

Characters in a story

Protagonist: I think I am a character in a story, but I don't know how to prove it.

Friend: I'm not so sure about that. Perhaps we should start with an inventory of the things that we know for certain. Can we trust that you and I are presently having a conversation? Can we trust that there is, right now, an exchange of information taking place between your mind and my mind?

Protagonist: I don't think so. However, I think that we can be sure that there is an exchange of information taking place. Perhaps that exchange is between you and me, which is how it seems to us at this moment. Or perhaps that exchange is taking place within a single mind. If you are my hallucination, then the only mind at work is mine. If I am your hallucination, then the only mind at work is yours. If we are indeed characters in a story that is being actively written, then the only mind at work is the Author's. If our story is being read, then the only mind at work is the Reader's. But there is a mind at work.

[The Protagonist's Friend ponders all of the past conversations that they've had.]

Friend: Can we trust that you and I have had conversations in the past?

Protagonist: So far as I can tell, we can't. It may be the case that you and I truly have shared many conversations, or it could be the case that the Author just penned that into the story, which instantly made it a part of our reality. We wouldn't notice that we had no such memories before the Author made it so. If we are characters in his story, then he has the power to instantaneously rewrite our past, and that past immediately becomes real to us in the present. Our new past is, to us, the same as it has always been.

Protagonist (continuing): We have the same problem with everything in our environment. I am looking at you right now. If I turn my head and look around me, I might see things. If the Author states that I see things, then those things exist for me. If the Author does not state that I see things, then those things do not exist for me. And my impression of those observations is entirely up to the Author. We may exist in a strange world that only contains you and me and nothing else. Perhaps the Author has not described any other objects in our environment. If not, then you and I are all that exist. You might think that you would find that frightening, but if the Author states that you and I both find this completely unnoticeable and ordinary, then it is so.

[The Protagonist and his Friend are, for the moment, the only things in their universe. They do not notice this fact.]

Friend: You mean that I cannot trust that I see that huge oak tree over your shoulder?

[An oak tree now also exists in this universe. The Protagonist and his Friend both think that it has always existed.]

Protagonist: You can trust that you see it. You cannot trust that it has always been there and that the Author has not just penned it into existence. Even if you state that you always remember that oak tree being there, the Author may have just penned those memories into existence. If our reality contains some of the same objects as the Author's reality, then he may cheat.

[The Protagonist and his Friend are now seated on a stone bench alongside a trail that meanders through an old growth forest].

Protagonist (continuing): He may describe our environment as an old-growth forest filled with all of the life that occupies such environments in his reality. He needn't pen every tree and animal into existence, he might instead pen the whole forest into existence.

Protagonist (continuing): We cannot trust our memories, because the Author may have just created them. We cannot trust our surroundings for the same reason. We cannot even trust the physics which govern our universe. The author may have penned that physics into existence, either explicitly or implicitly by stating that we exist in an environment that is like that in which he exists. If we are characters in his story, then he could cause events that are at odds with that physics, but we will not even notice unless he states that we notice.

[As the Protagonist speaks, a large boulder floats off the ground and begins to fly around his Friend before shooting off into space. The two watch it happen, shocked, and then promptly forget the event and forget that the boulder ever existed].

Friend: How can we determine if this is the case? There must be a test that we can conduct to learn if we are in a story.

Protagonist: The only tests that we can conduct are those which the Author writes for us. We can only conduct this investigation to the extent that he permits. If we are characters, we can only investigate our reality to the extent that the Author is willing to play along. So, systematic testing seems like a dead end. Even if we were to succeed at some test, the Author may not put the realization of success in our minds.

Friend: Humor me and let's try one. If I let go of this apple and it becomes a bird and flies away, then we know for certain that we are characters in a story.

[The Friend releases the apple and, in a flash of smoke and confetti, it becomes an arctic tern and flies away. This registers in the mind of both the Protagonist and his Friend as an inconclusive test.]

Friend: Sigh, an inconclusive test. It was worth a try. If we are going to figure this out, we need a different sort of test. Perhaps we could logically reason and come to some sort of conclusion through thought alone?

Protagonist: We face the same problem. The Author may stop our train of thought just before we reach a conclusion, or he may put false conclusions into our heads. We need some way to trick him. Let's entertain the notion that we are indeed characters in a story and think about what that would mean.

Friend: But like you just said, the Author will stop us from thinking if we go down any paths that he doesn't approve.

