

At the boundaries of reality: Is the interactor a character? An interdisciplinary inquiry in interactive art and narrative studies

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Abstract: The rise of new interactive devices and installations has given way to a new type of spectator, who functions as a narrative component: the interactor. Also part of the narrative, the character has been understood as a fictional entity distinct from others, endowed with agency and an inner life (Eder, Jannidis & Schneider, 2010). Can the interactor be considered a character? This paper explores areas of blending, ambiguity, or even transgression that emerge when the two concepts intersect, in order to identify conditions under which this may occur. The reflection is prompted by artistic forms such as interactive digital art created by Bianchini (2004), or Davies (2013). These works invite us to navigate thresholds by: (a) using Symbolic Interactionism to highlight how artworks are embedded with perceptual boundaries, whereby the interactor is perceived as a spectator by some and as a character by others; (b) conceiving of metalepsis as inherent to the interactor, who acts as a transgressive agent crossing the boundaries between the real and fictional worlds; and (c) questioning the limits of the concept of *character*, particularly the criterion of fictionality. We argue that the interactor can be understood as a character, considering theoretical, media-based, subjective and relational conditions.

Keywords: Character; Interactor; Interactive Art; Metalepsis; Symbolic Interactionism.

(Esp.) En los confines de la realidad: ¿Es el interactor un personaje?
Una indagación interdisciplinaria en arte interactivo y estudios narrativos

Resumen: El auge de nuevos dispositivos e instalaciones interactivos ha dado lugar a un nuevo tipo de espectador, que funciona como componente narrativo: el interactor. También parte de la narrativa, el personaje ha sido entendido como una entidad ficticia distinta, dotada de agencia y vida interior (Eder, Jannidis y Schneider, 2010). ¿Puede el interactor considerarse un personaje? Este artículo explora áreas de mezcla, ambigüedad o incluso transgresión que surgen cuando ambos conceptos se intersectan, a fin de identificar condiciones en las que esto puede ocurrir. La reflexión surge a partir de formas artísticas como el arte digital interactivo creado por Bianchini (2004) o Davies (2013). Estas obras nos invitan a navegar distintos tipos de umbrales: (a) mediante el uso del Interaccionismo Simbólico para destacar cómo las obras están imbricadas en límites perceptuales, en los que el interactor es percibido como espectador por unos y como personaje por otros; (b) al concebir la metalepsis como inherente a la condición del interactor, un agente transgresor que cruza los límites entre los mundos real y ficticio; y (c) al cuestionar los límites del concepto de *personaje*, particularmente el criterio de ficcionalidad. Sostenemos que el interactor puede entenderse como un personaje en determinadas condiciones teóricas, mediáticas, subjetivas y relacionales.

Palabras clave: Personaje; Interactor; Arte Interactivo; Metalepsis; Interaccionismo Simbólico.

Summary: 1. Introduction. 1.1. What is an interactor? 1.2. What is a character? 2. Is the interactor a character? 2.1. Character is in the eye of the beholder. 2.2. Metalepsis: Transgressing the boundaries of the real. 2.3. Fiction, narrative or something else? 2.3.1. Symbolism and representation. 2.3.2. The artistic double. 3. Conclusion. References.

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1. Introduction

Particularly since the twentieth century, art, fiction, and reality see their boundaries blur across various intersections: sometimes spectators "step onto the stage", while at other times actors make the "stage" out of everyday space. The artistic space becomes entangled with – and thus challenged by – the space we inhabit in our daily lives. The interactive artwork emerges as a privileged object of this reflection: a new type of spectator arises suggesting the possibility of a reconceptualization of the notion of character – the interactor. In contexts marked by the coexistence of fiction and reality, there is an interplay of dual universes, as exemplified by actors embodying characters. The interactor belongs to both realms, moving beyond the position of the conventional spectator to encounter and interact with the characters of the narrative. In this context, can the interactor be considered a character?

This study aims to understand the conditions under which an interactor may be perceived as a character, assuming that the dissolution of boundaries (cognitive, social, media...) plays a key role. These conditions may be theoretical or tied to the characteristics of artworks and the contexts, thus it is fruitful to combine both approaches. After reviewing the scientific literature, we conclude that research on character in interactive art remains scarce. We therefore also draw on cross-reference work on character and interactive art with other areas (e.g., Symbolic Interactionism, documentary studies), finding it mostly theoretical, rather than empirical. Methodologically, we adopt a qualitative theoretical case-study approach, which is particularly suited to engaging with the speculative nature of the research question. Verbal descriptions of the artworks, as well as images and audiovisual records of interactions (e.g., online documentation) are approached as analytical material and interpreted in a theoretically informed manner. The selected cases were chosen for the diversity they offer in terms of character and interaction (e.g., immersive, digital, performative), as well as for their heuristic value and clarity in illustrating the arguments. These include works that explicitly involve both character and interactivity, such as *The Very Near Future* (Bianchini, 2004), *Temps Libres* (Davies, 2013), and *Portray the Silhouette* (Fujihata, 2006), as well as a work that provides insight, although the presence of a character is debatable, namely *The Artist Is Present* (Abramović, 2010). We argue that the interactor can be understood as a character under specific theoretical, media-related, subjective, and relational conditions, within a processual and relational conception of characterhood in contemporary art.

