

Suspension of Disbelief and Audience Immersion in “Game of Thrones”: A Brief Conceptual Framework¹

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Abstract:

This article explores the concept of *suspension of disbelief* (SOD) as a key mechanism in audience immersion within fictional narratives, using *A Song of Ice and Fire* and its television adaptation *Game of Thrones* as primary examples. Drawing on cognitive and emotional theories, the paper examines how audiences engage with characters and events they know to be fictional, yet respond to them with genuine emotion. The analysis highlights the paradox of belief and disbelief in fiction reception, offering a theoretical framework for understanding narrative engagement and illustrating how SOD enables meaningful emotional and cognitive involvement in imagined worlds.

Keywords: suspension of disbelief, audience immersion, fictional narratives, Game of Thrones, emotional engagement, cognitive response to fiction.

1. Introduction

Audience engagement with fictional narratives has long attracted scholarly attention, especially regarding the emotional investment individuals make in stories and characters they recognize as unreal. At the core of this engagement lies the concept of suspension of disbelief (SOD), a theoretical framework that addresses the paradox of how audiences consciously set aside rational skepticism. This mechanism reflects a cognitive and emotional readiness to accept and interact with fictional elements as if they held a degree of reality. Through SOD, individuals are able to immerse themselves in imaginative narratives, forming meaningful connections with fictional worlds that may include fantastical or implausible aspects.

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This paper explores the theoretical underpinnings of suspension of disbelief and its significance in facilitating audience immersion. To illustrate this, the fictional universe of “A Song of Ice and Fire” and its television adaptation “Game of Thrones” serve as illustrations, demonstrating how audiences emotionally invest in complex fictional settings populated by extraordinary characters and events. The aim is to provide a clear conceptual framework that helps explain the cognitive and emotional mechanisms involved in engaging with fiction, setting the stage for further detailed analysis.

2. Suspension of disbelief – A brief overview

Concerning ‘the idea that the “willing suspension of disbelief” must have some role to play in the analysis of our response to fiction’ (Schaper 1978), Schaper (ibid.) argues that, ‘one of the main points in its favour is, it seems, that it helps us to resolve, or dissolve, a puzzle allegedly raised by that response to fiction: unless disbelief were suspended, we could not avoid the puzzle resulting from being moved by what we do not believe ever really happened or ever existed’ (31). According to the author (ibid.), ‘the puzzle which suspension of disbelief is called in to resolve must be supposed to arise in this way. In the general context of belief and emotional responses, two things seem uncontroversial: (A) knowing entails believing, and (B) an emotional response presupposes some beliefs (whether true or false) about that to which one responds’ (Schaper 1978). The author (ibid.) continues along the same line arguing that, ‘clearly, we know of at least some characters in fiction that their counterparts in real life do not exist and never have existed, and that the events in which they are caught up never occurred. And so, we must have beliefs to that effect (from A); yet we are, at least sometimes, genuinely moved by these characters and what happens to them, and so it appears (from B) we must hold beliefs that certain people are caught up in certain events – beliefs which are as a matter of fact false’ (31). Tomko (2016) draws on Abrams’s (1958) gloss of its common and critical usage of the concept, according to which, ‘the skilled reader in some fashion suspends his disbelief so as to go along in imagination with express judgments and doctrines from which he would ordinarily dissent’ (3).

If we were to apply Schaper (1978) and Abrams's (1958) theories regarding the suspension of disbelief to our analysis of the "A Song of Ice and Fire" fictional world created by George R.R. Martin and its visual portrayal in the "Game of Thrones" HBO television series by David Benioff and Dan Weiss, we encounter the following scenario: readers of the book series are fully aware that certain characters and entities within the narrative, such as the Dothraki people, the White Walkers, the Children of the Forest, the dire wolves, and Daenerys Targaryen's dragons (Drogon, Rhaegal, and Viserion) are purely fictional and lack real-world counterparts. Indeed, not only do Daenerys Targaryen's dragons, and other fantastical beings within the series exist solely within the realm of fiction, but Daenerys Targaryen herself, along with all other human characters in the novels, are entirely fictional constructs, as are the events in which they partake. Nonetheless, readers and viewers are often emotionally engaged with the storyline, demonstrating a suspension of disbelief by temporarily setting aside their rational disbelief and engaging imaginatively with the narrative. We are discussing here the typical response of readers or viewers, excluding extreme cases where individuals may develop beliefs in the literal existence of elements from the series, such as expressing a desire to purchase property in the fictional location of King's Landing. As of now, there is no evidence to support the occurrence of such an event. Any instances where fans express a desire to purchase property in King's Landing or other Westerosi locations are likely in a playful or humorous context, rather than reflecting a genuine belief in the reality of these places. Should there be any real cases, it might warrant deeper consideration, although this topic falls outside the scope of our current research focus.

