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Arthur/Artoria/Arthas. Some Theoretical Remarks on Arthur(ian) Characters in Contemporary Media Culture

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Abstract: Taking as its point of departure the observation that Arthur(ian) characters remain ubiquitous in contemporary media culture, with a range of literary texts, plays, comics, films, television series, animated works, board games, tabletop roleplaying games, videogames, and other (potentially) narrative media forms contributing representations of ›The Once and Future King‹, this article offers a comprehensive theoretical account of characters that are represented across conventionally distinct media forms as well as of the interrelations between them. Using a necessarily small selection of contemporary medial representations of Arthur(ian) characters as examples, the article conceptualizes ›characters‹ as represented entities with an intentional inner life that are (or at least can be) located in storyworlds (and thus are presented as ›logically consistent‹ by default), distinguishing them from ›transmedia figures‹ as the complex cultural constructs that arise from contemporary media culture's tendency to adapt, expand, and modify previously represented characters across the borders of both individual media texts and their respective media forms (and thus are not presented as ›logically consistent‹ by default). The article further distinguishes between ›work-specific‹, ›trans-textual‹, and ›transmedia characters‹ that are interrelated in sometimes rather complex ›transmedia character networks‹, emphasizing that ›transmedia character templates‹ and ›transmedia character types‹ often lead to recipients having prior knowledge about transmedia figures (or even about particular work-specific characters), which may fulfill important functions in the intersubjective construction of work-specific (as well as transtextual and transmedia) characters. In regarding the ubiquity of contemporary Arthur(ian) characters not just as an occasion for theoretical reflection but also as an opportunity to connect the proposed theoretical frame to ongoing discussions about premodern characters (which do, of course, prominently include various Arthur[ian] characters), the article moreover argues for the continued usefulness of a transmedial, transcultural, and transhistorical conceptualization of characters that allows for a comparison of (representations of) characters across a diverse set of medial, cultural, and historical contexts.

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1 Introduction. Arthur(ian) Characters and Arthur(ian) Figures

It has become something of a cliché to begin theoretical explorations of characters in contemporary media culture by noting their ubiquity. Yet, it remains true that there are very few literary texts, plays, comics, films, television series, animated works, board games, tabletop roleplaying games, videogames, or other (potentially) narrative media forms that do not in some way represent characters.¹ As the other contributions in this issue aptly demonstrate, this is not a new phenomenon, either. The ways in which characters are represented, circulated, and understood may have changed over the centuries, but characters (of some description) have arguably been around for as long as humans have told each other stories. Not coincidentally, it even seems as if some specific characters (rather than characters in general) have stuck it out since premodern times. A particularly productive example of this is ›King Arthur‹, who continues to occupy a salient position in our cultural imaginary.² While the cultural saliency of Arthur(ian) charac-

1 As I have discussed in considerably more detail elsewhere, prototypical narrative representations can be conceptualized as representations of worlds situated in space and time as well as populated by characters (cf., e.g., Thon 2016b; as well as Herman 2009; Ryan 2006) and such (narrative) representations can be realized in a range of conventionally distinct media forms including literary texts, plays, comics, films, television series, animated works, board games, tabletop roleplaying games, and videogames. For further discussion of media forms as conventionally (rather than ›merely‹ technologically and/or semiotically) distinct as well as of the (socio)cultural and historical specificity of such distinctions, cf., e.g., Thon 2016b; as well as Gitelman 2006; Rajewsky 2005; Ryan 2006; Wolf 1999.

2 Cf., e.g., Cronin 2019; Frank 2017; Longinović 2011; Romele 2024 for a selection of rather different examples of how the notion of a ›cultural imaginary‹ (which is often likened to the ›social imaginary‹ that was perhaps most influentially theorized by Castoriadis 1975) can be made productive in the context of literary and media studies. Frank, for example, uses the concept of the ›cultural imaginary‹ to explore how ›the cultural memory of past events (such as wars) premediates later events to the extent that it serves as a cognitive framework and narrative template for the perception and subsequent representation of these events‹ (2017, 17), while also emphasizing that ›there is little use in attempting to separate this imaginary from the realm of fiction‹ (2017, 18). Even without unpacking this further, then, the concept of a ›cultural imaginary‹ seems clearly relevant for (representations of) characters across media forms (cf. also Ossa 2022 for an application of Frank's account to ›sleepers characters‹).

ters³ has fluctuated, with an initial period of prominence in the medieval literary traditions of the 12th to 15th century having been followed by a decline in popularity during the 16th to 18th century, the 19th century saw a revival in interest that has by-and-large lasted up to our present moment (cf., e.g., Bryden 2018; Higham 2018; and the contributions in Fulton 2009). Unsurprisingly, then, we do not have to look very far in order to find Arthur(ian) characters in contemporary media culture, with the countless media texts representing characters recipients may recognize (without too much of an effort) as some ›version‹ of ›King Arthur‹ ranging from novels such as those in T.H. White's *The Once and Future King* series (1938–1977) or Rosemary Sutcliff *Arthurian Trilogy* (1979–1981), plays such as *The Island of the Mighty* (1972) or *The Tragedy of Arthur* (2011), and comics such as *Prince Valiant* (1937–) or *Arthur: The Legend* (2009) via films such as *First Knight* (1995) or *King Arthur: Legend of the Sword* (2017), television series such as *Merlin* (2008–2012) or *The Winter King* (2023), and animated works such as *The Sword in the Stone* (1963) or *King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table* (1979–1980) to board games such as *Shadows over Camelot* (2005) or *Tournament at Camelot* (2017), tabletop roleplaying games such as *GURPS Camelot* (1991) or *Keltia* (2015), and videogames such as *King Arthur: The Role-Playing Wargame* (2009) or *King Arthur: Knight's Tale* (2022).⁴

Yet, this diverse set of medial representations of Arthur(ian) characters also brings to the fore some complex theoretical questions about the nature of the characters thus represented and (no less importantly) the nature of the interrelations

3 I will further unpack some of the reasons for this terminological preference below, but would already like to note here that I use ›Arthur(ian) characters‹ as a general umbrella term for characters that are in some way recognizable as ›versions‹ of ›King Arthur‹, independently of whether these characters are actually called Arthur (and thus could rightly be described as Arthur characters) or are referred to by some other (perhaps recognizably similar, or easily translatable) name (yet could still be described as *Arthurian* characters even without such nominal similarity). Incidentally, I would further distinguish these kinds of Arthurian characters from what could be described as Arthur-adjacent characters – i.e., characters that are recognizable as some ›version‹ of ›Guinevere‹, ›Gawain‹, or the other Knights of the Round Table and that are often represented as saliently defining the sociality of ›their‹ respective ›King Arthur‹. That said, I certainly acknowledge the importance of ›the centrifugal pull of other characters in prompting the narrative expansion of Arthur's world‹ (Watt 2023, 131) from the 12th through to the 21st century.

4 Evidently, ›King Arthur‹ is not the only example of a premodern figure that still regularly manages to inspire contemporary representations across media forms. Another particularly salient example from antiquity would be Hercules (cf., e.g., Bär 2018; Galinsky 1972; Hsu 2021; Stafford 2012), who continues to enjoy a salient position in our contemporary cultural imaginary due to various media texts across media forms that prominently include, for example, Disney's animated film *Hercules* (1997) as well as *Hercules. The Animated Series* (1998–1999) and the tie-in videogame *Disney's Hercules* (1997). Cf. also, e.g., Bär 2024; Fuhrer 2024; Grethlein 2021; de Temmerman 2019 for further theoretical and/or methodological proposals that focus on characters ›from antiquity‹.

between them, with any answer to the latter presupposing at least some answers to the former. Perhaps unsurprisingly, these questions are answered differently not only in the substantial corpus of studies that focus (more or less exclusively) on Arthur(ian) characters (cf., e.g., Achnitz 2013; Higham 2018; Meyer 2017; Watt 2023) but also in more general theoretical accounts of characters from historical narratology (cf., e.g., von Contzen/Cordes/Salzmann [forthcoming]; Philipowski 2019; Reuvekamp 2014; Stock 2010; de Temmerman 2019; Zudrell 2020), literary theory (cf., e.g., Frow 2014; Jannidis 2004; Phelan 1989; Schneider 2000), film studies (cf., e.g., Eder 2008a; Smith 1995; Tomasi 1988; Tröhler 2007), and other parts of media studies (cf., e.g., Aldama 2010; Varis 2019 on comics characters; Mittell 2015, 118–163; Pearson/Davies 2014, 149–184, on television series characters; Blom 2023; Schröter/Thon 2014 on videogame characters). It thus goes without saying that I cannot provide an exhaustive reconstruction of all possible answers to the aforementioned questions about the nature of contemporary Arthur(ian) characters and the nature of the interrelations between them here, but I still want to use the observation that not just characters in general but Arthur(ian) characters specifically are nothing short of ubiquitous in contemporary media culture as an occasion for offering a reasonably comprehensive theoretical account of characters that are represented across conventionally distinct media forms and of the interrelations between them that may well also prove productive for the analysis of premodern (or Victorian)⁵ representations of Arthur(ian) characters. Notwithstanding the fact that the ways in which characters are represented, circulated, and comprehended are always medially, culturally, and historically situated, I would indeed argue for the usefulness of a transmedial, transcultural, and transhistorical conceptualization of characters that allows for a comparison of representations of characters across a diverse set of medial, cultural, and historical contexts. As provocative as the suggestion that our theoretical understanding of characters does not have much to gain from medial, cultural, or historical ›exceptionalism‹ may seem at first glance (and particularly so in the context of the present issue, which focuses largely on premodern characters), however, it is worth noting here that a general conceptualization of characters or even a general ›character theory‹ does of course not preclude theoretical

