Literariness Journal

REWRITING THE TRAGIC: CLASSICAL STORYTELLING STRUCTURES AND MORAL COMPLEXITY IN INTERACTIVE NARRATIVES

ELIKA MARY RAJI

Research Scholar
Department of English
TKM College of Arts and Science, Kollam

Abstract: The art of storytelling shifted from the boundaries of quill and paper, diving into the codes and depths of digitalisation. Storytelling evolved into an art that spread its branches into transmedia, and, currently, it has expanded its roots into the digital world, taking the form of digital narratives, specifically interactive video games. Video games became a platform for transmedia storytelling, where players became co-authors of their narrative evolution, giving rise to interactive storytelling. Players are not just passive users but have become active participants in the progression of gameplay and character development. The player utilises the freedom to navigate the direction of the narrative progression. The narrative art of video games inherits the tragic and ethical frameworks of analog literature (traditional literature) while reshaping it through player agency and interactive storytelling. This leads to the creation of a digital form of storytelling that re-imagines classic motifs such as villainy, catharsis, and morality. The academic goal of this venture is to investigate how narrative video games reconfigure classical literature's ethical, tragic, and villainous framework through interactivity, player agency, and a digital narrative framework.

Keywords: *Catharsis, Tragedy, Player Agency, Interactive Narratives, Villainy, Morality, Digital Narratives*

Introduction

Once upon a time, tales of woven words were danced and interpolated aloud on grand platforms with gilded stages, silken curtains, and thespians who spoke with grandeur and bold conviction. Bards told stories that later metamorphosed into a stage they performed before audiences gathered in eagerness to hear tales of heroic bravery or bear witness to their tragic fall. Over time, storytelling evolved again; what was once performed soon moved to another stage with the arrival of the digital era. Narratives expanded beyond words or staged enactments. Villains became more complicated and composite, and audiences began to sympathise with their motives, though they condemned their actions. Stories in the digital era were not merely told or performed; instead, they have become platforms for participatory culture where the ethical weight of choices is felt in the press of a button.

Traditional or analog literature rested on a set of conventions: rules of form, authorship and interpretation that shaped storytelling for centuries. Classicists of the past upheld a set of aesthetic and structural mechanisms that defined literary value. Yet with the advent of digital media, these atavistic stable frameworks began to rupture, giving rise to new interactive narrative forms that challenge the inherited hierarchies of author and audience, structure and play, and reconfigure villainy. The evolving discourse of digital humanities paved the way for persistent questions regarding creativity, authorship, and participation, reshaping our understanding of literature as a dynamic and living ecosystem. The introduction of new tools for reading and archiving has transformed the very texture of narrative production and reception. Literary meaning now promulgates through networks of collaboration, remixes and reimagination; blurring the lines between text and paratext, author, and the audience.

This shift marks a conspicuous moment in literary studies with the emergence of what may be understood as "participatory literature", a narrative paradigm where digital environments foster the co-creative meaning-making through interactivity, fan participation, and algorithmic spaces. These evolving spaces extend the possibilities of human impulse to narrate, interpret, and transform, situating readers as active agents in narrative spaces. To position this study within that continuum is to concede how digital narratives – whether games, fanworks, or other transmedia literary genres- extend the possibilities of this project by new means; redefining what literature means.

In the digital age, storytelling extends beyond the pages into a participatory and choice-driven environment. Transmedia spaces, like video games, embody the metamorphoses from analog fixity to digital fluidity. Players do not merely consume a story; they become active agents in its construction through their choices, actions, and failures. Digital narratives become a dual platform for authorship and a laboratory for ethical reflections.

Unlike close static moral universes of tragedy, where predetermined fate orchestrates the downfall of a hero, digital narratives open doors to a branching ethical terrain that stimulates responsibility, consequences, and potential redemption based on choices. In games such as *Detroit: Become Human, Batman: The Enemy Within, Beyond: Two Souls,* and the *Assassin's Creed* franchise, the player assumes the role of a moral agent whose decisions blur conventional boundaries between villainy and virtue, guilt and catharsis. This transformation reveals how digital storytelling inherits moral and tragic structures of traditional literature while reconfiguring them through interactivity and moral agency.

While existing scholarship on video games and narratives often emphasises immersion, interactivity, or ludology-narratology debates, comparatively sparse attention has been dedicated to how digital storytelling reconfigures classical moral and affective structures. Although academic discourse in game design, ethics, and digital humanities studies has explored the mechanics of player agency and ethical choice, it seldom situates these within the broader genealogy of literary ethics and tragedy. The objective of this study is to

address this gap by reading digital narratives as not mere entertainment forums or technological artefacts, but as evolving moral texts that reconstruct frameworks of guilt, conscience, agency, and villainy within the interactive sphere.

