ISSN: 2345-0479 / eISSN: 2345-0487

VILNIUS TECH
Vilnius Gediminas Technical University

CREATIVITY STUDIES

2024
Volume 17
Issue 1
Pages 59–72
https://doi.org/10.3846/cs.2024.17447

CARNIVALESQUE, CREATIVITY, AND THE BECOMINGS: A CRITICAL ASSESSMENT OF THE POLITICS OF RESISTANCE IN *BATMAN: ARKHAM ASYLUM*

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Article History:
- received 18 August 2022
- accepted 24 January 2023

Abstract. There is a growing academic interest in respect for critical game studies from the domains such as cultural studies, literature, ludology, and gender studies. However, the research done on videogames from the perspective of the political discourse is not broad enough. *Rocksteady Studios*' *Batman: Arkham Asylum* (2009, director Sefton Hill) is a franchise that has redefined the superhero videogame genre. Although previous Batman transmedia adaptations would usually portray Gotham City as the prime location to narrate the story from the perspective of Batman, the videogame utilizes the carceral setting of *Batman* to subvert the traditional narratives and makes it completely a Joker's (character) game. Therefore, this version of storytelling carries a character with a more nuanced demeanor and a setting with socio-political influence. The current paper examines the underlying structural inequality present in *Batman* using Giorgio Agamben's bare life theory and the subsequent discourse of resistance using the theoretical framework of Mikhail Bakhtin. The analysis reveals the various carnivalesque elements present in the game and illustrates how the game takes advantage of them to mount an attack against the bare life status of the antagonists that are usually seen in Batman transmedia universe. Furthermore, the paper elaborates on the posthuman traits of Joker's becoming through a Gilles Deleuze-inspired perspective.

Keywords: bare life, carnivalesque creativity, critical game studies, Gilles Deleuze, grotesque body, Mikhail Bakhtin, posthuman body, resistance.

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1. Introduction

Critical game studies is an incipient area of study in the broader field of humanities. Game studies from a technical perspective operate after a very universal principle to be found in humanities in general, namely the detection of a phenomenon, the application of a theory/method, and the analysis on basis of their synthesis. Moreover, the domain helps to contribute new mechanics and narratives to the industry. Game studies also help to figure out how playing games proves problem-solving skills and stimulates creative thinking among gamers (Lock et al., 2021). Games, whether they be digital or physical, are platforms for exploration and engagement with other worlds and worldviews. It makes sense that some of the things could be subversive and that games could be fascinating entry points for unconventional ways of thinking. Because they are essential cultural and political tools, we should take them seriously. A gamer should try to approach a game both from the ludological and narratological perspective to better understand the ergodic as well as the creative sides of a game.

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Videogames, unlike any other form of storytelling, immerse the gamer into another person's reality completely. According to Sautman (2016, p. 1), "videogames are part of a history that roots itself within the mythic tradition of storytelling". *Rocksteady Studios*' *Batman* is a game so impactful that it is still considered a benchmark that the best superhero games of today are measured against. It is the first game in the *Batman* game series and its design was inspired by Morrison's (1989) graphic novel *Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth*. The chaotic backdrop of *Arkham Asylum* proves as the perfect setting for the game, given that a game would normally have a markedly longer run time that a traditional film having multiple villains is key to crafting a story that satisfies the requirements of the gameplay. The plot revolves around Batman facing his arch nemesis the Joker as he formulates a plan to trap Batman and the asylum while he works to set off the bombs in the city. The game gracefully accommodates both the narrative and the ergodic engagement, the two main factors required for the success of a videogame (Bezio, 2015). *Arkham Asylum* focuses heavily on the creation of space and provides players a chance to comprehend reality outside of the game. The two primary locations in *Arkham Asylum* – Gotham City and Arkham Island – depict the complexities and subtleties of sociopolitical structures and governmentality. By growing and altering in shape as the game goes on, these two places aid in creating coherency for the activities. The takeover of the conceptual space is the game's central objective.

The character of Joker first appeared in *Batman* No. 1 in 1940 and would become Batman's longest-running villain among his arch enemies. He is one of the most intricate and influential characters in the Batman transmedia universe. Joker's character has changed from being a one-shot villain to the embodiment of madness and mayhem. However, one thing remained the same in all the iterations the Joker is the opposite of Batman's *logos*. Over the years, the character stopped being merely unpredictable and becomes an embodiment of anarchism and nihilism.

