In Search of Characters Without Signifiers

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ABSTRACT: This essay explores the question whether characters can exist without being signified in any way. If characters can exist trans-medially, independently of a particular form of signification or sign-vehicle, why not exist without any signification at all? What kind of existence would such a character have? And, paradoxically, what would examples look like? While the question at face value might appear logically invalid, I argue that at (or just beyond) the minimalist end of the character-representational spectrum, we find what might be called *implied characters,* that is, characters that are not in any way given, represented, named, or performed, but can only exist in the minds of their players during play, as a formal slot without physical, structural, communicational, or mental properties.

KEYWORDS: *characters, implied characters, game characters, minimalist characters*

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Characters Without Signifiers

Espen Aarseth

That whereof we cannot speak, thereof we must remain silent

   —Wittgenstein

Henry slipped and fell in the river. Gravity drowned.

   —Tale-Spin

Introduction

This essay proposes the notion of *characters without signifiers,* that is, a set or category of character that shows no or very few signs of being represented, like a theoretical sub-atomic particle in nuclear physics that may or may not exist.

The inspiration for this idea comes from the increasing focus on *characters* as a research topic in its own right, that is, to conceive of, and theorize, characters as a phenomenon with qualities that persist across media and genres, not just as components in narratives, storyworlds, and entertainment franchises, but independent of any specific sociohistorical context or communicative form; that there is such a thing as *a character* independent of any particular medium or text type in which it may appear. But to invoke such a possibility inevitably or ultimately begs the probable impossibility of a character that is not dependent on, or represented by, any form of signification at all, and not just independent of a particular form. If the hunt turns out empty, then at least the question has been explored. It is in some sense the exact opposite of a well-known logical discussion, the problem of references without referents (e.g. Sainsbury), but that inverse issue will not trouble us further here.

Another hinge question is whether the signifier is considered a purely material or also a mental phenomenon. If one takes the position that signifiers can exist purely mentally, without the need for a materially grounded and persistent presence, then a considerable part of the mustered examples below will not work for the argument that there can be characters without signifiers. But some examples should still work, and so the category simply becomes more confined.

And in other ways, the question is not either/or. Between mere existence and non-existence, there is a spectrum of possible candidates for what a signifier-less character could be. It is not a good idea to expect that a theoretical category like this will match only one type of phenomenon, and even less so when the search potentially takes place across, and even beyond, all and any forms of mediation. A solution to this challenge is to replace the notion of *category,* which implies similarity between members, with *perspective,* which does not, but instead implies relevance

(of the application of a concept to a phenomenon), or the lack thereof. If *characters without signifiers* exist, they could also exist in different ways. Henceforth, to search for them is to apply a perspective and establish its utility across potential examples, and not to create a singular, empirical character type. What is ultimately being fleshed out here, then, is not the set of examples but the notion itself. In terms of method, the first step is to identify and characterize (no paradox intended) as many potential examples as possible, and then extract from these any possible commonalities in order to ultimately establish the perspective of characters without signifiers as a theoretical concept.

What is a Character?

The notion of character can denote many different things. While we may simply define character as a mediated representation of a person, it is not clear in what sort of medium the representation takes place, or which aspects of a person are being represented. The different ways in which something can be said to constitute a character are, however, possible to disentangle, through an analysis of the ontological layers on which characters can be said to exist. Following Aarseth and Grabarczyk's ontological metamodel (2018), which proposes four ontological (but not semiotic) aspects of media objects—physical, structural, communicational, and mental—we can pose the following four questions: Do characters depend on physical existence? Are characters defined by a certain functional structure (in the sense of agency, not narrative function)? Do they depend on utterances? Or on their mental processes? Characters can be defined by any of these dimensions, and one is enough to identify them, although in very different ways. Laura Palmer, found dead in the first episode of *Twin Peaks,* lacks all but the first aspect (at least in the first episode), while the artificial intelligence Hal in *2001: A Space Odyssey* possesses agency and speech but not bodily or mental processes. If these are four different aspects of being a character, then characters can potentially exist in fifteen different combinatory modes (Mental-Structural-Physical, Physical-Communicational, etc., etc). The exact empirical number is debatable, and maybe all fifteen possibilities do not exist (yet).