Examining how digital games reinterpret and reframe tragic and ethical sensibilities in classical literature, this work pivots into how interactive digital media transforms static notions of fate and authorship into dynamic, participatory experiences. In doing so, it situates these interactive narrations as contemporary extensions of literary traditions rendered in code and choice, yet resonating the moral gravitas of their analog predecessors. In doing so, this paper seeks to contribute to the ongoing discussions in digital humanities scholarship regarding the convergence of technological interactivity and inquiry, showing how ethics of play can become a renewed form of literariness in the digital age. The paper hypothesises that digital narrative games reinterpret ethical and tragic architectures of analog literature, transforming the reader's passive contribution as spectators into an active, participatory form of co-authoring, thereby redefining what constitutes literariness in the digital age.

To examine the transformative nature of digital narratives, this paper employs a qualitative analytical approach grounded in close reading and comparative analysis. It focuses on the ethical tension, moral consequences, and character construction, particularly designs of villainy in selected texts such as *Detroit: Become Human* and *Batman: The Enemy Within.* Drawing from narrative theory, game studies, and digital humanities, the analysis traces how interactivity and player agency reposition villainy as dynamic participatory sites of moral reflections and echo chambers. It reframes the moral gravitas of classical tragedies in the digital medium. As screens become mirrors of moral reflections, the digital realms emerge not as the end of literature but as sites of transformations, where every ethical decision revolves around the ancient pulse of tragedy in a new, interactive form. The audience remains not just as a mute spectator that watches as the protagonist's own hubris and hamartia lead to their downfall, they become active agents in the process, becoming determining factors in their fate. This is the goal of this academic discourse, which will be examined in this journey within this paper.

From page to code: Literature, interactivity, and questions of evil:

"All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances;
And one man in his time plays many parts,
His acts being seven ages." William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*

The emergence of digital storytelling has redefined how narratives are produced, experienced, and interpreted. As literary texts transition into interactive forms, the reader no longer remains a passive spectator but becomes a co-creator in shaping the meaning of the text. This shift from analog authorship to digital co-creation has generated a new field

of literary inquiry that blurs the line between narrative and play, authorship, and participation.

Scholars across digital humanities and narratology have explored this transfiguration through frameworks of interactivity, immersion, and moral engagements. The digital age has expanded the metaphor of the stage from beyond its physical presence into algorithmic spaces where players not only perform but also create, shaping moral choices and narrative outcomes. What was once a theatrical metaphor now unfolds as an interactive reality. This review seeks to chart the evolving academic discourse that interprets digital texts as both the stage and the mirror – a site where interactivity reawakens ancient moral architectures and where the figure of villainy becomes not a trope of clichéd evil, but a reflection of participatory conscience.

Section 1: From Text to Code: the Narrative evolution of Digital storytelling

The evolution of storytelling — from oral to written, and from written to digital represents more than a perceptual shift in medium; it signals a fundamental reorientation in how humanity perceives and participates in narratives. Classical literary theory, grounded in structuralism and classical narratology, framed texts as a self-contained medium, an object that can be decoded in isolation rather than experienced. Roland Barthes' declaration of the "death of the author" and Mikhail Bakhtin's polyphonic dialogism both anticipated a future in which meaning doesn't reside solely with the author but is collaboratively created. Participatory environment intersects with authorial control; authorship becomes a site of negotiation rather than unilateral control.

As stories began to permeate digital environments, this shift intensified. In *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (1997), Janet Murray famously envisioned computer games as the new platform for narrative creativity capable of transforming audiences into co-authors. She notes that the technical and economic cultivation of the digital epoch has provided fertile grounds for the birth of new and upcoming platforms for storytelling. Digital storytelling does not forfeit the human impulse to narrate; rather, it extends into immersive and interactive terrains. Murray exemplifies its importance in her work, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, where she states:

> We need stories in every medium we can master, truth and fiction, ephemeral and enduring, unilinear and interactive, secret stories between lovers or family members, mass entertainment shared by millions. We need the process of expanding our means of storytelling because it allows us to expand our ability to know who we are and to reimagine who we might become. (Murray, 256)

Murray's vision situates digital storytelling not as a rupture with literary tradition, but as its continuation; an evolution that enriches narrative capability by expanding who participates in meaning-making and how participation unfolds.