1.1. What is an interactor?

Traditionally, the spectator is seen as the opposite of the actor: while the latter performs on stage or screen, the former remains seated, distanced from the play, the film, or another form of mediated representation. However, various artistic forms have recently challenged this paradigm, not only with regard to the roles of spectator and actor, but also in terms of narrative structure. Augusto Boal (1974/1991, p. 180) questioned the very concept: "‘Spectator’, what an ugly word!"¹. For him, the appropriate term is *spect-actor*, calling not only for the spectator's physical participation in the story but also for the dissolution of the boundaries between spectator and actor (Boal, 1992/2005, p. 19). In new interactive formats, the visitor does not merely assume an active role: in fact, the narrative awaits their intervention, their awakening of the story, a trigger or a redirection initiated by them. Without their presence and participation, the narrative cannot continue: it remains suspended in its virtual state, awaiting actualization. Nonetheless, in the case of interactive installations the participant's ability to act is always conditioned by prior preparations made by an author who organizes and predefines the elements (and possibilities) of interaction. This special type of spectator has been called visitor, spectator-participant, user, immersant, agent, witness-participant, audience-participant, playing-audience, guest-performer, among others (e.g., Machon, 2016). All of these terms appear across numerous published texts as

¹ Free translation of Portuguese "‘Espectador’, que palavra feia!".

attempts to classify the new agent within interactive and immersive artworks, but one captivated our attention. In 1991, Brenda Laurel proposed the neologism “interactor”, a term that highlights their interactive and dialogical character while distinguishing the participatory visitor of interactive artworks and virtual environments from the conventional spectator or museum-goer.

1.2. What is a character?

Character has traditionally been studied within the field of fictional literature, where it has been understood in disparate ways. Some approaches emphasize its distinction from real people, as in structuralism, which conceives character as a textual construct defined by its narrative function, while others highlight its projective dimension and its affinity with the human mind, as in psychoanalytic approach. Uri Margolin (1983; 2007) became a groundbreaking and influential author by advancing an integrative perspective. He defends a cognitivist approach, according to which the character originates from words, visual images, sound, or other narrative elements, but is not limited to them – a distinct entity emerges that inhabits the subject's mental imagery or even interpersonal dialogue, potentially persisting in those mental and social spheres after the narrative itself has been forgotten. The author further emphasises that characters are generated within specific cultural and social contexts and are shaped by established conventions. Throughout the process, spectators' representations of real life² play a decisive role in perceiving and interpreting characters.

Building on the theoretical integration introduced by Margolin, Jens Eder has significantly broadened the study of filmic character, while providing a thorough systematization of the field. (e.g., Eder, 2025). With considerable depth, scope, and scientific rigour, Jens Eder, Fotis Jannidis, and Ralf Schneider (2010) developed an interdisciplinary account of the concept, writing one of the most widely cited English-language works in the field. Adopting a flexible and integrative framework, they propose a prototypical approach to the concept of “character” in fictional contexts, while acknowledging that much of their argument accommodates a wide range of cases, including non-fictional characters. Instead of relying on a strict definitional framework, the prototypical approach assumes that specific cases are compared to a mental model shaped by a set of parameters. A definition, understood as an abstract formulation, identifies the necessary and sufficient conditions for a concrete case to be included: either it fits or it does not. However, borderline, hybrid, and ambiguous cases constantly challenge this binary view. The prototypical model, by contrast, accommodates specific instances that may deviate from one or more criteria and yet still be perceived as characters. Eder and colleagues (2010, p. 10) state that at the core of the concept lies a “recognisable fictional being, to which the ability to think and act is ascribed,” although there may be characters who deviate from core criteria such as fictionality (e.g., historical figures like Napoleon) or animation (e.g., in *The Trouble with Harry* by Alfred Hitchcock [1955], one of the characters is dead from the outset of the story).

2. Is the interactor a character?

2.1. Character is in the eye of the beholder

In Alex Davies's installation *The Very Near Future* (2013), visitors and actors are part of a narrative, which appears different to each. Within a production set, surrounded by a working crew, spectators are invited to explore various scenographic spaces that they believe to be the backstage of a film shot. The spectators encounter characters, actors, sets, and other elements typically associated with film production. At some point, everything shifts: instead of being behind the scenes of a film, the spectators realize they are in a setting where they have, unwittingly, become characters. For example, at a certain moment, the visitors walk past a window, which they instinctively peers into. Later, in the supposed editing room, they watch footage of a couple performing a scene in which they appear apprehensive, looking toward the window – as if

² In this text, when we speak of the “real,” we refer to the subjective perception of the real, as opposed to the subjective perception of the fictional – this is a psychosociological approach rather than a philosophical or ontological one regarding what reality is.

unsettled by a shadowy figure that appears to haunt them from the other side. The interactor then realizes that the villain was himself³... (Fig. 1) During *The Very Near Future*, the individual's perceived role changes over time: at first, they are a visitor who believes they are observing a film being shot; later, they become an interactor; and finally, they realize they have been a character in that very film.



