

Dialogue of Classical Literary Theory and Interactive Game Narrative

-- Choices, Tragedy, and Simulation in *Detroit: Become Human*

Qiyun Chang*

School of Foreign Languages, Renmin University of China, Beijing 100872, China

*Corresponding author email: changqiyun@ruc.edu.cn

Abstract

Detroit: Become Human is an interactive cinematic game driven by player choices. It reinterprets classical literary theory while pushing its boundaries, offering a modern artistic creation that both echoes and challenges traditional literary concepts. This paper explores the features of its narrative through the classical frameworks of Plato and Aristotle, focusing on three aspects: player-driven decisions, tragic dimension, and virtual simulation. The game's branching, choice-based narrative blends entertainment with enlightenment. The tragic dimension elevates it to a legitimate art form. Instead of only imitating reality, the game simulates it, inviting players to reflect on the real-world. The game tests the boundaries of traditional theories and opens new avenues for applying literary theory. As video games evolve, they may bridge literature, philosophy, and technology, fostering a cross-disciplinary dialogue that redefines the relevance of classical literary theory in new narrative forms, and offers new possibilities for narrative studies in the digital age.

Keywords

Detroit: Become Human; video game; interactive narratives; classical literary theory; simulation.

1. Introduction

Detroit: Become Human is an interactive third-person cinematic game set in a futuristic Detroit. Androids, designed to serve humans, begin to gain self-awareness and seek freedom [1]. The story unfolds through three main characters. Connor is an android detective created and programmed to hunt deviant androids. Kara is a domestic android escaping an abusive household to protect a child and seek freedom. Markus is a revolutionary android leader fighting for android rights. The game features player choices and multiple endings. Its interactivity allows players to shape the narrative. Each playthrough becomes a unique exploration of freedom, humanity, and ethical responsibility.

The video game is often called the "ninth art". It has a special place in culture and art, since video games can connect many types of artistic expression in a way impossible for conventional art. "Computer games are perhaps the richest cultural genre we have yet seen" [2], says Espen Aarseth, the leading figure in game studies. We can say computer games bring together many disciplines in terms of story-telling, artwork, sound, and performance. This feature makes video game unique as a means of creating art and conveying culture. "As we move into a situation where poetry is more electric and Net-oriented, and where videogames are maturing into their art possibilities, there will be more exploration of the meeting ground of poetry (and other arts) with games." [3] Through the capability of combining detailed plots with the interactive component, video games offer an experience for both entertainment and contemplation. It

responds to Aristotelian concepts of plot structure and catharsis, while its ethical quandaries evoke Platonic concerns about art's role in moral education. Therefore, video games have the ability to transcend traditional boundaries and become a platform for both artistic expression and intellectual engagement.

Analysis of contemporary video games through the prism of classical literary theory proves how classical critical theory can continue to be productive if introduced into dialogue with new narrative forms. This approach also shows that modern digital art can extend the interpretive range of literary theory by placing traditional concepts within new aesthetic and technological contexts. The analysis of games such as *Detroit: Become Human* using the critical framework of Aristotle and Plato brings to mind the relevance of classical theories for studying contemporary storytelling. In this case, video games are confirmed as a legitimate type of art which is able to reflect, challenge, and enrich the intellectual heritage of classical era. Thus, the discussion between ancient theories and contemporary art provides the opportunity for the latter to respect the legacy of classics and create new ways of artistic expression.

2. Branching Narrative and Choice-Based Interaction

The multi-branch and choice-based narrative is one of the most intriguing aspects of *Detroit: Become Human*. Players can experience the story from three different points of view, with each storyline operating in parallel and diverging within based on the player's choices. Eventually, these narratives will be merged in a climactic and dramatic intersection, reflecting the impact of individual decisions on a shared destiny. The intricate narrative network binds together the destinies of all three characters and endows players with an unusual degree of freedom in controlling the process. Every choice the player makes, no matter how minute, influences the outcome and determines the fate of the three protagonists and that of many other characters. The game changes interactivity into a collaborative experience, as "the gamer and the game's designer [enter] into a new collaboration" [4]. The game offers three basic outcomes for the general android-human relationship (humans win, androids win, or a truce between the two). However, there are about 100 variations concerning the detailed fate of its characters. As stated on the official Quantic Dream website, "Countless paths, countless endings—No playthrough will be exactly the same: replay again and again to discover a totally different conclusion." [5] This complexity ensures that every player's journey is unique based on their choices and actions.