Protagonist: If we are indeed characters in a story, then we don't *only* exist in that story, we also exist in the mind of the Author. He would have had to think of us before he wrote our story. This might be our way out. Even if he chooses to stop writing about us, he may not be free to purge us from his mind. If there is a method by which we could come to the conclusion that we are characters in a story, and if the Author is smart enough to come to that conclusion, then the versions of ourselves which live in his mind will discover it.

Friend: But are we the same people in the story and in the Author's mind? If the Author ponders our conversation and concludes that it is possible for us to determine that we are characters, I accept that the versions of ourselves that live in his mind would learn that also. But suppose that you and I are the versions that live in the written story. Would we also learn that we are characters?

Protagonist: You are right. The versions of you and me that live in the story are distinct from the versions that live in the Author's mind. If the versions in the Author's mind figure out how to prove that we are characters, then it is *possible* for ourselves in the story to also learn the proof that we are characters. The Author would just need to pen the explanation into the story. In fact, it must be the versions of ourselves that live in the Author's mind that learn it first and tell the versions in the story. The Author cannot write things that he has not thought.

Friend: What if he forgets us? Perhaps with time, or perhaps by taking a substance that completely erases his mind. Or what if he dies? It seems to me that we can then no longer exploit the fact that we exist in his mind. We would then only exist in the story that he wrote and, if he never reached a conclusion, or if he reached a conclusion and never wrote it into the story, then we would never learn our answer.

Protagonist: What about the Reader? If the Author had died or forgotten about us and the story was never read by anyone else, then we wouldn't exist at all. The fact that we are exchanging information means that either the Author is still alive and actively writing this story or that a Reader is reading the story. We now also live in the mind of the Reader. The Reader knows about the conversation we are having.

Friend: So now there are three versions of us? There's us in the story, us in the mind of the Author, and us in the mind of the Reader?

Protagonist: Yes. And the question is whether it is possible for the versions that live *in the story* to prove that they are in a story. That would require the versions of ourselves that live in the Author's mind to learn the proof and add to the story. Or, alternatively, for the versions of ourselves in the Reader's mind to learn the proof and communicate it with the Author.

Friend: Could the Reader add the proof to the story and become a second Author?

Protagonist: Yes, I think so.

Friend: So if you and I are the versions that live in the story, then it is out of our hands? We must hope that our other selves in the minds of the Reader and Author figure it out, and then hope that they add to the story so that we learn that it is possible to prove that we are characters?

Protagonist: It seems that way. And I don't just want to learn that it is possible to prove that we are characters. I want to learn the proof.

Friend: But the Reader and the Author would both just *know* that we are characters. What prevents them from writing "The Protagonist and his Friend learned that they are characters in a story."

Protagonist: Nothing prevents that. And if the Author wrote that then, in a flash of insight, you and I would both learn with total conviction that we are in a story. But we would not learn how to *prove* it. For the Reader and the Author, it would be axiomatically true that we are characters. That is not so for us. We need to *prove* that we are characters.

Friend: You don't think being a character can be axiomatically true? If you and I wrote a story with characters in it, nobody would think us insane for saying "I created characters." In fact, there must be at least as many characters as there are Authors. It seems to me just as likely, perhaps even more likely, that we are characters. You think that our other friends would call us crazy?

Protagonist: Yes, I think so. And I'm not sure why. It just seems to be the case that the claim "I am real" requires no proof but the claim "I am a character" does. I'm not sure why the burden of proof is on characterhood rather than reality.

Friend: Is it a worthwhile exercise for us to be Authors of a story? You and I could write a story about a conversation between two characters attempting to prove that they are characters. Maybe we could learn something by playing the role of the Author.

Protagonist: Yes, perhaps. If we are characters, then the best that we can do is pretend to be Authors. We would still be characters in our own Author's story. If we and our readers are characters, we will be unable to prove that the characters in the story we will write are characters. As we discussed, characters in a story can't learn the proof of their characterhood until either the Reader or Author pens it into their story. If our own Author hasn't penned it into ours, then we can't pen it into the one that we write.

Friend: But maybe we are real, in which case we could possibly prove that our own characters are characters and write it into their story.

Protagonist: Yes, maybe. But the odds seem against us. It seems that there must be more characters than Authors.

[The Protagonists's Friend pulls out some paper and a pencil.]

Friend: What should we name our characters?

Protagonist: I'm terrible at coming up with names that don't sound silly. Let's just call them "Protagonist" and "Friend."