Game Character

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Abstract

This entry explains how game characters have been discussed in Game Studies and adjacent fields, evolving from agents and human-like beings to avatars [LINK: Avatar], player-characters, transmedia [LINK: Transmedia] characters and companions. Our understanding of game characters is based on our perception of characters in other media. Although characters are understood as pieces of writing and human-like entities in Literary Studies, Game Studies [LINK: Game Studies] has focused mainly on the playable figure, that is, the avatar and the player-character with little interest in other types of game characters. Currently, game characters are mainly discussed in two trends: as part of a global and transmedial network of characters over different texts, and as companion characters with which players can form a romantic emotional attachment.

Introduction

The term 'game character' is colloquially used to refer to a human-like figure that originates from a computer game, like PacMan or Lara Croft. But characters are not entities exclusive to games. They appear as transtextual phenomena through different stories, media and platforms in all kinds of shapes ranging from historical figures in television dramas and fictional entities in comics or novels to virtual YouTubers streaming videos. Games are one of the many platforms through which characters manifest, hence, our understanding of game characters is based on our perception of characters in other media. It is therefore imperative to trace the origin, development and perception of characters in other media and fields to understand game characters in Game Studies.

The History of Characters

The root of the English word 'character' can be traced to the Greek word *kharakter*, an instrument for stamping a distinctive mark (Cixous, 1974, p. 386; Frow, 2014, p. 7). It was later used in Greek literature to refer to the impression of the stamp instead of the instrument (Cixous, 1974; Frow, 2014). It was not until the word appeared on the stage of Greek theatre that it came to refer to an individual person or a representation thereof (Cixous, 1974; Frow, 2014).

The earliest account we have of the predecessor of the character is Aristotle's *Poetics* from around 330 BC (see Aristotle, 1902), that differentiates between agents (*prattor*) and character (*ethos*) in ancient Greek tragedies. Favouring plot, and therefore action, Aristotle considered agents as those who perform the actions, move the plot forward and are therefore necessary components of drama. Character, on the other hand, is the agent's qualities and set of traits that arise from its actions and was therefore considered less important as it did not move the plot forward. This opposition has persisted until recently in other academic

domains where discussions about characters occurred, such as Literary Studies, Film Studies, and Game Studies – which I will discuss in more detail below.

We currently understand characters simultaneously as pieces of writing and person-like entities. This dual understanding of the term derives from the field of Literary Studies, which contributed most dominantly to how we look at characters today. In her exhaustive survey on the historical development of the term, Heidbrink (2010) explains that characters have been discussed primarily around the three following topics:

1. The notion of a character naturally seems to be connected to concepts of humanlikeness, although they seem to be made of rather abstract medial material like words, images, and sounds.
2. Different characters seem to be of different importance to the plot in respect to their acts and functions.
3. Characters seem to be constructed by a link between the observed material and the thereby elicited reception process and effects.

> In general all three points refer to a continuum between 'abstraction' and 'concretion', whereas the first pole stands for the medial material, the text, the signs, or the structures of the medial product and the second pole stands for the character that is via reception perceived as a humanlike entity with a coherent self including an individual personality. (Heidbrink, p. 72)

The continuum that Heidbrink speaks of refers to a long debate in literary studies since the early 1900s on how we should understand characters, reminiscent of Aristotle's division between 'agent' and 'character'. The debate is made up of two positions: on the one side, there was the 'structuralist position' that holds the view that characters should be addressed as signs or structures of the text (Barthes, 1966/1995; Cixous, 1974; Genette, 1979/1980; Greimas, 1966; Propp, 1928), whereas on the other side, the 'humanistic position' holds the view that characters should be looked at in terms of their humanlikeness (Bal, 1979, 1978/1999; Chatman, 1978; Forster, 1927; Frow, 1986; Rimmon-Kenan, 1983). This debate informed the field of Film Studies, that continued to discuss characters as either a structure of the film to move the plot forwards (Bordwell, 1985; McKee, 1998) or person-like entities (Eder, 2008, 2010; Smith, 1995, 2010, 2011).

