Abraham Lincoln and Harry Potter: Children's differentiation between historical and fantasy characters

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ABSTRACT

Based on the testimony of others, children learn about a variety of figures that they never meet. We ask when and how they are able to differentiate between the historical figures that they learn about (e.g., Abraham Lincoln) and fantasy characters (e.g., Harry Potter). Experiment 1 showed that both younger (3- and 4-year-olds) and older children (5-, 6-, and 7-year-olds) understand the status of familiar figures, correctly judging historical figures to be real and fictional figures to be pretend. However, when presented with information about novel figures embedded in either a realistic narrative or a narrative with obvious fantasy elements, only older children used the narrative to make an appropriate assessment of the status of the protagonist. In Experiment 2, 3-, and 4-year-olds were prompted to judge whether the story events were really possible or not. Those who did so accurately were able to deploy that judgment to correctly assess the status of the protagonist.

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1. Introduction

Young children encounter both historical and fantasy narratives. How do they differentiate between them? In particular, how do they distinguish between two radically different types of protagonists: those who actually lived at a certain point in time and those who are merely fictional? In studying children's early cognitive development, the history of ideas can serve as a guide. For example, in tracing children's understanding of heat and temperature (Wiser, 1988), their predictions about falling objects (McCloskey, Caramazza, & Green, 1980), or their ideas about the origin of species (Shtulman, 2006), psychologists have looked at conceptual change in the history of science. Although few domains are as cumulative or progressive as science, the same strategy might be helpful in tracing the development of children's understanding of non-scientific domains such as history and fiction. Historiographic analysis has suggested that the distinction between historical and fantasy narratives emerges only gradually. David Hume, for example, declared that: "The first page of

Thucydides, in my opinion, is the commencement of real history" (Hume, 1742/1987, II, Essay IX; 98). Subsequent scholarship has supported Hume's dictum. Before Thucydides, historians introduced the supernatural, notably the deeds of the gods, into their narrative with the goal of delivering a dramatic story. By contrast, Thucydides aimed at an accurate account of the past analyzing historical events only in terms of natural phenomena and human motives (Cochrane, 1929; Williams, 2002).

This analysis suggests the following developmental hypotheses. It is possible that at first young children make no systematic distinction between historical and fictional figures. At best, they learn on a rote basis which figures belong to which category. Then, children gradually come to use their causal knowledge of the real world to differentiate between historical narratives that contain no magical or supernatural events and fantasy narratives that do contain such events. Based on that differentiation, children could infer that the protagonist in a historical narrative is a real person whereas the protagonist in a fantasy narrative is not.

A review of earlier findings offers some support for the proposal that young children do not systematically differentiate between real and fictional figures. They sometimes

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judge that real figures are only fictional. For example, when Morison and Gardner (1978) asked children ranging from 5 to 12 years to sort 20 pictures of real and fantasy figures into two piles – "one pile of things that are real and one pile of things that are pretend" – children often misjudged real figures that were remote from their everyday experience – 'knight' 'Indian' and 'dinosaur' – as pretend. A similar error pattern was reported by Woolley and Cox (2007) in a study of preschoolers. When fantastical stories (which included special beings such as monsters) as well as realistic stories (which included only ordinary events) were presented to 3-, 4-, and 5-year-olds, they typically claimed that the protagonists in both types of stories were not real and just "in the book." Moreover, in a follow-up experiment, 4- and 5-year-olds claimed that the events in the stories – irrespective of whether these were fantastical or realistic events – did not happen in real life but "just happened in the story."