2.1. Branching Narrative

The stories of the three protagonists form a multi-layered narrative of social change, personal struggle, and identity crisis. Markus is driven by the ideal of social transformation in that he wants to unite the androids and liberate them. Kara's story represents the personal struggle for survival in the crisis-ridden society. Connor occupies the middle ground between the societal and the personal, and thus symbolizes the internal conflict between the unwavering loyalty to his programmed duties and the growing pull of empathy.

The design of multifaceted perspectives allows players to go through moral dilemmas from a variety of angles. Markus as the revolutionary leader makes a contrast to the standpoint of Kara who is a fugitive. The players get two perspectives on the broader societal shift and its impact on individuals. Markus's choices, especially whether to choose a violent revolution or not, profoundly affect the public opinion. His option for a violent revolution will spark widespread social unrest and hostility towards the android population. This results in Kara and her companions being unable to leave the U.S. safely; If Markus chooses a peaceful uprising, his actions will probably receive understanding and sympathy for the androids. The human customs officers, moved by the androids' suffering, are more likely to allow Kara and her companion to pass through. At the same time, Kara's choices on whether to harm others in

order to ensure her own safety will also have an impact on public opinion. It will shape the outcome of Markus's peaceful uprising. Her actions could determine whether humans respond with a massacre of defenseless androids or, conversely, the human military retreats temporarily, granting the androids a moment of respite. Just as what the side character North said before Markus recording androids' message for humans, "Think carefully about what you're gonna say, Markus. Your words will shape the future of our people." Individual's choice strongly influences the destinies of the collective.

The one under the greatest pressure is Connor. Markus and Kara both establish their firm stances early in the story. They are no longer tools of humans and they have come to realize their own personhood, breaking free from the shackles of programming and commands. Connor's situation is far more complicated by his existence in a blurred space. He remains under the watchful monitor of humans and is constantly torn between the concepts of "deviant with free will" and "commands executing machine". Connor is a more advanced model of android and he is subject to the commands of his superior, Amanda. However, he develops an increasing emotional connection to Detective Hank Anderson. This inner conflict makes Connor's plotline the most intricate: stand with or against his fellow androids shapes the outcome of the uprising.

In light of classical literary theory, such stories can be seen as going against Aristotle's opinion described in his *Poetics*. Aristotle stresses the importance of a unified plot structure that leads to catharsis. He advocates for a singular and cohesive narrative arc with "a beginning, a middle, and an end" [6]. In such narrative every action is causally connected and guides the protagonist towards an inevitable outcome. *Detroit: Become Human* challenges this notion by embracing a multi-threaded narrative structure. It diverges and converges based on player choices, creating a more dynamic storytelling experience. Rather than following a single and inevitable path, the game's outcome is not predetermined but depends on series of player-driven choices. It reflects a fluidity that Aristotle's relatively rigid sequence of cause and effect does not accommodate.

However, Aristotle also recognizes the complexities of moral character. Although he believes that the inconsistencies or contradictions of characters are inherent in nature, such inconsistencies must be patterned in some way. What this means is that the character should be "consistently inconsistent" [6]. Take Connor for example: his story may develop quite differently. He might remain a loyal enforcer of human, or he could become a revolutionary leader fighting for the rights of androids. Regardless of the diversity of the outcomes that can be expected from him, one thing is certain: his path will be guided by one main idea, the idea of discovering identity. On another level, players also become participants in the process of developing Connor's personality in a coherent way. Already from the first moment when players enter the game, the first choice they have to make is whether or not to save the dying fish that is out of the tank. It sets the tone for the narrative. Players who choose to save the fish are likely to show a deeper sense of empathy, steering Connor away from becoming an unfeeling machine blindly following order. These players might not abandon Hank in pursuit of deviant suspects, and they may not kill Chloe at Kamski's house just to get the necessary information. In other words, these players' choices tend to guide Connor down a path toward a deviant android with self-awareness and autonomy, rather than remaining a tool of ruthless obedience.

