A Realistic Constraint on Authorial Creativity/ Uma restrição realista sobre a criatividade autoral[1]

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ABSTRACT
In this paper I argue that there is an important constraint on an author's creativity when it comes to the imaginative content of stories. It may seem as if authors can create storyworlds however they choose, that there is no limit on their imaginative creativity. I claim, however, that this is not the case. I argue that readers necessarily take for granted that the background of a story is the real world; if they did not do this, they could not understand what they read. With this assumption in the background, authors can depart from reality only along some dimensions, and not all.
***KEYWORDS**: Constraint; Creativity; Reality; Literature.*

RESUMO
Neste artigo defendo que existe uma restrição importante na criatividade do autor quando se trata de conteúdo imaginativa de histórias. Pode parecer como se os autores podem criar storyworlds como quiserem, que não há limite para a criatividade imaginativa. Eu reivindico, no entanto, que este não é o caso. Defendo que os leitores necessariamente tomam como certo que o pano de fundo de uma história é o mundo real; se não fizerem isso, eles não podem entender o que lêem. Com este pressuposto como fundamento, os autores podem afastar-se da realidade apenas em algumas dimensões, e não em todas.
PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Restrição; Criatividade; Realidade; Literatura.

Introduction

What does it mean for an author to be creative? I address this question today with a focus on creativity in writing fictional stories. In a sense, every author of a story creates something, namely the story. But creativity requires more than merely producing something new; it requires producing something that is (at least) original and valuable.[3] There are many dimensions along which a work of fictional literature may be considered creative, for example in style, structure, or content. My concern is with creativity in this last sense, the imaginative content of the story. It may seem as if authors of fiction have unlimited scope to imagine, and to get us to imagine, that anything at all is "true in the story," or fictionally the case, even when it is not actually true. For instance, it's fictionally the case in Kafka's *Metamorphosis* that Gregor Samsa transforms into an

[1] This text is from a transcript of a talk given at the the IVth Symposium on Aesthetics at the Catholic University of São Paulo (PUC), edited for readability and accuracy, with a revised introduction and conclusion
[2] Birkbeck, University of London
[3] Berys Gaut, "The Philosophy of Creativity," *Philosophy Compass* 5, no. 12 (2010): 1034–46.

insect, even though this would be impossible in reality. So it looks as if authors can describe fictional worlds—or as I prefer to call them, *storyworlds*—that differ from the actual world in all sorts of ways, filling those worlds with strange creatures and unfamiliar events.

Yet creativity is never *entirely* unconstrained. Artists face the limitations or expectations of media, genres, and traditions. Some artists do something new and exciting within these constraints, whereas others challenge them directly. Authors of fiction in the most common contemporary forms, the novel and the short story, are relatively unconstrained by comparison with some other genres. For instance, anyone writing a sonnet must conform to the relevant rhyme scheme within the requisite fourteen lines; but there are no similar strictures for novels or stories. However, in this talk I argue that there is an important constraint on an author's creativity when it comes to getting us to imagine storyworlds: specifically, that readers take for granted that the background of the story is the real world.

Before turning to the argument, I should say something briefly about my approach to fiction. Sometimes *fiction* is contrasted with facts or reality; but this is not the sense in which I use the term. Instead, fiction in my sense is contrasted with *nonfiction*, where both fiction and nonfiction are kinds of representation. These representations can be in different media, for example texts or films. Today I will focus on fictional literature. According to the account I offer elsewhere, fiction and nonfiction are not distinguished in terms of truth, reference, assertion, or beliefs; they are instead different *genres*, associated with different conventions that change over time.[4] In consequence, there is no obstacle to works of fiction being about the real world, even if they invite us to imagine the world to be very different from how it actually is.

In this talk I argue that the appropriate starting point for interpreting fictional literature is the assumption that the work is about the real world. I think that this assumption helps to explain why we care about fictional characters, how we learn from fiction, and why we value literature. I will spend most of the talk defending this claim. At the end I will say how the assumption constrains authorial creativity.