Becoming is a central concept in Deleuze and Félix Guattari's philosophical tradition. Becoming for Deleuze and Guattari is a pinnacle stage of escape or release from being territorialized or dominated. From the Deleuzian point of view, these mechanisms of domination are molar or rigid segmentarity (Deleuze & Guattari, 2009, p. 58). In other words, various social establishments such as schools, religions, hospitals, and asylums function as institutions of control. To escape from getting territorialized by these bodies of institutions, one embraces becoming rather than attenuating to the already ascribed identity. The current study investigates how the character of Joker through multiple becomings escapes from being captured and territorialized by the sovereign body of Batman and the institution of Arkham Asylum. He subverts his bare life identity by introducing the Bakhtinian carnival in *Arkham Asylum*. Here, he becomes a figure of the carnivalesque. Later, he becomes a grotesque figure and finally a posthuman figure, which constitutes a forever-evolving body of possibilities. The article further bolsters the overlapping connection between Deleuze's concept of becoming and Bakhtin's concept of the unfinalizable self and the grotesque body by analyzing the character's metamorphosis into a posthuman super-villain. By using the descriptive method to analyze the game, the first section uses Agamben's political theory to understand how Joker is reduced to bare life in Arkham Asylum. Then the article discusses Joker's introduction of carnival in the asylum and the subversion of power following it. A chronotopic analysis of the

spatial and temporal features of the game helps to understand the overall carnivalesque tone of the game. The discussion then focuses on the unfinalizable self of Joker and his gradual becoming of a posthuman villain.

2. Bare life and the state of exception in *Batman: Arkham Asylum*

Agamben is one of the key figures in contemporary political philosophy. Agamben (1998) develops his analysis of the condition of biopolitics in his work Homo Sacer*: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (originally published in 1995). It is a book that tries to rethink the European political tradition by using a set of concepts. He writes about the refugees, the state of exception, and the concentration camps to show how the differences between the public and the private, the law and the power, the human being, and the citizen, and even between the judiciary and the executive, are all put in question in the state in which we live. A political theory provides a tool for deciphering the political relationships among people in any given society. Bare life theory, as a significant theory in contemporary political thinking, meets this end and helps in understanding the relationship between the people and the state.

In his treatise, Agamben argues that the notion of life is never defined in our culture. It is endlessly divided into *zoe*/the natural life common to all animals, *bios*/the political life, the vegetative life, the social life, and so on (Agamben, 1998). In the theorization of the bare life, Agamben argues that the production of bare life is the primary activity of the sovereign power. When biological life became the concern of the modern state, the bond between sovereign power and bare life is exposed. Agamben begins to prove his argument by tracing back to Aristotle's differentiation of *zen* (life) from *euzen* (the good life). As said by Agamben, Aristotle's exclusion of *zen* from *euzen* is similar to the exclusion of *zoe* (bare life) from the *bios* (political life). This exclusion is inclusive at the same time because it forms the foundation of the community (Agamben, 1998). Agamben names such an excluded inclusion as an exception. The excluded (*zoe*) maintains its relationship with the rules (*bios*) in the form of its suspension. Agamben calls this zone of indistinction between this chaos and normal life the state of exception, following Carl Schmitt's analysis of sovereignty. Since the state of exception becomes the rule, *zoes* are included in the law only in the form of exception. They are banned and abandoned by the rule. Agamben calls this condition the sovereign ban. Therefore, such lives are always exposed to the threat of death. That makes him say that *zoes* are virtually *homines sacri* or sacred men (Agamben, 1998, p. 49).

Agamben says that the state of exception has been used around the world as an apparatus to generate modern totalitarian regimes. A legal civil war must be declared in order to allow for the physical eradication of a whole class of population who, for whatever reason, cannot be assimilated into the political system. A state of exception increases the power of the state and the sovereign. *Homo sacer* lives in a state of bare life. So, the sovereign power declares a state of exception that generates bare life.

Arkham Asylum in the videogame is a fictional place that exists in a constant state of exception. It is a state-controlled institution where the order is imposed through harsh psychiatric treatment and the carceral system. Ever since its first appearance in October, 1974's *Batman* 1(258), Arkham Asylum has remained a core part of the Dark Knight mythos serving

