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## Fiction in another World

### **The *Participation Mystique* as an alternative model to the *willing suspension of disbelief* in reader/audience immersion**

**Abstract:** The predominate explanation for immersion in fiction—novels, films, electronic games, theatre—is the *willing suspension of disbelief*. This model is examined and found unable to account for the depth of emotional engagement in reader/audiences. Through a discussion of *plausibility* and *belief*, and the binary opposites of *imagined* and *real* emotions, the concept of a ‘third space’ of engagement with fiction is considered, supported by the ideas of Holland (2002) Winnicott, (1998) and Jung (1971). Tolkien’s (1966) concept of a ‘secondary world’ is related to Lucien Levi-Bruhl’s *participation mystique* proposing the latter as an alternative model to the *willing suspension of disbelief* in reader/audience immersion. This hypothesis has potential ramifications across multiple disciplines—literature, arts, philosophy, sociology, psychology and behavioural sciences—inviting further consideration and study.

**Introduction:** Fiction is capable of producing deep emotional responses that stem from reader/audience immersion (Cody, 1988). This phenomenon keeps readers and viewers enthralled, an experience described as ‘*getting lost, swept away or taken up*’ (Holland 2002). The accepted model for readers/audience immersion relies on plausibility and Coleridge’s (1817) *willing suspension of disbelief*, neither fully accounting for the kinds of subjective experiences readers/audiences report when they ‘*fall into a story.*’ By exploring the ideas of plausibility and the *willing suspension of disbelief* and comparing and contrasting across multiple disciplines including Tolkien’s (1966) concept of a *secondary world* and Jung’s (1965) understanding of the *participation Mystique*, this paper develops a hypothesis for reader immersion—a ‘third space’ of engagement. Describing a process of interconnection where the definitive boundaries between listener and teller disappear, the *participation mystique*

offers a unified model for reader/audience immersion, eliminating the need for *willing suspension of disbelief*.

**Discussion:** Storytelling engages both writer and reader/audience allowing an involvement not fully controlled by either (Seitz, 1991). Evidenced in the oral tradition, stories are performed to audiences who participate directly with the narration, contributing to the mood, ambiance and meaning of the tale. Oral storytelling becomes a co-creative event, one where something powerful is accomplished through a mutually arranged composition (Pollock, 2003). This link between narrator and audience translates to contemporary fiction—novels, theatre, film and electronic game playing—provided the right circumstances are present to allow the reader/audience to believe in something that they know is not real (Saffar, 1987). These ‘right circumstances’ are predominately defined through models of *suspension of disbelief* and *plausibility*. (Taylor & Perry, 2005)

Many authors and theorist emphasise plausibility as a vital component for reader engagement. Harris (1952) states plausibility consists in the ‘subsumption of fictional events under the laws of nature.’ For Harris, the writer’s aim is to ‘deceive a fussy collaborator’ (the reader) ‘who knows it is all a fake.’ Readers will accept deception if they find the story plausible—adhering to the rules and laws of its fabricated world (Harris, 1952).

Welsh (1953) found this reference to deception a poor approach, pointing out that lies are told by replacing a truthful account with one that is false—but a story is not a history, ‘nor does a reader compare the novel with some state of affairs in order to confirm either its truth or its plausibility’ (Welsh, 1953). Consistency in this sense applies only to making certain a character’s eye and hair colour do not change without

explanation or that a machine that breaks the time barrier doesn't run on corn flakes.

In this sense, a consistent story need not be plausible at all (Welsh, 1953), nor is plausibility prerequisite for immersion.

Le Guin (2005b) supports this notion saying fiction is what *didn't happen*, but realistic fiction pretends it did. She distinguishes between historical fiction—telling stories that *might have* happened with characters that *might have* existed, and science fiction, which is a form of realism, and fantasy, which has an ‘altogether different contract with the reader’ (Le Guin, 2005b). She points out that inner coherence, not plausibility, holds the reader enthralled. ‘Fantasy deliberately violates plausibility in the sense of congruence with the world outside the story. Only in lesser matters is realistic detail used to ground the story, to prevent the reader from getting an overload of the improbable’ (Le Guin, 2005b).

Aside from inner coherence, Le Guin (2005a) along with Douglas (2006) and Eddings & Eddings (1998) suggest it is in the intimate details of a scene and the tone, register and vernacular that supports reader engagement. Tolkien (2003) took this notion of intimate detail to great lengths, labouring for decades to fashion Middle-earth. Not only did he create entire languages (Elvish and Dwarf) prior to writing the Lord of the Rings, he used vernacular so meticulously it reads as if the English is an actual translation from the fabricated languages (Abrahamsen, 2003). Though the stories created by the above authors are not plausible under Harris's (1952) definition, they offer deeply engaging experiences, raising again the question of how readers respond to fiction as if they believed in it.

Plato was one of the first recognized thinkers to address the problem of *belief* and *knowing*. In his dialogue with Meno (Lamb, 1967) he describes what someone may *know* and what they may *believe* by using the example of ‘roundness.’ For Plato,

this kind of knowing—the basis for non-observable scientific knowledge (Nola, 2004)—has three criteria:

- a) A person must believe that something is round.
- b) The belief must be true.
- c) A person must evidence this truth.