Premediated Characters

In the trans- and cross-media literatures, one naturally finds the concept of trans-mediated characters; that is, characters that are translated from one medium to another, and often to a third—from film to game, from novel to film, from graphic novel to TV series to game, and so on. (See other articles in this volume). When signifiers are not part of the translation, for instance, when a novel is turned into a silent film, or when characters from a novel are depicted in a drawing, the characters' essence or personality has been carried over through a complete change of signifiers. However, there are also characters who start out as cross-media franchise characters (see Lemke,

"Critical Analysis"; Aarseth, "Culture"), and who do not originate in one medium, but from the start are intended to be deployed in as many media formats as possible, all at once, to get the greatest possible effect out of the marketing campaign (which in itself also becomes a vehicle for the characters in question). Prior to these mediations, however, the character exists only as a glint in the cross-media creator's eye; a creative idea which may or may not work and which may or may not be forthcoming. At this stage of the character's existence, it only exists as a mental notion, an imagination, with no material dimension.

One such example is Death Jr. (cf. DeMott), a charming, adventurous boy who happens to be the son of the Grim Reaper. Death Jr. was conceived from the start as a cross-media character, with simultaneous deployment as comic book, video game, action figure, and animated TV series.

Hypothetical Characters

A fairly simple example of signifier-less characters are hypothetical characters, that is, characters that could or must exist, but who are not known to us in either way. These could be both fictional (Sherlock Holmes' grandmother on his mother's side) or historical (my own great^10 directly ascending paternal grandfather). We have no reason to doubt their fictional or real existence, but there is nothing that invokes them *as characters* (except of course, the preceding sentence, which may seem to contradict this argument.) These could also be labelled *relative* hypothetical characters, since they get their existence through their relation to another character. Or they could be termed deductional characters, since their mere existence (but not their personality) can simply be deduced and does not require creative speculation or invention. Non-relative hypothetical characters are those that are anonymous but can be inferred or deduced by the traces of their manual activity: products such as buildings, drawings, or other manufactured artifacts.

Hypothetical characters are part of a highly effective creative strategy when they become realized through signifiers. When and if realized, these could be called *potential characters:* a form of character-creation where the ongoing media franchise has an abundant or even infinite amount of hypothetical characters to draw on, often through a generative mechanism such as time travel, parallel universe, or simply, history: Lee Falk's *The Phantom* (1936 -) uses the device of a 400-year, 21-generational succession of masked crimefighters, which the comic strip series will dip into for fresh material, replacing the contemporary protagonist, Kit Walker, with any of his 20 forefathers (and once with his 17th forefather's twin, Julie).

Invisible Characters, Monsters, and Demons

The genres of fantastic literature/film and (supernatural) horror are replete with invisible beings and possessive spirits that, although represented by their actions and

the consequences thereof (or imagined actions, in the case of protagonist insanity) are not represented directly, but instead through Peircean index signs. These may then perhaps be better classified as cases of *characters with weak signifiers*. As such, they are easily transferable between media formats, no special effort is needed to represent them. Three separate sub-categories can be identified: beings that are present but are simply not shown, beings that are merely invisible and inaudible but otherwise must be assumed to be physically present, and beings that are represented only through the minds of other main characters (e.g., the movie *It Follows*). In general, the horror genre is the most productive generator of characters that are never fully displayed and usually hinted at rather than described in any detail. While the main reason for this lack of representation is to induce tension, fear, and, eventually, shock (e.g., in *Alien* or *Predator*) it also provides ample room for the audience to engage in filling in *Leerstellen* (Iser)

Imaginary Friends

Perhaps surprisingly, there exists a long research tradition on the topic of imaginary friends or imagined companions, going back to the end of the 19th century (Klausen and Passman). Imaginary childhood friends are very common; it is estimated that up to 65% of us have had them, and they seem to be filling a need for socialization (ibid.). At first glance, imaginary friends may seem like a poor candidate for a character without signifiers, since they do exist in the children's accounts of them. However, the method of inquiry in much of this research seems to be interviews with children, and through these interviews the ontological nature of the characters is engaged in a way that may well change the target of investigation, especially if the child never enunciated their special relationship before being interviewed. An imaginary friend, therefore, even when being engaged in private dialogue the child (and sometimes, of course, an adult) does not necessarily become represented in that conversation.

