



Deconstruction of iconic characters: binary opposition and *différance* in the visual-narrative design of Darth Vader, Naruto, and Mario

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ABSTRACT

Character design plays a crucial role in visual narrative effectiveness and emotional connection with audiences, yet existing scholarship privileges visual-narrative coherence over the role of contradiction in shaping emotional resonance. This study asks how Derridean mechanisms, binary opposition and *différance*, operate within iconic character design to generate interpretive depth. It employs a qualitative multiple-case design analyzing three purposively selected characters: Darth Vader, Naruto Uzumaki, and Super Mario. Selection followed three operational criteria: documented global iconicity, representation of three distinct visual traditions (Hollywood cinema, Japanese anime, and Japanese video games), and contrasting modes of iconization (tragic-antagonistic, heroic-developmental, and functional-iconic). Each case was analyzed through a four-stage deconstructive procedure—identification of the privileged binary, contradictory close reading, exposure of the moment of *différance*, and synthesis of layered meaning—applied to two defined units of analysis: visual units (silhouette, color, costume, facial configuration, movement, and symbolic marker) and narrative units (scene, action, transformation, and symbolic reversal). Interpretive claims were validated by returning each reading to its primary text, by cross-case pattern testing, and by author consensus. The analysis finds that resonance is generated not by design harmony but by sustained tension between visual meaning and narrative subversion, with each character organized around a distinct collapsing hierarchy: power/weakness, recognition/alienation, and complexity/simplicity. The study contributes an operational deconstructive procedure for visual-narrative research, reframes visual contradiction as a designed resource rather than a flaw, and extends deconstructive analysis across three cultural production contexts. As a textual analysis, it describes interpretive potential inscribed in the design and makes no claim about measured audience response; empirical reception testing remains a task for subsequent research.



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1. Introduction

In the landscape of visual media, characters constitute the foundation upon which narratives are constructed, and emotional connections with audiences are forged. Yet the process of creating memorable characters is far more complex than mere alignment between visual design and narrative function. In many cases, the most profound emotional resonance emerges not from perfect harmony but from the tensions, contradictions, and ambiguities embedded within

the design itself. The deployment of mutually opposing elements within a work can render it more meaningful and considerably more powerful in evoking audience responses [1]. For example, designing an antagonist with a visually approachable, non-threatening appearance can generate a far more complex and emotionally conflicted experience for the viewer [2]. Accordingly, apparent incongruences between a character's visual exterior and their essential narrative nature need not be concealed or neutralized, but may instead be foregrounded deliberately to produce distinctive forms of appeal [3].

Incorporating ambiguity and "friction" into such a design creates interpretive space that invites more open-ended engagement and facilitates the co-construction of deeper experiential meaning [4]. Notwithstanding these observations, existing scholarship on character design tends to privilege visual-narrative coherence over internal tension as a source of meaning. Consequently, there remains considerable scope to explain how the contradiction between visual appearance and narrative structure may, in fact, generate stronger interpretive depth and emotional impact.

A significant body of prior work has examined the extent to which narrative aligns with visual codes, with the primary aim of facilitating audience comprehension [3]. Yet presenting events that run counter to viewers' visual expectations, such as when a character with a menacing appearance rescues a vulnerable protagonist, has been shown to be highly effective in inducing narrative tension and emotional curiosity [2]. Crucially, ambiguity and the potential for misreading are not weaknesses, but rather natural features of human communication that make character interactions feel far more dynamic [5]. It is precisely through situations of interpretive uncertainty that new and more meaningful understanding emerges gradually over the course of the story [5]. This gap constitutes the point of departure for the present study.

Concretely, the stakes are practical as well as conceptual. Character-design pipelines in film, animation, and game production routinely treat visual-narrative inconsistency as a defect to be corrected in review, and design pedagogy transmits coherence as a normative rule. If contradiction is in fact a generative resource rather than an error, then both production practice and pedagogy are systematically discarding one of the mechanisms through which characters acquire durable affective weight. The absence of an articulated framework is therefore not merely a gap in the literature; it leaves practitioners without vocabulary for a phenomenon their own canonical examples demonstrate.

Theoretically, a visual sign carries no meaning in isolation; its value is determined through its differential relations with surrounding signs [1]. The same visual form can be appropriated to convey entirely different meanings depending on narrative context, compelling viewers to continually reinterpret what they perceive [6]. When opposing elements are permitted to remain in productive friction, audiences frequently experience ambivalence a psychological state in which they simultaneously sustain contradictory emotional responses an experience that binds them more powerfully to the narrative [7]. Ultimately, the viewing experiences that prove most transformative and enduring are those generated through the dialectical interplay between mutually opposing forces [4].

Although this phenomenon has been observed in fragmentary form across various studies, the specific textual mechanisms through which visual narrative tension operates within iconic character design have not yet been articulated. What is required is a framework that explains not merely that contradiction exists but how it produces emotional resonance. This study therefore asks two questions. First, which Derridean mechanisms operate in the interaction between the visual and narrative elements of iconic characters, such that they generate an instability of meaning that can function emotionally? Second, how do moments of *différance* the gap between the meaning a design projects and the meaning a narrative subverts form the textual conditions in which that resonance emerges? In pursuing these questions, the study identifies the patterns of binary opposition and their mechanisms of subversion across three iconic characters drawn from distinct visual traditions, and sets out what those patterns imply for understanding depth of meaning in character design.

This study makes three distinct contributions to the field of visual communication and character design. First, it offers the first systematic account of how the Derridean mechanisms of binary opposition and *différance* operate within visual-narrative character design to generate

emotional resonance. That account fills a conceptual gap: earlier scholarship has documented the emotional power of internal contradiction without explaining the textual mechanisms that produce it. Second, it challenges the long-standing assumption that a character's effectiveness depends on visual-narrative coherence, showing instead that productive ambiguity and the collapse of binary hierarchies are the primary engines of psychological depth and lasting affective resonance. Third, it extends the methodological toolkit of visual communication scholarship by showing that deconstructive textual analysis can be applied to iconic character design across three culturally distinct visual traditions. The result is a replicable framework for analyzing character meaning-making in non-Western and emergent media contexts.

The paper proceeds as follows. The remainder of this introduction establishes the theoretical foundations of Derridean deconstruction within visual studies and character design, and locates the gap this study addresses. The Methods section sets out the multiple-case design, the units of analysis, the four-stage deconstructive procedure, and the validation strategy. The Results and Discussion section presents each case beginning in every instance with an explicit description of the visual object and closes with a cross-case synthesis. The Conclusion states the contribution, the limits of the claim, and the research agenda that follows from it. Situating this inquiry requires tracing how character design has been theorized across four connected bodies of work: iconic-character scholarship, visual deconstruction, binary opposition in visual semiotics, and the mechanics of emotional resonance, and showing where each stops short of the mechanism this study seeks to specify.

1.1. Iconic Character Studies and the Limitations of Coherence-Based Readings

Scholarship on character design in animation and visual communication has developed across a range of rigorous disciplinary perspectives [8]. Among the most prominent is the visual language approach, which examines how fundamental elements such as shape, color, and exaggeration elicit predictable psychological responses in viewers [9]. This approach aligns with semiotic theories addressing the visual recognizability of characters and the centrality of appeal and the quality of visual magnetism in the tradition of animation [9], [10]. Complementing these frameworks, the visual communication semiotic approach provides a structured visual grammar that articulates the relationship between pictorial form and the social meanings that emerge within cultural contexts [11].