1 Story-truth

Let me begin by saying something about the concept of "truth-in-a-story" or "truth-in-fiction," which is common in debates about fiction in analytic philosophy.[5] There is widespread agreement among philosophers, scholars in literary studies, those who study narrative, psychologists, and so on, that in order to understand a story—whether it's fiction or nonfiction doesn't matter—you have to "fill in the gaps" in the explicit text. You have to make inferences from what's said in order to understand what else is going on in the story. So what is "story-true" or, in my preferred terminology, *storified*—what obtains according to the story—goes beyond what's explicit and may even contradict it. For example in Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Lolita,* you have a narrator, Humbert Humbert, who's very unreliable. He's either self-deceived or he's deceiving us. So when he says that Lolita is his willing partner, we're not supposed to believe that that is what's really happening in the story. So what's explicit isn't necessarily what we infer is actually going

[4] Stacie Friend, "Fiction as a Genre," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 112, no. 2 (2012): 179–209.
[5] The argument of sections 2-5 is given in more detail in Stacie Friend, "The Real Foundation of Fictional Worlds," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* published online (March 10, 2016): 1–14.

on in the world of the story. Philosophers ask two questions about this idea of truth-in-a-story: What does it mean to say that something is storified, or that something obtains according to a story? What is happening in a story is often not actually true, so what does it mean to say that "something happens in a story"? And the second question, which is going to be my main focus, is how do we determine what is going on in a story? How do we generate all of the different *story-truths*?

With respect to the first question, of what it means to talk about truth-in-a-story, it's important that when analytic philosophers ask these kinds of questions, like "what's going on in a story?" they're not focused on what you might think of as the really interesting questions, the controversial questions about interpretation. The focus is on uncontroversial descriptions of the storyworld. All of us will agree, for example, that a particular character has arms and legs, even if the story never says that the character has arms and legs. And the question that philosophers ask is: why are we so sure? How do we know? So we're concerned with cases where there is agreement about what's going on in the story, that is, what's storified; and what we want to know is what are we agreeing about, and how do we know. So this is just an example of philosophers being puzzled by what's obvious to everyone. For instance we all agree that in Jorge Amado's *Dona Flor and Her Two Husbands*, Dona Flor has the usual internal organs: a liver, stomach, and so on, even if the text does not say so. Since Amado was not describing any real person with actual organs, what does it mean to say that this is storified?

To answer this question, I defend a claim that's quite common in analytic philosophy, which is that works of fiction invite us to imagine various things. I'll say something about what an *invitation to imagine* is in more detail later, but the basic idea is that when you're reading a story, and you come across a particular claim or you make an inference to something that's implied—to keep with the Dona Flor example, you know that Vadinho has returned from the dead to give Dona Flor pleasure—when you know that, I say you're being invited to imagine it. That's what it means to say that it obtains in the story: that you're supposed to imagine it.[6] What does it mean to imagine in the relevant sense? You're supposed to *imagine a storyworld*, which means constructing a certain kind of complex mental representation. This is something that psychologists call either a *mental model* (Johnson-Laird 1983) or a *situation model* (van Dijk and Kintsch 1983). Basically, as you're reading, you get introduced to characters, they do things, things happen to them; and you represent these things as developing in your mind as you're reading. You imagine them occurring. That's the basic idea. So what a work invites you to imagine is what obtains in the storyworld. That's my background account.[7]

Now, here's the part that I want to defend today. With respect to the second question, of how we decide what is storified, what is true in the story, I want to claim that

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[6] The view that fictional truth should be explained by invitations to imagine originates with Kendall L. Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990). This approach avoids taking storyworlds to be real in any sense; they are only imagined. However, it does not mean that what is storified differs for every person. Although different people will imagine differently, what is storified is what the work *invites* them to imagine, not what they actually do imagine.

