The Everyone/No One Problem:
A Fictionist Dreams of Authoring Tools

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Overview: Among the inherent authoring challenges of interactive digital narrative is the tension between character flexibility and character complexity; characters designed to become something for everyone may lack the specificity to become unique and memorable as individuals. This is particularly true in IDNs that feature customizable characters such as first-person avatars, and even more so in those that focus primarily on plot and action. Accommodating customizability for a wide variety of interactors tends to flatten characters, threatening to make them *tabulae rasae* that offer much flexibility but little in the way of complexity, particularly when it comes to internal conflict.

This paper explores, from a fictionist's perspective rather than a computer scientist's, ways in which IDN authoring tools might accommodate rounded characterization that reflects multiple layers of potentially conflicting selfhood. Thoughtful incorporation of character-centric fiction strategies into IDN authoring tools can aid in the naturalistic depiction of digital characters, resulting in more nuanced options for writers and more robust experiences for interactors.

Layers of Selfhood: When developing customizable characters, IDN authors are tempted to rely on archetypes (and stereotypes) that interactors then tailor to their own wishes to maximize their narrative immersion. This temptation is especially strong with heavily trope-fueled narratives, and it can lead to a reductionist authorial approach. Such flat characters exist primarily to serve a narrative function, rather then as self-standing entities. Both writers and interactors experience them as means to a narrative end.

A more complex view of character identity allows for greater nuance. The most commonly customizable aspects of IDN characters are merely the outer shell they show to the world, but other layers of the self can be leveraged for greater character complexity. We also have inner shells (identities we hold but don't share with the broader world) and unspoken cores (identities we experience but don't or can't articulate). These layers of the self inevitably work against each other, and IDN authoring tools that acknowledge this internal conflict allow authors to create more robust characters than is possible with archetypes.

Measurable Personalities: As stat-based avatars in IDN and gaming have demonstrated, many aspects of character personality are computationally measurable and trackable throughout the course of a narrative. If internal conflict is not recognized as a factor in characterization, all measurable personality aspects will congregate on the outer shell where the most salient

customizable identifiers reside (e.g., gender, age). But other layers can also be measured, as well as tracked as they change, to enhance characterization. Because layers of personality rub against each other, each character has not only a highly specific system to maintain their equilibrium, but also equally specific circumstances in which that equilibrium can be overriden. This helps to both effect and account for character decision making and and change.

Measuring a broader range of personality aspects also allows for greater depiction of contextual behavior. While archetypes may behave the same way at all times, most humans change their behavior depending on their environment (e.g., their various discourse communities). Layers of selfhood are not uniformly thick; depending on our situations, we may reinforce our outer shells to protect ourselves or, when we encounter a kindred spirit, reveal our inner shells. Under certain kinds of pressure that are unique to each individual, our unspoken cores can reveal themselves. IDN authoring tools that measure more layers of the self, and use these measurements in their proper narrative context, enable the creation of more contextually responsive characters.

Internal Conflict as Narrative Driver: Measuring and tracking layered personality attributes permits better use of character identity to shape paths through a narrative environment by closely correlating plot events with internal conflict. Digital characters will, like their human counterparts, make decisions that cut off and open up possibilities within their story worlds. When significant plot events are set in motion by character decision-making, rather than by the simple need for narrative progress, interactor identification and immersion both deepen. Clearly identified internal conflict can shape the pathways that lead into and out of major plot events, as well as enable more character-specific responses to them.

Introspection: The strategies described above will increase IDN authors' ability to generate introspective content for their characters. Introspection derives not principally from the outer shells we show to the world, which is performative by nature, but from private inner tension between the layers of our personalities. Narrative events can trigger moments of character self-realization, and the more complexly expressed those moments are, the more lifelike they become. Similarly, self-realization can also *generate* narrative events, such as when a character reflects before deciding to take (or step away from) action. Another common use of introspection in IDN is the internal monologue or aside, which is more effective with full access to a character's internal conflicts. An expanded set of measurable personality elements would greatly expand this aspect of the IDN author's toolbox.

Conclusion: IDN authoring system designers can aid the storytellers who use those systems by providing nuanced and robust personality metrics that facilitate the use of inner conflict as a tool to shape narrative. Customized personality assessment and tracking tools will enhance IDN characterization by providing naturalistic ways of expressing character identity.