While each of these theoretical contributions is genuinely valuable, they all rest upon a shared foundational assumption: that a character's effectiveness depends upon the coherence between its visual appearance and its narrative role [12]. This assumption leaves largely unaddressed the question of why the most culturally enduring and emotionally potent characters are so frequently those whose design is marked by internal contradiction [13]. Darth Vader, for instance, operates simultaneously as a compelling villain and a tragic figure; Naruto Uzumaki rises from social alienation to become an exceptional leader; and other iconic characters derive their appeal partly from the technological constraints of their era [2], [14], [15].

The extraordinary cultural magnetism of these figures appears to subsist not only through consistency but through the very ambiguity and contradiction that keep their meaning in perpetual, open-ended circulation [16]. The need for an analytical framework that treats meaning instability not as noise to be eliminated but as an object of inquiry in its own right directs this study toward Jacques Derrida's deconstructive theory. Unlike conventional semiotic approaches, which seek to map stable relations between signifier and signified, Derridean deconstruction explicitly contests the possibility of fixed, singular meaning an epistemological stance that is particularly apt for analyzing characters whose very appeal depends upon the irreducible incompleteness of their signification [16], [17]. Through this approach, the rigid boundaries of character design are dismantled, revealing the mechanisms of meaning production concealed beneath an apparently coherent visual surface [17].

1.2. Visual Deconstruction and the Deferral of Meaning (Différance)

This study deploys Derridean deconstruction not merely as an instrument for the analysis of written texts, but as an analytical framework for dismantling the hierarchies of meaning embedded within images and visual communication. This application is theoretically grounded in Campbell's contention that Derridean theory is directly relevant to the examination of visual

forms, given that images equally resist reduction to any single, definitive meaning [17]. Just as in spoken language, each visual element acquires its meaning through differentiation and relational positioning within a broader field of signs, rather than through any intrinsic or pre-given signification. The deconstructive approach, therefore, carries legitimate and well-founded theoretical authority for the analysis of visual character design [17]. This argument concerning the deferral of meaning aligns directly with Derrida's concept of *différance*, which holds that the meaning of a visual sign is never fully or immediately present; it is never exhausted by the material form through which it appears [17], [18]. Instead, every sign perpetually leaves a trace that refers outward to other elements within the text, such that the eventual fixing of meaning is perpetually deferred and never arrives at closure [18], [19]. Applied to character design, this implies that an audience's understanding of a character's visual form is never completed upon first encounter; its meaning continues to develop, shift, and evolve as the narrative progresses.

The theoretical basis of this method refers directly to Derrida's argument in "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," wherein he contends that every structure necessarily requires a "center" to maintain systematic order while simultaneously constraining the free play of meanings within it. This center functions as an anchor that stabilizes and fixes meaning against unlimited proliferation. In applied visual character design, this center is assumed by the character's visual identity, the determinate combination of color composition, bodily form, and worn attributes which appears to successfully inscribe the character's identity and nature within a singular, authoritative meaning [19]. Deconstruction advances an argument that destabilizes the presumption of fixed and stable meaning. Jacques Derrida asserts that "the pure trace is *différance*": a sign is never fully present to itself in a single determinate signification, but always leaves a trace referring to other signs. The term *différance* a portmanteau of "to differ" and "to defer" marks interpretation as always ramifying, relational, and structurally inconclusive [18]. Applied to character design, this means that an apparently stable visual surface—a color choice, a bodily posture, a facial configuration—is not a fixed identity. It is a constellation of visual traces that keeps inviting new layers of meaning, deferred and without final resolution [17], [18].

Within the field of visual studies, this mechanism of deferred meaning operates as a powerful analytical instrument for excavating concealed messages and often invisible ideological assumptions. By attending carefully to the "gaps" and absences within an image, it becomes possible to understand how rich, stratified meaning is produced—meaning that ultimately possesses the capacity to generate powerful and enduring emotional resonance in its audience. Although deconstructive theory has long been established as a methodology for analyzing literary works and cultural texts, its application to the design of widely recognized popular characters remains comparatively rare. A further lacuna exists in the scholarship that directly accounts for how the differential play of *différance* constitutes the primary mechanism through which deep emotional resonance between character and viewer is made possible [17].

1.3. Binary Opposition in Visual Semiotics and Narrative Archetypes

Before any deconstructive analysis of a character can proceed, it is necessary to establish what constitutes the "privileged meaning" of the general audience expectation that will subsequently be dismantled. In *Positions*, Jacques Derrida sets out the logic of binary oppositions. He argues that in classical philosophical pairings the two terms never coexist in peaceful symmetry; they produce a coercive hierarchy in which one term dominates and claims superiority over the other. The implication for character design analysis is direct. When a character's appearance foregrounds one trait, say, "Strength" while suppressing its contrary, "Weakness", what is presented is not a neutral representation but an active hierarchy that works to render the subordinated term invisible.

Derrida further introduces the concept of undecidable elements that can no longer be contained within either pole of a binary opposition, yet which continue to inhabit the contradiction, resisting and disrupting both terms without ever constituting a stable third category. This concept most precisely captures the characters examined in this study: they are neither entirely heroic nor straightforwardly villainous; neither unequivocally powerful nor wholly powerless. These characters inhabit the space of irresolvable tension between opposing

terms, and it is from precisely this irreducibility that their exceptional emotional force derives [20].

As a theoretical anchor for this argument, the study draws on Katalin Kroó's examination of Yuri Lotman's theory of fictional texts. Kroó demonstrates that binary opposition is not merely a stylistic device but the primary structural engine that organizes the totality of fictional narrative. Every work of fiction is constructed upon one or more foundational oppositions that distribute values, meanings, and identities within the storyworld. In other words, binary opposition functions as the constitutive "grammar" the governing set of rules that determines how a character is positioned and interpreted by audiences at large [21]. Within narratology, the Hero's Journey has been identified as the most dominant archetypal schema in shaping audience expectations of the protagonist: a hero who departs from the ordinary world, confronts a series of trials, undergoes transformation, and returns bearing gifts for their community [22].

Complementarily, within the structuralist narratological tradition, literary and media conventions construct characters by attributing standardized, stereotyped, and codified traits consistent and predictable attributes aligned with the character's narrative role; the archetypal knight, warrior, and king are canonical examples [23]. Taken together, these two frameworks reveal that the "privileged meaning" in conventional character design consists of a set of stable attributes that cohere with the character's archetypal position. At the level of visual perception, Tseng et al. provide empirical validation of the claim that shape language the use of basic geometric forms automatically triggers specific binary associations in audience cognition: rounded forms are associated with friendliness and safety, while angular and pointed forms are associated with danger and aggression [24].

Consistent with this, Liberman-Pincu *et.al.* demonstrate that audiences form strong, near-instantaneous character judgments based on a character's visual appearance, long before the narrative provides additional information [25]. Both findings confirm that a character's visual code operates within a cognitively embedded binary logic, rendering it a particularly appropriate target for deconstructive analysis. Taken together, this sub-section establishes that "privileged meaning" in character design is not an arbitrary construction, but is sustained by structured semiotic, narratological, and cognitive mechanisms. It is precisely this understanding of such mechanisms that lends analytical weight to the moment when the narrative dismantles the structure they uphold.

1.4. Resistance and the Mechanisms of Emotional Resonance

Within the theoretical framework of this study, emotional resonance is understood as the affective force of a character its capacity to engage audiences at a profound and enduring level [26]. This affective engagement encompasses the processes of perspective taking, empathetic identification, and the experience of cathartic relief whose effects persist beyond the conclusion of the work. It is essential to emphasize that emotional resonance here is not measured through direct testing or empirical audience response; rather, it is analyzed as the affective potential inherent within the text's visual-narrative structure [27]. The elicitation of emotional response from viewers is, in this sense, an integral dimension of the sympathy structure strategically designed and constructed by the visual-narrative text [26].

