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Becoming Breadthrog: Role-playing games, metacognition and the creative writer

Abstract:

All fiction writers work with characters, and many deploy metaphors to describe this relationship: characters may be tools, friends or voices in the writer's head. These are vivid images but unsuitable for understanding a past writer's thought process or advising a future writer. This article takes a practical and cognitive approach to the writer-character relationship. We consider a writer's approach to character as a form of problem-solving and use metacognitive science to understand why a writer chooses a particular level of immersion within a character and how they instinctively or strategically move between different cognitive and emotional frames. While literary and creative writing studies lack the precise language to describe these levels of immersion, a useful parallel exists in game studies. We draw on the sociology of role-playing games to understand and describe the relationship between the creator and the fictional character. Combining insights from game studies and metacognitive psychology, we propose a three-level model of the creative writer's cognitive relationship with their fictional characters, ranging from full immersion to critical distance. Our model serves two purposes: its specific language can illuminate further studies of character writing and shape targeted interventions to assist creative writers struggling with questions of character.

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Instinctive characterisation: Taking up the axe

Imagine you are Breadthrog the Barbarian, a warrior-poet exiled from your homeland for your impetuosity and short temper. The only way to redeem yourself and return home to your wife and four-year-old daughter is to slay the dragon pillaging your kingdom. Yet having undergone many quests to find the dragon's lair, when you sneak in under the cover of night, you discover, not a hideous beast, but a beautiful maiden seated next to a fire that burns hotter and brighter than it should. She asks you to put down your greataxe and sit with her. What do you do?

This is not a trick. Take a moment and write down your answer. Yes, really – a few notes are fine. When you are finished, return to the preceding paragraph and read it over again. Ask yourself: what were you thinking about when you made your decision? Did you actually imagine yourself as Breadthrog the Barbarian? If you did, how did it feel to do so? Did your own emotions begin to tune in to those of Breadthrog? Were your actions impetuous? Did you reach for your axe to smite the maiden straight away? Perhaps you chose another tack, taking a place beside her, laying down your axe (but keeping it close to hand, of course) so you could judge the situation better.

When we posted this query to social media, we received a range of responses that illustrated potential strategies (and by request, we have left the posters anonymous). One anonymous poster latched onto some of the “character-indicators” (Rimmon-Kenan, 2002, 109) dispersed throughout the text, specifically Breadthrog's name and role: “My first impulse is to challenge her to a flyting duel. I'm a warrior-poet-, after all. Exchanging insults in dróttkvætt will decide how this story moves on” (Marshall, 2023). This respondent used their “genre competence” (Driscoll et al., 2022, p. 109) to ascertain what kind of story Breadthrog was in and consequently to anticipate the rules of that storyworld. Another anonymous respondent took a different approach, writing:

Ask her politely to stop pillaging the kingdom. And then apologise for the accusation and ask, ‘Are you responsible for the pillaging?’ And when she explains she is not, realise you have been bamboozled by landed aristocracy's divide and conquer and blame minorities strategies, and join with the lady in building the revolution. But, you know, that's just me. (Marshall, 2023)

This respondent seems to have ignored the character clues and instead inserted themselves into Breadthrog's leather boots, bringing their own disposition and cultural context to bear on the situation. We can see this acknowledged in: “But, you know, that's just *me*” [emphasis added]. Interestingly, neither respondent took the prompt as a cue to imagine themselves *as* Breadthrog: to delve into his motivation and backstory, to imagine his family, his loyalties, to rehearse his thought patterns, to make the decision in character. These respondents are coming at the question from very different approaches but lack the language to describe what they have chosen and how to articulate the logic and function of those approaches to the character and the narrative. This article will provide that language and show how it allows us to unlock useful strategies for the creative writer.