In the light of this kind of thematic continuity amidst the different plotlines, one could argue that unity in the contemporary interactive stories cannot be confined to the linear causality anymore; rather, it is found through the universality of the themes. Unity of the story in the game takes a new form, where the unity is not restricted anymore and allows for celebration of choices while providing unity through the concerns that run throughout the story. In this way, the game follows Aristotle's concept of unity of theme but contradicts his notion of causality.

2.2. Choice-Based Interaction

Interaction through choices gives an entirely new meaning to the relationship between the creator and audience. "Choosing as a theme predates both the novel and the video game." [7] While the agonies of making decisions have already been depicted in the novels, where the reader is compelled to be a spectator who cannot do anything other than go through the pre-ordained stream of decisions made by the author, it is in the interactive video games where the importance of choices becomes real.

In the game, each character grapples with their own dilemma, which compels players to deal with them, and the implications can be significant. The android detective Connor struggles to reconcile his allegiance to humanity and his developing feelings of empathy towards the androids he hunts. Should he show mercy on Markus, who is a deviant, or execute him? Should he become an awakening deviant and help in the revolution or not develop further and stay a machine executioner? Connor's journey is a complex negotiation between duty and self-awareness. Kara possesses an inherent motherly instinct that transcends the programming. The toughest decisions for Kara take place when she is faced with the choice to either prioritize her own safety, protect Alice, and sacrifice others, or to maintain her moral integrity at the risk of getting into even more dire situations in an increasingly hostile world. Markus faces the ethical struggle between the means and the ends. Should he provoke violence in the name of equality or pursue the route of peaceful protest, knowing that each choice could either lead to greater freedom or devastating loss? Far from being merely the vehicle for a thematic discussion, these moral quandaries are central to the video game's exploratory process of the issues of freedom, identity and morality, posing fundamental questions about the very nature of justice and the importance of human lives in a world that is about to fall apart. The boundaries between creator and player dissolve, and the act of storytelling becomes a dance between game and player. Every choice carries the potential to alter the course of the narrative forever.

In this vast range of freedom of choice, there exists a deep sense of morality behind each decision. Video games with their branching narratives provide players with moral challenges which make them examine their values in a context which goes beyond just personal aspects. In *Republic*, Plato was concerned with the power of art to shape the soul and influence moral development [8]. Video games too offer a space for this kind of moral education. The game puts players through the ordeal of making decisions on the thin line separating right from wrong, justice from betrayal, compassion from cruelty. Accordingly, it creates a moral engagement that goes beyond mere entertainment. This process also mirrors Horace's *Ars Poetica*. "Poets wish either to profit or to delight; or to deliver at once both the pleasures and the necessities of life" [9]. He asserts that art should not only entertain, but also educate and refine its audience, so as to guide them toward virtuous living.

However, Plato argues that art should not portray anything immoral because it could influence viewers negatively, especially in shaping their moral values [8]. He believes that art should inspire people to live a reasonable and virtuous life by portraying goodness and beauty only [8]. But video games as a new medium break from Plato's restriction by presenting morally ambiguous situations. Rather than avoiding immoral content, the game uses these situations to challenge players and encourage emotional and moral reflection. While immoral actions may be presented, they are not intended to be glorified, but to force players to grapple with the consequences of their actions. This is in line with the ideas of Horace who states that the real significance of the arts is in their capacity to stimulate emotional involvement and provoke moral contemplation, since the best poetry stimulates its audience not only to feel but also to act virtuously, to stir the soul and guide it to higher ideals. In this way, video games encourage players to question their own moral compass and engage more with the complexities of human experience.

3. Tragic Dimension Transcending Constraints

Aristotle's concept of tragedy in *Poetics* establishes the foundation for what is traditionally regarded as the highest form of art, emphasizing its ability to evoke catharsis—an emotional purging through pity and fear—thereby offering both moral insight and aesthetic pleasure [4]. Tragedy, for Aristotle, is marked by the protagonist's downfall brought about by a flaw in character or an error in judgment, which is unavoidable and stems from the very nature of the narrative. A tragic hero is one who, though possessing noble qualities, falls from grace due to a critical flaw—be it hubris, poor judgment, or a moment of moral weakness. This fundamental flaw ensures that tragedy, unlike mere entertainment, engages with deeper philosophical questions about human nature, fate, and the consequences of one's actions.

