Children spend much of their lives immersed in fiction, as they engage with stories in fairy tales, books, movies, and television shows. Because of this immersion, developmental psychologists have long been interested in how children make sense of fictional characters such as Batman and SpongeBob SquarePants. For an adult, there is a sharp division between what is real and what is not, but this might not be the case for children. One traditional view of development, defended most notably by Piaget (1962), is that young children are prone to magical thinking—they lack the capacity to distinguish the real from the make-believe.

There is now abundant evidence that this view is mistaken. When explicitly asked, even 3-year-olds understand that ghosts, monsters, and witches are 'make-believe' and dogs, houses, and bears are 'real-life' (e.g. Morison and Gardner 1978; Wellman and Estes 1986; DiLalla and Watson 1988; Harris et al. 1991; Samuels and Taylor 1994; Golomb and Galasso 1995). They also do not confuse imagination with reality—a child who imagines that a pencil is in a box will not mistakenly direct someone asking for a pencil to the box (Woolley and Phelps 1994; see also Leslie 1994). And, contrary to popular belief, those children who create imaginary friends are aware of their status as imaginary (Taylor 1999). The consensus from this work, then, is that an understanding of the distinction between what is real and what is make-believe is present by the age of 3, if not earlier.

In our own research and in this chapter, we will accept the general conclusion that children can distinguish reality from fantasy, and we will present our own evidence that supports this claim. But our main purpose here is to argue that this body of previous research has not yet asked the right questions. Adults’ and children’s intuitive understanding of fiction¹ is considerably more nuanced than developmental psychologists have assumed.

We thank Tamar Gendler, Shaun Nichols, and Geoff Pynn for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this chapter.

¹ We use the terms ‘fiction’, ‘fantasy’, and ‘make-believe’ interchangeably in our discussions.
REALITY AND FICTION

Imagine someone who could make only a reality/fantasy distinction. Someone with this binary categorization scheme would correctly separate fictional characters from real people. All real people belong in the same (real) world, and all of these people could potentially meet and interact in this world. This world is separate from anything fictional, so all real people are unable to meet or interact with fictional characters. This separation is what has been explored in all of the developmental research to date.

Despite having complete success with the reality/fantasy distinction, our binary categorizer would miss an important fact about the nature of fiction. She would create a single fictional world, separate from the real world, and she would populate it with all of the fictional characters. All of the characters in this single fictional world could potentially meet and interact, just as all real people can potentially meet and interact. Batman and SpongeBob could potentially sit down in Gotham City together for a chat; James Bond might meet Alexander Portnoy; Superman could rescue Anna Karenina.

Something seems flawed about this aspect of the categorization scheme, so much so that the idea of these crossovers can be funny, as in the *New Yorker* cartoon in Fig. 5.1.

We want to separate Batman from SpongeBob, eliminating the possibility of contact between these characters. Batman and SpongeBob belong to different...
fictional worlds, and Batman’s world is just as disconnected from SpongeBob’s world as it is from the real world.

At least, this is our intuition. But do ‘normal’ adults (without any philosophic or psychological axes to grind) feel the same way? What about young children? We explored this by asking adults and 5-year-old children questions such as the following:

Do you think Batman is real or make-believe?
Do you think your friend is real or make-believe?
Does Batman think Robin is real or make-believe?
Does Batman think SpongeBob is real or make-believe?

This method might need some justification, as one might object that there should be no constraints on a fictional character’s beliefs, or that it is nonsensical to attribute any beliefs to characters. But we claim that, in order to make sense of fiction at all, we must attribute mental states to fictional characters, including beliefs about what is real and what is make-believe. For instance, consider that Batman will travel across Gotham City, risking life and limb to rescue Robin from the clutches of the Joker. This would make no sense at all if Batman thought that Robin did not really exist. Additionally, Batman’s beliefs are constrained in certain ways. While we as readers are aware that Batman is stuck in a fantasy, Batman does not share this awareness; he believes that he is real. Indeed, many fictions draw heavily on a character’s struggle to tell fiction from reality, including *Hamlet* and *Spellbound*. These stories work precisely because we can attribute beliefs to the characters in them and evaluate those beliefs as being true or false in the world of the story.

In support of this analysis, our subjects provided consistent and clear answers to our questions. Not surprisingly, adults and children both reported that Batman is make-believe and that their friends are real, correctly separating reality from fiction. This is a replication of previous work. More interesting, however, are their responses about Batman’s beliefs.