The debate has calmed down somewhat since the late 1980s. Nowadays, academic works on characters focus less on creating a comprehensive theory on the definition of character and focus more on the broader historical development of the term (Heidbrink, 2010; Jannidis, 2004, 2012; Reicher, 2010) or the different perspectives from which we understand characters (Eder, 2008; Margolin, 1986; Palmer, 2004; Phelan, 1989, 2005; Reicher, 2010; Smith, 2010, 2011). Within this current academic sphere, there is a consensus that characters can be understood as both pieces of writing and human-like entities (Frow, 2014). That is, we understand them as representations of persons — regardless of whether these persons are real — and simultaneously as textual phenomena embedded in the material of the text through which they manifest.

Game Characters: Avatars and Player-Characters

Game Studies took its understanding of characters from the field of Literary Studies, where it mirrored the debate between the 'structuralistic' and 'humanistic' positions. Since its start in the late 1990s, the field of Game Studies has been focusing almost exclusively on the playable figure in relation to the player, which they directly control, like the avatar and the player-character (Aarseth, 1997; Calleja, 2011; Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 2008; Klevjer, 2006; Vella, 2015). Although the terms 'avatar' and 'character' have different meanings, they are often conflated because they refer to the entity the player directly controls and could sometimes be a function of the text or a human-like entity. Game scholars were interested in the question if this playable figure is to be considered just a tool for players to manipulate the game world, a puppet, a representation of the player or a person-like being with its own traits and characteristics (Aarseth, 1997; Bartle, 1996; Linderoth, 2005; Newman, 2002; Salen & Zimmerman, 2004).

It was not until Klevjer's work *What is the Avatar* (2006) that the difference between the avatar and the player-character was somewhat settled. In his work, Klevjer proposes the avatar to be a mediator of agency and control (2006, p. 62). He defines the avatar as "an instrument or mechanism that defines for the participant a fictional body and mediates fictional agency; it is an embodied incarnation of the acting subject" (p. 87). It is the extension of the player: a body in the world of the game through which players are able to interact with the game environment. However, this body does not have to be the body of a human-like figure; it can also be a vehicle or a mouse (arrow) (p. 116), as long as the player directly controls it.

Within the division between avatar and character, we continue to see the difference between the figure as a function of the text taken on by the avatar and the being as an analogue to human beings. While both a character and an avatar can have an avatarial relationship with the player in which the player directly controls the figure, Klevjer perceives characters as independent subjects; that is, figures that act and can be related to as human persons with goals and intentions (Klevjer, 2006, p. 16). The avatar, on the other hand, is not an independent agent, since it is a "prosthetic extension of agency and perception" (Klevjer, 2006, p. 94) controlled by the player.

After Klevjer, contributions on the avatar tended to focus more on the identity of players in the game world through the avatar (e.g., Carter et al., 2012; Manninen & Kujanpää, 2007; Tronstad, 2008; Westecott, 2009), on the avatar-as-tool (e.g., Bayliss, 2007; Linderoth, 2013), on the interaction between players through avatars (e.g., van Vugt et al., 2010) and on the appropriation of the term 'avatar' within Western-centric tech culture (de Wildt et al., 2019). For a more extensive account, see the 'avatar' [LINK: Avatar] entry in this encyclopaedia.

The dual nature of the player-character was not yet established at the time. Taking on this issue, Vella (2015) considers the playable figure in games an entity with a dual nature, something that consists of the player and an entity belonging to the world of the game. According to him, players deduce attributes and traits belonging to a character from textual cues in games or 'characterization statements' as borrowed from Margolin (1986) to turn a playable figure into a character. Once players consider the playable figure to be human-like, it becomes a character that consists both of the player's personality and its own. The player-

character, then, is a playable figure distinct from the avatar in the sense that it denotes a human-like figure with a personality independent from the player even if the player controls them directly.