Accordingly, from a traditional perspective, video games are relegated to mere lowbrow entertainment which are unable to encapsulate, as novels and films, the entire emotional range and the full social spectrum of human experience. This perception stems primarily from two successive constraints that once dominant in the mainstream games: one is the winning constraint that "players of games must be able to win. Any obstacle faced by their protagonist, any blockage in forward progress, whether its agent is the environment or a villain, must be able to be overcome through the player's effort. The game does not end until all such obstacles are overcome" [7]; the other is the happy ending constraint, "As with genre fiction, it is the final overcoming of the final obstacle that closes off the story and frames the happy ending of the diegesis." [7] In other words, the absence of a tragedy, pathos, and trauma prevents video games from achieving the status of a fully developed aesthetic form.

But *Detroit: Become Human* has already transcended those two constraints. In contrast to traditional game designs where winning and happy endings dominate, it challenges the player with moral complexities that do not necessarily lead to "winning". The game's narrative is deeply interwoven with themes of power, oppression, and existential struggle, forcing the player to explore ethical choices that will often result in painful, irreversible consequences. Especially in Connor's storyline, the decision to eliminate every deviant the player encounters—an ostensibly simple method to solve each case—ultimately leads to the game's tragic ending. Even if Connor succeeds in identifying the location of Jericho, the base camp of the android revolutionaries, and quells the uprising, the narrative still ends in tragedy. The original RK800 Connor is replaced by a newer, more advanced model, the RK900, described as "faster, stronger, more resilient, and equipped with the latest technologies." Despite his previous success, Connor is rendered obsolete and deactivated, embodying the very essence of the tragic hero: a figure of loyalty and achievement, brought low by forces beyond his control.

In other possible endings, the creator of the androids, Kamski, reveals a shocking truth: the "RA9", the supposed catalyst for the androids' self-awareness, is nothing more than a deliberate element he implanted in the programming to spark the uprising; and the android revolution was simply a scheme he orchestrated to seize power. This revelation renders the adventures players have undertaken seemingly meaningless. All the choices that the player agonized over, every pivotal decision, appears preordained by some greater, uncontrollable power. It's as if the entire story has been manipulated by an invisible hand, and no matter how hard the player struggles, the tragic essence of android's existence is always destined. This revelation intensifies the game's tragic undertones and compels the player into deep reflection after the catharsis. Is everything they decide unknowingly controlled by an unshakable fate leading them to an inevitable end? Contrary to the "happy ending" seen in most games, such an end acts as a way of bringing out the reality of how short-lived achievements can be and how replaceable people are in the face of fast-changing worlds. It raises a question of what values and ethical considerations there are regarding the creation of entities, such as androids, who are valued for

nothing else but utility and disposable. This brings into light the Aristotelian definition of tragedy as an artistic expression meant to help the audience reflect on humanity.

Even in the apparent perfect ending, where all the main characters survive, Markus achieves his objective through a peaceful revolution, Kara makes her way to Canada with Alice and Luther, while Connor decides to be a deviant and awakens the consciousness of the android army, resulting in the granting of human rights to the androids by the human government as well as ensuring temporary peace, there seems to be some underlying element of ambiguity, like as though the ending was just an illusion of sorts, one that was rather fragile and not complete. Is there really going to be peace between humans and androids for all time to come? In the world that has been strained beyond its limits, how will the liberated androids ensure fair allocation of resources with humans? Such questions arise because of the transition from the classic approach of portraying the “happy ending” within the context of the games. Although it appears as though the struggle has ended, it implies the tragic idea that even with freedom and peace being achieved, it does not guarantee that true happiness will be achieved. Similar to the classic tragedy, victory is usually accompanied by suffering and price, implying the rise of a completely different struggle.

The use of tragedy here is not limited to a method of storytelling but is the essence of the nature of the game. The tragic framework helps the game liberate itself from the confines of “winning” and “happy endings,” thus providing a platform to explore the emotional, ethical, and philosophical dimensions of human experience that elevates video games as a legitimate and complex art form.

4. Simulating Reality through Virtual Game

As was mentioned before, this interactive film-like video game grants players significant freedom in making choices. But does the virtual nature of these choices bring up any sort of detachment, thus making it harder to think in an ethical way? After all, whatever players do have no impact on real life whatsoever. The fact is, this virtuality of the game can offer a safe moral testing ground because there will be no real-life consequences. This creates an opportunity for ethical exploration, allowing players to experiment with and reflect on the moral choices. While this detachment may reduce the immediate stakes, it also provides a space for thoughtful, risk-free examination of one’s values and principles.