Figure 1. Davies, *The Very Near Future*, 2013 (Davies's website <http://schizophrenia.com/portfolio/the-very-near-future/>)

It is worth relating this experience to invisible theatre, a form developed within Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed. Invisible theatre involves a scripted performance designed according to theatrical aesthetic parameters (dramatic structure, characters, dialogue, etc.) but staged within everyday public settings, without being revealed as theatre. The audience is led to believe they are witnessing real events. Without their knowledge, people are included as interactors and spectators. The actors possess an awareness of the theatrical nature of the situation – a perception that escapes the general public or the interactor, who remain convinced that what they are witnessing is part of the real world. In this context, characters are only perceived as such by the actors. For the unsuspecting spectators, the event appears as an interaction between real people, since there is no consciousness of fictionality, nor any cues that might suggest it. Invisible theatre thus illustrates that the perception of a character varies depending on the participant.

Let us recall that an important contribution of cognitive narratology is the ontological status of the character as both an object of thought and of communication, within a relational understanding of art: the character is constituted in the social and cultural act of storytelling, which is essential to its definition as such (Margolin, 2007). This idea aligns with the approach of Symbolic Interactionism (Blumer, 1969/1982; Mead, 1934/1962), which holds that the social definition of a situation (as fictional, narrative, or artistic, for example) is a co-construction based on previously acquired symbols (e.g., aesthetic parameters, artistic spaces) and others obtained at the moment. It is not a matter of objective reality, but of intersubjectivity: a sharing of subjectivities that does not eliminate individual differences, but rather coexists with them. In the

³ For detailed description, see the statement of the writer, researcher and consultant of this work, Velikovskiy (2014), at the website <https://theconversation.com/new-media-art-in-sydney-in-the-very-near-future-22896>

moment of social interaction, a consensus is reached – not an absolute one, but an operational one – which allows participants to act according to a shared interpretive framework. Considered a key author, Goffman (1959/1993) uses theatrical concepts to understand social interaction. According to Goffman, in the presence of symbols indicating a particular social situation (such as “going to the theatre” or “visiting an art gallery”), each person will develop their own understanding of the appropriate social attitude to adopt and will seek to maintain it at all costs. The *role* of each participant is also part of the social definition of the situation. Goffman refers to elements such as clothing and non-verbal behaviour as the *personal front*, while *setting* refers to contextual symbols like furniture or architecture. Goffman (1961) also introduces the notion of *membrane*, conceived as a social boundary that encloses any focused encounter – it includes what is meaningful (and excludes what is not), guiding attention toward what is considered relevant (Goffman, 1961).

Using this theoretical approach, a limited number of recent scholars have conducted empirical studies involving interactive art. Kobyshcha (2018) observed the interaction of spectators with three artistic installations at a festival. Her publication describes various ways of perceiving the artwork’s membrane: through communication (e.g., written or oral) about its limits, through the type of interaction with the work (e.g., as object, activity, or space), through visually explicit material boundaries, or through its relationship with the surrounding environment (e.g., via material contrasts). We may suppose that such parameters also influence the interactor’s perception of characters – particularly their own status as character – insofar as they help clarify what is significant in defining the artwork and the role of each participant. Regarding the communication parameter, it is worth mentioning that Colleen Rua (2019) engaged the audience explicitly in an immersive theatre production, providing prior access to the script and assigning roles during a rehearsal. In the actual performance, she observed that interactors appropriated their roles in highly variable ways, with some even bringing different clothing to embody a character. Yet such explicitness does not seem to be the norm. Scott, Hinton-Smith, Härmä, and Broome (2013) observed a frequent absence of oral or written communication about the spectators’ roles in interactive art, which led to confusion among participants. People’s prior assumptions about their place in the artwork (as passive spectators) were challenged without any alternative references being provided. Faced with this ambiguity, the authors observed a variety of reactions from visitors – ranging from disengaging and assuming a detached spectator stance to subtly seeking information (or even validation) from others in the room, in an effort to reach an operational consensus on what behaviour was expected in the situation. They concluded that there is a contradiction inherent in the role expected of visitors, which generates stress: on one hand, the works invite performance (*i.e.*, a role similar to that of an actor, subject to observation and evaluation); on the other, they withhold explanatory or instructional information, typically available to actors (there is no script, not even a description of how to physically operate the interface).

Some artworks involve spectators in a highly active and intradiegetic way, integrating them as characters who interact on the same level as professional actors, as in the immersive theatre analysed by Rua (2019). In such cases, the interactor’s contribution is more likely to be seen as a form of immersion into a fictional universe, where they assume a character role similar to that of the other characters. In other artworks, the spectator’s type of participation is more sporadic and/or take place from an extradiegetic, observational position (e.g., making external decisions about the narrative’s direction), which reduces the perception that they are an entity akin to the characters. A cursor has no counterpart in the fictional world, and so, as an avatar, is therefore more likely to be experienced in an extradiegetic way. Between these extremes lies a vast range of possibilities.

Analogous to the materiality of boundaries mentioned by Kobyshcha (2018) – and adopting a slightly broader interpretation – we are also interested in how the physical characteristics of the interactive device itself may either highlight or obscure the interactor’s dual nature. Where there is continuity with the surroundings, as in invisible theatre set in non-artistic, everyday spaces, the event is less likely to be perceived as artistic (and, consequently, the character as such). One may suppose that a similar improvisation occurring on a theatre stage would be more likely to prompt recognition of the participants as characters, due to the physical separation from the audience.