If the preceding section addressed how audiences hold fixed expectations regarding character design, this section examines why violating those expectations produces a considerably stronger and more enduring affective bond. Through the concept of narrative resistance, storytelling is shown to actively contest the conventional constraints that have historically suppressed and circumscribed interpretive possibilities. When a narrative boldly inverts initial visual expectations, the resulting tension is not mere cognitive confusion, but rather a catalyst for profound emotional transformation. Audiences are no longer left to receive characters passively, but are challenged to reflect and to reconstitute their empathetic relations, thereby generating a level of affective engagement that is simultaneously more liberating and more deeply felt [7].

The following account of the MA-EM model is invoked as a conceptual parallel only. This study does not measure neural or affective response, and no claim is made that the readings below are corroborated by neurocognitive evidence; the model is cited to indicate that

ambiguity is treated as productive in adjacent literatures, not to import its empirical warrant. The neurological basis of our response to this form of appeal is described by the MA-EM (Mixed and Ambiguous Emotions and Morality) model. The model challenges a longstanding assumption: rather than experiencing flat, single-valued affect, the mind can process several contradictory emotional responses at once [28].

A stimulus that elicits mixed emotions when a character's apparent happiness is revealed to be shot through with grief, for example produces responses that are more powerful and more persuasive than those generated by emotionally predictable narratives. In character design, this suggests that tension between a character's visual exterior and an ambiguous or contradictory narrative disposition does more than invite intellectual engagement. It plausibly engages the more complex affective processing the model describes, which would help explain why such a character is difficult to forget [28].

Rühlemann explains that emotional resonance in narrative occurs when audiences succeed in reflecting and aligning their own emotional states with those presented within the work. This deep affective attunement frequently develops more productively in narrative situations that preserve interpretive open-endedness, as such indeterminacy encourages audiences to draw upon their own emotional experience, rather than passively consuming an overly explicit message [29]. This argument is further reinforced by the concept of narrative transportation as developed by Nikulina *et.al*, which examines how audiences' thoughts, imagination, and emotions can become so fully absorbed as to render them experientially immersed within the storyworld.

Their research demonstrates that visual elements or characters that preserve interpretive gaps stimulate curiosity and compel viewers to engage their imagination and personal experience, thereby substantially deepening narrative absorption and its lasting impressions. This theoretical foundation allows the present study to connect the operation of deferred meaning *différance* within the structure of the text with the affective transformation that audiences demonstrably undergo [30]. In other words, *différance* does not function merely as a machine for the production of plural meaning; it constitutes the very animating force that generates the emotional resonance binding audiences to the work.

1.5. Visual and Narrative Elements as Deconstructive Text

Within the deconstructive framework, the totality of a character's visual elements and narrative trajectory is treated as a unified "text" [8], [31]. Both dimensions are engaged because a character's meaning and identity are fundamentally produced through the collision between the visual language made visible to the eye and the narrative discourse through which the character is constituted [8], [11]. It is precisely at this site of contradiction that deconstructive analysis finds its most productive field of inquiry, where previously foreclosed meanings may be excavated and brought into view [13].

- First, the formal language of shape and color plays a crucial role, as basic geometric forms circles, rectangles, triangles automatically activate specific psychological associations within human cognition, thereby producing what may be understood as the "privileged meaning" or normative code within a given cultural context [25], [32]. Rounded forms, for example, are routinely read as safe and benign, while inverted triangular or angular configurations immediately project menace and danger [25]. Through deconstructive analysis, the study examines whether these established visual conventions are faithfully observed or deliberately inverted by the narrative in order to produce tension and interpretive surprise.
- Second, canonical narrative schemas such as the Hero's Journey and the archetypal categorization of fundamental human dispositions (Jungian archetypes, including the Hero and the Shadow) have long been the structural templates most familiar to audiences [22]. This study examines two departures from them: how a character may embody several archetypal traits that conflict directly with one another, and how a character's narrative trajectory may diverge from the conventional heroic formula on which audience expectations rest [33], [34].

It is, however, essential to emphasize that the invocation of Jungian archetypes here is not intended as a claim that such fundamental character traits possess universal, transcultural

validity [33]. Rather, they are positioned purely as the "privileged meaning" produced by the habitual conventions of the mass media industry a reified interpretive structure whose apparent fixity will be destabilized through the operation of *différance* as it manifests in each of the characters under analysis.

2. Method

This study adopts a qualitative research design in order to engage more deeply with the complex phenomenon of character design as it manifests in real-world cultural texts [12]. Through a descriptive qualitative approach, the analysis moves beyond surface-level observation to systematically unpack the layered meanings embedded within the visual and narrative elements of the works under examination [35], [36]. A multiple case study design was selected to enable comparative analysis of the deconstructive mechanisms operating across three iconic characters: Darth Vader, Naruto Uzumaki, and Super Mario. The three were selected purposively against three criteria. The first is documented global iconicity. The second is representation of three distinct visual traditions: Hollywood cinema, Japanese anime, and Japanese video games, which permits cross-contextual comparison. The third is diversity in the mode of iconization: the tragic-antagonistic figure, the heroic-developmental figure, and the functional-iconic figure whose status emerged through visual simplification. Iconicity is understood qualitatively here, assessed through each character's cross-generational cultural diffusion, sustained representation across popular media, and established standing as a cultural reference point in both public and academic discourse.

2.1. Research Design and Case Selection.

Each of the three criteria was operationalized before sampling rather than applied retrospectively. Global iconicity was indicated by three observable conditions: continuous commercial circulation of the character across at least three decades; presence of the character in scholarly literature across more than one discipline; and recognition of the figure outside its originating national market. Distinctness of visual tradition was indicated by difference in production system, rendering technology, and stylistic convention. Contrasting mode of iconization was indicated by the character's narrative position (antagonist, protagonist, avatar) and by whether iconic status derived from visual elaboration or from visual reduction.

2.2. Corpus and data sources.

Analysis is confined to a defined primary corpus, specified per case so that every interpretive claim in Section 4 can be traced to a locatable passage. For Darth Vader, the corpus comprises two theatrical features, *Star Wars: Episode V – The Empire Strikes Back* (dir. I. Kershner, Lucasfilm, 1980) and *Star Wars: Episode VI – Return of the Jedi* (dir. R. Marquand, Lucasfilm, 1983), consulted in their released home-video transfers. The passages cited are the meditation-chamber sequence in Episode V and the unmasking sequence in Episode VI. For Naruto Uzumaki, the corpus comprises three episodes of the television anime as broadcast: *Naruto*, episode 1, "Enter: Naruto Uzumaki!" (dir. H. Date, Pierrot / TV Tokyo, first broadcast 3 October 2002); *Naruto: Shippūden*, episode 178, "Iruka's Decision" (Pierrot / TV Tokyo, first broadcast 16 September 2010); and *Naruto: Shippūden*, episode 175, "Hero of the Hidden Leaf" (Pierrot / TV Tokyo, first broadcast 26 August 2010). The passages cited are the schoolyard sequence following the failed graduation examination in the first, the childhood flashback in the second, and the village-return sequence in the third.

The episodes are listed in the order in which they are analyzed, which follows narrative chronology rather than broadcast order. The corpus is defined as the anime as broadcast, so that anime-original material falls within scope. For Super Mario, the corpus comprises *Super Mario Bros.* (Nintendo, Famicom/NES, 1985), *World 1-1*, and *Super Mario Bros. Wonder – Nintendo Switch 2 Edition + Meetup in Bellabel Park* (Nintendo, Nintendo Switch 2, 2026), *Local Multiplayer Plaza*. These two titles were selected as the endpoints of the character's rendering history rather than as a sample of the releases between them. Every frame reproduced in Section 3 is identified in its caption by title, year, and locator, so that each interpretive claim can be returned to a specific passage. The frames are screen captures from commercially released works, reproduced solely for scholarly criticism and commentary, limited to the extent the argument requires, and fully attributed to their rights holders; no claim of ownership is made.

