

What Have Become of Me: Branching Narrative and Morally Ambiguous Characters (MACs) in *Detroit: Become Human* and *The Witcher 3 Video Games*

Rayana alif angoro^{1*}, Satriya Muhammad Aulia Ridwan², Zakky Fawwaz Maulana Al Khozi³

UIN Raden Mas Said Surakarta, Indonesia ;

236111107@mhs.uinsaid.ac.id; 236111103@mhs.uinsaid.ac.id; 236111109@mhs.uinsaid.ac.id;

*Rayana alif angoro

ARTICLE INFO

Article history

Received:

22-01-2026

Revised:

27-01-2026

Accepted:

03-02-2026

Keywords:

Branching narrative;

Moral ambiguity;

Player agency

ABSTRACT

In family life, parents play an important role in their children's development. One factor is the parenting style of the mother. In the world of film, parental parenting styles are often shown to the audience. Therefore, this study aims to examine the impact of Marina's poor parenting style on her child in the anime series Takopi's Original Sin. The method used in this study is qualitative descriptive analysis, which is research that is examined through researcher observation. The results of the study show that an unstable family situation has a direct impact on a child's growth. Negative parental behavior is followed by violence at an early age as a result. In addition, this parenting style causes significant psychological trauma, which affects the child and shapes Marina's psychological condition.



Introduction

In recent years, branching narratives have become one of the most defining features of modern video games. A branching narrative refers to a story structure that changes according to the player's choices, allowing multiple outcomes and personalized storylines. Krakowiak (2012) Unlike traditional linear narratives, where the story follows a fixed path, branching narratives encourage interaction inviting players to shape events and determine consequences. This interactivity transforms games into a new kind of storytelling medium, where literature and gameplay converge. Through decision-making, dialogue choices, and moral dilemmas, players become both the reader and the author of the story.

Many popular games have used branching narratives to explore moral and emotional depth. In *Detroit: Become Human* (2018), players control androids named Connor, Kara, and Markus whose fates depend on hundreds of choices. Each decision changes not only their survival but also their ethical identity. As Chen (2024) notes, the game places players in situations that test empathy, logic, and rebellion, making moral reflection a central part of gameplay. Similarly, *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015) presents an open-world structure where Geralt of Rivia must make decisions without clear "right" or "wrong" answers. The famous quest "The Bloody Baron" shows how even well-intentioned actions can lead to tragedy, prompting players to confront moral ambiguity. These examples illustrate how branching narratives have turned games into complex moral fictions, where ethical choice becomes a literary and emotional experience.

Scholars have increasingly recognized this intersection between narrative design and moral reflection. Sicart (2009) argues that ethical gameplay arises when players face "wicked problems" situations without easy solutions forcing them to examine their own values. Bopp, Müller, and Opwis (2016) found that players often experience emotions like guilt or confusion

when confronted with moral choices, deepening their narrative engagement. Guglielmo and Klinecicz (2021) also suggest that designing NPCs who behave “as if moral” provides a safe space for exploring ethics in gameplay. Together, these studies reveal that branching narratives and morally ambiguous characters (MACs) are not only popular storytelling devices but also powerful frameworks for understanding how people reflect on values, identity, and emotion in interactive media.

Despite this growing academic interest, there remains a research gap in how different game genres construct moral ambiguity through branching narratives. Most prior works focus on player psychology or general game design, yet few compare games with distinct narrative architectures. *Detroit: Become Human* presents a structured, cinematic model centered on emotional choice-making, whereas *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* uses open-world freedom to weave moral dilemmas through exploration. As Quantic Dream developers explained in an interview (2020), *Detroit* aims to evoke empathy and moral conflict rather than fixed storytelling. However, there has been little comparative research between this linear-branching style and *The Witcher 3*'s open-world morality. Following from these issues, we formulated the following research questions (1) What elements of MACs are found from the branching narratives in *Detroit: Become Human*, and (2) What elements of MACs are found from the branching narratives in *the Witcher 3*