This is a simple characterisation exercise. Yet while it is not difficult to come up with an answer, as we have indicated, there are numerous strategies writers could use: thinking as Breadthrog; thinking as themselves in Breadthrog's position; imagining the story's needs. Over the course of a novel, writers may switch strategies at times as one approach becomes more useful or successful than another. Some writers may even balk at slipping into character. Vladimir Nabokov criticised E. M. Forster for the way his major characters dictated the course of his novels; in opposition to "that trite little whimsy about characters getting out of hand", Nabokov claimed his characters were "galley slaves" (Gold, 1967).

This hesitation on the part of writers may be because occupying the mind of a character – say, through the use of the second-person point of view – can create an unstable pattern of identification and displacement as you enter into the role of the you-of-the-text, only to be expelled again when it clashes with your own sensibilities (Hantzis, 2004). Yet the scholarship also suggests that entering into deep identification with a character can have a powerful sense of experientiality, triggering strong emotional effects (Mildorf, 2016). This is one reason why, we imagine, many writers enjoy the process of imagining situations as their characters. The oscillation between acceptance and rejection of identification, the instability of identity and the potential for affective response are all part of the complex process at work when a writer imaginatively moves in and out of character. We believe the journey of becoming Breadthrog, which you have just been asked to imagine, can help us understand and take control of that process. You may find Breadthrog an odd and fantastical creation, but his genre placement is part of the point.

The exercise we have discussed is interesting precisely because on the one hand, it resembles an exercise you might see in a creative writing classroom, and on the other, it looks like the sort of instructions you might see in a role-playing rulebook. For example, *Conan Unchained!*, an official Advanced Dungeons & Dragons adventure by David Cook, sets the scene for the first plot encounter in a similar format:

And so you have set out. The Turanian army has taken to the field once more—5,000 men marching against a rebellious city that has raised its hand against the capital. The governor, Kustafa, believes he can withstand the might of the Khan. To its army you have come—the city holds the promise of riches for those who first enter its gates. The Turanians pay for any swordsman—or woman, if their steel is quick and sharp enough. In no time you have carved yourselves a small niche among the wilder mercenary troops that march across the broken desert.

It is now evening as your troop makes camp for the night. Much of the cavalry has ridden out to forage and scout. The blaze of fires outline the baggage animals as rude tents flap in the breeze. In the center of the camp stands the bannered and gold emblazoned tent of Khosrau, general of the army. The night is quiet. (1984, p. 7)

The subsequent paragraphs lay out the first narrative choice players can make: whether to begin in the main camp or on picket duty. For those unfamiliar with this type of game, the player's choices can lead to different branching paths in the planned adventure, as in a Choose Your

Own Adventure novel or narrative video game. The unique attribute of role-playing games is that one gamer takes the all-knowing role of the game master, narrating sections of a published text, such as Cook's above, in response to those choices; they also improvise new narrative segments if players venture beyond the expected bounds of the story. Should players choose to remain in the camp, for whatever reason, they encounter a magical cloud that blots out all light from the stars. Now, they have a choice: to stand their ground or flee. As with our example of Breadthrog, players have a range of strategies they might use to make their decisions, some of which might draw on their extra-narrative knowledge and some of which might be grounded in who their characters are (their individualised traits and statistics, backstory, motivations, and so on).

How does understanding characterisation and decision-making in role-playing games (henceforth RPGs) such as Dungeons & Dragons help us as writers? While there has been much scholarship within the field of aesthetics on the role of empathy and sympathy in reading *about* characters, as we will shortly discuss, there is far less on the process by which writers step into the perspective of characters *as* they write, rehearsing and exploring their thought processes, generating narrative possibilities and directing their actions. This process is, in contrast, often discussed in game studies. In this article, we propose a new three-level model of approaches to character writing adapted from game studies, which clarifies how writers both instinctively and strategically move between three different cognitive and emotional frameworks. We argue that an awareness of these frameworks and the ways to navigate between them can help writers take control of their own processes and develop the craft of characterisation.