Applying this model to works of fiction, for a reader to immerse in a story where cats talk to humans they must believe in talking cats as if it were true.

In ‘real life’ the belief in talking cats would encounter difficultly measured against Plato’s criteria. Even if someone held a) they would have trouble with b) and c). Yet this same phenomenon, talking cats, has appeared in fiction from Carroll’s *Alice in wonderland* to Gayle Greeno’s *The Ghatta’s Tale* (1994) with readers fully immersed in the stories. Theorists answer this problem by suggesting that an emotional response to a book, film or computer game is not a ‘real’ emotion (Taylor & Perry, 2005). The distinction between real and imaginary emotions is difficult to evidence.

When Dickens’ *Old Curiosity Shop* reached a climax with the death of the character Nell, the author was flooded with letters of protest (Cody, 1988). Readers went into shock, screaming, crying and throwing their books (Taylor & Perry, 2005). The actor William Macready wrote in his diary: ‘I could not weep for some time. Sensations, sufferings have returned to me, that are terrible to awaken’ (Cody, 1988). These emotional responses have all the appearance of being ‘real’.

Describing emotions felt when immersed in fiction as ‘not real’ conflicts with neurophysiological studies of the brain (Dispenza, 1999). Emotions are experienced through interpretations of electrical signals to the brain and the brain can not distinguish between information that is received empirically, inspirationally, as a

hallucination, as a stored memory or artificially activated by electrodes (Dispenza, 1999) (Mindell, 2000). This suggests that *real* is something processed as a subjective interpretation of reality in order to perceive outside of one's self (Mindell, 2000). Because the brain can not distinguish between real and not-real there is no measurable way to compare 'real' emotional responses and those artificially induced or imagined (Dispenza, 1999). The brain does not differentiate between feelings for a character in a book or a person in 'real life'.

Some theorists attempt to explain emotional response to fiction by distinguishing between *real* and *imagined* believing. Gregory Currie (1995) states that in real believing one can not simultaneously believe in A) a girl named Nell has died and not-A) there is no girl named Nell who has died, yet with fiction, one can, suggesting to him that fiction is not 'real believing' (Gaut & Lopes, 2001). The example Currie gives shows an unresolvable sequence of beliefs.

- A. We fear for characters in fiction who are in danger.
- B. To fear for someone we must believe they are in danger.
- C. We do not believe in the dangers described in fictions.

His solutions are varied, creating a disjointed approach to the problem, widening the gap between 'real believing' and 'imagined believing.' What is not adequately explained is how a reader can care so much about a character they know does not exist.

The conventional answer relies on Samuel Coleridge's (1917) idea of *Poetic Faith*, or the *willing suspension of disbelief*. Here the reader must *will* themselves to overlook aspects of the story that are not real or plausible.

'... my endeavours should be directed to persons and characters supernatural, or at least romantic, yet so as to transfer from our inward nature

a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith.’ (Coleridge, 1917)

This *willing suspension of disbelief* implies effort—the act of *willing* takes deliberate consciousness—the making of a choice (Stevenson, 1973). Yet reader/audience immersion coincides with a lack of awareness, not conscious will (Holland, 2002). Spicher (2005) overlooks this dichotomy, merging receptivity and openness with the willing *suspension of disbelief*. ‘To be affected deeply by the work of art, we have to approach it with openness and receptivity in a state characterized by a willing suspension of disbelief’ (Spicher, 2005). The juxtaposition of the *willing suspension of disbelief* and receptivity/lack of awareness portrays binary thinking that leaves the phenomenon of reader immersion unsatisfactorily resolved.

Although Holland (2002) upholds the *willing suspension of disbelief*, he rejects *imagined believing* and explores the notion of a *third space* to explain reader/audience immersion. Arguing from a neuro-scientific perspective, he highlights four pivotal experiences present in reader immersion, none of which coincide with active *willing*.

- 1) we no longer perceive our bodies;
- 2) we no longer perceive our environment;
- 3) we no longer judge probability or reality-test;
- 4) we respond emotionally to the fiction as though it were real.

Holland explains these immersive experiences through a model based on Winnicott’s (1982) notion of *potential space*. This ‘space’ is analogous to the in-utero experience and early mother - infant bond where the boundaries between mother and child are indistinct. Holland (1968) associates a lack of awareness in outer reality or

ego consciousness with this space and links it to reader/audience immersion. In his research, subjects described the experience of fiction/films with words such as ‘rapt,’ ‘absorbed,’ ‘[in] motion with the work,’ ‘lose track of time,’ ‘a feeling of joyful unreality’ ‘I am gathered up’, ‘carried along’, ‘unaware of being a reader/viewer’, ‘total anaesthesia.’ This vocabulary reflects the stage in infancy when the child and mother boundaries are blurred, yet like Spicher (2005) and Winnicott (1982) Holland (2002) claims the ‘third space’ supports the *willing suspension of disbelief* in reader/audience immersion.