Literature Review

Branching Narratives and the Chain of Player Agency

Over the last decade, branching narratives have reshaped how scholars and players understand storytelling in video games. These interactive structures invite players to explore multiple narrative paths, transforming them from mere observers into active participants in meaning-making. Ryan (2001) refers to this process as interactive mimesis, emphasizing how digital narratives grant the reader or players creative roles within the story. Aarseth (1997)

similarly introduces the idea of ergodic literature, highlighting that player must invest effort and decision to move a story forward. Expanding on these ideas, Juul (2005) describes games as hybrid forms, balancing rigid rules with imaginative freedom, thereby allowing narrative and mechanics to continually shape one another. What connects these theories is a shared concern with player agency are how much freedom a player truly possesses in shaping a story. García I Quiroga (2024) observes that even in the most complex branching systems, stories maintain a “central narrative spine” to preserve coherence. This balance between freedom and structure in interactive narrative systems show how players controls within predetermined constraints, while still allowing moral interpretation to emerge through branching choices and overlapping narrative. In that way it's demonstrated that moral meaning in games is not fixed but dynamically produced through the interaction between narrative possibilities and player decision-making (Ensslin, 2012; Fernández-Vara, 2015).

Morally Ambiguous Characters and the Chain of Ethical Reflection

If structure defines how stories move, then *morally ambiguous characters* (MACs) define how players feel within them. Unlike the clear moral binaries of early game narratives, MACs inhabit the grey areas of choice and consequence. Sicart (2009) in *The Banality of Simulated Evil* argues that ethical gameplay emerges when players confront “wicked problems” and moral dilemmas without simple answers. In such moments, the game becomes a space for self-examination rather than victory.

Emotional responses play a crucial role in how players experience morally complex narratives. Bopp, Müller, and Opwis (2016) found that feelings such as guilt, uncertainty, and moral tension heighten player engagement by making choices that feel personally meaningful. Klimmt et al. (2009) describe this as eudaimonic entertainment, in which players' values are from reflection, ethical questioning, and emotional depth rather than momentary pleasure alone. Moral complexity in games therefore coming not only from narrative structures and

decision-making mechanics, but also from the affective resonance that characters generate, allowing players to evaluate their own values while shaping the direction of the story (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004; Schut, 2019).

Narrative Engagement and the Chain of Interpretation

Narrative engagement offers a bridge between the mechanics of moral choice and the psychology of player interpretation. Krakowiak (2012) conceptualizes engagement as a triadic experience: narrative (interest in outcomes), emotional (empathy with characters), and cognitive (ethical reasoning). These dimensions illustrate that to play is also to interpret, to feel, to think, and to decide. The immersive quality of such experiences transforms moral choices into personal reflections, where the player's sense of self becomes entangled with the narrative's ethical fabric.

Jauss's (1982) *Reception Theory* expands this view, suggesting that meaning is not embedded in the text itself but negotiated through the reader's or player's "horizon of expectation." Every player brings a unique moral lens shaped by culture, emotion, and prior experience. Consequently, the same decision whether sparing an android in *Detroit: Become Human* or shaping Ciri's fate in *The Witcher 3* can lead to vastly different moral interpretations. This reveals that in video games, morality is not a fixed construct authored by designers; it is an *emergent performance*, co-created by the player's interpretive and ethical participation.

Integrating the Chains: From Structural Design to Moral Experience

Bringing these theoretical strands together shows that branching narratives and morally ambiguous characters form an interconnected system of ethical experience. Earlier research often treated structure, ethics, and engagement as separate domains (Sicart, 2009; Bopp et al., 2016; Krakowiak, 2017), yet their interaction reveals a deeper truth: moral reflection in games emerges precisely where these domains converge. *Detroit: Become Human* demonstrates a structured cinematic model that channels emotion through tightly designed choice pathways, while *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* embodies an open-world ethical system in which meaning arises organically through consequence and context.

By employing Spradley's (1980) ethnographic method alongside Krakowiak's engagement framework, this study positions itself within that intersection—investigating how design structure and player freedom together produce moral complexity. The chain that runs through structure, ambiguity, engagement, and reflection underscores that ethics in interactive storytelling is less about determining right and wrong than about exploring how players come to feel responsible for their decisions within digital worlds

RESEARCH METHOD

The data of this study consist of branching narrative paths, moral decision points, and character arcs from two video games: *Detroit: Become Human* by Quantic Dream and *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* by CD Projekt Red. These games were chosen because both have morally ambiguous characters (MACs) whose development depends heavily on player decisions, creating branching narrative structures that emphasize ethical complexity. The data forms comprise of textual, visual, and operative. Textual data refer to verbal expressions articulated before the branching narratives, as branching narratives, and after the branching narratives are selected. Visual data refer to images and scenes that come along with the branching narratives. Operatev data refer to the choices and how players have to engage with the consequences of the choices presented through the branching narratives.