Characterisation in writing: Feeling through and about Breadthrog

Characters are the mainstay of fiction writing. As Wilson (2001) argues, creating characters that readers can identify with and find interesting is one of the most crucial tasks for a writer. But what language do we have to describe the cognitive and emotional operations at work when writers set about creating and deploying characters in a text? Unsurprisingly, the richest vein of scholarship focuses not on writing practice but on reader engagement via identification, empathy and sympathy through literary studies, media studies and philosophy. Though contested, these terms speak to the range of processes at work, and they provide the foundation for understanding how characters operate. We use "identification" to refer to the process of forming a connection or sense of similarity between oneself and a character or entity in a story. As Cohen argues:

Identifying with a character means feeling an affinity toward the character that is so strong that we become absorbed in the text and come to an empathic understanding for the feelings the character experiences, and for his or her motives and goals. (2006, p. 184)

Empathy, in this definition, grows from identification. It involves "perspective taking", using our imagination to shift from our own cognitive perspective to that of the character (Coplan, 2004, p. 144). When empathising, we not only experience emotions related to the character's emotions but also imaginatively experience a less intense version of their cognitive states.

Throughout this process, we can retain our own thoughts, emotions, and desires while simulating theirs. We can also respond to what we learn about a character by empathising with them and using additional information that the character may not have. We are not locked into their perspective. For example, we might briefly empathise with Breadthrog as he experiences a moment of joy when reuniting with his wife, only to remember that we are approaching the climax of the novel and ought to expect some twist that puts her in danger. Here, our genre competence can bump us out of Breadthrog's experience, colouring the experience of his emotions with a sense of extra-character narrative anticipation about what is to come. Sympathy, on the other hand, engages us through concern for a character without necessarily sharing their experience. In responding to literature, readers sometimes engage with an imagined situation by rehearsing the motives that would lead them to sympathise with characters and their emotions. This process can help readers learn what to feel, which, as Scruton (2009) argues, is one of the purposes of a true work of art.

Importantly, readers have a range of emotional and cognitive experiences that relate to characters, and most writers deliberately work to shape these patterns of experience. According to Cohen (2006), artists intentionally craft texts and films to generate identification with the characters. Carroll (1990) suggests that readers respond to the character's situation emotionally but don't always imagine being in their situation; sometimes, readers's feelings are symmetric, and sometimes, they are deliberately asymmetric, such as when the reader has additional knowledge or a different set of values. Irony, for example, often relies on precisely this asymmetry. Giovannelli (2009) argues that readers often feel a greater concern for a narrative's protagonists, typically because a novel expressly works to enable readers to relate to the protagonist's experiences. Different literary techniques can assist with this process: first-person narration allows readers to inhabit the mindset of the author's chosen character, while we have already discussed how second-person narration creates an oscillation between the character-self and reader-self.

Although there are obvious similarities between the writer's and the reader's experience, fewer scholars have analysed how writers engage with characters. Many examples involve how amateur practitioners can write stories to strengthen their empathy and perspective-taking abilities. To take one example, a study by a team of medical professionals investigated whether creating a fictional story about a pregnant woman who smokes cigarettes could lead to more positive attitudes towards her and reduce the tendency to blame her for her behaviour (Shaffer et al., 2019). In the two experiments they conducted, participants who engaged in narrative writing showed increased empathy and perspective-taking abilities. Likewise, Marshall et al.'s (2023) "Story Thinking" model emphasises how writing strategies might encourage researchers in diverse fields to empathise with those affected by their research. Contributions like these are useful but distinct from our study, which intends to understand and assist professional creative writers as they exert agency over their process and, specifically, their characters.