Hallucinatory Voices and Characters in Dreams

Similar to the example above, the mental phenomenon of hallucinatory voices is experienced by a significant percentage of people who typically, but not necessarily, suffer from any of a number of mental conditions, often schizophrenia. These voices are speaking to the experiencers, mostly in negative and disparaging ways, but they can also be positive. They are internally generated, but experienced as though externally originated. However, there are no material signifiers at work; only signifieds, which by definition are mental. The same can be said for characters experienced only through dreams, or daydreams.

Godot and Other Absent Characters

As Beckett himself said about the character Godot:

> I don't know who Godot is. I don't even know (above all don't know) if he
> exists. And I don't know if they believe in him or not—those two who are
> waiting for him. The other two who pass by towards the end of each of the
> two acts, that must be to break up the monotony. All I knew I showed. It's
> not much, but it's enough for me, by a wide margin. I'll even say that I would
> have been satisfied with less. (qtd. in Cohn 122).

Godot only exists as a name, a completely absent entity that even its author claims not
to fully believe exists in any other way. And yet, Godot is one of the most recognized
names in the history of drama. But in what sense is he a character? In name only?
Neither of the main characters, Vladimir and Estragon, seem to know him at all, and
only the Boy appearing at the end of the play purports to know Godot well enough
to contradict Beckett's statement above: Godot owns sheep and goats, and employs
him and his brother as goatherd and shepherd. But should we trust Boy, or can we
trust Beckett?

Accidental Characters

In James Meehan's dissertation from 1976, a most peculiar character appears, by
accident: Gravity. Meehan had programmed a "metanovel," *Tale-Spin,* capable of pro-
ducing short Aesop-like tales in which animal characters experienced and conducted
simple actions and interactions. However, Gravity was not intended to be one of the
main characters; instead, gravity was supposed to play its usual role as a force of
nature, an invisible agent influencing the turn of vertical events. In this fable, Henry
Ant, slipping on the riverbank, was dragged into the river by Gravity, and then res-
cued by his friend Bill Bird. Gravity, however, had neither friends, nor arms and legs,
and could not call for help, and so, due to a quirk in the programming, drowned.
Gravity is here what we might call an accidental character, not conceived as such
by anyone but suddenly and briefly becoming the center of attention, like a stage
manager revealed by a curtain failure. As a minimal, one-fact character, Gravity is a
paradox; the drowner that becomes the drowned.

Another example of an accidental character is Figwit, which stands for "Frodo
is Great; Who is that?!" In the first of Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings* films, the
comedian Brett McKenzie plays an unnamed elf who appears for three seconds in the
Elrond's Council scene, and whose appearance as an extra nevertheless aroused the
film's fans so much that numerous websites, a fan club, slogans ("Figwit Lives!") and
eventually a documentary (Alley et al.), were devoted to him.

Player Characters

In games with a diegetic world where the player has an in-world presence, the player plays a character, known as the *player character* (PC). However, this notion is multi-faceted and unclear, and not to be confused with avatars. Games can have both, one, or neither. Avatars may or may not represent a specific character, and then typically not the player, but a character predefined by the game. Other diegetic games allow the player to design their own avatar, so that their visual and functional characteristics are not predefined, only given as a certain design space. Player-defined avatars and player characters are orthogonal: a player can lend their avatars to other players, who would then, in a multi-player game in particular, appear as another personality in the same body. The avatar exists on a functional and representational level, whereas the character exists on a communicational and mental level. The character is mind, the avatar is body.