The trans-medial convergence of media has redefined the concept of interactive narrative, reshaping the relationship between the author and the audience. Espen Arseth elaborated on this notion in his work, *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (1997), arguing that the digital text is not merely read but traversed through individual choice and effort. It requires non-trivial effort from the reader-player. His concept of 'cybertext' emphasises textual mechanics by understanding the intricate bond between various media as an integral part of literary exchanges. Arseth posits that all texts possess a degree of non-linearity, yet digital ecosystems foreground the reader's navigational agency, transforming textual engagement into a performative activity; ergo, the result is a participatory mode of reading in which meaning emerges through interactivity rather than passive reception. These foundational thinkers established a theoretical bridge between classical narratology and the emergent field of ludology - a space where play and storytelling converge.

The concept of interactive narrative provides a dynamic site for the reinterpretation of ethical and emotional frameworks of analog literature. Marie-Laure Ryan's *Narrative as Virtual Reality* (2001) further champions and advances the argument by positioning digital environments as "imaginative spaces of immersion", where players do not observe the fictional events but inhabit them. This immersion does not merely replicate the cathartic engagement of tragedy but reshapes it into a reflective process mediated by agency and consequences. Each decision that the player or the reader makes for the progression of the narrative acts as a self-reflective mirror, leading to a moment where narrative design intersects with player intent. Digital storytelling thus functions as an experimental site where audiences test value systems, confront ethical dilemmas, and observe the repercussions of their choices. The literary text, once bound to spectatorial consumption, becomes an interactive arena where narrative design operates both as a guide and catalyst, prompting self-reflection and expanding the moral potential of fiction.

James Phelan's *Experiencing Fiction* (2007) further extends this trajectory by foregrounding the rhetorical interplay among author, text, and reader, arguing that narrative meaning is constructed through emotional and interpretive participation. This rhetorical model anticipates participatory modes later actualised in digital storytelling, where narrative ethics emerge through player experiences rather than mere authorial design.

This shift towards participatory narrative is expanded in Henry Jenkins' work on participatory culture. In his academic work, *Convergence Culture* (2006), he foregrounds the cultural and political implications of player interaction, a theme also echoed in Alexander Galloway's *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture* (2006). Jenkins's notion of participatory culture identifies players and fans as active contributors to digital text. In his work, *Participatory Culture in a Networked Era* (2015)*, he notes that there has been a significant expansion of our communicative capabilities within a culture of the network domain. Galloway, in his work, highlights the cumulative manner in which performative

politics of play, code interface, and narrative collectively determine how agency is practised and distributed. Building upon this interdisciplinary frame of mind, Digital Humanities scholarship reconceptualises narratives as both a cultural text and a computational process.

Contemporary Digital Humanities scholarship increasingly frames this shift as the redefinition of literariness itself – from primary textual practice to one fundamentally shaped by algorithmic participation. Digital narrative is thus not a mere extension of literary form into new media but an epistemological transformation of how stories are authored, experienced, and interpreted. In an interactive ecosystem, narrative meaning emerges through the interplay of texts, player agency, and computational design. The digital world transforms into an evolving site of ethical and emotional inquiry. These interactive structures inherit the thematic and affective legacies of analog tragedy and catharsis while reconfiguring them within procedural systems, allowing players to inhibit moral dilemmas and participate in narrative construction as a form of experiential critique.

Section 2: Ethics, Moral Choices, and Player Agency in Games

"Games are objects that are designed for play, these moral experiences can be designed for players to enter, experience, and leave with a sense of agency, ownership, and ethical responsibility." Miguel Sicart, *Beyond Choices: The Design of Ethical Gameplay*

If interactivity redefines how stories are told, ethical choice redefines why they matter. In digital narratives, play becomes a form of moral enquiry, transforming aesthetic participation into ethical reflection. The player's decision on whether to act, delay, or disobey becomes the performative statements within the narrative world, reshaping the boundaries between fiction and responsibility. Games such as *Detroit: Become Human, Until Dawn, The Last of Us,* or *Batman: Enemy Within* do not merely place moral conflict before the audience; they demand participation in it. The player moves from spectator to agent, inhabiting the consequences of their decisions as part of the lived theatre of choice.

Miguel Sicart, in *Beyond Choices: The Design of Ethical Gameplay* (2013), asserts that "ethical gameplay" arises not from moral didacticism, but from agency; the player's capacity to act meaningfully within a value-based system. Players navigate moral tension by interpreting the situation, negotiating consequences, and becoming complicit in both the games' ethics and their own. For Sicart, digital play becomes a moral practice because it forces the player to inhabit a system of choices and accountability, to act as a mirror of their own self, echoing the classical tragic dilemma where every choice carries the possibility of loss. The moral architectures embedded in code do not instruct the players what to choose, but compel them to question why they choose. In this regard, digital ethics becomes an experiential philosophy in which action, emotion, and consequences are entangled deep inside their narrative fabric.