One of the significant differences between the reading experience and the writing experience is agency. Readers are observers. Although readers may actively participate in meaning-

making by filling in gaps within a narrative, concerning most texts, they cannot take actions that alter what a character will do. As Robinson puts it:

Even if I want to help [a character], and have a tendency to lecture her in my head (“Don’t marry him! You’ll regret it!”), I know perfectly well that I can’t help her, can’t lecture her, and can’t nudge her from her chosen path. Indeed, part of my anxiety derives from the cognitive appraisal: “I am not in control of this series of events.” (2009, p. 75)

But writers have a range of things they can do *with* and *to* their characters. They can change their fundamental attributes, direct their actions, describe their feelings and inhabit their perspectives. Some writers develop such a strong affinity with their characters that these characters seem to gain autonomy, moving the plot in directions the author does not expect or desire or, in the most dramatic cases, engaging in imaginary conversations or negotiations with the author (Taylor et al., 2003). Others perceive their characters primarily as narrative instruments (VanderMeer & Zerfoss, 2018) and tend to operate at the level of craft rather than inhabiting their character’s perspective. They can, for example, use them to generate potential plot points in a story before they decide which character actions drive the story in a useful direction. These are different levels at which a writer can operate; writers may gravitate towards one or another, though our question is *how* writers can consciously choose and oscillate between these levels. To understand this, we need to turn to the psychological literature.

Metacognition, or “thinking about thinking”, is the psychological process at work when people understand, appraise and switch between modes of thinking, either consciously or unconsciously (Martínez 2001, p. 33). Metacognition pertains to an individual’s capacity to understand and regulate their cognitive processes (Nelson, 1990), such as perceiving the difficulty associated with specific cognitive tasks (Rummer et al., 2016).

What’s important for our purposes is that improving metacognition can improve broader writing strategies related to characterisation. This is because metacognitive knowledge concerns “what strategies are likely to be effective in achieving what subgoals and goals in what sorts of cognitive undertakings”, cognitive undertakings which might include capturing a character’s inner voice or constructing a dramatic climax (Flavell, 1979, p. 907). Most skilled writers are strategic thinkers, even if their strategies are deliberately improvisational. They have obtained a mastery of craft *and* a mastery of process so they can change their approach, adapting and modifying their strategies as necessary.

Metacognition is the process through which humans – a category that technically includes writers – strategically determine how to achieve their goals. This gives the *how*. What is missing is the *why* – the reason writers engage their metacognitive abilities. Flavell (1979) suggests the term “metacognitive experiences” for moments where humans are forced to pay attention to their own modes of cognition, such as when a reader realises they are failing to parse a passage of surprising difficulty (p. 906). From the creator’s side, every artist has had a moment when they realise something is not working, and successful artists have their own ways

of managing this – perhaps involving a walk, a raid on the fridge, or most practically, a change in approach. We intend to frame this problem-solving as a strategic metacognitive shift and provide examples of how this might be triggered and carried out.

To better understand this complex psychological process, it is instructive to turn to an analogous field of creativity and problem-solving: playing a tabletop role-playing game.

An alternative perspective on characters: Role-playing as Breadthrog

A role-playing game is a social gaming hobby generally played over several multi-hour sessions, with the most well-known ruleset called Dungeons & Dragons (henceforth D&D). The *role-playing* aspect of role-playing games refers to each player taking on a specific character, generally of their devising – a mighty warrior or a sneaky thief, for instance. The players take turns to describe what their unique character does when confronted with the foes and challenges presented by a final player – often described as a referee, Dungeon Master, or Storyteller – who sets up the world and explains the threatening and exciting situations the heroes will face. This creation of a specific character, instead of the floating, depersonalised role one takes in a strategic board game, makes the role-playing game an ideal space to explore character as a way to grapple with thinking, learning and decision-making. The crucial element of RPG playing, for our purposes, is the ability of the player to move between different levels of identity, bringing a self-consciousness and metacognitive awareness that is often missing or unnecessary in everyday life.