It should also be noted that, for the sake of this theoretical argument, the present conceptualisation of player characters is rather narrow, but still one that should make general sense and could function in a general, ludo-hermeneutic theory. Clearly, one alternative meaning of player character, that of the preconceived, authored, *playable character* found in many ludo-narratives (*Unchartered, The Last of Us,* the *BioShock* series, to mention just a few) does not fit the *characters without signifiers* category at all, as the characters in such games are very much constructed by game-industrial signifiers. However, there is another type of PC, through which the game's protagonist is not sign-based, but an empty slot to be filled by the player's imagination, actions, and personality. Such characters are primarily imagined by the player, part of their private mental universe only. They may, in the cases of lets-play internet streamers and multiplayer role-play, become signifierized, but even in those cases they are not predefined parts of the game as work. It is also possible to define a scale, or design space, of signification across various games, between the signifier-less PC and the fully pre-characterized PC, where some games contain semi-open slots with some pre-authored characterization, such as dialogue trees or scripted cut scenes, but with flexibility to create core person-traits such as gender, sexuality, appearance, and disposition. The Dragonborn in *Skyrim* (2011) is one such half-fabrication.

A crucial question regarding the signifier-less player-character games, then, becomes: are players characters at all? Are they not simply themselves, a NUL, or blank, character? A game operator, enacting a "game ego" (Wilhelmsson)? Even so, the game (or at least those games with a diegetic world containing other characters) implies a character, and the player fills that role. In acting/playing within a diegetic world, the player enacts a character, even if it is a minimalist one. The question becomes much fuzzier when it comes to games with no in-game player position, such as with strategy games like chess or *Age of Empires.* Perhaps an interesting parallel here is poker. In traditional, table-top (diegetic?) poker, the player plays a character—one who tries to resist being "read" by their "tells" and who may be pretending to possess a hand they do not have. In online poker, on the other hand, there is no face or body, but does that mean that there is no character? There are still reads and tells, but they are more

subtle (Williams). So rather than having no characters, online poker can be said to have minimalist ones, signified by index signs.

From fully characterized player characters, such as Lara Croft or Duke Nukem, to partially displayed, but charmingly voice-acted ones like the Dude in *Postal 2,* and gender-nonspecific protagonists like *Mass Effect*'s cosmic hero/ine Shepard, via blank-slate and mute but recognizable figures like Gordon Freeman in the *Half-Life* series—at the minimalist end of the blank player character we find, as a now classic example, the Warden in *Dragon Age: Origins* (2009). The Warden, protagonist in a typical high-fantasy role-playing game is, despite the rather tightly controlled branching narrative, not a person so much as an occupation, a vacancy to be filled by the player. Players are free to construct and/or choose not only the name, gender, sexuality, looks, race and skills of the Warden, but also their morals. But the game forces them to do the Warden's job. Is the Warden a character at all? Perhaps only in the sense of a player character, one that does not exist without the player, but also not without the game. The Warden is legion, possessed by millions of players. We expect the warden to be a character, but there is no character as such in the game, before the player begins to play.
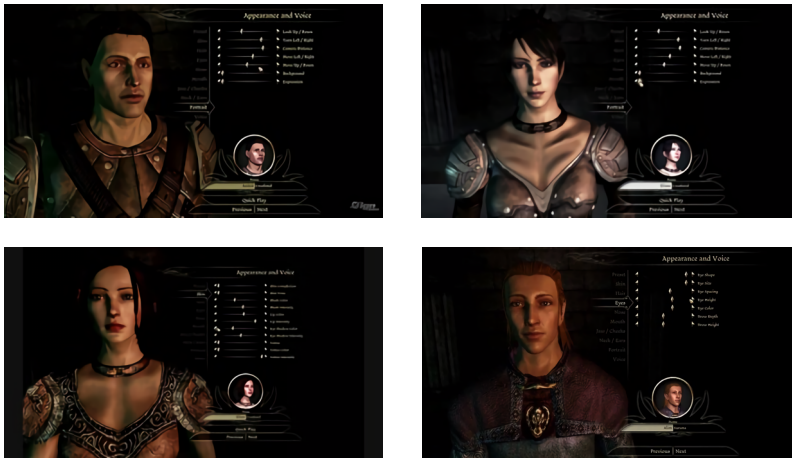
Figures 1.1–1.4. Dragon Age: Origins (2009), character construction screen:
'The Warden' is not a character, but legion

