

# The Character Interpretation

## The Process Before the Immersion and the Game

*The interpretation of the character is the most common way of creating a clear and sharp image on one's character in role-playing games. Until this has been done, it is impossible to think of costumes, mannerisms or actions for a character. This image also determines to a great extent how much you will get from your character during the game.*

Usually players form a mental image of a character by interpreting a character document. A character document is usually a story<sup>1</sup> or a character sheet<sup>2</sup>, but it can be also a video, a piece of fine art, a list of facts, a collection of music – anything that conveys the necessary information, really. However, this article only concentrates on the most typical formats of the document: a story and a character sheet.

The interpretation of a character starts before a player has even seen a character document. It begins when a player sees the cover of a role-playing book or an announcement for a larp. An interpretation and a reading of a character are two different things, although an interpretation often also contains a reading. Two players could make very similar interpretations of a character based on two very different readings of the character document and vice versa. When a player merely reads a character document, she knows what it says – but when she interprets it, she is prepared to continue the character, because she learns *why* the document says what it says.

In this article I try to show that the medium of a character has great relevance when a player interprets a character. It is extremely unlikely that the character the player uncovers from the character document ends up being the one she plays in the game.

If the player merely understands what a character document says, things can be problematic, as he may be unable to explain the character's motivations and reasoning. For example, if the character document states that the character is egoistic, the player has no problem understanding what this means. But egoists act in different ways, so the character's way of acting egoistically is left unclear. It is impossible to explain every detail in a character document, and obviously the player has to improvise, but the actual process of constructing a character from the character document is less obvious.

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<sup>1</sup> A short story, an article, a report, a psychological analysis etc.

<sup>2</sup> The format of a character sheet depends on the rule system. A typical character sheet contains fields for the information (weight, age, merits, dark secrets, strength et cetera) about character.

Every role-player has interpreted a character. Now I will attempt to make that process transparent.

## A Definition of the Character

A character is not only a thing on a paper. A character is born from a character document if, and only if, it is interpreted as a character. To become a character is more than just being a part of a story. For example, it is doubtful that reading a short newscast about the governor of Kigali will lead the reader to perceive him as a character. Most people in newscasts and in our lives just float by us – we see them, but we don't understand them.

A character is something that we understand in a certain way. It is still a very blurred concept and I don't even want to define it accurately or objectively, but I don't want to speak of every character-like part in stories, in news or in our life as characters either. A character is something of which we can ask, "what would she do in a certain situation?"

If that question is not voiced, we are dealing with an individual part of a story or a person, not a character. Particularly, if this question has not been voiced about a role-playing character, we have not yet fully understood the character. In role-playing games, one doesn't need to know the answer to every possible question about the character – it is enough that one knows everything that is relevant. The rest can be made up.

A character is *not* just a static, unchangeable collection of facts. Every character is an individual, and most characters are also persons – but not vice versa. Only some individuals and persons are also characters.

This light definition is not the only way to conceptualise a character, or even a common one. In many games, the characters are defined as persons who act in certain way in the game world, or who have a role in a game (session). In some games the character is defined as a protagonist, an imaginary person, similar to those found in fiction<sup>3</sup>, and in many role-playing games the character is simply the hero of a story and so on. The problem with all of these definitions is the same: Very little can be said about a character in the role-playing games using them.

### The Media of the Character

How do the interpretations of Neo in *The Matrix* (1999) and Vladimir Lenin in real history differ, and what relevance does that difference have? Though the facts about Neo are very different from the facts about Lenin, we might want to argue that the deep structure of the two characters is the same. Both of them can be interpreted as characters. Still, the seeming similarity can prove deceptive in a deeper analysis. The most significant questions to be asked here why and how certain facts about their lives are told.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> see e.g. *Vampire: The Masquerade Introductory Kit*.

The facts about Neo mostly concern fighting – only a few facts about his personal history are revealed. Essentially, Neo seems to be an active, aggressive and violent character. Could Lenin be acting like Neo or Neo acting like Lenin? Would Lenin be running on walls and shooting an Uzi? What would possess Neo to give a speech on the theory of the dialectic or the unfairness of capitalism? Imagine a Matrix-like movie with Lenin as the hero. If that Lenin-Matrix were our only source of information about Lenin, the character of Lenin would probably be radically different. We perceive Neo visually as a set of movements, while Lenin consists of a set of historical facts related to a certain ideology.

Thus, the medium has great influence on the character. The conclusion is basically the same as Marshall McLuhan's in his book *Understanding Media: The Extension of Man* (1964).

Different media are used to convey different messages. In television, there is no space for a deep, analytic discussion just as books are unable to create the collective feeling radio is capable of. (McLuhan 1964.)