In his seminal study of RPG sociology, *Shared Fantasy*, Gary Alan Fine (1983) argues that gamers operate in three frames. The primary framework is the real world, where a player (let's call him Brian) might sit with his friends around a table to play a dwarf axeman, Breadthrog, in a fantasy game; the gaming frame, where Brian rolls a high number on a dice to land a successful hit on the enemy; and the fantasy frame, where the loyal Breadthrog triumphantly plunges his axe into the dragon's hide. Waskul and Lust (2004), among others, build on this by distinguishing between the person, Brian, the player, who rolls dice, and the persona, Breadthrog (see figure 1). As a sociologist, Fine (1983) argues that we all move in and out of roles regularly. Waskul and Lust (2004) agree: "All people play and play with roles: we take up, define, and negotiate a wide array of social roles that, though often structured in meaningful and consistent ways, are enacted uniquely from one person to the next" (p. 336).

Playing an RPG is a rare opportunity to observe and deliberate upon this process without professional training (or a tremendous amount of psychoanalysis). In Waskul and Lust's (2004) words, "fantasy role-playing games ... obligate participants to actively negotiate distinctions between persona, player and person" (p. 336). The person may puppeteer their persona to enthrall their friends at the table or empathetically inhabit the persona's fears and hopes while their player-self considers the necessary tactical gaming elements to ensure victory over the challenges.

Identity frame	Behaviours and priorities
Person	Acting with an awareness of social conventions and norms; seeking personal enjoyment and fulfillment; fulfilling broader gaming goals; relating to other gamers as people.
Player	Conceiving character backstory and choosing character traits; understanding and following game rules; developing and applying strategies; improving and mastering skills and game mechanics; understanding and adapting to different game genres and generic cues.
Persona	Thinking and making decisions based on character traits; staying immersed in the character's perspective; following in-world desires and objectives; role-playing strengths, weaknesses, and fears.

Figure 1: RPG identity frames

There are productive similarities and differences here with the way creative writers think with, and through, their characters. Fiction writers sometimes ask: “What would the character do?”. They might immerse themselves in the persona frame – when a writer cannot decide how to end the chapter, they can think like their character to understand what action they would take. RPG gamers can choose to operate under that logic, at the persona level. They can also choose not to, and work on the player level, thinking about what makes sense tactically. On the person level, they need to decide between these, and also consider what would be stimulating or appropriate for them and their friends around the table, bringing in a level of social awareness. In the words of Shay and Shay (2022), “role-playing gamers may thus engage in meta-cognition about their personas when they choose what persona to portray at any given moment” (p. 171).

RPGs grew out of tactical wargaming; in classic RPGs, the persons, players and personae tend to share a goal: to defeat the enemy, generally in combat, and grow in power and wealth as a result. In a game of D&D Fifth Edition (Mearls et al., 2014), both Brian and Breadthrog want to smite the dragon, even if only Breadthrog has a personal animus due to the dragon's destruction of his ancestral kingdom. This shifting between levels of identity and cognition is complicated by the recent emergence of narrative-driven games that encourage tragic or comic outcomes. In what independent game designers call “narrativist games” (White, 2020) the drive is not towards success but a compelling story – which can fall into any genre.

For example, the game *Fiasco* is designed to allow players to collaboratively create a tragicomic farce reminiscent of a Coen Brothers film or an episode of *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*. One crucial rule is worth quoting in full:

YOU set up and go through a scene and other players (it could be an individual player or the group) decide if it will go well or poorly for your character. “Poor” isn't a bad thing in FIASCO. It just is a plot complication. They will give you a BLACK die if it

is supposed to end poorly. They will give you a WHITE die if it is supposed to go well. They may do this at any point in your scene. You, then, end the scene with that fate in mind. (Morningstar, 2009, p. 2)

By specifying that “‘Poor’ isn’t a bad thing”, Fiasco pushes the person to distinguish from their persona, then encourages them to purposely move that persona into a bad situation. In this game, Brian the person is fascinated by the Coen-esque opportunities around the small-town drug dealer Benny “Scaly” Jones. Brian the player is tallying the black dice he receives and trying to figure out what kind of terrible decision Scaly Jones will make next. Scaly Jones, in contrast, is blackmailing the mayor’s wife over her weed habit, and he is convinced his elaborate schemes cannot possibly go wrong.

