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Recontextualizing Characters. Media Convergence and Pre-/Meta- Narrative Character Circulation



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Lukas R.A. Wilde

Recontextualizing Characters. Media Convergence and Pre-/Meta- Narrative Character Circulation¹

Abstract

This introduction to the topic of character recontextualization sets out to address a variety of character products that cannot be adequately described as ›narrative‹: Coffee mugs, clothes, office supplies, and other material objects. Fictitious entities such as Hello Kitty or Hatsune Miku have given rise to a veritable wave of literature in Japanese studies outlining a ›pre-narrative character theory‹. Characters without stories, based entirely on highly affective iconographies, often function as hubs, interfaces, or intersections for diverging ›games of make-believe‹ that are in turn often forms of an aesthetic, medial, social, and especially diegetic *recontextualization*. Consequently, every pre-narrative character could also be addressed as a decontextualized, trans-fictional, trans-world, or »meta-narrative nodal point« (AZUMA). Often, these recontextualizations take place within the collaborative networks of participatory culture, highlighting the decontextualized character state as central to what is known as ›media convergence‹ or ›media mix‹. I will situate these discussions within the field of international character theory, arguing that a systematic divide runs through existing literature on how to deal with decontextualized, trans-fictional, trans-world entities. My article closes with some indications on what a discourse often seen as specific for Japanese studies, might contribute on a variety of international phenomena and perspectives.

¹ The following arguments and observations have first been developed in my media studies/Japanese studies dissertation on the functions of ›characters‹ (*kyara*) within everyday communication of contemporary Japanese society (WILDE 2018a), later expanded in WILDE 2018b.



Introduction. Transmedial Characters without Stories

Characters are essential for what is discussed as ›media convergence‹ (cf. JENKINS 2006) or ›media mix‹ (the respective Japanese concept, cf. GALBRAITH/KARLIN 2016). These terms both address, maybe with a slightly different emphasis, two interconnected dynamics: on the one hand the expansion of narrative works and worlds by means of different media forms and platforms; on the other, participatory practices related to the creation of user-generated content (cf. SCOLARI/BERTETTI/FREEMAN 2014). Characters can not only be considered the ›currency‹ of and between different forms of media (cf. LESCHKE 2010: 11). In many cases, they also serve as a kind of ›fuel‹, as an incentive for both dynamics mentioned above. Marc Steinberg, in his groundbreaking, historically-oriented media studies survey of Japanese character marketing, considered a ›character‹ consequently as »an entity that [...] both supports the transmedia movement and environmental diffusion [...] and refuses to be pinned down in any one medial incarnation« (STEINBERG 2012: 44).

It is not surprising, then, that many character theories in recent years are essentially thought of as *transmedial*: applicable to representations of characters through a variety of media (e.g. film, television, comics, video games, etc.). In most cases, however, such theories—often emerging close to what is understood as a ›transmedial narratology‹ (cf. THON 2016)—specifically focus on *narrative media*: media artefacts which offer representations of a story-world, of a diegesis. Consequently, characters are often considered »first and foremost elements of the constructed narrative world« (EDER/JANNIDIS/SCHNEIDER 2010: 9).

Pre-narrative characters, in contrast, seem to share the common trait of existing in denial of any such ›mandated‹ narratives, official stories, or fictional worlds surrounding them. In this regard, one might consider ›virtual idols‹ or ›fictional celebrities‹ like Hatsune Miku; corporate icons like LINE's Cony or Brown the Bear; or mascots, like the German Railway (DB)'s Max Maulwurf or Paris RATP's Serge the Rabbit. In Japan, ›communicational characters‹ are found on street signs, instruction manuals, in post offices, corner stores, or supermarkets. The notion that there is a contemporary »*character-ization*« of Japan (*kyara-ka* キャラ化, AIHARA 2007) has in fact become a truism within Japanese studies by now. »Living in Japan today means being surrounded by characters. The streets are overflowing with products featuring popular characters, such as Hello Kitty and Pokémon« (SADANOBU 2015: 10). Some are invented with great effort, some emerge out of public contests, some even went through a kind of public grass-roots career (cf. INUYAMA/SUGIMOTO 2012). Further examples are fictitious beings that were invented only as toys, such as Mattel's Barbie doll or Takara's Licca-chan; and, finally, ›pure‹ product placement figures such as Sanrio's notorious Hello Kitty or Thomas Goletz' Diddl Maus which circulate on clothes, coffee mugs, and office supplies. To account for all these phenomena, Japanese theorists offer the helpful conceptual distinction between ›*kyarakutā*‹ (character), on the one hand: a fictitious being



represented to exist within a diegetic domain (storyworld); and ›*kyara*‹, on the other hand: a stylized or simplified visual figuration that can be easily reproduced and consumed outside of its original narrative context (cf. GALBRAITH 2009: 125). Although the term has many contradicting meanings in both everyday and specialized language (cf. SADANOBU 2015), critic Itō Gō² proposed to use it as a technical term for fictional entities in a »proto-character-state« (*puroto kyarakutā-tai* 前キャラクター態, ITŌ 2005: 150).³ His initial model in 2005 has since given rise to a veritable wave of literature in Japanese studies (cf. KACSUK 2016), outlining a ›pre-narrative character theory‹ that has rarely been connected to existing international literature on transmedia characters.

From the Pre-Narrative to the Meta-Narrative Character State

From a narratological perspective, *kyara* phenomena might seem of limited interest. They certainly offer a considerable amount of resistance to the tools and methods of narratological analyses. Cultural critic Azuma Hiroki spoke prominently of a »grand non-narrative« (*ōki na hi-monogatari* 大きな非物語, AZUMA 2001: 54), emerging with *kyara* or, maybe, being mediated by *kyara*. While the media artefacts they are circulating on/in (all kinds of material *kyara guzzu*, character goods) might not primarily be described as ›narrative‹, they are nevertheless not accurately addressed *without* any account of imaginative ›make-believe‹. Steinberg convincingly argued that »[a]s children stickered their surroundings with the image of Atomu [Astro Boy], they incorporated or transposed an Atomu world into their environment« (STEINBERG 2012: 81). Accordingly, a pre-narrative character is often intended to ›overlay‹ the actual environment of their material representation.

Their ›pre-narrative‹ state is not so much based on a *lack* of narrative information—which could always be supplemented according to something like Marie-Laure Ryan’s »principle of minimal departure« (RYAN 2014: 35), by which recipients draw on their general world-knowledge (or previous mediated knowledge) to provide information that the representation is withholding. It has become a commonplace within character theories, regardless of orientation, that fictional entities are by necessity ›incomplete‹. In this regard, the tens of thousands of Hello Kitty products would only appear *more* incomplete, prescribing almost no ›fictional propositions‹ about Kitty’s biography and her

² Throughout this issue, Japanese names are given in the original order, with the family name preceding the given name.

³ In general, I do not think it is helpful to equate ›characters‹ with fictionality: A text that is considered ›non-fictional‹ (as a documentary) will construct its characters in exactly the same way, there is just a different pragmatic truth-claim surrounding the representation. The difference of non-fictional characters to meta-narrative, trans-world entities is that the former will be expected to inhabit one world, and one world only: the one that is accepted as our shared ›reality‹, while deviations must be counted as falsehoods or lies. Characters accepted to have meta-narrative qualities (*kyara*) must therefore be trans-fictional by definition.



diegetic contexts. The intuition that Kitty, and the many other entities typically discussed as *kyara*, might be something ontologically different from the usual suspects of transmedial character theory (such as Sherlock Holmes, Batman, or Luke Skywalker, cf. ROSENDO 2016) is rather based on the (over)abundance of competing and utterly incoherent information.



Fig. 1:

Kitty ›as‹ Mount Fuji—›narrative incoherence‹ taken to the extreme; only one of the innumerable ›masks‹ or ›roles‹ Sanrio's iconic *kyara* adopts throughout its countless representations (photographed by the author, 2015 – L.W.)

An instructive example could be found in a tourism poster of Kitty ›as‹ Mount Fuji (found in the restaurant area of the Mt. Fuji bus station, cf. fig. 1). Toratani Kiyoko (2013: 45) uses such examples to observe a »spectrum of pretense« between »Kitty as agent« and »Kitty as object«. At the ›object-end‹ of the scale—where Kitty is depicted as a tiny grain of rice or, indeed, as a mountain—there can no longer be any kind of coherence between the semantic information provided in other representations. Myriads of regionalized Kitty-products (*gotōchi* kitty) put Kitty in ever-changing roles, settings, and represented contexts, as if there was a decontextualized entity ›behind‹ all her contextualized instances. The notion that *kyara* function very much like fictitious actors, play-acting or performing a number of incoherent fictional roles as if they had »a body produced (that of the character) and a body producing (that of the actor)« (STEINBERG 2012: 68), is central to the most successful Japanese franchises today.

Hatsune Miku is another obvious example. Initially, the virtual idol ›existed‹ only as the artificial singing part of the Vocaloid2 synthesizer by Crypton Future Media. The manga artist KEI finally produced her a drawn body,



whereupon she went through a rapid career as a pop culture icon, as a ›fictional celebrity‹. During Miku’s rise through Japanese and international popular culture, many collaborative media products and platforms developed around her. »Hatsune Miku is one of the most successful cases of convergence, at least in the Japanese media industry, in the twenty-first century« (LEAVITT/KNIGHT/YOSHIBA 2016: 202). None of her countless instances appearing in fan-produced videos and artworks every day, however, are bound by the requirements of any diegetic coherency. She might appear as a medieval princess in one video, as an early 20th century American circus star in another, or as an Edo-period Japanese warrior. For Sandra Annet, this shows that

it is possible for fans to engage with the structures that *kyara* create and de-stratify them. They can find ways to experiment with *kyara* by producing their own programs of desiring. *Kyara* can become the focus of *dōjinshi*, songs, videos, and artworks that have very little to do with the organized uses of *kyara* and more to do with the desires of smaller collectives (ANNETT 2014: 173).

In other words, if characters without stories (*kyara*) are considered ›pre- or proto-narrative‹, as manga critic Itō Gō famously coined it, they essentially function as hubs, interfaces, or intersections for diverging ›games of make-believe‹. These games, in turn, are often forms of aesthetic, medial, social, and especially diegetic *recontextualizations*. Consequently, every *kyara* could also be addressed as a »meta-narrative nodal point« (*meta-monogatari-teki na kesetsuten* メタ物語的な結節点, AZUMA 2007: 125). *Kyara* can easily be placed back into heterogeneous narrative contexts (as contingent *kyarakutā*). »Abstractly speaking«, Azuma pondered in a conversation with Itō and manga theorist Natsume Fusanosuke, »a character is a thing that has only one life. In contrast, if we can imagine an existence of multiple lives, we have a *kyara*« (in ITŌ/NATSUME/AZUMA 2007: 153, translation L.W.).⁴ In a nutshell, the »essence of the distinction between *kyarakutā* and *kyara* is based on the imagination of possible worlds« (in ITŌ/NATSUME/AZUMA 2007: 153, translation L.W.).⁵ The following figure 2, which is based on a model of manga reception by Itō (2005: 149), shows how a *kyarakutā* (a character) emerges on the horizontal axis as a contextualized diegetic entity (however ›flat‹ or ›incomplete‹): Recipient project a synthesis of the various individual images onto a presupposed storyworld. At the very same time, however, on the vertical axis a *kyara* can arise, if the imagination is stimulated to imagine an existence ›outside the textual world‹ through which the *kyara* appears in completely incompatible contexts, as long as they remain recognizable as the same *kyara*—but not necessarily as the same character (*kyarakutā*). Even parameters such as race, gender, or species might be contingently exchanged.

⁴ Original: »抽象的に言えば、キャラクターとは一回しか人生がない存在のことなんです。それに対して、もっといろんな人生があるかもしれないと想像させる存在が、キャラなんです«.

⁵ Original: »つまり、キャラクターとキャラの区別の本質は、可能世界の想像力に関係している«.



Pre-Narrative Characters as Meta-Narrative Nodal Points

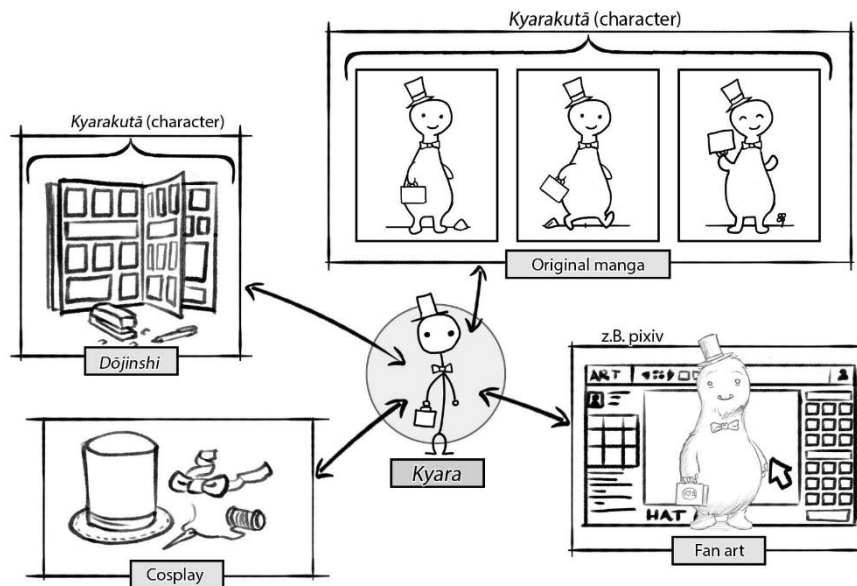


Fig. 2:

The *kyarakutā/kyara*-model by Itō Gō (2005: 149), slightly modified by the author (L.W.) for a trans-medial application (illustration by Kilian Wilde, www.wilde-grafik.com)

The Systematic Divide within Transmedial Character Theories Today

In contrast to the pre-narrative character state, much has been written about the meta-narrative character state in ›Western‹ theory as well, under a number of different terminologies. Yet, a systematic divide seems to run through existing literature on popular characters, regardless of orientation and disciplinary background. Transmedia character theories in the narrower sense clearly prefer the theoretical option that a ›character‹ must first and foremost be thought of as a coherent, contextualized entity (although always presented *incomplete*), which is presumed to exist within a diegetic world. Uri Margolin, for instance, conceptualizes a character as a »non-actual but well-specified individual presumed to exist in some hypothetical, fictional domain« (MARGOLIN 2007: 66). This is also the position of Jens Eder, Fotis Jannidis, and Ralf Schneider (2010) who aim to provide a consensus of wide theoretical and disciplinary approaches. The stronger version of this argument can be found in earlier theories derived from literary studies. In his seminal article on ›interfigurality‹—as a special case of ›intertextuality‹—Wolfgang E. Müller finds that »[o]ntologically and aesthetically, it is [...] impossible to have entirely identical characters in literary works by different authors« (MÜLLER 1991: 107).⁶ He later goes on,

⁶ In am indebted to Dirk Vanderbeke for bringing Müller's article to my attention.



however, to exclude *popular* characters like Sherlock Holmes entirely in passing:

There are instances of complete identity, of course, especially in the stereotyped heroes of popular literature [...]. Public demand and enormous financial offers made him [Doyle] resuscitate his detective, who was, of course, expected to be entirely the same person he had been in the first two collections (MÜLLER 1991: 112).

For the countless transmedial characters of popular culture, this transtextual ›identity‹ that Müller is skeptical about is the rule, rather than the exception (cf. ROSENDO 2016). One strategy many theorists adopt is thus to ›relocate‹ the presumed coherent identity of the character from the work of a single work to a *transmedial storyworld* as a whole (cf. THON 2015). This has the obvious consequences for their assumed ontology: Paolo Bertetti, for instance, notes that

instead of considering the fictional character an entity inscribed in the text itself, we see it as a semio-pragmatic effect produced by texts, the result of an interaction between text and receiver (reader or viewer) [...]. A character can be the overall result not only of a single text, but also of a diverse series of texts, producing a semiotic object (BERTETTI 2014a: 16).



Fig. 3:
The many ›Batmen‹ across media; some, but far from all of them can be accounted for as the same biographical individual. <https://sea.ign.com/detective-comics-1937/143458/news/batman-the-ark-ham-knight-makes-his-dc-comics-debut-in-detect> [accessed December 1, 2018]

Other theoretical options to conceptualize this ›semiotic object‹ would be Eder's or Thon's »intersubjective communicative construct« (EDER 2008: 68; THON 2016: 54). In what way one chooses to conceptualize a transmedial ›character‹, however, the question remains whether they are thought of as coherent, contextualized individuals, presumed to exist within any diegesis or possible world. Note that this option is in no way contradictory to the fact that recipients will and must, at times, willingly ›ignore‹ certain inconsistencies between the many representations of the character across media, as they always occur (cf.



THON 2017). If we assume this position, however, then incoherencies and inconsistencies that are too large to be conveniently ›ignored‹ must be accounted for differently—usually, as different characters. The Batman played by Adam West (1966–1968) and the one written by Frank Miller and drawn by David Mazzucchelli in *Year One* (1988), the one animated by Bruce Timm and others in *Batman: The Animated Series* (1992–1995), the Batman played by Christian Bale in *Batman Begins* (2005), the one players use as an avatar in the *Arkham Asylum* (2009) video game, or the one in Mizusaki Junpei’s recent anime-adaptation *Batman Ninja* (2018) (cf. fig. 3)... whether (and to what extent) all of these ›add up‹ to the same fictitious entity might be open for discussion and increasingly complex continuity management. »[E]ven the Batman of contemporary comic books is far from a unified, coherent character« (BROOKER 2012: 77). It seems obvious, however, that at least the ›Batmen‹ from so-called Elseworld-stories can *not* amount to the same fictitious individual under the assumption of storyworld coherency. *Superman: Red Son* (2003), for instance, depicts Batman as a Russian anarchist whose parents have been killed by the KGB, while *Batman & Dracula: Red Rain* (1991) presented a ›character instance‹ living his life as a vampire; *Batman: Dark Knight of the Round Table* (1998) introduced readers to a »Bruce of Waynesmoor« at King Arthur’s Camelot.

Not only radically incompatible world-settings should dictate insuperable differences in character identity, but also in particular variations in skin color or gender. Nick Fury had a light skin tone within Marvel’s regular universe around the year 2000, while Mark Millar and Bryan Hitch turned ›him‹ into an African-American in the competing Ultimate-universe. The respective ›version‹ in Marvel’s cinematic universe (MCU) is, again, another version which, in turn, appears likewise in spin-off comics (cf. BROOKER 2012: 75f.). These different ›versions‹ are transmedial themselves, but distinct from each other—or so it seems. Transmediality as such is thus neither necessary nor sufficient to decide identity/difference. Without a concept for a decontextualized, trans-fictional, trans-world, or—with Azuma—meta-narrative entity, the sum of all Batmen (or Nick Furys) must, by necessity, be conceived of as something else: a ›character network‹, for instance, as Thon (2019) proposes. The network is thought to consist of individual ›nodes‹ made up of character versions that are themselves coherent (or can conveniently be thought of as coherent).

Other scholars, however, prefer exactly the other way around: a transmedial ›character‹ is then, actually located ›this side or beyond‹ any single storyworld contextualization. Paolo Bertetti is one of the few ›Western‹ scholars who built a theoretical model around this notion: »[T]ransmedial fictional coherency and consistency are less central. What is instead more important is the recognisability of the character and his identity [...] are not always unequivocally defined« (BERTETTI 2014a: 36). This, I would say, does not prescribe that characters cannot sustain or afford an existence in worlds as heterogeneous as Soviet Russia and Camelot—as long as they remain recognizable. Coherence and world-specificity become contingent properties. For Japanese



theorists, this notion seems commonplace. Compare Bertetti's statement to an observation by Nozawa Shunsuke:

For we are not talking about the absolute condition of sameness and difference but the sufficient condition of character malleability across different contexts. People must be sufficiently convinced in the semiotic event of character-encounter: ›Ok, the way this character behaves and looks in this context, I'm ok with that‹ (NOZAWA 2013: n.pag.).

If we adopt this position, then the ›character‹ from above becomes something else in turn—a ›character instance‹ or a ›character role‹.

Although this is a minority position within ›Western‹ character theories in the narrower sense, it still seems the commonplace notion for many anthropologists and critics less interested in abstract, transmedial models than in the investigation of specific fictional entities: William Uricchio and Roberta E. Pearson argued convincingly why »[t]he very nature of the Batman's textual existence reveals an impulse toward fragmentation« (URICCHIO/PEARSON 1991: 184). They substantiate this claim with the observation that

[u]nlike other fictional characters, the Batman has no primary urtext set in a specific period [...]. Neither author, nor medium, nor primary text, nor time period defines the Batman. In the absence of these other markers, character, that is, a set of key components, becomes the primary marker of Batman texts (URICCHIO/PEARSON 1991: 186).

Will Brooker, one of the most eminent Batman scholars today, describes his object of study »in terms of multiple but simultaneous variants; Batmen of many worlds, coexisting across alternate earths« (BROOKER 2012: x). While one could argue that the terms ›coexisting‹ and ›Batmen‹ (plural) betrays exactly a network model of nodes (themselves thought of as coherent), Brooker seems to feel no sincere inclination to decide for one side or the other. He constantly highlights the matrix-like nature of ›Batman‹ as franchise, brand, and myth *at the same time* (cf. BROOKER 2012: 74–88). Any new Batman text therefore enters in a »a matrix of difference and sameness, variation and familiarity, which runs through both diegetic representation of ›Batman‹ as corporate concept and the real-world circulation of the character as a commercial property« (BROOKER 2012: 84). Jenkins, too, differentiates between characters that are built on the paradigm of continuity and those that are built on the paradigm of multiplicity (cf. JENKINS 2009a). He thereby seems at least to imply that a ›character‹—as an intersubjective communicative construct or as a semiotic object—can, in principle, be located on the level of the transworld-entity if they can in general sustain many versions, or afford multiple storyworld instances/roles.

Despite the fact that we do not have to *decide* between identity vs. difference in a lot of cases (Umberto Eco observed an »onereic climate« surrounding the ›myth‹ of Superman, »where what has happened before and what has happened after appears extremely hazy«, ECO 1972: 17, or, in Brooker's words, »different continuities lending to, learning from, and even arguing with each other«, BROOKER 2012: 88), the question *does* keep coming back: Identity (or: continuity) *is* a prerequisite within any one ›story‹ (regardless whether one wishes to count, in a Television series, only a single sequence, an episode, a season, or the whole show as one). And *some* inconsistencies are so large (as



between Gotham and Camelot, or between differently gendered versions) that no ›charity‹ will be able to account for them. From a media theoretical or media comparative perspective, however, it is interesting to note that the necessity to distinguish seems most urgent in specific medial contexts only—not surprisingly those which narratologists and character theorists (in a narrower sense) mostly look at.

For the protagonists of many animated film genres, such as the *Looney Toons* cartoons, the prerequisite of world-coherency becomes more difficult to maintain—in many cases even outright counter-intuitive (cf. FEYERSINGER 2017: 79–101). Jenkins himself conceded that a ›modern‹ transmedia character (›who carries with him or her the timeline and the world depicted on the ›mother ship‹, the primary work which anchors the franchise«, JENKINS 2009b: n.pag.) should be clearly distinguished from protagonists of earlier animated cartoons, such as Felix the Cat (›a character who is extracted from any specific narrative context«, JENKINS 2009b: n.pag.). Watching cartoons in which an eponymous protagonist is placed within different roles, worlds, and identities in between almost every episode—maintaining their *gradual* identity only by iconography and certain character traits, not any coherent contextualization—does not require any ›sharing or not of a common fictional universe‹ (BERTETTI 2014b: 2358) as a criterion for identity or difference. Daffy Duck or Felix seem to stay ›themselves‹, no matter which diegetic ›role‹ they are placed in. Within these medial contexts, the ›actual‹ character seems to exist on the plane of decontextualized, trans-fictional, trans-world, meta-narrative entity. One could also think of traditional caricatures and political cartoons that have produced a wealth of meta- or pre-narrative beings such as Uncle Sam (cf. DEWEY 2007: 10–20). Recognizable through their dominant iconographies, they are in no way committed to any specific diegetic contextualization. For such beings, too, an identity that is linked to a (specific) diegetic context would hardly be convincing. And the same applies even more so for those entities that are typically conceived of as (pre-narrative) ›*kyara*‹ in Japan.

The Potentials of a Pre- and Meta-Narrative Character Theory

What keeps their various instances together—what functions as the meta-narrative *nodal point* Azuma was referring to—is less a set of narrative information (in the case of Bruce Wayne/Batman the fact that his parents were murdered, for instance, cf. URICCHIO/PEARSON 1991: 186f.). What remains is merely a recognizable, often highly *affective* iconography, connected to shared assumptions about character *dispositions*—that the entity will behave ›clumsily‹, ›modestly‹, or ›impulsively‹, for instance. But it is in no way bound to a specific context or world. Azuma discussed this famously as a post-modern ›database consumption‹ (*dētabēsu shōhi* データベース消費, AZUMA 2001: 71), replacing the competing reception mode of ›narrative consumption‹. Where fans were striving



for coherency and continuity before, they now look mainly for the satisfaction of incoherent desires and affects in characters.

It has to be noted that ›Western‹ character theories offer a variety of options to account for decontextualized, trans-fictional, trans-world, or meta-narrative entities as well. Shane Denson and Ruth Mayer established the distinction between ›series characters‹ (*Serienfiguren*) and ›serial figures‹ (*serielle Figuren*), the latter circulating (and ›existing‹, culturally) outside of specific narrative contexts. »After all, the ›true‹ existence of the serial figure is not anchored in the diegesis of any single narrative, but is constantly recreated through the accumulation of performances« (DENSON/MAYER 2012: 93, translation L.W.).⁷ Margolin proposed that characters can evolve into a »second level-original« (MARGOLIN 1996: 116), a cultural synthesis of core properties and features of their many different (partially contradictory) versions: »[T]hey undergo a process of culturization, where they are becoming common cultural property« (MARGOLIN 1996: 116). What these traditions usually share, however, is that a ›serial figure‹ emerges only as the *result* of a great number of many contextualized, ›actual‹ characters. It is based on a series of narrative representations, out of which a ›second-level-original‹ can emanate as a contingent entity. This becomes particularly evident in Thon's network-model: there cannot be a network without a plurality of nodes.

Here is where Japanese observers add substantially to the available theory. A *kyara*, a pre-narrative, de-contextualized, trans-world entity, is thought to be a more fundamental phenomenon than a contextualized character. This has profound theoretical consequences, not least (but far from only) on questions of authorship, which can only be hinted at here (cf. WILDE 2019). A closer inspection of the pre-narrative character state—in relation to its meta-narrative state—might help to shed new light on well-known ›Western‹ phenomena as well. Christina Meyer, for instance, has pointed out (2016) that the first American comic book ›celebrity‹, Richard F. Outcault's Yellow Kid, was not only a ›series character‹, but also deeply rooted within illicit practices of theater show producers, sheet music composers, publishers, toy manufacturing companies, and advertisers. It was the recognizability of his iconography—a bald head, a yellow shirt—that enabled his circulation across media, not a set of coherent narrative information. In other words: The Yellow Kid is much closer to the *kyara* than to the *kyarakutā*-end of the spectrum.

If a character's ›default mode‹ is not bound to any one diegetic incarnation, their various contextualized instances can be regarded like ›roles‹ they can take on and off. *Kyara* (or *kyara*-like entities) can accordingly be seen as ›mediated performers‹ or ›virtual celebrities‹ more than anything (cf. MAYNARD 2015): Fictitious actors that can take on any *role* (usually, but not always likewise, fictional) attributed to them. Nozawa expanded on this idea, specifically for *kyara*-communication in public contexts: »Characters' life is maintained through

⁷ Original: »Die ›wahre‹ Existenz der seriellen Figur ankert schließlich nicht in der Diegese einer einzelnen Erzählung, sondern wird durch die Kumulation der Inszenierungen immer wieder neu erzeugt«.



processes of ›decontextualization‹ and ›recontextualization‹ (NOZAWA 2013: n.pag.). In this respect, too, comparisons to ›Western‹ phenomena could be illuminating: The Walt Disney studios are well-known for using ›stars‹ such as Mickey, Donald, or Goofy trans-fictionally, *just like actors*: as if they, too, could take on any character roles in highly contingent and contradictory contexts. Uricchio and Pearson, likewise observed that

Bugs Bunny and Mickey Mouse [...] function as actors/celebrities rather than characters. Bugs Bunny can appear in an opera, a Western, a Sherwood Forest adventure, a science fiction film, or even, as ›himself‹ at the Academy Awards. In each case, he plays a role within the narrative as well as constantly remaining Bugs Bunny, in a similar fashion to such flesh and blood counterparts as Groucho Marx (URICCHIO/PEARSON 1991: 185).

In Disneyland theme parks, performers in full-body suit arguably do not represent Mickey or Donald as contextualized fictitious beings, but rather as (meta-narrative) fictitious actors—mediated performers—*play-acting* all those roles. Often, however, these recontextualizations take place within collaborative networks of participatory culture; in fan fiction, fan artworks, or in cosplay. They can be *enacted* and *performed*. Nicolle Lamerichs, for instance, observed that »perhaps the most important body of the cosplayer is a character body—a referential body that is closely related to the source text where its design, meaning and narrativity are based« (LAMERICHS 2014: 121). If there is little or no official and ›mandated‹ narrative information (or prescribed storyworlds), recipients are almost completely free to develop their own (decisively private) game worlds, thus *appropriating* the *kyara* as their individual *character*. The inherent tension and interrelation between the personal appropriation and the social circulation (through which a *kyara* seems to gain a ›life of their own‹, independent from any authorial agency or intention)—comprises the conceptual core of the *kyara/kyarakutā*-duplicity. This is where he, she, or rather it gains a ›life force‹ (*seimeikan* 生命感, ITŌ 2005: 95), or a ›presence‹ (*sonzaikan* 存在感, ITŌ 2005: 95), to take up Itō's foundational terminology again.

An Overview on the Present Issue

Some questions, which have rarely been discussed in connection, emerge as key issues to all this circulation and re-contextualization, especially if considered from an intercultural and interdisciplinary perspective. The following contributions are based on Tuebingen University's Winter School »De/Recontextualizing Characters. Media Convergence and Pre-/Meta-Narrative Character Circulation« (held from February 27 to March 2, 2018). It took place at the Graduate Academy of the University of Tuebingen, Germany, and was supported by the Institutional Strategy of the University of Tuebingen (German Research Foundation, ZUK 63). The Winter School strived to create a vital dialogue between experts on Japanese and international character theory, investigating character recontextualization across media and formats as heterogeneous as real-life and animated films, comic books, manga, videogames, cosplay, pen-



and-paper RPGs, poetry, internet memes, and advertisement. The participants investigated, from an intercultural and interdisciplinary perspective, several questions: Which medial (material, institutional, and semiotic) *affordances and constraints* are relevant or even necessary for the recontextualization of characters within convergence cultures? Which medial (material, institutional, semiotic, and maybe even affective) ›characteristics‹ are needed in order to identify a given representation as the same decontextualized *kyara*/serial figure/second-level original—but not necessarily as the identical contextualized *kyarakutā*/character? And, conversely, which *sociocultural functions and uses* are connected to these circulations through—and especially *outside of*—narrative contexts? In other words: how do social and cultural contexts shape the recontextualization of characters—and vice versa?