[7] The idea extends to other kinds of representation. For example, in representational painting we typically need to infer a three-dimensional world from the two-dimensional surface we see, and we typically use our background knowledge of reality to do this.

our starting point is that we're imagining about the real world. So we take the real world as background when we start reading. Note that this is compatible with a story inviting us to imagine the real world to be very different from how it actually is. Nonetheless I claim that the stories are inviting us to think about *our world* as a different kind of place. So the starting point for interpretation that I want to defend, I call the *Reality Assumption*. This says: Assume that everything that is really true is storified; everything that actually obtains in the real world can be represented as part of the storyworld, including all the ordinary, mundane facts of the world. So when we ask, "How do you know that Dona Flor has a liver and other internal organs?" it's just because you know that people have those things, and you take that for granted as you're reading. The Reality Assumption captures the very common idea that fictional worlds remain as close as possible to the real world.[8]

2 The Reality Assumption

The Reality Assumption is just a starting point for interpretation, because most stories, particularly fictional stories, depart from the real world in many different ways. The most obvious reason we adjust our Reality Assumption is explicit content that contradicts reality. Most of the time, when you open up a work of fiction, you're immediately introduced to people who don't exist and events that never happened. Here is an example from the first paragraph of *The Posthumous Memoirs of Braz Cubas*, also translated in English as *Epitaph of a Small Winner*: "I am a deceased writer not in the sense of one who has written and is now deceased, but in the sense of one who has died and is now writing, a writer for whom the grave was really a new cradle."[9] This is in the first paragraph of the novel. As soon as you read this, you adjust certain assumptions that you have about reality, for example: Ordinarily, people cannot write when they are dead. But in the world of Braz Cubas, someone can write when they're dead. So you've just now stepped away from reality.

Even works that are less unrealistic than that, very realistic works, normally require you to imagine people that didn't exist, like Dona Flor, or Sherlock Holmes, or whoever. More unrealistic works will require greater departures from reality. If you're reading *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, then you have to suspend everything you know about the physical laws of the universe. That's a much more radical departure than you get from either *Dona Flor* or *Braz Cubas*. But the important point of the Reality Assumption is that even when you take these departures from reality, you assume the story-truth of whatever aspects of reality remain consistent with the other story-truths, and you rely on this when you make further inferences about what is the case according to the story. So, you find out right away that Braz Cubas is dead, but when he tells you about his loves and his life, you assume that all of that happens in the normal way. You don't assume that if he can write when he's dead, then there might be ghosts and fairies everywhere changing everything. You don't do that; you stick with what you know as far as you can.

Now, in the discussion of story-truth or "truth in fiction," the main focus tends to be how we make these inferences: how we get from what a story actually says, to the

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[8] Marie-Laure Ryan calls this the *principle of minimal departure*. See her "Fiction, Non-Factuals, and the Principle of Minimal Departure," *Poetics* 9, no. 4 (1980): 403–22.

[9] Machado de Assis, *Epitaph of a Small Winner* (London: Bloomsbury, 2008), p.5.

further story-truths. And the usual assumption is that some story-truths are directly generated by what's explicit. For example, we assume the narrator is reliable in *Braz Cubas*; when he says that he's dead when he's writing, we just take that for granted. It's directly generated. So that's a *primary* story-truth. And we infer other story-truths from these; those are the *implied* story-truths.[10] There are worries about this picture, such as unreliability, but I'll just assume that at least some sentences in a text establish some story-truths that we can rely on. The standard way, on that assumption, to capture the intuition that the world of a story remains close to reality is with what's called the *Reality Principle.*[11] There are different formulations, but the basic idea is this: Let's assume that the primary story-truths obtain. For example, let's assume that whatever the narrator tells us is the case in the story. Then we ask: What would the world have to be like if that were the case? The implied story-truths are all the story-truths that would also obtain in that counterfactual circumstance. So we say: If someone could write while they were dead, what else would have to be true in that world? (That is, if it were similar to the real world but departed in that respect.)