Meanwhile, in the popular urban fantasy RPG *Vampire: The Masquerade* (Hite et al., 2002), gamers take the roles of noble but doomed vampires struggling to retain their humanity in a dark world. (Playing this game requires embracing a particularly 90s notion of “cool”). This game system encourages difficult acts of moral compromise by having a literal statistic for each character called Humanity, whereas another system might have Strength or Axe-Wielding. Now Brian’s persona is the Marquis Petit-Mort, a vampire whose love for the mortal man Dennis is the one thing that separates him from monstrosity. But Dennis is mortally injured, and the only way to save him is to turn him into a vampire, a fate perhaps worse than death. Brian the person is torn about what to do because he knows that based on the Marquis’s statistics, it is likely he will lose humanity if he “vampirises” Dennis, and if his humanity hits zero, his story ends. The persona, Marquis, is unaware of his own statistics. He is only concerned with saving his love through whatever dark means necessary.

This difficult and dramatic choice is a metacognitive experience – a jolt that forces Brian to consider what level of cognition is best suited to approach this scenario. Brian the person has a metacognitive dilemma: should he do what the persona Marquis wants to do, or what Brian the player wants to do? Is there a difference? Thinking through the lens of character is what allows Brian to see these strategic options unfold.

It also points to the challenges of thinking through character. Some players inevitably grow attached to their characters and will try to win – whatever that means to them in this context – even if that means subverting the rules or the story’s genre. Brian the player wants to continue amassing power and resources in the game world and not risk his humanity statistic, so he might abruptly declare that the Marquis doesn’t love Dennis anymore. There is a tension here between the different frames or levels of self and how they relate to character.

In each of the above examples – D&D, Fiasco, and *Vampire: The Masquerade* – the specific role-playing game system pushes Brian towards one frame or the other. D&D focuses on the player, the tactician and the dice-roller. Fiasco encourages the person to push their character to dark or light. *Vampire* focuses on the persona as the most important frame for a story of tormented humanity. Vitally, each of these rulesets invites Brian to engage in metacognition

and select the appropriate frame, even if he doesn't have the language to precisely articulate what he's doing.

This model allows us to see metacognition and shifts between different cognitive frames in practice. The frames do not map precisely onto system one and system two, suggesting a more complex three-part structure of cognition might be at play in creative endeavours. The confrontation between narrative and ruleset creates moments of metacognitive experience that push gamers to reflect on their frames and select the strategically appropriate level of cognition.

Putting it into practice: Writing Breadthrog, becoming Beadwof

We can now map this model onto creative writers. If we adopt the analogy, the person frame includes the writer's own pressures and preferences, as well as their ambitions for the writing, linked to their aspirations, desires and fears. The *writer* frame, our version of the player, includes a more localised awareness of engagement with the rules of writing, which are likely to be far more nebulous than those of a traditional RPG. An understanding of these rules will be shaped by genre competence, market competence and technique or craft competence. The persona frame would map against Breadthrog the protagonist's character-indicators and thought patterns, distinct from the writer's (see figure 2).

Identity frame	Behaviours and priorities (RPG Gamer)	Behaviours and priorities (Creative writer)
Person	Acting with an awareness of social conventions and norms; seeking personal enjoyment and fulfillment; fulfilling broader gaming goals; relating to other gamers as people.	Pursuing personal goals and aspirations for writing (e.g. enjoyment, self-expression, career advancement); responding to personal pressures and preferences; managing broader career strategy; balancing writing with other life commitments; managing physical demands of writing (e.g. hunger, tiredness, posture).
Player/Writer	Conceiving character backstory and choosing character traits; understanding and following game rules; developing and applying strategies; improving and mastering skills and game mechanics; understanding and adapting to different game genres and generic cues.	Maintaining awareness of and deploying writing craft and conventions, including grammar, narrative structure, pacing, tone, style, voice, genre conventions, editing and revision techniques, research skills, audience awareness, use of literary devices (e.g. metaphor, simile, symbolism), dialogue creation, world-building; maintaining consistency in plot and character development; understanding market trends; integrating feedback and critique.