5 As noted above, interest in the figure of ›King Arthur‹ has fluctuated and it seems rather plausible that our current expectations regarding Arthur(ian) characters are ›rooted in the renewed interest in Arthurian legends which marked nineteenth-century Britain‹ (Bryden 2018, 1; cf. also Higham 2018) at least as much (if not more) as they are rooted in the representations of the legendary king(s) during the medieval period (though the former of course also drew on, referred to, and incorporated [elements of] the latter in various ways, which Bryden also discusses in terms of ›the literary, mythical and historical traditions relating to Arthur which the Victorians inherited, and the particular aspects of those traditions which had most resonance for the Victorian imagination‹ [2018, 1]).

specifications. Just as I have repeatedly argued that any attempt at theorizing and analyzing transmedial strategies of narrative representation (which, at least to my mind, include the representation of characters) needs to remain »media-conscious« (Ryan/Thon 2014, 4) by acknowledging both similarities and differences between the narrative affordances, limitations, and representational conventions that emerge from the specific mediality of conventionally distinct media forms (cf., e.g., Thon 2015b; 2016b; 2017), so would I maintain that transcultural and transhistorical conceptualizations of characters and their medial representation will always also have to take into account the latter's cultural and historical specificity.⁶

In any case, the observation that Arthur(ian) characters are ubiquitous in contemporary media culture already leads us to a rather fundamental terminological problem, namely that the term ›character‹ as well as character names such as ›King Arthur‹, ›Brenin Arthur‹, ›Arthur Gernow‹, ›Roue Arzhur‹, ›Roi Arthur‹, or ›König Artus‹ are used to refer to two very different basic concepts and that, therefore, two very different types of medial or, more generally, cultural constructs are commonly called ›character‹ in both popular and academic discourses.⁷ On the one hand, many of the more recent ›character theories‹ within literary and film studies (as well as, to a lesser extent, within comics studies and game studies) conceptualize characters (implicitly or explicitly) as »text- or media-based figure[s] in a story-world« that are »usually human or human-like« (Jannidis 2009, 14). On the other

⁶ This is, of course, more of a programmatic claim at this point – and I evidently still approach the theoretical framework presented in this article from the perspective of (a specific kind of) media studies, which not only privileges certain media forms (such as literary texts, comics, films, television series, or videogames) over others (such as everyday narration, theatrical performances, paintings, instrumental music, or tabletop roleplaying games) but also quite likely suffers from a range of Eurocentric and presentist biases. That said, attempting to conceptualize characters from a broadly transmedial, transcultural, and transhistorical perspective (while also taking into account the diversity generated by their medial, cultural, and historical specificity) still seems preferable to insisting that we always have to theorize characters »from scratch« (Ryan 2006, 6) for each of the countless available medial, cultural, and historical contexts in which they can be represented.

⁷ My point here is thus not primarily that we can conceptualize characters differently depending on our previous theoretical commitments, methodological orientations, epistemological convictions, etc. That is certainly also the case, though, and while I will not be able to offer a detailed reconstruction of the different strands of ›character theory‹ that are available at this point, I would still consider the broad distinction between hermeneutic, psychoanalytic, structuralist and semiotic, and cognitive approaches to or theories of characters that is proposed by Eder, Jannidis, and Schneider (2010, 5) to be a helpful starting point for any attempt at mapping the field. As will become clear below, my own approach is influenced more by structuralist/semiotic and cognitive than by hermeneutic or psychoanalytic approaches, and by Eder's (2008a) comprehensive work on film characters in particular.

hand, however, the term ›character‹ as well as specific character names are also commonly used to refer to considerably more global, encompassing, and heterogeneous kinds of medial or cultural constructs that usually cannot be understood as a singular represented entity with an intentional inner life that is (or can be) located in what will usually be presented as a ›logically consistent‹ storyworld anymore.⁸ In different theoretical contexts, such a heterogeneous cultural construct may then be called »a second-level original« (Margolin 1996, 116), »popular hero« (Bennett 2017, 1), »cultural icon« (Brooker 2013, 8), »decontextualised *kyara*« (Wilde 2019, 15), or »serial figure« (Denson/Mayer 2018, 65), but I will here follow my own previous proposal to distinguish between *work-specific*, *transtextual*, or *transmedia characters* as represented entities with an intentional inner life that are (or at least can be) located in storyworlds, on the one hand, and *transmedia figures* as the complex medial or cultural constructs that arise from contemporary media culture's tendency to adapt, expand, and modify previously represented characters across the borders of both individual media texts and their respective media forms, on the other (cf. Thon 2019b; 2022, on which much of the following theoretical account of Arthur[ian] characters in contemporary media culture also draws).⁹ Despite readily acknowledging the cultural saliency of transmedia figures such as ›King Arthur‹, however, my theoretical interest remains primarily in what I would describe as the ›transmedia character network‹ of medially represented Arthur(ian) characters that are certainly associated but should not be conflated with the transmedia figure of ›King Arthur‹.¹⁰

8 Evidently, the proposed conceptualization of the term ›character‹ as referring to a singular represented entity with an intentional inner life that is (or at least can be) located in what will usually be presented as a ›logically consistent‹ storyworld (which refers to an expected lack of *logical* contradictions) is notably different from (and certainly more specific than) Jannidis's (intentionally general) conceptualization of the term »character« as referring to a »text- or media-based figure in a storyworld« that is »usually human or human-like« (2009, 14). I will unpack some of these differences in the following section, but would consider both conceptualizations to be broadly compatible.

9 Perhaps unsurprisingly, I would argue that this conceptual distinction is relevant not just for contemporary media culture, as it is indeed not entirely uncommon even for research focusing on the medieval context to speak of the ›character‹ or ›figure‹ of ›King Arthur‹ in the singular as well as the plural (cf., e.g., Higham 2018; Meyer 2017), though the alternating uses of the terms ›character‹ and ›figure‹ that can be observed here do not seem to establish a consistently applied terminological distinction with regard to the ›singularity‹ or ›plurality‹ of ›King Arthur(s)‹. For further reflections on this issue, cf. also Philipowski 2019, who primarily draws on Reicher's more general distinction between »maximal« and »sub-maximal characters« (2010, 130); as well as Fuhrer 2024 for a historically specific discussion of Romulus as a ›transtextual figure‹ (instead of a ›transtextual character‹).

10 While a range of different conceptualizations of the adjectives ›transmedial‹ and ›transmedia‹ are certainly available, there does not seem to be a particularly strong case to be made for an

2 Conceptualizing Arthur(ian) Characters in Contemporary Media Culture

Let us begin, then, by unpacking in slightly more detail the proposed conceptualization of the term ›character‹ as referring to a medially represented entity with an intentional inner life that is (or at least can be) located in a storyworld. First, the notion that characters are medially represented entities brings into focus the somewhat controversial question of their ontological status (or ›mode of existence‹). In fact, the notion of ›medially represented entities‹ is considerably underspecified here, since there is no consensus about what kind of ›entities‹ characters are even amongst those theorists agreeing that, while characters are represented by media texts (such as literary texts, plays, comics, films, television series, animated works, or [video]games), they should not be conflated with these media texts (cf., e.g., Margolin 1990 on characters as possible nonactual individuals; Schneider 2000 on characters as mental models of actual empirical readers; Jannidis 2004 on characters as mental models of hypothetical model readers; Eder 2008a; 2008b on characters as intersubjective communicative constructs; and the broader survey in Eder/Jannidis/Schneider 2010). Here, I follow Eder (2008a; 2008b) in conceptualizing characters as intersubjective communicative constructs with a normative component – or, somewhat less unwieldily, as »abstract objects« that are best understood as »neither material nor mental« (Reicher 2010, 115) and that therefore neither coincide with ›objectively‹ existing medial representations of characters nor with the ›subjective‹ mental representations that recipients form on the basis of such medial representations of characters (cf. also, once more, Thon 2019b; 2022 on characters as intersubjective communicative constructs; as well as Thon 2015a; 2016b; 2017 on storyworlds as intersubjective communicative constructs).¹¹

exclusive use of either (cf., e.g., Elleström 2019; Jenkins 2006; Kinder 1991; Tosca/Klastrup 2019), and I have previously used both to specify storyworlds as well as characters that are represented in more than one media text *and* more than one media form (cf., e.g., Thon 2015a; 2016b; 2019b; 2022). In the interest of consistency (and despite the slight awkwardness that results from distinguishing between ›transtextual‹ and ›transmedia characters‹), I will mainly use ›transmedia‹ rather than ›transmedial‹ throughout the present article, except where I refer to more general cases of transmediality.