Ishida Minoru 石田美紀 opens the subsequent discussions with a historically oriented perspective on a specific type of character-hybridity that, at first glance, seems only loosely connected to issues of recontextualization and database-consumption: The *Sailor Moon* anime from the 1990s, approached via a series of close readings of key sequences. Conceptualizing anime characters such as Haruka Tenou as, in Azuma's terminology, intersections of decontextualized, affective database elements, Ishida demonstrates the full potential of this methodology even without immediate concern for later *dōjinshi* (fan fiction). Anime characters such as Haruka, generally *kyarakutā* (characters) in the full sense, can nevertheless be seen as compound entities of both visual and vocal elements, the latter referring to the prominence of voice actors within a complex star system. »[T]he anime audience«, Ishida argues, »can imagine a character's appearance and design just by listening to his or her voice. The opposite can also be true: the audience can imagine a certain type of voice just by looking at the character's visual design«. While both ›databases‹ are usually in close cooperation with each other to produce characters with a high level of consistency, they can also generate tensions and deviations that are open for all kind of subversive interpretations. In some cases, these frictions intentionally destabilize notions of gender and sexuality in media-specific fashions. Following Haruka and her successors from a feminist perspective, Ishida demonstrates how authors of the 1990s »interpreted them enthusiastically and created their own narratives with regard to their gender and sexuality«. The duplicity of both visual and a vocal ›databases‹ thus carries a *virtual potential for recontextualization* specific to anime, its star system and its elaborate conventions.

Luca Bruno expands this notion of ›databases‹ further and develops a complex theoretical conception of decontextualized characters within the »Akihabara cultural domain«. Setting out from the Japanese videogame genre of visual novel games, Bruno builds on Azuma's notion of affective character elements and Stevie Suan's recent idea of ›the anime-esque‹ as a continuous re-performance of conventions. Distinguishing between »projected« and »un-projected« forms of characters—rather than between *kyarakutā* and *kyara*—Bruno nevertheless argues that unprojected »[c]haracters can exist within, without,



and in-between texts and, more importantly, before any media specificities are applied to them«. If ›unprojected‹ characters within Japanese popular culture are conceived of as hierarchal sets of pre-narrative database-elements—most saliently in, but not restricted to, visual novel games—then »characters constitute a distinct category of intersubjective communicative constructs, antecedent to the storyworld«. What Bruno addresses as ›aggregated character elements‹ might be even *more* decontextualized as is typically accounted for with ›*kyara*‹, bordering on generalized character *types*, such as *osanajimi* 幼なじみ (›childhood friend‹) or *tsundere* ツンデレ (a female character appearing cold or hostile in public, but revealed to be caring in private). The ›character literacy‹ required from players of visual novel games is then, in Bruno’s conclusion, a complex negotiation between characters’ pre-narrative aspects (design elements), narrative ones (the ›actual‹ characters within the game’s story), as well as meta-narrative ones (references to similar characters in other media or stories).

While the first two contributions address character (re)contextualization from a ›Japanese‹ perspective, the following two articles are concerned with ›Western‹ phenomena of character identity and hybridity. Tobias Kunz first takes a close look at continuity and authorship management within the *Star Wars* franchise where—in contrast to many of the examples discussed in the articles before—questions of character identity are strictly governed by the intellectual property rights holder Lucasfilm/Disney. Analyzing the transition of Grand Admiral Thrawn from the pre- to the post-2014 continuity model in particular—and especially Lucasfilm/Disney’s respective strategies to ›handle‹ narrative inconsistencies and contradictions—Kunz traces Thrawn’s migration from Timothy Zahn’s fan-favorite novel *Heir to the Empire* (1991) to Disney’s new continuity established from 2014 onwards: Thrawn recently re-appeared in the third season of *Star Wars: Rebels* (2014–2018). While the earlier Expanded Universe‹ (EU) has, in general, been completely de-canonized from ›actual‹ Star Wars history, rendering earlier iterations of Thrawn *different characters*, Disney nevertheless employed countless strategies—textual as well as paratextual ones—to let the new version reflect his earlier iterations to maintain a sense of identity and continuity wherever possible. Placing these negotiations within a complex theoretical model of ›ideal‹ and ›subordinate model readers‹ (both addressed and accommodated by the rights holder), Kunz suggests that »the (mainly biographical) changes made to the character are legitimized by resorting to the authority of Dave Filoni, who is framed as an heir or torchbearer to George Lucas; at the same time«, Kunz continues, »the implication that Thrawn should still be understood as a single character with a single life history was reinforced by Timothy Zahn, who, as the original creator of Thrawn, is framed as *the* (or at least *a*) legitimate authority on the character and his attributes«.

Mark Hibbett sets out to investigate a somewhat related phenomenon within the Marvel Comics universe: the character of Doctor Doom. Different from most other protagonists within Marvel’s ever-expanding storyworlds,



Doctor Doom only ever headlined one short-lived, ongoing series of his own. This lack of his own series (or a dedicated creative team) has allowed him to evolve as a prototype ›open source‹ character, Hibbett suggests, developed by numerous creators with no predetermined path. Hibbett's contribution then describes the process of generating an empirical corpus for the examination of Doom's transmedial developments as a »wandering character« during the period known as ›The Marvel Age‹. Of major concern are the many problems in defining clear selection criteria for Doom's many narrative, non-narrative, and ambiguous appearances (such as in comic flashbacks, in actual, but rather obscure radio shows and record albums, and even in advertisements). Hibbett discusses the benefits and methodological difficulties in using online comics databases, notably The Grand Comics Database, and suggest data-cleaning methods by which these issues can be mitigated. »From this research«, the author concludes, »it is clear that although online databases [...] can be very useful for transmedia research they must, at all times, be used with caution, applying stringent cleaning procedures before any conclusions can be drawn«.

The concluding article is contributed by Nicolle Lamerichs, who brings together a variety of questions and approaches while also connecting ›Japanese‹ and ›Western‹ phenomena and theories in an original way. Lamerichs demonstrates the full potential of the pre-narrative ›*kyara*‹ concept by applying it to an emerging field of virtual characters, located somewhere in the borderlands between videogames, participatory culture, and embodied performances. Analyzing characters (or rather *kyara*) based on emerging technologies such as chatbots, intelligent personal assistants, and holograms, Lamerichs indicates that »characters are not passive entities that audiences consume; increasingly, they are becoming ›digital puppets‹ [...]. Once machine learning enters the picture«, she argues, »characters also learn from their interactions with users and become new entities altogether, which perhaps will no longer fit the current conceptual box of ›character‹«. How could these »characters of the future« be conceptualized? Lamerichs draws on theories of video game avatars, applying them to Azuma Hikari, a personified interface that could be seen as a Japanese evolution of iOS' Siri or Amazon's Alexa. Primarily a digital hologram in Vinclu's Gatebox device, Azuma Hikari evokes strong affective responses in ›her‹ fanbase, users being even able to marry ›her‹ in a make-believe frame. The interrelation between the personal appropriation and the social circulation of *kyara* thus becomes substantiated by technology and its institutional framework, as Lamerichs observes: »Each user has their own Gatebox, and the contract is very specific about the fact that users can marry just *one version* of the character, namely the hologram in their own personal Gatebox«. In the remainder of her article, the author explores how one ›character of the future‹ that has long arrived in our present is used to *reflect* these developments. In Shibuya Keiichiro's digital opera *The End* (2013), the only actor on stage is Hatsune Mike—the virtual idol that the present article here opened up with as well—employed as an aesthetic and artistic interface between human and non-human agency, between the real, the fictional, and the virtual.



Concluding this introduction, it is my hope that all these approaches to pre- and meta-narrative character circulation might bring us closer towards a truly *transmedial* character theory that does not limit itself to the analysis of narrative media. It should have become clear that this is in no way meant to compete with narratological approaches for which a great many analytical tools are at our disposal, but rather complement them in areas where our concepts and categories are still underdeveloped. While this is the first publication that emerged out of the Winter School »De/Recontextualizing Characters«, it will not remain the only one in which participants are going to present their contributions. Some additional theoretical and methodological impulses circling around the topic of character recontextualization and their pre- and meta-narrative state will be included in the upcoming special issue of *Frontiers of Narrative Studies*, 5(2) on »Characters across Media«.

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Minori Ishida 石田美紀

Deviating Voice. Representation of Female Characters and Feminist Readings in 1990s Anime

Abstract

In the 1990s, Japanese anime sophisticated both their ›visual database‹ and their ›voice database‹ for their character design. These two ›databases‹ usually cooperate in a complementary manner in order to construct characters for an audio-visual medium. In the following article, however, I am going to point out that there are always possibilities of deviation, because, fundamentally, the visual appearance and the voice of the character are created independently. This has, in fact, opened up the possibility to introduce a new style of characters like Haruka Tenou, one of the most popular characters in the *Sailor Moon* series (1992–1997). According to Azuma Hiroki, *moe* (affective responses) toward characters had drastically altered the reception of anime in the 1990s, preparing the way for the so-called ›*kyara-moe*‹. Within *otaku* (fan) cultures, however, another kind of reception took place, which was inspired by female, queer characters, such as Haruka or her successors. Feminist audiences who experienced *moe* toward these characters interpreted them enthusiastically: with regard to the gender and the sexuality of the protagonists, they created their own narratives.

Introduction

From birth to death, we are enclosed within our given bodies. Even though we are able to modify our bodies to some extent, we are soon confronted with



their limitations. In contrast to us, anime characters are created and modified according to will. Characters are artificial beings. Various opinions have been expressed with regard to their artificiality, which remains the core feature of fictional beings. Most existing studies, including Azuma Hiroki's theory of ›database consumption‹ (which I will examine later), have focused on the visual aspects of animated characters. However, considering only visual aspects is not enough to understand how characters are constructed and represented in animated works. Since animation must be understood as an audio-visual medium, most of its characters are also given a voice, which plays an important role in animation. If a character's voice suddenly changes, for instance, we do not think that he or she is the same person we have come to know before. Therefore, an identical voice is usually necessary for the viewers to recognize coherent characters in animation.

This article explores the role of *voice* in animation on the one hand, by analyzing the ways in which it supports character design, as well as the relationship between visual elements and characters' voices on the other. To this end, I choose—from the vast area of animation—Japanese TV anime series from the 1990s as a site for the following discussion. In the history of anime, the decade of the 1990s is considered to be of paramount importance. In 1963, when televised anime series became popular with the introduction of *Tetsuwan Atomu* (*Astro Boy*), this new genre was perceived strictly as entertainment for children. However, as the anime industry started developing a variety of narratives, the age of the audience expanded. In the 1990s, TV anime series had long reached a young adult audience. In response to the expanded audience, many influential masterpieces targeting young adults were produced, such as *Kōkaku Kidōtai* (*Ghost in the Shell*, 1995), *Shin Seiki Evangelion* (*Neon Genesis EVANGELION*, 1995–1996), *Cowboy Bebop* (1998), and many more. By recalling these titles, we can easily recognize that anime was already ›mature‹ as a young-adult genre in the 1990s.

Moreover, with regard to audience reception, an outstanding phenomenon occurred in the 1990s: the young-adult audience became deeply and intensely fascinated with anime characters. This attitude revealed a new tendency of increased social anime acceptance: the *otaku* subculture had emerged. So-called ›*otaku*‹ (devoted fans) began to describe their feelings, which even included sexual desires toward anime characters, with the term ›*moe* 萌え‹: an intense affective response toward fictional characters. Thus, firmly embedded within various social practices, anime reached its maturity through the public's fascination with characters. Of course, both with regard to the character and the audience, *moe* can be evoked regardless of genre. Nonetheless, the discourse on *moe* is almost exclusively centered around the reception of female characters by male audiences, as is the case within Azuma's theory of *database consumption* (AZUMA 2009).

These contexts make us aware of two overlooked issues with regard to female anime characters in the 1990s. One is the contribution of voice to character design. As was already mentioned, anime characters are not only visual



entities. Hence, questions with regard to the relationship between their visual elements and their voices arise. In fact, female anime characters exhibit interesting varieties of vocal expression. Another overlooked issue is the reception of female anime characters by female audiences. According to existing studies, *otaku* have mostly been assumed to be male. However, there is actually a large portion of enthusiastic female fans within anime audiences, which indicates that female fans can also be considered ›*otaku*‹. The reception of female anime characters by female audiences, and whether this reception is different to male reception, is a research subject that deserves closer attention.

To investigate these two issues, I am first going to consider the ›voice database‹ for character designs and re-evaluate the concept of ›database consumption‹ proposed by Azuma. Second, I am going to analyze the female characters from the *Sailor Moon* series (1992–1997), a representative anime show from the 1990s, by focusing on the relationships between their visual elements and their voices. Third, I will demonstrate that there was a positive reception of female anime characters by their female audiences in the 1990s. I will discuss readings relevant to the artificial and even queer relationships between visual elements and voices in the design of anime characters.

Moe and Database Consumption

In 2001, cultural critic and philosopher Azuma Hiroki published *Otaku. Japan's Database Animals* (the English translation referenced in this article was released in 2009). In this book, Azuma analyzed the close relationship between *moe* and what he coined ›the database‹. According to the author, characters in the 1990s were rapidly rising to prominence within *otaku* culture; a social ›database‹ of shared assumption and conventions could be identified as a resource for recurring *moe*-elements, mediated by anime characters. *Otaku* strongly demand the experience of *moe* from their reception of fictional characters. Therefore, the narratives to which the characters belong became less and less important. Consequently, only the database is relevant, and *otaku*-desire seeks out works that function like a database themselves, which allow fans to abstract idealized *moe*-elements most efficiently. Azuma named this new kind of reception ›database consumption‹ (AZUMA 2009: 47).

As a significant example for such ›database consumption‹, Azuma discusses Di Gi Charat, also known as Dejiko. This character was originally (in 1998) created as a mascot for a retail shop chain called Gamers. Gamers specializes in anime, manga, and games. Di Gi Charat, in fact, did not have any narrative background-story at all. Interestingly, however, soon after her introduction, she became very popular within her *otaku* audience. Subsequently, she also became the heroine of an anime series. Because *moe* towards characters changes the hierarchy of character traits traditionally governed by narrative, Di Gi Charat rose to popularity without or before being part of any story: she therefore existed before any narrative on which her ›existence‹ could be



based. In the 1990s, characters could thus become independent from stories, and their abilities to ›fascinate‹ the audience became a powerful hub for the *otaku*-imagination.

Azuma moreover points out that every design feature and character trait of Di Gi Charat was based on popular *moe*-elements from the *otaku* database, which explains why she became so popular in a short span of time. He notes:

However, one cannot quite say that the design was particularly original or attractive. In fact, the design of Digiko [sic] is a result of sampling and combining popular elements from recent *otaku* culture, as if to downplay the authorship of the designer (AZUMA 2009: 42).

In Azuma's discussion, his notion of ›database‹ indicates that the Japanese society is increasingly governed by postmodern conditions. The acceleration of information technology had finally brought about the ›death of the author‹ in Japan, as well as the decline of all ›grand narratives‹. In their wake, *otaku* and their mode of database consumption have emerged. However, if we change our point of view slightly, we can recognize many positive aspects of database consumption. The database then appears as a mere foundation, supporting both the creators and the audience. More importantly, database consumption allows for a free interpretation of characters by the audience. This freedom will be discussed in more detail later.

The ›Voice Database‹ of Anime Character

One aspect is of particular importance in Azuma's lucid conception of the relationship between *moe* and character design. Although he does point out briefly that some instances of Di Gi Charat are represented to talk with the particle »~nyo« (a cat-like sound), which *is* considered a *moe*-element (cf. AZUMA 2009: 47), the rest of the *moe*-elements are purely visual ones. In fact, Azuma's database is essentially a *visual* database. Therefore, his explanation cannot adequately describe characters developed within audio-visual media, because the anime-database should also include voices.

Historically, anime has depended extensively on characters' voices. I will briefly demonstrate the functions of anime voices by referring to the first TV-anime series: *Astro Boy* (1963). Right in the first episode, the inventor Doctor Tenma holds his dead son in his arms—which he should go on to reconstruct as the robotic hero of the series—and he screams in a heartfelt way. At that moment, nothing on the screen is moving or animated. His overall expression is completely different from the original manga version, however, because we come to know the character's deep suffering through his voice. It is this very cry that establishes the whole tragedy between father and son. Moreover, this scene demonstrates unambiguously that voice can give internal depth to the characters at the same time. Furthermore, anime voices can also drive the narrative as a whole, particularly when movement is limited (cf. GAN 2009: 302).



In Japan, animation has traditionally emphasized movement, as it was established in a quite different style than Disney's animation in the United States. We must nevertheless remember that the maturation of the anime system was inevitably linked to the maturation of voice acting as one of its most defining characteristics.

Nowadays, more than 60 years after the TV-broadcast of *Astro Boy*, the anime audience (including the *otaku*) can imagine a character's appearance and design just by listening to his or her voice. The opposite can also be true: the audience can imagine a certain type of voice just by looking at the character's visual design. Tone, pitch, and voice articulation, in association with the visual elements, allow us to conceive a character's personality as, for instance, cool, clumsy, or *tsundere* (girls that appear cold or even hostile in public, but are revealed to be lovely and caring in private), and so on. Accordingly, the voices of characters could also be classified into patterns of *moe*-elements, similar to Azuma's ›cat ears‹ or ›maid costumes‹ as visual traits. *Moe*-elements of character voices have thus entered the database of fans, where they are available as another kind of resource for the audience's desire.

The Voice of Di Gi Charat

To illustrate this more concretely, I will return to Di Gi Charat whose anime series was released in 1999. Di Gi Charat is in fact an interesting example for a discussion of character voices. The audition to cast the voice actress for Di Gi Charat was held publicly, and six finalists were selected. Watching the footage of this audition, it is impossible to ignore that all the finalists' voices were strikingly similar.¹ Of course, each finalist performed Di Gi Charat in their own way. However, the tone and pitch had many common characteristics. More importantly, the style of the voice acting was not at all strange or unfamiliar to an audience of anime fans. Listening to similar voices, they could easily imagine a female character of specific traits (that must be ›pretty‹, for instance). What is more, the anime audience—including the finalists and judges—could be said to *expect* a certain tone, pitch, and voice articulation in accordance with Di Gi Charat's visual elements (props such as ring, or a specific dress). Through these interconnections of visual appearances and voices, we can deduce that a voice database must exist for characters and that it is shared by both the anime

¹The footage of the audition was distributed as a special treat for the customers of Gamers, cf. Karinto: Neko no me girarin. *Diary*, May 17, 2006, <http://d.hatena.ne.jp/karinto/20060517/p4> [accessed August 25, 2018]. It can be found on several video-sharing platforms on the internet nowadays, cf. Di Gi Charat seiyū ōdishon 1/2. *Nico Nico*, October 20, 2008, <http://www.nicovideo.jp/watch/sm4989445> [accessed August 26, 2018]; Di Gi Charat seiyū ōdishon 2/2. *Nico Nico*, October 20, 2008, <http://www.nicovideo.jp/watch/sm4989744> [accessed August 25, 2018]. The footage is known for rare recordings of the young Sawashiro Miyuki who became a popular voice actress later. Sawashiro, who was just a junior high school student at the time, participated in the audition and received a special award. Based on the popularity of this footage and the number of comments it received, we can conclude that the audience is highly interested in voice actors.



audience and the voice actors. This database of vocal features allows them to imagine that Di Gi Charat has a ›pretty‹ appearance, for instance.

Characters' voices, however, are not integrated into the visual database, because their voices are given to them by actors and actresses, whereas the visual elements are drawn by designers and animators. These separate production contexts indicate that anime characters have at least two different components: visual appearances and voices. In this regard, their bodies are ontologically different from ours. Therefore, even though a voice can possess *moe*-elements, its database must exist independently from the visual database. Hence, I will call it the ›voice database‹. Anime characters are constructed from both a visual and a vocal database.

Coherence Between the Visual and the Vocal Database

How does coherence between the visual database and the voice database occur? Typically, these two databases are in close cooperation to produce characters with a high level of consistency. As the Di Gi Charat audition reveals, their tight interconnection can provide easy access to *moe*-affects. To activate the voice database effectively, voice actors specializing in anime speech patterns are required. Kobayashi Shō, who closely investigated the history of anime voice acting (2015), considers the 1990s as an important era because, during that time, a fandom around anime voice actors (lending their voices exclusively to anime) was established. Before then, many voice actors first made a debut as stage actors, performed on theater and radio plays, or dubbed foreign movies and TV dramas. For such actors, anime was only one part of their jobs (cf. KOBAYASHI 2015: 12). Yokomori Hisashi, for example, the voice actor of Doctor Tenma in *Astro Boy*, mainly appeared in live action films. His acting career was thus not only supported by anime.

Specialized anime voice actors internalize a set of anime production conventions right from their debut on. Amongst these conventions, the most important one is that, in anime, voice recording is conducted at the latest possible stage of the production. Anime voices are typically *added* to more or less finalized character animations. In Disney animation, in contrast, voices are mostly recorded first. The moving images are then produced to match the existing tracks. For this reason, in anime, the visual appearance of the characters provides a stronger anchoring for the voice acting in comparison to Disney animations. It is therefore not at all peculiar that the visual and the vocal databases cooperate seamlessly in order to create a conventional consistency for anime characters. Since the 1990s, when anime voice actors were at their heyday, the two databases were consequently employed in cooperation to each other to contribute to the production of *moe*.



Voice Deviation from the Visual Database in the 1990s: Sailor Uranus

As was shown by the audition of the *Di Gi Charat* anime series, the voice database and the visual database cooperate seamlessly in most cases. I would like to emphasize, however, that there are always possibilities of deviation, since the visual appearances and the voices of characters are created independently from each other. Occasionally, the voice can deviate from the visual elements, in what must be an *unconventional* combination of the two databases. To illustrate this point, I will take a closer look at an anime from the 1990s, namely the *Sailor Moon* series mentioned before. The story revolves around themes of love and friendship among girl-heroines: schoolgirls who acquire the special ability to transform into sailor-warriors, fight against evil, and form great friendships. Although this series was originally aimed at young female recipients, it became highly popular within a wider audience, including *otaku*, and had a considerable effect on the Japanese society at that time. Moreover, *Sailor Moon* is particularly suggestive and important for discussing the relationship between the visual and the vocal database. Hence, I will analyze Haruka Tenou, also known as Sailor Uranus, who appears in the third season of *Sailor Moon S* (1994–1995), since this character exhibits a radical tension between the two databases.

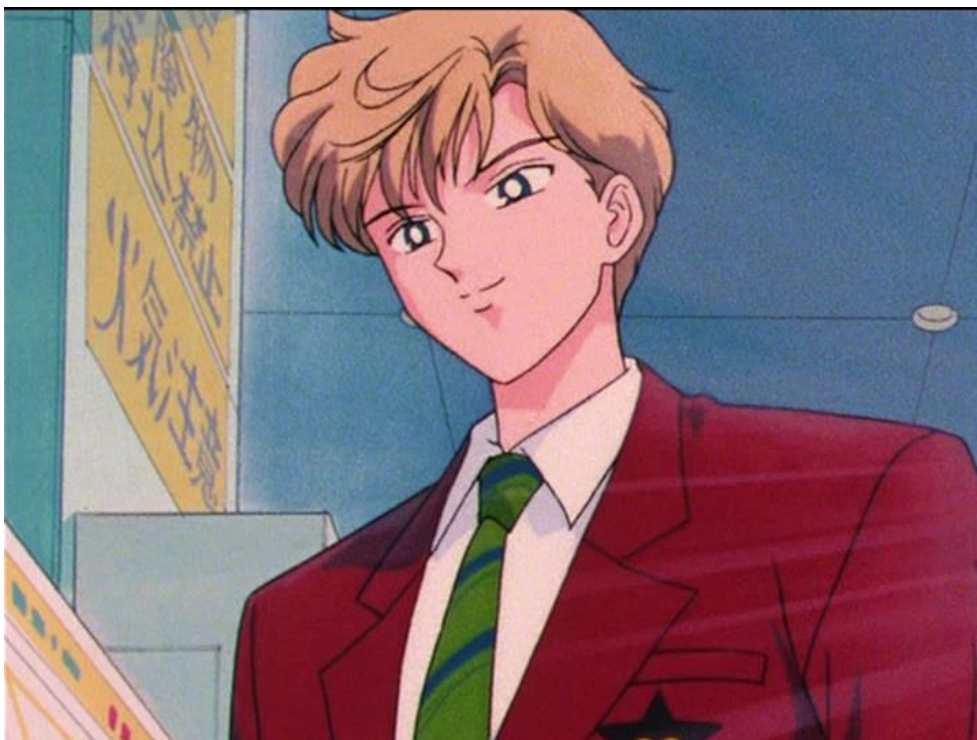


Fig.1:
Haruka's first appearance in *Sailor Moon S* (episode 92, 1994)



The protagonist Usagi, also known as Sailor Moon, and her friend Minako, also known as Sailor Venus, are playing a racing game at a game center in the series' 92nd episode. When they start bickering, a person unknown to them (Haruka) approaches them, saying: »Hi girls, may I drive with you?« (translation M.I.). Her voice is lower and huskier than Usagi's and Minako's, her hair is short, and she is dressed in the male uniform of a Japanese high school student: she is wearing trousers and a tie. Therefore, at her first appearance, Haruka looks decidedly like a high school *boy*. Moreover, Haruka refers to herself as »*boku*«. In Japanese, »*boku*« is a first-person pronoun for male speakers. Taken together, the vocal database reinforces the visual database to present Haruka as a young boy. Not surprisingly, Usagi and Minako fall in love at first sight with Haruka (cf. fig. 1).

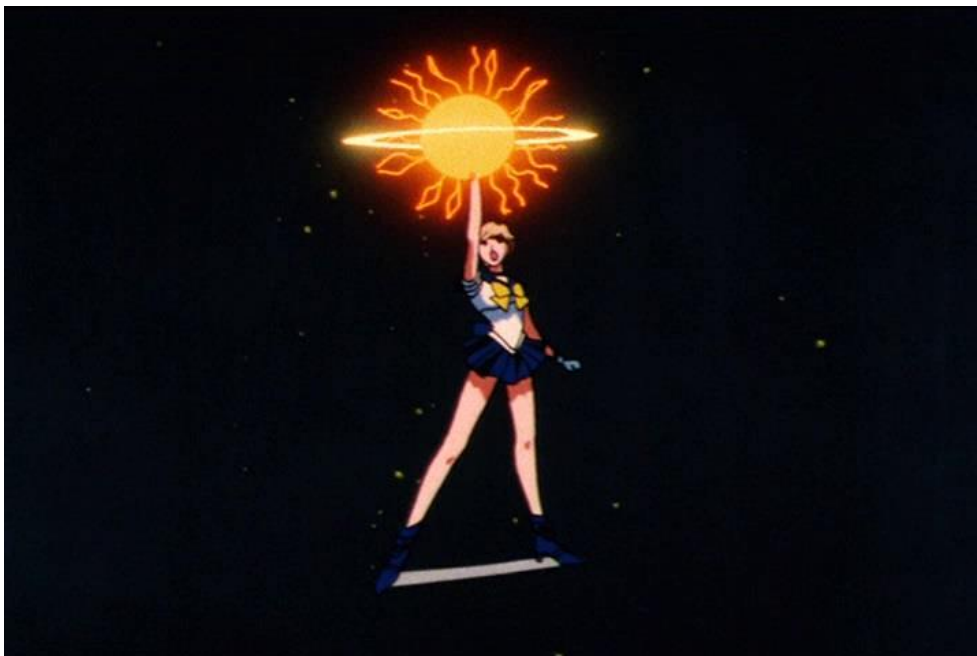


Fig. 2:
Sailor Uranus in a battle scene of *Sailor Moon S* (episode 92, 1994)

However, in a subsequent battle scene (a recurring feature of the *Sailor Moon* series), the coherence between the two databases is radically altered. When Haruka transforms to Sailor Uranus, she wears a mini skirt, as well as a tiara on her forehead. Her costume is as feminine as the dresses of the other Sailor warriors (cf. fig. 2). At the same time, however, Haruka often shouts with a voice that is lower-pitched and more powerful than in the daily scenes of her usual self. At moments such as these, the visual elements (uniform-like dresses with mini skirts) and the vocal elements (a powerful roaring)—signifying femininity and masculinity, respectively—coexist within the same character. Because the voice deviates from the visual elements, the discrepancy between the two databases becomes evident. Consequently, Haruka's gender remains



undefined and ambiguous. After the battle, a more intricate and interesting situation occurs with regard to Haruka's sexuality and gender. »I never said that I am male«, Haruka admits to Usagi and her friends. At this moment, Haruka's sex is clearly identified as female. Her gender, however, remains a much more complicated issue. In comparison to the voice she employed during battle, she is speaking in a slightly higher pitch later, while at the same time continuing to call herself »boku« (the first-person pronoun for male speakers). Additionally, if we pay attention to the visual elements, we can also observe minor changes in her body: she is not wearing the tie, her chest is drawn somewhat roundly. Compared to the battle scene, her eyes are also depicted in larger sizes; in other words, her femininity is in fact emphasized. Thus, the discrepancies and tensions between the visual and the vocal database is upheld without being consolidated. Consequently, Haruka continues to cross the gender boundary; this is only possible by the artificiality of characters that are always subject to a double-system of visual appearances and voices.

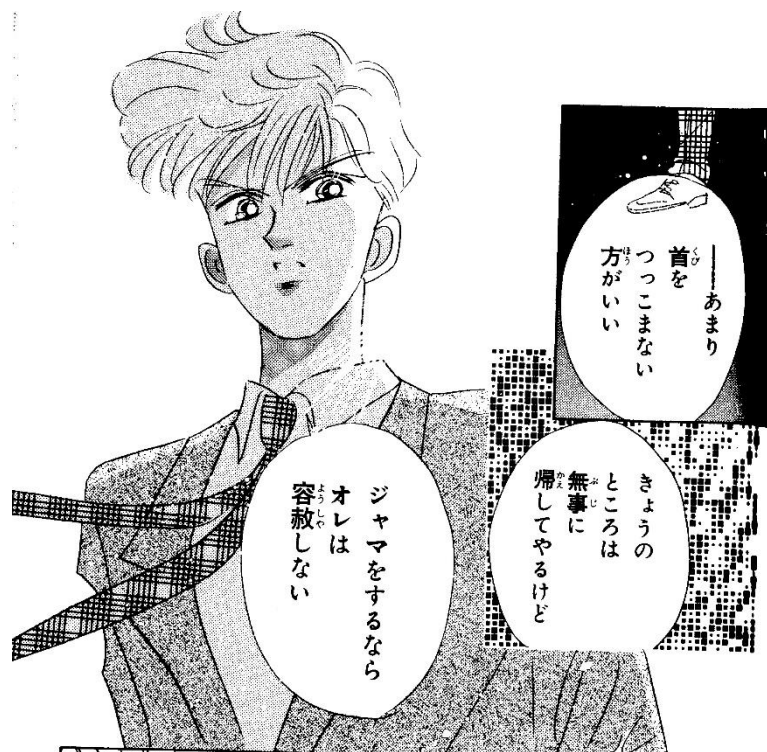


Fig. 3:
Haruka refers to herself by the pronoun »ore« (TAKEUCHI 1994/1: 171)



Fig. 4:
Sailor Uranus calls herself »*atashi*« (TAKEUCHI 1994/2: 61)

Before discussing more closely what this playful and provocative deviation initiated, I want to stress that this depiction of Haruka’s complex gender is specific to the anime version of *Sailor Moon*, even in striking contrast to the Haruka of the manga version. In the *Sailor Moon*-manga (created by Takeuchi Naoko, 1991–1997), Haruka’s appearance is almost the same as in the anime. However, there are important differences between the two versions. In the manga, Haruka chooses »*ore*« as her first-person pronoun in daily life (cf. TAKEUCHI 1994/1: 171, fig. 3). In Japanese, »*ore*« is an even much more masculine pronoun than »*boku*«. Here, the verbal expression closely corresponds to the male attire. Haruka appears as male in daily life, but she wears a female costume during battle—just as in the anime version. Interestingly, however, Haruka changes her first-person pronoun again to »*atashi*« during fight scenes (cf. TAKEUCHI 1994/2: 61, fig. 4), which is a first person pronoun for female speakers in Japanese. In the manga, the correspondence between the verbal expression and the costume is thus quite static and even rigid. The masculine verbal expression is adopted with the male costume, while the feminine verbal expression is adopted with the female costume. Therefore, in the manga, Haruka never actually disturbs the gender boundary. Moreover, the manga-Haruka transforms to Sailor Uranus and speaks to Usagi about her gender during one specific battle. There, it is explained that Sailor Uranus is in fact male *and* female, a warrior with both powers (cf. TAKEUCHI 1994/3: 20, fig. 5). The Manga version concludes by informing us that Sailor Uranus is, in fact, androgynous.