According to Schaper (1978), 'as we maintain both (A) and (B) it seems that either we are committed to holding contradictory beliefs about characters and events in fiction or we must deny that we can, logically, be moved by fictional events or characters' (31). In addressing Schaper's arguments which discount the Coleridgean hypothesis regarding the "willing suspension of disbelief" by the reader or audience (1978), Roseberry (1979) queries, 'how CAN we be moved by fiction – by what we know to be accounts or representations of events which have not really happened?' (120). According to the author, 'all of us except the naïvely

credulous know, and therefore believe, that when (for example) we sit in a theatre watching Richard III, and being moved to pity and indignation, we are not really witnessing episodes from the historical king's career. Therefore, our beliefs about that to which we are responding cannot, without contradiction, include the belief that Richard III's career is happening before our eyes, with real intrigues and real murders. Yet our response does, it seems, call for description in terms ("pity", "indignation", etc.) which would be appropriate if it were founded upon just that belief.' (1979). Rosebury (1979) argues that, 'merely apprehending the content of a statement is no guarantee of experiencing an emotional response; in non-fictional situations we normally need to believe in, or at least entertain the possibility of, its existential truth' (123). Rosebury (1979) concludes that 'it seems, then, that in order to make possible our emotional response a second-order belief about fiction must be more than a belief about the content of a statement or representation: it must carry something of the force of a type A belief, a belief that p is the case' (124). Drawing from the scholarly literature, the act of believing in something nonexistent, while experiencing specific emotional, physical, or psychological responses, is commonly identified as a paradox. Davies (2009) refers to this phenomenon as "the Charles and Diana accounts of the paradox". According to the author, 'it is widely held that there is a paradox in the fact that we respond emotionally to characters, situations, or events that we know to be fictional, or in other words, when they do not exist' (2009). Davies illustrates this paradox with the following examples:

 '1a To feel fear, a person has to believe that something threatens to harm him.

 2a Charles, a filmgoer, does not believe that the killer slime that seemingly looks toward him can actually harm him, since (he knows) the slime does not exist.

 3a Yet Charles fears the slime.

 Or to use an equally well-known illustration:

 1b To feel pity, a person has to believe that another person or creature suffers or is in a pitiable situation.

 2b Diana, a reader of Tolstoy's "Anna Karenina", does not believe that Anna suffers, since (she knows) Anna does not exist.

3b Yet Diana pities Anna' (2009).

