Fanfiction as imaginary play: What fan-written stories can tell us about the cognitive science of fiction

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Available online 13 January 2015

Keywords:
Fanfiction
Psychology of fiction
Imaginary play
Parasocial relationships
Reading for pleasure

ABSTRACT

Fiction has often been viewed as requiring imaginative input on the part of the audience, but relatively little empirical work has examined the role that fictional characters and worlds play in the imaginations of adolescents and adults, outside of the text itself. Here, I provide an overview of existing research on fanfiction, or extratextual stories written for pleasure by fans, based on an existing media property. I suggest that fanfiction is a form of imaginary play that reflects both emotional engagement with and resistance to the source material. I draw comparisons between writing fanfiction, daydreaming, and childhood pretend play and argue that there is a need for research that explores this phenomenon using more rigorous psychological methods. Such research may shed light on a range of issues in the psychology of fiction and why we read for pleasure.

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1. Introduction

Walton (1990) characterized fiction as an “invitation to imagine.” Under this view, fiction enables a game of make-believe analogous to the elaborate pretend play of childhood. Other scholars have noted parallels between our relationships with fictional characters and children’s relationships with their imaginary friends (e.g. Taylor and Mannering, 2007). However, while prior research has investigated
the phenomenon of parasocial relationships with fictional characters (e.g. Cohen, 2004) and the role that the audience’s imagination plays in filling in the gaps in narratives (e.g. Weisberg and Goodstein, 2009), relatively little psychological research has investigated the degree to which fictional narratives, such as books, movies, and television shows, enable subsequent imaginary activities long after the last page has been turned or the credits roll.

If fiction serves as a prop for make-believe, analogous to a child building a pretend scenario around a toy or doll (e.g. Walton, 1990), what kinds of imaginings do fictional stories evoke? Here, I suggest that one avenue of exploring this question involves the analysis of fanfiction—that is, extra-textual stories, written by fans, that focus on the characters or world of an established narrative. I begin by providing a theoretical justification for predicting that our imaginative engagement with works of fiction should not be limited to the time spent consuming the works themselves. I then argue that the analysis of fanfiction may provide a window into the ways in which an audience can “play” with a narrative and provide a review of existing fanfiction research from a variety of disciplines. Using this body of work, I argue that fanfiction reflects both emotional engagement with and resistance to the source material. As a whole, this paper aims to highlight a phenomenon that is vastly understudied in the science of fiction and to serve as a primer for future research on this topic.

2. Fiction and Imagination

Consuming fictional stories requires imaginative input on the part of the audience. Consider, for instance, the genre of horror movies: sometimes, a scene is scary because of what we do see, and sometimes, it is scary because of what we don’t see. There is evidence to support the idea that readers contribute imaginatively to the fictional stories they consume. Prior research has shown that readers will project a gender onto a protagonist whose gender is not specified (Carreiras et al., 1996), import real-world facts into fictional worlds (Weisberg and Goodstein, 2009), and misremember the details of a story to make it more congruent with stories from their own culture (Bartlett, 1932). Even more striking, however, are readers’ emotional contributions to the stories they read (Gerrig, 1993).

Rosenblatt (1978) defined aesthetic reading as that which involves the lived through experience of consuming a story, including the “sensing, feeling, imagining, thinking” (26) that accompany becoming immersed in a text. When reading aesthetically (as opposed to reading for the purpose of extracting information), the reader’s imaginative contributions to the text depend not only on the words on the page, but also on the life experiences, personality, values, culture, and expectations of the reader (Rosenblatt, 1978). Different readers may experience the same text differently, just as two actors may have a different interpretation of the same role (Gerrig, 1993; Rosenblatt, 1978). While making their way through a book, some readers may continually brainstorm ways for the story to turn out to their liking (Polichak and Gerrig, 2002), while others may view the character and events through the emotional lens of the personal memories the story evokes (Oatley, 2002). The unique way in which each reader participates in a narrative affects the inferences he or she makes while reading (Gerrig, 1993), the aspects of the story to which he or she pays attention (Rosenblatt, 1978), and the reader’s subsequent memory for what did happen in the story, once it has ended (Allbritton and Gerrig, 1991).

Somewhat less work has focused on the degree to which fictions influence or inspire subsequent acts of imagination, such as daydreams—particularly in adulthood. It seems reasonable to predict that fictional characters and worlds might figure prominently in our fantasy lives. Many adults develop strong emotional attachments to fictional characters (e.g. Cohen, 2004), and becoming absorbed in a fictional world can serve as a means of escape (e.g. Green et al., 2004; Radway, 1984). To the extent that we find these activities pleasurable, why wouldn’t we want to return to favorite fictional worlds again and again? While it’s been suggested that the only way of interacting with fictional characters is by watching, reading, re-watching, or re-reading these narratives (Branch et al., 2013), daydreaming about these characters—imagining their further adventures or playing out our hypothetical interactions with them—seems to be a reasonable alternative.

Consider each of the following scenarios. (1) After watching Casablanca, you find yourself wondering what would have happened if Humphrey Bogart had gotten on the plane with Ingrid Bergman at the end of the film. (2) As you reach the end of the fifth book in George R.R. Martin’s Game of Thrones series, you start theorizing about what might happen in the next one—who’s going to live,
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