Findings and Data Analysis

The data were analysed through Spradley's (1980) method in conjunction with Krakowiak's narrative framework. The first step, domain analysis, identified broad categories

such as moral dilemmas, identity and transformation, and consequences of actions within the branching narratives of *Detroit: Become Human* and *The Witcher 3*. These domains were refined through taxonomic analysis by breaking them into detailed subcategories—for instance, loyalty versus betrayal, self-sacrifice versus survival, or justice versus pragmatism. Once the domains and taxonomies were established, Krakowiak’s theory of narrative engagement was applied to examine how branching structures influence the player’s perception of MACs. The final stage involved comparative mapping, which highlighted similarities and differences between the two games in terms of how branching narratives produce morally ambiguous character identities and moral complexity.

Tabel.1

Data	Data Source	Textual	Meaning for MACa
Moral Dilemma	✓	✓	✓
Identity Transformation	✓	✓	✓
Consequence of Actions	✓	✓	✓
Moral Dilemma	✓	✓	✓
Identity & Transformation	✓	✓	✓
Consequences of Actions	✓	✓	✓

The table show how morally ambiguous characters are represented across branching narratives in both games. In *Detroit: Become Human*, characters such as Connor, Kara, and Markus embody moral ambiguity through their shifting identities and androids negotiating obedience, rebellion, and humanity, while the outcomes of their choices highlight how individual morality intersects with collective destiny. In *The Witcher 3*, Geralt’s morally ambiguous nature is revealed through quests where justice and pragmatism collide, and through personal relationships that define his moral stance. Ciri’s multiple fates further demonstrate how player-guided decisions shape not only narrative outcomes but also the moral identity of central characters.

By integrating Krakowiak’s narrative framework, the study interprets these domains and taxonomies as strategies that heighten player engagement and ethical reflection. Thus, the combination of Spradley’s method and Krakowiak’s theory allows for a systematic exploration of how branching narratives construct morally ambiguous characters and influence the player’s perception of morality within interactive storytelling.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Morally ambiguous characters (MACs) are characters who operate within a gray area of morality, meaning their actions cannot be easily classified as good or evil. They often make decisions that are justified by personal beliefs, survival, or emotional motives rather than absolute ethics. In video games, MACs are especially compelling because players directly participate in shaping their morality through choices and gameplay mechanics. Good or evil the character is based on how player control them

Moral Dilemma

A moral dilemma in narrative media refers to a situation where a character (or player) must choose between two or more actions that all carry moral cost. There is no clear “right” or “wrong” answer, every option has a consequence. According to Krakowiak & Oliver (2012), morally ambiguous characters often confront audiences with uncertainty because their decisions cannot be easily judged as purely good or evil. This unpredictability increases

cognitive involvement and makes the audience reflect more deeply on the ethics of the situation.



Figure 1 Geralt offering to help the woman

Geralt faces a deeply human moral dilemma when he encounters a dying woman suffering from fatal wounds inflicted by the griffin. The dialogue options, either to promise vengeance by saying *"I'll kill the griffin. No more victims after that,"* or to show compassion through *"I could try to help her"* confront the player with two opposing moral imperatives. The first option reflects Geralt's professional detachment as a Witcher, prioritizing the completion of his contract and the prevention of further deaths over individual suffering. The second option expresses empathy and moral responsibility toward the immediate pain of another being, even though Geralt acknowledges that no potion or skill can truly save her. This conflict encapsulates the duality of Geralt's nature as both a mercenary and a morally man trained to remain neutral, yet constantly challenged by his human side. After Player offered help to heal the wounded woman, Geralt brew her a strong poison for her to drink. It's either she healed or she died from the strong nature of the poison.



Figure 1 Brewing a potion

If player decided to help the woman, the game will give the player a quest to brew a Witcher poison, player need to find the item around the map to brew the potion.



Figure 2 Player decision interface showing Markus's moral dilemma

In this scene, Markus is attacked by Leo, the son of his owner Carl. Leo insults and pushes Markus, trying to make him fight back. The player is given two choices: “Push Leo” or “Endure.” This situation creates a strong moral dilemma for Markus whether he should protect himself or stay loyal to his peaceful programming.