Davies (ibid.) explains this paradox by drawing on the cognitive theory of emotions. According to the author, 'the Charles and Diana accounts involve a commitment to what has been called the cognitive theory of emotions.' Davies (ibid.) argues that, 'this is the view that emotions take intentional objects and are distinguished in terms of the beliefs one holds about them. A person who is afraid is afraid of something and must believe that what she is afraid of is potentially harmful. Someone who experiences pity feels it for a sentient being and must believe that the being's situation is one of suffering, hurt, or loss. An envious person believes that another possesses something she does not have and wants, and resents this. And so on' (Davies 2009). In his study, Davies (2009) draws on Neill's (1993) account, 'with respect specifically to the case of Diana' (Davies, ibid). According to Davies (ibid.), Neill 'attempts to reconcile the emotional response to fictions with the cognitive theory of the emotions by re-characterizing the existence belief to which the cognitive theory should be committed when Diana pities Anna' (Davies, ibid). Neill's (1993) theory suggests that, 'the belief relevant to Diana's pitying "Anna Karenina" is not that Anna exists in the actual world but that she suffers in the world of the fiction. It is only if Diana wrongly believes of something that it exists in the actual world, only to learn that it does not, that her emotional orientation to it collapses. But so long as she is aware of the context that places Anna in a fictional or possible world, Anna's non-existence in the actual world should not inhibit Diana's pity for Anna' (Davies 2009). Davies (2009) concludes that 'in brief, this view, which I will call the "simple theory", dissolves the paradox by rejecting the truth of 2b – Diana, a reader of Tolstoy's "Anna Karenina", does not believe that Anna suffers, since she knows Anna does not exist – in favor of the claim that Diana rightly believes that Anna suffers in the world of the fiction.' Ji and Raney (2016) draw on Böcking (2008), according to whom, 'suspension of disbelief has been frequently cited to explain why audiences care about people, things, and events that are clearly not real. The underlying assumption is that viewers actively stop evaluating the authenticity of fictional content once they decide to maximize enjoyment (126).

Busselle and Bilandzic (2008) suggest that ‘credulity is the default mode of reading/viewing fiction, and audiences typically create belief in fiction instead of actively disbelieving’ (Busselle, Bilandzic, 2008, apud. Ji, Raney 2016:127). According to Pouliot and Cowen (2007), ‘what makes a fiction film interesting is precisely that it requires a suspension of disbelief’ (256, apud. 2016). Ji and Raney (2016) concur with those scholars ‘who contend that SOD exists as a mode for viewers to negotiate violations of realism’ (128). Randall and Wood (2005) argue ‘in the context of reality TV programs, the active negotiation of real and fantastic factors constitutes the constructed, authentic experience of enjoyment’ (apud. 2016). Ji and Raney (2016) draw on Weber and Wirth’s study (2014), ‘in which they conceptualize SOD as a tolerant audience response to a perceived lack of realism, with such tolerance reaching its limit once violations of realism grow overly excessive’ (128). Ji and Raney (2016) conclude that, ‘emotional aspects of involvement should be positively predicted by narrative realism: the more one perceives that the narrative world is logical and coherent, the more likely she is to become emotionally involved with that world. Similar logic should seemingly apply to SOD: the more willing one is to suspend their disbelief, the more likely she is to emotionally engage with the target of that suspension’ (132-133).

Conclusion

The concept of suspension of disbelief emerges as a fundamental mechanism through which audiences engage meaningfully with fictional narratives, enabling cognitive and emotional responses to events and characters that are known to be unreal. By temporarily setting aside rational skepticism, individuals are able to enter imagined worlds and respond to them with genuine empathy, excitement, fear, or sorrow. This paradox—believing while knowing – is at the heart of narrative immersion and underscores the complex interplay between imagination, emotion, and cognition in the consumption of fiction.

Through the lens of “A Song of Ice and Fire” and its television adaptation “Game of Thrones”, the present paper has illustrated how deeply audiences can become involved with fantastical plots and morally ambiguous characters. Despite the presence of dragons, magic, and

improbable political developments, viewers and readers alike often exhibit strong affective ties to the narrative, demonstrating the durability and flexibility of suspension of disbelief as a psychological and cultural process. This phenomenon also sheds light on the human capacity for imaginative engagement and narrative transportation, both of which contribute to the enduring popularity of speculative fiction.

While this discussion has offered a theoretical overview of SOD and its implications for audience reception, further research could expand on this foundation by analyzing empirical data from fan communities, narrative structures, or media-specific techniques that encourage or disrupt disbelief suspension. Additionally, interdisciplinary approaches – drawing from psychology, cognitive science, narratology, and media studies – may deepen our understanding of how and why fiction affects us so profoundly.

Ultimately, the suspension of disbelief is not merely a passive act of acceptance but an active, dynamic engagement with storytelling that reflects the intricate relationship between reality and imagination. Recognizing and analyzing this process enriches our appreciation of fiction's power and the uniquely human inclination to find truth and meaning in invented worlds.

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