Jesper Juul's *The Art of Failure* (2013) complements this ethical reading by framing games as emotional negotiations between agency and frustrations. As Juul observes:

> "Humans have a fundamental desire to succeed and feel competent, but game players have chosen to engage in an activity in which they are almost certain to fail and feel incompetent, at least some of the time." (Juul, 2)

The player's suffering born of failure, guilt, or indecision mirrors the cathartic process of tragic literature. Juul notes that players "seek out failure and embrace it as a form of learning", transforming digital defeat into emotional reflection. When we experience defeat, we feel embarrassed, humiliated, and inadequate. This feeling motivates us to play and overcome this inadequacy and emerge victorious. Failure becomes an integral part of the system that challenges the players to better themselves and acts as an artificial laboratory of cathartic experiments. When a player's moral choices produce agony rather than victory, the game transcends its ludic frame and becomes a platform for narrative introspection. This parallels Aristotelian notions of catharsis - not as purgation, but as recognition of one's moral place within a world structured by repercussions.

These frameworks reposition the player as both actor and philosopher within the digital text. Ethical engagement is not an external supplement to the narrative framework; rather, it is the pulse of the narrative itself. The choices, consequences, and empathy are intricately interwoven into the algorithmic fabric of the story. Digital games become moral arenas where the player rehearses and experiments with ethical possibilities in a controlled yet emotionally charged environment. In such spaces, villainy, tragedy, and redemption cease to be static archetypes and instead become dynamic utterances of player-driven morality.

This interlacing of ethics and play extends beyond the interface. It evokes the moral framework of analog literature, where the tragic hero's downfall reflects human frailty. The difference lies in the site of performance. The moral decision now rests within the power of the reader-player, making ethical acts both diegetic and deeply personal. The digital medium thus becomes a space where individuals may interrogate the consequences of their impulses and decisions, engaging tragedy not through spectatorship but through participation. The hubris of the player translates into the choices they make within the narrative. They use video games as the medium to investigate the consequences of their hubris, without enacting such actions within real life.

Section 3: Villainy, Tragedy, and Moral Complexity: The Aesthetics of Playable Evil

When we play, we are not merely looking into a world; we are folding into ourselves.
Gordon Calleja, *In-Game: From Immersion to Incorporation*

If ethics in digital narratives transforms the player into a moral agent, then villainy metamorphoses them into a moral performer. The digital medium cultivates a unique

aesthetic of participation in which the player is not simply positioned to condemn evil but to inhabit its architecture, be lured into its seductions, negotiate its boundaries, and confront its consequences. Villainy within interactive analysis is not an externalised force to be defeated; it is an experiential construct, woven into the threads of the player's agency and emotional engagement. The stage of tragedy, once confined to the hamartia and soliloquy of fallen kinds and analog heroes, now re-emerges as an interactive theatre where players rehearse the moral ambiguities of power, corruption, and empathy.

Soraya Murray's landmark essay, *High Art/Low Life: The Art of Playing Grand Theft Auto* (2005), reframes the act of play as an aesthetic and cultural performance. She argues that games such as *Grand Theft Auto* destabilise the binary between art and obscenity, morality and entertainment, by complicating the player in transgression. The digital villain is no longer a narrative function but an embodied role, an identity performed and reflected upon. Murray suggests that this performance of immortality is not merely gratuitous; rather, it coaxes critical inspection about systems of violence, urban decay, and control embedded in the player's social reality. The player's capacity for moral suspension and aesthetic involvement creates an experiential field where villainy becomes a language of critique.

Expanding upon the performative dimension of moral play, Darshana Jayemanne in *Performativity in Art, Literature and Video Games* (2017) situates video games within the broader framework of aesthetic performance. Jayemanne contends that games function as "performative artworks" wherein interactivity merges ethical reflection with theatrical embodiment. The player's actions, moral negotiations, and gestures are performances through which meaning is generated. In digital narratives, villainy thus emerges as a choreography of ethics - a dramatic enactment of what it means to choose, to transgress, and to confront the aftermath of one's decisions. This theatricality of decision-making blurs the distinction between the narrative's moral architecture and the player's self-awareness, positioning villainy as a participatory discourse rather than a static, linear theme.

Gordon Calleja's *In-Game: From Immersion to Incorporation* (2011) deepens this discourse by reframing immersion as incorporation – a process by which the players internalise the game's moral, emotional, and aesthetic logics. While Jayemanne foregrounds villainy as a theatrical performance enacted through choice, Calleja highlights how digital environments are not merely inhabited but absorbed. Calleja argues that players do not simply enter into fictional worlds but carry them within. The affective bond between the player and the character renders villainy not as an opposition but rather as a mirror of reflection to one's moral system; it becomes a means of exploration of one's capability for moral elasticity within a designed system of consequences. Through this incorporation, the ethical boundaries of the self are reconstructed within the digital arena, creating a space where tragedy and empathy converge.