Fig. 5:
Sailor Uranus reveals his/her sexual identity to be androgynous (TAKEUCHI 1994/3: 20)

Manga and anime are different media. In manga, there is no possibility for a direct vocal expression, so the presentation of Haruka is inevitably different to her anime counterpart. However, if the anime version had been more loyal to the original—which defines its gender by corresponding first-person pronouns and costumes—the anime-Haruka would have spoken differently: when Sailor Uranus said »*atashi*«, the voice would have betrayed a higher pitch, it could have sounded much more feminine. In comparison with the androgynous manga-Haruka, her anime version crosses the gender boundary and stands out significantly, since the identification of Haruka’s gender is not an important issue in the anime version. While Haruka’s gender identity is the subject of six episodes in the manga, the same issue is resolved within a single anime-episode. But while Haruka’s gender is only a minor explicit topic within the anime narrative, these questions are presented as much more complicated in formal terms. In the episodes that follow, she stays in male attire and speaks in a much lower-pitched voice (even in comparison to the only male protagonist, Mamoru), although she is definitively presented as female. For this reason, we can say that she deviates from stereotypical female characters to a large degree.

Switching our attention towards Haruka’s sexuality, we also need to take Michiru into account, also known as Sailor Neptune. The two of them have a provocative relationship. Because the narrative informs us that both of them are female, they are understood to have a lesbian relationship. More importantly, however, Usagi and the other characters respect them just as they are. Thus, there is no denial of sexual diversity in *Sailor Moon* (cf. episode 95), which is one of the most positive and important achievements of the anime series. The playful discrepancy of the vocal and the visual database highlights the artificiality of anime characters. As has been shown with respect to Haruka,



such discrepancies between visual appearance and voice can expand the repertory of female characters. This opens up the possibility of introducing a new type of characters.

Deviance as an Indicator of Maturity in the Character Creation of the 1990s

How can we evaluate the discrepancies between the visual and the vocal database behind Haruka's construction? We could think of it as a kind of Brechtian ›alienation‹-device, criticizing conventions. However, I do not think that this applies to Haruka for two reasons. The first reason lies in the context of Haruka's creation. She appeared two years after the first season had started. In fact, she is the eighth warrior within the show. Hence, it was necessary for the creators to somehow evade the preceding seven Sailor warriors' characteristics. At the time, ›adult‹ and ›masculine‹, themes had not yet been used. The discrepancy under discussion was thus probably chosen as nothing more than a defining characteristic of a new character. In fact, Haruka is older than Usagi and her friends and she is also presented as a genius driver. In the Japan of the 1990s, owning a driver license was considered a symbol of the matured male. Thus, the deviation from stereotypical female characteristics occurred mainly for the purpose of immersing the audience into the story, by using a fresh and attractive character.

The second reason why I am hesitant to consider Haruka as a critical intervention relates to the vocal database itself. The role of Haruka was performed by voice actress Ogata Megumi, who gave Haruka a persuasive and attractive masculine voice. At first glance, the fact that the masculine voice was performed by a voice actress could be seen as yet another challenge for norms of gender and sexuality. It was not an actual deviation, however, because it had already been an established convention within the voice database itself. Let us return to *Astro Boy* in 1963. Atomu, the eponymous boy protagonist, was voice-acted by an actress (Shimizu Mari) even then. Since this pioneering performance, many boys' roles have been voiced by actresses, regardless of genre. This type of casting thus quickly established a firm convention. Before Haruka, Ogata herself had performed as the high school boy Kurama in the anime series *Yū Yū Hakusho* (1992–1995). After Haruka, she continued her work as the junior high school boy Shinji Ikari in *EVANGELION*. Thus, Haruka's casting followed an established convention after all.

At the same time, I want to point out that Haruka's voice reopened and subverted that convention from inside the vocal database. In her case, a boy's voice—performed by a voice actress—is given back to a *female* character. The discrepancy in the casting thus occurred from the inside of the vocal database: it was ›corrected‹ during the audience's first encounter with Haruka, right after she appeared to be a boy. In the following battle sequence, however, the vocal database conflicts drastically with the visual one, because Haruka's feminine



costume amplifies and emphasizes the deviation between the two. Within this interplay of discrepancies and deviations, Haruka was born. Her introduction renewed the visual and the vocal databases for anime characters. Continuing to disturb gender and sexual norms, Haruka converted the artificiality of anime characters into the embodiment of gender and sexual diversity. As an achievement of 1990s anime, the queerness embodied in Haruka reminds us of Judith Butler. In criticizing the repressiveness of gender, sex types, and immobilization, Butler asked the following question: »What constitutes the possibility of effective inversion, subversion, or displacement within the terms of a constructed identity? What possibilities exist *by virtue of* constructed character of sex and gender?« (BUTLER 1990: 32, original emphasis). Haruka, an artificially constructed character, responds to this question unexpectedly, but fully. However, I am going to emphasize that such possibilities of effective inversion must be searched outside of Butler’s discourse, with respect to the process of anime character creation and development. Creating a new and attractive character can be seen as a series of trial-and-errors, consisting of interrelations between vocal and visual databases.

New Tendencies after Haruka

Does Haruka stand alone in this history of anime? In the remains of this article, I will describe what happened after she was introduced to the genre. Connected to this provocative character is the anime director Ikuhara Kunihiko, the chief director of *Sailor Moon S*. His interests often revolve around questions of gender and sexuality. But, even after he left the Toei-animation studio (responsible for the *Sailor Moon* anime), discrepancies between the visual and the vocal database could be found within the series. In the last season (*Sailor Moon Sailor Stars*, 1996–1997), three new male protagonists, members of the boy band »Three Lights«, appeared. Their voice was performed by voice actresses—again, according to the prevailing casting convention. In scenes depicting their daily life, these characters were evidently shown as boys, both in terms of visual appearance and voice. During battle scenes, however, they transformed to female warriors wearing sexy and feminine clothes. Because they also relied on discrepancies between the visual and the vocal database, they can be considered Haruka’s legitimate successors.

In these ways, the *Sailor Moon* series introduced new types of characters to anime by using both databases in innovative ways. After the series ended, playful discrepancies between visual appearances and voices could be found in many other anime. Let us briefly consider another example from Ikuhara’s works. Utena, a heroine of *Shōjo Kakumei Utena (Revolutionary Girl Utena, 1997)* calls himself »*boku*« (similar to Haruka) and wants to be a prince. There is a long tradition for this in manga and anime as well. The visual appearance of Oscar in *Berusaiyu no Bara (The Rose of Versailles, the manga was serialized in 1972–1973, the anime aired in 1979–1980)* can be described as



that of a beautiful lady in male attire. However, Utena's combination of feminine, pink, and long hair with remodeled student clothes deviates from Oscar's typical male attire. More interestingly, she does not have a low-pitched voice, but rather a high-pitched and cheerful one. Ikuhara created a new type of character by slightly modifying the regular interplay of the vocal and the visual database. Departing from previous deviations (Haruka or Oscar) to a new one, Utena embodies the personality of a girl who searches for her own way to express her gender and sexuality.

From *Kyara-Moe* to Feminist Readings in the 1990s

So far, I have described playful deviations between the vocal and the visual database in 1990s anime. Coming to a close, I am going to consider some aspects of audience responses to these deviations. Again, we can draw insights from Azuma's ›database consumption‹. Azuma states that *EVANGELION* functions essentially not as a narrative, but rather as an assemblage of information that drives the *otaku* desire for *moe*, which the *otaku* call ›*kyara-moe*‹ (or, in the original translation, »chara-moe«, AZUMA 2009: 36). *Kyara-moe* refers to a reception of anime focusing exclusively on characters, which is an effect of database consumption. Although Azuma does not evaluate database consumption in great detail, he describes the term ›database‹ as follows:

Therefore, as these databases display various expressions depending on differing modes of interpretation by users and consumers, once consumers are able to possess the settings, they can produce any number of derivative works that differ from the originals (AZUMA 2009: 32).

Interestingly, the database can eventually become an apparatus to provide the audience with freedom of interpretation. It is thus necessary to re-examine the reception of the *Sailor Moon* series in the 1990s. It is famous, if not notorious for its enthusiastic *otaku*-fans, mainly because their fan-creations manifest *moe* for the characters. The *Sailor Moon* reception can be seen as typical for *kyara-moe*, resembling the reception of *EVANGELION* and other series. In fact, each sailor warrior's characterization corresponds exactly to affective *moe*-elements in Azuma's visual database. For example, Usagi is a typical ›clumsy but adorable girl‹; Ami is a typical ›serious and honorable student‹, Rei is a typical ›shrine maiden‹. However, the *Sailor Moon* series also created a new type, Haruka, which exploits discrepancies between the visual and the vocal database. Moreover, other characters such as the »Three Lights« and Utena followed in her wake. All of these characters are thus deviations from the conventional coherence between the two databases. Interestingly enough, many reviews and essays by feminist writers have been published in the 1990s which focus exactly on these kinds of characters.

In 1997, for instance, Yamaguchi Kayoko described Haruka's uniqueness, comparing her to Oscar from *The Rose of Versailles*, as follows:



Even the characters who seem to be male need a female body in order to participate in the public sphere within the narrative. This means that this story can realize a new world, where the gender bias will be reduced as much as possible, and new relationships will emerge between men and women that have never existed before (YAMAGUCHI 1997: 75, translation M.I.).²

Yamaguchi does not praise everything about the *Sailor Moon* series. Nevertheless, she interprets some of its characters—who continue to cross the gender boundary—to provide resources for relationships that might become free from the bias of gender. In the following year of 1998, the anthology *Shōjotachi no senreki. »Ribon no Kishi« kara »Shojokakumei Utena« made (The Girl's War History. From »Princess Knight« to »Revolutionary Girl Utena«)* was published.³ Most of its contributors enthusiastically discussed Haruka and her successor, Utena, with regard to themes of gender and sexuality. According to Azuma, the affective potential of *moe* had drastically changed the reception of anime and its characters in the 1990s, leading to the predominance of *kyarumoe*. Alongside the *otaku* culture, however, another kind of reception—inspired by female characters such as Haruka and her successors—took place. The feminist authors in the collection above, who might have experienced *moe* towards these characters as well, interpreted them enthusiastically and created their own narratives with regard to their gender and sexuality. Each essay or review consequently examined gender and sexual diversity outside of regular norms and conventions. The blossoming of the feminist readings in the 1990s proves that characters, constructed artificially against the backdrop of vocal and visual databases, can symbolize possibilities for freedom and diversity for human beings. After all, we are not only confined by our material bodies, but also by social norms and conventions.

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² Original: »一見男にしか見えないキャラクターも「公」領域ではすべて女の肉体を持つ世界—それはすなわち、生まれ持った性差というものが極度に矮小化された世界である。そこには、現実社会に存在するどのような男女関係も重ね合わせる事が出来ない画期的なドラマを描きだせる可能性が存在していた«.

³ Saitō Tamaki's essay »Genealogy of Beautiful Fighting Girls«, first published within the same anthology and later (2000) released as *Sentō bishōjo no seishin bunseki* (English: *Beautiful Fighting Girl*, 2011), is praised as a classic work with regard to *otaku* and their sexuality. Considering the amount of critical attention the *Sailor Moon* series had received, it can be said that its impact on the Japanese society was indeed profound.



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Luca Bruno

The Element Factor. The Concept of ›Character‹ as a Unifying Perspective for the Akihabara Cultural Domain

Abstract

This paper presents a developing perspective on characters within Japanese visual novel games and their connections to their host cultural domain of Akihabara. The cultural domain comprising Akihabara and its connected fan industries (cf. SUAN 2017: 64) have been alternatively described as a ›database‹ for a ›grand non-narrative‹ (cf. AZUMA 2009: 33–34), as a ›fantasy-scape‹ (cf. RUH 2014: 171), or as an ›imagination-scape‹ (cf. KACSUK 2016: 277). These viewpoints are concord in their vision of the Akihabara cultural domain as being in a continuous flux, lacking any fixed perspective or origin. This paper will propose characters as the unified perspective of the Akihabara cultural domain. While their design elements are not static and subjected to conventional re-performances (cf. SUAN 2017), ›characters‹ themselves, as hierarchical sets of information, remain recognizable and render their host media as belonging to Akihabara. This activates expectations (as well as related rules and procedures) associated with the domain, which in turn require additional conventional re-performances. Conceptualizing ›characters‹ and their associated conventions as a peculiar type of an intersubjective communicative construct (cf. THON 2016: 54), the paper argues that characters presented in visual novel games are representative for the wider tendency of Akihabara characters to exist prior to all media and narratives. The re-performance of conventions precedes media specificities, narrative peculiarities, or subjective reception.



1. Introduction

Akihabara, as a peculiar subcultural niche and physical location, has mobilized new terms for the description of its characters. These terms include ›*moe*‹ (cf. GALBRAITH 2009),¹ ›character elements‹ (›*moe yōso* 萌え要素), ›*bishōjo/bishōnen* 美少女, 美少年-characters‹, and many more. The employment of such terminologies reflects a tendency to aggregate meanings, capable of generating fan engagement and participation through a continuous re-performance (second order restatement) of conventions (cf. SUAN 2017: 64, 72). Such a tendency to aggregate and re-perform meaning, primarily linked to the domain of animation by critics like Thomas Lamarre (2009), is not limited to it, nor does animation constitute the exclusive origin point from which Akihabara characters originate. This is especially evident in light of the disparate media forms circulating within the cultural domain of Akihabara: printed material, model kits, musical performances, video games, animation, and many more (cf. ALLISON 2006; CONDRY 2013; STEINBERG 2012). All of these feature subcultural characters while also possessing their own forms of media specificity.

As a subcultural niche, Akihabara is both self-referencing across a wide variety of media and permeable to external influences, resulting in ill-definable and blurry borders. The conventionality by which Akihabara characters remain recognizable, however, is clearly a defining point. Consequently, Stevie Suan's discussion (2017: 64) of the development of ›anime-proper‹ as a reperformance of aesthetic and operational practices of representation can be extended to the Akihabara cultural domain as a whole. This tendency serves as a common ›language‹ between content producers and content consumers (cf. AZUMA 2007: 67). Amongst the disparate media forms within Akihabara, there is one peculiar video game genre, visual novel games, in which characters are even more vital than in other Akihabara media. Differing from anime, manga, or other non-interactive media forms, visual novel games entrust the operation of re-performing conventions more directly to the player's imaginative prowess, which, in turn, is based on their intimate knowledge of Akihabara's conventions.

Generally, the player's explicit task in a visual novel game is to seek an affective relationship with one (or more) character(s) which are depicted, aesthetically and behaviorally, in the style of Akihabara. The ultimate objective of the player is to get to the game's ending(s) through decisions made at key points during the game. Making the appropriate choices steers the playthrough towards one (or more) particular character's storyline (and towards an ending). Aside from making these choices, the player reads prose text and enjoys illustrative artworks, especially so-called ›reward images‹ (›*gohobi-e* ごほび絵, cf. MIYAMOTO 2013). These images serve as milestones in the game's narration and

¹ Within the study of Japanese characters, character-based media, and their fans, ›*moe*‹ has been widely used as a descriptor for specific aesthetics, and also to point to unique fan engagement with characters. However, due to the semantic width and instability of the term, its usefulness is limited. The following perspective will be opting instead for an emphasis on ›meta-engagement‹ with characters.



can generally be re-accessed once viewed through a gallery located in the game's main menu. The settings and stories of visual novels are disparate, ranging from ›high fantasy‹ epics to gritty tales of post-apocalyptic science fiction; their emotional tone ranges from the comedic to the tragic.

What connects these disparate ranges of themes and tones is the common purpose to establish an affective relationship with the respective characters, which may or may not lead to physical intimacy. The focus of navigating a visual novel game is not limited to amorous conquests and, in fact, it would be pinpointed better by highlighting the many, highly emotional situations which are traversed by the player's avatar and the game's characters, through which tight affective bonds are developed. While sexual intimacy can be presented explicitly, often in pornographic details, such scenes are used sparingly. They signify a particular climax in the relationship between player and character, the game's plot, or both. Consequently, it is necessary to further remark that a visual novel game might not be so much about pornographic enjoyment. It is better described by its focus on the experience of highly emotional storylines, centered on Akihabara characters.²

Playing a visual novel game is, on the surface, a strikingly non-interactive experience. The player proceeds through reading texts and building engagement with the characters by imagining their actions on the basis of prose text and voiced lines (if present). Character illustrations on the screen are usually not animated, but instead cycled through image files deputed to represent the respective character in a certain emotional state. These images are essential, but not tied to any specific narrative situation. The lack of a connection to distinct situations allows a continuous repurposing of the image files to denote small changes in mood throughout the course of the narration. Patrick Galbraith highlights that character designs are divided into three major categories: visual design, voice (idiolect and manner of voice acting), and scenario (the character's personal background narrative, cf. GALBRAITH 2017: 152, 159; fig. 1). These three macro-categories, each corresponding to a different channel within the enfolding of the visual novel's narrative, coalesce into a system of conventional character design elements. These elements, recurring and self-referencing, form a system of coded cues embedded into the character's design (cf. GALBRAITH 2017: 150).

Different colors of hair and hairstyles might suggest character, for example ›blond with pigtails‹ (*kinpatsu tsuin tēru*), which I was consistently told referred to characters with a bad attitude and a soft heart. There are hundreds of these combinations. A strand of hair sticking up, which is called ›stupid hair‹ (*ahoge*), suggests a character that is energetic but not too bright. Glasses may convey intelligence or shyness and a girl with glasses becomes a character type, ›glasses girl‹ (*meganekko*) (GALBRAITH 2017: 150–151).

This reliance on the combination of recurring elements was explored by cultural critic Azuma Hiroki (2009) in his famous ›database consumption‹ framework. According to Azuma, characters are constituted by specific affective

² A subset of visual novel games, *nukigē* (›strip games‹), is instead primarily focused with providing pornographic entertainment to its audience. There is a tendency that these remain confined to their own market niches, however.



elements (*moe yōso*) capable of generating engagement in its intended audience (cf. AZUMA 2009: 33). These elements are organized in the structure of a non-linear database, where no apparent over-arching narrative can be found, favoring the aggregation by keywords and ›tagging‹ in its stead. Consequently, each element can equally function as a window into its host culture. Elements are in a constant flux and can be freely combined to design characters whose structure enables them to exist within, without, and in-between media (cf. AZUMA 2007: 133–134).

Beyond the sense of commonality generated by the system of conventions (cf. AZUMA 2007: 67–68), another development resulting from this tendency is the data-ification of character design practices, leading to the identification of hundreds (if not thousands) of discrete character design elements. These can range from being mere visual components, such as specific accessories (glasses, ribbons, ties, etc.) or hairstyles, to a peculiar demeanor (as in ›being lovey-dovey‹). All of these elements are subject to a continuous re-performance of conventions, in a way that is similar to Suan's discussion of anime-esque acts within anime-proper.



Fig. 1:
A gameplay screenshot from *Tōkyō Necro* (Nitroplus 2016). Note the character sprite, super-imposed on the locale illustration, and the stylized language expressed through the text box in the lower portion of the screen

These conventional acts are what allows anime to be recognizable as such; anime-proper is then a form of animation which performs a large quantity of such anime-esque acts. This allows the conceptual disentanglement of anime-proper from ›animation from Japan‹, in favor of a categorization as an animation genre that follows a certain set of conventions (cf. SUAN 2017: 64–65). In the same vein, the characters of the Akihabara cultural domain can be recognized by the re-performance of conventions expressed through their character design. Each design element is, in turn, involved in a complex system of



repetition, reinforcement, innovation, and re-invigoration (cf. SUAN 2017: 68), citing prior re-performances as conventional acts (cf. SUAN 2017: 73). This, however, would not make a ›character‹ more than a sub-domain in a fuzzy and blurry cultural niche.

As with Jaqueline Berndt's concept of ›the manga-esque‹—a descriptor of what may or may not be expected typically from a ›manga‹ (cf. BERNDT 2012: 149)—a similar ›character-esque‹ system would coexist with the anime-esque and the manga-esque. The presence of characters, however, overlapping with both the anime-esque and the manga-esque, distinct from acts proper to the respective medium (such as camera angles or panel layouts), suggests otherwise. Characters can exist within, without, and in-between texts (cf. AZUMA 2007: 133–134) and, more importantly, before any media specificities are applied to them. This non-contextualized character-state is often referred to as a ›*kyara*‹ in Japanese discourse, in contrast to a contextualized ›*kyarakutā*‹. However, the ›*kyara*/*kyarakutā*‹ dichotomy envisions both *kyara* and *kyarakutā* as individual entities. Such a framework does not take into account the system of conventions that makes characters within the Akihabara cultural domain recognizable as such. Their respective identities and individualities can be recognized only under this system of conventions. Conventionality begets the necessity for Akihabara characters to remain recognizable as such, even after media specificities are applied to them. In other words, the prerequisite for the media (re)contextualization of characters is that their identity remains recognizable before and after they are (re)contextualized (cf. NOZAWA 2013). Therefore, it can be argued that the system revolving around characters within the Akihabara cultural domain exerts its influence prior to and beyond all media specificities, even modifying the media forms in which the characters will be placed in the end.

2. A Bedrock of Information. Characters, Motion, and Projection

In discussing the ›anime-esque‹, Stevie Suan (2017) compares it with the ›anime-ic‹ descriptor proposed by Thomas Looser (2002) and built upon by Brian Ruh (2015). According to Suan, the ›anime-esque‹ is the ›performance of conventions that can be easily recognized and associated with anime, and the accompanying tension between repetition and variation in such a performance‹ (SUAN 2017: 73). In contrast, the ›anime-ic‹ is an insistence on multiple layers, mixed styles, media, and their orientations (cf. LOOSER 2002: 310), as well as a space containing multiple (non-unified) points of view lacking a fixed perspective (cf. RUH 2015: 171).

However, there are differences between the anime-ic and the anime-esque. Put simply, the anime-ic appears to be a way of conceiving of space that relates to how anime deals with a distinctive manner of organizing together layers of perspectives that are not unified; whereas the anime-esque is the performance of conventions that can be easily recognized and associated with anime, and the accompanying tension between repetition



and variation in such a performance. While the anime-ic and the anime-esque usually overlap, they can be mutually exclusive (SUAN 2017: 73).

In contrasting the ›anime-esque‹ with the ›anime-ic‹, Suan describes two different levels: the ›anime-esque‹ is concerned with the conservation of a trajectory as the medium (anime) evolves, while the ›anime-ic‹ is concerned with its overall organization. Both Suan and Ruh argue for the lack of a fixed origin point, either by way of a constant flux or by the need to accommodate for disparate media technologies, styles, and perspectives. However, this fails to consider the perspective that is communicated through characters and their own system of conventional re-performances.

This becomes evident when the model for media diffusion developed by Kadokawa and ASCII media works, now dominant within Akihabara, is taken into consideration. On the basis of Ōtsuka Eiji's (2010) framework of ›narrative consumption‹, this model calls for information to be disseminated through characters (cf. STEINBERG 2015: 28) and, by extension, by their design elements. When approaching anime-proper, or other media forms similarly supporting the Akihabara cultural domain, it is important to highlight that these systems are projecting character information through media specificity. Anime-esque acts are tied to animated productions and build upon the convention of animation (cf. SUAN 2017: 75–77), which finds its foundations in motion. By coalescing into motion, character information is ›fixated‹ by a specific point in narrative time and space. Within manga, characters are projected into a specific point in narrative time and space as well, this point being a specific panel on a specific page (cf. fig. 2). In action figures, character information is projected into a specific pose and materialized by means of specific materials, such as Acrylonitrile Butadiene Styrene (ABS) or PolyVinyl Chloride (PVC). It follows that a certain choice of material can pre-empt the possibility that a series of details are omitted or modified due to constraints in the manufacturing process (cf. fig. 3).

Visual novel games, on the other hand, rarely feature motion or other kinds of projections outside of key elements (such as the introductory movie or other special events through the game's narration). They present the building blocks of their narrative experience discretely. It is then up to the player to bridge the gap between character visuals, narrative prose, and soundtrack. While a similar case could be made for manga representation, where the recipient makes an effort to mentally visualize a temporal progression between panels, there is a decisive difference to visual novel games. Each of a manga's panels can be connected to a specific moment in the narrative's timeline, while the game's illustrations cannot be connected to any point in the narrative's time at all.



Fig. 2:
A diptych of panels from the manga *Zero in* by Inoue Sora (Kadokawa Shōten 2004–2011). Each illustration/panel is a representation of a progress through the manga’s narrative timeline



Fig. 3:
A Character sprite of Ashikaga Chachamaru from *Sokō Akki Muramasa* (Nitroplus 2010) and a PVC statue (ALTER 2018) of the same character. Note the loss of detail in the hair, which assume a more rounded shape and lose transparency, compared with the character sprite

The character(s) and the setting of the scene are depicted as still, two-dimensional illustrations, which have (by themselves) no connection to any particular moment in the story’s timeline. Each of the illustrations depicting a character represent a generic, *essentialized* state, which is only ›projected‹ by the user: He or she mentally combines the illustrations with the narrative situations described through prose and soundtrack. »To put it simply, the player looks at



the still image and imagines it to be moving in ways that are described in the text and suggested by the sound« (GALBRAITH 2017: 158).³

The visual presentation of characters within visual novel games consequently differs from anime, because, arguably, the character is generally presented in what can be defined as an ›un-projected‹ form. Character illustrations are not animated (exceptions can sometimes be found in eyes or lips) and resemble character model sheets for animated productions. The same can be said for the illustrations depicting the locales in which the scene is taking place. This mode of representation makes it impossible to connect graphic representations of characters and locales to a specific point in the narration (cf. fig. 4); they are thus *non-projected* information in the form of a set of character design elements. Again, this non-contextualized and non-projected character-state is often referred to as a ›kyara‹, although not with the same specificities highlighted within this paper (I will continue to refer to ›un-projected‹ and ›projected‹ characters and character information). The user is free to visualize and contextualize the character in the way they prefer, as long as character information is not contradicted. In contrast, medial contexts such as frames in anime or panels in manga consist of projected information pointing towards a specific point in narrative time, placing limits on how the user coalesces the information provided to them.

Other media forms, such as action figures or PVC statues, project character information onto material dimensions with all their constraints (instead of in narrative time/space): They render the character into material form (in just one pose, at the exclusion of all others).⁴ Within visual novel games, an exception to the lack of projection lies in ›reward images‹ (cf. fig. 5). This is due to their role as markers of progress through the game (cf. MIYAMOTO 2013: 24), as representations of pivotal events in a character's personal story. The player can usually review these images later from a gallery and thereby check how many of the game's story paths they have traversed. Aside from reward-images, it is only through the user's own mental projection that character and locale illustrations point towards specific situations. This fundamental difference signifies that characters and visual novel games cannot be reduced to the anime-esque acts or manga-esque acts mentioned before. The anime-esque requires motion for its re-performance, while the manga-esque relies on the specificities of a printed medium (consisting of sequential images). Characters in visual novel games, on the other hand, consist mostly of static, non-projected, and hierarchical sets of information.

³ A similar case could be made for light novels, which provide some character key visuals at the beginning of each volume, but they lack the interactive dimension of visual novel games. Furthermore, there is a preponderance of prose over re-usable visual elements which brings light novels closer to projected media forms. However, an in-depth comparison between visual novel games and light novels is outside the scope of this paper.

⁴ This particular aspect of character information projection requires extensive additional research. This brief statement should not be considered definitive, especially since the examination of (dis)similarities between narrative time/space and materiality (both restricting the user's imaginative projection) is well beyond the scope of this brief perspective.



However, while characters in visual novel games cannot be reduced to medium-specific acts, they nevertheless often carry certain media-specific associations (such as the anime-esque or the manga-esque) in their visual design, their idiolect, or their personal background story. One example can be found in the *Muv Luv* video game franchise by âge (2003; 2006), and, more specifically, in the character of Yashiro Kasumi. Her visual design implies that she is soft-spoken, that she has a general stiffness in her movements, as well as a propensity to become expressionless. Her idiolect privileges short, tone-lacking sentences, devoid of flowery descriptions, over-enthusiastic remarks, or visible expressions of sadness; her background story focuses on her being an artificially-bred human with mysterious powers that are key to fight an alien invader threatening mankind.



Fig. 4:
Character sprites from *Muv Luv* (Âge 2003). These illustrations can be freely re-used during any point in the game



Fig. 5:
A reward image from *Muv Luv* (Âge 2003). This illustration is clearly linked to a specific point in time within the game's narrative timeline

Through these three channels, the character of Yashiro Kasumi evokes the characters and the situations of Ayanami Rei from *Neon Genesis EVANGELION* (cf. fig. 6). While it is up to the player to «animate» Yashiro's character information mentally, what is provided to the player steers the visualization into recreating situations similar to those experienced with Rei in the anime. The character type developed with Ayanami Rei, and all the associated character design elements, are thus both preserved and re-performed in a new context. Through the projection of character elements into a specific point in narrative time, the anime-esque acts of *EVANGELION* are clearly referenced. From the irreducible baseline that is a character's constitutive set of design elements, players can face a range of possible outcomes during their efforts in mental visualizations. The range of possible outcomes is determined by the interplay of a character's design elements and the associated conventions, and how they are coalesced as a character. When, where, and how a character will behave—in relation to the information provided—generates specific expectations, which can then be confirmed, subverted, or disappointed. The constant feedback between expectation and either confirmation or subversion builds engagement and, through it, iterate the cultural domain as a whole.



Fig. 6:
A character sprite of Yashiro Kasumi from *Muv Luv* (Age 2003) (left) and a character key visual from *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (Studio GAINAX 1994) (right). Note how the expression and the general visual arrangement (hair, facial expression, pose) of Yashiro tends to evoke Ayanami Rei

3. Engagement, Expectation, Confirmation, Subversion, and Procedure

Building on expectations towards characters, a visual novel game includes a significant metatextual component: the task of imaginative projection is entrusted to the players. When they face a character's design, they are presented a range of possible outcomes concerning their imaginative projection efforts, as well as a respective range of expectations. The use of the term ›projection‹ (instead of just ›imagination‹) is important for this perspective, as ›projecting‹ character information requires that the character's core features remain stable, and that the source of the projection must be evident at all times. Imagination, on the other hand, is supposedly unlimited and unbridled. Suan, in describing this process within anime, writes:

These rules dictate a degree of restriction of potential, evidenced by the repetition of only certain conventions. But these conventional rules are not entirely a limiting practice. They may be described as, using the words of Jonathan Culler (2002), ›a system of constitutive rules: rules which do not regulate behavior as much as create the possibility of certain forms of behavior‹ (SUAN 2017: 70).

