

## *Contemplating Character*

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The ‘post’-modern hero was a heroic part of the herd, responsible for all of what he is part of, [...] The jut-jawed modern hero of action (‘Hawaii Five-0’) becomes the mild-eyed hero of reaction (‘Hill Street Blues,’ a decade later). [...] We as a North American audience, have favored the more Stoic, corporate hero of reactive pobyty ever since, some might be led to argue ‘trapped’ in the reactive moral ambiguity of ‘post’ and ‘post-post’-modern culture. [...] We await, I predict, the hero of *non*-action, the catatonic hero, the one beyond calm, divorced from all stimulus, carried here and there across sets by burly extras whose blood sings with retrograde amines.

- David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest* (1998)

When discussing theories of character in literature, I’m reminded of Wallace because the majority of his storytelling occurs through meticulous exposition of characters, many of whom have no centrality to any main plot within his stories. In *How Fiction Works*, literary critic James Wood says the following of Wallace’s writing: “If I try to distinguish between major and minor characters—flat and round characters—and claim that these differ in terms of subtlety, depth, time allowed on the page, I must concede that many so-called flat characters seem more alive to me, and more interesting as human studies, than the round characters they are supposedly subservient to”(Forward, *Infinite Jest* 20th Anniversary Edition). While the concept of flat/round character comes from E.M. Forester, Wallace’s philosophy of writing characters can be also placed into conversations with our readings of Rorty and Frow from class. In this paper I hope to briefly explore some of this scholarly discussion, meditating on the distinctions between character and personhood and locating new theoretical real estate for character in game studies, and then introduce my character concept for a ‘hero of inaction’.

It is widely agreed that a character and a person are not the same. John Frow writes “Fictional bodies and places are in some sense like real persons and places, and in another sense are of a quite different order of being” (p.106). Characters exist within a system, like a gameworld or a story arc. Frow reads Charles Grivel’s Aristotelian reduction of character as just a device for creating and resolving a “disturbance” in a system. Frow himself says “What is at play in the composition of person is a

predication of the existence, implicit or explicitly stated, of a person-like being and of a storyworld in which actions take place”(p.113) which I think means he conceives character to be both person and not, like my body is both me and not. The character is the ‘body’ for a person-facsimile in an unreal composed place.

What is the difference between character and identity? Per my understanding, an identity is like a category or a title. A character may hold multiple identity titles: gay, white, upper-class, Episcopalian, American citizen. Identities are touchstones by which we ground ourselves within a larger culture. Identity is inherently related to existing social hierarchies and how certain physical or metaphysical, (transient or permanent, chosen or not chosen, etc.) ‘flags’ mark us for sorting and change the fabric of our lived experiences. Althusser posited the following: "Ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their conditions of existence [...] Ideology has a material existence"(p.153,155). He also wrote “Ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects by means of the pre-existing category of the subject” (p.209). If I understand correctly, personal identity is a way of internalizing patterns of interpellation.

Considering the game *10 Lost Boys* by Mark Sample<sup>1</sup>, the way white nationalists have adopted the cultural signifiers of pastiche is a tertiary response to interpellation. Would-be white nationalists are “hailed” or interpellated by the latent ideologies upon which all of American society runs. They then experience recognition of themselves as subjects within a set of categories (white, cis, usually Christian), linking their membership in these categories to a set of values based on maintaining/changing certain aspects of the conditions of their existence, they then need to create a set of signifiers to mark the like-minded. These material signifiers become an integral part of the unification and trafficking of their worldview.

In “Video Game Characters: Theory and Analysis”, scholars within game studies observe the dearth of a comprehensive systematic analysis for character in video game mediums, stating that existing

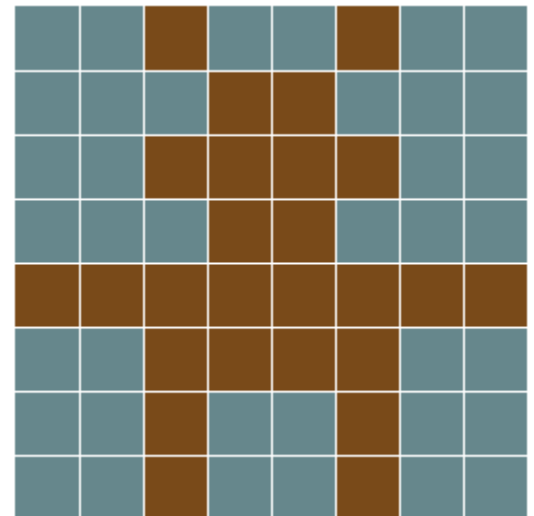
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<sup>1</sup> Because this game is on my mind and I can’t think of a Wallace-related way to answer the identity question. I know it’s really out of place and am sorry.