When we normally talk of a medium in the context of role-playing games, the medium can be understood as the format of the meaningful content. We can judge whether the format of meaningful content fits a character. For example, if we converted Lenin to the *Cyberpunk 2.0.2.0.* rule system<sup>5</sup>, the meaningful content given by the character sheet would be misleading. The skills and attributes in *Cyberpunk 2.0.2.0.* reflect Lenin's abilities quite poorly. Of course, we could use other media to convey additional meaningful content regarding the character.

However, in some cases the medium of a character is not a format of a meaningful content. For example, music certainly has one kind of meaningful content, as it usually tries to express something. Songs in particular have some meaning. It's hard to say how music actually describes a character, even though it's easy to agree that it carries meanings, because the format is unclear.

The medium of a character is a tool or a technology<sup>6</sup>, that makes it possible to know something about the character, but at the same time the medium itself as a tool or as a technology determines the content of the character.<sup>7</sup>

It is impossible to express what Lenin is within a Matrix-like medium just as it is impossible to describe Neo's character the way we are shown the meaningful content of Lenin. We should pay some attention to how we interpret and create our characters. As

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<sup>4</sup> What I'm going to do here is exactly the same as Husserl and Wittgenstein did in epistemology in the 20th-century. They argued that the classical definition of knowledge being true, justified belief (Plato, Theaetetus) fails – it isn't relevant to ask what knowledge is; but how something becomes knowledge (Wittgenstein 1953, Husserl 1907). In this article I argue that it isn't very relevant to ask what a character is. It is more important to ask how a character becomes what she is.

<sup>5</sup> See Mike Pondsmith et al.: *Cyberpunk 2.0.2.0.* Talsorian games.

<sup>6</sup> Here technology is understood as a system or system of a system, not as only a machine or an apparatus. More on the concept from Airaksinen (2003) and Heidegger (1964).

every medium does not fit every character, it is important to think which medium does justice to the character we are creating.

### Relevant Facets of a Character

Petri Lankoski and Satu Heliö have argued that one way of creating good characters is to sketch their physical, social and psychological aspects.<sup>8</sup> The three-dimensional model they have developed is a very good tool for a game master, and their thoughts on conflict are likewise useful. On a practical level, there is no major conflict between their work and my view. Martin Enghoff (2003) has also written about this subject on a basic level, though I find Lankoski and Heliö (2002, 2003) both clearer and bolder.

While I agree that Lankoski and Heliö's list is quite practical, I'm afraid that the form of the list has been caused by the rigidity of our thinking. For example, our present day Western mindset may prove to be anachronistic when studying historical characters. Europeans often perceive people through the three aspects that Lankoski and Heliö write about – it is not a coincidence that that the three-dimensional model contains just those aspects, Lankoski and Heliö both being European.

As the mind-body dualism is a very old phenomenon in the European way of thought, it is not unexpected that the physical and mental aspects of our existence have been divided in the three-dimensional model. In some Asian cultures the distinction is not as strict. The three-dimensional model also further divides the mental aspect to the psychological and the social aspects. This distinction, caused by individualism, is also a fairly new phenomenon. In ancient Greece, man didn't see himself as separate from society. Plato wrote that the good and the justice in a state are exactly the same as the good and the justice in men.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, if we write a character by describing her physical, social or psychological attributes, we often end up with a character thinking the way we do.

On the other hand, it has been argued that we can't really play a character drastically different from ourselves. Many players seem to understand a character the same way they understand themselves. They don't even seriously try to play characters that are very different from them. For them, describing a character in the same format as they would describe themselves is not limiting. Personally, I think we shouldn't be afraid

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<sup>7</sup> See McLuhan (1964) for a more general definition. The fact the medium determines the content does not mean that there couldn't be other, more significant causes that influence them even more. Determinism means only that everything has a cause; that nothing is really random. If something determines a state of being, there can be another thing that neutralises the first one and said state never exists. There probably isn't any individual cause, but rather a set of causes (see Airaksinen 2003 for meaning of determinism).

<sup>8</sup> Heliö & Lankoski 2002a, 2002b, 2003; Lankoski, Heliö and Ekman 2003. The three-dimensional model of characters was not originally invented by Lankoski and Heliö, though they have developed it. I refer to the three-dimensional model of a character as it has been presented in their research. Some of their research focuses on computer games, but most of their arguments also fit role-playing games.

<sup>9</sup> Plato, *The Republic*.

to play different characters, and that in order to do so, we must not limit ourselves to only the most familiar descriptive methods and the easiest ways to interpret characters.

## The Paradox of Interpretation

If the character is very different from the player, how does the player understand the facts about the character and the character's way of conceptualising the world? If the character is written from the player's point of view, how does the player grasp the character's way of thinking? This is the paradox of interpretation.