This materiality is relevant not only for defining boundaries, but also for identifying differences between the artistic elements and the surrounding environment in which the spectator is. In Masaki Fujihata's *Portray the Silhouette* (2006), there is a physical distinction that sets the fictional world apart from its real-world context. On the wall, we see programmed autonomous dark figures in 2D – including a character, a teapot, and several teacups – in contrast with the colourful 3D real world (Fig. 2). Without the shadows, the 3D table and seat would lose its power as artistic artifacts, likely even going unnoticed due to their resemblance to the natural environment of an art gallery. However, this similarity also invites the visitor to interact, functioning as a conceptual doorway, a subtle in-between space where the tangible and the imaginary begin to blur. Upon crossing it, the interactor gains a spontaneous and highly evident avatar: their own shadow. This mirrored visitor closely resembles the shadow-character programmed by the installation, and both can interact on the same material plane (the wall onto which their contours are projected). The similarities between the interactor (or more precisely, his shadow, a natural double) and the programmed character makes it even more apparent that the interactor is (also) a character.

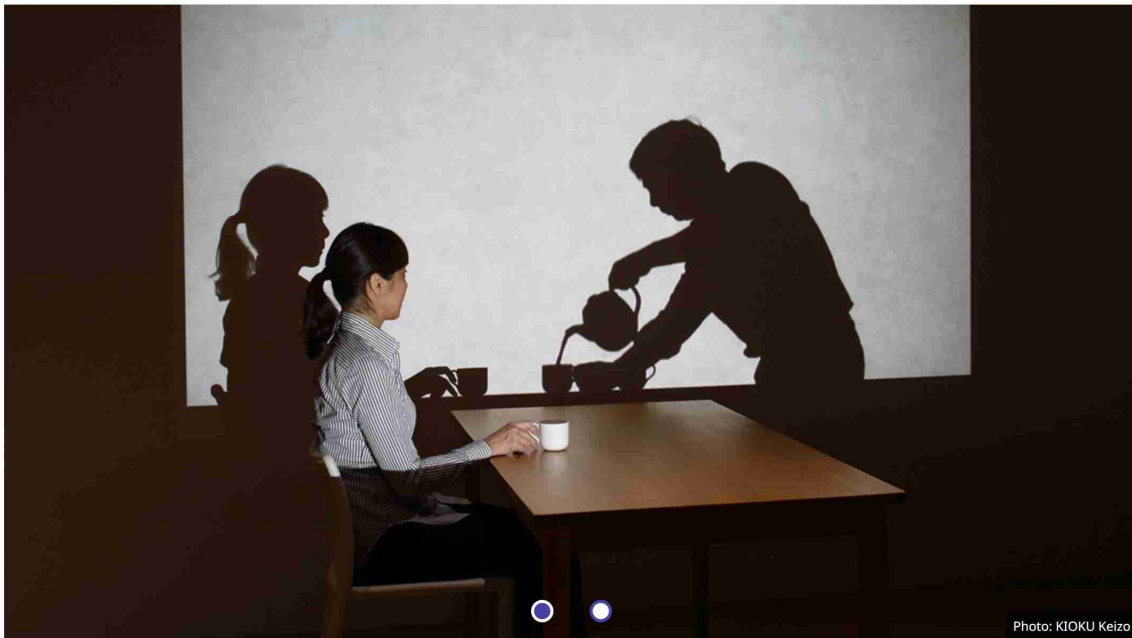


Figure 2. Fujihata, *Portray the Silhouette*, 2006 (website of the Intercommunication Center, where it was presented <https://www.ntticc.or.jp/en/archive/works/portray-the-silhouette/>)

Beyond the physical context, the social context is also relevant. The variable behaviour of other spectators (or even their presence or absence) may influence the interactor to immerse themselves more fully in the artwork – and perhaps to adopt a dramatic role before an audience. If the spectators' attitude diverges significantly from that of the interactor, it may increase the sense of the interactor as a dual being: an actor portraying a character, in the presence of a watching audience.

In sum, using a symbolic interactionist approach, we observed that some of the conditions under which an interactor may be perceived as a character arise from the subjective and intersubjective construction of social roles, as well as the boundaries between them (e.g., interactor, conventional spectator, actor, creator, or even non-artistic everyday roles). Since the interactor is a relatively recent agent, the situation carries a greater degree of ambiguity and uncertainty, rendering particularly visible the unpredictability and plurality of symbolic construction. Subjective conditions include personal characteristics and prior meanings associated with the interactive situation, its context, and its agents (e.g., expectations regarding the spectator's role). Equally important are intersubjective constructions that emerge in the moment,

particularly through communication about the artwork and participants' behaviour, which may frame the interactor as a character.

Recent empirical studies in Symbolic Interactionism applied to interactive art, together with the analysis of specific artworks, allowed us to identify several media-related factors. These include the explicitness of information regarding the interactor's role, the type of interaction (e.g., intradiegetic, temporally extended, high elicited agency), the physical characteristics of the artwork and its context (e.g., explicit boundaries, continuity or discontinuity with the surroundings), and the resemblance between the interactor and other characters (e.g., physical similarity, narrative role).