11 Again, the ›intersubjective communicative construction‹ of characters differs across medial, cultural, and historical contexts as well as from character (representation) to character (representation). This includes not only a gradual difference between (more) ›global‹ and (more) ›local‹ characters but also the question how broadly representations of a given work-specific character are distributed or, rather, who has access to them – with medieval representations of Arthur(ian) characters, for example, being aimed at a significantly smaller ›audience‹ than the popular representations of Arthur(ian) characters that the present article primarily focuses on. That said, there

On the one hand, this highlights the importance of what Currie describes as »representational correspondence«, referring to the observation that, »for a given representational work, only certain features of the representation serve to represent features of the things represented« (2010, 59). To give just one comparatively medium-specific set of examples (although an awareness of representational conventions is of course also required to comprehend representations of characters in literary texts, plays, comics, animated works, or [video]games in an intersubjectively plausible manner), recipients will likely comprehend without too many problems that the various Arthur characters represented in the films *King Arthur* (2004), *Arthur: Legend of the Sword*, *First Knight*, and *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975) or in the television series *Merlin* and *The Winter King* should not be taken to look *exactly* like the more or less well-known actors Clive Owen, Charlie Hunnan, Sean Connery, Graham Chapman, Bradley James, and Iain De Caestecker – since they are ›only played‹ by these very actors and photographs of the actors are thus used to represent the respective Arthur characters (cf. also Currie 2010 on ›representation-by-origin‹ and ›representation-by-use‹). On the other hand, recipients will follow what Ryan describes as the »principle of minimal departure« (1991, 51) in making inferences about the corporeality, psyche, and sociality of the respective Arthur characters on the basis of general (actual or fictional) world knowledge, even if the corresponding films and television series do not explicitly represent certain aspects of these characters corporeality, psyche, and sociality. Both the notion of ›representational correspondence‹ and the ›principle of minimal departure‹ are transmedial, transcultural, and transhistorical concepts – but they yet again *also* refer to medially, culturally, and historically specific representational conventions and forms of (actual or fictional) world knowledge.¹²

are certainly also ›highly local‹ (representations of) Arthur(ian) characters to be found (or, indeed, created on the spot for specific purposes and using a broad range of media technologies) in contemporary media culture.

¹² This is, of course, a very brief version of the rather more comprehensive theory of representation that my theoretical account of (the representation of) characters across media forms is based on (cf., once more, Thon 2016b; 2017; 2019b; 2022), but my main point here is that general theories of (narrative and/or character) representation should aspire to be broadly compatible with (more) specific theories of (narrative and/or character) representation. This applies to the medial, cultural, and historical specificity of representational conventions (which does not, however, necessarily call into question more general notions such as that of representation as such, or indeed that of ›representational correspondence‹) as well as to the cultural and historical specificity of the world knowledge that the ›principle of minimal departure‹ refers to (which does not, however, necessarily call into question the more general notion that recipients use their world knowledge to ›fill in the gaps‹ of [narrative and/or character] representations). Indeed, while Ryan does not make this particularly explicit (although it is worth noting that she includes medial and generic knowledge and even knowledge about specific [fictional] storyworlds in the »frame of reference invoked

In addition to the distinction between medial representations and the characters represented by these medial representations, however, it is also important to distinguish between mental representations that recipients form of characters and these characters themselves, since recipients are of course entirely free to imagine all sorts of things, including the physically or logically impossible, on the basis of medial representations – but they can then hardly make intersubjectively plausible claims that what they imagine in this way necessarily corresponds to what is represented by the medial representations in question (cf. also Walton 1990 on ›work worlds‹ and ›game worlds‹). Even if spectators can imagine the King Arthur that is played by Sean Connery in *First Knight* as the alter ego of the immortal swordmaster Juan Sánchez Villa-Lobos Ramírez that is played by Sean Connery in *Highlander* (1986), and the two characters may even appear to look similar, the character of King Arthur in the storyworld of *First Knight* is evidently not ›identical‹ to the character of Ramírez in the storyworld of *Highlander*. Likewise, even if players of *King Arthur: The Role-Playing Wargame* can imagine themselves as the King Arthur that the videogame represents, no actual player is actually ›identical‹ to the character of King Arthur in the storyworld(s) of *King Arthur: The Role-Playing Wargame*. Again, then, a general ›character theory‹ needs to be able to distinguish between the medial representation of characters (in specific media texts), the mental representation of characters (in the minds of specific recipients), and the characters themselves (as, for example, intersubjective communicative constructs with a normative component).

Second, the notion that characters are entities with an intentional inner life may require some explanation. Put in a nutshell, this element of the proposed conceptualization of characters replaces the more common specification that characters are »usually human or human-like« (Jannidis 2009, 14), which might be too narrow if we keep in mind that media texts may represent not only a variety of nonhuman animal characters but also nonliving characters such as ghosts, gods, demons, animated objects, robots, AI programs, and so forth. While one could extend the notion of anthropomorphicity to characters such as those as well, a more prudent solution would be to define characters not via their ›human-ness‹ or ›human-likeness‹, but rather via their possessing of an »intentional (object-related) inner life«, which means that recipients can attribute »perceptions, thoughts, motives, and emotions«

by the principle of minimal departure« (1991, 54)), there are other formulations of this principle that do. Walton, for example, distinguishes between the »reality principle«, which would make »fictional worlds as much like the real one as the core of primary fictional truths permits« (1990, 144 sq.), and the »mutual belief principle«, which »directs us to extrapolate so as to maximize similarities between fictional worlds and the real world not as it actually is but as it is or was mutually believed to be in the artist's society« (1990, 152).

(Eder 2010, 17) to them (in an intersubjectively plausible manner).¹³ This allows us to distinguish, say, a great round table or a magical sword as Arthur-adjacent (noncharacter) objects from both Arthur(ian) and Arthur-adjacent characters. Yet, the notion that characters are »usually human or human-like« (Jannidis 2009, 14) might also be too narrow in a second sense, namely in that characters are still mediably represented entities and as such are constructed in certain ways that do not necessarily correspond to the regimes of realism arguably emphasized at least to some extent by both the notion of characters' anthropomorphicity and the notion of characters' intentional inner life. That said, I would follow Phelan (1989) in distinguishing between a mimetic, synthetic, and thematic dimension of characters, which is also echoed by Eder's (2008a) distinction between characters as fictional beings, artifacts, symbols, and symptoms, and allows us to acknowledge that specific (representations of) characters may foreground any of these dimensions.¹⁴

13 Note, however, that the intentional inner life of a character does not have to be *explicitly* represented as recipients will often be able to infer a character's general ›state of mind‹ based on its externally observable behavior. Put in a nutshell, a specific version of the ›principle of minimal departure‹ is at play here as recipients apply what Zunshine describes as »mind-reading skills« (2006, 6) to representations of characters as well as to actual persons in the actual world. As Palmer puts it, »[d]irect access to inner speech and states of mind is only a small part of the process of building up the sense of a mind in action« (2004, 210 sq.). There may well be substantial cultural and historical differences between the relevant ›theories of mind‹, but I would not expect such differences to necessitate removing the criterion of an intentional inner life from our conceptualization of characters.

