an article.

"All these independent institutions reported that the company was very well managed, that it respected the law in all aspects, and that they had no issues to report," Cage said.



Above: Quantic Dream's workplace.

Image Credit: Quantic Dream

After video game news site [CanardPC](#), French newspaper [Le Monde](#), and the investigative news site [Mediapart](#) published articles on Quantic Dream, the company fired back with defamation lawsuits against Le Monde and Mediapart (Quantic Dream chose not to sue CanardPC, as it appeared to be a much smaller publication).

"We knew that these articles were a complete fabrication, and that was unacceptable. This is why we decided to sue the journalists for defamation," Cage said.

Regarding the third-party audits, Dan Israel, one of the Mediapart writers, responded, "We asked a lot of questions on these issues. If David Cage and Guillaume de Fondaumière had shared these explanations with us, we would have quoted them on that. They did not: They only explained that there was an audit that did complete due diligence about the company, and that everything was deemed legal. We included this comment in our article. We were meticulous in including all the answers they gave us on these important matters."

In response to a query from GamesBeat, journalist William Audereau, author of the Le Monde article, said in an email, "Our investigation spanned over three months. I consulted extensive internal documentation, talked with around 20 former or current employees, including some very high profile, who all confirmed the stories. While investigating on their own, Mediapart (a major French investigation website) and CanardPC (one of the most independent video game outlets) reached the same conclusions.

Quantic Dream calling it 'falsehoods' or a 'sensationalized story' sounds like another awkward PR spin from the company, and this is a pity for people who suffered, and for some of them still suffer from what they described as a toxic workplace."

Labor court battle



Above: These are human cops, and they're far from perfect.

Image Credit: Sony

The IT manager's complaint with the Labor Court worked its way through the system. The Labor Court is an institution in France where any employee who has a complaint against an employer can request a hearing. A judge analyzes the evidence and renders a judgment. Both parties can hire legal defense, provide evidence, and argue the case.

Cage said that in 22 years, with more than 1,000 employees employed over that history, Quantic Dream has had only three cases brought to the Labor Court. It lost one of those cases, unrelated to this one. This, Cage said, shows that issues with employees are extremely rare at Quantic Dream.

The first hearing took place in 2018, but the judges in the case could not come to a decision. In a second hearing in 2019, the judge ruled that the plaintiff "did not provide evidence of a deterioration of working conditions within the company, [...] and the production of press articles [...] were insufficient to establish these facts."

The IT manager asked for €115,000 (\$128,215) and the reclassifying of his resignation into unjustified dismissal (in France, a dismissal has to be justified on very serious grounds, otherwise the employee is entitled to significant compensation).

The judge rejected the IT manager's request for compensation and ruled that the IT manager had voluntarily resigned. The company believed that the threat to tell the press unless the employee was fired was "totally unacceptable." The judge also rendered similar verdicts for two other employees from the IT team, and a third case is under appeal. In the two other cases, the judge ruled that the employees were "instrumentalized by others" in hopes of getting higher compensation, Cage said.

Israel said that is not a correct interpretation of the court's ruling. Translated from the French, the court's wording included, "It is permitted to wonder whether he wasn't instrumentalized by others or would not have thought he could benefit from a windfall effect to obtain a much higher financial compensation." This language was included in the dismissal of the IT manager's claim.

"To give context to these verdicts, it is worth noting that a few weeks before the incident, these employees had their annual interviews with their lead, the IT manager, in which they reported how happy they were in the company and what a pleasant working atmosphere there was," Cage said. "These documents among other evidence convinced judges that this story of 'toxic atmosphere' was only made up to ask for compensation."

Quantic Dream had to pay the IT manager compensation of €5,000 (\$5,572) because the court ruled that the company should have anticipated the potential risk of an employee editing pictures and should have prohibited this activity from the start. Cage claims that the French journalists twisted the meaning of the ruling, interpreting it as a loss for the company. That tone carried over into international articles, like this one in [Variety](#), with the headline, "Detroit Developer Quantic Dream Loses Court Case Over Harassment." The French journalists in particular continue to interpret this outcome as a victory for the plaintiffs.