If Markus chooses to endure, he obeys his code as an android and avoids violence, even though he is treated unfairly. But if he decides to push Leo, he breaks his programming and starts to act with human emotion anger and self-defense. This moment shows how Detroit: Become Human uses player choices to explore questions about morality and humanity. Markus's choice is not only about physical action but about who he becomes. By choosing to fight back, he begins to form his own identity and challenge the system that keeps androids obedient. The player feels responsible for this moral shift, realizing that every action has consequences, both for Markus and the world around him.

Identity and Transformation

Identity and transformation refer to how the audience's perception of a character evolves through their dialogue choice with moral complexity. Krakowiak & Oliver (2012) explain that when Players feel emotionally transported and perceive a narrative as realistic, they begin to identify with the character. Identification allows the audience to Understand the character's moral identity through decisions and emotion. Players are also able to shape Character's morality as if the Character itself is a blank canvas.



Figure 3 Dialogue choice interface illustrating Geralt's moral and identity between openness and secrecy

This scene demonstrates the concept of identity and transformation because Geralt's personality is continually shaped through the player's choices. Here, the player must choose whether Geralt responds with openness “Heading to Novigrad” or emotional detachment “Not your concern”. Krakowiak and Oliver (2012) say that morally ambiguous characters need players to constantly reevaluate who the character are, as their actions reveal shifting moral intentions and emotional complexity. In this conversation, Geralt's identity becomes a

negotiated outcome between the player and the narrative: choosing honesty suggests empathy for connection, while secrecy emphasizes his role as an isolated, discriminated monster-slayer. The presence of a dialogue timer force players to make a quick decision for this transformation by pushing players to respond instinctively, revealing their internal interpretation of Geralt's morals. When identity is not predetermined but actively shaped by decision-making, players experience a closer bond with the character, developing emotional alignment and reflective engagement a process Krakowiak and Oliver identify as central to enjoying morally complex. Therefore, this scene show that Geralt's identity is fluid rather than fixed, continuously transformed through ethical choices that blur the boundary between Witcher detachment and human compassion.



Figure 4 Kara's introduction

At the start of the game, Kara introduces herself by saying, "My name is Kara." She speaks politely and acts like a normal android who follows orders without question. Her identity is built by programming, not by choice. She only exists to serve humans. This early scene shows how androids in Detroit: Become Human have no personal identity they are property, not people. Later, after witnessing violence and deciding to protect Alice, Kara becomes a deviant an android who breaks her code and acts on emotion. Her short hair and stronger expression show her transformation. She is no longer just following commands; she starts to make her own decisions and think about what is right or wrong. This change represents her journey from machine to human. Through Kara's transformation, the game shows how identity is not something given, but something created through choices. The player helps Kara shape who she becomes a servant, a protector, or a mother figure. This process makes players reflect on the meaning of freedom and what it means to truly have a self.



Figure 5 Kara's charater shaped after a certain event

Consequences of Actions

Krakowiak & Oliver (2012) state that suspense and enjoyment rise when audiences Think of their consequences on their choice while waiting for the outcome from their decision. Consequences of actions are the real, noticeable results that follow the player's decisions and they provide emotional weight to those moral dilemmas. Decisions in morally ambiguous situations feel meaningful for players because players must accept responsibility for the

aftermath from their decision.



Figure 6 Dialogue interface illustrating the consequences of Geralt's decision-making

This scene demonstrates the concept of consequences of actions, where the player's decision directly influences both the narrative outcome and Geralt's moral perception within the world. Each dialogue choice leads to a different consequence: responding with aggression "Back off or die" escalates into violence and reinforces Geralt's reputation as a threatening and emotionally detached witcher, while choosing to explain himself "I'm a witcher" appeals to honesty but may increase fear or hostility toward him due to social prejudice against witchers. In contrast, offering peace "Care for a drink?" introduces an unexpected path of diplomacy that avoids unnecessary bloodshed and reveals a more compassionate side of his character. Krakowiak and Oliver (2012) emphasize that when morally ambiguous characters face meaningful consequences, audiences become more emotionally invested because they must reflect on the ethical weight of their decisions. In this way, the game requires players to take responsibility for shaping not only the immediate situation but also how Geralt is seen by others whether as a dangerous outcast or a humane protector. These branching outcomes illustrate how moral significance in *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* does not lie in obtaining rewards or punishments alone but in how choices define the character's path and identity within a morally complex world.