First, adults report that Batman believes Robin is real. Five-year-olds tended to have the same intuition, although they sometimes misinterpreted the questions about Batman’s beliefs in terms of their own beliefs, and hence said that Batman believes that Robin is make-believe. Second, adults report that Batman believes SpongeBob is make-believe. So do 5-year-olds. Because of children’s occasional egotistical reinterpretations, we conducted a second study that asked children to judge which actions were possible between two characters, rather than asking them to judge the real or make-believe connection directly. Using this method, we obtained the same results: characters in different worlds cannot act on each other, while characters in the same world can (see Skolnick and Bloom, forthcoming, for discussion).

Children and adults thus seem to assume that fictional characters do not all belong to the same world. We have yet to test younger children, but our results
so far strongly suggest that the hypothetical binary categorizer may not actually exist.

THE RELATIONSHIPS AMONG FICTIONAL WORLDS

In our discussions, we characterize our patterns of intuition in terms of worlds (see Currie 1990; Eco 1990; Lewis 2000). There is a single real world, which contains everything in our universe: people, planets, laws of physics, and so on. When we categorize something or someone as real, we judge that that object or person belongs in this real world. When we categorize something or someone as fictional, we judge that that object or person does not belong in our world; it belongs in the realm of fantasy. As our study shows, there are many fictional worlds in this realm: one for Batman and Robin, another for SpongeBob and Patrick, another for James Bond and Dr No, and so on.

These results suggest two general principles: (1) Within a world, characters are connected by an ‘is-real-to’ relationship, and (2) across worlds, characters are connected by an ‘is-fictional-to’ relationship. As a direct consequence of these principles, we can infer characters’ beliefs about each other. Two characters in the same world should believe each other to be real; two characters in different worlds should believe each other to be fictional. The results from our study could be taken to support these principles as adequately describing our common-sense cosmology of fictional worlds.

We believe that claim (1) is mostly correct, with the qualification that the appropriate knowledge connection must exist in order for characters to make the ‘is-real-to’ judgment correctly. After all, you are in the same world as many people you don’t believe to be real—not because they aren’t, but because you have never heard of them. There are certainly fictional worlds in which characters might not know of each other, as in mystery stories where a detective is unaware of the identity of a criminal. There are also cases in which characters are confused or mistaken about another character’s status, as when some of the characters in The Usual Suspects start the movie believing that Keysar Soze does not exist. We will simply conclude that all characters within a world could potentially know each other, and hence are all potentially real to each other.

But claim (2), which describes the nature of across-world relationships, is mistaken. It is not necessarily true that characters in any one world are fictional to characters in every other world. For one thing, there are asymmetrical relationships. You might think that Batman is fictional, but Batman shouldn’t think that you are fictional. Batman presumably thinks that he is in the real world, and should have no thoughts about our (actually real) world. If Batman did know about the real world, it would be possible for him to know about his creators at DC Comics, and thereby to know that he is actually a fictional character. This might be acceptable for experimental fiction, but not for a garden-variety superhero.
There exist asymmetrical relationships within the realm of fiction as well. A realistic fictional character, such as the mobster Tony Soprano, has presumably heard of Batman and could judge Batman to be fictional. But has Batman heard of Tony Soprano? Maybe, but probably not. Tony Soprano has heard of Cinderella; has Cinderella heard of Tony Soprano? Certainly not.

It is thus clear that our second claim needs modification. Every fictional character does not believe that every fictional character in a different world is fictional. In fact, our study might have over-estimated the extent to which people believe that SpongeBob is fictional to Batman. This is because we used a forced-choice method, asking our subjects to answer only ‘real’ or ‘make-believe’. Suppose our subjects had a firm intuition that ‘real’ was the wrong answer. This might lead to a response of ‘make-believe’, even if they weren’t sure that this option was correct. If we had included a ‘neither of the above’ or a ‘never heard of him’ alternative, our subjects’ responses might have been different. We are currently in the process of running a study that addresses these issues.

This new study will reveal the intuitions that people have about the knowledge connections between characters. But how are they able to make these judgments? How can they tell when it is appropriate for one character to have beliefs about another? We believe that these intuitions are the direct result of how we create fictional worlds.