2.3. Units of analysis.

Two unit types were coded. Visual units comprise silhouette and proportion, color palette and its distribution, costume and its functional elements, facial configuration and expressive range, movement quality, and discrete symbolic markers. Narrative units comprise the scene, the action performed, the transformation undergone, and the moment of symbolic reversal. A binary opposition was recorded as present only where a visual unit and a narrative unit could be paired such that the narrative unit inverted the hierarchy asserted by the visual unit.

2.4. Data collection technique.

Material was gathered through repeated structured viewing and reading of the primary corpus. Each viewing pass targeted one unit type: the first recorded visual units without reference to plot, the second recorded narrative units, and the third paired them. Instances were logged in an evidence table recording the source location, the visual unit, the narrative unit, the inferred hierarchy, and the point of collapse. The completed evidence log, comprising the coded instances for all three cases, is retained by the authors and is available on request; a condensed version is reproduced as Table 1 in Section 3.4.

2.5. Analytical Procedure

The primary analytical method is deconstruction, as formulated by Derrida. Analysis proceeds through close reading of each character's visual representation and narrative function as these appear in their respective popular cultural texts. The study's focus therefore rests on the production of meaning within the text itself, not on the empirical measurement of audience response. The operational procedure for each case is adapted from the deconstructive analytical framework as follows.

1) Identification of Binary Opposition

This step identifies the central binary opposition that the character's design appears to uphold, for instance, Strength vs. Weakness, or Hero vs. Villain [16]. This constitutes the identification of the text's "privileged meaning," the hierarchical expectation actively constructed by the character's visual code [20].

2) Contradictory Analysis

A close reading of both visual and narrative elements is conducted in order to locate evidence that actively contradicts or subverts the binary hierarchy previously identified [16], [17].

3) Exposure of the Gap (*Différance*)

This step exposes the "gap," or the moment at which meaning becomes unstable the point at which the design simultaneously communicates two mutually contradictory propositions without the possibility of singular resolution [18]. It is precisely this moment that, in Derridean terminology, constitutes *différance*: not merely difference, but a permanent and productive deferral of meaning [16], [19].

4) Synthesis of Layered Meaning

The final stage analyzes how the tensions and contradictions identified far from constituting failures of design function as the primary mechanisms through which the character's psychological depth and emotional resonance are produced [16]. This synthesis connects the textual deconstructive findings to their emotional implications, in accordance with the proposition that productive ambiguity is the enabling condition for resonance to occur [28].

2.6. Validation of interpretation

Four procedures were applied. First, source return: every interpretive claim was carried back to the passage that generated it and rejected if the passage did not sustain it independently of the surrounding argument. Second, negative-case testing: each proposed mechanism was tested against passages where it would predict a collapse that does not occur, and the mechanism was narrowed where such passages were found. Third, cross-case testing: a pattern was retained only where it could be demonstrated in all three cases without redefinition of terms. Fourth, author consensus: the three authors coded the cases independently and retained only readings on which all three converged, with divergences resolved by returning to the primary text rather than by discussion alone. To enhance the credibility of the analysis, each interpretive claim is returned to its primary textual sources the films, manga/anime, and video games to verify that the binary oppositions identified are indeed inscribed within the text rather than imposed from without.

The authors acknowledge that deconstruction, as a method, is inherently interpretive; findings are therefore presented as documented and accountable readings rather than as singular, closed truths. This study is circumscribed to interpretive textual analysis and does not seek to generalize audience responses in any statistical sense; its contribution is conceptual and critical. The boundary of the claim is therefore specific. This study analyzes meaning as it is organized within the text. It does not measure what audiences feel, and no finding reported below should be read as evidence about audience psychology, neural response, or reception. Where the term emotional resonance is used, it denotes affective potential inscribed in the design and available to interpretation, not a measured effect.

3. Results and Discussion

Profound meaning and the affective bonds audiences form do not originate in characters whose dispositions are straightforward or readily predictable. They emerge most powerfully from the collision of contradictory traits embedded in the design. This is consistent with neurocognitive research on mixed emotions and moral ambiguity, which reports the most intense engagement where a villain proves to possess genuine humanity, or a heroic figure commits acts of cruelty [28], [37]. Such emotional confusion and cognitive tension push the mind beyond its comfort zone, prompting closer thought and deeper moral rumination about the character. The greatest strength of iconic characters, in other words, lies not in the neatness of their moral positioning but in the way their contradictions elicit more nuanced and sympathetic responses, making them more compelling and memorable than one-dimensional characters [13], [28], [37].

No narrative figure arrives as a complete or self-contained identity. Each is contested terrain, on which an apparently settled visual appearance is continuously unsettled by the narrative. Read through Derridean deconstruction, a character's physical form and visual elements first work as an anchor, holding meaning inside a familiar, stereotypical category. The narrative then defers, contests, and fractures that single meaning, so that the character's identity stays fluid and open to reinterpretation. This collision between a legible exterior and a contradicting narrative is not a visual defect. It is a deconstructive strategy for dismantling binary thinking the presumption that strength always triumphs, or that villainy must be visually legible and what it produces is a psychological resonance exceeding what the images alone could sustain [16], [37]–[39].

3.1. Deconstruction of Darth Vader: The Collapse of the Power/Weakness Binary

The visual design of Darth Vader functions as a Derridean "center" that firmly forecloses any interpretation of the character other than that of absolute sovereign power [19]. Through the imposing mass of his dark silhouette and the militaristic menace of his helmet, the character is constructed to foreground "Power" while categorically suppressing any impression of "Weakness" from the very first moment of his appearance. These visual codes operate with the immediacy of an automatic cognitive trigger; the mere sight of his exterior is sufficient to prompt the audience to conclude that he poses a formidable, supremely dangerous threat, well before he speaks a word or performs any action within the narrative [2]. As the narrative unfolds, however, this armor of invincibility is progressively dismantled through the disclosure of Anakin Skywalker's profound psychological fragility.

Clinical psychological research has established that he exhibits personality disorder traits characterized by intense emotional volatility, an overwhelming fear of abandonment, and a chronic instability of self-concept [40]. This inner wound exists in a condition of perpetual tension and collision *différance* with the prosthetic body that projects such formidable power [18]. The narrative gradually excavates the inverse truth: the seemingly impenetrable armor is in fact a medical containment apparatus sustaining a profoundly damaged body, and the iconic mechanical respiration is no more than evidence of his total dependence upon machinery for biological survival [40]. His physical exterior thus becomes the unwilling testimony to biological vulnerability and psychological suffering.

1) Visual configuration of the character.

Before the deconstructive reading, the visual object itself requires explicit description. Darth Vader's silhouette is vertically dominant and monolithic: a flared, helmeted head sits on a broad

armored torso, and a floor-length cape widens the base so that the whole figure resolves into a stable, near-triangular mass. The proportions are adult and heavy, without the taper or articulation that would suggest agility; the reading is architectural rather than anatomical. The palette is close to monochrome. Matte black covers almost the entire surface and absorbs rather than reflects light, setting the figure against the reflective white of the Imperial troopers who surround him and making him legible as a silhouette even in low light. The only chromatic incidents are a narrow band of silver at the shoulder trim and belt, and a small cluster of colored indicator lights on the chest panel, the sole point on the body that reads as active rather than sealed.