The Reality Principle is the standard way of approaching this issue, but there are numerous objections to it. I want to mention these, because I want to distinguish the Reality Principle from the Reality Assumption that I'm defending. So the Reality Principle—this idea that we assume the primary story-truths, then try to figure out what else is the case in the story—is too strong, because it entails that primary story-truths are the only reason for departures from reality. Other considerations might be relevant. Here is an example from the philosopher David Lewis. Suppose that you are reading a traditional fantasy story about knights and dragon, and a new dragon enters the scene. Nothing is said about whether the dragon can breathe fire. The text simply leaves it open. Now, it would be closer to reality to have a dragon that doesn't breathe fire, because reptiles in reality do not breathe fire. But of course we assume that in the story the dragon does breathe fire, because that's the convention. However, that isn't something you can infer based on the Reality Principle.

The bigger problem from my point of view with the Reality Principle is that the counterfactual formulation allows for very significant departures from reality. We're supposed to stay close to reality in deciding what would be true if these primary story-truths obtained, but we still have to make adjustments. The more fantastic a story, the less clear what else is storified in it. Here's an example. In *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, the earth turns out to be a supercomputer designed by intelligent mice, and you can travel through space using an infinite improbability drive, which takes you to all points in all universes simultaneously before delivering you randomly to some spot. Given those primary story-truths, so much would be so radically different from the way reality actually is, that it would be rash for us to make various inferences. For example, the main character in the story, Arthur Dent, is one of two humans left in the universe after the earth is destroyed, and we follow Arthur as he responds to the crazy events that he experiences when he meets aliens and travels to other planets. We make

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[10] This terminology is from Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe*, p.142.

[11] Versions of the Reality Principle may be found in Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe*, p.145; Ryan, "Fiction, Non-Factuals, and the Principle of Minimal Departure"; David Lewis, "Truth in Fiction," in *Philosophical Papers*, vol. 1 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 261–80; and Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Works and Worlds of Art* (Clarendon Press, 1980).

inferences about how Arthur is feeling, because he's reacting in a way that you expect human beings to react in a crazy situation. But how can we be justified in assuming that Arthur Dent's psychology is ordinary human psychology, when after all, he's the product of a supercomputer made by mice? The Reality Principle doesn't explain why we simply assume that the psychology of Arthur Dent, or the psychology of aliens, matches our ordinary psychology. Similarly for novels like *Braz Cubas* or *Dona Flor*, which have supernatural elements. If those things really happened—if someone could author a story when dead, or come back from the dead—how would we decide what else is going on in the story? Things would be really different from how they are now. But these kinds of assumptions are necessary to understand such novels. You couldn't understand *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* if you didn't assume ordinary psychology for the characters, no matter how bizarre they are. So the Reality Principle doesn't justify our ordinary way of understanding stories.

By contrast, the Reality Assumption that I'm defending is not a mechanism for generating new story-truths, but rather a starting point for specifying the input into any such mechanism. Facts about the real world are just storified by default. They're not storified as a consequence of a procedure for determining what follows from whatever the text says. From the start, we're invited to represent whatever is true as part of the storyworld, as long as it doesn't contradict other features of the text, including what's explicit but also the genre and whatever else. The important point is that when we depart from reality, our departures are *localized:* they're very specific. In *Hitchhiker's Guide*, the fact that we exclude all kinds of facts about the physical laws, the laws of space travel, just has no implications for psychology. We've assumed ordinary psychology; nothing in the story requires us to give it up, so we just go on assuming it. We don't worry about whether it obtains in a story that has radically different physical laws. And that's our standard way of interpreting.