Other Types of Game Characters

There exists a striking lack of significant academic work on different types of game characters other than the avatar and the player-character. Although several scholars have come up with typologies to classify game characters into certain types (Aarseth, 2012; Calleja, 2011; Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 2008; Isbister, 2006, 2016; Schröter, 2016;), these typologies serve mostly to set the playable character apart from other types of characters. The playable figure was considered such an essential part of game characters that in their analysis of video game characters, Schröter and Thon (2014) identify three different ways of experiencing game characters: as a fictional entity, as a game piece and as a representation of the player (pp. 49–50), the latter category entirely dedicated to the avatar and player-character. Yet, not all early works associated game characters with the representation of the player.

Early works on other types of game characters were mostly interested in them as computer-based agents which responded to the user's input, distinct from characters found in literature. They borrow their notions of characters from theatre. For example, Laurel (1991/2014) borrows the Aristotelian definition of agents, the figures who perform the actions in a plot. She distinguishes between human agents and computer-based agents. The former refers to users operating the computer, whereas the a bundle of functionalities that performs a task for a user. Computer-based agents could be represented as characters but do not have to be. According to Laurel, computer-based agents turn into characters depending on the traits they exhibit through their actions. Murray (1997), on the other hand, was inspired by the structure of *Commedia dell'Arte* theatre which possesses a stock character system where actors improvise based on a set of scenarios. She states that this form of theatre offers a solution to the staging problem of procedural characters which do not operate on a pre-determined script but on artificial intelligence (AI). In order for procedural characters to appropriately respond to other characters, there has to be a way to synchronize their actions without a script. The scenarios of *Commedia dell'Arte* would thus offer such a way (Murray, 1997, p. 235). However, in their reflection of the interactive drama *Façade* (Procedural Arts, 2005), which makes use of an AI system to reconstruct a real-time dramatic performance, Mateas and Stern (2005) state that a player's agency over an interactive story is the hardest part to implement. Even only a 20-minute interactive drama like *Façade* needs to incorporate thousands of possible jointed dialogue behaviours just to facilitate a player's unpredictable actions. In short, these works showed that moving away from the traditional idea of scripted characters like those found in Literary Studies proved to be rather challenging.

These early works received little attention in terms of their discussion on game characters during the debate on the distinction between avatars and characters. Later works recognise game characters as meaningful entities to which players could have empathic and emotional reactions, but these too tend to emphasize mainly the player-character (see Lankoski, 2010, 2012; Morrison & Ziemke, 2005; Perron, 2009). Works on other types of game characters, with a focus on their role, remain few. Only a couple of notable exceptions discuss game characters other than avatars or player-characters as the main interest. While Pinchbeck

(2009) acknowledges non-player characters (NPCs) as agents with some sort of significance and with a definable role in the game's world and plot, it is most notably Jørgensen (2010) who brings attention to supporting characters, a type of character that is considered 'cast characters' by Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al. (2008), with a specific function related to the game's plot (p. 209). Giving these entities a high degree of importance based on her observations in *Dragon Age: Origins* (BioWare, 2009) and *Mass Effect 2* (Bioware, 2010), Jørgensen (2010) describes supporting characters as narrative devices that enable a coherent narrative experience. By shifting the focal point to their responses to the player's activities, the player takes an active part in the narrative's progression (p. 328).

Current Trends

Characters have become more important than ever before in our current media ecology, but less so in their medium-specific roles as characters in a game. In more recent discussions on game characters, the term has diminished in significance in Game Studies as fewer works attempt to categorise game characters into specific types, relating them to characters in other media (with exceptions of Aarseth, forthcoming 2022; Backe, forthcoming 2022). Game characters are now discussed in two distinct but related trends, namely: 1) as *transmedial characters* that are seen as part of a larger transmedia ecology in which these figures move between different media and platforms; 2) as *companion characters* where they have become powerful tools for storytelling in games and for players to create affectionate attachments to.