as the home to many iconic villains including Joker, Killer Croc, Scarecrow, *etc*. Inspired by the work of Howard Phillips Lovecraft and even sharing the same name as the writer's hometown, this gothic penitentiary for the criminally insane is one of the most famous locations in the Batman *status quo* (Fernández Ozores, 2015–2016). Arkham appears in all the Batman transmedia texts from the comics to the videogames. However, the criminal discourse inside the asylum poses major concerns regarding the incarceration and incapacitation of criminally insane patients (Fawcett & Kohm, 2020). This is most noticeable in the *Batman* videogame series. The game with its graphic visualizations of the asylums' interior expresses the horror of confinement. It reiterates the brutality and ruthlessness of the carceral system while making the gamers actively participate in the extreme acts of surveillance and penalty practices over the criminals. The game in this sense suggests the players be emotionally and morally detached from the game narrative (Fawcett & Kohm, 2020). The asylum, according to Agamben's theory is the modern camp. In Agamben's (1998, p. 168) opinion, "the camp is the space that opens up when the state of exception starts to become the rule". Here, the state of exception or the temporary suspension of law and order gains a permanent spatial arrangement where the state of the law is not applicable (Agamben, 1998, p. 38). This space is usually located outside of the state territory.

It seems appropriate to equate the lives of Arkham's criminally insane patients with Agamben's bare life theory. The sovereign is the person who can suspend the laws of the state in order to protect the political order. In the game narrative, Batman becomes the sovereign figure by acting beyond the law and reducing the criminals to figures of bare life. In the guise of restoring order and purifying Gotham City, Batman interferes with the sovereignty of the state. Along with the state force, Batman wages war against the criminals and detains them in the island asylum of Arkham. Batman in *Batman* (2009) justifies his actions by saying that banning the criminals from the city is "the only way to cure the evil, the only way to purify the city and ensure its future".

The asylum functions as a camp which is a site of the state of exception. Because the prisoners are banished from Gotham City by the sovereign ban in which the laws of the state are no longer applicable to them, their existence in the state goes undocumented. The state is not responsible for its life since they are not legally part of the state. The prisoners live outside the territory of the state like nomads (Deleuze & Guattari, 2009). Although Batman has the power to get rid of the real problems of Gotham City, which include the working-class marginalization and the apparent power hierarchy, he never takes any effort to address them. Agamben's key concept of bandits finds a close resemblance with the case of Arkham prisoners. They are excluded and included at the same time (Swiffen, 2012). They can be killed but not sacrificed. Similar to the bandits, the prisoners too are regarded by Batman as people who interrupt the peaceful life of the citizens by unleashing violence. They are banned from a democratic society. As a result, they are reduced to *homines sacri*, those who can be killed, but not sacrificed. The patients' interview audios suggest that most criminals have major psychological problems. Most of them either experienced serious childhood traumas or extreme financial problems, which resulted in poor parenting and upbringing.

In *Batman* both the criminals and the patients are accommodated together in the asylum. However, Batman does not pose any concern over the safety of the patients who are lodged

together with the violent criminals. Instead, in *Batman* (2011, directed by Hill) he extends his concern for the safety of the Gothamists and asks, "How can this be safe for the people of Gotham?". Here, the citizens of Gotham City are considered *bios* or people with political rights and obligations. The video narrative clearly focuses on the power hierarchy present in Gotham City and Arkham. The game creates a new form of prison, where the line that divides the criminals and the patients blur. For Batman, the only concern is the safety of the normal people who reside in Gotham City. The prisoners are stripped of legal rights and political roles. According to Agamben (1998, p. 195), *homo sacer* "is in a continuous relationship with the power that banished him precisely insofar as he is at every instant exposed to an unconditional threat of death".

Another notable observation about the game is that along with the prison staff and guards, the gamers are allowed to physically torture the criminals or lock them away and watch how they react to various experiments done by doctors and scientists. Through this, the game provides the players with the role of the sovereign. This way, the sovereign power is transferred to the hands of the players.

3. Carnivalesque resistance and becomings in *Batman: Arkham Asylum*

The word *carnivalesque* was derived from the familiar root word *carnival* which signifies an occasion of festivity and celebration. The festival of carnival has an inevitable role in all prominent cultures. Carnival is often related to creativity and free expression. The term was popularized by Bakhtin (1984b, p. 218) in his book *Rabelais and His World* (originally published in 1965), where he used it to indicate "the varied popular-festive life of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance". The book was influential because it helped literary critics to reassess many works of literature in terms of their value and to make sense of those literary works that had previously been considered low for serious study. According to Danow, carnival in literature

> "supports the unsupportable, assails the unassailable, at times regards the supernatural as natural, takes fiction as truth, and makes the extraordinary or magical as viable a possibility as the ordinary or real" (2004, p. 3).