Now, this does not mean that we should, or that we must, include every real-world truth in our representations of the storyworld. This is where I'll talk a bit about what an *invitation* is. An invitation to imagine should be contrasted with a *mandate* and a *prescription*. (I'm just stipulating these terms.) A mandate is an obligation. On my view, we're mandated to imagine what we must imagine in order to understand a story at a basic level. If you don't understand that Dona Flor's first husband was Vadinho, and that he died and comes back, then you have missed the most basic parts of the plot. So you're mandated to imagine those things. A *prescription* to imagine is what we should imagine to have a fuller appreciation of a story. The things that literary critics think about, and you pull out from the story in literary appreciation, are things that you *should* imagine. By contrast, an invitation to imagine is defined in this way: You are invited to imagine something if, given a choice between imagining it and not imagining it, you must imagine it. For example, we take for granted that Dona Flor has internal organs. We take for granted that she has a liver, and kidneys, and whatever else. Normally, you would never think about this. It's unusual for people to have to think about characters' internal physiologies in most stories. But if the question came up, and someone asked whether Dona Flor has normal human physiology, the answer to that question is surely yes. She's not an alien. That's the basic idea. You are invited to imagine something if, if the question came up, it would be obvious that you should imagine it. And the question

might never come up, and you might never think about it. But that's what an invitation to imagine is.

An invitation to imagine is also contrasted with what I call an *authorization* or a *permission:* what we are permitted to imagine, what's not ruled out. It may be (I can't remember) that Braz Cubas does not specify his eye color. I imagine him with blue eyes, and you imagine him with brown eyes, and Sonia doesn't think about his eye color at all. We're permitted to imagine his eye color any which way, but it's not storified that he has a particular eye color, because if the question came up, there would be no way to decide which eye color he has. So the basic idea is that you are invited to imagine much more than you should imagine for full understanding, or what you must imagine for minimal understanding, but less than you're allowed to imagine. So the idea behind the Reality Assumption is just that facts about reality are available to us when we need them, in order to make inferences from the primary story-truths.

3 Evidence for the Reality Assumption

There's actually quite a bit of empirical evidence in cognitive psychology which suggests that if we didn't rely on something like the Reality Assumption—that is, if we didn't take the real world as background—we would have difficulty understanding the basics of any story. Just briefly, there are a number of studies that show that readers automatically use their prior knowledge of the world to make various inferences. In particular, the studies have focused on emotional and spatial inferences. I'll give you an example. In one study people had to read a short, fairly boring story in which someone named Tom goes to the shop of his friend Joe.[12] Joe goes to get a drink, Tom steals some money out of the cash register, and later he finds out that Joe was fired because of the missing money. The researchers wanted to find out if people would automatically assume that Tom felt guilty for having caused the loss of his friend's job. They asked people to read a sentence, "It would be weeks before Tom's *guilt/pride/shyness* would subside." When the sentence said *guilty,* people read it much more quickly than when the next word was one of the others, which caused them to pause. In a different experiment in the same study, when people were asked to pronounce various words after having read the story, they pronounced *guilt* much faster than words that were contrary to that emotion, even though pronunciation is a different skill from story comprehension. What the researchers concluded was that people had already assumed that Tom felt guilty, so that they thought of guilt very quickly, which wasn't the case for other kinds of emotions.

In another study researchers found that even when people were asked to read very unrealistic stories, with aliens and superheroes and so on, they assumed that many real-world truths obtained in the story.[13] After they read the story, they were given a list of sentences and asked whether they obtained in the world of the story. And most

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[12] Morton Ann Gernsbacher, H. Hill Goldsmith, and Rachel R. W. Robertson, "Do Readers Mentally Represent Characters' Emotional States?" *Cognition & Emotion* 6, no. 2 (1992): 89–111. See also Dieter Haenggi, Morton Ann Gernsbacher, and Caroline M. Bolliger, "Individual Differences in Situation-Based Inferencing during Narrative Text Comprehension," in *Naturalistic Discourse Comprehension: Advances in Discourse Processing*, ed. Herre van Oostendorp and Rolf A. Zwaan (Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1994), 79–96.

[13] Deena Skolnick Weisberg and Joshua Goodstein, "What Belongs in a Fictional World?" *Journal of Cognition and Culture* 9, no. 1 (2009): 69–78.

people responded that mathematical truths, like 2+2=4, obtained even in very unrealistic stories; that people have hearts, even in pretty unrealistic stories; and so on. So even when the facts were completely unrelated to the story—nothing was even mentioned about these kinds of issues in the story—people take for granted that the world of the story resembles reality.