14 This is evidently directly relevant to the present issue as there is a common concern in medieval studies that the ›identity‹ or ›individuality‹ of both premodern *characters* and premodern *persons* differs considerably from the ›identity‹ or ›individuality‹ of contemporary characters and persons (cf., once more, von Contzen/Cordes/Salzmann [forthcoming]; Philipowski 2019; as well as, e.g., Gerok-Reiter 2006; Möllenbrink 2020; Schlip 2020; Schulz 2012). However, contemporary characters can also exhibit rather different ›identities‹ and are not necessarily represented as clearly delineated ›modern individuals‹, with some representations of characters emphasizing their mimetic dimension, while others emphasize their synthetic dimension or their thematic dimension (sensu Phelan 1989; cf. also Phelan 2022; as well as Eder 2008a for a similar distinction). Indeed, just like premodern characters (cf., e.g., Lienert 2020), contemporary characters can (appear to) be contradictory in various ways (yet, I would also stress again that not every logically inconsistent narrative representation should be taken as representing a logically inconsistent storyworld and not every logically inconsistent character representation should be taken as representing a logically inconsistent character, not just because, in Margolin's influential formulation, »the explicit ascription of any individuating features to an IND [individual, J.-N.T.] may be cancelled if inconsistent or if introduced and then withdrawn«, but also because, if »several irreconcilable strands are superimposed on one another«, this »turn[s] the IND [individual, J.-N.T.] into a plurality of mutually exclusive individuation possibilities« [1990, 853]). Instead of insisting that premodern characters are categorically different from contemporary characters, it might thus be more productive to acknowledge

Third and finally, the notion that characters are (or at least can be) located in storyworlds has several wide-ranging implications. On the one hand, because I conceptualize storyworlds as ›logically consistent‹ by default (cf. Thon 2015a; 2016b, 56–66; 2017; but also, e.g., Alber 2016 for a theoretical account of ›impossible storyworlds‹), characters locatability in storyworlds leads me to conceptualize them as by-and-large ›logically consistent‹ entities and therefore not to generally assume that one and the same character can have two logically contradictory characteristics. There is plenty of room for (medially, culturally, and historically specific) complexity here in terms of ›representational correspondence‹ and the related notion that recipients may follow what Walton describes as a ›principle of charity‹ in ignoring certain features of medial representations that »would render the fictional world uncomfortably paradoxical« (1990, 183) if (medially, culturally, and historically specific) external explanations for their appearance are readily available, but at its core, the locatability of characters in storyworlds leads to the hardly controversial insight that, for example, Arthur the Romano-British commander played by Clive Owen in *King Arthur*, Arthur the criminal ringleader/king's lost son played by Charlie Hunnan in *Arthur. Legend of the Sword*, Arthur the wise and righteous British king played by Sean Connery in *First Knight*, and Arthur the somewhat less wise and less righteous British king played by Graham Chapman in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* should not be considered to be one and the same character (even if they are clearly associated with the same trans-media figure).

Yet, it is also worth highlighting here that the concept of the storyworld (as opposed to the related concept of the fictional world) »applies both to fictional and nonfictional narratives« (Herman 2002, 16; cf. also, e.g., Gerrig 1993; Thon 2016b) and is thus agnostic with regard to the issue of fictionality, presentist assumptions about which have been identified as a particularly salient problem when it comes to premodern characters (cf., e.g., von Contzen/Cordes/Salzmann [forthcoming]; Philipowski 2019, 116 sq.).¹⁵ It is true that most if not all of the more influential

that characters in toto can take very different forms while also sharing at least some features that can be addressed by a general ›character theory‹.

¹⁵ This (doubtlessly justified) skepticism with regard to conceptualizations of characters as fictional entities is also based on more general ongoing discussions around the differences between premodern and modern conceptualizations of ›fictionality‹ (cf., also, e.g., Glauch 2025 on the ›fictionality‹ of premodern characters; and Fulton 2017; Glauch 2014; Manuwald 2018 for more general discussions of premodern ›fictionality‹). That said, while I agree that the commonly encountered distinction between fictional and nonfictional representations needs to be historicized, not least with regard to supposedly ›historiographic‹ medieval representations of Arthur(ian) characters (cf. also, once more, Higham 2018; and the contributions in Fulton 2009), I would also note that there are plenty of complex examples of not-quite-fictional (or, vice versa, not-quite-nonfictional) medial

theories of characters in literature, film, and other media forms have (at least initially) conceptualized them as fictional entities (cf., e.g., Jannidis 2004; Eder 2008a; Phelan 1989; Smith 1995; as well as, e.g., Aldama 2010; Blom 2023; Mittell 2015; Wilde 2019), but there do not seem to be particularly good reasons for this if we do not want to subscribe to the panfictional position that all representation is fictional (cf., e.g., Ryan 1997; Zipfel 2020).¹⁶ Indeed, some of the kinds of nonfictional or at least not-merely-fictional characters that are represented in historiography (cf., e.g., Pikkari 2013), journalism (cf., e.g., Berning 2014), autobiography (cf., e.g., Howarth 1974), or documentary (cf., e.g., Plantinga 2018) are also routinely discussed as *characters* and it thus does not seem particularly controversial at this point to conceptualize characters as represented rather than (merely) fictional entities (cf. also, e.g., Eder 2014a; Eder 2025; as well as Schröter/Thon 2014, 75n4; Thon 2016b, 353n29; Thon 2019b, 178n2; and the related changes in position on the possibility of charac-

representations to be found in contemporary media culture as well (cf., e.g., Thon 2019a for one of many available proposals of how to deal with this state of affairs). In any case, it would seem that conceptualizing characters (transmedially, transculturally, and transhistorically) as represented rather than (exclusively) fictional entities is a *prima facie* plausible way to approach the medial, cultural, and historical specificity of ›fictionality‹ without abandoning the project of a general ›character theory‹ (not coincidentally, however, I would add a cautionary note not to conflate the term ›fictional‹ with the terms ›possible‹ or ›nonactual‹, nor the term ›nonfictional‹ with the terms ›factual‹ or ›actual‹, and would in fact see little use in talking about ›factual‹ representations here; for different positions on the latter, cf. the contributions in Fludernik/Ryan 2020).

16 Cf. also, e.g., Thon 2014; 2016b, 66–69; 2019a for more detailed arguments against conceptualizing nonfictionality in terms of ›true statements about the actual world‹, which lead me to a conceptualization of nonfictionality as a feature of representations that (textually and/or paratextually) communicate the *claim* that what they represent corresponds to the ›actual world‹ at least in the dimensions and with the degree of faithfulness that are relevant for and/or required by the respective communicative context. Conversely, it also does not seem very plausible to define fictionality in terms of ›false statements about the actual world‹, which would transform every lie or false report into ›fictions‹ in a rather unintuitive way (and also would run into problems when trying to account for the fact that fictional representations usually draw on real-world knowledge at least to some extent, as described by the aforementioned ›principle of minimal departure‹). Instead, fictional representations can then be conceptualized as representations that do not communicate nonfictional claims. In this view, even (more or less clearly marked) nonfictional representations are still considered to be *representations*. Such nonfictional representations may represent nonfictional characters, but these characters are still *represented entities* (as intersubjective communicative constructs) and should by no means be conflated with the actual persons they are claimed to correspond to. Arguably, this also applies to ›historiographical‹ or otherwise (more or less explicitly marked) nonfictional representations of Arthur(ian) characters (independently of the question of whether a ›King Arthur‹ actually existed), though there do not seem to be too many of these around anymore in any case.

ters being represented nonfictionally that can be observed in Phelan 2022; Smith 2022, 237–276).¹⁷

3 Correlating Arthur(ian) Characters in Contemporary Media Culture

Having sketched a conceptualization of characters that allows us to understand them as medially represented entities with an intentional inner life that are (or at least can be) located in storyworlds (and therefore regularly appear to be ›logically consistent‹), the notion that a character is (or at least can be) located in a storyworld also needs to be unpacked in light of the commonly made observation that the same (or at least very similar) character(s) can be represented in more than one media text and across conventionally distinct media forms. Such characters are then variously described as ›transtextual characters‹ (cf., e.g., Philipowski 2019; Richardson 2010; Thon 2019b), ›transfictional characters‹ (cf., e.g., Albertsen 2019; Haugtvedt 2022; Pearson 2018), or ›transmedia(l) characters‹ (cf., e.g., Bertetti 2014; Kunz/Wilde 2023; Thon 2019b). Each of these terms has somewhat different connotations,¹⁸ but they all share the assumption that the representation of a given character is not

¹⁷ While I have long considered the distinction between fictional and nonfictional representations to be largely irrelevant with regard to the question of whether such representations can represent characters, it is particularly worth highlighting Eder's rather welcome change of mind here, not only because my own conceptualization of characters extensively draws on his work but also because he has changed the conceptualization of characters as fictional entities that he proposes in both editions of his influential German-language monograph *Die Figur im Film* (cf. Eder 2008a; 2014b), another German-language monograph (cf. Eder 2008b), and his earlier English-language articles (cf., e.g., Eder 2010) to a conceptualization of characters as represented entities in later English-language articles (cf., e.g., Eder 2014a) and, rather more explicitly and with additional theoretical justification, in the recently published English translation of *Die Figur im Film* (cf. Eder 2025).

¹⁸ Both the term ›transtextuality‹ (cf., e.g., Genette 1992; 1997) and the term ›transmediality‹ (cf., e.g., Kinder 1991; Thon 2016b) can certainly be conceptualized differently, but putting in place a plausible distinction between ›transtextual‹ and ›transmedia(l)‹ characters seems to be comparatively simple. Put in a nutshell, we can say that ›transtextual characters‹ can be understood as characters that are represented in more than one (media) text, while ›transmedia(l) characters‹ can be understood as characters that are represented in more than one conventionally distinct media form. Not least because the term ›transfictionality‹ (cf., e.g., Doležel 1998; Ryan 2008; Saint-Gelais 2011) mainly refers to a specific case of ›transtextuality‹, ›transfictional characters‹ could then be understood as ›transtextual characters‹ (or potentially ›transmedia(l) characters‹) represented by fictional (media) texts.