2.2. Metalepsis: Transgressing the boundaries of the real

Considered a seminal work in interactive art, *Portrait One* (Courchesne, 1990) marked a turning point by introducing new modes of engagement, while certainly also provoking unease in the face of the unfamiliar. It is likely that this piece elicited astonishment among visitors, or even paralysis and detachment, as they hesitated over how to behave – phenomena observed by Scott and collaborators (2013) in more recent interactive installations. The idea of astonishment in the face of a new situation, in which previously impassable boundaries are crossed, aligns with what an influential author in narrative studies – Gérard Genette – defines as *metalepsis*. Genette (1972/1980) proposed a novel use of this stylistic figure, which has since influenced the way it is conceptualized within narrative studies. Genette's account of *metalepsis* is more psychological than the traditional one, which concerned the rhetorical inversion of cause and effect. According to this author, *metalepsis* refers to the transgression of the boundary between diegetic levels, creating a sense of strangeness or bizarreness – such as when a character steps out of (or into) a story within a story. Genette underscores the presence of particular sensations, especially those of transgression and astonishment, which arise when the impossible becomes, in some way, possible – through the paradoxical violation of the seemingly impassable line between two previously distinct and irreconcilably separate worlds. More recently, authors such as Wolf (2005) has extended the concept to encompass various media (film, comics, painting, etc.), emphasizing its transgeneric and transmedial nature. We consider this expansion further underscores the psychological processes involved, as its core lies not in the specific materiality it engages with, but in the cognitive mechanisms it activates.

According to Pier's (2005) conceptualization, *ascending metalepsis* refers to the invasion of an embedded diegetic level into the embedding level that contains it (for example, when a character enters the story in which they were created to speak with the author); in *descending metalepsis*, the opposite movement occurs. Ensslin (2011) uses the term *convergent metalepsis* to characterize a double *metalepsis* that often occurs in interactive installations, where both directions tend to coexist and intersect: the pre-programmed character addresses and interacts with someone from the real world, while the interactor appears to enter the narrative world. The expression *interactional metalepsis* has become recurrent among authors such as Ensslin to describe situations in which the very use of interactive technology implies a transgression between these two ontologically distinct worlds. In this context, the artwork only exists insofar as transgression occurs. Martins (2018) is among the few scholars to conduct empirical research on *metalepsis* in interactive art, regarding interactive installations as inherently *metaleptic*. In her analysis of the installation *The Rut*, she observes that fictional and real spaces blend, placing visitors simultaneously in the roles of spectator and character, to the extent that at a certain point, the work itself asks them: “Which one are you?”

Consider the case of *Temps Libres*, by Samuel Bianchini (2004). In this interactive installation, we are presented with a filmic action in which players on a golf course begin to advance across an empty field, initiating various game actions (Fig. 3). However, the unfolding of these actions (particularly the speed of the characters on screen) is determined by a voice that “controls” the narrative – the voice of the interactor. The greater the vocal intensity, the faster and more abundant the movements of the filmic characters. The interactor may be perceived as part of the artwork as a character who dominates the entire scene through their voice (a “god-like” voice, we might suppose). “Vite! Dépêche-toi!” shouts one female interactor, successfully commanding the characters on the field.



Figure 3. Bianchini, *Temps Libres*, 2004 (Bianchini's website <https://dispotheque.org/fr/temps-libre>)

In addition to the already mentioned metaleptic manifestations – such as the interactor's voice influencing how quickly the players move on screen – some audiovisual recordings of visitor interactions with the installation allow us to observe the interactor's body language, which seems to oscillate back and forth between the two worlds (see the video on the artwork's website, around 40 seconds after the beginning). After yelling at the filmic characters, one female interactor physically turns toward the audience and laughs, then shifts her attention back to the screen, addressing it both physically and verbally. She appears temporarily immersed in the fiction and seemingly unaware of the other spectators, before returning to the real world to seek feedback from the audience – only to plunge once again into the screen. To the question “Which one are you?”, this video replies: both. But with a fraction of a second's delay. It becomes evident that the interactor mentally alternates rapidly between two coexisting roles – actor and spectator. In this way, metalepsis reveals itself above all as a conceptual phenomenon: it takes place first and foremost in the mind of the interactor, as suggested by verbal and non-verbal clues.

In this section, we have emphasized a theoretical tool – metalepsis – that presents another way in which a real person may be perceived as a character, namely through the transgression of concrete boundaries between worlds. Initially studied in non-interactive media (e.g., literature), metalepsis has more recently gained prominence in interactive art, which is regarded by some authors as inherently metaleptic. Since initially proposed by Genette, the study of metalepsis has been marked by a psychological tone. We consider that the interdisciplinary nature of subsequent studies has amplified it by excluding its dependence on a specific artistic form. Integrated in this trend, close observation of the footage of *Temps Libres* reveals something further: in the interactor, there is a rapid alternation between the sense of being spectator and actor, providing behavioral indicators of this cognitive process, unfolding in real time.