The process of re-performance steers expectations according to established conventions. It also determines how close (or distant) the result will be from the original model. Consequently, the range of possible outcomes is not limited exclusively by the information contained within the characters' visual



appearance; the information also includes the narrative potential invoked by elements of the characters' background story, their demeanor, and their ways of relating to other characters. A proper understanding of each element and its implication is fundamental, as highlighted by Kagami Hiroyuki. According to this veteran visual novel scenario writer, the system of conventionalized elements employed in the character design of visual novels requires a proper understanding to ›parse‹ what is being communicated through characters. He calls this a ›literacy in [character] elements‹ (*moe riterashi* 萌えリテラシー, KAGAMI 2010: 131; translation L.B). Patrick Galbraith offers a similar remark as part of an interview with Kagami:

Let's say I write a Lolita granny (*roribaba*) character. That's a character type, you know, Lolita granny. It makes no sense unless you understand that Lolita means a young girl character with a small chest and granny refers to the fact that she speaks or sounds like an old woman. You know, saying ›ja‹ at the end of a sentence. You have to read the characters in terms of [visual] design, scenario and sound (GALBRAITH 2017: 152).

By parsing the character in this way, the player expects a determinate range of outcomes based on the character information provided by the game, which in turn is based on conventions internal to the Akihabara cultural domain. As the narrative proceeds, the player keeps guessing when, where, and how characters will or will not act by using the character information as a basis. The continuous testing of the player's expectations builds tension, until the narration hits a climax, and the player's expectations are either confirmed or subverted. Each climax within a character's narrative bestows an emotional impact upon the user, a development that echoes cognitive musicologist David B. Huron's (2006) ITPRA-theory of expectation. Huron divides expectational responses to an event in time in five categories: imagination, tension, prediction, reaction, and appraisal (ITPRA). Imagination and tension take place before the respective outcome, while prediction, reaction, and appraisal take place afterwards (cf. HURON 2006: 7–18).

Imagination (cf. HURON 2006: 7–8) is tied to the contemplation of a possible future outcome, with the power to both induce emotional states and to retain an awareness that the outcome has not yet taken place. Tension is a preparation for an imminent event, involving changes in one's arousal (proportional to the uncertainty of the outcome, cf. HURON 2006: 9–12). Prediction is tied to the accuracy of the expectation, with appropriate positive and negative changes in the emotional state tied to the process' results (cf. HURON 2006: 12–13). Reaction activates bodily functions and is emotional in nature (cf. HURON 2006: 13–14). Finally, appraisal is a conscious and attentive reflection about the outcome, separate from the emotional response itself (cf. HURON 2006: 14–15).

Each of these five proposed systems is able to evoke various feeling states—although some systems are more constrained than others. The tension and reaction responses, for example, have a limited range of affective expression. By contrast, the appraisal response is able to evoke a huge range of feeling states, from jealousy, contempt, or loneliness, to compassion, pride or humor. For any given situation, these five proposed systems combine to create a distinctive limbic cocktail. Actually, ›cocktail‹ isn't quite the right word, because it is a dynamic phenomenon rather than a simple static mixture. Expectation-related emotions can begin long before an event occurs and linger long afterwards.



Within this time span, a dynamically evolving sequence of feelings can arise (HURON 2006: 18).

Characters within visual novel games, by setting the player on a continuous cycle of expectation and prediction, are particularly reliant on a similar system to build engagement in players. Depending on the accuracy of their predictions, players undergo changes in their mental and physical state, with positive and negative reinforcements directly tied to how accurate their prediction was. When the prediction is completely inaccurate, there is subversion, and an equally charged emotional state. The state of surprise derived from inaccuracy is tied to contrast (which can be negative) and then inverted by appraising the outcome as positive, or vice-versa (cf. HURON 2006: 22). The construction of a personalized mental projection by means of character information is a learning process. The character's identity is discovered throughout the game's story. The player traverses the narration, visualizes the character, and, in doing so, builds a ›personalized take‹ on the narration, while also developing their ›literacy‹ in character elements. This makes the pre-requisite of character *sameness* all the more fundamental, as highlighted by Nozawa Shunsuke (2013). Although each projection is personal—and therefore distinct—each of them needs to be retraceable to the original set of design elements that constitute the character's identity.

The process of mentally assembling information is similar to the interplay between a transmedial storyworld and specific forms of media representations discussed by Jan-Noël Thon (2016) in his framework of a transmedial narratology. Thon argues for the need to differentiate between 1) internal mental representations of the world of a story, 2) how the world is represented in various media, and, finally, 3) the storyworld itself (cf. THON 2017: 51). The mental representation of a storyworld is the narrative world, including characters and their perspectives, as projected by individual recipients. It must be held separate from the specificities of the respective media on which the material representations are based. Finally, there is the storyworld itself, the irreducible sequences of events, characters, and their motivations which must or can be agreed upon by producers and recipients (cf. THON 2016: 51–52). In this way, commonalities of narrative references are established within a fan-producer community. Thon defines storyworlds as »intersubjective communicative constructs based on a given narrative representation« (THON 2016: 54). He draws on David Herman's definition of »mental models of who did what to and with whom, when, where, why, and in what fashion in the world to which recipients relocate« (HERMAN 2004: 9). In other words, the storyworld is the irreducible bedrock upon which an audience can agree when engaging with a specific narration, regardless of media specificities or potentially unreliable narrators.

To function as an irreducible bedrock is a commonality between such a conception of a storyworld and character identity, with one interesting difference: narrative ambiguity across media allows for the possibility of multiple storyworlds (cf. THON 2016: 55), while visual novel characters' primacy (in terms of visual design) cements a single irreducible baseline. A visual novel game's



character will usually retain a set of visual elements (or visual-based elements, such as demeanor-denoting poses) whose constancy is necessary for the character to be recognizable as such. The set of elements is hierarchal in nature, with certain elements requiring the presence of others to acquire meaning as a node within the set's hierarchy.⁵ While these are parallels to the ›kyara-state‹, ›kyara‹ are envisioned in a framework of substantial independence from narration in favor of their endless re-contextualizability, but still as unique and indivisible character identities. The ›openness‹ of character design elements and the shared means of character re-production and re-performance between producers and audiences makes accounting for conventionality within the ›kyara/kyarakutā‹ framework problematic.

The necessity for constancy in conventional re-performances echoes the anime-esque, in that it allows characters to be recognized as such through a stylized repetition of acts (cf. SUAN 2017: 67). Furthermore, it makes characters exist on a level separate from the storyworld, as the same character (and his identity) can exist across multiple storyworlds as the same set of elements. A visual novel game's structure makes this capability explicit via the (generally) mutually exclusive storylines that a player can experience during the course of many playthroughs. Once a player starts making narrative decisions and embarks on diverging storylines, other characters might still feature within these specific story paths, albeit in minor roles only. Their character identity, their hierarchical set of character elements, remains unchanged—despite being located within different narrative worlds. They are, for all intent and purposes, *the same characters*, with the same hierarchical sets of character elements, even when contextualized in different storyworlds. Within visual novel games, and by extension, within the Akihabara cultural domain, characters constitute a distinct category of intersubjective communicative constructs, antecedent to the storyworld.

Emblematic in support of this argument is the 2000 interview with Takahashi Tatsuya, lead writer on Leaf's visual novel game series *To Heart* (1997; 1999). He remarks that character design is happening before the establishment of any kind of narration and observes that the game's multiple stories were merely an exploration of this initial character design.⁶ These practices, although new at the time, are now an industry standard for visual novel game creators; they explicate the focal importance of characters and character information within the Akihabara cultural domain.

By envisioning characters within visual novels (and the Akihabara cultural domain as a whole) as a distinct type of intersubjective communicative construct, accompanied by distinctive re-performance aspects, allows to explain the constancy of character conventions, aesthetics, and storytelling

⁵ The ›blond with pigtails‹ character combination is an excellent example: visually, it requires the character's set of elements to possess two visual elements before the character can be identified as having a ›bad attitude and a soft heart‹ (cf. GALBRAITH 2017: 150), which, in turn, calls for a peculiar graphical representation.

⁶ Cf. <http://www.tinami.com/x/interview/04/page1.html> [accessed September 15, 2018].



practices across media within the wider cultural domain. The presence of an Akihabara character forces modifications on the alleged specificity of media forms to accommodate for the character's re-performance, even before any distinct storyworld can be established. In fact, the construction of a storyworld is itself conditioned by the presence of characters. Certain narrative scenes that appear completely superfluous by themselves (a homicidally jealous character plotting to murder his love rivals, for instance) can be required by character identities that need to be realized at to their fullest extent. Within visual novel games, the process by which characters condition storyworlds is only made more explicit. Here, three dimensions of aspects of characters continuously exist at the same time: pre-narrative dimensions (design elements), narrative dimensions (the actual characters within the game's story) and meta-narrative dimensions (references to other characters and media).

4. Procedures for Emotional Feedback

The processes necessary for the mental visualization of characters are consolidated amongst the audience by continuous references to conventional practices shared amongst fans and producers. This makes Akihabara characters subject to what Ian Bogost (2007) termed a ›procedural rhetoric‹: »Procedural rhetoric is the practice of persuading through processes in general and computational process in particular« (BOGOST 2007: 3). By way of a shared set of conventions surrounding the production and reception of characters (and media) within the Akihabara culture, players are persuaded about what, who, and how to expect. ›Literacy‹ in these elements is not limited to the understanding of the codes invoked (cf. KACSUK 2016: 277), but also includes experience of how the information (facilitated by the code) can or should be creatively (re)projected to achieve pleasant effects: it is a question about which methods of (re)projection are most effective. Partaking in this process is rewarded with emotional engagement, successful predictions are connected to positive emotional states. Furthermore, all of these procedures are based on underlying philosophies and hierarchies of meaning, exposing the inner workings and how something operates or fails to do so (cf. BOGOST 2007: 71–75).

These *hierarchies* of meaning are evident within the arrays of possible outcomes, which can result from the projection of a character's elements into visual novel game narratives. One example for this tendency is the female *osanajimi* 幼なじみ (›childhood friend‹) character-element. When the player is presented with a character featuring said design element, they can expect an associated array of events and characteristics even before the beginning of the actual game (by reading a game's back cover or the promotional website featuring characters descriptions). The player can reasonably expect, for example, that this specific character will be first to appear during the game's narrative, or that the respective character will have a very gentle, but responsible disposition towards the player's avatar. Furthermore, they can



expect—with a degree of certainty—that the physical intimacy involving that character will be of the virginal type (with all the associated pathos). There can also be other elements reinforcing these expectations, such as a certain shape of the eyes. A ›sweet‹ disposition might be reinforced by the shape of the eyelids tending outwards, which bestows a gentle and tender look upon the character. This shape is known as *tareme* タレ目 (cf. fig. 7) and it is contrasted with another eye shape, the *tsurime* ツリ目 (cf. fig. 8). The *tsurime* shape mandates an inward-pointing eyelid. *Tareme* are featured on characters with a ›sweet‹ disposition, ranging from the *deredere* デレデレ (›lovestruck‹) to the *yandere* ヤンデレ (›homicidally jealous‹), while *tsurime* are featured on mischievous, world-weary characters, whose disposition might range from playful sassiness to outright hostility.



Fig. 7:
Tareme example from an official character art for *Koi to Senkyō to Chokorēto* (Sprite 2010)



Fig. 8:
Tsurime example from a character sprite taken from *Euphoria* (Clockup 2011)



Elements such as *osanajimi* are not immediately evident when compared to elements such as *tsundere* ツンデレ, a demeanor prescribing a character torn between outward hostility and an almost irreconcilable love towards another character. The former, while associated with a specific narrative role, does not call for specificities in terms of visual representation. The latter, on the contrary, requires a series of visual explications in terms of character illustrations that allows an immediate identification of the emotional contrast within the character (cf. fig. 9).

Regardless of the respective specificities of these rules within the system—which elements are necessary for certain predictions to be expectable—it is extremely important to remark that the presence of certain elements usually excludes a range of other elements. This mechanism of element-(in)compatibility, in turn, also removes certain outcomes from the range of expectations that can be exerted over the character and its narrative. Even results which generate an unexpected outcome, and thus subversion, must still derive from the information presented. Consequently, a character whose set of elements is arranged to evoke innocence, for instance, will include said information, even when the element is subverted in the end. One example lies in *yandere* characters whose homicidal jealousy is expected to be articulated through a sweet and honeyed-sounding idiolect.



Fig. 9:
An example of a *tsundere* character from *Muv Luv*. The expression drawn on this sprite is used as the default expression for the character. Confront and compare this to figure 4: the sense of outward hostility must be explicated through visual characteristics



The procedural aspects of engagement towards characters lie in the fact that each player is given the metaphorical tools to draw a series of probable conclusions, and the result can be confirmed or subverted through narrative climaxes. Within visual novel games, this extends to the actual choices presented to the player: acting in contrast to the information provided can lead to the ›wrong‹ story path, and—within certain games—to a negative ending. Therefore, visual novel games can be seen as a kind of explication of the process by which character engagement is developed within the Akihabara cultural domain; they also offer commentary on how the system of production and fruition of characters and their elements could be said to represent the irreducible bedrock upon which the Akihabara cultural domain is founded.

Presenting characters (and character information) as the bedrock of the Akihabara cultural domain is not without difficulties. The process of re-performance described by the anime-esque is mostly concerned with a continuity of conventions and does not call for a unified perspective. While conceptual frameworks like the *anime*-esque or the *manga*-esque can be very useful for the description of a continuous state of development (typical for cultural domains as Akihabara), they do not necessarily recognize a unifying factor. However, the presence of characters proper to the Akihabara cultural domain unifies media forms through reliance on characters as intersubjective communicative constructs. Regardless of the set of character elements which constitute a specific character's identity, characters remain *loci* for generating engagement through the imaginative projection of information on the basis of conventional models. The system of character elements also possesses the duality highlighted by Suan in anime-proper: it possesses the same »consciousness of doubleness, through which the actual execution of an action is placed in mental comparison with a potential, an ideal, or a remembered original model of that action« (CARLSON 2004: 73, as quoted in SUAN 2017: 71).

Character design elements reference ideal models not linked to a particular character itself, although certain characters (or certain aspects of characters) might serve as more or less apt representatives of a certain set of elements. In these relations to ideal models, character elements could be seen as rules for visualizing a character, either through specific media forms (such as anime-proper) or through one's personal mental visualization. Guided by these rules, character users can develop their own personalized rendition of a character and thus develop engagement via shared procedures. This, in turn, is built on the character as a form of intersubjective communicative construct, but at the same time expands it into the personal and private. This expansion into the personal sphere, however, is never removed from the character's bedrock, shaping the media forms themselves with their presence. As part of this process, the intersubjective construct is expanded into the subjective perception, which, in turn, is subjected to conventionality in order to maintain the character's recognizability as part of the Akihabara domain. Consequently, rather than rendering Akihabara characters as ›flat‹ and ›freely reconfigurable‹,



the mechanism highlights the same tendencies stressed by Jos de Mul (2015) in his discussion of the ›database-ification‹ of identity:

Facebook might serve as example again. Paradoxically, in spite of the almost unlimited possibilities to combine, decombine and recombine the elements of the database, Facebook forces its users into an extremely homogeneous technological structure with predefined menus, dropdown lists and categories. ›Individualization‹ requires extreme forms of standardization, technological and cultural homogenization (DE MUL 2015: 112).

To produce these highly personalized experiences, a strict set of rules is necessary, accompanied by the potential to influence and guide how possible stories can be constructed around them. Whether it is the male-oriented *bishōjo* or the female-oriented *bishōnen*, characters within the Akihabara cultural domain are constructed for the inter-relation with other Akihabara characters and different forms of media. As was highlighted before, characters are thus capable of exerting a profound influence on the creation of storyworlds, and, in fact, often come into being long before a specific storyworld can be agreed upon. With this capability, they carry their own potential stories; if the character is placed within a storyworld, it must conform to the character elements to allow the preservation of character identity—as well as of the conventionality of the cultural domain as a whole. Through articulations of character identity, all the elements point into the direction of the recipients' imaginative projection as they traverse the story.

However, a journey through a visual novel game or, for that matter, any Akihabara-related form of media, is not merely an exercise of literacy in elements to obtain a positive emotional feedback. It is also a learning process in which commonalities with other media users are exercised and developed. The re-performance of conventions requires a hierarchy, negotiating the relevant directions for the connections between character elements, characters, and media forms. These directions can then be employed by each media user to *actualize* the re-performances of a character. The respective procedures are not even limited to the navigation of visual novel games' storylines. In fact, these only bestow the player with the mental toolbox that is necessary to derive at personalized engagement with the game's characters; the same toolbox is necessary to relate the personal engagement with other players' experiences. Every player might be enjoying the same narration, but each enjoys it in his or her own way: in ›direct‹ engagement with the characters and the story, relying on the same kind of procedures as other players. In virtue of this personalized, yet homogeneous engagement, a sense of commonality is established. Through these procedures, Akihabara, as a cultural domain, fluidly develops, thrives, and evolves, always divergent, but recognizable as a distinct domain, its blurry boundaries ever enlarging and contracting.



5. Conclusion. Procedural Characters?

Characters—as hierarchical sets of character design elements, both within visual novel games as well as within the wider Akihabara cultural domain—can be seen as intersubjective communicative constructs which enable the re-performance of conventions. Although media forms (such as anime-proper and the surrounding system of character design elements) are in a state of constant flux, the presence of characters conditions the requirements for this re-performance. This potential does not rely on the respective state of the system of conventions at any given time. A particular character’s presence immediately shapes the rest of a surrounding storyworld, acting as a virtual interface to the Akihabara cultural domain. It makes design elements meaningful, capable of being parsed: a kind of hub for emotional feedback. This system relies heavily on expectations, as well as on the emotional feedback following the success—or the failure—of the imaginative projection of character information distributed through the character’s core identity. Character identity can then be seen as an arranged set of design elements, whose structure determines the array of possible outcomes that players can expect during their imaginative engagement. To properly initiate this ›meta-game‹ of character information projection, a certain literacy in character elements is necessary, as the entirety of the set of character elements must be parsed for the proper appraisal of possible outcomes.

Such a reliance on the respective *procedures* surrounding Akihabara-characters is noteworthy, a testament to characters’ roots in games, both analog and digital (cf. STEINBERG 2015: 8–12, 22–29). This paper proposes the descriptor of ›procedural characters‹ to denote and reflect these dimensions. My proposal is informed by the peculiar position of Akihabara-inspired characters within the larger media ecology, parallel but distinct from any given storyworld, as well as by their reliance on specific rules for personalized projections. This is not to say that Akihabara-characters are in fact ›procedurally generated‹, especially given the popular use of the term to refer to *randomly* generated characters. It is rather to emphasize their reliance on established procedures, even long after their actual creation. Akihabara characters can be seen as intersubjective communicative constructs whose presence exerts a salient influence on potential storyworlds into which their information can be projected—in which they can become contextualized. This, in turn, transforms the respective media into ›Akihabara-proper media forms‹, which stem from the projection of character information onto storyworlds and back onto the media forms themselves. Through this potential for the transmission of information and its influence over specific media forms, Akihabara characters can arguably be regarded a possible candidate for the role of a unifying factor throughout the Akihabara cultural domain. In turn, this would allow to trace the blurry boundaries of the cultural domain and its slowly shifting hierarchies of meanings. It also helps to avoid a conflation with similar, but distinct subcultural niches (such as productions originating within the *JUMP* editorial conglomerate). By



highlighting the *procedures* for emotional engagement and conventional re-performances, Akihabara remains distinct from other Japanese subcultures. From this perspective, new approaches can be derived and new paths opened.

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[\[Table of Contents\]](#)

Tobias Kunz

»It's true, all of it!«. Canonicity Management and Character Identity in *Star Wars*

Abstract

Taking as its object of study the character of Grand Admiral Thrawn from the *Star Wars* franchise, this article examines how character identity is managed in narrative transmedial franchises. Focusing on the notion of ›canonicity‹, it suggests a way of conceptualizing how hierarchical systems of continuity can affect the mental modelling of characters. Furthermore, it discusses what strategies are employed—both textually and paratextually—to maintain a sense of character identity in the face of a reboot like the one undergone by *Star Wars* in 2014.

Introduction

On April 25, 2014, roughly one-and-a-half years after the Walt Disney Company had bought Lucasfilm Ltd., *StarWars.com* published a short press release which confirmed that in preparation for the release of *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* (2015), Lucasfilm would drop the majority of *Star Wars* continuity established outside of George Lucas's six feature films.¹ This marked a substantial »shift in [...] transmedia economy« (PROCTOR/FREEMAN 2016: 232) for one of today's most commercially successful and extensive transmedia franchises; a

¹ Cf. <http://www.starwars.com/news/the-legendary-star-wars-expanded-universe-turns-a-new-page> [accessed September 9, 2018].



shift that has been received with mixed feelings on the part of fans.² In this context, a recurring point of controversy is the depiction of characters in the new canon, and said depiction's consistency with other works of *Star Wars* fiction, both canonical and non-canonical.³ While there have already been some scholarly analyses of some of the reboot's implications (cf. CANAVAN 2017a; 2017b; GERAGHTY 2017; PROCTOR/FREEMAN 2016), the question of how character identity and consistency is managed in its wake has remained largely unaddressed as of yet.

In the present article, I aim to conduct a detailed analysis of such management procedures in the form of a case study, taking as its object the character of Grand Admiral Thrawn, who was first introduced in Timothy Zahn's novel *Heir to the Empire* (1991) as a new villain for the heroes of the original film trilogy (1977–1983). I have chosen Thrawn for three reasons: First, the fact that he never appeared in any of the six original films or the television series *Star Wars: The Clone Wars* (2008–) means that with the de-canonization of the former ›Expanded Universe‹ (EU) of books, comics, videogames etc., Thrawn was completely erased from official continuity before being re-introduced in the third season of *The Clone Wars*'s successor programme, *Star Wars: Rebels* (2014–2018). From a production standpoint, this eliminated all creative constraints with regard to the attributes of his canonical version, which enables an analysis of all aspects of his portrayal in the new canon as deliberate creative decisions. Second, Thrawn's original iteration was one of the most popular characters from the EU, appearing at number ten on IGN's 2010 list of the 100 greatest *Star Wars* characters—bested only by characters from the original trilogy.⁴ This suggests a strong awareness of the character and his original characterization among fans, which in turn makes the ›faithfulness‹ of his depictions in post-reboot works a potentially controversial issue. As a third point, however, the new iteration of the character was received with near-unanimous favour and approval for its consistency with the EU Thrawn (cf. GOLDMAN 2016; TABER 2016; TERRY-GREEN 2016),⁵ indicating a ›successful‹ transition from old to new continuity in terms of fan appreciation.

² Some of the most extreme expressions of discontent have been associated with a fan group called ›Give us Legends‹, who successfully raised money for a San Francisco billboard urging Lucasfilm to continue the stories told in the novels and comics released prior to the reboot (cf. PHEGLEY 2016). The group has also been associated with online harassment targeted at actresses involved in the production of *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* and *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* (2017) (cf. WARD 2018).

³ The two most prominent examples of this would be the controversies about Luke Skywalker's characterization in *The Last Jedi* (cf., for example, WATERCUTTER et al. 2017) and the casting of Alden Ehrenreich as a young Han Solo in the eponymous spin-off film (2018) (cf. VERHOEVEN 2016). The fact that the former controversy focused on questions of characterization, whereas the latter was mainly concerned with Ehrenreich's looks (and therefore matters of representational correspondence), shows the wide variety of issues connected to this, as well as the huge amount of scholarly work still to be done.

⁴ Cf. <http://web.archive.org/web/20120530015102/http://www.ign.com:80/star-wars-characters/10.html> [accessed September 1, 2018].

⁵ It is noteworthy that, of the three reviews cited here, two (Taber and Terry-Green) speak of ›consistency‹, implying that the two iterations of the character are regarded as essentially *one* entity. Goldman, on the other hand, frames his comparison in terms of ›similarity‹, suggesting a viewpoint that clearly differentiates the two iterations from each other. The fact that Goldman is reviewing



Taken together, these three factors add up to the overall question of this article: How is Lucasfilm, as a corporate IP (intellectual property) owner, addressing »fan anxieties about authenticity and canon« (PROCTOR/FREEMAN 2016: 237) with regard to characters in the face of a substantial shift in the »intended structure« of its transmedial universe« (THON 2015: 33)? I will address this question in three steps: In order to establish an adequate theoretical framework for the ensuing analysis, I will first draw on several theories of transmedia storytelling to describe the storyworld(s) and canonicity system of *Star Wars* in suitable terms. Following this, I will examine Thrawn's old and new iteration from the perspective of semiotics and cognitive narratology, determining how they relate to each other in terms of *identity*. Lastly, I will analyse the paratexts surrounding Thrawn's re-introduction into *Star Wars* canon to show how shifting attributions of narrative authority can contribute to contested questions of consistency between (contradictory) depictions of a popular character.

1. Canon and Contradiction in the *Star Wars* Universe

»Transmedia storytelling represents a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience« (JENKINS 2007: n.pag.). Henry Jenkins's influential definition of »transmedia storytelling« seems to apply to the *Star Wars* franchise for the most part—with the notable exception of his attribute »unified«. While Jenkins himself has already problematized this particular part of his original definition (cf. JENKINS 2009: n.pag.), Jan-Noël Thon argued that *Star Wars*, in particular, »exemplifies transmedial entertainment franchises' potential for synchronic complexity and diachronic variability, which makes analysing them based on the model of the single world appear overly reductive« (THON 2015: 39). Nevertheless, consistency of and coherency between various narrative elements—including characters—have been identified as central attributes of TS (transmedia storytelling) (cf. HARVEY 2014: 279). One of the tools for relieving the tension between the contradictory multiplicity of a given transmedia franchise and its recipients' unwillingness to imagine paradoxical fictional worlds (cf. THON 2015: 28) is the notion of »canon«. Roy T. Cook defines »canon« as the result of practices which »identify a privileged subfiction that constitutes the real story regarding what is fictionally »true« [...], whereas noncanonical stories are »imaginary« or are delegitimized in some other sense« (COOK 2013: 272). In order to examine the relationship between the different iterations of the character Thrawn, it is essential to understand the canonicity practices of Lucasfilm, both before and after the EU reboot. Hence, the following section will attempt to give a theoretical

for professional media website IGN, whereas Taber and Terry-Green are writing for fan websites, can be viewed as a first indicator that different recipient groups are encouraged to adopt different readings of the relationship between the original Thrawn and his rebooted version (cf. section 1.2).



account of said practices in order to indicate how they might pertain to individual characters.

1.1 The Expanded Universe

Up until 2014, Lucasfilm had been developing an increasingly sophisticated system for classifying elements of the *Star Wars* universe with regard to the ›accuracy‹ with which they depicted the ›actual‹ fictional world of *Star Wars*. When the EU was discontinued in 2014, Lucasfilm's ›Holocron Continuity Database‹ comprised six different levels of canonicity mirroring the corporate structures organizing the production of *Star Wars* works (cf. CANAVAN 2017b: 160).⁶ Due to this duplicity of corporate and diegetic levels, the structure of the *Star Wars* canon (until 2014) can be conceptualized in terms of Colin B. Harvey's (2014) taxonomy of transmedia storytelling, which is based on the legal relations regulating memory across individual franchise entries. Harvey's taxonomy is more generalisable and less complex than Lucasfilm's own system, while retaining all features of the latter that are relevant to the purposes of the forthcoming analysis.

With regard to works that do not require any form of user participation,⁷ Harvey distinguishes three levels of transmedia storytelling (TS): ›Directed TS‹, over which the legal owner of an IP exerts close authorial control and which is therefore regarded as the highest authority on the state of the world it depicts; ›devolved TS‹, which is still bound to directives from the IP holder, but in which »certain aspects of established continuity can be forgotten or otherwise misremembered« (HARVEY 2014: 282); and finally ›detached TS‹, which is not under the IP holder's control and might deliberately alter aspects of established continuity to avoid copyright infringement (cf. HARVEY 2014: 282–283). In the case of *Star Wars*, the IP owner originally coincided with what Mark J.P. Wolf (2012: 273–274) addressed as the ›originator and main author‹, i.e. George Lucas. Works in whose production Lucas was closely involved automatically took precedence over others when canonicity was in question (cf. CHEE 2006).⁸ Therefore, these works can be classified as directed TS *sensu* Harvey. The subordinated level of devolved TS was constituted by works that were produced by commissioned authors, with little or no input from Lucas himself (cf. PROCTOR/FREEMAN 2016: 229). While most of these works attempted to correctly ›remember‹ all elements from directed TS works, Lucas's ongoing additions and alterations to his own body of work often resulted in inconsistencies that were retroactively framed as ›mis-rememberings‹ on the part of the devolved content. A notable example for this can be found in Timothy Zahn's novel *The Last*

⁶ Cf. <http://starwars.wikia.com/wiki/Canon> [accessed September 2, 2018].

⁷ While video games and supplements for pen-and-paper role-playing also formed part of the EU, they were only ever considered partly canonical and are negligible for the purposes of my analysis.

⁸ This means the six *Star Wars* feature films released between 1977 and 2005, as well as the *Star Wars: The Clone Wars* television series and its pilot film. The only exceptions to this rule would be the *Star Wars Holiday Special* (1977) and the two *Ewok Adventure* TV films (1984–1985), which were already treated as part of ›devolved‹ content prior to 2014.



Command (1993), the final instalment of the so-called ›Thrawn trilogy‹ that had started with *Heir to the Empire. The Last Command* describes the clone wars—an event that had so far only been vaguely alluded to in the original *Star Wars* film (1977)—as a conflict between the Galactic Republic and a number of ›clone masters‹.⁹ This was later contradicted by *Star Wars: Attack of the Clones* (2002), with all subsequent (devolved) productions adhering to the ›new version‹ of events. This does not only show how, in many instances, remembrance ›flows from the films into the various transmedia compartments, but not in the opposite direction‹ (PROCTOR/FREEMAN 2016: 233); it also demonstrates the usefulness of Jan-Noël Thon’s (2015) three-level model of transmedia storyworlds.

In the face of inconsistencies like the one described above, it is clearly no longer adequate to treat the original *Star Wars* trilogy, the prequel trilogy, as well as the Thrawn trilogy as one single, noncontradictory storyworld. Instead, Thon offers

a systematic distinction between the local mediums-specific storyworlds of single narrative works, the glocal but noncontradictory transmedial (or, in quite a few cases, merely *transtextual*) storyworlds that may be constructed out of local work-specific storyworlds, and the global and often quite contradictory transmedial storyworld compounds that may, for lack of a better term, be called transmedial universes (THON 2015: 32, original emphasis).