Now, if this is right—if people are taking this for granted—then we should find that readers have much more difficulty the more unrealistic a story is. And actually this turns out to be true. The psychologist Arthur Graesser and his colleagues did a study of a novel called *Einstein's Dreams*.[14] In this novel, in each chapter Einstein dreams about a place where time works differently than in reality. For example, in one chapter time goes backwards; in one chapter it goes in a circle; in another chapter it stands still; and so on. The researchers determined what inferences you could draw about what was happening in the story, and asked people to say whether or not these things obtained in the story. What they found was that most readers could draw inferences that were consistent with real-world assumptions about time, but only readers who had studied literature had any success in verifying the story-truth of inferences that relied on the atypical conceptions of time in the story. The rest did no better than chance; that is, they were guessing as to what was happening in the story. They really had no idea.

Now, that's just a little bit of the evidence that we operate this way. So let's suppose that readers do rely (subconsciously) on the Reality Assumption when they're filling in the gaps to understand a story. They're drawing on their knowledge of reality. It doesn't follow that this is what they *should* be doing. The Reality Assumption is a normative claim, not just a descriptive claim. But notice that denying the normative principle would commit us to a massive error theory, because all the evidence suggests that people actually do make all these assumptions about reality when they read. Nonetheless, it's worth considering some of the objections. I'm only going to consider two of the main objections to the Reality Assumption here.

4 Objections

One objection is that not every story is realistic. Kafka's *Metamorphosis* is an example of a very unrealistic story. If a story is unrealistic, we're going to be often departing from reality in order to understand it. Maybe this undermines the central role I've claimed the Reality Assumption plays. Perhaps before you read a work and you don't know what genre it's in, you should assume anything at all might obtain; anything at all could be storified. Then you should adopt the Reality Assumption only when you recognize that the story is realistic, and for other stories you should rely on genre conventions or other kinds of interpretive strategies.

In reply to this concern, I say that genre conventions, as well as other strategies, are simply too limited in scope to generate most story-truths. Here is an example. I imagine that you know some version of this fairy tale, "The Princess and the Frog." "The Princess and the Frog," in all the versions I have looked at, starts out with a princess playing by a well with her precious golden ball; she drops the ball in the well; a frog offers to get the ball back for her if she will kiss him, and she says yes; he gets the ball; she refuses to kiss him and runs away. That's the beginning of the fairy tale. Now, no

[14] Arthur C. Graesser et al., "Verification of Statements about Story Worlds That Deviate from Normal Conceptions of Time: What Is True about Einstein's Dreams?," *Cognitive Psychology* 35, no. 3 (1998): 246–301.

version of the fairy tale tells us why the princess could not get the ball, why the frog could get the ball, or why the princess doesn't want to kiss the frog. These things are not made explicit. And it's not in the fairy tale genre to tell you the answers to those questions. You know the answers because you know ordinary things such as that wells are small, she may not be able to swim, frogs can swim, frogs are a bit icky and disgusting to people, and so on. So it's your ordinary knowledge of reality that fills in the gaps and thereby lets you understand even fairy tales in which frogs talk and turn into princes. So that's the first objection I'll consider.

The second objection is perhaps the most significant one. This is that the Reality Assumption generates lots of totally irrelevant story-truths, because it invites us to include all the truths, and represent all the features of the real world, in our situation models—that is, in our mental representations of the storyworld—except when they're excluded by the work. For example, in Voltaire's *Candide* it will be storified that there was a major California earthquake in 1906. *Candide* was written in the eighteenth century, so it's surprising to think that in the world of *Candide* there is a 1906 earthquake in California. It's also storified in *Candide* that there are subatomic particles, even though Voltaire could not have known about subatomic particles. According to what I have said, every story includes vast collections of remote facts unknown to the author and completely immaterial to the narrative.[15] What do I say in reply?