The face is wholly occluded. The helmet's lenses occupy the position of eyes but return no gaze, and because there is no visible facial musculature, the character has no available expressive range; all affective signal is displaced onto voice and onto the amplified rhythm of respiration. Costume elements are few, and each carries function: armor, cape, belt, and the chest control panel. Movement is unhurried and weighted, built from low-frequency, large-amplitude gestures with no acrobatic vocabulary, and the cape trails behind rather than responding to the body. The decisive symbolic marker is the respirator, and it is decisive because it is legible twice. Heard as sound, it signals menace and inevitability; understood as apparatus, it signals that the character cannot breathe unaided. The same object sustains both readings simultaneously and resolves into neither. This is the point at which the visual design generates its own contradiction: the surface asserts complete self-sufficiency, while the single element that makes the surface possible is a declaration of dependency. As can be seen in Fig. 1.



Fig. 1. Darth Vader in full armor: the closed silhouette that asserts absolute power. Frame from *Star Wars: Episode V The Empire Strikes Back* (dir. I. Kershner, Lucasfilm, 1980; [01:50:34]).
Reproduced for scholarly criticism and commentary.

Fig. 1 makes the description above available for inspection, and three of its properties can be verified directly against the frame. The silhouette resolves into a single closed mass: helmet, shoulder line, and floor-length cape form an uninterrupted contour with no negative space through which the body could be read as articulated. The surface is uniformly light-absorbing, so the figure registers as a void against the illuminated background rather than as a lit object within it. And the chest control panel is the only region of the body that emits rather than absorbs a small array of colored indicators set at the center of the torso. At first encounter, that panel reads as an insignia of rank. The reading that Section 3.1.2 will set against it is available in the same frame: the panel is instrumentation rather than ornament, and its position at the sternum marks the point at which the armor is performing the work of a body. The frame therefore already carries both terms of the binary; what it does not yet carry is the narrative information that reverses their hierarchy.

2) *The Armor (Power) vs. the Prison (Weakness)*

The visual design of the antagonist is carefully calibrated from the outset to immediately activate audience expectations of the character's malevolent nature and threat potential. Darth Vader's dark armor reads as impenetrable and inviolable consistent with the classical villain archetype deliberately constructed to radiate dominance, danger, and absolute power [2]. The narrative, however, dismantles this illusion by revealing that the fearsome armor is in fact a sophisticated medical apparatus that imprisons and sustains his critically compromised life.

Every viewing of his protective armor, therefore, presents the audience not merely with a symbol of absolute authority but also with tangible evidence of Anakin Skywalker's physical incapacitation, his tragic historical defeat, and the biological fragility concealed beneath the exterior [40]. It is precisely this sharp tension between the invulnerable exterior and the profoundly fragile interior that dismantles unilateral audience judgment, rendering the character's dimensionality far more complex and emotionally affecting [2], [13]. As can be seen in Fig. 2.

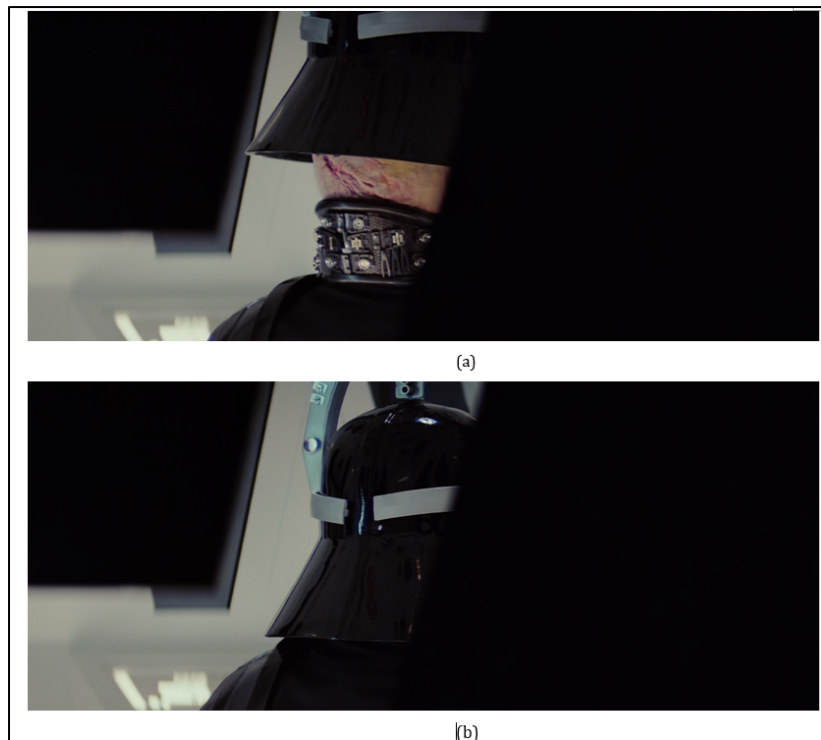


Fig. 2. The armor as containment apparatus: (a) the helmet raised, exposing the scarred cranium and the segmented life-support collar; (b) the same helmet closing over it seconds later. Frames from *Star Wars: Episode V – The Empire Strikes Back* (dir. I. Kershner, Lucasfilm, 1980; [00:44:40] and [00:44:42]). Reproduced for scholarly criticism and commentary.

Fig. 2 Panel (a) is the only point in the original trilogy at which the helmet is separated from the head. What it exposes is not a face but a wound: an unpigmented, scarred cranium seated on a segmented mechanical collar. Its visible components clamps, ducting, contact plates are surgical rather than martial. The armor, read at this moment, is not equipment worn over a body but an apparatus the body depends on, and the figure is legible as a patient before it is legible as a threat.

3) *Mechanical Respiration (Threat) vs. Dependency (Weakness)*

In the domain of visual storytelling, sonic and musical elements play a crucial role in reinforcing a character's identity and disposition effects that often precede and shape the audience's perception of physical action [41]. The heavy, cold, and iconic sound of Darth Vader's mechanical breathing is deployed as an auditory instrument to project an aura of menace and dread at every moment of his appearance [39].

Yet when examined more closely within the narrative, this ostensibly terrifying sound is revealed to be not a roar of supreme power, but the desperate exhalation of an artificial respiratory mechanism sustaining him in biological existence. The sound functions, in effect, as a perpetual reminder to the audience that this figure is profoundly helpless that he is entirely dependent upon medical technology for survival from one moment to the next. The presence of a sound designed to intimidate that is simultaneously a marker of biological limitation and existential suffering generates a profound irony, ultimately producing a complex empathetic response and a deeply resonant emotional impression in its audience [40], [42]. As can be seen in Fig. 3.



Fig. 3. The terminal state of the collapse: the mask removed and the face beneath disclosed. Frame from *Star Wars: Episode VI – Return of the Jedi* (dir. R. Marquand, Lucasfilm, 1983; [02:00:38]). Reproduced for scholarly criticism and commentary.

Fig. 3 records the terminal state of this collapse. With the helmet removed, the face is pallid, hairless and scarred; the eyes for which the helmet lenses had substituted are recessed and unfocused, and the residual apparatus at the jaw remains attached to a body that can no longer be separated from it. The frame is composed from the position of the figure kneeling beside him, which reverses the elevated framing conventionally granted to this character and places the viewer at the height of the one who is looking rather than the one who is looked at. What the image demonstrates is not that the earlier reading was mistaken but that it was always partial: the armor of **Fig. 1** and the face of **Fig. 3** are the same object at two points in its disclosure, and the affective force of the character is generated in the interval between them rather than by either frame alone. Darth Vader's identity exists in a state of radical ambiguity—embodying absolute power and fatal vulnerability at once. In Derridean terms, he is a paradigmatic instance of the undecidable: he continues to inhabit the space between two hostile dispositions, dismantling the boundary between them from within without ever producing a new category or a stable label [20].