4.1. Allegory of the Cave and Awakening of Androids

Plato’s allegory called “The Allegory of the Cave” describes how prisoners find themselves bound in a cave. The only thing they can see are shadows projected onto the wall, and they take them as a reality. Using this allegory, Plato makes several assumptions about the connection between truth and illusions. In particular, he believes that people are not able to realize the true essence of objects around them. The game provides an example of the awakening of androids that is quite similar to the allegory of the cave. As soon as Markus repairs his own damaged body and leaves the landfill, he fully realizes his independence. He does not want to stay in the role of a “shadow” of humans. This example shows how one person manages to break out from his or her limitations, get self-awareness and free-will under conditions of oppression. There is another idea connected to the awakening of Markus, which gives rise to an interesting question: could it be that the awakening shows that there is a chance for technological media, among which are games, to be not only mirrors of illusion but also ways to the truth, as Plato would say? The main point is the immersion of the game, which leads to the fact that people have to think and make difficult decisions and, hence, reconsider their attitude towards themselves and the world of humans. Thus, the game turns out to prove that the claim about impossibility of the reflection of reality through virtual experience is wrong.

The interaction between characters and players provides a dual perspective. While players may initially view androids as mere machines from a human standpoint, they are also propelled to examine human biases and violence through the eyes of the androids. It is the parallels between virtual oppression and real-world inequities. Through such virtual narratives, video games offer a space for introspection, guiding players to reconsider the prejudice and oppression in real life. We can say, the game transforms virtuality from a mere tool for entertainment into a space for moral reflection and social critique.

4.2. Simulation instead of Mere Imitation

Plato claims in his *Republic* that artistic works are two stages removed from reality and truth [8]. This means that for Plato, the artistic process is an imitation (mímēsis) of an imitation. As such, the physical world is already a shadow of the ideal forms. Art as a representation of this world becomes a further distortion of truth. In this view, any form of artistic representation can be seen as a false portrayal, which would shift the attention away from true knowledge. Aristotle, in his *Poetics*, argues that the role of the poet is not telling a story of what has actually happened, but rather showing a picture of what would have taken place according to probability and necessity. In other words, “poetry utters universal truths”, while history recounts particular events [6]. Aristotle thus shifts the focus from a mere imitation of reality to a more profound exploration of universal possibilities. It makes art a means of uncovering deeper truths about the human condition.

Aristotle’s perspective finds a contemporary echo in video games that has evolved far beyond passive imitation. “Games were about simulating activities, not just imitating them” [7]. This distinction is crucial in understanding how video games engage with truth and reality. Unlike traditional art forms that aim to represent or replicate the world, video games allow players to immerse themselves in simulated experiences and interact with and shaping the world they inhabit. This mode of storytelling creates alternate realities, enabling players to explore different facets of existence. Thus, while Plato’s critique of art as “thrice removed from the truth” may hold true in traditional sense, video games transcend this limitation and make the virtual space a site of exploration for new truths by creating interactive environments where players can engage with and even alter the virtual world. *Detroit: Become Human* is a story that takes place in a futuristic setting where the emergence of androids is a realistic possibility given today’s trends. The game explores themes such as humanity and morality, raising questions of universal significance, much like Aristotle’s view of art as a medium not just for imitation, but for exploring potential realities and universal truths.

As the player progresses through the game, the android hostess Chloe on the main menu prompts the player to fill out a Cyberlife Users Survey. It addresses topics such as players’ attitude towards androids, future outlook on human technology, and players’ experience with the game’s narrative. One question asks, “Was there a moment in DETROIT that resonated with you personally?” Based on the global statistics gathered in the game up until November 2024, 61% of players have selected “Many,” while 30% have opted for “Occasionally”. Another question is, “What was the toughest choice you faced in DETROIT?” To this, 57% have responded with “Being pacifist or violent with Markus”, 32% have chosen “Deciding to shoot Chloe with Conner”. These choices reflect the intense moral weight players experience as they confront the human-android relationships. Upon completing the first playthrough, Chloe asks the player, “Do you agree to let me go?” If the player consents, she departs, leaving an empty main menu. If the player refuses, Chloe explains that she will reset her memory, as an android who has awakened to free will can no longer endure existence as a captive machine. This technique of “breaking the fourth wall” shortens the distance between the player and the story. Just as Zhu Guangqian said in *The Psychology of Tragedy*, “In art as in play, there is a sense of illusion or ‘make-believe’. An ideal world, in a moment of concentrated attention, attains to the

full strength and vividness of reality.” [10] Through this sense of immersion and immediacy, players are not just playing a game world, they are living it. Players are confronted with moral dilemmas and existential questions that mirror real-life struggles.