Thus, the carnival functions as a space where people from both the acceptable and unacceptable categories of society come together to celebrate. As stated by Bakhtin,

> "no dogma, no authoritarianism, no narrow-minded seriousness can coexist with Rabelaisian images: these images are opposed to all that is finished and polished, to all pomposity, to every ready-made solution in the sphere of thought and work outlook" (1984b, pp. 2–3).

Bakhtin's philosophy seeks to parse out the tension between acceptable and unacceptable language, between the official and unofficial voices within a work.

Carnival generally constitutes scenes of wild revelry and abandon. Bakhtin points out that such carnivals were an integral part of medieval European social life. He claims, "carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people" (Bakhtin, 1984b, p. 7). These bawdy celebrations which characterized the spirit of the carnival were deeply subversive in nature. The spectacle usually

revolved around the willful suspension of the social rules and hierarchies that were otherwise very strictly imposed (Martin & Renegar, 2007). For example, in a carnival one could see a buffoon playing the role of a king, or for instance, an ecclesiastical figure is seen parodied and ridiculed in street acts (Bakhtin, 1984b, p. 81). Hence, the carnival involves turning upside down the social norms as they were otherwise known. Bakhtin notes that the underlying spirit of these carnivals was to challenge and even degrade the hierarchical regulations that guided medieval societies. In other words,

> "carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions" (Bakhtin, 1984b, p. 184).

Such turning upside down of the social hierarchies and norms through laughter dismantles the official and formal discourses and truths of social existence and situates these official versions, discourses, and truths within a field of multiple other possibilities. This tension-filled space of contradictory subversive and alternate social possibilities leads to the dialogic relationship inter-illuminating each other. Bakhtin's writing on the spirit of carnival shows that the site of dialogism is as much social as linguistics. From a socio-cultural point of view, the carnival functions as a tool of "resistance" (Jackson, 1988, p. 213).

The twin concepts of the *carnival* and *carnivalesque* are embedded and embodied in the medieval European cultural milieu. Carnival is the time when a new ruler of the state is elected "to *govern* the ungovernable, and where the generally accepted rules of polite behavior are overruled in favor of the temporarily reigning spirit of carnival" (Danow, 2004, p. 3). Carnival is a space of creative energy. In the opinion of Bakhtin, carnivals in medieval and renaissance Europe are those unofficial fests that are conducted along with church feasts. Carnival has historically been an occasion where people have the liberty to release their inner desire and allow themselves to indulge in what would become prohibited otherwise. However, its purpose has shifted to make others feel the desire to indulge in themselves and/or release their tension. Bakhtin coined the term to mean either a social institution in which people frequently do this or "an immaterial force" in which the aspects of carnivals are shown in situations. The traditional carnivals are considered "people's second life, organized on the basis of laughter", during which "people were, so to speak, reborn for new, purely human relations" (Bakhtin, 1984a, p. 10). Bakhtin emphasizes François Rabelais' exploration of the transgressive energies of the medieval carnival in order to subvert the rigid, single-voiced, dark, and authoritarian rule of the Medieval Catholic Church. However, the carnivalesque is not treated as derogatory, rather it is ambivalent as it questions and tests various aspects of society (Lacapra, 1983) resulting in humor that is political, affirmative, and resistant.

Bakhtin highlights three aspects of the carnival: the chaos, the comedy, and the grotesque. Bakhtin (1984b, p. 34) states that "the carnival spirit offers liberation from all that is humdrum and universally accepted". The *Batman* game starts in Gotham City where Batman captures Joker and later takes him to the asylum to imprison him again. Batmobile speeds up with Joker in the back seat who is almost unconscious. As explained by Bezio (2015), the opening scene challenges the narrative conventions and establishes a sense of confusion that is seen throughout the gameplay. Batman enters the asylum with all authority while the guards strap Joker to a gurney and drag him inside the prison. However, soon Joker starts to laugh and