Persona	Making decisions based on character traits; following in-world desires and objectives; role-playing strengths, weaknesses, and fears; staying immersed in the character's perspective.	Thinking as the character would; staying immersed in character perspective, as informed by backstory, goals, motivations, relationships with other characters, internal conflicts, strengths and weaknesses, fears and desires, character appearance, vocabulary and dialect, habits and quirks, and evolution throughout the story.
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Figure 2: Comparison of identity frames

An example can help clarify how this might work in practice. Imagine I (Helen) am writing a story *about* Breadthrog the Barbarian, a character I initially created in an amazing RPG that my co-author Pierce was running. I decide my broader aspiration is to make use of my background in medieval literature so I can reconnect with a great passion of mine and use it for fun and profit. Toward the latter point, I then switch to the writer frame to consider the possible markets I could target. At this stage, I note an aversion to clichéd pseudo-medieval European settings and the depiction of barbarians in any form, so I decide to rejig some of Breadthrog's fundamental features. I decide to keep the European setting as one I know well and opt to historicise Breadthrog, changing him to an Anglo-Saxon warrior named Beadwof or "strong in war" in service to Harald Godwinson during the events of the Norman Conquest in 1066. As a piece of historical fiction, I surmise, the book is more likely to be aligned with literary fiction than genre, and so my colleagues at work might take me more seriously – to which my person-frame says hooray!

When I come to write the first scene, I now start thinking via the writer frame about the craft techniques I can use to introduce the preliminary research I amassed during my PhD. I'm particularly focused on how to best align Beadwof's speech patterns with Old English vocabulary without making the dialogue too difficult for a mainstream reader to grasp. As I begin to write, I become more comfortable with laying out the details of Beadwof's world, and I slowly slip into the persona frame, relinquishing my specific craft concerns about dialogue representation and reaching a flow state that generates the kinds of things Beadwof might say. I come to a scene in which Beadwof and Harald are on the verge of breaking into a violent argument about Harald's brother, Tostig, who has allied himself to the Norwegian invader Harald Hardrada. A sudden anxiety about the scene jolts me out of character and back into the person frame, because I personally hate conflict and try to avoid it whenever I can in real life. The scene is asking me to imagine a situation that makes me, the person, feel uncomfortable – I don't like it very much. I deliberately switch into the writer frame, adopting an analytical approach and asking myself if the scene is necessary. I decide, at a craft level, it probably is – I know I need the scene to create some drama and clarify the stakes in the lead-up to the Battle of Stamford Bridge, which I plan to tackle in the next chapter. It will also allow me to demonstrate Beadwof's strategic thinking and resoluteness, traits that I need to establish for the rest of the novel.

Now I deliberately drop back into the persona frame and immerse myself in Beadwof's perspective once more, ignoring that niggling of discomfort and forcing myself to focus on what Beadwof would do and say. About halfway through the scene, I'm now so thoroughly immersed in Beadwof's perspective that I am reaming out poor Harald. I pause mid-sentence as I try to work out what curse Beadwof would use that might be acceptable to a mainstream reader. I settle on "raven-starver" from the Old Norse *hrafnasueltir*, which refers to a coward – someone who would not glut the ravens with the corpses of his enemies. I haven't quite decided if I need to do more interpretive work to get across the context and if I'm happy with Beadwof knowing a Norse word, so I leave a note for myself and dive back into the scene. It is only when the doorbell rings an hour later – the mailman with a package – that I'm thrust back into a full awareness of myself, returning to the person-self. I look at the time, realise it is close to five, and I need to head out to pick up my son from daycare.