Summing Up: Characters Across the Signifying Spectrum

The table below represents the results of my survey of candidates who might qualify as characters without signifiers, or who are minimally represented in various ways. Some Player Characters, like the Warden are only materialized by players and/or their avatars during play, but do not exist preludically.

TABLE 1. Some characters across the representational spectrum

TYPE	EXAMPLES	REPRESENTATIONAL MODE
Premediated characters	Death, jr.	Mental (Conceptual)
Hypothetical characters	Sherlock Holmes' granny	Mental
Invisible characters, monsters and demons	The alien in *Alien* It in It Follows	Physical, Functional Imagined
Imaginary friends	n/a	Mental
Hallucinatory voices and characters in dreams	n/a	Communicational
Accidental characters	Gravity Figwit	Functional Physical
Absent characters	Godot	Communicational
Player characters	Duke Nukem The Warden in *Dragon Age*	Physical, Funct., Comm. [Functional, Comm.]

Conclusion: Implied Characters

Perhaps the best-fitting candidate for a *character without signifiers* is what we might alternatively call an *implied character;* an indirectly mediated entity that exists only as a human-shaped slot in the machine, waiting for a human agent to be inserted, like the Dragonborn in *Skyrim,* or the Warden in *Dragon Age: Origins.* The implied character does not exist directly but comes into existence by being imagined by the player/observer/user.

Clearly, it is a character that can never be presented as such, because each experience of it is private and ephemeral, and even if told, will be overshadowed by the teller's motivation in the act of telling, to the extent that we do not know what will be produced, and for what purpose. Is it the implied character itself? Not at all, because in being related, it is turned into something else, no longer implied, but realized as one of an endless number of possible interpretations, a collaboration of human and text/machine which the implied character itself is not but precedes. Implied characters, then, are characters without signifiers, uninterpretable in themselves—only, and only indirectly, available through the medium of the human character player.

In this essay I have examined the working conditions of characters across a number of representational and mental platforms, from conceptual transmedia proto-characters, via non-signified and private mental constructs, to what is often called

player-characters in computer games. While all of these three examples may be said to be characters without direct representation, perhaps the last one is the most fluid, since it is both the product of a carefully staged medium, as well as a character without qualities; we perhaps naïvely use the term player-character for something that is neither player nor character, but the double shadow of both.

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Characters with Signifiers: A Framework Direction

Veli-Matti Karhulahti

THE CONTINUOUS ATTENTION given to newer and newer media has rightly fueled the question of how to manage theoretical constructs that were previously associated with only few cultural forms. "Character," as conventionally discussed in literary theory and narratology (e.g., Phelan; Herman), is certainly one such concept. Defying the constantly increasing number of signifiers, Espen Aarseth entertains the possibility of "Characters *without* Signifiers." Discussing the absence of signifiers by means of signifying language has its challenges (Gumbrecht), but the premise also opens avenues for fruitful theory building and amusing cul-de-sacs. I highlight some of those avenues and argue that a worthwhile approach could be one that considers characters on both *medial* and *metaphysical* levels, respectively.

Characters with Barely Signifying Signifiers

Aarseth lists eight types of characters, which show "no or very few signs of being represented." The keywords are "very few," as none of the listed characters—Aarseth tends to agree—is fully without signifiers, but they rather just have few. Before further commentary, I stress that we operate without committing to *a* definition of characters; for instance, the *Living Handbook of Narratology* defines "character" as a "text- or media-based figure in a storyworld" (Jannidis), and some of Aarseth's examples, such as imaginary friends and schizophrenic hallucinations, would be difficult to fit in such definitions (as he is aware of). Let us proceed with an open and inclusive mind for as many conceptions of characters as viable.