(necessarily) bound by the limits of a single media text (whatever that may be), which at least at first glance seems to challenge the notion that a character necessarily is (or at least can be) located in a (singular) storyworld, instead suggesting what has been described as ›transworld identity‹ (cf., e.g., Doležel 1998; Eco 1979; McHale 1987; Pavel 1986) and perhaps even leading us to the notion of ›transworld characters‹ (cf., e.g., Lăcan 2019; Lowes 2005).¹⁹ Yet, this may appear less salient of a problem if we remember that various theorists argue that a singular storyworld likewise can be represented in more than one media text and across media forms (cf., e.g., Jenkins 2006; Thon 2015a; Tosca/Klastrup 2019; as well as more broadly Doležel 1998; Ryan 2008; Saint-Gelais 2011).²⁰ In any case, I will focus on transtextual and transmedia characters here.

19 In contrast to the terms ›transtextual‹, ›transfictional‹, and ›transmedia(l) character‹, the term ›transworld character‹ more clearly emphasizes not the relation between the media texts representing the ›character‹ in question, but rather the relation between the worlds within which the represented ›character‹ is located. Unsurprisingly, ›transworld characters‹ can thus be understood as characters exhibiting ›transworld identity‹, with the latter defined, for example, as the ›identity of a given individual through worlds‹ (Eco 1979, 219) or as a ›relationship of identity between entities that are located in different possible worlds‹ (Doležel 1998, 282). It is worth highlighting here, however, not only that the discussion around ›transworld identity‹ is closely connected to perhaps only tangentially relevant philosophical discussions within possible worlds theory (cf., e.g., the broad survey in Mackie and Jago 2022) and includes the relation between represented characters and actual persons as opposed to the relation between fictional and nonfictional characters (with ›historical novels‹, for example, ›often claim[ing] ›transworld identity‹ between characters in their projected worlds and real-world historical figures‹ [McHale 1987, 16 sq.]) but also that what is here called ›transworld identity‹ might be more plausibly understood as (strong) similarity rather than (complete) identity. Indeed, the notion that ›transworld identity‹ describes a relation between distinct ›versions‹, ›surrogates‹, or ›counterparts‹ of a ›character‹ is comparatively common and the question is often posed ›whether there are any specific (kinds of) essential properties which all counterparts have to maintain in common with their original and what their nature might be‹ (Margolin 1996, 118). Yet, if ›transworld identity‹ primarily is about ›which of a character's internal properties are supposed to be essential and which are not‹ (Reicher 2010, 127; cf. also, e.g., Richardson 2010; Lăcan 2019), that would seem to suggest that the ›counterparts‹ in question are not just located in different storyworlds, but are indeed different characters.

20 While I accept that the answer to the question whether a character ›is‹ located or merely ›can be‹ located in a storyworld is not always clear-cut, it is also worth emphasizing here that the ›storyworld‹ in which a given character is or can be located may well remain quite rudimentary or vaguely represented. This is not to say that I agree with Gerrig's comparatively ›radical‹ position ›that no a priori limits can be put on the types of language structures that might prompt the construction of narrative worlds‹ (1993, 4) and that the author of a literary text may well ›manufacture[] a richly layered world virtually within a single sentence‹ (1993, 145), but at a minimum, it would seem that the proposed conceptualization of characters as entities that are or at least can be located in storyworlds could still be taken as covering the cases of ›pre-narrative characters‹ or *kyara* discussed by Wilde (2019) as well (though Wilde goes on to argue that the latter's ››pre-narra-

Let me stress again, though, that my conceptualization of characters is comparatively narrow – and remains so whether or not the characters in question are represented transtextually or transmedially. I certainly acknowledge the theoretical and analytical importance of being able to trace various kinds of similarity and interrelations between characters,²¹ but the kind of intersubjective communicative constructs I would describe as transtextual or transmedia characters are comparatively rare in contemporary media culture (and appear to have been even rarer in premodern times). As already hinted at in the introduction, I would always start by looking at representations of characters in individual media texts, and only then ask how these work-specific characters relate to other work-specific characters that are associated but should not be conflated with a transmedia figure. From this perspective, the Romano-British commander represented in *King Arthur*, the king's lost son represented in *King Arthur: Legend of the Sword*, the king represented in *First Knight* and the recognizably different king represented in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* as well as the young Wart in *The Sword in the Stone*, the arrogant prince in *Merlin*, the old king in *Prince Valiant*, and the undead tyrant in *King Arthur: Knight's Tale* each appear as *one*, but not *one and the same* Arthur character (even though they may all be associated with the same transmedia figure).

As noted above, however, this conceptualization still allows us to speak of a transtextual character when a character that is recognizable as ›identical with itself‹ is represented in different media texts within a single media form. This is the case, for example, when Rosemary Sutcliffe's *Arthurian Trilogy* represents King Arthur across three novels – even if one could critically ask whether such a trilogy might not also be understood as a singular ›text‹ or ›work‹.²² It is also possible

tive‹ state is not so much based on a lack of narrative information« [2019, 5] as on an »(over)abundance of competing and utterly incoherent information« [2019, 6], and thus perhaps more precisely described in terms of a »meta-narrative character circulation« [2019, 18], which once more seems broadly compatible with my distinction between ›characters‹ and ›figures‹).

21 Perhaps most obviously, these include interrelations between characters that can be analyzed as cases of ›interfigural‹ (cf., e.g., Müller 1991), ›retelling‹ (cf., e.g., Worstbrock 1999), ›adaptation‹ (cf., e.g., Parody 2011), or ›modification‹ (cf., e.g., Ryan 2008; as well as Thon 2015a; 2019b; 2022), but see also the discussion of ›transmedia character templates‹ and ›transmedia character types‹ below. Put in a nutshell, the comparative rarity of ›genuine‹ transtextual or transmedia characters would seem to make it even more interesting and relevant to also look at other kinds of interrelations between the work-specific, transtextual, and transmedia characters that (usually) make up the transmedia character network that is associated with a given transmedia figure.

22 It may go without saying that both of these terms (›text‹ and ›work‹) are far from unproblematic, and become even less so when taking into account the broader historical perspective that is the hallmark of the present issue. That said, while the borders of the categories of ›text‹ and ›work‹ as well as of specific texts and works may appear fuzzy not only in premodern but also in modern and contemporary (media) culture (and certainly cannot be specified via a strict focus on [linguis-

to speak of a transmedia character if the character in question is represented in various media texts that belong to more than one media form. An example of this might be the representation of young Arthur in the television series *Merlin* and various licensed expansions such as the comic by Damian Kelleher and Lee Carey that was published in *Merlin Magazine* (2011) or the videogame *Merlin. The Game* (2012) by Bossa Studios.²³ In any case, instead of positing the existence of a singular Arthur character, it seems more appropriate to capture the multiplicity of Arthur(ian) characters via the concept of a global transmedia character network consisting of work-specific characters, some of which can – but do not have to – coalesce into a singular transtextual or even transmedia character under certain conditions. At least in contemporary media culture, however, modifications of previously represented characters that result in new work-specific characters are the rule rather than the exception, while expansions that lead to either transtextual or transmedia characters are comparatively rare – especially since the latter not only

tic or multimodal] semiotic form as many literary texts, plays, comics, films, television series, animated works, board games, tabletop roleplaying games, and videogames come in [or can be used to generate] different semiotic forms that may be understood as different texts/works or as different versions of a singular text/work, nor via a narrow expectation of singular authorship, which [as will be discussed in more detail below] tends to be the exception rather than the rule when it comes to contemporary media texts/works), it still seems clear that borders between individual texts and/or works across media forms are regularly (and often by-and-large unproblematically) drawn at least in contemporary media culture. For further discussions of both the expansion and the interrelation of the concepts of ›text‹ and ›work‹ in the overlapping disciplinary contexts of literary and media studies, see, e.g., Hayles 2003; Stanitzek 2005; as well as Gray 2017; Kelleter 2017.