First of all, an invitation to imagine is not a mandate. We should normally simply ignore all these irrelevant story-truths. But if the question came up, and we had to decide between imagining that there are subatomic particles in the world of *Candide*, and imagining that there are not subatomic particles in the world of *Candide,* then surely we should imagine that there are, because *Candide* is not a science fiction in which the physical laws of the universe are different. So whatever the physical laws of the universe are, those are the physical laws in the world of *Candide,* whether Voltaire knew this or not. Similarly, we may find that certain truths are relevant in ways that we can't predict. For example, many people will be aware of the 1755 earthquake in Lisbon, which appears in Chapter 5 of *Candide* as part of Voltaire's argument that this is not the best of all possible worlds. The fact that there were earthquakes—much more devastating earthquakes, in fact—later on in history is relevant to appreciating Voltaire's argument. So we shouldn't exclude those kinds of truths even if an author is not aware of them. Of course, it would be very odd to *say* something like "In *Candide*, there are subatomic particles." No one would actually say that. But it would also be odd to say that about Euclides da Cunha's *Rebellion in the Backlands,* even though it's a work of nonfiction and we take for granted that it's about the real world. When we report what's the case in a story, we restrict ourselves to the important story-truths.

As I said, there are other objections to the Reality Assumption, but I think these can be addressed. So I conclude that we do, and should, deploy the Reality Assumption in reading fiction.

[15] It follows from this that we may not know what is storified, because we do not know what is true. As a consequence, we may be misinterpreting stories, for instance by assuming a false theory of psychology for the characters. Although this result is counterintuitive, it does not affect actual interpretive practice, since the inferences we actually make in reading stories do not typically rely on obscure or controversial facts. All we can do is use the best theories available at the time.

5 Constraining Creativity

Now I want to consider how the Reality Assumption constitutes a constraint on the creativity of authors. I've been focusing on the way that the Reality Assumption allows us to fill in the gaps, supplying the background of a story so that we can understand what's going on. Since this is our default starting point, it's actually quite difficult for an author to get readers to imagine a completely different background for a story: that is, a story that is not in any way set in the real world, one that has no overlap with anything that we're familiar with. We just tend, automatically, to fill in the gaps with what we know. Of course authors are aware of that, and authors who want to create storyworlds that are dramatically different from the real world manage to do this; but they have to work hard. If a story had absolutely no overlap with anything that we're familiar with, it's very likely we wouldn't understand it at all.[16]

The idea here is that even if we suspend our default assumption about the real background for some domain, for example physics, we don't suspend it for other domains represented in the story. If Douglas Adams in *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* had wanted us to assume that the psychology and not just the physics was different, he would have had to have done quite a bit of work to get us to stop assuming that the characters are responding in the normal way. So authors who want readers to imagine much more radically different storyworlds must work very hard. This is true even with impossible fictions, even fictions that explicitly have contradictions on purpose. We tend to try to work all the time to try to make sense of it in terms of something that we know. So even having a contradiction doesn't actually get us to think that the world of the story is completely different from the real world.

Now, as I said, the usual way to get readers to depart from a real-world background is with the explicit text, when we take what's explicit in the text to represent what I'll call *authorial say-so:* what the author wants you to imagine. For example, Amado just establishes that Vadinho has come back from the dead, and we accept that; it's explicit in the story. But it's not the case that authors can simply stipulate whatever they want to be the case in the story just by writing it down. The Reality Assumption provides a reason why they can't do that. Readers can reject certain stipulations because the story simply doesn't provide sufficient reason to override the Reality Assumption in a certain domain.

For instance, there's a substantial discussion in analytic philosophy about why readers may not accept stipulations about moral or conceptual story-truths that contradict reality. Suppose that you have a story in which a bunch of characters are searching for various things on a list, hunting around in order to win a prize.[17] One of the things that they have to find is an oval. A character finds a five-fingered maple leaf, and announces, "Good, we found the oval!" and runs off and claims the prize. The thought here is that an author cannot simply stipulate that a maple leaf is shaped like an oval.