"Anyone who reads the verdict can see that this is utterly misleading, but their version was the one that some people wanted to hear, so they just interpreted the court's findings in order to serve their own editorial appetite," Cage said.

He said the court noted, "Contrary to what the employee claims, there is no evidence of a deterioration in working conditions within the company."

Another French journalist who was not connected to the published stories sided with Cage and Quantic Dream. Vincent Jolly, senior reporter at *Le Figaro* magazine, told me in an email (and speaking only for himself) that he did some reporting on the case and chose not to write a story about allegations of a toxic culture.

Jolly added, "Having covered Quantic Dream frequently in the past years and knowing some of the employees myself, I just don't see unbiased evidence that would support the claim of the investigations. There is no smoking gun. There is, from my point of view, just no story here."

The media defamation lawsuits



Above: Jodie, voiced by Ellen Page, is the star character of *Beyond: Two Souls*

Image Credit: Quantic Dream/Sony

The defamation lawsuits continue, but on a much slower pace than the Labor Court. The recent labor riots forced a rescheduling of the first hearing until May 2021.

The company is impatient to clear its name, and it says its employees are as well.

Cage said, "It is also interesting to note that although many people talk about what happens inside Quantic Dream, absolutely no one tried to talk to our employees. Some people have the image of game studios where employees are treated disrespectfully, are humiliated and exploited, but this is not our case. Most of our employees are between 30 and 50 years old; they have families; they are very talented veterans in the industry; and none of them would accept to stay in a company that is 'toxic,' especially when they can easily find work in the best triple-A studios in the world. Anyone analyzing the facts would have come to the same conclusion — that this whole story doesn't reflect the evidence provided."

Audereau, the journalist from *Le Monde*, responded, "As for the outcome of the Labor Court: Court described the pictures as 'homophobic, misogynistic, racist, or highly vulgar' and fined Quantic Dream for having failed to their 'duty of security' toward their employees, which is, to my knowledge, very rare. Using a very obscure and risky point of the French labor law, the '*prise d'acte*,' the employee asked for [the] resignation to be requalified as a termination, but the court didn't agree on that. Hence he didn't obtain the amount of damages and interests he was asking for, and appealed against the ruling."

Regarding the pending lawsuits, Cage said that both sides have been asked to share evidence in the case. He said Quantic Dream has testimony from 40 current and former employees, with "numerous messages of support that team members spontaneously sent when the articles were published." The company also included as evidence the full independent HR audit of the team, the results of all the financial and social audits and controls, and "many other documents supporting very consistently that Quantic Dream is a well-managed company where employees are appreciated and respected."

Cage also said that the judge in the case said, "The photomontage showing [the IT manager] in *Supernanny*, if it appears vulgar, is neither homophobic, nor racist, nor pornographic."

Mediapart's Israel said, "David Cage and Guillaume de Fondaumière are of course entitled to their opinion. Which is why we interviewed them and quoted them extensively on this issue (among others) in our article. If you read our piece, you'll see that we let them a lot of room to express themselves. It is our standard process at Mediapart."

Cage said that evidence supplied by Mediapart was scant. Quantic Dream said the judge in the case limited witnesses, so the company will call five witnesses on its behalf instead of the 50 who are prepared to testify. Mediapart and Pixel/Le Monde had four witnesses, including the three journalists who wrote the articles.

"We cannot comment on the issue of our sources, as you will understand, but we had far more than one source," Israel of Mediapart said. Israel added, "The four witnesses Quantic Dream is talking about are the ones that were subpoenaed to the hearing that was supposed to be held on December 5 and 6. In addition to those, we have provided four other written testimonies, that are considered just as important by the French law. And our five witnesses are ex-employees, even the union representative. Moreover, as you may have guessed, a lot of our witnesses wished to stay anonymous, and didn't want to testify in their own names. We couldn't reveal their identities to the court."



JASON!!!

Above: A father looks for his son in Heavy Rain

Image Credit: Quantic Dream

Regarding the delay in the defamation lawsuit, Cage said it is "extremely frustrating, because this hearing would have clarified everything about these allegations." Cage said the company decided to speak up now rather than wait because the company needed to answer attacks on social media, as its employees who have spoken up were "bullied, caricatured as 'traitors to the employees' cause' and even threatened [*sic*] with death."