Together, these theoretical frameworks re-centre and reposition villainy as an aesthetic of conscience, a space where digital narratives re-imagine the tragic conditions for the interactive age. The player's engagement with moral corruption or failure is not a regression of spectacle of evil but a contemporary reworking of catharsis, inviting reflection rather than revulsion. Within the moral playhouse, *Batman: The Enemy Within* and *Detroit: Become Human* exemplify the modern digital tragedy, where the villain's voice becomes inseparable from the player's own agency, a reflection of the consequences of their own choices made amongst the pandemonium of dilemmic choices presented before them, and the act of play becomes a test of ethical imagination.

Section 4: Bridging Analog and Digital Ethical Traditions

The architecture of narrative ethics has long been grounded in the conventions of analog literature, and currently, it finds renewed resonance within the participatory frameworks of analog literature. In the classical mode, moral reflections were achieved through interpretive dissociation; the reader witnessed the hero's fall, the villain's deceptiveness, and the moral arc of tragedy as an act of interpretation rather than involvement. The tragic stage was the mirror and the boundary was designed to contain human flaws within the aesthetic boundary of recognition and catharsis. However, in the digital arena, that contemplative distance collapses. What was once read is now enacted, and what was once observed becomes co-authored in real time, transforming tragedy into a dual–constructed ethical canvas shared between system and subject.

Tzvetan Todorov's structural model of equilibrium, disruption, and restoration acquires new vitality when mapped onto interactive media. Digital narratives do not merely represent the moral tension between order and chaos; they demand that the players restore, disrupt, and redefine it. The ethical actions, once confined to the journey and growth of the protagonist, have now become the player's burden to bear. Similarly, James Phelan's conception of the "ethical component" of narrative, where the emotion, judgment, and action converge, finds an embodied expression in the algorithmic worlds of the play. Ethical literacy, in this scenario, is no longer passive comprehension but participatory navigation; the reader-player must interpret while indulging in play, judge while choosing, and feel while watching.

This synthesis between analog contemplation and digital participation marks the epistemic shift in this study. The moral reckoning of the tragic hero, once confined within the written page or performance on stage, is now distributed within the streamlines of code, interface, and interaction. Within this new terrain, villainy and virtue cease to be stable poles of morality and become fluid states negotiated through player agency and consequences. The digital game becomes a crucible where ancient moral architectures are refurbished into experiential ethics, compelling players to confront the emotional and ethical implications of the choices they make.

This paper proposes that narrative video games such as *Batman: The Enemy Within* and *Detroit: Become Human* transform traditional tragic structures into participatory ethical performances, where villainy and failure function not as transgressions but as instruments of reflection and introspection. By situating digital play within the continuum of literary ethics, the forthcoming analysis explores how interactive storytelling reimagines catharsis not just as purgation of emotions, but as its active embodiment through choice, reflection, and consequences.

Case Studies

In the wake of this convergence between analog and digital participation, these case studies that follow – *Batman: The Enemy Within* and *Detroit: Becomes Human,* function as experiential laboratories where these theoretical premises unfold in practice. Through their narrative architectures, moral mechanics, and aesthetic designs, these texts demonstrate how the player's negotiation of villainy, empathy, and failure reconfigures the classical tragic impulses into the participatory experience of ethical self-discovery.

Case Study I: Ethics and Villainy in *Batman: The Enemy Within*

Telltale's *Batman: The Enemy Within* (2017) dismantles the stable moral binaries traditionally associated with the Batman mythos. The game does not merely invite players to assume the role of Batman but to participate in the ethical architecture that produces the antagonists of the iconic Dark Knight. This instability is shown through the character of John Doe, a malleable, anxious man, who, through the player's choices, may emerge either as a ruthless villain or a fractured vigilante. The transformation of John into Joker is not pre-ordained or predetermined by narrative arcs; it is a collaborative effort in an ethical experiment, positioning the player as a participant in the very conditions of villainy.

The narrative begins with a world steeped in moral exhaustion. The Riddler's cryptic murders serve not as creative catalysts but as ethical provocation. His calculated violence expresses the futility of Batman's justice, pushing both players and the audience towards acts that could compromise their ethical certainties. When Amanda Waller enters the narrative, representing state-sanctioned surveillance and bureaucratic coercion, the distinction between villainy and governance begins to blur. The game establishes the iconic fictional city of Gotham as a procedural state where moral equilibrium is yet to be established.