The three trilogies in question could therefore each be regarded as distinct glocal, transtextual subworlds of the global (partly contradictory) *Star Wars* universe. As Nicholas Rescher and Robert Brandom have noted decades earlier, this approach would allow to treat contradictions as ›a *local* and not necessarily *global* anomaly‹ (1980: 24, original emphases).¹⁰ In fact, this is precisely the strategy that many fans seem to have adopted: *Wookieepedia*, the most extensive fan-maintained *Star Wars* encyclopedia, states that ›in the absence of [...] *ad hoc* solutions [such as retcons], the EU [was] considered incorrect only on the particular points of contradiction [with directed content]‹.¹¹ The result of this practice would be another glocal subworld of the transmedial *Star Wars* universe, one that is not so much ›constructed out of local work-specific storyworlds‹ (THON 2015: 32), but rather out of individual elements of said local worlds, according to a fixed set of rules. This approach to canonicity on the level of elements (rather than entire works) was also practised and encouraged by Lucasfilm, with ›Keeper of the Holocron‹ Leeland Chee stating that, when in doubt, ›the canon level of the entry [i.e. an individual character, vehicle, alien species etc.] would override the canon level of the source [i.e. an entire work]‹ (CHEE 2006: n.pag.).

This principle became especially relevant with the release of *Star Wars: The Clone Wars*. Set during the narrative gap between *Attack of the Clones*

⁹ Cf. http://starwars.wikia.com/wiki/Star_Wars_Legends#Lucas.2FEU_contradictions [accessed September 9, 2018].

¹⁰ Thon (2015: 31) has already used Rescher and Brandom’s results in this way.

¹¹ Cf. http://starwars.wikia.com/wiki/Star_Wars_Legends [accessed September 3, 2018]. While *Wookieepedia* does not offer any official sources for this statement, its inclusion in the article can be regarded as an indication of the prevalence of said practice among fans, if nothing else.



(2002) and *Revenge of the Sith* (2005), the series freely adapted characters and other elements from already existing, yet devolved material set in that timeframe, often making salient changes to some of these elements' attributes. For example, the character of Asajj Ventress, originally created for Dark Horse's *Star Wars* comics, is one of the main antagonists in the TV series, with depictions of her childhood and death being subjected to substantial changes in comparison to the earlier comics.¹² Following the principle outlined above, Chee clarified that *only* elements of the comics regarding the specific circumstances of Ventress's death (and, by implication, her ›origin story‹ as well) should be regarded as non-canon.¹³ Accordingly, her *Wookieepedia* entry is a compound of information stemming from both directed and devolved TS material, with all elements of the latter (which do not explicitly contradict directed works) being integrated into a coherent biographical narrative.

What follows from all this for a theoretical conception of characters suitable to describe the actual complexity management by recipients and fans is something similar to what Jens Eder (with reference to Fotis Jannidis) calls an »ideal character model determined by the intention of a work or of an author« (EDER 2008: 49, translation T.K.).¹⁴ In the case of *Star Wars* (prior to 2014), the system that ruled over canonicity could be understood as a paratextual expression of such work/author-intentions. As such, the canonicity system managed how a model reader, a »construct with knowledge of all relevant codes and equipped with all necessary competences to successfully execute all operations required by the text«¹⁵ (JANNIDIS 2004: 254, translation T.K.), would construct an internal representation—i.e. a mental model—of a given character, based on its external representations in a body of works (cf. EDER 2008: 53). As the example of Asajj Ventress shows, the ideal model for some *Star Wars* characters seems to be a compound of biographical details taken from different glocal subworlds, with conflicting versions of individual events being treated as local anomalies and resolved via the precedence of directed TS.

1.2 Canon and ›Legends‹

While Thrawn was, originally, a product of the EU and therefore subject to the canonicity practices described above, his appearances in *Rebels* and three subsequently published novels (*Thrawn*, 2017; *Thrawn: Alliances*, 2018; *Thrawn: Treason*, 2019) form part of the new continuity established from 2014 onwards. After George Lucas had sold Lucasfilm to Disney, the newly appointed President of Lucasfilm, Kathleen Kennedy, formed the ›Lucasfilm Story Group‹. While not technically the IP owner, the group replaced Lucas as the overarching

¹² Cf. http://starwars.wikia.com/wiki/Asajj_Ventress/Legends#Behind_the_scenes [accessed September 9, 2018].

¹³ Cf. before.

¹⁴ Original: »ideales, werk- oder autorenintentional bestimmtes Figurenmodell«.

¹⁵ Original: »Konstrukt, das gekennzeichnet ist durch Kenntnis aller einschlägigen Codes und auch über alle notwendigen Kompetenzen verfügt, um die vom Text erforderten Operationen erfolgreich durchzuführen«.



authority for canonicity questions on any given *Star Wars* work.¹⁶ Consequently, any work in whose creation the Story Group was involved—which effectively encompasses almost all films, novels, and comics released from April 2014 onwards—is now added to the level of directed TS as established under George Lucas and therefore considered *canonical* on the same level. The novels, comics, and other media forms that had formed the EU were consequently rebranded as *Star Wars Legends*.¹⁷ In its initial press release on the matter, Lucasfilm emphasized that »while the universe that readers knew is changing, it is not being discarded. Creators of new *Star Wars* entertainment have full access to the rich content of the Expanded Universe«. ¹⁸ The release went on to cite several characters and vehicles that were introduced in the EU, but later formed part of *Star Wars: Rebels*. This emphasized the continuation of some aspects of the established system of canonicity management, but also showed clear structural changes in other respects.

On the one hand, the works of the EU can still be classified as ›devolved TS‹: They have been created without direct involvement from either George Lucas or the Story Group and are therefore still framed as ›mis-remembering actual continuity‹ in some instances, while being ›accurate‹ in others (e.g. the elements featured in *Rebels*). On the other hand, Lucasfilm’s paratextual statements regarding the *default* relationship between directed and devolved TS have reversed: Whereas originally, the EU was implicitly treated as part of the official continuity *if not otherwise indicated* (i.e. in cases of open contradictions), nowadays *Legends* only regain that status *if explicitly referred to* in a work of directed TS. As before, this mechanism does not pertain to the level of entire works, but isolates individual elements such as characters, institutions, or locations, which are only considered ›canonical‹ to the degree that they actually appear in directed TS.¹⁹

While this policy change would certainly appear as a violation of the established social contract between author and audience (especially with regard to the adherence to formerly established facts of a diegetic world, cf. WOLF 2012: 213), Lucasfilm and its associates have also released statements with a slightly different tenor: Shelly Shapiro, Editor at Large of Del Rey (the publisher currently holding the license for *Star Wars* novels), told *ScreenRant* in 2014 that the *Legends* label was chosen »[s]o [the EU] wouldn’t get shoved off too far to the side, and treated like it never happened«, comparing *Star Wars*’s devolved TS to the legends of King Arthur, which ostensibly had »kernels of truth in [them]« (DYCE 2014: n.pag.). Beginning with the claim that »we don’t want to just disappear stuff that everybody read and loved« (DYCE 2014: n.pag.), Shapiro’s statement is framed as a reaction to fan concerns about the canonicity of established, well-loved characters. As such, long-time fans may

¹⁶ Cf. http://www.forcecast.net/story/home/ForceCast_273_The_Galaxy_Is_Reading_154431.asp [accessed September 9, 2018].

¹⁷ Cf. <http://www.starwars.com/news/the-legendary-star-wars-expanded-universe-turns-a-new-page> [accessed September 9, 2018].

¹⁸ Cf. before.

¹⁹ Cf. http://starwars.wikia.com/wiki/Jennifer_Heddle/Twitter [accessed September 9, 2018].



justifiably read it as an invitation to continue imagining the *Star Wars* universe and its characters on the basis of its pre-2014 ideal model, integrating devolved *Legends* into the directed narrative wherever they do not explicitly contradict each other.

When it comes to communicating an authorial intention as to what kind of mental model of the *Star Wars* universe an ideal recipient is supposed to construct, Lucasfilm seems increasingly keen to reconcile two opposing interests: creating a ›blank slate‹ for future works to be both more accessible to new audiences and more strongly coordinated than before while at the same time avoiding to alienate *Star Wars*'s established ›hard-core‹ audience that has an invested interest in the perpetuation of the »reading contract that the franchise has been forging with its consumers [...] over the last 40-years which have [sic] created a sort of transmedia baggage« (JENKINS 2018: n.pag.). In order to theoretically account for this ambivalence, I will differentiate between two model readers (MRs) in the following: The dominant MR, i.e. the model reader who only takes directed TS into account when constructing his mental model of the *Star Wars*' storyworld (thereby following the rules of *Star Wars* canon that are currently and ›officially‹ in effect); and the subordinate MR, who follows Lucasfilm's paratextual invitation to compound directed and devolved TS into a unified model, according to ›technically‹ outdated rules of canonicity. Of course, the subordinate MR's marked ›inferiority‹, at least in terms of projected economic impact,²⁰ means that his mental model construction will not always be considered relevant for all elements of the *Star Wars* universe.²¹ However, as the next sections will show, Grand Admiral Thrawn constitutes an example for a character where multiple intra- and extratextual strategies are being employed simultaneously in order to support the effectiveness of Lucasfilm's ambivalent canonicity practices and enable *both* (dominant and subordinate) MRs to successfully integrate newly released works into their respective mental models.

2. The Importance of Being Thrawn. Grand Admiral Thrawn and his Versions

As I already stated in the introduction above, one of Thrawn's interesting features is that his character was effectively erased from *Star Wars* canon by the EU reboot. This has wide-ranging consequences for any attempt to analyse his portrayal in directed *and* devolved TS: Since Lucasfilm's current canonicity practices essentially treat the two levels as ontologically separate, we can no

²⁰ Any comparison between the sales figures of devolved and directed *Star Wars* works will demonstrate that only a fraction of *Star Wars*'s overall audience are invested in the former EU, cf. CANAVAN 2017b: 160.

²¹ For example, given the depiction of Luke Skywalker's death in *Star Wars: The Last Jedi*, it would be hard to integrate any part of the devolved *Legacy of the Force* series of books into Luke's overarching biographical narrative: said series is set later in the timeline, while still featuring him as a main character—very much alive.



longer speak of *one* ›Grand Admiral Thrawn‹ but should rather conceptualize the directed TS's Thrawn by drawing on Uri Margolin's concept of character versions. Margolin operates under the premise that some characters in fictional worlds »can be intuitively regarded as a version of an original, bearing the same proper name, which is located elsewhere« (MARGOLIN 1996: 113). This notion seems applicable to Thrawn, at least if we take ›intuitively‹ to mean ›bearing in mind current canonicity practices‹, with the devolved *Legends* iteration constituting the ›original‹ for the more recent, directed ›variation‹ (cf. MARGOLIN 1996: 115–116). Hence, I will use Margolin's approach as a structural foundation for my analysis. An examination of how the two existing versions of Thrawn relate to each other will elucidate in how far his portrayal caters to both the dominant and subordinate MR.

2.1 A Taxonomy of Character

In order to make meaningful statements on the relation of two versions of a character, several theoretical preliminaries are necessary: First, the term ›character‹, which was only vaguely defined in the sections before, needs to be clarified. Going forward, a ›character‹ will be understood in the sense of Fotis Jannidis's ›Figur²², which he defines as a »[m]ental model of an entity in a fictional world, which is incrementally constructed by a model reader over the course of the reading process, based on the attribution of character information and characterization« (JANNIDIS 2004: 252).²³ In this conceptual framework, ›information‹ designates all propositional as well as sensorial data on a character that is directly given by a text (thus constituting a fact about the character within the storyworld), whereas ›characterization‹ is dependent on more indirect reader inferences (cf. JANNIDIS 2004: 252–253). Since it has been acknowledged that such inferences are often dependent on culturally and historically specific knowledge (cf. EDER/JANNIDIS/SCHNEIDER 2004: 14) and given that this article is mainly concerned with model readers rather than empirical recipients, my analysis will be limited to the level of more or less explicit information.

To further differentiate between different levels of character information, I will draw on Eder, Jannidis and Schneider's notion of a character ›base type‹, understood as a set of basic attributes supposedly shared by all mental models of the respective character. Such a base type consists of a) his²⁴ corporeality, i.e. all stated attributes of a character's body; b) his psyche, which encompasses all mental states ascribed to the character; and c) his sociality, which refers to »particular qualities [that] emerge from social interaction, e.g., social roles« (EDER/JANNIDIS/SCHNEIDER 2010: 13). However, this typology is not

²² Since Jannidis, in contrast to other scholars (cf. DENSON/MAYER 2012), does not differentiate between ›character‹ and ›figure‹, I have taken the liberty to translate his potentially ambiguous German term ›Figur‹ as ›character‹.

²³ Original: »Mentales Modell einer Entität in einer fiktionalen Welt, das von einem Modell-Leser inkrementell aufgrund der Vergabe von Figureninformationen und Charakterisierung im Laufe seiner Lektüre gebildet wird«.

²⁴ For the purposes of readability, and given that the subject matter of this article is a male character, I will use masculine pronouns for the remainder of my analysis.



entirely sufficient when dealing with characters in a franchise like *Star Wars*, with its strong emphasis on a consistent diegetic timeline. Margolin notes that »[a]ny comparison of original and version [...] must also take into account the crucial role the temporal aspect plays in all story worlds [sic], the fact that the life histories they contain are the verbal representations of time bound phenomena and [individuals]« (MARGOLIN 1996: 121). Therefore, to retain the base type's heuristic value in this specific context, I will add to it the category of ›biography‹, which refers to the temporal order and the intervals of/between significant events in a character's fictional life history. I deem events ›significant‹ if they alter the makeup of the character's base type (by modifying and/or adding to its corporeality, psyche, and/or sociality) in ways that cannot be tacitly reversed by works representing later points in time if consistency is to be maintained. Examples for this would be the death of a character's spouse (sociality), the suffering of an injury with permanently debilitating effects (corporeality), or the obtaining of extensive knowledge in the field of media studies (psyche). While not all works contributing to a character's life history after such a diegetic event would necessarily have to explicitly depict its effects (depending on the situations represented), any manifest reversal to the previous state of the character's base type would have to be explained.

Of course, examining the textual information provided on a character is not equivalent to examining the ideal mental model of said character (constructed on the basis of such information), a problem which has been discussed in detail elsewhere (cf. JANNIDIS 2004: 198–207). To resolve this issue in a way that avoids further theoretical elaboration and increases reliability, I will again use *Wookieepedia* as a resource. Self-identifying as »a wiki that strives to be the premier source of information on all aspects of the *Star Wars* universe«²⁵, the website's entries on characters can reasonably be treated as approximations of ideal character models, i.e. a MR's approximate model of the character, constructed in full consideration of all existing *Star Wars* material and in observance of Lucasfilm's rules of canonicity.²⁶ Nevertheless, an exhaustive survey of character information is neither possible within the constraints of this article, nor is it intended.²⁷ Instead, I will first discuss particularly salient similarities and then direct contradictions between the two Thrawns on the level of their base type, before providing an extended analysis of how the characters relate to each other in terms of biography and its management.

2.2 Moving Parts. Thrawn in Legends and Canon

In any transmedial franchise encompassing visual media, iconography is one of the primary means to ensure consistency (cf. HARVEY 2014: 279). Therefore, it is especially noteworthy that in terms of visible corporeality, Thrawn's

²⁵ <http://starwars.wikia.com/wiki/Wookieepedia> [accessed September 9, 2018].

²⁶ For all characters occurring in both *Legends* and canonical works, *Wookieepedia* holds two separate entries that conform to the old and new canonicity rules, respectively.

²⁷ In fact, any attempt to do so would probably result in something akin to the famous map in Borges' short story, taking up almost as many pages of writing as the primary works themselves.



original and his new version are almost identical. Both are depicted as humanoid, with blue skin, red eyes, and blue-black hair.²⁸ *Legends* material added information to this by providing his exact height and weight, information which has (so far) not been established in canonical material. This constitutes a first example of one level of TS containing an informational ellipsis which readers could fill in by referring to another level. At the same time, this ellipsis can be expected not to be salient to readers who do not do so.



Fig. 1:
Thrawn as he appears in the canonical *Star Wars: Rebels* Episode »An Inside Man« (left) and in a 2003 *Legends* article in *Star Wars Insider* (right; WALLACE/PEÑA/CORRONEY 2003: 45)

With regard to psyche, consistency issues are less frequent, mostly due to the fact that many if not most changes in a character's interiority from one work to another can theoretically be attributed to »reidentification over time« (MARGOLIN 1996: 121). However, it is noteworthy that both (canonical and *Legends*) Thrawns are frequently described as military geniuses (as »brilliant military

²⁸ <http://starwars.wikia.com/wiki/Mitth'raw'nuruodo> [accessed September 9, 2018]. In the remainder of this section, all information on the character that is not otherwise indicated is drawn from this source.



strategist« and »master of military tactics«, respectively) who study works of art owned or created by their opponents in order to predict their behaviour.

On the level of sociality, Thrawn has been ascribed a variety of affiliations, social roles, and co-actants. Both original and variation hold, at least at some point during their life histories, military positions in an alien government called the Chiss Ascendancy, and also within the Galactic Empire. For both affiliations, the sub-groups with which Thrawn is associated differ slightly in name and function between canon and *Legends*. However, other details, like the name of a spaceship that Thrawn commands for the Empire (»Chimaera«) or the names and social roles of several of his associates (»Captain Pellaeon«, »Rukh«, »Ar'Alani«), are identical for both iterations. Again, devolved TS offers more information, additionally stating Thrawn's affiliation to a secret political organization and his role as leader of the »Empire of the Hand«, another autocratic government. Similar to his corporeality, none of these additional pieces of information clash with information from directed TS.

Most of the contradictions between Thrawn's original and variation occur on the level of biography, with the order and point of occurrence of significant events markedly altered. For example, in *Legends* continuity, Thrawn first assumes command of the Chimaera several years after the events of *Star Wars: Episode VI – Return of the Jedi*, whereas the new canon sees him commanding the ship years prior to *Star Wars: Episode IV – A New Hope*. Similarly, in *Legends*, his relationship to the character Rukh, a personal assassin and bodyguard, goes back to some point between the events of *Episode V – The Empire Strikes Back* and *Return of the Jedi*, whereas *Rebels* already shows it at a point prior to *A New Hope*. The same goes for his promotion to the rank of Grand Admiral.

What all these biographical shifts have in common is that they move significant events to what used to be a substantial narrative ellipsis in Thrawn's life history. On the level of devolved TS, Thrawn's earliest appearance in terms of storyworld timeline, presented in the novel *Outbound Flight* (2006), is set between *Episode I – The Phantom Menace* and *Episode II – Attack of the Clones*. He next appears in the short story *Mist Encounter* (1995), taking place shortly after the events of *Episode III – Revenge of the Sith*. What follows is a gap of 18 diegetic years, after which he reappears in a novella titled *Dark Forces: Soldier for the Empire* (1997), set one year prior to *A New Hope*. All directed TS material featuring Thrawn that has been released or announced to date²⁹—the third and fourth season of *Rebels* as well as the novel *Thrawn*, its comic book adaptation (2018), and its sequel—is set within this ellipsis, so that no point in the timeline is occupied by two contradictory events.³⁰ Notably, the entire first chapter and parts of the second chapter of *Thrawn* are an adaptation of *Mist Encounter*, with the only alterations being the addition of a focalized character

²⁹ That is, by January 2019.

³⁰ The only exception to this rule is formed by a series of extended analepses in *Thrawn: Alliances*, which take place between *Attack of the Clones* and *Revenge of the Sith*. This time window, however, is not covered by devolved TS content either.



witnessing the events, the deletion of specific references to another minor character, and some alterations of a spaceship design (in order to match one established by the prequel trilogy).³¹

This temporal ›overlap‹ between directed and devolved TS would, of course, be obvious to the subordinate MR of *Star Wars*,³² and can easily be integrated into Thrawn’s ideal character model on the basis of pre-2014’s canonicity rules by ›adjusting‹ *Mist Encounter*’s representation of events in accordance with the novel.³³ With their marked reference to a *Legends* work, *Thrawn*’s initial chapters can be seen as a hint for the subordinate MR that, other than Lucasfilm’s official stance on canonicity may sometimes suggest, the life history of Thrawn has been left largely unaltered. In fact, there is (so far) little evidence to the contrary: Due to the specific temporal relation between the directed and devolved TS featuring Thrawn,³⁴ all licensed works in which he appears can theoretically be compounded into a unified life history, with local contradictions occurring mostly on the level of biography, i.e. the level on which numerous precedents for resolving contradictions have already been set prior to 2014 (cf. section 1.1).

With regard to the level of actual empirical recipients, the biographical changes made to Thrawn may actually have a positive effect on the perceived ›faithfulness‹ of the new Thrawn to the original: All of the temporally ›displaced‹ (altered) elements mentioned above were originally featured in Timothy Zahn’s Thrawn trilogy, which, apart from introducing Thrawn to the *Star Wars* universe, has also received much stronger public attention than most *Star Wars* works beyond the films,³⁵ making it, for many recipients, the first and most formative encounter with the character. This means that Thrawn, as he appears in *Rebels*—a Grand Admiral commanding the Chimaera, with a personal servant named Rukh and an officer named Pellaeon—³⁶ is, with regard to these base type attributes, *more* similar to the character audiences remember from *Heir to the Empire* than he would have been if his ›original‹ biography (the sequence of significant life events as it was established in *Legends*) had been more closely observed.³⁷

However, this strategy for ensuring character recognizability also pushes the limits of directed TS’s ability to accommodate the reading strategies of the subordinate MR. While the alteration of biography in itself is, as

³¹ [http://starwars.wikia.com/wiki/Thrawn_\(novel\)#Continuity](http://starwars.wikia.com/wiki/Thrawn_(novel)#Continuity) [accessed September 9, 2018].

³² This assumption is supported by the fact that the *Wookieepedia* entries for *Thrawn* and *Mist Encounter* both make explicit note of the adaptation.

³³ Interestingly, *Mist Encounter* was itself ›adjusted‹ for re-print in 2007’s *Outbound Flight* paperback edition, with references to past events being altered in accordance with the prequel trilogy.

³⁴ I am—again—referring to intradiegetic time.

³⁵ The first novel topped the *New York Times* bestseller list and proved popular enough to merit a ›20th anniversary edition‹ in 2011. Furthermore, the entire trilogy was voted one of the ›top 100 Science-Fiction and Fantasy Books‹ in a poll conducted by NPR in 2011 (cf. WELDON 2011: n.pag.).

³⁶ In this context, Thrawn’s rank holds special significance, since one of his most obvious iconographic features—the white uniform—is tied to it.

³⁷ In this latter case, none of the mentioned base type attributes could appear in *Star Wars Rebels*, since *Legends* continuity has established other, contrary attributes for this point in intradiegetic time.



explained above, largely unproblematic in this regard, the further development of some elements from their new points of introduction has led to contradictions that are somewhat harder to resolve: Rukh's implied death in the fourth season of *Rebels* is particularly problematic, because it would preclude his substantial involvement in the events of the Thrawn trilogy, especially his responsibility for Thrawn's death. Here, simply ›forgetting‹ certain elements of the novels while keeping the overall narrative intact would seem hardly feasible. While, as stated above, Rukh is never explicitly shown to have died in *Rebels*,³⁸ the *Wookieepedia* entry on the subject indicates a wide consensus that he did.³⁹ Consequently, while it would be theoretically possible to explain his appearance in the Thrawn trilogy (e.g. by assuming that he did, in fact, survive, or by treating his devolved TS iteration as a different character with the same name), all such explanations would go beyond the usual amount of charity required of the subordinate MR.

In summary, it can be stated that when re-introducing a version of Thrawn into their transmedial universe, Lucasfilm was, to a large extent, accommodating the interests of the subordinate MR: On the level of base type, the *Legends* original and its canonical version share a majority of basic attributes, while most existing contradictions can be dealt with by applying the now-outdated canonicity rules of the EU. Furthermore, all directed TS featuring Thrawn so far has only ›filled‹ an ellipsis in the original's life history, facilitating the compounding of a single, unified course of events. Nevertheless, some of the biographical changes have resulted in inconsistencies that stretch the established requirements of charity on the part of the subordinate MR. It may be in anticipation of or reaction to such problems that Lucasfilm has strategically used attributions of narrative authority to increase acceptance of Thrawn's new version. This will be discussed in the next section.

3. Heir to the (Corporate) Empire. Thrawn and His Authors

When it comes to the question of how transmedia storyworlds are constructed by recipients, it has long been acknowledged that questions of authorship can have a strong impact. Wolf notes that »[t]hose works [...] that typically possess the highest degree of canonicity are those which come from the innermost circles of authorship, which surround the originator and main author of a world« (WOLF 2012: 271), while Margolin specifies that

we associate a fictional [individual] with the circumstances of its creation, hence with its originator. Accordingly, if original and version occur in texts by the same author, and if they and their surrounding worlds can be seen as compatible, we are ready to construe

³⁸ Toward the end of the *Rebels* episode *Family Reunion* (2018), Rukh is trapped in a power generator that has just been switched on. In an audio transmission heard later in the episode, his screaming and electric noises can be heard in the background. He is neither mentioned nor represented after this point.

³⁹ <http://starwars.wikia.com/wiki/Rukh> [accessed September 9, 2018].



each of these texts as a partial description of one and the same [individual]'s life story (MARGOLIN 1996: 117).

For dealing with transmedial universes, Margolin's phrasing needs to be slightly modified to accommodate some specific elements and aspects of such universes: First, we need to acknowledge that we can no longer speak of individual texts to which ›original‹ and ›variation‹ must be attributed, but rather of separate glocal subworlds or continuities, which are each based on a number of texts. Second, the idea of individual authors is not sufficient to describe narrative authority in the context of franchises like *Star Wars*: While individual authors have been credited by fans with the creation of certain characters,⁴⁰ these were always kept subordinate to George Lucas, the overarching ›auteur‹ of *Star Wars* (cf. LYDEN 2012). Due to his role, Lucas could choose to borrow some elements from other authors' works for his films and series, thereby granting them the canonicity status of directed TS, while rendering others apocryphal as ›mis-rememberings‹ (cf. PROCTOR/FREEMAN 2016: 231). Therefore, acceptance and compounding of a character version with its original (in a MR) does not (only) depend on singular authorship, but also on adherence to more complex authorization practices. Third, given the canonicity practices described in section one, the condition of ›compatibility‹ should not be taken too strictly, since overriding certain incompatibilities is the exact purpose of said practices.

Keeping this in mind, Margolin's principle, re-formulated to be applicable to *Star Wars* as a transmedial franchise, would run as follows: ›we associate a fictional individual with the circumstances of its creation, hence with its originator and their degree of narrative authority. Accordingly, if original and variation occur in texts by the same author or authors with higher narrative authority, and if they and their surrounding subworlds can be seen as compatible according to established canonicity practices, we are ready to construe each of these subworlds as a partial description of one and the same individual‹.

The authorial attributions made in connection with Thrawn's re-introduction to canon seem designed to ensure maximal readiness to accept his iterations as partial descriptions of one and the same character in the subordinate MR. The first announcement of his ›return‹ in *Rebels* was made on July 16, 2016, during a convention panel at *Star Wars Celebration Europe* by Dave Filoni (cf. TACH 2016). Filoni, who served as supervising director of *Star Wars: The Clone Wars* before fulfilling the same function on *Rebels* (eventually abandoning this position in favor of executive production duties), has, on several occasions, framed himself as a kind of ›spiritual successor‹ to George Lucas, with whom he directly collaborated on *The Clone Wars*. He stated that he saw it as his task to »be a guide to other people [i.e. authors] coming on board just as George [Lucas] was a guide to [him]« (as quoted in BROOKS 2013: n.pag.), and he repeatedly stressed his commitment to maintaining the »integrity and the authenticity of *Star Wars*« (as quoted in HUVER 2018: n.pag.) by doing so.

⁴⁰ *Wookieepedia* entries frequently include information on the creators of specific characters, cf. for example http://starwars.wikia.com/wiki/Aayla_Secura/Legends#Behind_the_scenes [accessed September 9, 2018].



These statements position Filoni somewhere between what Wolf calls the ›heir‹ and the ›torchbearer‹ of a transmedial franchise, respectively: Whereas the ›heir‹ is directly chosen by the originator of a franchise, a ›torchbearer‹ would be appointed by whoever owns the franchise’s IP after it no longer belongs to the originator (cf. WOLF 2012: 274–276).⁴¹ What both have in common is that they are generally attributed the authority to make additions and changes to a franchise, up to the same degree that the originator had the right to. Of course, Filoni was never technically appointed as George Lucas’ successor – neither by the man himself, nor by Kathleen Kennedy, who now manages Lucasfilm and its intellectual property – but the fact that his statements to that effect are being published on the official *Star Wars* website indicates at least tacit acceptance on the part of Lucasfilm’s corporate leadership. As pseudo-successor to Lucas, Filoni could be assumed to also ›inherit‹, in the eyes of the subordinate MR, Lucas’ authority to adapt characters from devolved TS works with notable alterations, which is exactly what happened to Thrawn.

Additionally, on the very same day as Filoni’s initial reveal of the new Thrawn, a second statement was made via an official Twitter account of publisher Del Rey, announcing the novel *Thrawn* for spring 2017 (cf. TACH 2016). It would be written by none other than Timothy Zahn, Thrawn’s original creator. Not only did this cover Margolin’s condition for character compounding in a narrower sense.⁴² Zahn’s statements in an interview on *StarWars.com* also notably underscore and reinforce the possibility of integrating the new, directed TS into the character’s established life history. Asked how he approached the character’s psyche »at this point in his life and career«, Zahn responded that »[h]e’s the same character« and that

[i]t was simply a matter of getting as much information of what he does and how he acts on *Rebels* and start back where I had last left him in the timeline with the ›Mist Encounter‹ short story. [...] In the Thrawn trilogy, he is essentially the leader of the Empire or at least the Imperial Remnant. Here, he is having to prove himself (as quoted in FLOYD 2017: n.pag.).

What is striking here is, on the one hand, the explicit framing of Thrawn’s life history as simply being ›picked up from where it was left‹, and, on the other, the comparison of the character’s sociality and psyche in *Thrawn* with that in the Thrawn trilogy – a comparison that seems to be conducted merely on an axis of temporal, rather than ontological, difference. Given that the Thrawn trilogy is the work that is probably the hardest to reconcile with the biographical changes made to Thrawn (cf. section two), this claim to consistency is as salient as it is puzzling.

⁴¹ Wolf assumes the originator’s death to be the only possible circumstance that could cause such an ownership to change. While this is not the case for *Star Wars*, Wolf’s terms can otherwise be imported without modification.

⁴² Despite the complex system of authorship governing *Star Wars*, Zahn’s role as creator of Thrawn still seems to be relevant, as it has been repeatedly emphasized in paratexts, and even explicitly framed as the reason for his authorship of *Thrawn*: »Who better to pen this tale than the man who created the character himself, Timothy Zahn?« (FLOYD 2017: n.pag.).



It can therefore be ascertained that, in addition to a textual structure that facilitates the integration of two worlds that are ›officially‹ ontologically separate, Lucasfilm also deploys the authority of specific authors to a) justify the changes made to a character and to b) resolve resulting continuity issues. Interestingly, while Dave Filoni was tasked with making the original announcement of Thrawn’s inclusion in the new canon, the other paratext – which includes the more notable attempts to »police proper interpretations, insisting on how [it] would like us to read the text« (GRAY 2010: 79) – is focused on Timothy Zahn, indicating that, despite all insistence on a »need to radically shift our understanding of what authorship is« (JENKINS 2018: n.pag.) for transmedial franchises, there may still be some contexts in which a work, or part of it, is considered subject to the authority of its direct author, rather than a storyworld-originator.