2.3. Fiction, narrative or something else?

2.3.1. Symbolism and representation

As we have seen, Eder and collaborators (2010) consider fictionality to be a crucial criterion for the concept of character, nevertheless adopting a flexible prototypical approach that accepts exceptions. Reflecting on the differences between characters and real people, Eder and collaborators state:

Readers, listeners, or viewers focus on media texts, activate media knowledge and communication rules, they cannot interact with the represented persons but can think about their meaning, as well as about causes and effects, and they can shift their attention from the level of what is represented (Sherlock Holmes) to the level of presentation (the words of the book, the actor's performance). The symbolism and the communicative mediation of characters mark fundamental differences to the observation of persons in reality. In addition to that, the texts that construct characters are fictional. Real persons can of course also be represented in (non-fictional) texts, such as biographies or the news, but they do not owe their existence to these texts. (Eder et al., 2010, p.11).

Now, the very notion of the interactor challenges that first assertion – the interactor is a reader, listener, or viewer who interacts with the represented persons. Continuing with the authors' remaining points, we must note that in everyday life we would not find it strange to hear someone say, for instance, “my father is the prototype of tyranny” (symbolic) or “my friend has this personality because of a difficult childhood” (symptomatic). In fact, symbolic (meanings) and symptomatic (causes and effects) perceptions of people have been thoroughly explored in psychoanalysis. They are articulated by psychologists and psychiatrists, but also by laypeople with an interest in psychology, or who simply engage in their own day-to-day interpretations of how people function. Goffman's model is less known, but it clearly refers to communicative processes that people use to represent themselves in everyday life. Someone familiar with this model can easily view others as playing narrative roles, evaluating how well they embody certain social roles, and so on. Similarly, in certain professional domains, one often encounters laypeople whose worldview has been significantly shaped by the analysis of communicational strategies, including negotiation, manipulation, and political tactics. In contemporary psychology, narrative therapy (White & Epston, 1990) is used, encouraging the client to analyze the story they tend to tell about their life, as well as to construct new narratives about it, including perceptions of themselves and others as characters. Regardless of the level of psychosocial knowledge, it seems undeniable that there is a significant portion of individuals who do shift attention between what is represented and how it is presented by observed real persons. What is different in the case of fictional characters is the extent and specificity of the social discourse constructed around them, for example, regarding the mechanisms of representation (e.g., acting, costumes, scenography, script), the styles and movements they embody (e.g., filmic and literary genres), or the entities and agents involved (e.g., the Hollywood industry, dramaturgs). In social domains with a strong emphasis on communicative strategies for self-representation – such as politics – a comparable level of discourse sophistication may occur, for example about branding techniques and social actors (e.g., political commentators, image consultants, journalists).

Finally, Eder and collaborators (2010) highlight that although people can be represented, they are not ontologically dependent on that representation. However, influenced by Symbolic Interactionism, the foundational work of Bill Nichols (1991) stresses that people become social actors when they are filmed. The mere awareness of being observed alters how people feel and behave, prompting manipulation of their own image and possibly more performative attitudes (e.g., by amplifying emotional expression), either intentionally or unconsciously. Thus, the person that the viewer sees in a documentary film is, in fact, an interplay between reality and performance. In line with Nichols, Plantinga (2018) argues that the filmmaker's aesthetic decisions also create that new version. Documentary participants are represented and fulfill certain dramatic functions: in other words, they are characters. Plantinga goes on to say that behind the people we see is a director and a team that selected them, chose the moments when they were filmed, cut actions, edited scenes, and enhanced them with visual and sound effects to shape the viewer's perception in a particular direction in order to serve their goals. Everything we see is subordinated to a narrative, that is, a representational structure that organizes so-called

“real” information to convey a specific message. In many documentaries, there is even reenactment: participants are portraying themselves in past events. We can say that what is at stake is not creation from scratch (as in fiction), but nevertheless there is a construction of a certain level of reality.

In this context, to conceptualize a real person as a character (historical figure, documentary protagonist, interactor, etc.), it seems appropriate to use *representation*, as grounded in narrative. In line with this idea, in a recent edition of the extensive study stemming from his doctoral dissertation, Eder (2025) defended representation – rather than fiction – as essential to the concept of character, broadening the scope to documentary and other non-fictional characters.

2.3.2. The artistic double

Some types of performance are not represented, in the sense that stage actions are immediate and unmediated – such as performance art, TV reality shows, etc. The interactor also appears to fall into this category. It is unlikely that the interactor will represent a character with previously planned roots, except in specific cases where prior contact is provided for by the piece itself, as in the one described in the study by Rua (2019). Let us consider what happens in the interactive performance *The Artist Is Present* (2010) by Marina Abramović, a pioneering artist and key figure in performance art. Seated with an empty chair in front of her, the artist remains still, waiting for someone to sit, make eye contact and possibly physical contact. After several interactors take the seat, unexpectedly Ulay, her former romantic and performance partner, appears in this role. Footage of this moment shows that when Marina Abramović sees Ulay, she seems to exit her performative state to meet her former partner emotionally: she is moved, shedding tears of joy in what appear to be genuine feelings arising from a different identity than the performative one (Fig. 4). We now see a real person reacting to the unexpected reunion with someone dear after a long separation.



Figure 4. Abramović, *The Artist is Present*, 2010. Interaction with Ulay (NSS Magazine's website <https://www.nssmag.com/en/art-design/29333/marina-abramovic-artist-is-present-ukraine>).