23 Alas, I was not able to verify this as of the time of this writing (since I do not currently have access to either the complete comic strip or the Facebook game, with the former having been published in a magazine that has proven somewhat difficult to acquire [cf. Freeman 2024] and the latter having been taken offline some time ago). Indeed, I suspect that the interrelation between the Arthur characters represented across these rather different media texts might be a little more complex than straightforward ›expansion‹. Note, however, that the mere fact that the work-specific Arthur characters in question are represented differently in the television series, the comic strip, and the Facebook game would not suffice to exclude the possibility of their coalescing into a singular transmedia character. Rather more interestingly, the first few pages of a fancomic entitled *Always Together* (2022–) have recently been published on Tapas.io and while the fancomic is quite unlikely to be considered ›canon‹ by the IP owners of *Merlin*, its author still evidently assumes that its readers are reasonably familiar with the work-specific Arthur character represented in the television series – which, incidentally, is of course quite common in the context of fan fiction and would also seem to apply to the even more recent emergence of ›fanbots‹ (Ask/Sihvonen 2025, 68) on platforms such as Character.ai that use large language models (LLMs) to allow users to engage in a language-based role-playing situation (cf., e.g., Chen et al. 2025) oriented toward a broad range of characters that also include various (clearly ›noncanonical‹ and highly ›localized‹) Arthur(ian) characters (to be explored in more detail in future publications).

presuppose the communicated and authorized claim that two (or more) work-specific characters represented in two (or more) media texts should be understood as a singular transtextual or transmedia character but also require (at least to some extent) the (intersubjectively plausible) acceptance of this claim by the recipients.²⁴

It seems worth noting at this point that some literary theorists have identified authorial continuity as a salient requirement for different media texts to contribute to the representation of a singular transtextual or transmedia character, which is seen as a problem with regard to premodern characters because of the considerable historical differences in conceptualizations of authorship (cf., once more, von Contzen/Cordes/Salzmann [forthcoming]; Philipowski 2019). There are various versions of this argument, but Richardson in particular emphasizes the requirement of authorial continuity quite strongly, while also acknowledging that, »[i]f the criterion for continuous identity across texts is authorial designation (tempered by consistency and, when appropriate, mimetic fidelity), then authors may equally appoint others to extend their created worlds« (2010, 533) and thus have other authors expand ›their‹ previously represented characters. Even if it seems misguided to completely discard ›authorization‹ as a requirement for strong forms of (narrative) continuity, then, it is worth stressing that, depending on the medial, cultural, and historical context, this ›authorization‹ can take many forms, with the interrelations between work-specific characters within transmedia character networks seldom being governed by the authority of single authors (cf. also, e.g., Kindt/Müller 2006; Spoerhase 2007), but rather by multiple authors or author collectives with varying degrees of authority as well as by the kinds of institutional authorship that often takes the form of IP ownership in contemporary media culture (cf. also, e.g., Johnson 2013; Wolf 2012).

Depending on the specific authorial configuration of a transmedia franchise or other kind of transmedia constellation, some authors (of some description) will have the authority (attributed to them) to declare that certain work-specific char-

24 Cf. also, once more, Ryan's discussion of »expansion« and »modification« (2008, 385) as well as Jenkins's discussion of »adaptation and extension« (2011, n.pag.) and Wolf's discussion of »growth and adaptation« (2012, 245). I have previously proposed that two media texts within a transmedia franchise can be characterized, first, by a relation of redundancy, when one is aiming to represent the same elements of a storyworld that the other represents; second, by a relation of expansion, when one is aiming to represent the same storyworld that the other represents, but adds previously unrepresented elements; and, third, by a relation of modification, when one is aiming to represent elements of the storyworld represented by the other, but adds previously unrepresented elements that make it implausible to comprehend the elements represented by the two media texts as part of a singular storyworld (cf. Thon 2015a). This is the basis of the distinction between expansion and modification employed here (cf. also, once more, Thon 2019b; 2022, where I have previously presented this theoretical account).

acters are ›meant‹ to coalesce into a singular transtextual or transmedia character, while others will be more limited in the claims they can persuasively make about the supposed expansion of previously represented characters. As Wolf explains, authorship can thus

be conceptualized as a series of concentric circles extending out from the world's originator (or originators), with each circle of delegated authority being further removed from the world's origination and involving diminishing authorial contributions, from the originator and main author to estates, heirs, and torchbearers; employees and freelancers; the makers of approved, derivative, and ancillary products that are based on a world; and finally to the noncanonical additions of elaborationists and fan productions (2012, 269; cf. also, e.g., Fathallah 2017; Salter/Stanfill 2020 on authorship in the context of fan culture and fan fiction, which is a salient area of ›expansion-sans-authorization-as-modification‹).

While it is clear that the interrelations between work-specific characters are subject to powerful normative discourses that draw on the authority that often comes with authorship or IP ownership, then, the degree to which transmedia character networks are actually ›policed‹ by authors and/or IP owners varies, and different ›authorial agents‹ may strive to control certain parts of a transmedia character network, but not others.

Hence, even if I maintain that expanding a previously represented character requires some kind of ›authorization‹ (with ›unauthorized‹ expansions perhaps best thought of as often drawing on previously represented work-specific, transtextual, or transmedia characters, but allowing for the transfer of character-specific knowledge ›in one direction only‹ and thus resulting in a kind of ›expansion-as-modification‹),²⁵ it should be clear by now that a transmedia character

²⁵ To spell it out one final time, I would still caution against medial, cultural, or historical ›exceptionalism‹ with regard to the ›authorization‹ of transtextual and transmedia characters. As noted above, there can be no doubt that premodern forms of authorship differ considerably from, say, Victorian forms of authorship or contemporary forms of authorship. Notwithstanding the fact that it is doubtlessly important to acknowledge and reflect on these historical differences in concepts, discourses, and practices of authorship (and that there are also medial and cultural differences to take into account from a synchronic perspective, not least with regard to contemporary concepts, discourses, and practices of authorship), however, this should not lead to a ›[r]adical relativism‹ (Ryan 2006, 5) that denies the possibility (or usefulness) of a general ›character theory‹ altogether. The aforementioned risk of Eurocentric and presentist biases remains just as real as the risk of medial biases here (cf. also Hausken 2004 on ›media blindness‹), but ultimately I would argue that it is just as undesirable to overgeneralize from how characters are represented in one medial, cultural, or historical context to how characters are represented in any or all other medial, cultural, or historical contexts as it is to undergeneralize by overemphasizing the differences between the ways in which characters are represented in these different medial, cultural, and historical contexts.

network includes all work-specific characters sharing the same or a recognizably similar or translatable name (or being identifiable as belonging to the transmedia character network in question in other ways) and that, from the perspective of the theoretical framework presented here, modifying a character does not require any ›authorization‹ whatsoever. Although it seems entirely likely that this finding could (and perhaps should) be further differentiated in a broader historical perspective (which would have to take into account a substantially larger corpus of representations of Arthur[ian] characters from the 12th via the 19th to the 21st century than I can hope to even hint at here), at first glance there are remarkably few examples of transtextual and even fewer examples of transmedia characters within the corpus of contemporary representations of Arthur(ian) characters that I am familiar with (and, as noted above, even those few examples that I could find seem less than clear-cut). My initial hypothesis would be that this can be seen as the ›flip side‹ of the still particularly strong recognizability of the corresponding transmedia figure of ›King Arthur‹ in our contemporary cultural imaginary, which not only makes it more difficult to design representations of Arthur(ian) characters in such a way that they can be recognized as transtextual or transmedial expansions of a *specific* Arthur(ian) character, but also means that such transtextual or transmedial expansions may often appear less attractive from a commercial perspective due to the intellectual property rights and licensing issues that then immediately arise.

4 Commemorating Arthur(ian) Characters in Contemporary Media Culture

That said, recognizing the multiplicity and diversity of Arthur(ian) characters within contemporary media culture and resisting the urge to diagnose the presence of transtextual or transmedia characters in areas of a transmedia character network that are more precisely analyzed as differently interrelated work-specific characters does, of course, not mean that we have to ignore the rather obvious observation that the cultural saliency of transmedia figures such as ›King Arthur‹ can lead to recipients having a certain prior knowledge of and more or less specific expectations about at least some of the characteristics of a character that is called, for example, ›King Arthur‹, ›Brenin Arthur‹, ›Arthur Gernow‹, ›Roue Arzhur‹, ›Roi Arthur‹, or ›König Artus‹. A helpful way of thinking about the function(s) that prior knowledge about transmedia figures (or even about particular work-specific characters) plays in the intersubjective construction of work-specific (as well as transtextual and transmedia) characters may be offered by conceptualizing such knowledge in terms of what Roberta Pearson describes as an »established charac-

ter template« (2018, 150) in the context of her analysis of contemporary Sherlock Holmes characters. Such a transmedia character template will likely include physical, mental, and social characteristics of an established transmedia figure that any work-specific character sharing the same (or a recognizably similar) name may or may not exhibit, but would initially be expected to exhibit via a character-specific version of the aforementioned ›principle of minimal departure‹ (at least by those recipients familiar with the transmedia character template in question). No less importantly, recipients may also recognize that a work-specific character belongs to a certain transmedia »character model[] or type[]« (Jannidis 2009, 14) and hence is saliently characterized by ›being a space marine‹ (in the storyworlds represented by, say, the *Warhammer 40,000* franchise; cf., e.g., Flarity 2023); or ›being an elf‹ (in the storyworlds represented by, say, the *The Lord of the Rings* franchise; cf., e.g., Young 2016); or ›being a/the great detective‹ (as is the case for both Sherlock Holmes and Batman characters; cf., e.g., Brooker 2013; Pearson 2018); or ›being an adventurous archeologist‹ (as is the case for both Indiana Jones and Lara Croft characters; cf., e.g., Aldred 2019; Hernández-Pérez/Ferreras Rodríguez 2014); or ›being a wise and righteous king‹ (as is the case for both King Arthur and King T'Challa characters; cf., e.g., Menon 2020).²⁶ By using not just their general world knowledge