Professor J.R.R. Tolkien (1966) rejects the *willing suspension of disbelief* as a component of reader immersion. In his essay *On Fairy Stories*, he suggests a ‘third space’ commensurate with Holland, (2002), Winnicott, (1982) and Spicher (2005) calling it a *Secondary World*—a space created by the writer that allows the reader to participate with the story (Tolkien, 1966).

‘(The writer) makes a *Secondary World* which your mind can enter. Inside it, what he relates is ‘true’: it accords with the laws of that world. You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside. The moment disbelief arises, the spell is broken; the magic, or rather art, has failed. You are then out in the Primary World again, looking at the little abortive Secondary World from outside. If you are obliged, by kindness or circumstance, to stay, then disbelief must be suspended (or stifled), otherwise listening and looking would become intolerable.’ (Tolkien, 1966)

Immersion in Tolkien’s *Secondary World* is not done through a *willing suspension of disbelief*. The latter mechanism is a substitute for the real thing—*believing in* and *being in* the story. Tolkien (1966) said that if we must engage the *suspension of disbelief*, the art has failed—we are no longer immersed.



‘ . . . this suspension of disbelief is a substitute for the genuine thing, a subterfuge we use when condescending to games or make-believe, or when trying (more or less willingly) to find what virtue we can in the work of an art that has for us failed.’ (Tolkien, 1966)

Perschon (2004) elaborates on the example of Tolkien’s secondary world using George Lucas’ (2007) *Star Wars* films as reference.

‘*Star Wars* is a prime example of Tolkien’s ideal of secondary worlds in which no suspension of disbelief is necessary because the secondary world is so complete. It has created within the viewer a sort of secondary belief.’

(Perschon, 2004)

He reminds us that Tolkien said at no time could he recall the enjoyment of a story being dependent on belief that such things would happen, or had happened, in real life’ (Perschon, 2004). Fiction, in this sense, takes place in ‘another world’.

Corresponding to Tolkien’s secondary world, the notion of being immersed in a space neither of the ‘real world’ nor simply the inner imagination was introduced by Lucien Levi-Bruhl in the early nineteen hundreds. He used the term *participation mystique* to describe a dichotomy between the logical aspects of the mind and a mystical, ‘pre-logical’ mentality in traditional tribal communities (Gaillard, 2004). For Levi-Bruhl, a subject-object relationship formed from a primitive consciousness, an *archaic identity* in which the ‘I’ experiences an animistic merging with something ‘other than self’—rock, storm, animal, person, deity (Chalquist, 2004).

Swiss psychoanalyst Carl Jung amplified the idea of the *participation mystique*, using it to describe the projection of unconscious material of an individual onto an object—person or thing—outside of themselves. It is no longer unconscious as it resides elsewhere yet it is not ‘other’, as it originates from the self (Jung, 1965).

‘A reader participates in the creative process when we let a work of art act upon us as it acted upon the artist. To grasp its meaning, we must allow it to shape us as it shaped him. . . plunged into the healing and redeeming depths of the collective psyche. . . This re-immersion in the state of participation *mystique* is the secret of artistic creation and of the effect which great art has upon us.’ (Jung, 1971)

The *participation mystique* has a numinous quality resembling the *Unio Mystica* of the Ecstatic Kabbalah. The thirteenth century founder, Abraham Abulafia, describes this ‘space’ primarily as a spiritual experience.

‘All the inner forces and the hidden souls in man are differentiated in the bodies. It is however in the nature of all of them that when their knots are untied, they return to their origin, which is one without any duality, and which comprises the multiplicity.’ (Harris, 2002)

The *untying of the knots* is akin to the experience of the *participation mystique* where subject-object relationships are replaced with a sense of wholeness. This is a space of mystical immersion which seeks to restore the primordial bifurcation between humanity and divinity, and in so doing, merge duality. (Harris, 2002) In this way, the *participation Mystique* represents the release of binary opposites and a feeling of completion and wholeness. True or false, real or imagined no longer have meaning.

Reader/audience immersion through the *participation mystique* accounts for the elements of body and environment neglect, lack of reality-checking and the deep emotional response to the story as if it were real. Readers immersed in this way become bound by a direct relationship amounting to partial identity (Jung, 1965). Fiction is fact, and the most bizarre experiences can take place without being

questioned. The story need not be plausible because the reader is experiencing it directly. There is no need to *willingly suspend disbelief* because the reader is in the story.

**Conclusion:** This paper discussed the nature of reader/audience immersion in fiction, problematizing the accepted model of the *willing suspension of disbelief*. Plausibility was compared to consistency, pointing out that the latter is not a test for plausible story nor is plausibility necessary for reader immersion. The nature of real and imaginary emotions and beliefs were considered and the notions of a ‘third space’ where engagement with story takes place was detailed through the work of Jung (1971) Tolkien (1966) Winnicott (1982), Harris (2002), and Holland (2002). The *Participation Mystique* was explored, offering an alternative explanation for reader/audience immersion, eliminating the need for the *willing suspension of disbelief*. Although further research is necessary, the ramifications of this hypothesis across multiple disciplines including literature, philosophy, psychology and behavioural sciences are significant and worth pursuing.

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