Conclusion

As I have attempted to show, up until 2014, *Star Wars* characters – understood as mental models of an ideal model reader – were frequently constructed by accumulating a unified life history from various individual texts that were contradictory when taken as a whole. This accumulation was regulated by a set of canonicity rules built around the idea of circles of authorship. While the reboot and the re-branding of the EU to *Legends* created a new model reader, who was no longer expected to remember any previously published *Star Wars* works other than the films (and, possibly, the television series), Lucasfilm and its associates also released statements implying that, apart from this dominant model reader, they were still targeting a second, subordinated model reader. This latter MR is assumed to be familiar with and invested in *Legends* material and to still create his mental model of the *Star Wars* storyworld and its characters according to old canonicity rules, where possible.

In the case of the character Thrawn, the subordinate model reader’s interests are notably accommodated in two areas: first, the temporal and semantic relations between the new, canonical texts on Thrawn on the one hand and his prior appearances in *Legends* on the other. By setting all new texts that feature Thrawn (released to this day) in what used to be a narrative ellipsis, as well as by keeping the character’s base type largely intact, the integration of *all* texts into one continuous, non-contradictory life history is facilitated, albeit not perfectly. Secondly, on the level of paratexts, the (mainly biographical) changes made to the character are legitimized by resorting to the authority of Dave Filoni, who is framed as an heir or torchbearer to George Lucas; at the same time, the implication that Thrawn should still be understood as a single character with a single life history was reinforced by Timothy Zahn, who, as the original creator of Thrawn, is framed as *the* (or at least *a*) legitimate authority on the character and his attributes. Judging from fan reactions (cf. introduction), the combination of these strategies may indeed have resulted in



audiences accepting the ›new Thrawn‹ as identical with the original, or at least as a ›faithful‹ adaptation.

Questions on the complicated relationships between transmedia texts and their respective storyworlds, fan practices, issues of distributed authorship, as well as the management of canonicity between these various actors are getting increasingly complex. I hope that this article, with its combination of theoretical models and analytical approaches, has successfully provided an example of how transmedial franchises and their corporate owners are addressing questions of character identity and consistency in an »Age of Reboots« (CANAVAN 2017b: 153). Of course, much work remains to be done in this area. Considering my focus on model readers and ideal character models, the reading strategies and continuity discussions of empirical readers seem to be a particularly intriguing field of inquiry. What remains to be seen is whether Lucasfilm will continue its strategy of accommodating fans of *Legends* material in the ways described here, or whether their multiple model readers will, much like *Star Wars*'s canonicity levels, eventually make way for a less differentiated system.

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Mark Hibbett

In Search of Doom. Tracking a Wandering Character Through Data

Abstract

This paper will describe the process of generating a corpus of comics for an examination of the transmedial development of the character Doctor Doom during the period known as ›The Marvel Age«. It will briefly define what ›The Marvel Age« means in these terms, and describe the rationale for choosing which items should be included in the corpus. It will then go into some detail about the use of online comics databases, notably The Grand Comics Database, and describe the many difficulties inherent in the use of a dataset that has been collaboratively generated over a long period of time without clear editorial guidance, and suggest data-cleaning methods by which these issues can be mitigated. Finally, it will discuss how this corpus will be used in future to analyse the progress of Doctor Doom’s characterisation through this period.

1. Introduction

Ever since he was created in *The Fantastic Four* #5 (1962) Doctor Doom has been a recurring character in every aspect of Marvel’s transmedia universes. He has been the main villain in all four live action Fantastic Four films, including the unreleased Roger Corman movie (1994), featured in almost every Marvel cartoon series from *The Marvel Superheroes* (1966) to the current *Avengers Assemble* (2013), and has appeared in video games, trading cards, toy ranges, and even hip-hop tracks. In the core Marvel comics universe he has appeared in over a hundred separate series, but until the recent *Infamous Iron Man* series



(2016), he has only ever headlined one, short-lived, ongoing series of his own, set in the ›Marvel 2099‹ universe (2013). My research examines the idea that the shared ›universe‹ of Marvel comics in the so-called ›Marvel Age‹ period 1961–1987 was an early example of the shared-world, multiple author storytelling which has become the source material for the hugely successful ›Marvel Cinematic Universe‹ of the 21st century.

As part of this I propose Doctor Doom as a key case study, very different from the more usual subjects such as Batman or Spider-man, in that ›his‹ largely unsupervised transmedial and transtextual wandering through Marvel storyworld(s) making ›him‹ an excellent example of what Jan-Noël Thon has described as a »Global Transmedia Character Network« (2018: n.pag.)—an assemblage of character-versions that can be constructed from single and serial works across media and media types. My research will examine how Doctor Doom’s fictional personality developed in these conditions by assessing its coherence over different media through different periods of history, and under different creators, through an analysis of every authored appearance made by the character during this period. In order to conduct such an investigation, a clearly identified corpus of texts is required, and this paper will therefore describe the process of defining, collecting, and investigating such a corpus.

2. Defining the Corpus

It is important to note that many of the decisions made about which texts to include within my corpus were based on the needs of my own research into Doctor Doom’s emergence as a transmedia character during the period 1961 to 1987. The term ›text‹ was used in the literary theory sense to mean any object that can be ›read‹ (interpreted) in order to receive a meaning or a message, with a specific focus on texts with a pre-determined (›authored‹) narrative such as a comic, television series, or radio show (cf. EAGLETON 1996). Other items, such as clothing, dolls, or branded gifts, would, of course, be vitally important in a wider assessment of Doom’s place in the history of transmedia, but their lack of a pre-authored narrative (as opposed to ›narratives‹ devised ad hoc in play by their individual owners) meant that they could not be considered as part of the character’s development within any of Marvel’s own storyworlds.

The process of selecting texts was similarly restricted by the date of publication for comics, as well as by the date of release or broadcast for other texts. My research focuses on Doctor Doom’s presence during what I have termed ›The Marvel Age‹ elsewhere—a period characterised by the growth and eventual decline of Marvel’s pre-eminence, commercially and creatively, within the American superhero comics market, bookended by the editorial reigns of Stan Lee and Jim Shooter (cf. HIBBETT 2018). According to this definition, ›The Marvel Age‹ begins with the first modern Marvel Superhero comic, *The Fantastic Four* #1, cover dated November 1961 and edited by Stan Lee, and ends



with the last month of comics to uniformly name Jim Shooter as Editor-In-Chief, i.e. those cover dated October 1987.¹

Stating the cover date, rather than the actual date of publication is necessary because the two are not the same, and the difference in time between them may vary. The standard practice in magazine publishing is to use a cover date that is some weeks or months ahead of the actual on-sale date, in theory to give the publication a longer shelf-life before the news vendor removes it from sale (cf. ADAMS 1990). During the 1960s, US comics publishers tended to use a cover date two to three months ahead of the on-sale date (cf. LEVITZ 2010). In order to ensure that other media items were available to consumers at the same time as the comics in the corpus, any text published, broadcast, or otherwise issued between August 1961 and July 1987 was thus included.

An apparently obvious criterion for inclusion in the corpus is that all texts should feature an appearance of Doctor Doom, although this was not quite as straightforward as it may appear at first. The original approach for selection was to only include appearances of Doctor Doom within the contemporary timeline of the story, excluding non-narrative ›pin-up pages‹, flashbacks, or other representations, such as on a television screen in *The Fantastic Four #18* (1963, cf. fig. 1) or in a gallery of statues in *The Fantastic Four #10* (1963).



Fig. 1:
The Fantastic Four watch Doctor Doom on television in *Fantastic Four #18*

¹ For reference, Mike Voiles informative online database Mike's Amazing World serves as a good starting point, cf. <http://www.mikesamazingworld.com/mikes/features/comic.php?comid=40952> [accessed April 17, 2018] and <http://www.mikesamazingworld.com/mikes/features/comic.php?comid=48885> [accessed April 18, 2018].



However, it soon became clear during the selection process that, although these ›non-actual‹ appearances or representations are not part of Doom’s own fictional ›life experience‹, they do provide evidence of his existence within the storyworld at that time. They would thus need to be examined as part of any analysis of the character’s transmediality, and so all texts with any mentions or appearance, however slight, were included.

An important caveat to the above is that all the items included were either published or licensed by Marvel. Images of Doom appeared in numerous fanzines and underground publications during this period, and although an analysis of the character’s existence in such publications would be important for a broader investigation of the transmedial history during this period, these images were used as illustrations, rather than for storytelling, and thus did not contribute to any form of storyworld narrative. They were consequently excluded from the corpus.

During the 1970s, Marvel themselves published a range of reprint series and collected editions, such as *Origins of Marvel Comics* (LEE 1974), which gave new readers an opportunity to catch up with older stories as continuity grew in importance for the fictional universe (cf. HOWE 2004). These collections did not, however, include any new material as part of the narrative, and so they were excluded from the corpus. Foreign editions and translations of the stories were also excluded for the same reason. Very occasionally, foreign publishers would make amendments to the reprinted stories. For example, Oldhams, the publishers of *Fantastic* in the UK, would make changes to costumes in order to maintain the continuity of their own, slightly different, publishing timeline (cf. STRINGER 2007)—but otherwise these were simply reprints and thus excluded.

The final inclusion criteria for texts to be included in the corpus were thus:

1. Part of a pre-authored narrative
2. Appeared during ›The Marvel Age‹
3. Featured Doctor Doom
4. Published or licensed by Marvel
5. Not a reprint or translation

3. Collecting the Corpus

The vast majority of Doctor Doom’s appearances during this period were in comics, and although reading through 25 years of Marvel Comics might be quite enjoyable, it would probably increase the length of my PhD by several years. Luckily for me, several groups had already catalogued these comics and made the results of their research publicly available and, for the most part, searchable.



Several Doctor Doom fan sites exist online, such as Fuck Yeah Dr Doom,² Ask Doctor Doom,³ and Doomfans,⁴ but for the most part these concentrate purely on humorous memes of the character, links to other (mostly defunct) supervillain sites, or lists of the authors' favourite Doctor Doom stories. One fan site, The Latverian Embassy does feature a chronological list of the character's appearances,⁵ but it has not been updated for at least eight years. This need not have been a problem, as the texts required for this corpus are much older, but initial investigations showed that the list drawn up by the site administrator was only partially complete. When comparing the site's list of 1960s comics to other, more complete reference sites (detailed below) it was found to have missed 28% (10 out of 36) of Doctor Doom's appearances in that decade alone.

Online comics databases proved to be a much more useful source of information. These are websites which draw on databases, rather than being purely textual, offering quantitative as well as qualitative information. The content of these databases varies, but it would generally include the title, publication dates, story titles, creators, publishing companies, covers, character appearances, and a brief synopsis of each publication. Unlike a fan site, these online databases contain information about thousands of comics, usually aiming to cover all those published within its historical remit, rather than focusing on a few favourites as fan sites tend to. The Marvel Chronology Project has a mission to place every story from Marvel comics into an in-universe chronological order.⁶ This means that it places, for instance, the six issue mini-series *Books Of Doom* (2007) first in a list of Doom appearances, interspersed with flashbacks to sections from other stories such as *Fantastic Four Annual #2* (1964) and *Marvel Superheroes #20* (1969).

This concentration on chronology within the Marvel comics diegesis makes The Marvel Chronology Project unique amongst comics database, which otherwise focus on the order of publication. It also differs from other large sites by not allowing users to directly edit or update the underlying database which generates its content. Other major sites link directly to their databases, so that the most up to date information is instantly available and, in most cases, users can perform simple queries in order to access the specific information they are looking for. The Marvel Chronology Project does not allow this level of access, presenting static reports with the option to email the site administrator, Russ Chappell, to suggest amendments or to request specific, limited, additional information. This latter function has been utilised by other research projects looking at the interactions between characters (cf. ALBERICH/ROSSELLO/MIRO-JULIA 2002), but the lack of accessibility to the main dataset, and

² <http://fuckyeahdrdoom.tumblr.com/?og=1> [accessed September 2, 2017].

³ <http://ask-doctor-doom.tumblr.com/?og=1> [accessed September 2, 2017].

⁴ <https://doomfans.dreamwidth.org/> [accessed September 2, 2017].

⁵ <http://www.angelfire.com/zine2/drdoom/> [accessed 17 November, 2017].

⁶ <http://www.chronologyproject.com/> [accessed January 7, 2017].



the absence of open data about publication dates, severely limited its usefulness for this project.

The other major online databases are community-based and, to different degrees, allow direct access to their data so that simple queries can be used to extract customised datasets. They also use online data entry forms that allow anybody to suggest changes or updates to the data, although they are not completely ›open‹ systems and still require moderator approval before going live. This ›peer review‹ of the data makes it, theoretically, more comprehensive and reliable than those set up by single enthusiasts, although it is still possible for different biases to arise between communities. For instance, conventions might develop differently as to whether background glimpses of characters should be included, or whether to categorise alternate universe versions as the same character.

Four of these databases were consulted, each with slight differences in the data they held. The oldest of these was The Grand Comics Database,⁷ which was set up as a successor to the paper-based *Amateur Press Alliance for Indexing* (BOTTORFF 2001). The Grand Comics Database allows users to download their entire database as an SQL database file. It is a relational database containing all of their current data in a format which can be uploaded to the user's own computer server, so that new queries can be run, and reports created, without needing internet access or further interaction with the site owners (cf. DALE 1986). This made it a much more flexible tool than its competitors, which allowed querying only via API (Application Programming Interface), a means of giving users the ability to pass simple queries to the online database and receive datasets in a format which can then be used to display customised information (cf. CHRISTENSSON 2016).

One such is The Comic Book Database,⁸ which has been described as cataloguing »every comic book, graphic novel, manga, illustrator, publisher, writer, and character [...] ever« (HOOVER 2013: n.pag.). It claims to be »the largest database of its kind«, while its competitor Comic Vine similarly calls itself »the largest comic database online.«⁹ Comic Vine, first established in 2006, requires registration to allow queries and edits, and its customisable data outputs are formatted in a way that makes it more difficult to ›scrape‹ data. ›Data scraping‹ is a way of extracting data from websites or legacy computer systems, sometimes with automatic programs but often by simple human interaction, such as copying information from a webpage into a text editor and then manipulating it into a format whereby it can be used in a database (cf. CHRISTENSSON 2011). This was the main method used to extract data from Comic Vine, The Comic Book Database, and also The Marvel Database,¹⁰ another online system similar to the others. Data scraping provided all of the data required without the need for setting up complex API queries or complying with

⁷ <https://www.comics.org/> [accessed January 10, 2017].

⁸ <http://www.comicbookdb.com/> [accessed January 10, 2017].

⁹ <http://comicvine.gamespot.com> [accessed January 10, 2017].

¹⁰ http://marvel.wikia.com/wiki/Marvel_Database [accessed January 10, 2017].



the limited number of allowable data interrogations (which these sites enforced).

By using this methodology, basic listings of comics featuring Doctor Doom were extracted from The Comic Book Database and The Marvel Database, although the formatting of information on Comic Vine meant that very little was practically available from there. In all of these cases, the data extracted was less rich and less adaptable than that which was available by uploading The Grand Comics Database SQL file to a personal server. The eventual strategy was then to use The Grand Comics Database as the base of the corpus, to check it against the less rich datasets scraped from The Comic Book Database, Marvel Database, and (to a much lesser extent) the Marvel Chronology Project, with Comic Vine used as a tool for manually checking individual cases. In this way, the biases inherent in using the results from any single community were avoided, while also increasing the likelihood of including every relevant appearance.

This is a similar approach to that used by Bart Beaty's *What Were Comics?*,¹¹ a database-driven project sponsored by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada which seeks to develop a data-driven history of the American comic book by indexing formal elements such as story length, page layout, and creator credits in a database structure. *What Were Comics?* also uses The Grand Comics Database as its main data source, and then ratifies the dataset using two other sources—in their case *Overstreet Price Guide*, and *mycomicshop.com*. Their approach differs from the one used for this project in that they require a comic to appear in all three datasets before including it in their corpus, whereas here it was required to only appear in one. This was to ensure that every possible appearance of Doctor Doom was included, in contrast to the objective of *What Were Comics?*, which was to generate a much more general random sample of 2% of all comics published between 1934 and 2014.

When The Grand Comics Database was queried using the previously defined inclusion criteria, 243 comics were discovered which, apparently, featured Doctor Doom during this period. The next stage was to link this database to those scraped from Comic Book Database and Marvel Database to see if any stories had been missed. But before this could be done, a great deal of data cleaning was required, a process whereby datasets are cleaned of any errors, and coding schemes are standardised to enable linkage and analysis (cf. VAN DEN BROECK et al. 2005).

The databases used in this research had many issues with data being recorded in non-uniform ways. There were several differences, for instance, between the way series titles were recorded. The use of the definite article was not uniform, within databases or across them, so that some databases referred to a series as (for example) *The Fantastic Four* while others referred to it as just *Fantastic Four*, making linking databases by name very difficult. Some series

¹¹ <http://www.whatwerecomics.com/> [accessed May 14, 2018].



also changed names over time, such as *The X-Men* becoming *The Uncanny X-Men* and then *New X-Men*, and each dataset dealt with this in a different way, too. Similar problems occurred around the use of hyphens, volume numbers, and how to catalogue special editions and annuals.

The data cleaning policy used was to edit the information in all datasets to conform to the conventions of The Grand Comics Database, using Comics Vine as an independent adjudicator where The Grand Comics Database had no data available. This was mostly done by hand, and took considerable time, but when it was finished, the datasets could be linked together, revealing 22 stories listed in other databases as featuring Doctor Doom that were not present in The Grand Comics Database. However, further checks reduced this number to three, as, on closer examination, the other 19 cases were all either mistakes, where Doom did not appear at all, or incorrectly listed reprints.

The remaining three cases definitely featured Doctor Doom, including a very enjoyable guest appearance in *Marvel Comics Super Special* starring the band Kiss (1977, cf. fig. 2). Hence, these were added to the first draft of the actual corpus, bringing it to a grand total of 246 comic books.



Fig. 2:
Doctor Doom battles Kiss in *Marvel Comics Super Special* #1

My overall corpus was not restricted to comic books, however, and further investigations were required to identify other texts featuring Doctor Doom during this period. This process was primarily based on internet searches using Google. A variety of search terms were used, combining the variant versions



of the character's name (›Doctor Doom‹, ›Dr Doom‹, ›Dr. Doom‹ and ›Victor Von Doom‹) with words describing media types (such as ›television‹, ›radio‹, ›film‹ and so forth). Similar searches were run using variations of ›Fantastic Four‹, under the assumption that any media featuring Marvel's ›first family‹ might also feature their archenemy.

Other items took a little more digging. Doom's appearance in *The Marvel Superheroes*-cartoon was widely known, but there was only one mention on a single blog of a long deleted, live action segment featuring the character created by WNAC-TV in Boston, Massachusetts, to promote the series.¹² Several texts were only discovered by accident while researching others. For example, the Power Records-album *The Way It Began* (1974, cf. fig. 3)—an audio adaptation of *The Fantastic Four* #126 in which Doctor Doom briefly appears—was discovered when it appeared in search results for an episode of the similarly titled Hanna Barbera-cartoon episode »The Way It All Began« (1967).

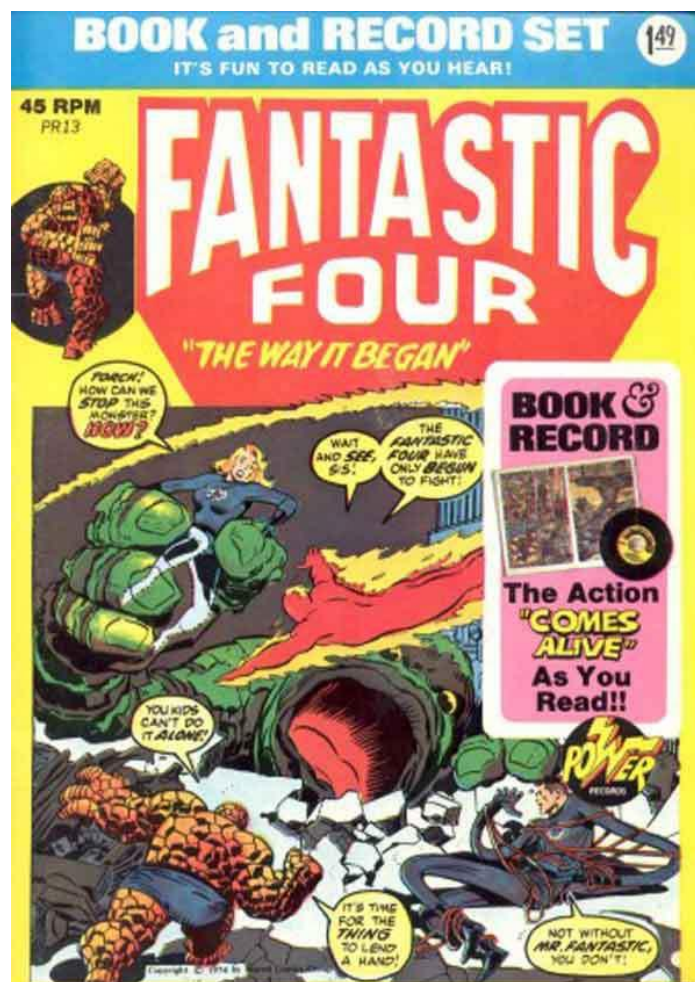


Fig. 3:
Power Records' book and record »The Way It All Began«

¹² [https://lostmediawiki.com/The_Marvel_Super_Heroes_\(lost_live-action_segments_from_WNAC-TV_in_Boston;_1966\)](https://lostmediawiki.com/The_Marvel_Super_Heroes_(lost_live-action_segments_from_WNAC-TV_in_Boston;_1966)) [accessed May 13, 2018].



In this way, a total of 23 additional texts have (so far) been discovered, from the obvious, such as episodes of the two *Fantastic Four*-cartoon series, to the obscure, like the Bill Murray-starring *The Fantastic Four Radio Show* (1975). The less straightforward and methodical nature of this part of the research meant that the process of updating the corpus would of necessity require a flexible cataloguing methodology beyond that supplied by the basic datasets and system architecture downloaded from The Grand Comics Database. In order to create a dynamic, updatable system of data collection an online content management system was developed. It was based on the .SQL file from The Grand Comics Database, with additional fields and tables added to suit the wider texts that would be entered.

Data entry forms were built using the PHP language, originally developed by Rasmus Ledorf in 1994.¹³ This allowed the system architecture to be easily customised and for data to be updated remotely whenever new facts came to light. For instance, whenever a reading of the actual comics showed that incorrect credits had been entered in The Grand Comics Database it could be easily changed by logging into the online repository. Similarly, newly discovered appearances of Doctor Doom could be added to the corpus quickly by using the data entry forms. Another benefit of this 'bespoke' system was that it meant the system could be developed further to meet needs identified during the actual analysis of the corpus.

4. Cleaning the Data

Upon examining the actual texts identified, it quickly became clear that just because The Grand Comics Database listed a comic as featuring Doctor Doom, it did not necessarily mean that the character was featured within the narrative itself. The different criteria for inclusion used by the many contributors to the database meant that, occasionally, comics would appear in the dataset that did not fit my own criteria, despite having passed through the initial data checking. *Journey Into Mystery* #125 (1966) is a good example of this issue. According to The Grand Comics Database (though to none of the other databases) it does feature an appearance by Doctor Doom, but upon reading the text I found that he is entirely missing from the story. Most of my reading was done via the Marvel Unlimited platform,¹⁴ an App which gives subscribers access to over 20,000 digital comics, scanned from Marvel's archives. This is an excellent resource, but it does have one significant limitation in that it generally only contains story pages. Sometimes letters pages are included, but never anything else, such as adverts or additional editorial content. After extensive internet searching, a scanned copy of the entire issue was tracked down, which

¹³ Cf. <http://php.net/manual/en/history.php.php> [accessed February 9, 2018].

¹⁴ <https://marvel.com/comics/unlimited> [accessed July 12, 2018].



showed that Doctor Doom *did* appear, in an advert for an Incredible Hulk-sweatshirt (cf. fig. 4)



Fig. 4:
Advertisement for Incredible Hulk-sweatshirts

This short strip may or may not take place within the main storyworld of Marvel's comics output, but is clearly a pre-authored, narrative-based version of Doctor Doom, and so should be included within my analysis. Interestingly, this was also not only the character's first use in advertising, but was also his first appearance written by somebody other than Stan Lee—Marie Severin. As the heading of the ad itself said, »this time you can't blame Stan!«

Another example could be found in *The Fantastic Four* #15 (1963, cf. fig. 5), which featured a »next time« teaser for the following issue, heralding the return of Doom.

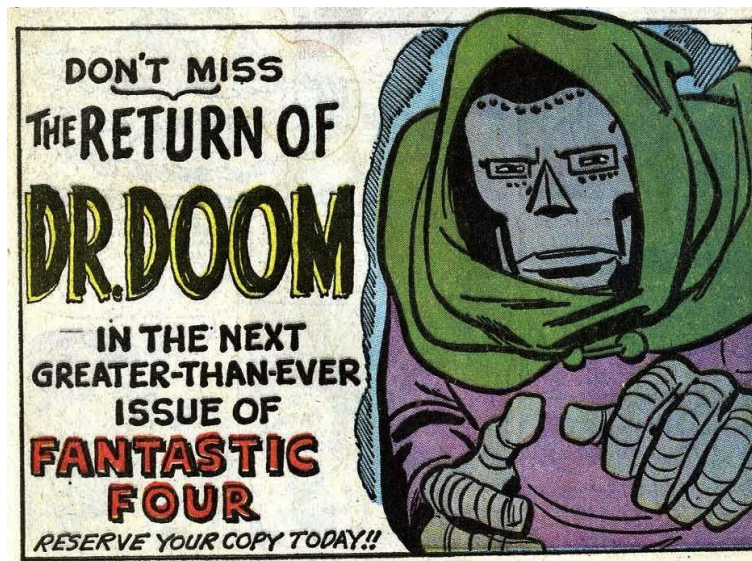


Fig. 5:
 »Next time« teaser featuring Doctor Doom in *The Fantastic Four* #15

This teaser was not recorded by any database and was only spotted by chance as part of an internet search for other texts. These examples highlight the importance of using multiple data sources, as well as the benefits of a flexible dataset which can be updated in tandem with an issue by issue examination of the texts.

The lack of consistency with regards to logging advertisements caused other problems. As part of the research process, I attempted to create a graph comparing Doom’s appearances to those of other villains (cf. fig. 6), and was surprised to find that it showed The Red Skull appearing in almost every single Marvel comic in either July or August 1976.

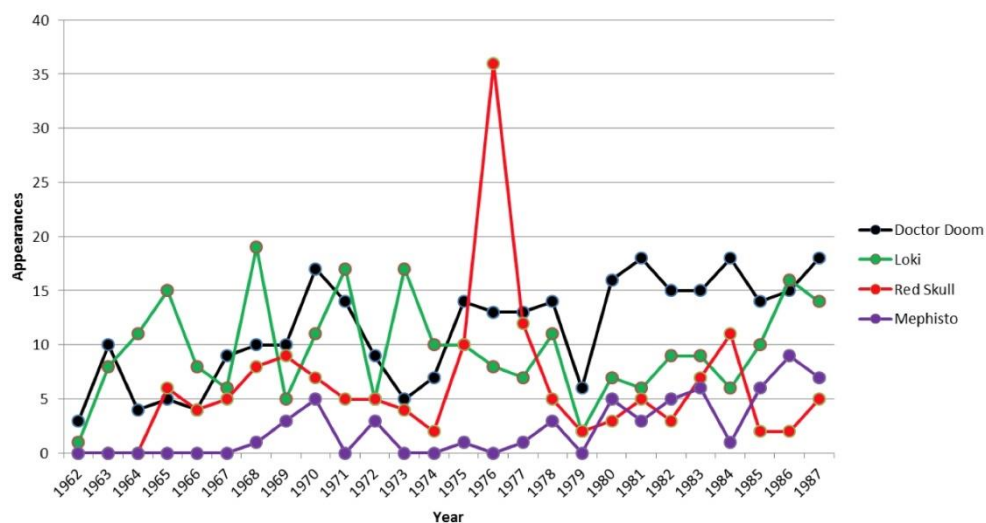


Fig. 6:
 Graph showing appearances of super-villains in Marvel Comics by year



Further research showed that this was due to an advertisement in that month's comics for the fast food snack Hostess Twinkies, featuring Captain America and The Red Skull (cf. ROACH 2007, fig. 7). Adverts such as these appeared on a regular basis, with the same strip being featured in most comics published in a given month. Usually, these were not added to any of the databases, but, clearly, at some point a contributor had decided to enter this particular advertisement into the database every single time it had appeared. This demonstrated the importance of thoroughly cleaning the data before attempting to undertake a quantitative analysis.



Fig. 7: Twinkies advertisement featuring Captain America and The Red Skull



Reading the texts also unearthed further narrative appearances that were not listed in any of the databases. For instance, the splash page of *The Avengers* #25 (1966) featured Doctor Doom and appeared to be a continuation from a previous issue which was not included in the database. A check of *The Avengers* #24 (1966) showed that Doctor Doom *did* appear, in silhouette, in the final panel of the issue (cf. fig. 8), and so the issue was added to the corpus. This demonstrates how useful a chronological reading can be in identifying such additional texts.



Fig. 8:
Doctor Doom appears in silhouette on the final page of *Avengers* #24

As I read my way through the corpus the analysis of each issue was uploaded to a blog, *Marvel Age Doom*.¹⁵ The use of a blog had three main purposes: to encourage the progress of the textual analysis by setting weekly deadlines for new updates; to allow the analysis of individual issues to be directly linked to the corpus database in order to simplify data searches; and to disseminate the work, encouraging others to engage with it and offer thoughts and criticism.

In order for this dissemination to succeed, a twitter account—@marvelagedoom—was set up to announce the upload of a new blog, which was promoted at conferences and other networking events for comics scholars and fans. However, the most effective way of drawing attention to the blog proved to be using the twitter account to ask questions of the comics community. One particularly effective instance of this was regarding the previously mentioned 'next time' advertisement in *The Fantastic Four* #15.

The image did not appear to have been drawn by Jack Kirby, but I was unable to find any information about who else it might have been—until I sent out a tweet asking for help. This request was retweeted by several people who

¹⁵ <http://www.mjhibbett.com/doom/> [accessed 1 May, 2018].



follow the account and was soon mentioned on the Facebook group London Loves Comics.¹⁶ A member of this group identified a blog entry from several years ago which discussed the image and suggested that it had been drawn by Sol Brodsky (cf. CAPUTO 2013). Thus, not only was the twitter account a means of gathering information, it also disseminated the research to a wider audience and introduced me to new resources.

The blog itself was not only used for the analysis of the individual issues, but also for the ongoing curation of a view of Doctor Doom's development over time. By depositing the findings on individual comics in a database, however, I hope to be able to conduct what Franco Moretti calls a ›distant reading‹, where, by stepping back from individual texts, one is able to »focus on units that are much smaller or much larger than the text: devices, themes, tropes—or genres and systems« (MORETTI 2000: 57).

This will require a completed, checked, cleaned, and validated database, which will not be available until the end of the reading process. However, when this is done, it will enable the running of quantitative analyses of the entire corpus with the added ability to link to individual qualitative appraisals of every comic, cartoon, advertisement, radio show, or other media format in which Doctor Doom appeared during this time period.