The ultimate contribution of Aarseth's analysis is a typology, which is based on a useful previous model with four core ontological aspects: communicational, mental, physical, and structural (Aarseth and Grabarczyk). The most intriguing of Aarseth's examples is "implied character"—"a human-shaped slot in the machine, waiting for a human agent to be inserted, like the Dragonborn in *Skyrim*"—which is represented by physical and communicational core aspects, but only after being created by a user (cf. Aarseth, "Fought"). The lack of signifiers thus refers to the time *before* character creation.

A long dialogue could be continued about what it takes for a character to "exist" or be "signified" in our increasingly algorithmic world with numerous latent constructs and simulacra (Karhulahti), yet I settle with two pragmatic questions, which arise from Aarseth's typology.

Q1. How to cope with the multiple *medial* (signifying) versions of any one character?

Q2. What are the minimum (signified) features of characters *metaphysically?*

I believe an applicable and explicable typology would benefit from taking into consideration both the multiple medial character versions and being built on an idea (regardless of how limited) of what characters metaphysically are. Without confusing the two and answering both, an argument for lacking signifiers will be stronger.

Q1–A1. The first step in discussing the ontology of any character should be acknowledging that they likely exist in many media; for instance, the signifiers of Godot differ between the written plays, theatrical performances, and film adaptations. It is often unproductive to debate over the "original" (perhaps except for historians); thus, a pragmatic solution for assessing the signifiers related to the studied characters is to situate them in a framework where the preferred media can be chosen and analysed. The framework is open to as many communicational, mental, physical, and structural medial layers (from any chosen number of "products" or "works") as the scholar is willing to study.

Q1–A2. The second step is more complicated, having troubled scholars since Aristotle's *Poetics:* to decide *what* features of characters are worth looking into. With respect to the virtues of brevity and clarity, the present framework settles with **agency**, **history**, **mind**, **physicality**, and **sensations**.

- **Agency**. What the character is capable of—skills, powers, and potential actions. For instance, in the videogame *Testament of Sherlock Holmes,* the protagonist has a "sixth sense" that Arthur Conan Doyle wrote nothing about.
- **History**. What the character has experienced—storyworld connections and background. In the Sir Arthur Conan Doyle novel *A Study in Scarlet,* John Watson fought in the Anglo-Afghan War, but in the British TV series *Sherlock* he was deployed to fight in the War in Afghanistan in the 2000s.
- **Mind**. What character's mental landscape is like—beliefs, motivations, personality, thoughts, and values, among others. In the film *The Seven-Per-Cent Solution* Holmes' personality is presented in a rather unique way, in comparison to many other adaptations.
- **Physicality**. How the character is—body and form, but other sensible manifestations too, such as smell and voice. Doyle described Holmes as a smoker, implying the smell of tobacco.
- **Sensations**. What the character feels—from kinesthetic and motor senses to lived emotions (Cartesian overlap with mind). Haptic and VR technologies might soon signify Holmes and Watson's sensations in yet unknown ways.

Table 1 illustrates how Aarseth's model could continue toward a framework direction, which considers both medial and metaphysical levels.

TABLE 1. A character framework direction. Vertical: signifiers on four medial layers, e.g., text (communication), memory (mental), material (physical), and algorithm (structural); note that one product may have signifiers on multiple layers. Horizontal: signified features.

	AGENCY	HISTORY	MIND	PHYSICALITY	SENSATIONS
Communicational $_1$					
Communicational $_n$					
Mental $_1$					
Mental $_n$					
Physical $_1$					
Physical $_n$					
Structural $_1$					
Structural $_n$					

Dragonborn is Dragonborn

Aarseth's foremost candidate for a character without signifiers is the "implied character," such as Dragonborn in *Skyrim:* "a collaboration of human and text/machine which the implied character itself is not but precedes." But already the fact that we know every Dragonborn *to be Dragonborn*—"individual with the body of a mortal but the blood and soul of a dragon," as the paratexts say—provides us with signifiers that concerns all past and future Dragonborns. The implied is not without an implier, as various materials, starting from the *Skyrim* retail box (communicated representation: "Dragonborn, the prophesized hero born with the power of The Voice") signify Dragonborn. A player of *Skyrim,* filling the role of their Dragonborn, can certainly influence the character's powers (**agency**), life story (**history**), motivations, (**mind**), looks (**physicality**), and even feelings (**sensations**); however, parts of the character remain fixed, as the single example of a retail box confirms (Table 2).