Batman along with the prison guards is seen disturbed and perplexed by it. Joker's comic ridicule and laughter are the two main aspects that the gamers hear throughout the play. For Bakhtin, laughter is the main feature of the carnival. Joker's laughter creates an impression that he is equally powerful as his rival. Thus, Batman's sovereignty is juxtaposed. According to Bakhtin (1984a), carnivalesque rejects the power of the sovereign or the sacred through instilling carnivalesque humor (Boje et al., 2003). Joker's laughter at the beginning of the gameplay acts as a flagship to the carnival he unleashes thereafter. Batman realizes that Joker's assault at Gotham City Hall was part of his grand plan as Harley Quinn takes control of the asylum's security system and releases Joker. Joker gleefully invites Batman and others inside the asylum; "you're not coming, Bats?" and "Hurry up, you'll be late for the party!" (in *Batman*, 2009). For Joker the whole plight is a party that brings down all the hierarchies that separated the prisoners from the prison keepers. Soon Joker gets complete control of the island and suspends all the power hierarchies creating a "world upside-down" (Bakhtin, 1984a, p. 5). Joker and other prisoners instill tension and chaos among Arkham doctors, researchers, staff, and guards. According to Bakhtin (1984a, pp. 15–10), "during carnival, there is a temporary suspension of all hierarchic distinctions and barriers" so that "all were considered equal". The gameplay breaks the hierarchy present in the asylum by obscuring the roles of the prison staff and the prisoners. The otherwise suppressed and controlled prisoners are released from their cells and start to roam freely along with the prison staff including the doctors and the scientists. Here, Joker's actions that led to carnivalesque chaos transgress the boundaries between the asylum seekers and the asylum keepers and he subsequently overrules the normative and prescriptive codes of behavior. He then offers instead a life-affirming and egalitarian joy and exuberance that respects no rules, allowing free mingling among representatives of diverse groups and individuals belonging to different affiliations. Joker tells Batman that the motive behind his actions is to "bring down your [Batman's] grim facade and let you see the world as I see it" (in *Batman*, 2009). Thus, it is evident that Joker wants to abolish the hierarchical power dynamism prevailing over Gotham City and Arkham and to bring everyone under a single category to see the world in the same way.

The clown figures in cinema and literature often produce a carnivalesque atmosphere with their humorous dialogues and actions. Nilsson in his article says that

> "joker, fool, prankster, jester, trickster, clown; the derivations of the fool archetype are many but joining them together is a sense of mischief and a ridicule of authority" (2015, p. 165).

The same trend can be seen in the Batman transmedia story world. In the game, Batman, the sovereign figure loses his power and wanders along with the prisoners solving the problems put forth by Joker. The asylum becomes a utopian state where there is no sovereign head rather everyone starts to hold equal power over each other. While tricking the asylum guards Joker says, "I don't want to escape. I'm having way too much fun" (in *Batman*, 2009). Joker seems to enjoy the carnival he started and soon he infiltrates his laughter among other prisoners. This "schizophrenic laughter or revolutionary joy" is seen throughout the game narrative (Perry, 1993, p. 184) Here, the sovereign – Batman – comes into face-to-face conflict with the riotous Arkham criminals or bare life holders who are led by the mastermind of Joker. Lundberg (2007, p. 172) states that carnival laughter reinforces the "possibility

of political agency". Joker's character acts as a leader of the suppressed and marginalized asylum seekers. His laughter and subsequent acts lead to the birth of an anti-authoritarian riot in the asylum. This sentiment is a clash between Joker's laughter and Batman's lack of expression. Bakhtin states,

> "As a spokesman of power, seriousness terrorized, demanded, and forbade. It, therefore, inspired the people to distrust. Seriousness had an official tone and was treated like all that is official. It oppressed, frightened, bound, lied, and wore the mask of hypocrisy" (1984a, p. 94).

In Arkham Asylum, prisoners are fed up with the caretakers' hypocrisy. Dr. Penelope Young in the interview audio accepts the futility of her treatments. Most of the patients are resistant to the interviews and manipulate the doctors. This resonates with Wilson's (2013, p. 260) words that "wicked people exist. Nothing avails except to set them apart from innocent people". However, the repeat experiments on the patients show the insufficiency of Arkham's medical system. The game also highlights the indifferent attitude of the doctors who find the patients distracting and disturbing. A doctor apathetically complains, "their insane muttering and constant twitching disgusted me" (in *Batman*, 2009). According to Michel Foucault, biology, and medical science, in particular, is a totalitarian ideology for two main reasons. Firstly, because of the way it measures life. It reduces people to animal quality; the bestialization of man as he says (Foucault, 2010). Biology which includes medical science is clinical and objective. Secondly, it introduces the concept of the norm and therefore the abnormal. With the advent of science, *bios* and *zoes* are combined. *Bios* and *zoes* are subjects and objects. So, in the modern nation-state, the subject is defined as an object within the system. Biology designates the other, the introduction of the norm. It also sanctions the killing of others as it reduces people to bare life with the state-given rights to *bios*.