This is a general paradox, not limited to role-playing. We face the same problem when we try to find out who our fellow man really is. When we say, "Anton acted really egoistically", we are only guessing at his motivations. The proposition is merely our way of conceptualising his behaviour. Anton may have the reasons we have postulated, but he can also have a set of perfectly altruistic reasons that we are oblivious to. So it is possible that Anton had actually acted really altruistically.

There are two parts in the interpretation that cannot be properly separated from each other. In texts, there are both hints on how to interpret the text and facts we can find from the text. Both can be implicit or explicit. Furthermore, some facts are meant to be more relevant than others. Even ordinary texts (articles, novels, newscasts etc.) can be problematic, despite the analytical tools we have for understanding them.

It's not uncommon for role-players to underestimate the problems that can occur during the interpretation of a character document. In the theatre directors helps actors find good interpretations of their characters in order to create marvellous roles. In role-playing games the players usually have to interpret their characters all by themselves. Are role-players generally so much more talented than educated actors, since most of them think they don't need a director to help them to find a good interpretation?

In theatre, one can discuss the interpretation of an actor or the interpretation of a director. Role-playing and theatre are two different forms of expression, but does that explain why an interpretation of a player or a game master sounds odd to most role-players? In role-playing the meaning of interpretation has often been almost forgotten. Sometimes it seems a game master even expects that a player to play the character exactly as written. This doesn't seem feasible even in theory.

### Trying to Resolve the Paradox

The problem is that it is impossible to strictly separate the medium from the content. Still, we should be able to do this if we want to know what a character essentially is, not how she is expressed in this format.

If the character the player is interpreting is similar enough to the player, the hermeneutic circle<sup>10</sup> is powerful enough a tool to help separate the medium from the message to a sufficient degree: the player reads the character once, corrects her

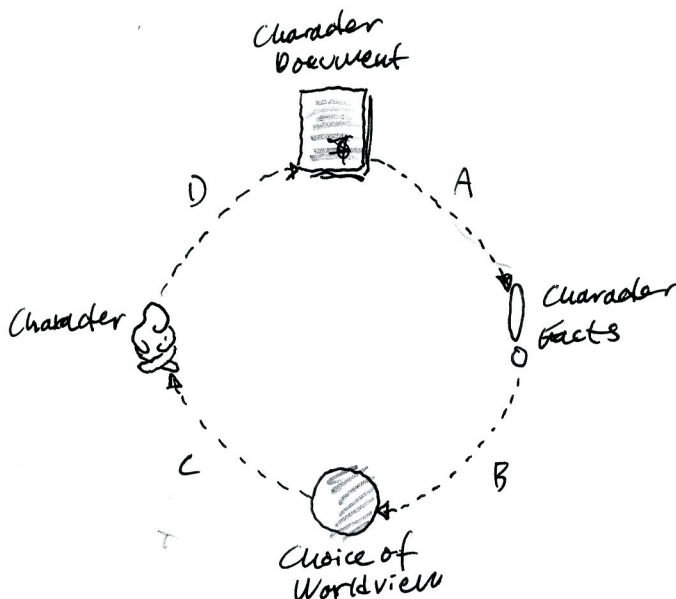
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<sup>10</sup> See Gadamer 1956 for hermeneutic circle.

background suppositions and rereads the text. This is repeated until the message is clear.

However, in a broader context the hermeneutic circle can only be used to construct a different history and set of abilities for oneself. It is not good enough if we really want to interpret the character, as it does nothing to reveal the underlying causes or structures. The character's world view does not emerge from the circle. Immediately after any view of the world has been postulated, the reasons behind the facts about the character become visible. If we notice that some other world view fits the character better, we can always change it (see ill. 1).

Illustration 1: The Process of Character Interpretation



- A A player reads the character and discovers facts about her.
- B If the player already postulated a world view, she tests whether the facts fit the world view. Otherwise the player tries to find a world view that is most suitable for the character.
- C A player postulates a world view, resulting in the character.
- D After a player had postulated a world view she should be able to explain why the character is described as she is. If she cannot explain that, she has to choose another world view.

I find it easier to postulate the world view first and then read the character document. I can then correct the world view and read it again. Many players read the character

first and then postulate the world view. The starting point of the process has very little significance.

I argue that it is possible to get more out of role-playing games and characters if one first creates the frame of interpretation, the world view and only then the content. For example, it is certainly true that when interpreting a Catholic monk, one should be familiar with Christianity and monkhood. Generally speaking, one has to know the context of the character – otherwise, she will be misinterpreted. However, this is only the most basic level of this method. The information about Christianity and monks is generalised, but there is no reason why the character should be exactly like the monks in books.

This idea is very similar to Hegel's and Fichte's dialectics. First we interpret a character without context (thesis or I), then we interpret the character with the context (antithesis or non-I). At the next phase, we combine thesis and antithesis, and the result is a synthesis or restricted I: A new interpretation that combines the good sides of both interpretations. In the case of the Catholic monk, the synthesis combines the features that are typical to only the character and the meaning of the community the monk lives in. The synthesis cannot be achieved through the hermeneutic circle, because the synthesis is more than the sum of its parts.