The emotional appeal of the character does not derive from the terror of his villainy but from the tragedy of his history. Neurocognitive research reports that mixed emotional experience is responded to more intensely and retained longer [28]. Vader illustrates that mechanism concretely: fear elicited by his brutality combines with compassion generated by the darkness of Anakin Skywalker's past, and that collision of feeling produces sympathetic identification with a figure whose visual design was built as the embodiment of absolute threat. Vader demonstrates *différance* through the collision between the armor of power and a vulnerability that is personal and tragic. Naruto's case operates in a different register. The binary being subverted is not strength against weakness but social recognition against communal rejection a social wound, and one marked far more literally on the surface of the design.

3.2. Deconstruction of Naruto Uzumaki: Subverting the Recognition/Alienation Binary

1) Visual configuration of the character.

Naruto Uzumaki is drawn with the compact proportions of a child: a large head relative to the body, short limbs, and a stance that reads as forward-leaning rather than poised. The hair is rendered as a set of radiating spikes that extend the silhouette upward and outward, so that the outline is larger and more assertive than the body it encloses. The palette is dominated by high-saturation orange across the jumpsuit, offset by blue at the shoulders and collar. This choice carries a professional contradiction that the design does not conceal: orange is the highest-visibility color available, and the character's stated occupation, the shinobi, is defined by concealment. The costume announces presence in a profession organized around not being seen. Facial configuration is highly expressive, with a wide mouth and large eyes permitting a broad emotional range, and this openness is legible at small panel sizes. Across each cheek run three whisker-like striations. These are not decorative: they are the visible trace of the sealed Nine-Tails, which is to say that the sign of the character's exclusion is inscribed permanently on his face, visible to every villager and, for much of the early narrative, unexplained to him.

The forehead protector functions as the counter-marker, the one costume element that signifies belonging and institutional recognition. Movement is kinetic and loud, with broad running poses and frontal gestures. The visual paradox is therefore precise. Every element of the design is organized toward maximum visibility color, silhouette, volume, motion and the narrative situation the design accompanies is one of being unseen. The character is simultaneously hypervisible and socially invisible, and the design sustains both states without resolving them. The orange that reads as a demand to be recognized is the same orange that marks him as the one who does not belong.

Fig. 4 makes the relational structure of the design visible in a single frame. The composition divides into two zones: a densely populated field at the right, in which the graduating students and their families are rendered as an undifferentiated mass of muted greens, greys and browns, and an empty field at the left occupied by one seated figure. That figure is placed on a swing a fixture spatially inside the schoolyard yet functionally outside its activity, and is turned away from the viewer, so that the only identifying marks available are the radiating hair silhouette and the spiral emblem on the back of the jacket. Two consequences follow. The high-salience orange of the costume does not operate here as a mark of prominence but as the operator of separation: it is the only chromatic value in the frame that does not belong to the group, and it therefore measures the distance rather than closing it. And the frame demonstrates that the character's visibility and his recognition vary inversely he is the most conspicuous element in the image and the only one at whom no one is looking. The binary the design asserts, Recognition over Alienation, is thus not stated but staged, as a spatial relation between one saturated figure and a desaturated crowd.



Fig. 4. Hypervisibility and social invisibility in one composition: the character seated apart from the assembled graduates and their families. Frame from *Naruto*, episode 1, "Enter: Naruto Uzumaki!" (dir. H. Date, Pierrot / TV Tokyo, 3 October 2002; [00:07:15]). Reproduced for scholarly criticism and commentary.

From his first appearance, the design of Naruto Uzumaki is built on a tension between two opposed terms "Recognition" and "Alienation." Read through the Derridean framework, the two are never symmetrical. They produce a covert hierarchy in which "Recognition" is elevated as noble and desirable while "Alienation" is treated as a disgrace to be excluded. The vivid orange of Naruto's jumpsuit places him in the subordinate term: he reads as a figure of social rejection, conspicuously out of place in a shinobi world that prizes stealth above all. This is consistent with Setiawan and Aditama, who show that Naruto's appearance and behavior are constructed from the outset to violate the codes governing a competent ninja. That conspicuousness is what consolidates his social branding as a disruptive child, ostracized by the very community he lives in [1], [14], [20]. As the narrative progresses, however, Naruto's lived struggle dismantles and inverts this value hierarchy. De Guzman uncovers a deeper narrative stratum: beneath the breadth of Naruto's grin and the brightness of his orange clothing, the character carries the weight of an oppressive history of suffering rejected from infancy, raised without parental care, and persistently denied recognition by his village. The gulf between the transgressive surface persona and the trauma beneath it is a near-perfect instantiation of Derridean *différance*. The orange of his clothing can therefore no longer be read solely as a symbol of failure, nor purely

as an emblem of heroic triumph. It keeps generating new traces of meaning deferred, re-woven, and left suspended between both terms [43].

2) Re-signification of the Symbol

Semiotic properties of the symbol prior to its re-signification. The re-signification described below operates on a symbol whose visual properties should first be stated in semiotic terms. As a signifier, the orange jumpsuit has three relevant properties. Chromatically, it occupies the highest-salience region of the palette used in the series, so it functions as a figure against nearly any ground and cannot be visually ignored. Formally, it is a uniform: a single continuous garment with minimal internal division, which suppresses individuating detail and presents the wearer as a type rather than as a particular. Relationally, it acquires its value by contrast with the muted greens, greys, and browns worn by the surrounding shinobi, so its meaning is not intrinsic but differential; it signifies only in opposition to what the community wears. It is this third property that makes re-signification structurally possible. Because the garment's meaning is constituted by its difference from the surrounding field rather than by any inherent content, a change in the wearer's standing within that field alters what the same unchanged signifier denotes. The color does not change; the relational system does. Différance is therefore not applied to the symbol from outside as a philosophical overlay; it names the mechanism already operating in the symbol's semiotic structure. Over the course of a narrative arc that faithfully follows the structural pattern of the Hero's Journey, Naruto gradually and successfully inverts the meaning of his orange uniform [22]. The garment, initially read as a mark of foolishness and social rejection, is gradually transformed into an emblem of pride and a beacon of hope for those around him. This process clearly illustrates that the meaning of a visual form is neither static nor foreclosed; it continues to shift, defer, and be reinterpreted in alignment with the progression of the narrative constituting a concrete instantiation of Derridean différance in operation [16], [38]. As can be seen in Fig. 5.



Fig. 5. One signifier, two relational fields. In (a), the village is a pale, near-featureless ring held at a distance; the child stands alone at its center, and the shadow cast from his body extends into the silhouette of the nine-tailed beast—the shape the community reads in place of the child before it. In (b), the same orange stands at the center of a fully individuated, saturated crowd turned toward him, and no shadow is cast. The panels follow narrative chronology rather than broadcast order. Frames from (a) *Naruto: Shippūden*, episode 178, "Iruka's Decision" and (b) *Naruto: Shippūden*, episode 175, "Hero of the Hidden Leaf". Reproduced for scholarly criticism and commentary.