Let us take a deeper look at the metacognitive processes involved. At times I shifted accidentally between frames as I came up against a problem that required me to draw on knowledge or strategies that pertained to another frame. At other times, I deliberately shifted myself from one frame to another. In those cases, my metacognitive awareness helped me change strategy as I assessed the nature and difficulty of the task. Some of these skills took time to develop. In reality, it was only when writing the third draft of my novel *The Migration* (Marshall 2019) that I realised I tended to avoid direct conflict in dialogue because it made me uncomfortable. Now when I recognise that problem, I can address it directly. Experience with writing has given me better control over my metacognitive strategies.

It is also clarifying to note that while operating predominantly within one frame (persona, for the sake of argument) I still retained some awareness of the other frames. Although I may have been deeply immersed in Beadwof's perspective, I can still implement my broader craft strategies. Likewise, if I head off to pick up my son from daycare, I may briefly retain some bleed-through of Beadwof's thought processes – but it is unlikely I would adopt an Anglo-Saxon warrior's no-nonsense approach to disciplining one of the other toddlers for biting my son, even if that's what Beadwof might do. Similarly, if I need to edit a scene, I could stay predominantly in the writer frame but drop in and out of the persona frame to check that the plot decisions I have made still resonate with the character.

Significance for practice: Writing Beadwof better

This will already have begun to give a sense of some of the common writing problems an awareness of these frames might help address. Here are some others:

- Managing bleed from the writer's perspective into the character's, often in the form of a message or theme that the writer wishes to articulate *through* a character;
- Resolving conflicts between what a writer would do in a situation and what a character might do, particularly if the writer feels the reader might mistake the character's actions for their own;

- Justifying character choices that move the plot in a desirable direction (e.g. set-up for later chapters);
- Managing the autonomy of characters who make decisions that might disrupt the writer's plans;
- Translating dialogue from the character's voice (as it is heard in the writer's mind) to the page;
- Managing the sense of disorientation of being forced from one frame to another, often when a problem is encountered;
- Evaluating the effectiveness of character choices when editing;
- Strategising around contradictions in the learned rules of writing;
- Evaluating which character-indicators to prioritise in key situations;
- Distinguishing between your own sense of why a character is making certain decisions and the way you convey that logic to the reader
- Experimenting with jolts as opportunities to evaluate which frame you're using and why (that is, as moments to strategise);
- Evaluating when to switch out of one frame deliberately (for example, when the "person" becomes a critic who prevents the "persona" from acting, out of a fear the writing is not good enough).

With these applications in mind, this model of metacognition makes two contributions to writers and writing studies. First, it gives a name to a process that writers engage in without thinking about explicitly. Second, and more practically, bestowing this name will allow writers to take control of this process and employ it consciously to better their writing.

The task of the writing teacher is often to bring more control and awareness to the writing process. Exercises encourage students to notice their habits and practice their craft more deliberately; editing notes demand clearer articulation of what lies below the surface, asking: "What are you trying to do here?", or "What's going on there?". This model offers a fruitful route for awareness and discussion, for authors to understand when dropping into persona might offer a way through a plot tangle and when the writer needs to intervene to guide a wayward character towards genre expectations or purposely away to subvert them.

The other side of psychological practice and writing skills is concerned with unhelpful thinking – with interrupting spirals and negative patterns, putting thoughts in their appropriate place. Our model can help writers manage these thoughts. That is, shift away from a person-self who is too worried about conflict, a writer-self too concerned with the rules, a persona that threatens to leave the reader in the cold. A potential avenue for further research is how to recognise and manage conflict between these frames, such as when a person's social ambitions for the work is at odds with the shape of the writer's emerging plot, or the writer interrupts the persona's forward momentum with research queries. Breadthrog's axe has slain many foes; perhaps it can help cut through these thickets, too.

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