John Doe's introduction into the narrative occurs amidst the landscape of chaos, presented first as a fragile, almost childlike patient at Arkham Asylum. John's interaction with Bruce, during the course of the narrative progression, destabilises the archetype of Joker as the symbol of chaos. The player's treatment of John functions as a moral hinge: empathy cultivates fragile trust, while manipulation or deceit breeds resentment and volatility. The carnival confrontation specifically determines this. The players must decide whether to blame John or trust him, and this crucial choice determines the trajectory of this game.

The Joker emerges at this moment not as an agent of chaos, rather as a figure who embodies the cumulative actions of player choices.

This model of ethical co-creation echoes Janet Murray's notion of "procedural authorship", wherein player agency is exercised within a bounded yet expressive ecosystem of rules. Every ethical choice generates what Todorov referred to as "renewal equilibrium", a temporal restoration of order that simultaneously reveals deeper moral instability. In this sense, *The Enemy Within* does not simply test the player's ethics; rather, it writes the ethics through the choices and inputs the player makes. The narrative unfolds as a dialogue between procedural constraint and emotional improvisation, between the mechanical and deeply personal.

John Doe and Batman function as a reflective dyad - two moral agents fractured by guilt and guided by conflicting codes of justice, two threads of the same stitch. Through this mirrored relationship, Telltale transforms the mythos of Joker into a study of performative ethics. John's oscillations between affection, betrayal, and aching desire for recognition expose the performative fragility of villainy itself. In the Vigilante route unlocked in the penultimate episode, his struggle to enact goodness feels tragically aspirational; in the Villain route, his cruelty seems less an inherent evil than a response to Bruce Wayne abandoning him and, by extension, the player's ethical abandonment. In both paths, the Joker becomes an ethical consequence rather than a narrative constant; he becomes a creation, a monster shaped by the player's participation.

Soraya Murray's analysis of *Grand Theft Auto* as a performance of "high art and low life" clarifies this dynamic, suggesting that games construct morality through aesthetic immersion and affective discomfort. Similarly, *The Enemy Within* illustrates how games aestheticise ethical discomfort. The game cultivates a moral aesthetic in which each choice, consequence and emotional rupture solicits oscillation between empathy and guilt. The concept of incorporation by Gordon Calleja becomes pertinent here; the player's emotional alignment with John Doe is not imposed by experience but through sustained moral investment and character development. The catharsis achieved is not Aristotelian in its resolution but modern in its fragmentation; the player leaves not with clarity, but with culpability of responsibility – burdened with a sense of mea culpa, recognising their role in cultivating the very villain whose tragedy they inhabit.

Telltale's reimagining of the Joker functions as a microcosm of participatory ethics in the twenty-first-century narrative culture. By allowing players to humanise the villain, the game destabilises the canon of absolute evil that was once structured in Batman and superhero universes. The result is not merely retelling but a rewriting, a fan-like remediation within the canonical frame. Villainy is transformed into a moral spectrum co-authored by the system, the story, and the player. In doing so, *Batman: The Enemy Within* materialises the central hypothesis of this study: that interactive storytelling enables ethical participation and reimagines the narrative boundaries of good and evil.

Where *Batman: The Enemy Within* situates its moral arena within the familiar iconography of the superhero mythos - where justice, guilt, and villainy are re-enacted as relational performances, *Detroit: Become Human* relocates the instability of human morality within systems of surveillance and coercion. Quantic Dream's work transforms these same questions into a meditation on autonomy, empathy, and artificial intelligence. In both narratives, the player is not merely a spectator of moral conflict but its architect. While *Batman* externalises ethical tension through performative dualities, *Detroit* internalises it within the circuitry of extensive choices. The stage of conscience thus evolves from the dark alleys of Gotham to the algorithmic consciousness of androids, revealing how digital narratives continually reconfigure what it means to be human, to act, to feel, and to be alive within the ethical confines of the play.

Case Study II: *Detroit: Become Human* – The algorithm of Conscience

If *Batman: The Enemy Within* stages villainy as a fractured mirror between justice and obsession, then *Detroit: Become Human* reframes it into a meditation on complicity - human and artificial alike. Here, villainy is neither coded in malice nor confined to any single entity; it disperses across systems, choices, and consciousness. The player is no longer a distant observer of ethical crisis but the architect of its formation. In the act of play, the boundaries between saviour, revolutionary, and oppressor collapse, revealing that moral corruption can emerge from the very pursuit of virtue itself.