THE CREATION OF FICTIONAL WORLDS

Every time we encounter a new fictional story, we create a new world. The default assumption is that this world contains everything that the real world contains. We then modify this representation based on several constraints: what the story tells us explicitly, what we can directly deduce from specific conventions of the fictional genre, and, most importantly, how similar to the real world the fictional world is described as being (for discussions of similar world-creation theories, see Walton 1990; Ryan 1991; Gerrig 1993; for an alternate perspective, see Thomasson 1998).

For example, when we read a story about Batman, we begin by creating a representation of the real world. We know explicitly from the story that Batman’s world must contain Batman himself, Robin, and a host of other characters that do not exist in the real world. So we modify our representation of the world by adding these characters to it. The story also tells us implicitly that other modifications need to be made in order to turn our world representation into Batman’s world. For instance, although the denizens of Batman’s world are fairly intelligent, they somehow lack the resources or inclination to figure out that Bruce Wayne and Batman are the same person—despite the fact that he’s an obvious candidate to be a caped vigilante, and, really, a cowl is a poor disguise. (Superman is a worse offender here, since one must assume that the people of that
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world are unable to recognize that Superman + glasses = Clark Kent.) So our
world-creation process modifies the intelligence level of the average Batman-
world person with respect to these particular facts.

One subtle change we must make to any fictional world is to remove any fic-
tional representation of the characters. That is, Batman’s world cannot contain
any of the Batman movies or comic books; that would require the same character
to be both real and fictional within Batman’s world. Changes in the same vein
must be made to the worlds of movies and plays and other media that rely on
actors. The realistic movie Million Dollar Baby, for instance, stars Clint Eastwood
as the boxing instructor Frankie Dunn. For this to make sense, someone watch-
ing the movie has to tacitly assume that world of the movie differs from ours in
that it lacks the actor Clint Eastwood. (Consider that if Clint Eastwood did exist
in the world of the movie, people would gawk at Frankie Dunn on the street,
because he looks exactly like the famous actor.) This requirement can lead to
some clever playing with these conventions. In the movie Oceans 12, the actress
Julia Roberts plays the character of Tess, who is enlisted as part of a plan to steal
a valuable work of art. Tess’s friends decide that the best way for her to do so
is by impersonating a famous person, and they decide to have her imperson-
ate an actress whom Tess somewhat resembles: Julia Roberts. Even this playful
case requires some adjustments to reality. For instance, one has to accept that
Tess bears only a vague resemblance to Julia Roberts, not obvious to a casual
onlooker.

These adjustments to the real world are made on the basis of what is explicitly
stipulated in the story, or what is implicit in the genre. But most things in fic-
tional worlds stay the same. People in Batman’s world have kidneys, when water
gets cold it turns into ice, bacon is made from pigs, 14 comes after 13, the word
‘hello’ is a greeting, and so on. There are countless default assumptions that are
extended, unconsciously, from the real world to the fictional world (see Gend-
ler 2000).

We believe that this theory of world creation explains our intuitions about
fictional characters’ beliefs about other characters. Importantly, our intuitions
about this relationship are not a direct property of the similarity between the
fictional worlds themselves. Rather, these intuitions are established via the real
world. For instance, when we ask what James Bond thinks of Cinderella, we
don’t compute the relationship between Bond’s world and Cinderella’s world
directly. Rather, we ask whether Bond’s world is similar enough to our own to
reasonably export the fact ‘Cinderella is fictional’ from our world to his—just
as we exported facts about ice and bacon to Batman’s world in virtue of its sim-
ilarity to our own world. This indirect method of setting up the relationships
between fictional worlds explains the occasional asymmetries mentioned earlier.
James Bond can think that Cinderella is fictional, but Cinderella should have no
intuitions about James Bond; her world is too different from our own for us to
credit her with the same beliefs about James Bond that we have.
Two examples can help to illustrate this point. First, consider Ian McEwan’s novel \textit{Saturday}, which takes place in London, on February 15, 2003. It is realistic in tone, and we assume that the story’s world is the same as our world, except for the specific story characters and events. So it is perfectly consistent that the main character coincidentally bumps into Prime Minister Tony Blair. Blair is part of our real world and has been imported into this fictional world as part of its creation. It is also perfectly consistent when the main character complains that \textit{Madame Bovary} is a boring work of fiction. \textit{Madame Bovary} is fictional to us; since the character is realistic, it is fictional to him as well. If we were to wonder what the character thought of Batman, we would assume that, as a normal adult, he would have heard of Batman and would believe that he is fictional.

In fact, we would make the same inferences about his mental states as we would about those of a real adult living in London in 2003.