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[16] This may be a feature of language, since in order to understand the words on the page, one typically relates them to what they ordinarily mean (even if there are many unfamiliar words, as with *A Clockwork Orange*, or they have been produced randomly, as with Dadaist automatic writing). The same applies to understanding representations in other media, for instance representational painting. However, The Reality Assumption may play little or no role in our comprehension of non-representational, abstract art.

[17] The example is from Stephen Yablo, "Coulda, Woulda, Shoulda," in *Conceivability and Possibility*, ed. Tamar Szabo Gendler and John Hawthorne, 2002, 441–92.

There's another case, with a story where someone stipulates that an armchair and a television are a fork and a knife.[18] The thought is that we won't accept that in the story. The reason is that we can't make sense of the idea that a five-fingered maple leaf is an oval, or that something that looks like a chair and a television are a fork and a knife. It just doesn't make sense, so we reject it.

However, I think that the relevant point applies to all sorts of facts, not just moral and conceptual truths. We criticize authors who make mistakes about the historical facts or the scientific facts and so on. In those cases, we may simply reject their claim about what obtains in the story, because we recognize that they're trying to set their story at a certain time period and that they've made a mistake about what was actually the case then. We simply don't accept what it says in the text, even if that's what they want us to accept. To give you an artificial example of this, suppose that in the middle of *Pride and Prejudice*, which is a realistic novel, Jane Austen wrote the following sentence: "A household of eighteen was slaughtered and consumed by a horde of the undead" (where the undead are zombies). I suggest that had Austen simply said that in the middle of her book, no one would accept that there were zombies in the world of *Pride and Prejudice*. It's not enough simply to stipulate it, given our default assumption that the novel is realistic in the relevant ways, and everything we've read so far supports that. But of course it is different if you do something, make an effort, to establish that there are zombies in the world of *Pride and Prejudice*. This is what Seth Grahame-Smith does in his novel *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, which is a "mash-up" of Austen's novel and a zombie story. (The quoted sentence comes from his novel.)

Notice that it's actually much easier for authors to stipulate departures from genre conventions. Authors simply have to state that something you take for granted in the genre doesn't obtain. Here are some pop culture examples. I'm told that in *The Lord of the Rings* there's a kind of dragon called a *cold drake* which Tolkien simply says doesn't breathe fire. That's all he has to do; he just says it doesn't breathe fire and everyone accepts that. In Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire*, Rice stipulates that vampires cannot be killed by a stake through the heart. Everyone accepts that. Similarly (though controversially), there are now "fast zombie" movies, even though in the past zombies were always slow in movies. How do you stipulate that there are fast zombies? You just say so, or you show them moving fast. Nobody says that those aren't zombies. This is by contrast with cases where an author tries to stipulate something that isn't true, when the rest of what they've done seems to support the assumption that they're being realistic for that domain (as with the hypothetical Austen example). So I think that the Reality Assumption is actually a much stronger constraint on authorial creativity than something like genre conventions, which authors can typically change simply by stipulation.

In conclusion, I claim that because of the Reality Assumption, authors face a significant challenge if they want to create a storyworld that departs radically from the real world. Mere stipulation is just not enough. But this is not a problem; it's not a negative restriction on authorial creativity. Rather, it's our shared background that provides the framework within which authors' creativity is exercised. In fact, I think that the default assumption that the work is about the world may enable the relevant sorts of

[18] The example is from Brian Weatherson, "Morality, Fiction, and Possibility," *Philosophers' Imprint* 4, no. 3 (2004): 1–27.

creativity. An author could not be explicit about every aspect of the storyworld without writing something infinite; they must let readers fill in the gaps as they go along. By not having to specify everything, they can focus on what they want to make original, whether in the characterizations, the plot, the language, and so on. Their challenge is to decide how to get readers to imagine a storyworld that departs from reality *in some respects*, but not in every respect. If the departure is too radical, we have difficulty appreciating the work. We care about many works of literature because we relate to the characters and their lives, because we feel a connection to them. The Reality Assumption explains how fictions can be grounded in the real world even if authors creatively depart from it.[19]

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