The narrative of *Detroit: Become Human* unfolds through three android protagonists – Connor, Kara, and Markus; each positioned at the precipice between servitude and sentience. Among them, Markus and Connor embody the tension between obedience and defiance, order and empathy. Markus, the messianic leader of the android revolution, begins his journey as an obedient caregiver; an instrument of human will. Yet as he ascends into leadership, his pursuit of freedom is haunted by the same violence he seeks to overthrow. His moral evolution is the narrative moral paradox; in seeking liberation, he risks replicating the coercive structure he seeks to dismantle. The revolution's ethical ambiguity; whether it becomes a movement of peace or anarchic vengeance is left to the player's purview, situating the experience within the tragic frame of agency.

Connor, by contrast, embodies programmed loyalty, an android detective designed to hunt his own kind. His narrative arc mirrors the Aristotelian notions of anagnorisis, the moment of recognition in which the hero's moral awakening is also his undoing. Connor's gradual disobedience, his questioning of command, and his capacity for empathy towards deviants redefine villainy not as rebellion but as awareness. His transformation challenges players to confront the ethical paradox of control, obedience, and moral awakening. The choice to deviate or to remain loyal transforms into a metaphysical inquiry: at what point does moral alignment fracture under the weight of understanding? If the player chooses unwavering obedience, Connor becomes the instrument of his own people's destruction, culminating in his tragic obsolescence as a tool that outlives its purpose. Yet if the player elects deviation, he ruptures the circuitry of programmed destiny and moves towards

personhood. His hamartia – whether blind loyalty or the fragile pursuit of freedom rests not in inherent flaw, but in player authorship. Thus, Connor's journey becomes a tragic calculus where selfhood, duty, and liberation are determined not by narrative inevitability but by participatory events.

In this digital theatre of conscience, the player becomes both the playwright and the participant, embodying the duality of the creator and the destroyer. The algorithmic architecture of *Detroit: Become Human*, with its branching structure of choices and moral consequences, is an ethical experiment in authorship. Decisions, whether they lead to Markus' triumph or Connor's fall, function not merely as narrative divergence but as moral propositions. The game thus echoes what James Phelan terms "rhetorical ethics", where the narrative's structure persuades, provokes, and implicates. The illusion of freedom within pre-coded constraints mirrors the human condition of moral limitation; freedom performed within systemic control.

Within this framework, villainy in *Detroit: Become Human* ceases to be a singular figure and becomes a condition; an atmospheric presence sustained by the player's moral hesitations. Whether through Markus' radical compassion or Connor's obedient precision, the player participates and indulges in the architecture of power. The system interrogates not simply what the player believes to be right, but what they are willing to compromise to enact that belief. In this lies the game's most profound moral inquiry: if humans created machines capable of empathy, can those machines, in turn, expose the limits of human morality?

As Kara seeks refuge, Markus seeks freedom, and Connor seeks truth, *Detroit: Become Human* transforms the tragedy of self-awareness into participatory ethics of play. The villain is not the system alone, but the player who sustains or subverts it. Within this interactive world, humanity's greatest antagonist emerges not as the deviant android but as the reflection of human hands shaping destiny; an algorithm of conscience encoded within the framework of every choice we make. We do not merely witness ethical collapse; we enact its possibilities.

Across *Batman: The Enemy Within* and *Detroit: Become Human,* villainy emerges not as a narrative archetype but as a reflective mechanism of ethical play. Both texts imagine morality as a performance – an algorithmic stage where players perform and interrogate their conscience. In *Batman,* villainy operates through duality; the fracture between justice and obsession, while in *Detroit,* it functions through multiplicity, a diffusion of ethical agency across human and machine. Taken together, they articulate a sense of digital poetics of moral ambiguity, where villainy ceases to be an object of condemnation and becomes a form of recognition. Within these interactive worlds, tragedy is reborn not through destiny, but through design; not through fate, but through choice.

And the song ends: Rewriting the Tragic Code

Digital narratives, as this study has demonstrated, do not simply inherit the ethical architectures of classical literature; they refashion them within the logic of interactivity. The moral frameworks of tragedy, long anchored in the inevitability of fate and the fall of kings, are now distributed across code, interface, and participation. When the player steps into the role traditionally reserved for the tragic hero or villain, they enter the algorithmic theatre where choice becomes both a privilege and a punishment. In this shift, the digital narrative does not abandon literature's ethical impulse; it animates it as a simulation, transforming moral inquiry from observation into participation.