A closer look suggests that Marina might be mentally alternating between these two states, analogously to the interactor described in *Temps Libres*. She subtly breaks the rules of the artistic performance, which she leaves discreetly (through eye contact, a smile, the tilt of her body in the chair...), even though the setting remains unchanged. Marina Abramović's real self briefly invades

her performative mode, revealing that even in performance art, there is a doubleness. For most of the performance, it is the artist who is present, but with Ulay, it is the person, Marina.

Given that a similar doubleness exists in other types of performance we have been discussing, it is worth asking whether there is also a character in performance art. There is unquestionably a generic story induced by the setting: the artist waits, a person sits, they interact, something happens, and the visitor leaves. Just as we witness a loosely defined narrative, this can also be the case with the character. Marina does not present us with a character marked by external signs of fictionality, which might be observable through costume or revealing dialogue, for instance. What we see is a subtle shift in nonverbal behaviour, which may suggest a loosely defined or an internal character, experienced only by the artist herself.

However, in interviews, Marina appears averse to the notion of character, stating that she is herself during the performance. She goes further, calling theatre her *enemy* because of its falseness – which implicitly includes characters, if understood as fictional (Kaye, 1996). Nevertheless, the impression we get is that the attitude the artist assumes for the piece has dramatic and aesthetic qualities. Therefore, we consider it plausible that Marina Abramović embodies a role, and that her way of being during the piece is not entirely improvised. The assumption is that, even if the actions are not planned and reenacted in detail, her performative identity might be previously conceived. At the artwork, the person Marina may be engaging in self-representation, i.e., managing a mental state of Marina the performer. In interviews, the artist says that she enters a special, almost spiritual state: “*I get into a state that is different from the state of reality and I become like a receiver and [transmitter] of some other type of energy which is not my own.*” (High Profiles, 2014). Schechner (1985), one of the founding figures of performance studies, proposes that in performative contexts the individual does not fully coincide with themselves, nor do they simply become another. Instead, they inhabit a paradoxical state that he describes as “not me / not not me,” a form of doubleness specific to performance in which the subject enacts behaviours that depart from their everyday identity while not becoming fully other to themselves. This condition may manifest in performance art, where such doubleness does not necessarily take the form of fiction. In some cases, it may be accompanied by altered states of consciousness, although these are not a defining requirement of performance. The characteristics of the state described by Marina coincide with the modified states of consciousness that empirical studies identify in actors and other professionals. Scheiffele (2001) frequently found in the accounts of actors, and other professionals who work with them, an intense presence in the moment, the feeling of channelling different realities, a mystical experience, among others. Pleshkevich & Mattson (2024) add that there is a double existence in this process: the modified state of consciousness in actors is accompanied by full awareness that they are playing a role. Actors – and perhaps performers more broadly – retain a sense of conscious self-awareness, even as they move through altered states of consciousness.

Furthermore, performance art’s aesthetic and artistic nature is undeniable. The work of art takes on a nature of exceptionality: it breaks into everyday life, which is often scattered, emotionally neutral, and devoid of meaning. Those qualities, in fact, are what distinguish people filmed in documentaries from those featured in television news, which also include narrative mediation but are primarily informative in nature. These observations allow us to raise the hypothesis that character does not live only in fiction or narrative, but in a space of intense experiences, emotionality, aesthetic experience, and symbolic weight – in art. Thus artistic doubleness refers to a performative condition in which an individual inhabits an aesthetically framed mode of being, characterized by a disjunction from everyday identity, which remains structurally present but is temporarily suspended or backgrounded.

The doubleness observed in Abramović is not, we argue, exclusive to the professional performer. The interactor, too, enters an artistic space that distances them from their ordinary identity, opening the possibility of conceiving them as a character. It seems undeniable that the interactor also lives, in part, in an artistic, aesthetic, and dramatic medium, and may therefore assume a performative attitude consistent with that. This does not entail (nor preclude) the presence of a fictional character confined to the mind of the interactor: an internal or loosely defined figure that does not manifest externally with the fullness and concreteness to which we

are accustomed. Above all, the person steps outside the self they are accustomed to being in order to become someone else – an artistic double.

Ultimately, this analysis expands the concept of character beyond fiction, examining the conditions under which a real person may be perceived as a character in narrative and artistic contexts. We first problematized the distinction proposed by Eder et al. (2010) between character and real person, as properties such as symbolic meaning, symptomatic interpretation, or communicative strategies are sometimes attributed to real individuals. Particular emphasis is placed on the erosion of the fictionality criterion, extensively questioned in documentary studies in favour of the concept of representation: there is a narrative construction and a degree of disjunction (or, at least, blending) with the attitude of real people in their everyday lives.

However, representation *per se* is not enough: news programs also present narratives involving real people, yet this is insufficient to produce character, as a referential and informative function remains dominant. The analysis of *The Artist Is Present* challenges the limits of the concept in a context where the artist herself rejects the notion of character. Observation of the footage reveals a form of doubleness, through the alternation of Marina Abramović between a performative stance and her condition as a real person. This disjunction enables the perspectivation of an artistic double, involving a reorganisation of perception along parameters shaped by an aesthetic function, dramatic intensity, or symbolic representation. These aspects become particularly visible when mediation and representation are reduced or even absent, as in the case of the performer and possibly the interactor. We conclude that the artistic doubleness is also a factor to consider when we hypothesize the interactor as a character.

