

RUNNING HEAD: Characters and Creatures: Know the Difference

Characters and Creatures: Know the Difference

By

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Abstract

Throughout television shows, video games, movies, myths, and novels, creators share worlds through detailed settings and especially interesting characters and creatures. If someone were to create their own characters and creatures, one would have to learn what distinguishes a character from a creature. To find out what is crucial in creating characters and creatures, I evaluated various video games and cartoon shows to see what defining qualities I could gather from different characters and creatures, humans, and natural animals in the real world. From this research, I have concluded there are two key factors that distinguish characters and creatures: appearance and intelligence. The appearance factor is outlined via examples from video games and cartoons; while the intelligence factor is explained using a spectrum of intelligence, natural animals, and humans.

Keywords: Characters, Creatures, Appearance, Intelligence spectrum, Media

I. Introduction

In media, one will inevitably encounter characters and creatures. Players assume the role of, fight, and create both characters and creatures in video games. Viewers watch the interaction and adventures of characters or creatures in movies and television shows. Readers get to imagine the creatures and characters in storybooks and novels. This exposure can lead people to want to create their own world with many different characters and creatures. However, one should understand what characters and creatures are before attempting to create them. What defines a character or a creature in media? Why is Sonic the Hedgehog considered a character, but all Pokémon are considered creatures? This thesis examines the differences between characters and creatures through research of animals that evolved in nature and myth and explained through their appearances and range of intelligence. Using the information from this thesis, people interested in creating their very own worlds can educate themselves on the distinctions of beings they create.

II. Origin of Creatures

The definition of the word creature is “something created either animate or inanimate: such as a lower animal, a human being or a being of anomalous or uncertain aspect or nature” (Merriam Webster 2019). For context purposes, this thesis uses “creature” in reference to “a being of anomalous or uncertain aspect or nature” in media and the word “animal” to refer to real life animals. The reason for this distinction is that creatures come in many varieties, some of which that are even composed of inorganic materials.

Millions of creatures have been brought to life through written and visual media. Whether they are two-dimensional, three-dimensional, or pictured in the imagination, many of these creatures have a unique sense of fantasy that adds to their world. However, where do creatures

come from and how are they created? The answer, in part, is by using natural animals, natural elements, and people as reference. This applies to creatures from mythology as well. For example, dragons take reference from multiple animal species. Reptiles like large dinosaurs and alligators were likely used in the creation and design of Western dragons from medieval times based on their body and skeletal structure and gait. However, many Eastern or Asian dragons look like snakes in terms of body structure, more specifically their elongated torsos and short limbs. Some even speculate that the skeletons and bones of whales could also be used as reference for dragons due to their large size (Sullivan, 2016). Another mythological example of a creature based on a real-life animal is the Kraken. The Kraken is described as a large, ravenous sea creature that wreaks havoc on passing ships to satiate its craving for human flesh in King Sverre of Norway's account of the creature. The Kraken, however, was based on documented sightings of a giant squid. Theory suggests the tale of the Kraken spread by sailors' word of mouth due it being prior to the discovery of the giant squid (Salvador, 2015).

Aside from mythology, the public may recognize creatures from video games and televised media. The Pokémon franchise, created by Nintendo and Game Freak exhibits multiple examples of real-life animals used to make creatures. In the Pokémon games, players can catch over 800 different creatures with different abilities based on elemental attributes and their physiological makeup, called Pokémon, and use them to battle. Pokémon is also a cartoon released in 1997 of the same premise, created by Junichi Masuda, Ken Sugimori, and Satoshi Tajiri. Pikachu, Pokémon's original mascot, is a yellow, mouse-like creature that can control electricity. Many versions of the game describe Pikachu as the "mouse Pokémon" (Figure 1). The first Pokémon games, Pokémon Red and Pokémon Blue, includes starter Pokémon, Charmander, Squirtle, and Bulbasaur that are other creature examples (Nintendo & Game Freak, 1997). Charmander is an