## Black Boxes and Glass Boxes

Characters made through different kinds of media are distinct. In role-playing games characters are typically glass boxes, which is a very rare feature among characters in any media. In most media, a character is a black box. We know how she has acted and what she has said, but we can only guess at why she did so. One does not have direct access to the character's true motivations.

A role-playing character is a glass box, meaning that it is not always known what the character has actually said or how she has acted. What is known is *why* she says something or acts in a certain way. In role-playing games one has direct access to the character's opinions, beliefs and desires, but not to what has really happened. A common source of conflict is that different characters have a very different image of what has happened in the diegetic history<sup>11</sup>.

To a large extent, the medium dictates what is known about a character. If the character is a black box, the facts are known as they are, but the reason behind them is unclear. If the character is a glass box, we know the reason to any possible fact about the character, but we lack the facts themselves.

When role-playing a character, only acts of the mind can be truly certain, but when interpreting a character, the variety of possible certain things increase exponentially. Most players I know interpret their characters in a dogmatic manner: what has been said in the character document has to be true. For them, the thought of

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<sup>11</sup> See also Montola 2003.

the game master lying about their character is impossible. That is why they don't read a character critically.

A character can be known either from an internal or external point of view, so the knowledge (and interpretation) of a character has a direction. Usually we interpret simultaneously both towards and outwards, but the dominating direction is clear.

For example, a character document might state that "Anton is an egoist" and "Anton helped an old lady, although he did not benefit from that personally." If we interpret Anton as a black box, we probably read that Anton actually wasn't a complete egoist – sometimes he acts altruistically or, perhaps, on some barely conscious level he believes that he will benefit by helping the old lady. If there is a conflict between the facts, a compromise will be made. However the fact what Anton is, is external, viewed from the outside, the direction of the interpretation is toward Anton from the external facts.

If we interpret Anton as a glass box, no compromises need to be made. Instead, we try to find something that could be the reason, why the narrator states that Anton is an egoist but still acts altruistically sometimes. A possible reason to the contradiction is the moral code Anton follows. Whatever it is, somehow we find an internal fact that explains why Anton is described as he is. Thus, the direction of the interpretation is outward from Anton to the description or the external facts.

A player doesn't role-play by facts but by reasons. In role-playing, there is no use for the character's past thoughts, unless she thinks them again and again. A player has to know how a character thinks.

### Incoherence between Media

A character as a document is a black box. A character in a story is usually interpreted inwards, even if the narrator of the story describes the character's thoughts and feelings. The motivations behind feelings and thoughts are usually unimportant in stories. In a role-playing game, great importance is placed on how and why the character's thoughts, feelings and motivations are born. Therefore, it is vital to see beyond the description, no matter how it has been written. A character document states only what a character is, whereas in a game one needs to know how a character became what she now is.

Of course, the distinction between the black box and the glass box is not a binary system, but a continuum between the two extremes.

For example, when one interprets a fairy tale, one certainly postulates a cause behind the description "the king was old and very wise". One may conclude that the king was very wise because he was old and hence very experienced.

In role-playing games the manner in which the king is wise has great importance. It is impossible to play a wise king who acts stupidly in the game all the time. In a fairy tale this is possible – we could have a story about the wise king's very bad day.

The problem with this is that when one gets a character, one usually interprets it as a black box, even if one plays the character as a glass box. I argue that this incoherence between the described character and the actualised character is the reason why many fail to immerse, or "get into" character.

In the beginning of the article I demonstrated how the medium of the character has great significance. I showed that a set of historical facts doesn't do justice to Neo, and that Matrix-Lenin is an odd way to describe Lenin. Here we have a similar problem: can a written document do justice to a played character or vice versa?

## Conclusion

In role-playing games one tries to combine very different kinds of media, usually written documents and constructed selves and world views, or in Wittgenstein's terms, forms of life.<sup>12</sup> This article is meant to show that the problem exists rather than to solve it.

I have tried to give some tools to help conceptualise the problem and hopefully some theoretical methods to aid in the interpretation of the character.

I have tried to show the meaning of a character as a medium. I have concentrated on the character interpretation and sketched the paradox of interpretation. One cannot know only by reading a character document which part of it is the actual content, and which is just a characteristic of the medium. Last, in closing, I scratched the surface of the special quality of characters in role-playing games – in them, one understands a character from an internal point of view, whereas in most other media a character is understood from an external point of view.

I am indebted to Juho Itkonen, as he has used the methods of improvisation and theatre while I have used my own analytical methods of approaching character creation and interpretation. With this article I hope to raise discussion on the meaning of character interpretation, and on how we should interpret a character.

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<sup>12</sup> See Wittgenstein 1953.

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