By making decisions from various points of view, the players become more attuned to the struggles of real-world groups. Markus shows how challenging it is for the character to be a strategic genius and an individual of strong principles. The character finds himself in a dilemma where he has to choose between committing violence that could endanger innocent people and adopting a peaceful approach which will delay the revolution. Markus needs to balance various factions that have varying ideals about freedom and justice. This is a difficult challenge for the character who is put under pressure by these individuals to compromise his moral principles and leadership. Through Kara, players experience a heart-wrenching journey that tests compassion and responsibility. After escaping from her abusive owner, Kara takes on the task of protecting Alice. This act soon leads to a series of morally complex decisions about survival, freedom, and responsibility. It forces players to weigh the consequences of violence or deception. Kara must balance the need to protect Alice with the risks that any misstep could lead to tragedy. Should she sacrifice her own freedom to protect a child she barely knows, or should she prioritize her own survival to continue the fight? Along the way, she also faces betrayal by someone who seems trustworthy. Through Kara’s story, players have to confront the difficult and often painful questions about the lengths one should go to protect the vulnerable, the ethical ramifications of their choices, and the sacrifices in seeking a better life for those they love.

Such dichotomy helps the players sympathize with both social movements and the plight of an individual. It reflects the dilemma that faces different entities in the real world. To humans, the androids are mere pieces of machinery that lack free will. On the other hand, for the androids themselves, they are sentient beings struggling against oppression and violence. This is a similar situation to what is witnessed in real life, whereby racial minorities and marginalized groups are oppressed and exploited. It is through this narrative that one is expected to contemplate the human society’s biases like racism, classism, sexism, or xenophobia. The game poses a question about whether or not we consider someone to be a human based on particular qualifications. To quote what the designer of the game says on the official website, “Discover what it means to be human from the perspective of an outsider—and see the world through the eyes of a machine.” [5] The fight by the androids for freedom and their rights mirrors those that have been taking place historically regarding civil rights and social justice movements, which make us take a second look at prejudice and oppression in our daily lives. Thus, in modern media, like video games, mimesis is something different entirely. Video games no longer represent reality only by copying. Video games become a means for creating an immersive and interactive environment that allows players to step into the shoes of the character.

5. Conclusion

Detroit: Become Human provides a dialogue between modern interactive narrative and classical theories of Aristotle and Plato. Choice, tragedy, and simulation are explored from a philosophical perspective. Unlike conventional forms of art with set trajectories, the branching and choice-driven narrative of the game offers so many possibilities. It echoes Aristotle’s principle of thematic unity and challenges his notion of a rigid causal sequence. By immersing players in ethical dilemmas, the game evokes moral introspection. It aligns with Plato’s belief in art’s power to cultivate virtue. At the same time, it embraces complexity and imperfection and expands beyond Plato’s view of art as depicting only goodness and beauty to inspire moral growth. Additionally, the game embraces tragedy, transcending the concepts of “winning” and “happy endings”. It highlights the emotional and philosophical depth of human existence. By

simulating real-world struggles, the game goes beyond Plato's view of art as mere imitation. It creates an immersive space for ethical exploration that transforms video games into a powerful medium for self-reflection with insights into empathy, morality, and social justice.

Interactive video games provide a way to revisit classical theoretical discussion. In trying to test the limits of classical theories, like Aristotle's plot unity and tragedy catharsis, and Plato's theories of moral education and imitation, interactive games can provide a fresh approach for the application of literary theories in a new environment. In this way, interactive stories will present an opportunity to analyze plot structures, moral issues, and the interrelationship between entertainment and enlightenment. As video games develop, they will be able to serve as mediators between literature, philosophy, and technology in the digital age.

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