orange creature that references a salamander; only this salamander-like creature can control fire, indicated by its color and iconic flame-lit tail. Its name is even a combination of the words “char” and “salamander.” Squirtle is a blue, turtle-like creature that controls water. Squirtle’s name is a fusion of the words “squirt” and “turtle.” Bulbasaur has less reference to a natural animal, since this green, four-footed creature has a plant growing out of its back and has control over grass and plants. The “bulb” in Bulbasaur’s name refers to the plant bulb growing on its back and “saur” relates to its connection to dinosaurs (Pokémon 1998). There are more examples of creatures based on natural animals or natural elements, showing that even fictional creatures take inspiration from the real world.

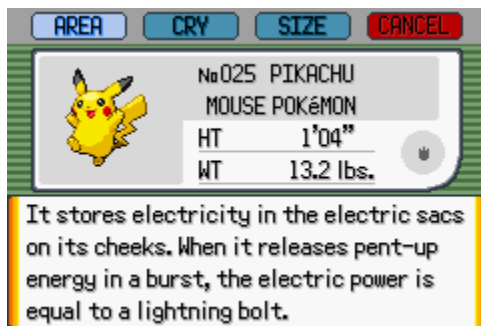


Figure 1. Pikachu’s Pokédex entry from Pokémon Emerald (Nintendo & Game Freak, 2005)

III. Appearance

Appearance is one of two key traits that separate a character from a creature. While appearance may not give an in-depth insight into the intelligence of a character or creature, it can reveal how characters or creatures express emotions and perform actions. Appearance can lead to perceptions of what many people see as a stereotypical character or a stereotypical creature. In the same way, unique examples of character and creatures’ appearances can break those stereotypes and shed a new light on the topic.

A. Characters

Most characters have something in common: their anatomy. Many characters have human-like anatomy: a head, a torso, two arms, and support themselves on two legs. These characters do not have to be human to fit this human-like anatomical structure such as Yoshi from the Super Mario Universe (Nintendo, 2017). Yoshi is a green dinosaur that has a large snout and tail, wears shoes, can flutter in the air, can swallow things whole, and lay eggs. Despite what Yoshi can do and despite some of his features are not human-like, he still captures the basic human-like anatomy described earlier. Yoshi has two arms, a head, and supports himself on two legs (Mario/Nintendo 2020). However, there is something unique about characters like Yoshi. Despite looking creature like, he contains characteristics and attributes one would find in a character.

While many characters have human-like features, there are also characters with mainly animal-like characteristics. For example, Scooby-Doo from *Scooby Doo: Where Are You?* is considered a character, despite being a Great Dane (Barbera, Nichols, Messick, Kasem, Welker, Christopherson, & Warner Home Video, 2004). Another example is Morgana from the game, *Persona 5* (Sony Computer Entertainment & Atlus U.S.A., Inc., 2017). In *Persona 5*, there are two worlds: the regular world and the Metaverse. In the Metaverse, Morgana looks like a bipedal, cartoon bandit cat. In the regular world however, Morgana appears as a regular cat (Figure 2). But how can these be considered characters if they have animal-like features?

Anthropomorphism is defined as “an interpretation of what is not human or personal in terms of human or personal characteristics,” or the placement of human behaviors onto animals or other lifeforms (Merriam Webster 2019). Scooby-Doo and Morgana would be considered anthropomorphic characters due to some of their behaviors and expressions. Some of Scooby-

Doo's anthropomorphic behaviors include speaking similarly to a human, consuming large quantities of food with Shaggy, and being shown to walk and stand on two legs to use hand gestures (Scooby-Doo). Some of Morgana's anthropomorphic behaviors include speaking similarly to a human, actively arguing or fawning over other characters of Persona 5 and showing intense greed when surrounded by treasure. Morgana also expresses what he is feeling through his facial expressions and words. Some examples of these expressions are him shouting in fits of anger whenever someone assumes he is a cat as he adamantly believes he is not a cat, expressing attraction to one of the main character's, Ann Takamaki, and referring to her as "Lady Ann," and him going starry-eyed and speechless whenever he sees one of the grand treasures in a Palace. (Sony Computer Entertainment & Atlus U.S.A., Inc., 2017). Anthropomorphism distinguishes animal-like characters from plain creatures.