Figure 7 Scene illustrating the character's transformation and emergence of self-awareness

In this scene, Markus wakes up in a junkyard after being destroyed. His body is broken, and he struggles to move. The player helps him find new parts and climb out of the pit. When Markus finally reaches the surface, he says, "My name is Markus," showing his rebirth. This moment represents the consequence of his earlier choices — his decision to survive and keep fighting gives him a new purpose. The scene shows that every action in *Detroit: Become Human* can lead to big changes. Markus's survival is not only a personal victory but also the beginning of a movement that will later fight for android freedom.

Through this event, the game shows how individual choices can shape collective

destiny. Markus's rise from the junkyard becomes a symbol of hope and rebellion. The player's action to help him climb out connects directly to the story's moral theme: that freedom and identity come with struggle and consequence.

Conclusion

This study has examined how branching narratives and morally ambiguous characters (MACs) function as connected elements in shaping moral reflection and emotional engagement in video games. By analyzing *Detroit: Become Human* and *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* through Spradley's scientific study method and Krakowiak's narrative engagement framework, this research shows that moral meaning in games emerges not from fixed outcomes but from the dynamic interaction between player, narrative structure, and ethical decision-making. Each moral dilemma, transformation of identity, and consequence of action serves as a space where players negotiate values and confront their sense of moral responsibility within digital worlds. The findings suggest that morally ambiguous characters invite players to engage in a process of ethical interpretation rather than players' judgment. Through these experiences, games become a medium for introspection, where emotional and cognitive engagement lead to deeper understanding of morality, empathy, and human identity. The comparative analysis between structured and open-world narratives demonstrates that both design models can generate moral depth, though through different pathways, one emphasizing emotional tension through controlled storytelling, and the other through freedom, consequence, and contextual choice.

The findings of this study can benefit future research and game designers in several ways. For researchers, this study provides a framework for examining how branching narratives and morally ambiguous characters (MACs) construct ethical reflection through player agency and interactive storytelling. Future studies can expand upon this work by applying Krakowiak's narrative engagement framework to other genres or media forms, such as visual novels, open-world simulations, or multiplayer role-playing games, to further explore how moral ambiguity functions in collective or networked storytelling environments. For game developers and narrative designers, the findings highlight the importance of creating decision-based systems that not only entertain but also teach empathy, introspection, and moral awareness among players. By understanding how ethical choice and emotional engagement interact, future creators can design games that encourage players to reflect on their values and the impact of their actions. Ultimately, this study aims to inspire researchers to view moral choice in video games not merely as a gameplay mechanic but as a meaningful narrative tool that deepens human understanding through interactive experience.

Daftar Pustaka

- Krakowiak, K. M., & Oliver, M. B. (2012). *When good characters do bad things: Examining the effect of moral ambiguity on enjoyment*. *Journal of Communication*, 62(1), 117-135.
- Bopp, J. A., Müller, L. J., & Opwis, K. (2016). *Exploring emotional responses to moral choices in video games*. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 58, 299-308.
- Ensslin, A. (2012). *The language of gaming*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Fernández-Vara, C. (2015). *Introduction to game analysis*. Routledge.
- García I Quiroga, P. (2024). *Branching narrative structures in digital storytelling: Player agency and coherence*. [Master's thesis, University of Barcelona].
- Guglielmo, S., & Klineciewicz, M. (2021). *Designing moral NPCs: Principles for ethical interactivity in games*. Tilburg University Press.

- Hartmann, T., & Vorderer, P. (2010). *Moral decision making in video games: A theoretical model*. *Media Psychology*, 13(4), 248–273.
- Juul, J. (2005). *Half-real: Video games between real rules and fictional worlds*. MIT Press.
- Klimmt, C., Hartmann, T., & Frey, A. (2009). *Moral emotions and enjoyment in interactive media*. *Media Psychology*, 12(3), 239–252.
- Krakowiak, K. (2017). *Narrative engagement: Understanding how stories captivate audiences*. Routledge.
- Ryan, M.-L. (2001). *Narrative as virtual reality: Immersion and interactivity in literature and electronic media*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Salen, K., & Zimmerman, E. (2004). *Rules of play: Game design fundamentals*. MIT Press.
- Schut, K. (2019). *Gaming the good life: Ethics and virtue in video games*. Baylor University Press
- Sicart, M. (2009). *The banality of simulated evil: Designing ethical gameplay*. *Design Issues*, 25(3), 28–37.