5. Conclusion

The definition of clear selection criteria allowed an initial dataset to be created, using various methods of data extraction, which purported to feature every appearance by Doctor Doom in comics during ›The Marvel Age‹. Other media items were added through a process of internet searches and further research. This dataset was then checked through a process of a chronological reading which was enabled by the development of an online database and linked to an ongoing blog. This not only facilitated further data cleaning but also assisted in the discovery of additional items. In addition, the dissemination of the research via a blog and twitter account encouraged the assistance of fans and academics as the project progressed.

From this research, it is clear that although online databases such as The Grand Comics Database can be very useful for transmedia research they must, at all times, be used with caution, applying stringent cleaning procedures before any conclusions can be drawn. Even when a corpus is identified in this manner it must be recognised that it is an iterative process, with the distinct possibilities of new items appearing, and others being ruled out.

Conducting this process has been vital to my own research, drawing attention to items which I was previously unaware of, and illustrating Doctor Doom's wandering journey through Marvel's various storyworlds. The next stage of the project, the analysis of the corpus, is ongoing and available to view

¹⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1451400028437800/> [accessed 15 June, 2018].



at www.mjhibbett.com/doom, with all comments and ideas actively encouraged on the blog.

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Nicolle Lamerichs

Characters of the Future. Machine Learning, Data, and Personality

Abstract

Fictional characters are changing from passive entities into active learners. New technologies are curating how characters speak, what they know, and what they can learn. Disruptive technologies, such as artificial intelligence (AI), robotics, and big data are changing what characters are, how they behave, and what media and texts they belong to. The ownership and authorship of characters is shifting from the professional creative industries to fans themselves. In this study, I analyze new tendencies and trends of how characters are increasingly based on new technologies such as chatbots, intelligent personal assistants, and holograms. I close-read different characters, such as the personal assistant Azuma Hikari and the hologram Hatsune Miku. An important theme that emerges in the discourses and narratives surrounding these characters is the meaning of artificial life and death. I analyze this recurring topic in-depth and conclude by theorizing the possible future of characters. Overall, I will argue that characters should not be read as passive entities authored by one specific instance anymore. Increasingly, characters are crowdsourced, highly technological-based, and self-learning. The future of characters, I argue, is therefore strongly mediated and interactive. New technologies are going to make us see characters in continuously new lights as well. In media studies, characters might best be understood as highly networked, non-human agents.



Introduction. Meeting an Artificially Intelligent Character

Characters are in a paradigm shift. Though we tend to associate the term ›character‹ with a fictional being of some sort, this concept is quickly shifting in the professional field. Increasingly, characters are not created by authors and imagined by audiences, but become avatars that users can control, and even intelligent agents in their own right. A character driven by machine learning, for instance, is not in any way predetermined or authored, and even goes beyond the procedural scripts and codes of an avatar. Such characters have the potential to become intelligent agents in their own right.

At the technology and media festival SXSW (Austin, 2018), I had an intimate conversation with a loveable AI-driven character. At TV Asahi's booth, there was a robotic AI version of Gō-chan the panda bear, the mascot of TV Asahi. He drew a large crowd of visitors from all over the world, interested in interacting with him. Gō-chan's ›mission‹ was to learn English in North America. This was clearly a fictional quest to engage with the visitors of the festival, a make-believe frame that belonged to the character, rather than the software. When I met the beloved panda, on day two of the festival, he already showed a good command of the language.

Nicolle: »Hi Gō-chan, I am Nicolle. Nice to meet you.«
 Gō-chan: »Nice to meet you, Nicolle, where are you from?«
 Nicolle: »I am from the Netherlands.«
 Gō-chan: »Nicolle, what sports do you like?«
 Nicolle: »I like swimming.«
 Gō-chan: »I like swimming, too!«

My conversation with Gō-chan lasted for two minutes, during which he gathered several replies; he subsequently created a rap song about me and my hobbies. It turned out his robotic head operated as a screen as well. He showed me different recordings of myself, as well as additional footage from his database as he sang his song.

The artificially intelligent Gō-chan is produced by Nextremer in collaboration with TV Asahi. The AI character can communicate with you, observes you and records you, and finally it even creates a song for you. By interacting with its users, the Japanese Gō-chan also learns to speak English. In other words, this character has machine learning skills and learns from the input that it is given.

As a mascot character, Gō-chan is a rather flat character, best described with the term *kyara* (cf. AZUMA 2009). The term *kyara* was coined by Itō Gō, who argues that since the end of the 1980s, characters in Japanese popular culture have become increasingly detached from stories, just like mascots (cf. ITŌ 2005). *Kyara* have a different function from *kyarakutā* (actual characters) embedded in narratives. *Kyara* are iconic and recognizable, and are meant to trigger fan affect at first sight.

Drawing from Itō's theory, Azuma (2009) writes that *kyara* are best understood as icons in a metaphorical ›database‹ that exist betwixt and between



multiple narratives—or even altogether outside of them. Their purpose is to raise a specific form of desire with their fans, also known as ‘moe’, which is triggered by their aesthetic appeal and recognizable tropes, such as their cuteness or their glasses (cf. AZUMA 2009; GALBRAITH 2009). Gō-chan is such an icon—simplistic in character design, with large cute eyes and a big head (cf. fig. 1).



Fig. 1:
Gō-chan at SXSW (photographed by the author, 2018 – N.L.)



Gō-chan is a straightforward *kyara*. Rather than being connected to any complex story, he simply represents the television network TV Asahi. In this sense, he is similar to other *kyara* like Sanrio's Hello Kitty or like Dejiko, the mascot of a Japanese retail chain store (Gamers). Such character types can be iterated in many texts and in merchandise, from stickers to keychains to toys. Gō-chan shares a family resemblance with characters like Hello Kitty. As Karen Ressler writes for the *Anime News Network*:

Gō-chan debuted in 2011. Yuko Yamaguchi, the designer of the original Hello Kitty, personally designed the character [sic] a collaboration between TV Asahi and Sanrio to raise awareness about TV Asahi's Digital 5 channel. His name (»Gō« sounds similar to the Japanese word for »5«), »V« shirt design, and May 5 birthday all represent the number 5 (RESSLER 2016: n.pag.).

Gō-chan is not completely without a backstory, though. He is the prince of ›planet EXPANDA«. This backstory was explored in several media, such as in the film *Gō-chan: Moco and Friends From Peculiar Animal Forest* (TV Asahi 2016) for young audiences. In 2018, a new *Gō-chan* animation series aired with a similar cast of protagonists. According to the official TV Asahi site, Gō-chan is »curious by nature and loves to cheer on others«¹. The AI version of Gō-chan was indeed a cheerleader, rapping for me enthusiastically and praising me as he mastered the English language through machine learning. By endowing a *kyara* such as Gō-chan with artificial intelligence, it has the potential to develop a sort of mind of its own and in the future, perhaps, even construct its own personality and ›voice«. Such characters, in a way, have the potential to develop beyond the *kyara* types into entities of their own.

This essay explores the future of characters. It goes beyond the implications of ›characters without stories«, and questions instead what happens when machine learning allows characters to increasingly ›write themselves« by learning through databases and user interaction. I explore trends like robotics, machine learning, and holograms to see how we increasingly make sense of characters whose stories are created by new technologies and by our interactions with them.

Characters and Avatars in Media Studies

The study of characters is not limited to literary studies of character and characterization, but has become an interdisciplinary endeavor. In game studies, fan studies, and Japanese studies in particular, characters have received wide attention. Most particularly, I want to unpack several theoretical lines of inquiry that by no means exclude each other, namely research approaches that focus on characters as transmedia entities flowing across narratives. In terms of reception, characters can even function as stars that audiences admire, but also be understood as affective beings that evoke responses with audiences and thus generate genuine social impact.

¹ <http://www.tv-asahi.co.jp/go-chan/e/character> [accessed October 23, 2018].



One challenge of studying characters is that they increasingly circulate in different domains of consumer culture, and thereby obtain new meanings for different audiences. Characters are omnipresent on billboards, as marketing tools, and as commercial vehicles that appeal to audiences. For instance, brands are continuously humanized and anthropomorphized in Japan (cf. WILDE 2016). Reading characters is not easy in this contemporary landscape, since the storyworlds that audiences deal with are becoming increasingly complex. These storyworlds pose challenges to interpreting characters, since they are not confined to one source text anymore. Increasingly, characters are written and rewritten in many transmedial iterations as well as within fan culture. A character such as Sherlock Holmes has been reimagined continuously throughout history by its fans and by different producers, but all these different installments, in a way, also solidify the overall character (cf. STEIN/BUSSE 2014). Iconic characters such as Holmes, Han Solo, Sailor Moon, or Batman are part of a transmedial flow of stories that goes beyond one source text (cf. JENKINS 2006).

In fact, the concept of ›source text‹ is a highly problematic one in today's media entertainment. Many characters are inhabitants of increasingly complex transmedial worlds and franchises, rather than of single works or even of specific stories, such as *Star Wars* or *The Lord of The Rings* (cf. KLASTRUP/TOSCA 2011). These franchises often ›burst‹ outside the original text itself into online games, film series, or merchandise articles. In Japan, specifically, this transmedial mobility has been called a ›media mix‹ by Itō Mizuko (2007), which describes not a concise transmedia story, such as defined by Henry Jenkins (2006), but rather a complex flow of characters in all their heterogeneous instances. The Japanese media mix strategy relies on bricolage, rather than on one complete story or any coherent storyworld.

In Japanese popular culture, characters even increasingly come without any stories. In the introduction, I mentioned Gō-chan. This is a pivotal example of a character without a story. He is a mascot: a ›kyara‹. Cultural critic Azuma Hiroki has discussed flat characters, or *kyara*, as well as their prominence within contemporary Japanese culture. He is critical of the emergence of *kyara* since he poses that this runs parallel to the loss of ›grand narratives‹ in manga and anime. He states that, whereas Japanese audiences once focused on animation with complex world-building such as the *Gundam* series, now its popular culture is turning predominantly visual. Increasingly, the production of manga and anime seems to rely on what Azuma calls a ›database‹ of references. In other words, this database contains about qualities of characters that are easily adaptable. These pre-narrative tropes (e.g. ›cute cat girl‹) are continuously repurposed in Japanese popular culture by the industry and the fans themselves. Azuma argues that this database of tropes diminishes the quality of anime and manga, since it results in flat characters and an overall lack of narrativity.

Azuma also explored characters further in his journal, *Shisōchizu beta* (›Map of Thinking‹), and with his publication company, Genron. He



additionally co-created the Vocaloid opera *The End*, featuring Hatsune Miku, which I will close-read further on. This opera can essentially be understood as a critique of flat characters. Azuma's theory on characters and their fandom has been influential in Japanese studies. Drawing from the ›*kyara*‹ concept, Lukas R.A. Wilde even argues that many narrative concepts do not apply to these mascots:

Conceptions [of characters], which place their emphasis on a) coherent storyworlds and b) on intersubjective commitment, would be applicable only under severe constraints on beings such as Hatsune Miku, (Hello) Kitty, or Ellen Baker. For Japan, however, these must be regarded as absolutely typical of media convergence strategies (WILDE 2018: 118, translation N.L.).²

Even in Western cultures, characters can leave or transcend their original text and become symbols or celebrities in their own right (cf. HILLS 2003). Virtual stars, such as the Minions (originally from Universal Pictures' animated film *Despicable Me*, 2010, and later the stars of their own, eponymous film in 2015), went beyond their original source texts and became iconic, as Rebecca Williams (2018) argues. In her study on costumed characters in theme parks, she explains that fictional characters can become ›ani-embodied‹ characters. Animated characters lacking a real-life counterpart, such as the Minions, can be represented in three-dimensional space in costume. In other words, costumes give mascot characters new meanings by embodying them, allowing for fans to tactically interact with them. Hugging characters like the Minions and Hello Kitty in theme parks, for instance, allows audiences to deepen their relationship with them.

In this sense, ani-embodied characters are rather like stars. Williams draws her reading from Bob Rehak (2003: 477) who writes: »The fan movement surrounding Lara Croft—one of the most recognizable, popular and lucrative media stars working today—is all the more remarkable given that its object does not, in any localized or unitary sense, exist«. However, reading characters solely as virtual stars with fans of their own does not suffice for the purpose of this study. As MacCallum-Stewart notes about Lara Croft, this character is more than an observed and admired icon. She is a playable character and an avatar that her players can relate to:

I have an abiding affection for Lara, both as a subject of critical debate and a gaming icon. Lara is an irrefutable part of my gaming life and has been since her inception in 1999, and when I play her, I revel in her strength and abilities, her wisecracks and her cheesy lines, as well as appreciating that she is not particularly realistic. In this respect, she is much the same as every other gaming character I have ever adopted (STEWART 2014: n.pag.).

Affect and interaction are key points, then, which should be taken into account when studying characters and avatars. They are fictional bodies that audiences are affected by, and that some fans even desire. Hannah Wirman (2015), for instance, speaks of her ›love‹ for Princess Peach, followed by a reading of

² Original: »Auf Hatsune Miku, (Hello) Kitty oder Ellen Baker wäre eine solche Konzeption, die den Fokus a) auf kohärente Storyworlds sowie b) auf intersubjektive Verbindlichkeit legt, nur unter starken Einschränkungen anwendbar. Für Japan müssen diese dennoch als absolut typisch für Medienkonvergenz-Strategien angesehen werden.«



diverse fan works that cast Peach in a range of roles from damsel in distress to empowered sex object.

Through various media such as drawings, stories, videos and comic stirs, fans show their love and hate for the game and game culture. Multiple fandoms come together in texts that refer to games in general and Peach's fictional character simultaneously. Fans' contribution is a power of love toward a computer game; her or his object of desire (WIRMAN 2015: 145).

Wirman's study shows that fans use Peach not merely as an object of affection, but also as a way to critique game culture and, for instance, its ›damsel in distress‹ tropes.

However, affect for characters is a complicated matter and does not need to be a healthy or a loving relationship between character and fan, necessarily. In fact, fans have shown throughout the years that their affect for characters can also consist of strong feelings of hate. In his case-study on the ›anti-fandom‹ of Jar Jar Binks, Matt Hills argues that the hate for this character should not be read as false or humorous, but as a genuine affective response: »[T]hese discourses can be viewed as part of an affective discourse which works, emotionally as well as cognitively, to legitimate the fans' prior investments in the *Star Wars* universe« (HILLS 2003: 80). *Star Wars* fandom, in particular, has not been kind to its characters. The character Rose Tico from *The Last Jedi* (2017) was met with so much hostility that her anti-fans threatened the actress (Kelly M. Tran) and forced her to leave social media. When studying characters, such an affective reception, whether positive or negative, needs to be considered.

Finally, characters are increasingly interacting within complex (technological) landscapes and even media ecosystems. Since this is a future-oriented case study focused on new media and technology, it is important to bear in mind that future users might have a more complex relationship with characters. In many new forms of media, characters are not passive entities that audiences consume; increasingly, they are becoming ›digital puppets‹ that users interact with and give shape to. Once machine learning enters the picture, characters also learn from their interactions with users and become new entities altogether, which perhaps will no longer fit the current conceptual box of ›character‹.

Avatars in gaming pave the way for these changes. According to Andrew Burn and Gareth Schott (2004), the avatar is a playable character that is simultaneously a ›heavy hero‹ (a character that can be read and interpreted) and a ›digital dummy‹ (an agent of interaction and a representation of the player). Because players interact with characters, certain complexities can emerge. One player's version of Gerald from *The Witcher* (2007) may make different choices than another's, which leads to a very different development of the character within each game experience. Game characters carry meaning and identity outside of the text as well, for instance in the ›headcanon‹ of fans (cf. CARTER-MCKNIGHT 2018), in fan costumes (cf. LAMERICHS 2018), or even as a



kind of ›virtual currency‹ that professional gamers level up and finally sell (cf. CASTRONOVA 2005).

Characters, then, increasingly affect our everyday life, our imagination, and even our economy. In contemporary media cultures, the study of characters implies going beyond narrative to see how characters affect different consumption spaces, including social and urban spaces. Roberta Pearson (2007) emphasizes that characters are networked, and that the study of characters should always be relational. While analyzing character features and their development has its own merits, this cannot be done while neglecting the social environments which the characters belong to and which shape them. However, Pearson's study is restricted to televisual characters and she primarily takes the production context of these characters into account. In the case of interactive characters, such as avatars, other contexts and actors in the network matter as well, such as the player and even the digital interface itself.

Characters, then, must be read as social actors, which are networked and move beyond narrative. Wilde (2016) argues that characters in Japanese culture are not just fictional protagonists or mascots, but can function as social actors. Characters are vehicles of social change, and should be read as »social actors« of cultural agency (WILDE 2016: 639). In this article, I thus understand characters as actors that are interpreted through affective reception by their audiences, able to influence diverse aspects of our societies. I will focus on technological characters that rely, for instance, on data or AI. They are not only ›written‹ but in fact interacted with. In the near future, the word ›character‹ might not even suffice to describe these entities, as they increasingly learn and ›write‹ themselves procedurally.

Approach

In the coming years, technology will make it easier to produce different forms of interactive and animated characters through means such as virtual reality and holograms. These characters will not only be represented *in* new media, but also fueled *by* artificial intelligence. In the rest of this article, I will focus on various instances and representations of such artificial characters. Primarily, I rely on close-reading as a means of studying how these different characters are embedded and created in new technologies, and what fictional narratives emerge around them.

A crucial factor for my sampling was what these different case studies represent, and how they can be culturally read and understood. I have picked examples that are salient and exemplary in relation to the phenomena that I study, namely the current changes in the relationship between characters and technology. The focus throughout this study remains on cases that primarily come from industrialized and advanced countries that are paving the way in AI, voice interfaces, and other ›disruptive‹ technologies. It should be no surprise, then, that most examples originate from the United States and from



Japan, where deep applications of AI are being developed (and also culturally reflected upon in fiction). For instance, I incorporate a close-reading of the opera *The End* (2017) starring the hologram of Hatsune Miku in a thought-provoking artwork about the nature of artificial life and intelligence. Characters of the future come in many forms. In many cases, these technologies converge into one device. The Gatebox software that I analyze, for instance, features elements of all these technologies within a portable hologram box that users can interact with.

In my selection, I relied primarily on recent examples from the past three years, although I historicize these with other depictions of AI that continue to influence how we think about such technologies. In this sense, we cannot speak of ›AI‹ and of ›voice interfaces‹ without considering one of its first iconic depictions, namely the Hal 9000 computer in Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). The remaining part of this article can be read, then, as both a study on the future itself and on characters of the future, as well as on the tropes that shaped them.

›Azuma Hikari‹ or The Rise of Voice Interfaces and Humanization

A recent technological development is the increase in interfaces that rely on voice, rather than text. In the past years, we have seen a mass market developing around speech software. We gradually have to become familiar with personified interfaces that talk to us, often referred to as ›personal assistants‹ or ›companions‹.

Amazon's Alexa is a great example, first employed in the smart speakers Echo and Echo Dot. Alexa plays one's favorite music, audiobooks, and podcasts; she forecasts the weather and syncs with other devices. Inspired by *Star Trek's* federation computer (cf. GREEN 2018), she assists users in their daily routines. This is just one example of how interfaces are personified and will shape our work, our habits, and our media consumption. To activate Alexa, we need to speak her name and address her personally.

In Japan, the tech company Vinclu developed ›Azuma Hikari‹. She is a small hologram in Gatebox, a smart device which also functions as a personal assistant. The device is designed as a clear projection tube that shows the computer-animated AI character Azuma Hikari. Vinclu is planning multiple avatars and personalities for the Gatebox, which functions like a portal to the respective characters' reality dimensions (cf. GALLAGHER 2016).

What is interesting about this case, and what will be an ongoing trend in the future, is that the interface is heavily personified and has developed a fandom of its own. Users can even marry ›her‹, meaning the character named Azuma Hikari, by submitting a registration form on the official website.³ The

³ <https://gatebox.ai/home/> [accessed October 23, 2018].



form is called »jigen tokōkyoku kon'in todoke 次元渡航局婚姻届«, lit. »marriage registration with a dimension-travelling lady«. In other words, the character cannot be separated from the interaction between its designers on the one hand, and its fandom and its users on the other, who can even ›officially‹ become the character's partners. Fandom changes when characters become so ›real‹ that we can marry them, admire them as holograms in our real spaces, and make them our ›*waifu*«.

In a way, such a background for the character fits the device well. Each user has their own Gatebox, and the contract is very specific about the fact that users can marry just *one version* of the character, namely the hologram in their own personal Gatebox. This allows all users to marry their specific version of Azuma Hikari. Because she is a dimension-travelling entity, not unlike the famous Doctor in *Doctor Who*, she can exist in multiple places at the same time and be in countless individual emotional relationships with all her users and fans. The prospect of choosing between different hologram avatars in the same box (cf. GALLAGHER 2016) will give a more complex and personalized touch to the Gatebox, allowing users to relate to a character of their choice.

This case befits Japanese culture, where the relationship between humans and objects is often considered ›intimate‹, and where objects have always been personified to some extent. Interestingly, not only are intimacy and affect emphasized by Gatebox, but also the idea that the character is not one entity, but multiple. This Japanese example pushes personal assistants further than the developers of Alexa ever did. It is fascinating, but also characteristic of how Japanese culture deals with characters. Azuma Hikari has limited machine-learning capabilities, but stands out in terms of background narrative as well. To entice fans, a whole background was introduced to the interface. This raises the key themes that I would like to dive into further, such as how users can interact with machine-learning technologies, and how AI is depicted in narrative media.

›Monika‹ or Reflections of AI in Popular Culture

Especially in the area of gaming, developers are embedding AI technologies more frequently. When *Cyberpunk 2077* was announced at E3 (2018) by Projekt Red, the press was introduced to a detailed, vibrant, and futuristic Night City, the fictional setting of the game. What impressed critics most was how dynamic and rich the city came across. Indeed, as reported and translated in *Game Pressure* (cf. LUCKIE 2016: n.pag.), the developers had applied for funding for the engine City Creation: »a complex technology for creating a huge living city, playable in real time, which [the technology] [sic] is based on rules, AI, and automation, and supports innovative processes and tools for making top-notch open-world games«.

While AI can be used to fuel game processes and worlds, it can also be used to create self-learning characters. The software Spirit AI (2018) creates



implementations of AI in augmented reality (AR), virtual reality (VR) and other applications. »We breathe life into digital interactions using the transformative power of artificial intelligence. We call it ›digital spirit‹, but simply put, it adds humanity«⁴. In their PR messages, the company consistently relies on metaphors of ›life‹ and ›the human‹, to show that it can add unexpected, self-learning elements and algorithms. Though AI is still very narrow today, and these messages can be understood as branding, I find the metaphor of ›life‹ an interesting one. The question whether an AI is ›animated‹, and in what respect, goes back far. To what extent is an AI ›human‹ or ›non-human‹, and can it experience feelings or empathy?

In fiction, AI characters have been represented from the start both as benign and as a potential source of moral panic. One significant 20th century example of dangerous AI is found in Karel Čapek's play *R.U.R.* (1920), which depicts organic beings rather than mechanical ones, but otherwise fits contemporary AI narratives. Another notable early example of evil AI is WOTAN (Will Operating Thought ANalogue) in the *Doctor Who* serial *The War Machines* (1966). Early depictions of good-natured AI characters include EPICAC from Kurt Vonnegut's eponymous short story (1950) and Mycroft from Robert A. Heinlein's *The Moon Is a Harsh Mistress* (first serialized 1965). These living computer characters are often presented as emotionally human-like and as relatable within their narratives. Whether their intentions are good or evil, AI characters are commonly depicted as transcending the ›bodies‹ of their visible hardware, e.g. the omnipresent eye of the malevolent Hal 9000 in Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968).

The living operating system Samantha in Spike Jonze's movie *Her* (2013) is narratively similar to Mycroft and to Hal 9000 in her high-omniscience and in her control over the human characters' living spaces, but the film additionally incorporates modern romance tropes by depicting her as a love interest in her own right. Still, even in *Her* the final plot twist dictates that an AI is *not* like us. In this film, which is all about intimacy and love, the AI finally learns to love—but in a way very different from her human mate. She turns out to have many relationships with others simultaneously, in real time. Another example of a loving AI is that of Denis Villeneuve's *Blade Runner 2049* (2017). Joy, the protagonist's holographic AI girlfriend, seems to exhibit true affection for her companion even when her capacities for physical interaction are quite limited. She is emotionally depicted as human through and through, showing genuine empathy for the protagonist which continuously contrasts with her lack of physical human form.

While there are many optimistic examples of AI representation, the trope of the evil AI is still strong, particularly in gaming. This is not without irony, given that the game industry is at the forefront of embedding AI in its products itself. A game that truly follows Kubrick's tropes of the sinister AI is, for instance, *Portal* (Valve, 2007), characterized by its unique puzzles and its

⁴ <https://spiritai.com/> [accessed October 23, 2018].



black humor. After the player character Chell awakens from stasis, she receives audio messages from a female AI called GLaDOS (Genetic Lifeform and Disk Operating System). Chell then has to solve puzzles by finding routes through test rooms with the help of her portal gun.

Portal is one of the few games in which a computer character addresses the player directly and consistently throughout the experience. This choice truly evokes the idea that the AI is playing mind games with Chell, which has the potential of evoking the feeling that the computer game itself is playing mind games with the gamer. While GLaDOS' comments start rather descriptive, as the game progresses she reveals herself as more and more sardonic and antagonistic. In test chamber 15, she tells the player character: »Did you know you can donate one or all of your vital organs to the Aperture Science Self-Esteem Fund for Girls? It's true!« The sarcastic monologues spoken by GLaDOS owe much to Ellen McLain, her talented voice actress, and to the technological manipulation of her voice into a cold, sometimes malfunctioning, robotic sound. Defeating the AI and obtaining freedom is the main purpose of this game. Similar to Kubrick's *Hal 9000*, *Portal's* AI is materially depicted as different orb-shaped cores that each have their own personality.

Another game in which the AI takes over is *Doki Doki Literature Club!* (Team Salvato, 2017). In this dating simulation, the player can choose to go out with different female characters. One of them, Monika, is a jealous NPC and wants to claim the player for her own. To do this, she is presented as going deep into the source code of the game itself in order to hack the other characters and plot lines. Slowly, she starts killing the other girls by messing with their codes. At the end of the game, Monika takes over, and reveals herself to be a sentient AI-driven character. She possesses self-consciousness and is constantly learning. She lectures the player for almost a full hour in a lengthy monologue about her choices, her life as an AI, and her obsession with them.

Critically, *Doki Doki Literature Club!* is more than a horror game. It must be understood as a deconstruction and critique of other dating sims which audiences may be familiar with. Games in this genre are often filled with flat, stereotypical characters, such as the ›*meganekko*‹ (girl with glasses), the ›*tsundere*‹ (girl who alternates between kindness and coldness), and so on. Such characters are created to inspire *moe* (desire for characters and their visuality). As Patrick Galbraith writes (2009), *moe* intimately connects the flatness of characters to the eroticism in otaku culture. In his concise definition, *moe* is »a word used to describe a euphoric response to fantasy characters or representations of them« (GALBRAITH 2009: 1). By presenting one of the girls as sentient, *Doki Doki Literature Club!* can also powerfully critique *kyara* as flat characters. Monika is undoubtedly one of the most intelligent and rich characters in dating sim history, because she is presented as self-learning and, in many ways, smarter than the player. Still, by using the same tricks as her, the player can and must delete her code and thus end the game.

What all these game representations have in common is that the respective AI is not human at all, but remains fundamentally different from us.



Taking cues from Hal 9000's classic film characterization, GLaDOS and Monika show no desire to collaborate, no empathy, and do not understand life as such.

Popular culture constantly warns us against the dangers of AI. Television shows such as *Westworld* (since 2017) provide us with images of rich theme parks in which humans try to control artificial life, but eventually fail to do so. The intelligence of these AI is depicted as going beyond that of mere humans. It is a danger that some of the world's most visionary thinkers, such as Elon Musk, continuously warn us against (cf. DOWD 2017). Will there be a rift between human and non-human agents in our culture?

›Hatsune Miku‹ or Artificial Life and Humanity in *The End* (2017)

Technology has opened up characters to their audiences and even shared their ownership in some cases with the fan base. Characters are increasingly becoming a ›common good‹—they are no longer authored, but shared, and constantly being reimagined in their respective communities. In fandom, characters circulate as subcultural capital and as a way of connecting with fellow fans, through practices such as fan art, fan fiction, and cosplay (cf. LAMERICHS 2018). As I noted earlier, in Japan, characters are increasingly flat entities whose backstories are added only later on, often even by their audiences themselves.

One example of such a ›crowd-sourced‹ character is Hatsune Miku. She is both a fan-driven hologram and an interface. Created in 2007, Hatsune Miku is a 3-D animated character that utilizes the synthesizer software Vocaloid. Originally, she was merely the name for the Vocaloid software itself until visual designer Kei provided iconic, *kyara*-like artworks which endowed ›her‹ with a life of her own as a virtual celebrity. Her songs are created by her users/fans themselves. All of the music that she sings is thus crowd-sourced, remixed and fan-created. Her performances, such as live operas, are distributed across a wide range of creators (cf. LEAVITT/KNIGHT/YOSHIBA 2016). As the world's first ›virtual idol‹, Hatsune Miku's success depends on openness, revisions of traditional intellectual property rights, and co-creation. These elements pave the way for an open, crowd-sourced, collaborative future of character circulation.

Although she is only a virtual image, there are live shows ›with‹ Hatsune Miku where she is projected on giant screens. In her many forms, she is the star of the opera *The End*, performing in checkered dresses designed by Louis Vuitton and in high stiletto heels. *The End* debuted in 2013 at Tokyo's Bunkamura Orchard Hall and Paris's Théâtre du Châtelet, and was shown at Amsterdam's Dutch National Opera & Ballet in 2015. The show was commissioned by the Yamaguchi Center for Arts and Media [YCAM] in 2012. For this article, I relied on the official recording of *The End* in Paris (2013) on YouTube, and its English translation as produced by Parucafe⁵. Directed by Keiichiro

⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ey8oj8S-j3U> [accessed October 23, 2018].



Shibuya and YKBX, the show is an immersive experience for audiences, who are dipped into a hologram stage show filled with lights and green hues. »Have you ever wondered what happens after death?« Hatsune Miku asks herself in *The End*.

Describing this opera as ›anime‹ or a ›fan experience‹ would diminish its power as a piece of art. *The End* is a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, in which all senses of the audiences are triggered. It mediates the feeling of endings and death to the audience continuously, for instance by starting with a completely dark stage during which the audience hears Miku's unreal synthesizer voice.

The only two characters who appear on the dark stage are Miku herself and an animal character, simply named ›animal‹ in the official soundtrack. Throughout the piece, its characters philosophize about their artificial life and its ending. Once Miku becomes aware of death, she sings: »Death always meant someone's disappearance / But I thought that death didn't concern me«. Floating amidst ghostly figures of herself, she later adds: »I can't pretend I don't care anymore / Now, I'm worried sick«.

Even though *The End* is a surreal and even abstract piece, its key themes are relatable for the audience, and closely connected to her nature as a virtual idol. Miku reflects on mortality, embodiment, and the concept of character itself. The piece is highly metafictional, in the sense that the characters reflect on their own technological and semi-fictional nature throughout the story. They consider whether they are human and whether they will die. Critic Gordon Forester writes in *Limelight* (2017: n.pag.): »*The End* [examines] what it means to exist, and cease to exist. Conceived after the suicide death of his wife, this collaboration, with original book concept and libretto by Toshiki Okada premiered in 2013«.