Figure 2. Images of Morgana in his Metaverse form (left) and real-world form (right)

B. Creatures

When someone is asked to think of a creature, animals and insects may come to mind. Some examples of popular animals include cats, dogs, spiders, fish, and elephants. The typical anatomy of creatures is far more unique and varied than that of characters. This is because the creator has the discretion of making the creature's body look any way they want. From

observations of creature-heavy media, some of the criteria of typical creature-like anatomy is having either no legs or more than four legs, extra appendages like tails, beaks, wings, fins or antennae, and being covered with hair, fur, rough skin, or scales. This is not a list of all criteria of creature-like anatomy, just general observations. Another observation suggests that a creature's appearance can be indicative of the environment they live in. For example, a wolf covered in thick fur could indicate that the wolf lives in a cold environment and the fur is needed to keep it warm (Dorling Kindersley Limited 2019).

Just as there are creature-like characters, there are also creatures that tend to be bipedal or have human-like attributes, such as Lucario and Zoroark from Pokémon. They are both bipedal and humanoid, but most of their actions are based on instinct or focused on survival. Another example of a bipedal creature is a wyvern. A wyvern is a fusion of a dragon and a bird, in which it is a reptile that walks on two legs, has two wings, and no arms (Merriam-Webster, Incorporated, 2019). A rather unique example of human-like creatures are zombies. Zombies are reanimated corpses of humans that feed off flesh (Eldridge, 2017). One piece of media that zombies are prominently depicted in is *The Walking Dead*. Technically, zombies fit the human-like character anatomy to almost perfectly, considering that they were previously humans. However, what causes zombies to be classified as creatures has to do with an attribute other than appearance. It has to do with their intelligence.

IV. Intelligence

Intelligence is the other key identifier for whether a being is a creature or a character. Intelligence can encapsulate a variety of meanings, like understanding concepts, performing actions through thought rather than instinct. On the other hand, lack of intelligence describes

concepts like beings performing actions arbitrarily or an inability to use tools. For example, zombies technically have all the physical requirements to be considered characters, since they are human corpses that are brought back to life. However, typical zombies have the mental capacity of a rock. Typical zombies instinctively hunt living creatures and eat their flesh or just wander aimlessly. For this reason, zombies would be considered a creature of low intelligence.

After some research into characters and creatures, I have developed a personal theory about how a character or creature is determined. In this theory, the determination of characters and creatures is not a dichotomy, but rather a spectrum (Figure 3). A being can be categorized as a character with high intelligence, a character with low intelligence, a creature with high intelligence, a creature with low intelligence, and anything in between. The idea of the intelligence spectrum came from the research and realizations that not all creatures are unintelligent and not all characters are intelligent. This idea of a spectrum is also more focused on the creature side of the research, despite being applicable to both characters and creatures. Characters' and creatures' intelligence can be examined through multiple categories such as the nature versus nurture or society versus freedom categories.

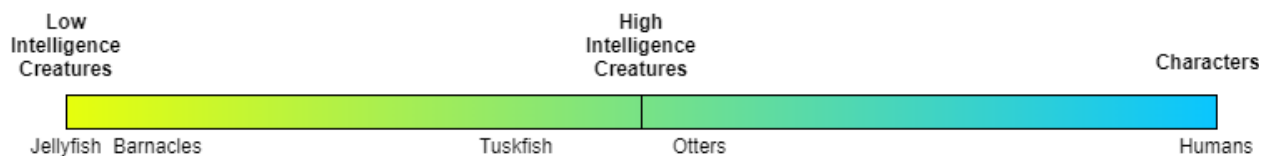


Figure 3. Spectrum of Intelligence with examples listed underneath

A. Characters

At the high end of the intelligence spectrum are characters. Characters, on an intelligence standpoint, are equal to real-life humans. Characters can form societies with laws and institutions,

understand ideas and concepts, communicate, learn, be self-aware of who they are, and have in depth thoughts. However, the ability to create culture is one key reason characters are at the high end of the intelligence spectrum. Culture refers to society, politics, religion, environment, technology, and art.