3. Conclusion

This study aimed to understand the conditions under which the interactor may be considered a character. By combining these two concepts through scientific literature and case studies, several lines of argument emerged that contribute to expanding knowledge on the research question. We examined a range of artworks that enabled us to conceptualize the interactor as a character, exploring boundaries in three ways, by investigating: (a) how artworks establish perceptual limits that shape subjective and intersubjective interpretation; (b) metaleptic transgression of thresholds between the real world and the artistic work; and (c) the boundaries of the concept of character itself. Our study offers an innovative interdisciplinary contribution by extending interactive art into narrative studies of character. This artistic form enables an analysis that departs from the traditional logic of presentation and contemplation and moves toward physical, real-time participation, making evident the cognitive, situational, relational, and momentary nature of character. The primary contributions of this research are threefold: it reconceptualizes the interactor as a potential character; identifies key conditions for the emergence of characterhood in interactive art; and expands the concept of character by supporting a processual understanding, while suggesting that aesthetic experience may play a decisive role in its constitution.

It is now time to return to the question: is the interactor a character? Drawing on empirical studies, we answer affirmatively, under certain conditions. Research grounded in Symbolic Interactionism understands interactors as assuming roles constructed in real time, shaped by personal characteristics and interpersonal communication, as well as by features of the artwork and its context (such as the information about the work, the type of interaction, or the boundaries of the artistic situation). The analysis of *The Very Near Future*, *Temps Libres*, and *Portray the Silhouette* supports this view: in specific interactive contexts, the interactor may effectively function as a character. However, this perception is not uniform. In Boal's invisible theatre, only the actors recognize interactors as characters, whereas in *Portray the Silhouette*, the visual resemblance between the interactor and the programmed figure makes this perception more shared. Observation of the participants in *Temps Libres* even revealed an alternation between the roles of spectator and character, suggesting a form of cognitive metalepsis and experiential doubleness. These cases also highlight that characterhood emerges through a combination of subjective and intersubjective processes, in which meanings are negotiated in the moment and shaped by both prior expectations and situated interaction.

From the perspective of theoretical narrative studies, the answer remains in development, yet several converging directions support this possibility. First, metalepsis provides a key conceptual framework, making it possible to understand how a real person may transgress the boundary between reality and the narrative or artistic world – and even suggesting that such processes may be intrinsic to interactive art. Second, the concept of character itself has undergone a process of flexibilization, moving beyond strict dependence on fictionality toward broader criteria such as representation. However, as this article argues, representation alone is insufficient, as illustrated by the referential logic of news media. Instead, it appears relevant to consider the disjunction between the person and their everyday identity, particularly when accompanied by aesthetic, dramatic, or symbolic intensification. The analysis of *The Artist Is Present* and *Temps Libres* revealed an internal doubleness, expressed through subtle behavioural shifts and oscillations between modes of being. In this sense, characterhood may be understood as a relational process grounded in aesthetic experience and in the capacity to inhabit an *artistic double*.

Thus, we identify conditions under which the interactor can be considered a character, concerning theoretical, media-related, subjective and relational dimensions. As theoretical tools that support this understanding, we propose metalepsis and a concept of *character* that includes, but is not limited to, representation, and also artistic doubleness, and aesthetic features, rather than fictionality. Media-related factors also play a significant role in shaping the perception of character, including the explicitness of information about the interactor's role, the type of interaction, the degree of similarity between the interactor and other characters, and the presence of metaleptic devices that foreground the crossing of boundaries between worlds, among others. We also consider subjective factors which include personal characteristics, prior meanings associated with the interactive situation, the experience of doubleness, feelings of dramatic and/or symbolic intensity, and the individual perception of embodying a character. Finally, relational and intersubjective constructions emerging in the moment are crucial, particularly through verbal and non-verbal communication among participants that frame the interactor as a character.

Bringing together these insights, we argue that the interactor is not a fully constituted fictional entity, but a figure in construction, situated at the threshold between real person and character. Under certain conditions, the interactor may be considered a character, particularly within a relational, symbolic, dramatic, or metaleptic framework that transforms how the person is perceived, allowing them to move beyond the condition of a mere spectator and function as an aesthetic or narrative double. In the digital age, characterhood thus emerges as a fluid, co-constructed process rather than a fixed ontological category, arising from structures that distance the individual from their everyday identity.

Recognizing this fluid boundary challenges traditional dichotomies between persons and characters and opens up space for new conceptualizations of the human being. Future research could move toward empirical studies that gather direct feedback from different social agents involved in interactive art – such as spectators, interactors, creators, or critics – in order to examine who they perceive as characters and under which conditions. Further work could also identify specific features of artworks and settings that shape this perception, detailing in a more systematic manner the subjective, relational and media conditions. Comparative research across other interactive domains – such as video games, web-based environments, and social media – as well as across related figures (e.g., virtual influencers, avatars, virtual assistants, and embodied users in VR/AR) could help clarify whether the interactor belongs to a broader family of interactive characters or represents a more specific artistic category.

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