TABLE 2. Dragonborn in the character framework through one (communicational) layer from a single medial artifact

	AGENCY	HISTORY	MIND	PHYSICALITY	SENSATIONS
Retail box of Skyrim, written text. **Communicational**	Dragonborn has the power of The Voice.	In the beginning, Dragonborn is a prisoner waiting for execution.	N/A	Dragonborn has a body of a mortal; one of the playable races, none of the non-play-able races.	Dragonborn's senses evolve and are enriched by the blood and soul of a dragon.

Some readers may remember how Prince (the musician) changed his name into a symbol after Warner Brothers trademarked "Prince." This did not erase Prince's history, however. Dragonborns, whether implied or not, cannot deny their documented past, either. Ultimately, a fair conclusion seems to be that *a character **may have no signifiers** in some media or medial layers, but we still know of its existence by other sources.* Silence of the unspeakable, as Wittgenstein suggested, still allows for non-verbal expression.

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Five Features in the Search of a Character Theory

Espen Aarseth

FOR A THEORIST, THERE CAN BE NO higher gratification than to see others build on one's own work. I was delighted to read Veli-Matti Karhulahti's generous and constructive response to my article on characters without signifiers, where he also contributes a model intended to map further differences towards an ontology of character-representational variety, with a focus on medial and metaphysical aspects. It is tempting to engage these proposals critically, but in this very limited space also unwise, because there seem to exist more fundamental, definitional issues to clarify first: To begin with, what is a character? I do offer a very simple definition ("a mediated representation of a person"), and while VMK does not, there is one implied in his assumption that characters possess the five characteristics of agency, history, mind, physicality, and sensations. VMK chooses to address my example of the game The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim (2011). Unfortunately, in his analysis VMK uses not the game but a paratextual interpretation of how the game might be played, written by the game company. While the paratext prescribes how an imagined player should conceptualize their epic role as "The Dragonborn," an actual player is free to ignore all these suggestions, and instead freely roam the open world and choose their own adventure, so to speak. And even if they decide to adapt to the pre-scripted telos, they still retain control over ethos (personal integrity), logos (strategy), pathos (emotional experience), and kairos (timing), to engage five Aristotelian concepts also relevant for character analysis.

Another necessary step when it comes to game-character analysis, is to divorce the notion of character from avatar—the pseudo-physical figure representing the player. This distinction has been pointed out many times in the game studies literature (e.g., Aarseth 127; using the word "puppet"—"an empty body"—in 1997 "avatar" was not yet the established term). VMK's notion of looks or physicality must fall on the avatarial side: players may possess the same avatar without playing the same character. Of the other three (VMK wisely skips "mind") only "history" is not completely optional, since every player of Skyrim does start out as a prisoner on a wagon. However, this fact alone is not very rich: what caused our capture, where we came from, and where and what we would like to be, are all blanks. The starting-as-prisoner trope, the staple opening metaphor of the entire Elder Scrolls series, represents the player's escape from a narrative destiny and into the open landscape of free play.

VMK's other query is how to deal with multiple medialities of the same character. This is the crucial starting point of my own inquiry and needs further nuancing. In terms of Godot, however, we might reply that he is not multimedially represented, but purely verbal, though that verbality can take many material shapes.

Does character studies need a definition of character? Is it proper scholarship to appropriate a widely used colloquial term, and narrow its meaning? Perhaps the best perspective on 'character' is to see it as a discursive field, with multiple interpretations and configurations.

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