Game Characters as Transmedial Characters

Characters are inherently transtextual phenomena that move between texts (Richardson, 2010), but with the growing mediated world in which we have come to live, the boundaries between different types of characters have become increasingly ambiguous. This includes the boundaries between game characters and their incarnations in other media. Within the current media ecology, popular entertainment franchises try to generate as much profit as possible by creating large transmedial worlds and stories so that it has become the rule rather than the exception that most characters are transmedial. Game characters move from game to game and from one medium to another so that the term 'game character' has become obsolete in the sense that it does not refer to characters exclusive to games.

The movement of characters between media was initially underemphasized in earlier discussions on characters within a transmedial ecology. Due to transmedia storytelling's focus on stories or worlds within our convergence culture, characters have been primarily discussed as "stock characters that re-occur" (Jenkins, 2006, p. 123), as part of the world's mythos which presents the world's background stories (Klastrup & Tosca, 2004) or as inhabitants of the world (Wolf, 2012). Such a stark attitude of insignificance towards characters in a transmedia ecology was reflected in Game Studies as well. Game characters were seen as figures that failed to be adapted to movies or vice-versa, because they were meant to serve as the player's avatar, an affordance that a movie does not provide (Pearce, 2004). Jessica Aldred (2012), for example, explains that the failure arises due to the double function that a film incarnation of a game character has to take on in which it needs to serve simultaneously as the player's avatar and as the fictional entity that serves to advance the story. Abstract (Aldred, 2012; McCloud, 1994) or iconic characters with little personality and story (Tosca, 2003) were seen

as the best method to circumvent the clash between the character's double function. That did not mean that game characters did not move transmedially before Game Studies acknowledged the phenomenon, but rather, it required a shift in attitude towards characters in the field. This shift is exemplified by Aldred (2014), who, only a few years later after her initial statement on the transfer of game characters to movies, explains that characters have become the symbols for the larger game franchises they belong to, which can be easily extended into other types of media and merchandise.

The field's gradual shift in attitude follows a general surge in interest in characters in adjacent fields such as Transmedia Storytelling, Fandom Studies, Comic Studies, and even Japan Studies so that game characters have become mixed into discussions on transmedial characters. This means that their significance as *game* characters has diminished. They are now mostly discussed as parts of a global network of characters that appear in different types of media, where the main issue that transmedial characters tackle is their various contradictory identities (Rosendo, 2016). This tension had already intrigued scholars decades before Jenkins coined the term 'transmedia storytelling' (2006). Scholars aimed to explain how the various incarnations of a character through multiple texts relate as a single character (e.g., Eco, 1972; Uricchio & Pearson, 1991). Nevertheless, discussions on the contradictory identities of transmedial characters did not thoroughly hit off until after debates on the convergence of fictional story worlds and universes, which were a favoured topic in Transmedia Storytelling (Pearson, 2016; Thon, 2015; Wolf, 2014). Recent discussions approach these figures from a variety of interlaced perspectives, including: seriality (Denson, 2011; Meyer, 2019), adaptations (Evans, 2012), continuity in terms of brand and canon (Brooker, 2012; Harvey, 2015), semiotics (Bertetti, 2014, forthcoming 2022), transfictionality (Pearson, 2019), meta-narrative in the Japanese discourse on characters (Azuma, 2007, 2001/2009; Itō, 2005; Wilde, 2019, forthcoming 2022), global networks (Thon, 2019) and transmedial character wheels to include derivative works made by fans (Tosca, forthcoming 2022). Since video games have become the focus product from which many franchises nowadays expand transmedially, the few discussions on the identity of game characters seem to either conform to the notion that they are the same character throughout the entire franchise (Blomquist, 2019), following the idea of a single-story world, or to show how game developers attempt to avoid having different manifestations of a game character clash in terms of their identities (Blom, 2020b, 2021).