26 There evidently is more complexity involved in ›identifying‹ work-specific characters with transmedia character types or ›recognizing‹ transmedia character types in work-specific characters than this brief summary may seem to suggest, and ›typifying‹ King Arthur characters as ›wise and righteous kings‹ in particular may invite some justified skepticism. Not only can we find plenty of Arthur characters that are not kings but many of the Arthur characters that are can hardly be characterized as consistently ›wise and righteous‹. While King Arthur was regularly represented as a »great sovereign« (Fichte 1999, 290) during the late medieval period, »the king's weakness« (Fichte 1999, 279) was also emphasized in various ways, evoking »a rather differentiated picture of Arthur« (Schuhmann 2010, 169) that may at least suggest the need for a distinction ›between an ideal kingship and a non-ideal king« (Wolfzettel 2010, 3). Yet, the norms that define what an ›ideal king‹ may be of course also historically (as well as culturally) malleable (cf., e.g., Witthöft 2007), and it would seem that the transmedia character template that may lead most if not all recipients of contemporary representations of Arthur characters to expect a ›wise and righteous king‹ was shaped at least as much (if not more) by »Arthur's [...] noisy presence« (Higham 2018, 255) at the end of the 19th century as it was by the late medieval period (cf. also note 5). However, this frame of reference includes not only »the Victorian habit of hero-worship« (Bryden 2018, 71) that resulted in »Arthurianism [...] as an assertion of national identity« (Bryden 2018, 141) but also »the Victorian's growing perception and treatment of Arthur as an artefact« (Bryden 2018, 145). In any case, I would maintain that contemporary representations of ›inverted‹ Arthur(ian) characters such as those in the comics series *Once & Future* (2019–2022), the manga series *The Seven Deadly Sins. Four Knights of the Apocalypse* (2021–) and the anime series of the same title (2023–2024), or the videogames *King Arthur: Knight's Tale* and *Sworn* (2024) are recognizable as ›inverted‹ precisely because of the ubiquity of Arthur(ian) characters that can be reasonably described as ›wise and righteous kings‹ (cf. also the discussion of Arthas Menethil as an ›inverted‹ Arthur[ian] character and/or figure below).

but also knowledge derived from a transmedia character template and/or knowledge derived from a transmedia character type, recipients can ›fill in the gaps‹ of even the most rudimentary representations of work-specific Arthur(ian) characters, such as those encountered in the competitive third-person multiplayer online battle arena videogame *Smite. Battleground of the Gods* (2014–), where the players can take control of a god-like King Arthur who does not do much beyond battling other gods in the titular ›battleground‹, or the collectible card battler videogame *Once Upon a Galaxy* (2024), where a young King Arthur is represented by a picture on one of the ›hero cards‹ the players can pick at the beginning of each game, but the players are offered no further information about the character at all.

As hinted at above, we should acknowledge that any transmedia character template associated with a transmedia figure will be historically malleable and interpretable in different ways, and we may even speak of transmedia character templates or transmedia figures in the plural (for further discussion of competing character templates associated with the transmedia figure ›Sherlock Holmes‹, cf. also, once more, Pearson 2018), but it seems clear that recognizing (elements of) a transmedia character template (and/or a transmedia figure) in a given work-specific character in an intersubjectively plausible manner will have to satisfy considerably lower requirements than recognizing a given work-specific character as ›identical‹ with another work-specific character (which, again, would suggest the comparatively rare case of two characters coalescing into either a transtextual or a transmedia character within the theoretical framework presented here). Most spectators will, for example, recognize (in an intersubjectively plausible manner) at least some elements of (at least one of) the transmedia character template(s) associated with the transmedia figure of ›King Arthur‹ in the various Arthur characters represented in *King Arthur*, *King Arthur: Legend of the Sword*, *First Knight*, or even *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, while perhaps also comprehending that coming from a previous life as a street-smart crime boss or having a penchant for riding around on a pretend horse will be rather less central to the transmedia character template(s) in question than being a (wise and righteous) king (or, perhaps, if the Arthur in question *must* be a Romano-British commander, that he should at least be a righteous one). Yet, recipients may still recognize at least some elements of (at least one of) the transmedia character template(s) associated with the transmedia figure of ›King Arthur‹ not just in the particularly ›buffoonish‹ Arthur represented in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* but also, say, in the ›inverted‹ Arthur represented in the videogame *King Arthur: Knight's Tale*, who is killed by Mordred, but returns from death corrupted by evil forces and in turn becomes a source of corruption that threatens Avalon and whom the Lady in the Lake thus tasks the player-controlled Mordred with eradicating. Admittedly, ›being an evil source of supernatural corruption‹ is unlikely to feature very prominently in (any of) the

transmedia character template(s) associated with the transmedia figure of ›King Arthur‹, but the ›corrupted‹ Arthur characters represented in the videogames *King Arthur: Knight's Tale* and *Sworn* (2024) (or the manga series *The Seven Deadly Sins. Four Knights of the Apocalypse* [2021–] and the anime series of the same title [2023–2024], or the comics series *Once & Future* [2019–2022]) still seem to have been ›wise and righteous kings‹, once. No less importantly, it is also entirely possible for recipients to recognize (in an intersubjectively plausible manner) characteristics of a particular work-specific character they have encountered before in another work-specific character they encounter later on, without the two work-specific characters in question having to coalesce into a singular transtextual or transmedia character. Perhaps most saliently, this includes work-specific Arthur(ian) characters that are presented as adaptations of previously represented work-specific Arthur(ian) characters, but more often than not refrain from coalescing into a singular transtextual or transmedia Arthur(ian) character, such as the young Wart in the animated film *The Sword in the Stone*, which loosely adapts T.H. White's *The Once and Future King* series, or the King Arthur in the action-adventure game *King Arthur* (2004), which loosely adapts the film of the same title.²⁷

Finally, I would like to highlight yet again how flexible the notion of transmedia character templates is when it comes to these processes of ›recognizability-without-identity‹, particularly when the transmedia figures in question are strongly anchored in the cultural imaginary. Moving away from Arthur(ian) characters that share the same name (albeit perhaps in different languages), let me give two examples of this flexibility drawn from contemporary media culture: Artoria Pendragon from Type-Moon's *Fate/Stay Night* franchise (cf., e.g., Risden 2022; Thomas 2022; Tuček 2024) and Arthas Menethil from Blizzard Entertainment's *Warcraft* franchise (cf., e.g., Cayres/Duran 2016; Noone/Kavetzsky 2014; Schröter/Thon 2013). In the recently re-released visual novel *Fate/Stay Night. REMASTERED* (2024),²⁸ Artoria

27 Again, while individual adaptations of contemporary media texts representing Arthur(ian) characters appear to be quite common, from what I can see, concerted efforts at high profile transmedia expansions remain rare-to-literally-nonexistent. Incidentally, *King Arthur: Legend of the Sword* was initially planned to be the first of a series of six films and assorted transmedia expansions, but its thoroughly underwhelming critical reception and commercial performance (which lost Warner Bros. a lot of money) has put a swift stop to that (cf., e.g., Shaw-Williams 2020).