theoretical frames either “(focus) on the audio/visual surface of (characters’) representation, their narrative functions and, at best, character-related game mechanics”(p.41) or fixate on video game characters as mere facets of “social presence in the game world, parasocial interaction, or players’ emotional responses to video games in general”(ibid). Applying literary concepts of character is also only part of the story, so to speak; video games exist between narrative and pure ludic simulation and thus there is a medially unique interplay between multiple “modes” of character representation.

To my mind, a character is a person perceived. If character is a set of things which can be remembered or understood about someone and their natures of being, the span of the set still cannot constitute a breathing person. As Rorty wrote, ‘persons are irreproducible’(paraphrase), however Rorty would not agree with my relation between a character (delineated) and a person - “the idea of a unified center of choice and action”(p.309). Rorty locates persons as moral entities who “stand behind their roles”(ibid), but can not characters also have roles? What is a role but a job or social function? Rorty understands a hero as an entity whose fate is predetermined “by parentage”(p.303) where a hero is a subset of character. The role of the hero is that of “courage and endurance in the face of chance”(ibid). It is widely understood that the role of a teddy bear is to be a child’s comfort toy: a plush facsimile of a protector animal which functionally fulfills its metaphysical parentage by helping a child feel safe. Frow writes “Anything at all can be imagined to be like a person, and no story exists without being driven by the quasi-persons that we call characters”(p.107). Can I create a quasi-person that may drive a narrative through complete inaction? I’ll try.

Imagine a brown teddy bear. His name is Arthur and he’s a normal teddy bear, except he’s completely sentient and feeling. He still cannot move independently or speak, but he loves his boy Jonah and Jonah carries Arthur everywhere. Arthur is not an “actant” per Griemas because he cannot functionally ‘do’. He is not merely the device to whom action can be ascribed. He can feel



and his only choices are about how to feel internally, so it's unclear to me if he's considered a person by Rorty's standards. Arthur is too defined to be a figure or a presence. As many video game characters have particular 'skills' or 'strengths', let Arthur also have these. Arthur's stats are as follows:

**0/15 - Strength (ST):** A measure of the character's physical power and bulk, ability to lift, carry, and do damage. - Arthur cannot move himself, let alone anything else. Jonah could swing him as a weapon against another kid at daycare, but he doesn't do that because he's a reserved boy and is respectful of others and inanimate objects.

**0/15 - Dexterity (DX):** A measure of the character's physical agility, coordination, and manual dexterity. - He can't move, again.

**13/15 - Intelligence (IQ):** A measure of the character's mental capacity, acuity and sense of the world - Arthur is both smarter than the average bear and smarter than the average human. He cannot do much with this but sit and think from within his silent corporeal form. He is ok with this.

**8/15 - Health (HT):** A measure of the character's physical stamina, recovery speed, energy and vitality, ability to resist disease

**14/15 - Perception** - Arthur is an excellent watcher (never even blinks) and an equally great listener. More attentive to minute details than a human, given that he doesn't ever have to multi-task or even single-task.

**8/15 - Charisma** - He is a stuffed bear, so I give him slightly less charisma than a human. He does have kind and open eyes though. Jonah likes that he's not got his mouth in a permanent smile.

**13/15 - Luck** - Once when Jonah's parents got in a moderately intense car accident, Arthur's soft belly shielded Jonah's head from getting bumped against one of the front seats. Somehow whenever Jonah trips and falls, Arthur's body always seems to cushion him from the full impact against a hard surface

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Sidenote: I sense a connection between the concept of character, particularly as Frow exposes via a Samuel Beckett excerpt from *Worstward Ho* and authorial monologism, but I can't hope to make sense of it at this stage. Interestingly, Wallace actually weighed in on via criticism H.L. Hix's book *Morte d'Author: An Autopsy after Roland Barthes' "The Death of the Author"*. I would like to learn more about this but I can't parse all the 'diegesis' and other jargon.