Fig. 5 provides the evidence for the claim that re-signification operates on the relational field rather than on the signifier. Panel (a) presents the field in its rejecting configuration: the village forms a pale arc held at a distance, individuated by neither face nor color, and the child stands alone in the space it encloses. The orange is the only saturated value in the frame, and it operates here exactly as Fig. 4 established, not as prominence but as the operator of separation. What panel (a) adds to that earlier demonstration is the signified the field imposes. The shadow cast from the child's body does not reproduce his outline; it extends into the silhouette of the nine-tailed beast. Two incompatible significations therefore occupy one frame at once: the body is a weeping child, and the shape the community reads off that body is a monster. Panel (b) shows the same field reconfigured.

The crowd is fully rendered, individuated by face and color, and oriented toward rather than away from the figure, who occupies the center by their arrangement rather than by their withdrawal, and no shadow is cast. What is invariant across the two panels is the orange and the spiral emblem rather than the garment's cut, which differs because the panels belong to two design iterations of the costume; the chromatic signifier, not any particular garment, is what persists. Nothing has been done to that signifier. What has changed is the degree of differentiation in the surrounding field, its orientation, and whether it projects a monstrous shape onto the body it encircles. Because the garment's meaning was never intrinsic but always differentially established, as this section argues, by contrast with the muted palette of the surrounding shinobi, a change in that surrounding field is sufficient to reverse what the unchanged garment denotes. Read together with Fig. 4, the demonstration is complete: three frames, one signifier, three incompatible significations, and no operation performed on the signifier itself.

3) *The Collapse of Rigid Categorization*

The culminating moment of this deconstruction of identity is rendered most legible when Naruto ultimately achieves the status of Hokage, the highest leadership position within his community, despite his formal shinobi classification remaining at the lowest rank (*Genin*), long equated with social expendability. This paradox dismantles the reductive social calculus that measures a person's worth exclusively through their official ranking, demonstrating that genuine strength and authentic excellence far exceed the limitations of formal institutional status. Naruto Uzumaki embodies Derrida's concept of the undecidable-most fully. He continues to occupy the boundary between "Recognition" and "Alienation" without ever being wholly assimilable to either.

The emotional intensity generated in the audience peaks precisely because viewers are invited to watch that boundary being dismantled. Audiences drawn into the storyworld through narrative transportation form a strong bond with him precisely because his identity keeps shifting and never fully resolves: he begins as an outcast and rises to lead, is branded a failure and becomes a legend [44]. This indeterminacy the open-endedness of his identity is the primary engine of lasting sympathetic identification, and it is not a flaw in the narrative's construction [45]. Vader carries an internal contradiction that is personal and tragic; Naruto navigates social alienation. Super Mario subverts binary opposition at a more fundamental level. The question is no longer who the character is, or how others receive him, but what "value" in visual design signifies at all and whether simplicity must always be subordinate to complexity.

3.3. Deconstruction of Super Mario: Subverting the Complexity/Simplicity Binary

1) *Visual configuration of the character.*

Super Mario's silhouette is squat and approximately as wide as it is tall. The head is large relative to the body, the hands and feet are oversized, and the limbs are short, producing an outline that remains readable when reduced to a very small pixel grid. The palette is severely restricted and historically specific. In the 1985 sprite, the cap and the overalls are red; the shirt, hair, mustache, and boots share a single brown; and the face and hands carry one skin tone three colors in all, the full allocation the hardware granted a sprite. This is the inverse of the combination by which the character is now popularly remembered. The red shirt and blue overalls belong to a color exchange introduced later in the series, and no blue appears anywhere on the 1985 figure. What the original design establishes is therefore not a particular pair of hues but a structural device: a two-tone division of the torso at the waist. It is that division, rather

than the colors filling it, that gives the immediate figure-ground read at any size and lets the character survive extreme reduction.

Facial configuration is minimal a large nose, a mustache, and simple eyes and this minimalism has a documented technical origin. At the resolutions available on early hardware, the mustache substituted for a mouth that could not be drawn, and the cap removed the need to render hair and its motion. Constraints of display, in other words, are inscribed directly in the face. Costume is the second site where the design refuses heroic convention. Overalls and work boots denote manual trade, not combat readiness; there is no armor, weapon, cape, or insignia, and nothing in the outfit signals exceptional status. Movement is organized around a single verb. The jump is the character's entire kinetic vocabulary, an arcing vertical motion that serves at once as locomotion, attack, and expression.

The visual paradox follows from the reduction itself. Every property of the design signals the minor and the generic: the proportions are comic, the palette is elementary, the occupation is ordinary, the action repertoire is one gesture. Yet these same properties are the source of the character's durability. A form carrying so little specificity offers the player almost no identity to negotiate with, and therefore accepts projection freely. The design's apparent poverty is the precise condition of its universality, and the two readings cannot be separated.

Fig. 6 exhibits the constraint described above, and does so at the resolution at which the constraint actually operated: the frame is reproduced from a 256×224 pixel output and enlarged only by an integer factor, so that no pixel has been interpolated away. Two quantities are directly countable in it. The entire screen is composed of eleven colors. The figure itself occupies a grid of sixteen by thirty pixels and is built from three of those eleven a red, a brown, and a single skin tone, which is the whole allocation the hardware permitted a sprite.

Every feature is therefore a decision about how to spend a fixed and very small budget, and three of those decisions are legible in the frame. The cap terminates the head with a solid block and removes any requirement to render hair or its motion. The mustache is a single dark horizontal mass placed where a mouth cannot be resolved, and it performs the expressive work a mouth would otherwise perform. The two-tone division of the torso at the waist produces a figure-ground separation strong enough to hold at this scale, which is the functional reason the silhouette stays readable against both the sky and the brickwork. What the frame demonstrates is that the design's simplicity is not a stylistic preference exercised within available means but the direct inscription of those means. The technological limitation is not concealed by the design; it is the design. As can be seen in Fig. 6.

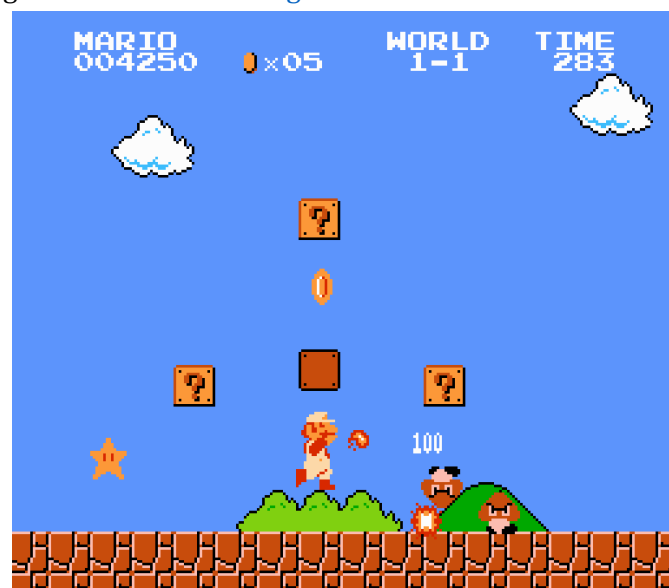


Fig. 6. Technological constraint inscribed in the form: the character at the native output resolution of the original hardware. Frame from *Super Mario Bros.* (Nintendo, Famicom/NES, 1985), World 1-1, captured at 256×224 px and enlarged by an integer factor using nearest-neighbor interpolation so that the pixel grid is preserved. Reproduced for scholarly criticism and commentary.

The visual concept of Super Mario effectively dismantles the long-held assumption that complexity is invariably superior to simplicity. Viewed through a Derridean lens, this evaluative hierarchy produces a profoundly biased and coercive structure of power, in which the public is habitually conditioned to assume that "Complex" design is inherently more valuable and sophisticated than "Simple" design. The reality of Super Mario's design, whose visual simplicity arose entirely from the severe technological constraints of its era, forcefully challenges this assumption [46].