28 The Japanese version of *Fate/Stay Night* was originally released in 2004 and has since been re-released and adapted to various other media forms a number of times. While I would certainly still consider a media text released in 2004 to be ›contemporary‹, the work-specific characters, transtextual characters, transmedia characters, and/or transmedia figure of ›Artoria Pendragon‹ that the various entries in the franchise have given rise to evidently also offer plenty of opportunity for further reflection about the medial and cultural specificity of (representations of) characters. Indeed, any detailed analysis of Artoria Pendragon would already be made more challenging by

Pendragon is represented as a young woman who is summoned as a heroic spirit (or ›servant‹) by the teenage magus Shirou Emiya in order to fight in the Fifth Holy Grail War. How her story unfolds depends on the players' decisions, but she is also represented as having pretended to be a man called Arthur while she was the ruler of Britannia. In the real-time strategy game *Warcraft III. Reign of Chaos* (2002), Arthas Menethil is represented as the heir apparent of the king of Lordaeron, trained by the paladin Uther Lightbringer to become a paladin himself. Alas, Arthas succumbs to the cursed runeblade Frostmourne and becomes the champion of the undead Lich King, before the two merge and Arthas becomes the Lich King himself (as represented in *Warcraft III. The Frozen Throne* [2003]).²⁹ Even from these brief descriptions, it should have become clear that most recipients will have no difficulties in comprehending Artoria Pendragon and Arthas Menethil as characters that are not ›identical‹ to any of the Arthur(ian) characters mentioned so far (nor to each other), but at the same time refer to (at least some) elements of (at least one of) the transmedia character template(s) associated with the transmedia figure of ›King Arthur‹. This recognition of certain elements of a transmedia character template is thus evidently not ›blocked‹ by significant deviations in these cases, so that both Artoria Pendragon, despite her gender deviating from prototypical Arthur(ian) characters, and Arthas Menethil, despite his moral-ethical orientation deviating from prototypical

the complicated publication history and nonlinearity of the visual novel with its three distinct main storylines (cf., e.g., Cavallaro 2010; Kretzschmar/Raffel 2023 for more general discussions of the genre of the visual novel; as well as Blom 2023; Schröter 2021; Schröter/Thon 2014; Thon 2016a on the implications of [some] videogames' nonlinearity for their representation of multiple storyworlds and multiple characters located in these storyworlds), which is further compounded by the multiple adaptations and expansions of ›Artoria Pendragon‹ that seem entirely comfortable with following a pronounced principle of ›multiplicity‹ that might be more characteristic of the Japanese ›media mix‹ than of ›Western‹ transmedia franchising practices (cf., again, Wilde 2019 on the distinction between *kyarakutā* and *kyara*; as well as, e.g., Blom 2023; Steinberg 2012 on characters in a Japanese cultural context).

²⁹ Once more, then, there is plenty of complexity here beyond the noteworthy similarities between the transmedia figures of ›Arthas Menethil‹ and ›King Arthur‹. On the one hand, the initial representations of work-specific Arthas Menethil characters were at least partially determined by the ludic requirements of the real-time strategy genre (which, despite the admirable efforts of *Warcraft III. Reign of Chaos* and *Warcraft III. The Frozen Throne*, is not a videogame genre primarily associated with narrative complexity). On the other hand, quite a bit of ›lore‹ has been added to the franchise via the still reasonably successful massively multiplayer online roleplaying game *World of Warcraft* (2004–) and various more narrative-focused transmedia expansions, particularly Christie Golden's novel *Arthas. Rise of the Lich King* (2009), leading to Blizzard repeatedly refining and redefining what it considers ›canonical‹ when it comes to ›Arthas Menethil‹ (as a ›canonical‹ transmedia character rather than merely a transmedia figure). Needless to say, however, there is also plenty of fan fiction representing Arthas Menethil characters, and searching for ›Arthas Menethil‹ on Character.ai generates more than 30 hits (as of 31 March 2025).

Arthur(ian) characters, are regularly identified as ›versions‹ of ›King Arthur‹ in the relevant paratexts (cf., e.g., Type-Moon Wiki 2025; WoWWiki 2020). Admittedly, this may at first glance be less surprising in the case of Artoria Pendragon than it is in the case of Arthas Menethil, since the latter seems considerably further removed from the transmedia figure of ›King Arthur‹ in ›ethical terms‹, but *Fate/Stay Night. REMASTERED* also represents a corrupted ›version‹ of Artoria Pendragon (›Artoria Pendragon Alter‹) in one of the ›routes‹ the players can take through the visual novel. In any case, it is worth noting that both ›Artoria Pendragon‹ and ›Arthas Menethil‹ can also be understood as transmedia figures and, perhaps, as transmedia characters in their own right, since Artoria Pendragon characters and Arthas Menethil characters are represented across various media texts within the *Fate/Stay Night* franchise and the *Warcraft* franchise, respectively. Put in a nutshell, this is only possible because recipients not only recognize (in an intersubjectively plausible manner) at least some elements of at least one of the transmedia character templates that are associated with the transmedia figure ›King Arthur‹ in the various medial representations of Artoria Pendragon characters and Arthas Menethil characters but also comprehend at least some of these medial representations as representations of a specific (singular) Artoria Pendragon character and a specific (singular) Arthas Menethil character, both of which can be clearly distinguished not only from each other but also from the multiplicity and diversity of other Arthur(ian) characters (even if the *Fate/Stay Night* franchise seems to much more prominently follow a ›multiplicity‹ model of canonicity than the *Warcraft* franchise).

5 Conclusion. The Once and Future King?

In conclusion, let me stress again the heuristic nature of the theoretical framework proposed here. Having taken as my point of departure the observation that Arthur(ian) characters not only enjoyed considerable prominence in the late medieval period and the Victorian era but also remain ubiquitous in contemporary media culture, with a broad range of media texts across (potentially) narrative media forms representing characters recipients may recognize as some ›version‹ of ›King Arthur‹, I have offered a comprehensive theoretical account of characters that are represented across conventionally distinct media forms as well as of the interrelations between them. To that end, I have conceptualized ›characters‹ as represented entities with an intentional inner life that are (or at least can be) located in storyworlds (and thus are presented as ›logically consistent‹ by default), distinguishing them from ›transmedia figures‹ as the complex cultural constructs that arise from contemporary media culture's tendency to adapt, expand, and modify

previously represented characters across the borders of both individual media texts and their respective media forms (and thus are not presented as ›logically consistent‹ by default). I have further distinguished between ›work-specific‹, ›trans-textual‹, and ›transmedia characters‹ that are interrelated in sometimes rather complex ›transmedia character networks‹, emphasizing that ›transmedia character templates‹ and ›transmedia character types‹ often lead to recipients having prior knowledge about transmedia figures (or even about particular work-specific characters), which may fulfill important functions in the intersubjective construction of work-specific (as well as transtextual and transmedia) characters.

While my focus throughout the previous pages has been largely theoretical, I have also offered some more concrete examples of how distinctions between work-specific Arthur(ian) characters represented in films such as *King Arthur*, *Arthur: Legend of the Sword*, *First Knight*, and *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, television series such as *Merlin* and *The Winter King*, or videogames such as *King Arthur: The Role-Playing Wargame* and *King Arthur: Knight's Tale* are drawn, despite most recipients likely being able to recognize in all of these characters at least some elements of the transmedia character template(s) associated with the transmedia figure of ›King Arthur‹. I have further highlighted the flexibility of the notion of transmedia character templates when it comes to these processes of ›recognizability-without-identity‹ by exploring in some detail the ›inverted‹ Arthur(ian) characters Artoria Pendragon and Arthas Menethil that were initially represented in the visual novel *Fate/Stay Night* (2004) and the real-time strategy game *Warcraft III. Reign of Chaos*, respectively. Beyond noting that Artoria Pendragon and Arthas Menethil are not ›identical‹ to any of the other Arthur(ian) characters I had mentioned (nor to each other), yet still refer to (at least some) elements of (at least one of) the transmedia character template(s) associated with the transmedia figure of ›King Arthur‹, I also highlighted that they can furthermore be understood as transmedia figures and, perhaps, as transmedia characters in their own right, since representations of Artoria Pendragon characters and Arthas Menethil characters are not limited to *Warcraft III. Reign of Chaos* and *Fate/Stay Night*, but can instead be found in various media texts within the *Fate/Stay Night* franchise and the *Warcraft* franchise.

Having explored at least some of the countless Arthur(ian) characters that can be found in contemporary media culture, I remain convinced of the usefulness of a transmedial, transcultural, and transhistorical ›character theory‹ that allows for a comparison of characters across a diverse set of medial, cultural, and historical contexts. However, in regarding the ubiquity of contemporary Arthur(ian) characters not just as an occasion for theoretical reflection but also as an opportunity to engage with ongoing discussions about premodern characters, I have also emphasized that any such general theoretical frame (as well as the transmedial, trans-

cultural, and transhistorical conceptualization of characters at its center) needs to be able to take into account that the ways in which characters are represented, circulated, and comprehended are always medially, culturally, and historically situated. Even if I still maintain that our theoretical understanding of characters does not have much to gain from medial, cultural, or historical ›exceptionalism‹, then, I hope that my necessarily cursory account of work-specific, transtextual, and transmedia Arthur(ian) characters that are interrelated within a diachronically and synchronically complex transmedia character network and that share (at least some) elements of (at least one of) the transmedia character template(s) associated with the still rather salient transmedia figure of ›King Arthur‹ will, despite (or perhaps because of) its doubtlessly remaining medial, Eurocentric, and presentist biases, serve as the beginning of a broader interdisciplinary dialogue about different medial representations of and different kinds of interrelations between Arthur(ian) and other kinds of characters across times and cultures.

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