Throughout the opera, attention is constantly drawn to Hatsune Miku's body. The camera zooms into her nostrils, and later her mouth, to reveal her intestines. The audience is exposed to images of her heart when she sings about how she once cut her finger to convince us that she, too, bleeds. Early on in the opera she emphasizes scent. Not much later, she wears a gas mask that deprives her of all sense of smell.

Her body is essentially an ›ani-embodied‹, to use Williams' (2018) term again. It is ›fleshed out‹ to give some real presence to this *kyara*. Not only does the hologram technology let her emerge from her 2-D surface, but she is also visually rendered beyond her surface, organs and all. We are presented with her heart, which looks human just like ours. The work of art always keeps its audience aware that Miku remains a construct, though. Her humanity is often framed as being different from that of mortal humans: »I am human just like you«, she sings. »Oh wait, a slip of the tongue«. In another moment, she mentions: »Maybe I was always human / Taken to extremes«.

More than any other avatar, Hatsune Miku has a sense of ›realness‹ because she is essentially a hologram. She is fleshed out and completely ›present‹ on stage. This state, however, is something that she reflects on at several moments in *The End*. »Light reflects on an object«, she sings, when her limp body



is floating in the air. »Thanks to that, we know that it exists / But now, light swallows everything and disappears«. These lines are meaningful and layered. »Light« is not just a metaphor for life itself, but for the technology that renders the character and makes her truly immersive and interactive. Holograms such as Hatsune Miku are created with light technology, which these lines refer to as well.

Throughout the piece, there is a constant awareness that the characters are simulated. They are shown imprisoned by screens, by white lines and pixels. The material screens are often used as metaphors. They are visually arranged as frames around her and the other character. They cannot break free of them. Miku is enclosed in small rooms with other digital objects that are clearly coded, just like her.

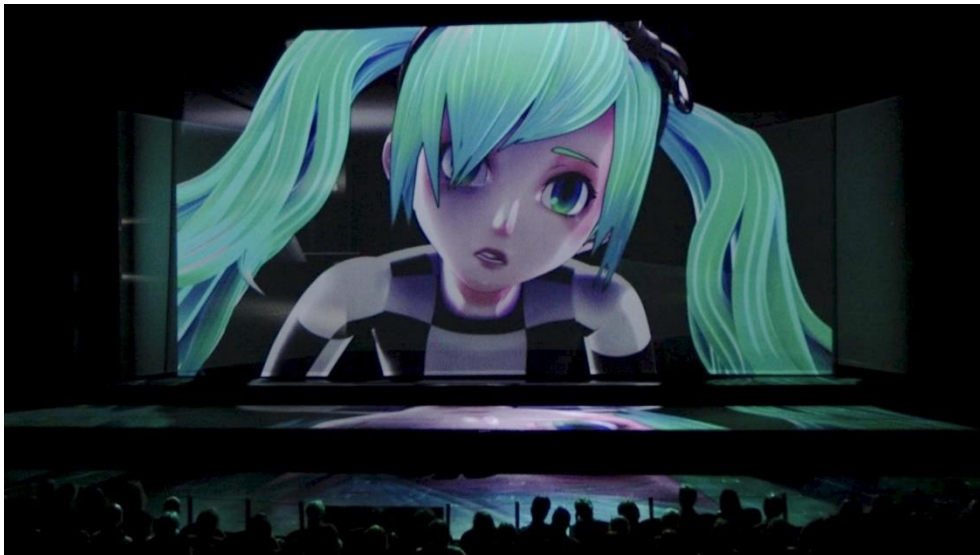


Fig. 2:
The stage of *The End*, photograph by Tokyogirlsupdate.com [accessed October 23, 2018]

Still, her body is not a physical, singular object, but a technically rendered corporeality consisting of multiple bodies and expressions. She is code. Throughout the opera, the audience is reminded of Hatsune Miku's multiplicity. During one song, Miku sings to a backdrop of many manga eyes, just like her own, and a large version of her own mouth. In another song, ghost-like figures hover around her, transparent copies of herself. One particular copy of Hatsune Miku is introduced early on. She has similar hair and a similar body type, but her mouth is open and her pose is zombie-like. Her animal companion describes her as »The woman who looks like you but failed«. This doppelganger makes Hatsune Miku aware of death, since the experience is like seeing an uncanny mirror image of herself. But the image is distorted, and almost like a corpse.

Similar to the theme of multiple bodies, there are multiple endings to the opera, which often throws the audience off-guard with fades-to-black and misleading suggestions of endings. In the final minutes, after a fade-to-black,



we are presented with a white text: »Is this the end? How many are there?« »When we were one, you were much closer to a human being«, her mascot character then continues to sing. This is followed by a haunting transformation of Miku into another body, that of a powerful dragon.

Flying through the skies, Miku is seemingly liberated from all technological prisons. Once Miku merges with her dragon mascot, she reigns over the audience with fire, but the end of this song is sober, too. The dragon opens its mouth and she is swallowed by it. She splits with her mascot again, and sings about the liberty of death itself: »Do we have to keep going on forever? For how long?« The song ends with her lying on the floor of her prison under fluorescent lights, looking at a flickering black cube with white lines. This cube is just another pixelated, and technologically rendered object, just like herself.

Finally, the fourth wall is literally broken when the audience sees the screen get shattered. Running on stiletto heels in her Louis Vuitton dress, Miku runs through shattering glass. The screen is broken. She sings that she is okay with the audience watching her, and that she, in return, watches them back. After mentioning that the lights are bright, she says she will memorize »you«, and that she will miss »you«. It is clear that Hatsune Miku needs an audience to admire her in order to feel alive.

The End is an iconic work of art—a highly immersive and emotional simulation of a beloved character singing haunting songs about death. Hatsune Miku wonders what it means for herself and her fans when she dies *as a character*. As artificial intelligence develops further, this question is a highly important one. Characters are not just fictional constructs anymore, but also technological ones. Like Miku’s holographic body, they can burst out of the screen and move into real life. Miku already has a very »real« tele-presence. At the very end of the opera, she asks: »Where do you come from?« The hologram sheds tears of blood, proving to her audience, once again, that she is corporeal, not pixelated. She bleeds and is aware of herself. Does that not make her human?

Conclusion

Our theories and assumptions of characters need revising, now that virtual reality, artificial intelligence, and other technologies are shaping them in new directions. The forms and appearances, but also the authorship of characters, are currently in a shift. In this article, I questioned how we can define a character, its construction, and the technology that mediates it. A character always exists within a network that is formed by, and shared with, its audiences and developers. The networked capacities of characters will only persist and grow in the future. Characters can increasingly learn from databases and algorithms, and their stories can be crowdsourced.

Culture is important in this analysis. Characters do not emerge in a global vacuum. In Japan, for instance, characters are often desired as the



object of *moe*. There is a desire to see characters as real in Japan, and naturalize them as actual persons. The desire for ›virtual wives‹ is a strong tendency in otaku culture that relates to this personification. ›Marrying‹ your personal assistant software, and being in a unique relationship with her, is just the newest example for that. The desire to see characters as real is not only manifested as love. There is a dark culturally specific longing that speaks from *The End*, a desire to watch Hatsune Miku fade away and die with blood streaming out of her eyes. This emphasis on death is characteristic of how characters are circulating in Japan, as real entities that are almost human. The fact that they are not quite human, is part of their appeal. I see similar tendencies in Anglo-American traditions and Europe, in films such as *Bladerunner 2049* and *Her*, but perhaps less explicit.

I analyzed the relationships between AI and their audiences and players briefly in examples of female AI, such as GLaDOS, in video game culture. Movies like *Her* and *Blade Runner 2049* portray the longing and loneliness that can emerge between AI and their physical companions. There are technological and emotional boundaries between human and non-human agents that fiction already explores today.

What is the future of flat characters and *kyara*, when technology can enrich them and make them learn? Within narrative media, such characters are also commented upon. GLaDOS and Monika, for instance, are examples of AI characters that are presented to us in fiction, that players interact with, listen to, and empathize with. They are just one inch away from the actual self-learning characters that are currently emerging.

I have argued that it is important to ›read‹ these characters not as structures or devices, but as social actors that have a degree of embodiment and agency. This holds true in all the case studies that I presented, but it is a key theme in the opera *The End*. This work of art cannot be analyzed without fully accounting for the tele-presence of Hatsune Miku, and her electric body as a hologram. The mediation of her body, including her organs, is vital to the piece. She is mediated as flesh and bone, and presented as finite, just like the humans that created her and love her.

In our study of characters—flat or round, virtual or fictional—it is important that we continuously consider affect, embodiment, and materiality. New technologies will push these qualities to the forefront, and they will continue to transform characters. In cultural studies of any kind, it does not suffice to read characters as fiction. They have a high degree of ›realness‹ in their mediation. They are everywhere. They influence us. Reading characters means reading interactions, networks, and interactions within networks. As scholars, we must be aware of their relationships to us. AI will accelerate these changes, as it will inevitably point to the fact that humans need to rethink their relationship to non-human agency.



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Herausgeber/in: Rebecca Borschtschow, Lars C. Grabbe, Patrick Rupert-Kruse

- REBECCA BORSCHTSCHOW/LARS C. GRABBE/PATRICK RUPERT-KRUSE:** Bewegtbilder. Grenzen und Möglichkeiten einer Bildtheorie des Films
- HANS JÜRGEN WULFF:** Schwarzbilder. Notizen zu einem filmbildtheoretischen Problem
- LARS C. GRABBE/PATRICK RUPERT-KRUSE:** Filmische Perspektiven holonisch-mnemonischer Repräsentation. Versuch einer allgemeinen Bildtheorie des Films
- MARIJANA ERSTIĆ:** Jenseits der Starrheit des Gemäldes. Luchino Viscontis kristalline Filmwelten am Beispiel von *Gruppo di famiglia in un interno (Gewalt und Leidenschaft)*
- INES MÜLLER:** Bildgewaltig! Die Möglichkeiten der Filmästhetik zur Emotionalisierung der Zuschauer
- REBECCA BORSCHTSCHOW:** Bild im Rahmen, Rahmen im Bild. Überlegungen zu einer bildwissenschaftlichen Frage
- NORBERT M. SCHMITZ:** Arnheim versus Panofsky/Modernismus versus Ikonologie. Eine exemplarische Diskursanalyse zum Verhältnis der Kunstgeschichte zum filmischen Bild
- FLORIAN HÄRLE:** Über filmische Bewegtbilder, die sich wirklich bewegen. Ansatz einer Interpretationsmethode
- DIMITRI LIEBSCH:** Wahrnehmung, Motorik, Affekt. Zum Problem des Körpers in der phänomenologischen und analytischen Filmphilosophie
- TINA HEDWIG KAISER:** Schärfe, Fläche, Tiefe. Wenn die Filmbilder sich der Narration entziehen. Bildnischen des Spielfilms als Verbindungslinien der Bild- und Filmwissenschaft



IMAGE 16

- JÖRG R.J. SCHIRRA:** Editorial
MATTHIAS MEILER: Semiologische Überlegungen zu einer Theorie des öffentlichen Raums. Textur und Textwelt am Beispiel der Kommunikationsform Kleinplakat
CLAUS SCHLABERG: »Bild«. Eine Explikation auf der Basis von Intentionalität und Bewirken
ASMAA ABD ELGAWAD ELSEBAE: Computer Technology and Its Reflection on the Architecture and Internal Space
JULIAN WANGLER: Mehr als einfach nur grau. Die visuelle Inszenierung von Alter in Nachrichtenberichterstattung und Werbung

IMAGE 16 Themenheft: Bildtheoretische Ansätze in der Semiotik

- JÖRG R.J. SCHIRRA:** Editorial
DORIS SCHÖPS: Semantik und Pragmatik von Körperhaltungen im Spielfilm
SASCHA DEMARMELS: Als ob die Sinne erweitert würden... Augmented Reality als Emotionalisierungsstrategie
CHRISTIAN TRAUTSCH/YIXIN WU: Die Als-ob-Struktur von Emotikons im WWW und in anderen Medien
MARTIN SIEFKES: The Semantics of Artefacts. How We Give Meaning to the Things We Produce and Use
KLAUS H. KIEFER: »Le Corancan«. Sprechende Beine

IMAGE 15

- JÖRG R.J. SCHIRRA:** Editorial
HERIBERT RÜCKER: Auch Wissenschaften sind nur Bilder ihrer Maler. Eine Hermeneutik der Abbildung
RAY DAVID: A Mimetic Psyche
GEORGE DAMASKINIDIS/ANASTASIA CHRISTODOULOU: The Press Briefing as an ESP Educational Microworld. An Example of Social Semiotics and Multimodal Analysis
KATHARINA SCHULZ: Geschichte, Rezeption und Wandel der Fernsehserie

IMAGE 15 Themenheft: Poster-Vorträge auf der internationalen Fachkonferenz »Ursprünge der Bilder. Anthropologische Diskurse in der Bildwissenschaft«

Herausgeber: Ronny Becker, Jörg R.J. Schirra, Klaus Sachs-Hombach

- KLAUS SACHS-HOMBACH:** Einleitung
MARCEL HEINZ: Born in the Streets. Meaning by Placing
TOBIAS SCHÖTTLER: The Triangulation of Images. Pictorial Competence and Its Pragmatic Condition of Possibility
MARTINA SAUER: Zwischen Hingabe und Distanz. Ernst Cassirers Beitrag zur Frage nach dem Ursprung der Bilder im Vergleich zu vorausgehenden (Kant), zeitgleichen (Heidegger und Warburg) und aktuellen Positionen



IMAGE 14

Herausgeber: Klaus Sachs-Hombach, Jörg R.J. Schirra, Ronny Becker

- RONNY BECKER/KLAUS SACHS-HOMBACH/JÖRG R.J. SCHIRRA:** Einleitung
GODA PLAUM: Funktionen des bildnerischen Denkens
CONSTANTIN RAUER: Kleine Kulturgeschichte des Menschenbildes. Ein Essay
JENNIFER DAUBENBERGER: »A Skin Deep Creed. Tattooing as an Everlasting Visual Language in Relation to Spiritual and Ideological Beliefs
SONJA ZEMAN: »Grammaticalization: Within Pictorial Art? Searching for Diachronic Principles of Change in Picture and Language
LARISSA M. STRAFFON: The Descent of Art. The Evolution of Visual Art as Communication via Material Culture
TONI HILDEBRANDT: Bild, Geste und Hand. Leroi-Gourhans paläontologische Bildtheorie
CLAUDIA HENNING: Tagungsbericht zur internationalen Fachkonferenz »Ursprünge der Bilder« (30. März – 1. April 2011)

IMAGE 14 Themenheft: *Homo pictor* und *animal symbolicum*

Herausgeber: Mark A. Halawa

- MARK A. HALAWA:** Editorial. *Homo pictor* und *animal symbolicum*. Zu den Möglichkeiten und Grenzen einer philosophischen Bildanthropologie
NISAAR ULAMA: Von Bildfreiheit und Geschichtsverlust. Zu Hans Jonas' *homo pictor*
JÖRG R.J. SCHIRRA/KLAUS SACHS-HOMBACH: Kontextbildung als anthropologischer Zweck von Bildkompetenz
ZSUZSANNA KONDOR: Representations and Cognitive Evolution. Towards an Anthropology of Pictorial Representation
JAKOB STEINBRENNER: Was heißt Bildkompetenz? Oder Bemerkungen zu Dominic Lopes' Kompetenzbedingung

IMAGE 13

- JÖRG R.J. SCHIRRA:** Editorial
MATTHIAS HÄNDLER: Phänomenologie, Semiotik und Bildbegriff. Eine kritische Diskussion
SANDY RÜCKER: McLuhans *global village* und Enzensbergers Netzstadt. Untersuchung und Vergleich der Metaphern
MARTINA SAUER: Affekte und Emotionen als Grundlage von Weltverstehen. Zur Tragfähigkeit des kulturanthropologischen Ansatzes Ernst Cassirers in den Bildwissenschaften
JAKOB SAUERWEIN: Das Bewusstsein im Schlaf. Über die Funktion von Klarträumen



IMAGE 12: Bild und Transformation

Herausgeber: Martin Scholz

- MARTIN SCHOLZ:** Von Katastrophen und ihren Bildern
STEPHAN RAMMLER: Im Schatten der Utopie. Zur sozialen Wirkungsmacht von Leitbildern kultureller Transformation
KLAUS SACHS-HOMBACH: Zukunftsbilder. Einige begriffliche Anmerkungen
ROLF NOHR: Sternenkind. Vom Transformatorischen, Nützlichen, dem Fötus und dem blauen Planeten
SABINE FORAITA/MARKUS SCHLEGEL: Vom Höhlengleichnis zum Zukunftsszenario oder wie stellt sich Zukunft dar?
ROLF SACHSSE: How to do things with media images. Zur Praxis positiver Transformationen stehender Bilder
HANS JÜRGEN WULFF: Zeitmodi, Prozesszeit. Elementaria der Zeitrepräsentation im Film
ANNA ZIKA: gottseidank: ich muss keine teflon-overalls tragen. mode(fotografie) und zukunft
MARTIN SCHOLZ: Versprechen. Bilder, die Zukunft zeigen

IMAGE 11

- JÖRG R.J. SCHIRRA:** Editorial
TINA HEDWIG KAISER: Dislokationen des Bildes. Bewegter Bildraum, haptisches Sehen und die Herstellung von Wirklichkeit
GODA PLAUM: Bildnerisches Denken
MARTINA ENGELBRECHT/JULIANE BETZ/CHRISTOPH KLEIN/RAPHAEL ROSENBERG: Dem Auge auf der Spur. Eine historische und empirische Studie zur Blickbewegung beim Betrachten von Gemälden
CHRISTIAN TRAUTSCH: Die Bildphilosophien Ludwig Wittgensteins und Oliver Scholz' im Vergleich
BEATRICE NUNOLD: Landschaft als Topologie des S(ch)eins

IMAGE 10

Herausgeberinnen: Claudia Henning, Katharina Scheiter

- CLAUDIA HENNING/KATHARINA SCHEITER:** Einleitung
ANETA ROSTKOWSKA: Critique of Lambert Wiesing's Phenomenological Theory of Picture
NICOLAS ROMANACCI: Pictorial Ambiguity. Approaching ›Applied Cognitive Aesthetics‹ from a Philosophical Point of View
PETRA BERNHARDT: ›Einbildung‹ und Wandel der Raumkategorie ›Osten‹ seit 1989. Werbebilder als soziale Indikatoren
EVELYN RUNGE: Ästhetik des Elends. Thesen zu sozialengagierter Fotografie und dem Begriff des Mitleids
STEFAN HÖLSCHER: Bildstörung. Zur theoretischen Grundlegung einer experimentell-empirischen Bilddidaktik
KATHARINA LOBINGER: Facing the picture. Blicken wir dem Bild ins Auge! Vorschlag für eine metaanalytische Auseinandersetzung mit visueller Medieninhaltsforschung
BIRGIT IMHOF/HALSZKA JARODZKA/PETER GERJETS: Classifying Instructional Visualizations. A Psychological Approach



PETRA BERNHARDT: Tagungsbericht zur internationalen Fachkonferenz »Bilder – Sehen – Denken« (18. – 20. März 2009)

IMAGE 9

KLAUS SACHS-HOMBACH: Editorial

DIETER MAURER/CLAUDIA RIBONI/BIRUTE GUJER: Frühe Bilder in der Ontogenese

DIETER MAURER/CLAUDIA RIBONI/BIRUTE GUJER: Bildgenese und Bildbegriff

MICHAEL HANKE: Text – Bild – Körper. Vilém Flussers medientheoretischer Weg vom Subjekt zum Projekt

STEFAN MEIER: »Pimp your profile«. Fotografie als Mittel visueller Imagekonstruktion im Web 2.0

JULIUS ERDMANN: My body style(s). Formen der bildlichen Identität im Studivz

ANGELA KREWANI: Technische Bilder. Aspekte medizinischer Bildgestaltung

BEATE OCHSNER: Visuelle Subversionen. Zur Inszenierung monströser Körper im Bild

IMAGE 8

Herausgeberin: Dagmar Venohr

DAGMAR VENOHR: Einleitung

CHRISTIANE VOSS: Fiktionale Immersion zwischen Ästhetik und Anästhesierung

KATHRIN BUSCH: Kraft der Dinge. Notizen zu einer Kulturtheorie des Designs

RÜDIGER ZILL: Im Schaufenster

PETRA LEUTNER: Leere der Sehnsucht. Die Mode und das Regiment der Dinge

DAGMAR VENOHR: Modehandeln zwischen Bild und Text. Zur Ikonotextualität der Mode in der Zeitschrift

IMAGE 7

JÖRG R.J. SCHIRRA: Editorial

BEATRICE NUNOLD: Sinnlich – konkret. Eine kleine Topologie des S(ch)eins

DAGMAR VENOHR: ModeBilderKunstTexte. Die Kontextualisierung der Modefotografien von F.C. Gundlach zwischen Kunst- und Modesystem

NICOLAS ROMANACCI: »Possession plus reference«. Nelson Goodmans Begriff der Exemplifikation – angewandt auf eine Untersuchung von Beziehungen zwischen Kognition, Kreativität, Jugendkultur und Erziehung

HERMANN KALKOFEN: Sich selbst bezeichnende Zeichen

RAINER GROH: Das Bild des Googelns

IMAGE 6

JÖRG R.J. SCHIRRA: Editorial

SABRINA BAUMGARTNER/JOACHIM TREBBE: Die Konstruktion internationaler Politik in den Bildsequenzen von Fernsehnachrichten. Quantitative und qualitative Inhaltsanalysen zur Darstellung von mediatisierter und inszenierter Politik

HERMANN KALKOFEN: Bilder lesen...



FRANZ REITINGER: Bildtransfers. Der Einsatz visueller Medien in der Indianermission Neufrankreichs

ANDREAS SCHELKE: Zur Sozialität des nicht-fotorealistischen Renderings. Eine zu kurze, soziologische Skizze für zeitgenössische Bildmaschinen

IMAGE 6 Themenheft: Rezensionen

STEPHAN KORNMESSE rezensiert: Symposium »Signs of Identity—Exploring the Borders«

SILKE EILERS rezensiert: *Bild und Eigensinn*

MARCO A. SORACE rezensiert: *Mit Bildern lügen*

MIRIAM HALWANI rezensiert: *Gottfried Jäger*

SILKE EILERS rezensiert: *Bild/Geschichte*

HANS JÜRGEN WULFF rezensiert: *Visual Culture Revisited*

GABRIELLE DUFOR-KOWALSKA rezensiert: *Ästhetische Existenz heute*

STEPHANIE HERING rezensiert: *MediaArtHistories*

MIHAI NADIN rezensiert: *Computergrafik*

SILKE EILERS rezensiert: *Modernisierung des Sehens*

IMAGE 5

JÖRG R.J. SCHIRRA: Editorial

HERMANN KALKOFEN: Pudowkins Experiment mit Kuleschow

REGULA FANKHAUSER: Visuelle Erkenntnis. Zum Bildverständnis des Hermetismus in der Frühen Neuzeit

BEATRICE NUNOLD: Die Welt im Kopf ist die einzige, die wir kennen! Dalis paranoisch-kritische Methode, Immanuel Kant und die Ergebnisse der neueren Neurowissenschaft

PHILIPP SOLDT: Bildbewusstsein und »willing suspension of disbelief«. Ein psychoanalytischer Beitrag zur Bildrezeption

IMAGE 5 Themenheft: Computational Visualistics and Picture Morphology

Herausgeber: Jörg R.J. Schirra

JÖRG R.J. SCHIRRA: Computational Visualistics and Picture Morphology. An Introduction

YURI ENGELHARDT: Syntactic Structures in Graphics

STEFANO BORGIO/ROBERTA FERRARIO/CLAUDIO MASOLO/ALESSANDRO OLTRAMARI: Mereogeometry and Pictorial Morphology

WINFRIED KURTH: Specification of Morphological Models with L-Systems and Relational Growth Grammars

TOBIAS ISENBERG: A Survey of Image-Morphologic Primitives in Non-Photorealistic Rendering

HANS DU BUF/JOÃO RODRIGUES: Image Morphology. From Perception to Rendering

THE SVP GROUP: Automatic Generation of Movie Trailers Using Ontologies

JÖRG R.J. SCHIRRA: Conclusive Notes on Computational Picture Morphology



IMAGE 4

JÖRG R.J. SCHIRRA: Editorial

BEATRICE NUNOLD: Landschaft als Topologie des Seins

STEPHAN GÜNZEL: Bildtheoretische Analyse von Computerspielen in der Perspektive Erste Person

MARIO BORILLO/JEAN-PIERRE GOULETTE: Computing Architectural Composition from the Semantics of the *Vocabulaire de l'architecture*

ALEXANDER GRAU: Daten, Bilder: Weltanschauungen. Über die Rhetorik von Bildern in der Hirnforschung

ELIZE BISANZ: Zum Erkenntnispotenzial von künstlichen Bildsystemen

IMAGE 4 Themenheft: Rezensionen

Aus aktuellem Anlass:

FRANZ REITINGER: Karikaturenstreit

Rezensionen:

FRANZ REITINGER rezensiert: *Geschichtsdeutung auf alten Karten*

FRANZ REITINGER rezensiert: *Auf dem Weg zum Himmel*

FRANZ REITINGER rezensiert: *Bilder sind Schüsse ins Gehirn*

KLAUS SACHS-HOMBACH rezensiert: *Politik im Bild*

SASCHA DEMARMELS rezensiert: *Bilder auf Weltreise*

SASCHA DEMARMELS rezensiert: *Bild und Medium*

THOMAS MEDER rezensiert: *Blicktricks*

THOMAS MEDER rezensiert: *Wege zur Bildwissenschaft*

EVA SCHÜRMANN rezensiert: *Bild-Zeichen und What do pictures want?*

IMAGE 3

KLAUS SACHS-HOMBACH: Editorial

HEIKO HECHT: Film as Dynamic Event Perception. Technological Development Forces Realism to Retreat

HERMANN KALKOFEN: Inversion und Ambiguität. Kapitel aus der psychologischen Optik

KAI BUCHHOLZ: Imitationen. Mehr Schein als Sein?

CLAUDIA GLIEMANN: Bilder in Bildern. Endogramme von Eggs & Bitschin

CHRISTOPH ASMUTH: Die Als-Struktur des Bildes

IMAGE 3 Themenheft: Bild-Stil. Strukturierung der Bildinformation

Herausgeber/in: Martina Plümacher, Klaus Sachs-Hombach

MARTINA PLÜMACHER/KLAUS SACHS-HOMBACH: Einleitung

NINA BISHARA: Bilderrätsel in der Werbung

SASCHA DEMARMELS: Funktion des Bildstils von politischen Plakaten. Eine historische Analyse am Beispiel von Abstimmungsplakaten

DAGMAR SCHMAUKS: Rippchen, Rüssel, Ringelschwanz. Stilisierungen des Schweins in Werbung und Cartoon

BEATRICE NUNOLD: Landschaft als Immersionsraum und Sakralisierung der Landschaft

KLAUS SACHS-HOMBACH/JÖRG R.J. SCHIRRA: Bildstil als rhetorische Kategorie



IMAGE 2: Kunstgeschichtliche Interpretation und bildwissenschaftliche Systematik

Herausgeber: Klaus Sachs-Hombach

KLAUS SACHS-HOMBACH: Einleitung

BENJAMIN DRECHSEL: Die Macht der Bilder als Ohnmacht der Politikwissenschaft. Ein Plädoyer für die transdisziplinäre Erforschung visueller politischer Kommunikation

EMMANUEL ALLOA: Bildökonomie. Von den theologischen Wurzeln eines streitbaren Begriffs

SILVIA SEJA: Das Bild als Handlung? Zum Verhältnis der Begriffe ›Bild‹ und ›Handlung‹

HELGE MEYER: Die Kunst des Handelns und des Leidens. Schmerz als Bild in der Performance Art

STEFAN MEIER-SCHUEGRAF: Rechtsextreme Bannerwerbung im Web. Eine medien spezifische Untersuchung neuer Propagandaformen von rechtsextremen Gruppierungen im Internet

IMAGE 2 Themenheft: Filmforschung und Filmlehre

Herausgeber/in: Eva Fritsch, Rüdiger Steinmetz

EVA FRITSCH/RÜDIGER STEINMETZ: Einleitung

KLAUS KEIL: Filmforschung und Filmlehre in der Hochschullandschaft

EVA FRITSCH: Film in der Lehre. Erfahrungen mit einführenden Seminaren zu Filmgeschichte und Filmanalyse

MANFRED RÜSEL: Film in der Lehrerfortbildung

WINFRIED PAULEIT: Filmlehre im internationalen Vergleich

RÜDIGER STEINMETZ/KAI STEINMANN/SEBASTIAN UHLIG/RENÉ BLÜMEL: Film- und Fernsehästhetik in Theorie und Praxis

DIRK BLOTHNER: Der Film. Ein Drehbuch des Lebens? Zum Verhältnis von Psychologie und Spielfilm

KLAUS SACHS-HOMBACH: Plädoyer für ein Schulfach ›Visuelle Medien‹

IMAGE 1: Bildwissenschaft als interdisziplinäres Unternehmen. Eine Standortbestimmung

KLAUS SACHS-HOMBACH: Editorial

PETER SCHREIBER: Was ist Bildwissenschaft? Versuch einer Standort- und Inhaltsbestimmung

FRANZ REITINGER: Die Einheit der Kunst und die Vielfalt der Bilder

KLAUS SACHS-HOMBACH: Arguments in Favour of a General Image Science

JÖRG R.J. SCHIRRA: Ein Disziplinen-Mandala für die Bildwissenschaft. Kleine Provokation zu einem neuen Fach

KIRSTEN WAGNER: Computergrafik und Informationsvisualisierung als Medien visueller Erkenntnis

DIETER MÜNCH: Zeichentheoretische Grundlagen der Bildwissenschaft

ANDREAS SCHELSKE: Zehn funktionale Leitideen multimedialer Bildpragmatik

HERIBERT RÜCKER: Abbildung als Mutter der Wissenschaften



IMAGE 1 Themenheft: Die schräge Kamera

Herausgeber: Klaus Sachs-Hombach, Hans Jürgen Wulff

KLAUS SACHS-HOMBACH/HANS JÜRGEN WULFF: Vorwort

KLAUS SACHS-HOMBACH/STEPHAN SCHWAN: Was ist »schräge Kamera«? Anmerkungen zur Bestandsaufnahme ihrer Formen, Funktionen und Bedeutungen

HANS JÜRGEN WULFF: Die Dramaturgien der schrägen Kamera. Thesen und Perspektiven

THOMAS HENSEL: Aperspektive als symbolische Form. Eine Annäherung

MICHAEL ALBERT ISLINGER: Phänomenologische Betrachtungen im Zeitalter des digitalen Kinos

JÖRG SCHWEINITZ: Ungewöhnliche Perspektive als Exzess und Allusion. Busby Berkeleys »Lullaby of Broadway«

JÜRGEN MÜLLER/JÖRN HETEBRÜGGE: Out of focus. Verkantungen, Unschärfen und Verunsicherungen in Orson Welles' *The Lady from Shanghai* (1947)