However, the carnival overthrows the distinction between *bio* and the *zoe*. It even makes the sovereign powerless and deterritorializes his authority. During carnival time, official rules are suspended, and a sense of freedom prevails. Such an atmosphere may involve disruptive, chaotic, or even violent acts taking place under the cover of the universal festive license granted to all participants. Thus, the carnivalesque images here are closely linked to resistance, subversion, revolution, and challenge to the authority of Batman. Like laughter, dance is another important feature of the carnival. After he breaks out from the clutches of the guards, Joker starts dancing through the corridor of the asylum yelling, "now, let's get this party started" (in *Batman*, 2009). The visitor's room where Joker appears multiple times resembles a carnival hall where prisoners wearing jester hats and make-up celebrate their freedom by dancing. Laughter, dance, and merrymaking are part of a carnival. All of these create an "atmosphere of freedom, frankness, and familiarity" (Bakhtin, 1984a, p. 81). However, all these come with a prize, "every despicable act, every murder, every form of excess that licentiousness and lunacy have dared to dream" (Robins & Jones, 2009, p. 187; Lachmann, 1988–1989, p. 127). Joker's dance always results in his violent actions. Most notably, Joker's dance in the beginning scene represents the chain of chaotic actions that follow. Moreover, he dances whenever he confronts the prison guards. His movements while attacking them are fluid in nature, almost like a ballet glissade. This indicates Joker's receptiveness to change and his gradual becoming of a posthuman body. Here Joker's body becomes both subject

and object. It is dynamic and self-organizing at the same time. Deconstructing the idea of the human being as a subject is one of the main principles of posthumanism (Mandradjieff, 2017). Joker's body is constantly becoming something other than itself. This becoming according to Deleuze and Guattari (2009) is a form of political resistance. Joker's imperfect body proportion along with his exaggerated make-up, costume, and body movements challenge the macho figure of Batman who represents law and order.

The carnivalesque atmosphere of Arkham is reflected in the costume of Joker. During carnivals, people from all classes come together to celebrate. It is a shared moment where everyone is treated equally. People dress up in unusual ways. Also, people are allowed to be eccentric during these ritualistic moments. Dressing up, role play, or role reversal are commonly seen in carnivals. While the familiar becomes the eccentric, a tension of profanation is created in the scene. The familiar replaces the subversive hierarchy of official culture (Lachmann, 1988–1989). The familiar takes commonalities and recognizabilities and places them in the carnival world. Eccentric is both about his or her identity and bringing forth the repressed. Emerson (2011, pp. 6–7) writes that "carnival-type laughter dissipates fear, encourages free inquiry <…> [and] is, in fact, a rebuttal of power-based etiologies".

The purpose of the carnival is to temporarily subvert or undermine power structures, whether that be political, social, or cultural. In a carnival, people come together and often suspend their social identity and undermine the power structure. Creative acts like role play or reversal of roles have a major role in tackling the established identity. In the game, Joker takes the role of a doctor cum researcher while conducting experiments on TITAN venom. He subverts his role completely and acts as someone with scientific knowledge and temperament. Likewise, Harley Quinn takes up the role of the prison guard while keeping James Gordon hostile. Harley Quinn also acts as a nurse while Joker manages the role of a doctor. Her costume is a mix of the nurse's scrub with school-going girl's accessories. Bakhtin says,

> "this faith in the self-sufficiency of a single consciousness in all spheres of ideological life is not a theory created by some specific thinker. It is a profound structural characteristic of the creative activity of modern times determining all its external and internal forms" (1984a, p. 149).

4. Chronotopic becomings in *Batman: Arkham Asylum*

The term *chronotope* builds upon two separate Greek terms, the *chronos* which means time, and the *topos* which means space. Using this concept Bakhtin explores the dialogic relationship between space and time and he particularly investigates how the time-space relations inform different kinds of literature. Bakhtin (1981, p. 232) writes, "it is the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature". Bakhtin uses the term primarily to define generic distinctions and understand the development of generic forms over time, particularly the development of the novel from earlier narrative forms like the so-called Greek or sophist novels written between the 2nd and 6th century A.D. or the Rabelaisian novels of the 16th century. Bakhtin explains the ways in which spatial and temporal indices came together in expressive unity as a key aspect of literature. Bakhtin (1981, p. 250) believes that "the organizing center of the narrative structure; it is the place where the knots of narrative events are tied and untied".

The videogame uses a carnivalesque chronotopic through using its own unique settings for narration. *Batman* is a chronotope of disaggregation. Once the chaos started, the asylum has become a space in which the prisoners are not encouraged to remain but is designed for them to pass through and be redistributed elsewhere. The game uses carnivalized time-space assemblages such as Joker's above-the-shoulder body stratum and voice, the untidy rooms, treatment chambers, and so on. Joker's above-the-shoulder body part including his head is extensively used as a narrative tool. While rest of the body part is immobile in most of the scenes, almost deceiving Batman to believe that it is just a mannequin while his face remains lively and expressive. Joker orchestrates the carnival using only his voice and unplanned appearances on the monitors. More than physically appearing in front of the henchmen and Batman, Joker controls and executes his plans through virtual spaces.