For example, if one created a character from urban Japan, they would have to examine the culture, using the aforementioned factors of culture, to determine multiple traits and behaviors of that character. In terms of environment, Japan is a nation built on an archipelago that has a limited amount of space. Cities in Japan became large centers for businesses, but very close-cornered for people living in the city. To answer this, contractors managed to turn small one family homes into convenient apartment complexes called manshon (Bestor, Bestor, & Yamagta, 2013). These apartments maximized the housing for many people while giving residents exclusive rights to their own unit (GPlusMedia Inc., 2020). One can infer that an urban Japanese character may be used to living in small dwellings and know how to utilize small spaces to the best of their ability.

Cities in Japan are surprisingly orderly, in terms of society and politics. Japan has one of the world's lowest crime rates, due to the strict expectation to follow the standards of the community. Japanese society values the laws of the state, community standards, and protecting individual rights. However, those values bleed together in focusing on roles and behaviors in the community. The law of Japan and the importance of community work hand in hand to shape the society and expectations in Japanese cities (Bestor et al, 2013). An urban Japanese character would likely hold rules, laws, and community standards to a high degree. One can also infer that this character would understand the importance of playing a role in the community.

Japanese cities have made high end innovations and inventions to improve life and efficiency, such as the intricate subway. These subways allow residents and visitors of these cities

to easily get to where they need to go in an orderly way. Subway stations are interconnected and entrances to the subway are within a five-minute walk from each other. The process of using these subways is streamlined for the utmost efficiency and ease of use. From this, one can infer that a character from urban Japan might depend on current technology to help make their life in their community more efficient.

Japanese cities manage to exhibit both Japanese and foreign kinds of art. Upon personal observation, some cities in Fukuoka had multiple art museums around for both natives and tourists. Some of the museum's had exhibits traditional Japanese ink paintings, pottery, tapestries, and other kinds of historical artifacts of Ancient Japanese culture. One museum even held an exhibition for the animated movies of Studio Ghibli (Fukuoka Now Ltd., 2019). However, many of the museums in the cities of Fukuoka also had artwork from different countries. Totems from tribal cultures of different countries, paintings from India and Korea, and sculptures from French and American artists are just a few of the types of multicultural art that these museums put on an exhibit.

Japanese cities cater to multiple religions. Some of the most prominent religions in Japan as of recently are Shintoism, Buddhism, and Christianity. Despite cities being center of commerce and business, many Shinto shrines, Buddhist temples, and Christian churches are incorporated. Along with each of these religions comes a set of beliefs that are held by peoples of those religions. For example, if one were to pray at a certain deity's shrine for academic success and offer some yen, good omens in academic success would come to the person praying (Bestor et al, 2013). An urban Japanese character might still have ties to religion and rituals, despite living in a center of business.

B. High Intelligence Creatures

In the middle of the spectrum of intelligence are high intelligence creatures. High intelligence creatures are the middle ground between characters and low intelligence creatures. Like characters, high intelligence creatures can understand simple concepts and react to their surroundings. The presence or absence of culture separates characters from high intelligence creatures. In this case, lacking culture insinuates that high intelligence creatures lack anything that does not relate to survival. Aside from environment and society for some species, all other aspects of culture have either a different meaning or absolutely no meaning to high intelligence creatures.

In terms of technology, many high intelligence creatures do not create their own weapons or tools. Instead, they use objects around them as “a means to an end.” In most cases that end is sustenance for survival, like otters and tusk fish using rocks to help them break open clams. Otters search for mussels and clams underwater then swim to the surface to find rocks to help break the shells open. Once they break open the shell with the rock, they finish opening the mussels with their teeth (Strickland 2019). Tusk fish repeatedly throw clams at rocks until the shells break open so they can get the food from within (Pappas 2011). Otter and tusk fish are not able to make brand new tools of their own, they use their surroundings to help them accomplish the task of obtaining food instead.