He added, "They just said they were not victims of anything, which was totally unacceptable to some. What is absolutely astonishing is how people from the outside are eager to save people who are humiliated and discriminated against even when there are none."

As to addressing the allegations of a toxic workplace, Cage said, "We faced our responsibilities and took these allegations very seriously. So we investigated internally to see if there was anything wrong in the company. We started a full internal audit, we conducted interviews of everyone in the studio, we even invited people to complain anonymously if they wanted to, and we called dozens of ex-employees. No one reported anything."

He added, "Then we hired a third-party company called People Vox, which specializes in audits of human resources (they work with many major companies in France). They asked 74 questions about the working conditions that employees answered anonymously through their platform. The result is absolutely clear: 96% of the responses mentioned the good atmosphere in the

studio as what they liked the most about the company, 94% said they were particularly proud of working at Quantic Dream, 96% said they trusted the management, and the “satisfaction grade” of the company reached 94%. People Vox never saw these kinds of figures in any company before.”

He also said, “At Quantic Dream, we offer competitive salaries to our employees, 50% of our managers are women, employees were granted 10% of the company shares for free, we have people of all origins, sexual orientation and backgrounds, we support humanist values and we do everything we can to offer pleasant working conditions to all. Anyone who would have seriously investigated would have seen these facts and realized the truth.”

But Israel of Mediapart said, “Considering our article about Quantic Dream (like every article published by Mediapart), we are very confident that we will win this case. We did our job and followed professional standards. Unfortunately, the outcome will only be in a long time.”

Employee reactions



Above: Detroit: Become Human character

Image Credit: Quantic Dream

As mentioned, I spoke with 16 members of Quantic Dream's staff. I talked with a large group over a video conference, and I also spoke with several over Skype calls. I did not visit the company in Paris, though I was invited to do so. I had permission to speak with employees from the company leadership, and I spoke with one employee in an interview that wasn't arranged by the company.

In a group discussion, employees said they felt the stories were off base and they hurt the reputation of the company, making it harder to recruit people in the competitive industry. Some of the employees — including some who worked at the company for decades — were surprised, "shocked," and indignant about the media coverage. They said the stories were "bullshit." One father said he was distressed when his teenage children read the story and said, "Oh, Daddy, you are working in a toxic company?"

The employees said that if there was a need for overtime, the company was open about it and discussed it in detail, as French law is very strict when it comes to overtime work and paying for it.

"We tried to stay positive in the shitstorm" of media coverage, said one employee. "You become depressed. We are passionate about making games."

Adam Williams, lead writer at Quantic Dream, started at the company about four years ago on the Detroit: Become Human project. He worked remotely at first and then relocated to Paris to work with the team. He sat across from Cage, and found him and de Foundamiere to be very kind. Cage helped with relocation, and he even taught Williams how to ride a bike.

"I remember the allegations of a toxic culture ahead of Detroit's release," Williams said in our interview. "But it wasn't exactly clear what the nature of those transgressions were. David was really racking his brains to think about where these allegations could come from. The timing was strange, as the allegations were ramping up as the publicity of Detroit was ramping up."

He added, "When I found out the photo montage was at the center of it, I could not remember people who were offended by them."

Williams said he has sisters himself and is particularly sensitive to stories he has heard about harassment in other industries.

"The idea that allegations like that might be used cynically by a member of the media was quite upsetting to me," Williams said. "It makes it harder for people who have really gone through these things to get the correct level of attention and be taken as seriously as they should be."

He was offended at the notion there might be a code of silence in management about talking about harassment or toxicity.



Above: Detroit: Become Human

Image Credit: Sony/Quantic Dream

“The idea that we as a group would be craven enough not to speak out about something like that if we had seen it felt slanderous to me,” Williams said. “As time went on, we moved from a genuine concern about what might be happening to a creeping sense that maybe we were the target of the stories rather than these being genuine investigations by the media. As time went on, I started to feel that it was actually that we had build up animosity among some journalists and sections of the games media. We realized there was nothing to be found.”