However, this is not the only narrative juxtaposition in the game. The chronotopic carnivalization is also visible in the presentation of Arkham Asylum. The asylum situates on an isolated island far from the mainland of Gotham City. The buildings look gothic with their ruined and untidy conditions. The floors and walls are cracked and missing tiles due to rough usage. There is aggressive and torturous equipment including chairs, cages, jackets, and large metal appendages that resemble the arms of a spider. It gives the impression that the inhabitants are not having a healthy atmosphere for rehabilitation. There is also a notorious place on the island called the Suicide Spot where usually inmates jump into the rocks and commit suicide. These spaces oppose the very idea of "the protective and timeless stability" that a cultured society disseminates (Bakhtin, 1984b, p. 81). Moreover, the constant movements of the avatars and the unstable camera angles give a tone of edginess to the narration. However, the settings remain the same even after all the movements. The gamers get a feeling that the avatar is going through the same corridor or the same garden, making Arkham labyrinthic. This emphasizes the aspect of the timelessness of the carnival.

The visitor's room is an important site of action in the game. It resembles the window displays where the prisoners are a sight for entertainment. It is also clear that the whole game takes place over the course of a single night. Such portrayals in the game invert reality and give an illusion of space. This way, the game is a perfect incarnation of the carnival.

5. The unfinalizable self and becoming posthuman in *Batman: Arkham Asylum*

One of the major concepts of Bakhtin is the unfinalizable self. He believes that a person constantly evolves in society as s/he communicates with other bodies that are also constantly changing and evolving. Thus, there is no being, but only becoming (Deleuze & Guattari, 2009). In the cultural context, one does not speak in an individual voice because the voice always encounters other voices. This rhizomatic connection is almost inevitable and inescapable in a way that there is no voice produced in isolation. Nevertheless, in society, people often try to reach perfection by altering their physique and manners to fit into the framework. However, Bakhtin believes that one cannot stay in a constant state of perfection even if efforts are put into physical alternations. Because the body is never finalizable. There are always possibilities for a body to change and become more (Deleuze & Guattari, 2009).

During the carnival, one breaks norms with his/her body. Bakhtin underlines how the physicality of the human body, and its sheer material is stressed through the grotesque images of bodily functions such as eating, excrement, giving birth, copulating, and even dying. The game uses the image of the grotesque body to illustrate Joker's deterritorialization of his bare life identity and his transformation into a posthuman body. Throughout the game, Joker uses monitors and a public address system to communicate with Batman. He appears with his head inside a monitor while the rest of his body remains immobile almost like a statue. Joker's physical presence is problematic in the game. With posthuman traits, Joker appears as the amalgamation of both organic and machinic bodies. Bezio (2015, p. 140) points out that, Joker is the "physical representation of the player-character's inter-active persona: a combination of both a digital avatar and the physiological person of the player". In some scenes, Joker deceives Batman using his voice-over on his look-alike mannequins. Both Batman and the gamers get confused about his little tricks. However, in one scene he shouts "surprise" and lifts the monitor showing his real body" (in *Batman*, 2009). At the end of the game, the Joker biologically alters his body using the project *TITAN* in order to have a physical influence over Batman. Joker's body during the game appears abstract and uncertain. He uses his voice to control Batman and to give commands to the henchmen and Harley Quinn. Joker's apparent power and control over everyone including Batman gives him the status of an omniscient god. Joker's dialogues confirm this claim, "I'm in control of the Asylum. You're not going anywhere. I don't want you to. Understand?" (in *Batman*, 2009). Bezio (2015, p. 130) rightly states that despite Batman being the titular figure, the game narratively and emotionally is centered on the character of Joker. During the boss fight in the final scenes, Joker's body transforms into a combination of god/human/animal/machine. His final transformation by the TITAN chemical gives him a grotesque body with giant monstrous features and imperfect body proportions. Here, Joker's body challenges the authority's instructions that persuade the patients to rise above their physicality in an attempt to sabotage the prison order.