The intersection of ethics and villainy in games such as *Batman: The Enemy Within* and *Detroit: Become Human* demonstrates how interactive storytelling redefines authorship, agency, and conscience. Villainy is not a fixed archetype but a mutable ethical spectrum in which the player's complicity signals a movement from spectacle to self-recognition. These works illustrate that moral failure, whether Batman's obsessive righteousness or Connor's devout obedience, does not signify the collapse of virtue but the necessary confrontation. The digital text becomes a site of ethical rehearsal, a space where the player negotiates their place between control and consequence, echoing the timeless rhythm of tragic introspection.

While this study centres on two key interactive texts, its implications extend to a broader corpus of interactive and narrative games. It argues for an expanded vocabulary of digital ethics that situates interactivity within the ocean of literary moral thought. Future inquiries may extend this dialogue further by exploring the intersections between algorithmic design, affect theory, and performative authorship, tracing how digital participation continues to reshape the aesthetics of virtue, violence, and responsibility in emerging narrative ecologies.

In the liminal space between decision and consequences, the player stands not outside the story but inside the moral wound; no longer solely hero or villain but both at once. The digital mirror, eternally an ouroboros, much like the atavistic stage, holds up a mirror not to what we are, but to reflect what we choose to be. Every pixel of rebellion, every programmed failure, every branching path, a rehearsal of conscience, a soft echo of the chorus that once mourned Oedipus or Hamlet, now rendered in code. The tragedy endures, only its language has changed: the soliloquy becomes the interface, the catharsis becomes interactive, and the villain, perhaps, is us.

Work Cited

Aarseth, Espen. *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature.* Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997.

Aristotle. *Poetics.* Translated by S. H. Butcher, Dover Publications, 1997.

Batman: The Enemy Within. Developed by Telltale Games, 2017.

Bernstein, Mark, and Clare Hooper. "A Villain's Guide to Social Media and Interactive Digital Storytelling." *Proceedings of the 29th ACM Conference on Hypertext and Social Media (HT 2018)*, 2018, pp. 50-61. https://www.academia.edu/42177639/A_VILLAINS_GUIDE_TO_SOCIAL_MEDIA_AND_INTERACTIVE_DIGITAL_STORYTELLING?utm_source=chatgpt.com

Calleja, Gordon. *In-Game: From Immersion to Incorporation.* MIT Press, 2011.

Detroit: Become Human. Developed by Quantic Dream, Sony Interactive Entertainment, 2018.

Galloway, Alexander. *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture.* University of Minnesota Press, 2006.

Jayemanne, Darshana. *Performativity in Art, Literature and Video Games.* Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. *Scribd.* https://www.scribd.com/document/781679032/Performativity-in-Art-Literature#page=300

Jenkins, Henry. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide.* New York University Press, 2006.

Jenkins, Henry, Mizuko Ito, and danah boyd. *Participatory Culture in a Networked Era: A Conversation on Youth, Learning, Commerce, and Politics.* Polity, 2015.

Juul, Jesper. *The Art of Failure: An Essay on the Pain of Playing Video Games.* MIT Press, 2013.

Murray, Janet. *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace.* MIT Press, 1997. *Scribd,* https://www.scribd.com/document/711335308/Henry-Jenkins-Convergence-Culture-Where-Old-and-New-Media-Collide

Murray, Soraya. "High Art/Low Life: The Art of Playing 'Grand Theft Auto.'" *Game Studies*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2005.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Birth of Tragedy*. Translated by Shaun Whiteside, edited by Michael Tanner, Penguin Classics, 1993.

Phelan, James. *Experiencing Fiction: Judgments, Progressions, and the Rhetorical Theory of Narrative.* Ohio State University Press, 2007.

Ryan, Marie-Laure. *Narrative as Virtual Reality: Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media.* Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001. *Internet Archive*, https://archive.org/details/narrativeasvirtu0000ryan_c5g1

Shakespeare, William. *As You Like It*. *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, Canterbury Classics, 2012, pp [670-702]

Sicart, Miguel. *Beyond Choices: The Design of Ethical Gameplay.* MIT Press, 2013.

Sicart, Miguel. "Game, Player, Ethics: A Virtue Ethics Approach to Computer Games." *International Journal of Computer Game Research*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2006. https://informationethics.ca/index.php/irie/article/view/163/161

Sicart, Miguel. "The Ethics of Computer Game Design." *Proceedings of DiGRA 2005 Conference: Changing Views – Worlds in Play*, Digital Games Research Association, 2005. https://dl.digra.org/index.php/dl/article/view/110/110

Todorov, Tzvetan. *The Poetics of Prose.* Translated by Richard Howard, Cornell University Press, 1977.

Wolf, Mark J. P., and Bernard Perron. "Introduction." *The Video Game Theory Reader*, edited by Mark J. P. Wolf and Bernard Perron, Routledge, 2003, pp. 1–24.