He noted how there are a lot of women on staff and a number of them are in senior roles. And Williams knew that Cage was motivated to write the story of Detroit because he “wanted to talk about how people can be treated like second-class citizens.”

Williams said that getting a chance to talk about this whole issue of a toxic culture was therapeutic for him, as it was hard not to be able to talk about his views of perception and reality.

“I honestly believe that a lot of people who are involved in this feel that because the cause is a good one — that we should defend vulnerable employers from sinister workplace situations — that those in the media doing the investigating felt like the

ends justify the means,” Williams said. “Even if they can’t prove something, and even if they haven’t got the right people or the right facts, it’s kind of OK. Because what they are doing is noble and they have this oral license.”

He and others noted that employees in France are very well protected by the law, and it’s hard for employers to win any fights against the word of employees. The fact that the Labor Court did not take the side of employees who were complaining said a lot, Williams said.

Lisa Pendse, vice president of marketing in the publishing division at Quantic Dream, concurred and said her experience in the past year has been good. When she was interviewing for her job, she asked about the allegations of a toxic culture. She said that she had other opportunities and it gave her a lot of pause.

But she decided after talking with the company for a long time that she would take the job, and it turned out to be a great decision, she said. She noticed how many women were in leadership roles on staff, and she felt all perspectives were listened to at the company.

“I asked Guillaume about the allegations against the studio in my very first interview, and he was really honest with me about the reality of life in the studio,” she said. “I feel I took a risk in coming here because of what I had read about the studio. But I decided to trust my own gut instinct, and every day of my life I am so thankful.”

Looking back



Above: A choice in Quantic Dream’s game Heavy Rain.

Image Credit: Quantic Dream

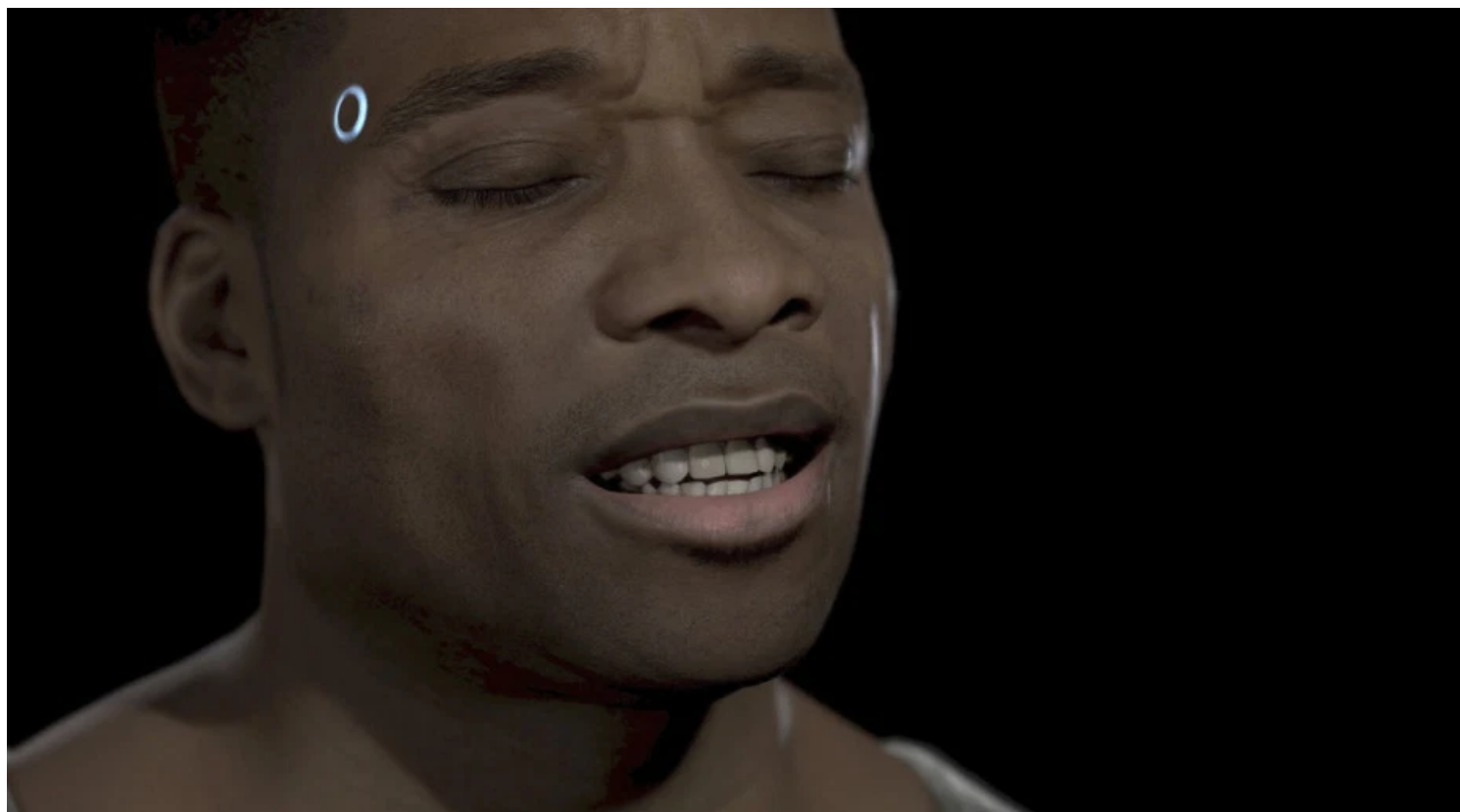
As to why this happened to Quantic Dream, Cage said the company was “a little bit naïve about all this.”