In this current age of posthumanism, the body is often associated with ambiguous meanings and interpretations. Posthumanism is the belief that the next generation of human evolution involving the human body will move beyond the purely organic to a fusion of the organic with the technological and the synthetic (de Lima Costa et al., 2017). The concept was developed in the latter half of the 20th century. In the beginning, it was part of the theoretical branches of science, medicine, engineering, and computing as well as popular science fiction stories. But gradually it has become part of reality. In ancient times the human body was considered pure/holy. However, some acts that are performed by the body are considered impure. This includes defecating, eating/drinking, sex, *etc.* According to Deleuze and Guattari (2009, p. 57), "the body suffers from being organized in this way. From not having some other sort of organization or no organization at all". The body suffers from being organized or being arranged in the manner of a structured organism. Deleuze and Guattari believe that at some point all organisms are uncomfortable living in their own skin. They suggest that perhaps the body might want to arrange it in a different way or perhaps it would be better off not being organized at all. All bodies and organisms, anything that is said to have an organization for that matter including processes, systems, societies, and institutions suffer from this persistent impulse of having an organized structure. Deleuze and Guattari think that

perhaps this impulse is a feature and not a flaw inherent to the forces which produce the organisms' organizations. Deleuze and Guattari's concepts related to the body and becoming are closely related to Bakhtin's idea of the grotesque body. For Bakhtin, the grotesque figure is a reversal and reconstruction of the unsettling ruptures of bodily borders (Granata, 2015). A constant alteration, transgression, expansion, and merging of borders constitute a Bakhtinian grotesque body (Bakhtin, 1984b, p. 318). Similarly, Joker's body goes through several transformations throughout the game making it difficult to define his physique. This also gives a sense of posthuman otherness to the character whilst also generating fear and fascination among the gamers (Block Friedman, 2000).

In the climax scenes of the game, Joker is shown as a completely grotesque figure. This contrasts with the "classical body of official culture, an entirely finished, completed, strictly limited body, which is shown from the outside as something individual" (Bakhtin, 1984b, p. 320). The grotesque puts the ideal body in contrast to what actually happens with the body, on the body, and through the body. The body is not stationary, rather it is fluid in nature. It always finds new rhizomatic connections and tries to become heterogeneous multiplicities (Deleuze & Guattari, 2009). The essential principle of grotesque realism is the degradation or the lowering of all that is spiritual, noble, and ideal to the material world. In the carnivalesque context, the grotesque is the recognition of the life cycle, birth, death, and decay. Joker's final metamorphosis into a grotesque body indicates his rebirth as a posthuman villain. The TITAN chemical catalyzes Joker's transformation into a monstrous figure. According to Sheehan (2015, p. 248), the posthuman body is analogous to the monstrous or the grotesque body. This way Joker's multiple becomings undermine the authority of manners that Batman and the Gotham City sovereignty try to impose. Becoming posthuman as Rosi Braidotti (2013) points out is a site of resistance against the dominant power. The grotesque/*zoe*/bare life/nomadic/egalitarian bodies at the core go through multiple becomings and function as a site of resistance.

6. Conclusions

The current study endeavors to examine the videogame *Batman* from the analytical context of Agamben's bare life theory and Bakhtin's concepts such as the carnivalesque and the grotesque figure to confirm Joker's posthuman becoming. First, the article uses Agamben's bare life philosophy to analyze the settings of the game. Arkham Asylum in that sense is a state of exception and the prisoners are figures of bare life living under the shadow of the sovereign power of Batman. In other words, there is an apparent power hierarchy in the asylum that confines and controls the life of the prisoners. Further, the study uses the Bakhtinian concept of the carnivalesque to elucidate how Joker subverts the power structure by converting the asylum into a site of carnival. Laughter, humor, chaos, and dance play a vital role in bringing the carnivalesque atmosphere to the asylum. Joker's laughter and the breakout of chaos, in particular, reinforce the disruption of the established order in the asylum. Here, the carnival functions as a tool of resistance against the totalitarian regime inside Arkham.

The study also finds that Joker's transformation from bare life to a carnival figure takes place in a chronotropic matrix that includes the filthy asylum corridors, the visitor's room,

and the overall atmosphere of the gameplay. The universality of carnival and the counter-culture it produces is reflected in the game through these visual elements. While the spatial particularities undergo major modifications, the temporal significations remain the same. The study concludes with the analysis of Joker's final transformation into a monstrous grotesque figure using the conceptual framework of the Deleuzian-inspired posthuman body. Hill's *Batman* is not just an adventure videogame, but a serious critique of the modern-day carceral system that suppresses those who need medical help and judiciary support. Moreover, the gameplay allows the player to empathetically identify with the Joker and his condition and thus supports his actions.

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