Second, consider SpongeBob SquarePants. SpongeBob is an animated, talking, pants-wearing sponge. He lives in a pineapple under the sea in a land called Bikini Bottom. His best friend, Patrick, is a talking starfish. His world has bizarre principles of physics and biology and few constraints on internal logic. For instance, a boring character might start to speak, and a title card will appear saying ‘Fifty years later’. The character will still be speaking, with his audience now fifty years older. But in the next scene, all the characters will return to their usual age. Although radical changes must be made to our representation of the real world in order to turn it into SpongeBob’s world, it is not anarchy in Bikini Bottom. There are countless real-world facts that are imported in to this world, such as the meanings of English words, the proper interpretation of facial expressions, properties of artifacts (i.e. chairs are still solid objects), and so on. Furthermore, someone watching this show can infer that the usual ‘is-real-to’ relationship holds among the characters belonging to this world; SpongeBob correctly believes that Patrick is real, and vice versa.

On the other hand, this world is so different from our own that specific geographical or historical facts might not be imported. It’s hardly obvious that his world contains Tony Blair. Furthermore, because the inhabitants of Bikini Bottom are sufficiently different from us, it is not clear that just because something is fictional to us, it will be fictional to them.

\section*{Challenges and Extensions}

The intuition driving much of our discussion is that Batman, SpongeBob, and characters from all other stories belong to separate worlds. Our research suggests that this way of structuring the fictional realm is intuitive even for young children. We contend that different stories belong in separate worlds because of how they are created. Whenever we encounter a new story, we start with a new representation of our own world and modify it accordingly, populating the
universe of fantasy with multiple worlds. Starting with our own world as the basis of all fictional worlds ensures that each fictional world has enough detail to fill in unspecified or underspecified elements. It also ensures that the multiple fictional worlds share the correct relationship to each other. Batman is a fictional character for us in the real world; so, when we make modifications to our world in order to create Tony Soprano’s world, Batman is exported as a fictional character during the creation process. Thus, Tony Soprano believes that Batman is fictional.

So our theory goes. But there are many problems one could raise as objections to this theory of the fictional cosmology and certain subtleties that our discussions so far glossed over.

Crossovers

Crossovers are cases in which characters from different worlds actually do meet, contrary to our multiple-worlds picture. (More generally, the problem also extends to events and entities, but we’ll restrict ourselves here to characters.) One example is the New Yorker cartoon reproduced in Fig. 5.1. Other examples include the movie Who Framed Roger Rabbit, some episodes of The Simpsons, cartoons where Spider-Man and Batman team up, and so on. How can these situations fit with our theory of the common-sense ontology of fiction?

One possible solution, proposed by Walton (1990), is that these creative innovations involve the creation of a novel world. A crossover story in which Batman meets Spider-Man involves three separate worlds: one for Batman, one for Spider-Man, and one in which they interact. The easiest way to create this third world is to import all of the distinctive facts about each of the other two worlds. The catch is that, for this three-world solution to be coherent, the characters involved must be similar enough to each other to interact effectively in a single world. There can be a crossover between the television programs CSI and Crossing Jordan, for instance, because their worlds are roughly our world, and so the creation of this third world poses no special problems. The worlds of Batman and Spider-Man both depart from reality in similar ways (e.g. the existence of super-villains) and so can also coalesce well enough. Consider, in contrast, a fiction that brought together a realistic drama such as Law and Order with the world of SpongeBob SquarePants. It is not clear that this is even possible, given that the two worlds conflict in so many ways.

A different possibility for crossovers is to continue with the story in an already established world. This works best when the world in question has been designed to be open to importing characters and events from other worlds. The world of the Shrek movies, for instance, by design contains all of the fairy-tale characters. Perhaps Batman could show up in this world as well without creating too much of a stir.

The likelihood of a crossover reflects the organization of our fictional-world cosmology. Stories that describe highly realistic worlds are close to each other and
to the real world in fictional space, and relatively far from worlds that are highly unrealistic, like those in sword-and-sorcery-type stories. Fictions that share certain attributes tend to cluster together, like all superhero stories.

Putting characters in the right world

How do we determine whether someone or something is real or fictional? In many cases, the information about reality status is explicit, as when we pick up a novel, or watch a televised drama, or when we are told that such-and-so is real or make-believe. But such explicit information may be lacking in many cases, so even children must develop a sensitivity to other cues.