The very simplicity of the design, so frequently dismissed and positioned as visual inadequacy, is ultimately revealed to be the character's greatest strength, the very quality that renders him extraordinary and legendary. Consistent with findings on player interaction in the digital space, the fundamentally pixelated and geometrically basic visual form of Super Mario deliberately preserves interpretive "empty space," which proves highly effective in stimulating players' creative imagination as they navigate the game world [46].

Precisely because the character's visual details are intentionally left incomplete, the player's cognitive faculties are prompted to engage more actively, drawing upon their own imaginative resources to animate and extend the game world within their own mental landscape. Complementing this phenomenon, players are shown to maintain a remarkably enduring affective bond with Mario regardless of the graphic or narrative revisions that have accumulated across decades of game development [44], [47].

This persistence of identification is directly attributable to the character's visual design, which renders Mario sufficiently flexible that individuals of virtually any cultural background can readily project themselves into the role of the protagonist. In essence, Mario succeeds as a universally beloved *avatar* precisely because his visual identity is not locked into an overly rigid or culturally specific form.

2) *Limitation as Strength*

The technological constraints of early game development forced designers into creative solutions, and those solutions produced immediately distinctive markers: a cap, a pronounced mustache, overalls. What began as a pragmatic workaround for the limits of the available technology has since become the character's most durable asset. It is this simplicity that produced a figure of legendary standing whose visual identity is legible to audiences worldwide [10], [15].

3) *Stasis as Reliability*

Unlike the majority of other game characters, whose visual design has been progressively updated to maintain currency, Mario's deliberately unchanged appearance across several decades has generated a sense of comfort, dependability, and profound familiarity among his players. With considerable ingenuity, an extraordinarily ambitious narrative mission "saving the world" is contained within a visual character form of remarkable simplicity and accessibility. Fig. 7 permits the persistence claim to be tested rather than asserted. Read against Fig. 6, the interval between the two frames is forty-one years and a complete replacement of the underlying display and rendering technology: a low-resolution tile-based raster in the earlier frame, a high-resolution composite with volumetric lighting and animated background depth in the later one.

The rendering is not merely improved; it belongs to a different technical order. Yet the identifying schema transfers essentially intact the same red cap, the same mustache, the same two-tone division of the torso at the same waist height, the same wide and short-limbed proportion, and the same single kinetic verb, the vertical arc of the jump, which the frame captures mid-execution. The demonstration is precise. The features that Fig. 6 shows to have originated as concessions to hardware scarcity are retained here under conditions in which no such concession is required; they have therefore ceased to function as solutions to a technical problem and now function as the character's identity. This is what Section 3.3.3 means in describing the design's stasis as a form of reliability: the trace of the constraint outlives the constraint.



Fig. 7. The same schema under a different technical order, forty-one years later. Frame from "Super Mario Bros. Wonder – Nintendo Switch 2 Edition + Meetup in Bellabel Park Launch Trailer", Local Multiplayer Plaza segment. Reproduced for scholarly criticism and commentary.

One qualification sharpens rather than weakens this reading. What persists across the interval is the schema, not every value within it. The 1985 figure wears a brown shirt beneath red overalls; the figure in Fig. 7 wears the red shirt and blue overalls the series adopted later, and which now stand in popular memory for the character as such. The colors were exchanged; the structure carrying them cap, mustache, two-tone torso divided at the waist, wide and short-limbed proportion, single kinetic verb was not. This is itself an instance of the mechanism under description. The later iteration does not merely follow the earlier one; it reaches back and overwrites what the earlier one is remembered as having been, so that the original sprite is now routinely recalled in colors it never carried. The trace persists, but never as a stable presence: it is continuously rewritten by what comes after it, which is precisely what *différance* names. Read through the lens of deconstruction, Mario's design is clear evidence that "simplicity" so often treated with condescension can dismantle the long-standing aesthetic doctrine that privileges "complexity".

The character also exemplifies what Derrida calls the "trace." His mustache, his cap, and his overalls are not decorative markers but surviving traces of an earlier moment's technological limits, kept rather than discarded; it is from that historical trace that his legendary status was born [48]. The emotional resonance he produces does not come from pathos or from the weight of a dark narrative. It comes from the pleasure and warmth of familiarity that his unpretentious visual form produces. This quality of affective enjoyment is consistent with psychological theories of mixed emotion: attention is held more firmly by the mismatch between the ambition of the adventure and the disarming simplicity of the character who undertakes it a figure who keeps defeating initial expectations [47].

3.4. Cross-case Synthesis

Read together, the three cases share one structure while differing in the material through which it is realized. In each, a visual hierarchy is asserted at first encounter; in each, a narrative unit inverts that hierarchy without removing the visual assertion; and in each, the subordinated term proves to be the generative one. Vader's weakness, not his power, produces the pathos that sustains the figure; Naruto's alienation, not his recognition, produces the developmental arc; Mario's simplicity, not his complexity, produces the universality. The pattern holds across three production systems, three rendering technologies, and three narrative positions, which suggests it is a property of visual-narrative construction rather than of any single medium. Table 1 sets out the mapping.

Table 1. Deconstructive Analytical Framework of Iconic Characters

Dimension	Darth Vader	Naruto Uzumaki	Super Mario
Central Binary Opposition	Power / Weakness	Recognition / Alienation	Complexity / Simplicity
Privileged Visual Meaning	Absolute power	Alienation & incapacity	Functional simplicity
Supporting Literature	Carvalho et al. (2023)	Setiawan & Aditama; De Guzman	Erb <i>et.al</i> ; Hayot
Narrative	Armor as prison;	Re-signification of the	Technical limitation as
Subversion	psychological vulnerability	orange symbol; <i>Hokage</i>	iconic resource; universal
Mechanism	vs. armor of power	status without formal rank	avatar
Moment of <i>Différance</i>	Armor = strength and weakness simultaneously	Orange = defeat and honor simultaneously	Simple = lesser value and universality simultaneously
Type of Resonance	Tragedy (<i>pathos</i>)	Inspiration (identification & hope)	Familiarity (nostalgia & joy)

4. Conclusion

This study set out to specify how Derridean mechanisms operate within iconic character design. It finds that binary opposition and *différance* work as a describable textual structure rather than as a general interpretive attitude. In each of the three cases, the pattern is the same: a visual hierarchy is asserted, a narrative unit inverts it without canceling it, and the subordinated term Vader's dependency, Naruto's exclusion, Mario's reduction proves to be the term that generates the character's durability. The contribution is threefold. First, the study offers an operational four-stage deconstructive procedure, with defined units of analysis and validation steps, that can be transferred to other characters and media. Second, it reframes visual-narrative contradiction from a design defect into a design resource. Third, it shows that the mechanism holds across three production contexts rather than being an artifact of one. The limitations are equally specific. The analysis is textual and interpretive; it measures nothing about audiences and tests no reception hypothesis. Its three purposively selected cases support analytical rather than statistical generalization. The readings offered here therefore describe affective potential inscribed in the design, not effects observed in viewers. For practice and pedagogy, the implication is that visual-narrative inconsistency warrants examination before correction, since the inconsistency may be carrying the character's affective weight. Subsequent research should test these textual predictions empirically, through reception studies comparing audience response to characters with and without sustained visual-narrative contradiction. It should also extend the procedure to characters outside the Euro-American and Japanese traditions examined here, where the conventions organizing visual hierarchy may differ.

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Declarations

- Author contribution** : AF: research idea, data collection and analysis, and wrote the article.
ER: data collection and analysis, and wrote the article.
CB: data analysis and wrote the article.
- Funding statement** : This research was conducted with independent funding.
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