In addition, children also judge fantasy characters to be real. Sharon and Woolley (2006) found that 3–5-year-olds judged Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny to be real, possibly due to the input children receive about these characters. Similarly, when Applebee (1978) asked 6- and 9-year-olds about the status of familiar story protagonists (e.g., "Where does Cinderella live? Could we go for a visit?"), most 9-year-olds recognized that Cinderella is only a fictional character and judged that such stories are not about things that really happened. However, many 6-year-olds were not so lucid. For example, one 6-year-old denied that a visit to Cinderella was possible but offered a pragmatic rather than an ontological explanation: "'Cause they'll say Cinderella can't come – she'll have to wash up the plates and all the dishes and wash the floor." Indeed, when pressed further by the interviewer ("Hmm, do you think we could go visit the ugly sisters?"), the child agreed that a visit was possible. Overall, Applebee concluded that 6-year-olds often think that fictional stories are about actual people, places and events. If the protagonist is inaccessible, it is because he or she lives far away – or lived a long time ago – and not because the protagonist is purely imaginary.

Taken together, these studies indicate that young children do not systematically distinguish between real, historical figures and fantasy figures. However, they do not provide evidence pertinent to the developmental hypotheses advanced earlier. In particular, the studies do not indicate whether children come to use their causal understanding of the world to distinguish between historical and fantasy figures.

Experiment 1 included two tasks – a Familiar Characters task and a Novel Characters task. The two tasks were designed to answer two related but distinct questions. The Familiar Characters task re-examined children's ability to classify familiar figures as real or fictional. Children were presented with a mix of well-known historical and fictional figures (e.g., Abraham Lincoln, Batman, Albert Einstein, and Harry Potter). Each figure was depicted by means of a photograph or portrait. Children were shown individual photographs, told the name of the person in the photograph, asked if they knew of the person, and then invited to allocate the photograph of the familiar person to one of two boxes: a box for real people and a box for pretend people (Sharon & Woolley, 2006; Woolley & Cox, 2007). Preliminary training was used to check that children understood the difference between the two boxes. Testing continued until children had made decisions about a total of six familiar figures, three historical and three fictional.

The Novel Characters task was designed to examine the basis for any observed differentiation that children might make between the two types of characters. Children were presented with a novel protagonist in the context of either a realistic narrative or, alternatively, a narrative with obvious fantasy events. They were then asked to categorize the protagonist as either "real" or "pretend". The experimental question was whether children would use the narrative events to infer the status of the protagonist. To further assess whether children were using this heuristic, they were asked to justify their responses.

We anticipated a developmental shift in children's ability to characterize these Novel Characters. Based on previous research, it is plausible that younger children may not make a principled distinction between real and fictional protagonists. Instead, they learn on a rote basis that some figures are real and others are not. More specifically, in first learning about a new character, young children have no real insight into the difference between real and fantasy characters, or between factual and fantasy narratives, but they remember, if told, the status of a given narrative and its protagonist. For example, they might be told explicitly that George Washington 'really' crossed the Delaware or that the story of Pinocchio is 'just' a story. On this hypothesis, younger children would lack any independent means of assessing the status of a new character that they learn about. Instead, they would rely on explicit signals from informants, and in the absence of such explicit signals, they would be at a loss to decide whether the character should be regarded as real or fictional. By analogy, they would be in roughly the same position as children who have been told about particular fruits and vegetables and can assign many familiar kinds to the appropriate category but have no principled grasp of the distinction between the two when determining the status of a novel kind.

By contrast, it is plausible that older children grasp one key difference between fantasy stories and historical narratives. Instead of learning the status of narrative figures on a rote basis, they use their understanding of what is not ordinarily possible in the real world to carve out a fantasy domain, one that is distinct from reality. Suggestive evidence that older preschoolers can use a heuristic of this sort to assess the status of a novel entity has been reported by Woolley and Van Reet (2006). Children were told about unfamiliar entities in a fantastical narrative context (e.g., "…dragons collect surnits"), in a scientific context (e.g., "…scientists collect surnits") or in an everyday context (e.g., "…children collect surnits"). Although 3-year-olds failed to make systematic make use of the contextual clues, 5-year-olds were more likely to judge the novel entity as real if they learned about it in either the scientific or everyday context rather than the fantastical context.

Thus, by listening to the narrative events and deciding whether they could occur in the world of everyday reality,