In terms of art, high intelligence creatures cannot understand the meaning in art that characters see. Some animals may naturally know how to sing or dance for courting mates, like the birds of paradise (bbc.com 2015). These types of dances are more focused on producing offspring and helping the species survive. In some cases, humans can teach animals to paint, sing, dance, and create other forms of art. However, that does not necessarily mean animals can understand or appreciate the deeper meaning of art. For example, Shigeru Watanabe conducted an experiment to see if pigeons could discern if paintings were either “good” or “bad.” In this

experiment, pigeons were conditioned to react to paintings that were “good” and to not react at “bad” ones. The paintings used varied by color or grayscale, material, and composition. The pigeons then used those variances to discriminate the paintings as “good” or “bad.” (Watanabe, 2010). While these pigeons can comprehend artistic concepts like color, material, and style, they are limited. These pigeons do not have the ability to contemplate the subject of the paintings or appreciate any deeper meanings. This lack of appreciation of these deeper artistic context lies the difference between characters and high intelligence creatures regarding art.

It is unclear whether high intelligence creatures understand the concept of organized religion or a higher power. Some sources claim that animals, like whales or dogs, mourn the death of others (Cuthbert et al 2018) and that some primates reach to the death of other primates in inexplicable ways, like dancing in a heavy rainstorm (Harrod 2014). While some people suggest this is evidence of animals having religions, it could also be these animals understand the concept of death or loss or even acting without a meaning. The lack of concrete evidence and the ability to clearly communicate with animals leaves the connection of animals and religion uncertain.

C. Low Intelligence Creatures

At the low end of the intelligence spectrum are the low intelligence creatures. Low intelligence creatures are the very base level of creatures in that they do the bare minimum to survive. In most cases, low intelligence creatures instinctively eat for sustenance and reproduce to ensure they do not die out. Another defining characteristic of low intelligence creatures is that they lack thought or any intense mental capacity. An example of a low intelligence creature is a typical zombie. As mentioned before, a typical zombie just instinctively feeds on any living being with

flesh and wanders around. The well-known game and television series, “*The Walking Dead*,” depicts many of the zombies in the game as either wandering around aimlessly or completely dormant when not chasing after any humans (TellTale Games & Skybound Games, 2012).

Some real-life examples of low intelligence creatures are jellyfish and barnacles. Jellyfish are aquatic planktonic membranes that float throughout the sea and eat other smaller creatures. They have stingers to protect themselves from predators like turtles. Jellyfish also reproduce asexually by budding off into small organisms, similar to a mushroom’s spores. The jellyfish merely eats, reproduces, and sometimes helps nourish the turtles as food (britannica.com 2019). Barnacles are small crustaceans that cement themselves onto surfaces with lots of movement, like buoys, boats, and sometimes whales. Once attached to a surface, their appendages called cirri grab food and bring it to them for sustenance. Like jellyfish, the barnacle does not really perform any action that requires any heavy mental capacity or intense thinking (NOAA 2020). Both the jellyfish and barnacle go along where the ocean takes them, just eating and reproducing.

V. Conclusion

The initial question of “what differentiates creatures and characters in media?” initiated research in natural examples. After studying both humans and various animals, two key factors were found that could help creators determine what they need to consider when creating a character or a creature. The first factor is appearance. Certain aspects in appearance can determine if the being conceptualized is a character or a creature, such as if the being is wearing clothes or not. The factor of appearance can segue into another key factor of character and creature distinction: intelligence. Intelligence encapsulates what kind of thoughts a being is having, the influence of

society they live in, the technology they use, and even what their priorities or instincts are. Even a simple action like wearing clothing suggests that a being is somewhere between a high-intelligence character or creature, since it shows they are aware of being naked or defenseless without it. Both appearance and intelligence are vital to the creation of creatures and characters since they can shape stories, ideas, and even worlds in multiple types of media.

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