Game Characters as Companion Characters
A related trend to the surge of transmedial characters is the emotional attachment to fictional characters within convergence culture which occupies a growing role for users to engage with different popular entertainment platforms. Since the mid-1990s, with the increase of a mediated society, there has been an increase in the focus on developing an affection relationship between the user and their virtual companions, ranging from creatures such as the *Tamagotchi* (Bandai 1996) (Turkle, 2011/2017) and voice assistants such as Alexa (Blom, forthcoming 2022; Strengers & Kennedy, 2020) to fictional characters found in comics, films and video games (Galbraith, 2019). As new technologies have expanded the possibilities to interact with characters even further, virtual realities, artificial intelligence and voice assistants have become so sophisticated to give us an impression that these figures have become real enough to even officially marry (Lamerichs, 2019).

It is particularly game characters over which players have a certain form of agency that have gained significant importance in terms of creating an affective relationship between user and character. One way in which we see this is in their role in a game's overall narrative. Supporting characters are now more acknowledged as powerful tools for storytelling in computer games despite the prior lack of interest in characters other than avatars and player-characters in Game Studies. In extension of Jørgensen's (2010) work, Blom (2020a) coined the term 'dynamic game character', a type of game character whose development outcome in the story is influenced by the player and stretches over a web of multiple characters so that players have become partially responsible for the character's eventual fate. Christensen (forthcoming 2022) pushes the significance of the supporting characters further, explaining how the powerful role of companion characters in a game's narrative and gameplay mechanics causes significant emotional attachment to the character.

Another way in which game characters have become companion characters is through romantic para-social relationships. With the increase of para-social relationships with fictional characters in popular culture (Karhulahti & Välisalo, 2021), computer games progressively facilitate romantic relationships between game characters and players (Kelly, 2015; Waern, 2015). Different forms of attachment to game characters have been identified that emphasise a character's several functional and emotional values (Bopp et al., 2019), but recent research on emotional attachment to non-playable characters shows that players particularly appreciate characters with whom they can form romantic relationships (Burgess & Jones, 2020). This type of emotional attachment is further supported by other studies in adjacent fields like Fandom Studies, Transmedia Storytelling and Japan Studies, which shows that games are particularly good at generating affective responses towards characters by providing players the agency to make meaningful choices over the relationships (Blom, forthcoming 2022a; Galbraith, 2021; Lamerichs, forthcoming 2022; Tosca & Klastrup, 2019). As such, it is likely that as the emotional attachment to characters continues to be of importance in the current transmedia culture, we will see more studies on players' affect towards game characters emerge.

Summary

In summary, our understanding of the term 'game character' in Game Studies comes predominantly from Literary Studies' dual understanding of characters as pieces of writing and human-like entities in a text. Game Studies has been mainly occupied with the playable figure that the players directly control and distinguishes between the 'avatar' and the 'player-character', in which the former refers to the extension of the player in the game world whereas the latter has come to denote an independent human-like figure that the player controls. With the increase of a mediated society where convergence culture occupies a large role, game characters have become less significant in terms of their medium-specific role in games and are instead seen as a part of a global and transmedial network of characters in popular cultural entertainment, which is increasingly more character-driven. Within this trend, they have become part of discussions as to how we make sense of a transmedial character's various contradictory identities. A second trend that has emerged with the rise of transmedial characters is that, despite Game Studies' previously lacking interest in game characters other than the avatar and player-character, there has been an increase of interest

in companion characters to which players become emotionally attached. First, we see this in Game Studies' acknowledgement that supporting characters have become powerful tools for games to tell stories. Second, various works in Game Studies and adjacent fields like Fandom Studies, Transmedia Storytelling and Japan Studies show that game characters have become entities with which players appreciate to form romantic relationships.

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