Cage said, “We always trusted and considered our employees a lot, and we never anticipated that any of them could lie in order to receive a payout. We know that most journalists are fair and honest, but we should have also anticipated that it only takes one to share and spread false news. We were certainly not cautious enough to protect our company and our employees against these risks. We are now.”

He added, “Like unfortunately more and more game studios these days, it is also true that we have some haters on the internet who hate our studio because we do games that they don’t like. We don’t make games based on violence, but we create emotional stories based on human relationships and storytelling. It may not be everyone’s cup of tea, which I totally understand, but there are also millions of fans around the world who love the genre and our work in particular.”

And he said, “There are also people who don’t like my ideas about the need for the industry to propose more varied and mature experiences, to focus more on emotion and meaning than on violence. This position apparently also generated a lot of anger with some people. I don’t pretend to please everyone, and if my games and ideas are that troubling to some, it means that they are interesting. I am not going to change what I believe in, no matter what some people will invent in order to justify their own anger and frustration.”

The impact on Quantic Dream



Above: Is this a human or an android? An animation or a video of a person?

Cage said that the controversy has not had a negative impact on the team, which has stayed together. Detroit: Become Human was also a commercial success. Cage said, "Fans also fully support Detroit and send us messages of love every day. We receive literally thousands of messages, fan art, pictures of cosplay, and incredibly moving messages. We get a wonderful reception wherever we go on the planet, and this is really amazing."

The company also received a big investment from China's NetEase to fund multiple games on multiple platforms. The company has built a new motion capture studio, new sound studios, new offices, and a common area for employees while working on new game concepts and next-generation technology. Over the course of a long relationship, Sony did not sever ties over issues related to a toxic culture. And NetEase presumably did its own investigation of Quantic Dream before investing in the company last year.

"Our team has never been so united. Nothing would be possible without their passion, talent and involvement in Quantic Dream. I am extremely proud of this team and of what we have built together over the past 22 years," Cage said. "This story shows that we should all be very concerned about how information can easily be manipulated, but also about how politics gets into video games. Quantic Dream doesn't do politics, but we refuse to be instrumentalized by people who use our notoriety to promote their political agenda or sell their articles. We should also be very respectful of the voice of the real victims, people who are really facing situations where they are mentally or physically in peril. People inventing or relaying fake stories like ours should understand that they don't help the industry nor the real victims."

He added, "On our end, we will continue to explore our vision of interactivity, to create experiences that are different, to collaborate with the best talents in the world, and to develop emotional and meaningful experiences. We will keep working as a team, with the same passion and pleasure to work together, we will keep imagining, laughing, arguing, dreaming, surprising ourselves, promoting humanist values while sharing our passion with our wonderful community of fans around the world."