In general, children can gain a good idea of what kinds of things belong in the real world and what kinds of things don’t, through their own experiences. When confronted with a representation of a new character or creature, they can do a quick perceptual comparison: is this new thing similar enough to objects in the real world to count as real? Conversely, is it similar enough to other fictional objects to be counted as fictional? Most of the characters that children know are highly unrealistic: superheroes, cartoon characters, talking animals, and the like. These are so different from the objects that make up their everyday experience that it should be easy for children to separate them into a different category using just perceptual properties. Children know, for example, that they don’t see cartoon characters walking among us. This makes it easy for them to judge that a cartoon character is fictional. This inference might lead them astray in rare instances, as when they see Stephen Hawking on The Simpsons, but it is usually accurate in its division from real and fictional. Additionally, if children use similarity as their main cue in making reality/fantasy distinctions, they should have more difficulty understanding that a realistic character is fictional, an issue that warrants further research.

Once reality has been accurately separated from fiction, there remains the issue of putting fictional characters into the right worlds. Our theory states that we create a new world every time we encounter a new story. But this is a little misleading, since it hinges on how we define ‘story’. Surely it is not the case that every novel or movie is its own story, since that would involve creating new worlds for sequels. The Sherlock Holmes stories by Arthur Conan Doyle all clearly belong to the same world; we should not create a new world for each Holmes novel. A story must thus be broader than a single work of fiction.

So what is a single story? What is contained in a single world? One promising direction to look for a definition has to do with characters. A single story could be one that involves the same character or set of characters. This takes care of the Holmes case and all other cases involving serial books or movies. As long as Sherlock Holmes is there, the new book belongs in the same, already created Holmes world. Note that sameness of character not a necessary condition for a single world, since there are cases in which one identifies two fictions as corresponding
to the same world, even if none of the characters overlap. For example, various television shows have taken place in the world of *Star Trek*, including the original 1960s series, *The Next Generation*, *Deep Space 9*, and *Enterprise*.

Even after accounting for cases where multiple character sets occupy the same world, determining which characters belong in which worlds is still not entirely straightforward. James Bond, for example, first appeared in Ian Fleming's novel *Casino Royale* in 1953. There is much debate about Bond's exact birth date, but in order for him to have been a spy by 1953, he must have been born around the 1920s. Since the novel is realistic enough to assume that time passes normally, he should be long retired by now. But we know from modern James Bond movies like *Die Another Day* that he's not—he's still middle-aged. So is the world of *Casino Royale* just a different world from that of *Die Another Day*? It's possible that a new Bond world is created every time a new actor plays the role, eliminating the problem of Bond's failure to age and change in appearance over time. But this solution creates new problems. We now have multiple Bonds, each of which has no shared history with the others, which fails to acknowledge that we're still dealing with the same character in all cases.

One promising solution to this problem of multiple Bonds relies on the distinction between essential and accidental properties (similar to ideas proposed in Kripke 1980). It is likely that some properties of a character are essential to that character, while others are not. As discussed above, Bond's birth date is intuitively irrelevant, for instance. So are his precise appearance and certain personal habits, such as whether or not he is a smoker. But other properties are essential to making James Bond *James Bond*, particularly the fact that he is a British spy.

Our solution thus involves creating a single Bond world that includes all of Bond's essential properties while leaving Bond's accidental properties underspecified (see Lewis 1983). This solution allows us to say that all of the Bonds in the various novels and movies are the same character, while still accounting for the differences in details among the various novels and movies. One advantage to this solution is that it allows us to account for cases where a work of fiction plainly would *not* correspond to the same Bond world. If there was a movie about a character named James Bond who was a depressed stockbroker who decides to quit his job and become a dancer, plainly this wouldn't be a Bond movie at all, merely a movie with a character with the same name. This movie thus requires its own fictional world, separate from the Bond world.

We are still left with marginal cases, illustrated by speculations before Pierce Brosnan was cast that a future Bond might be black (played by Wesley Snipes), female ('Jane Bond', played by Sharon Stone), or gay (played by Rupert Everett). It is unclear whether these Bond movies would belong in the same Bond world as the previous movies and novels. Although determining the classification of these characters is still difficult, we can now highlight the source of the difficulty: is Bond's race, gender, or sexual orientation an essential or an accidental property of
the character? Our answer to this question will indicate whether any new Bond belongs in the same fictional world or a different one.

Errors versus alterations

We have described the creation of fictional worlds as a straightforward exportation and modification of the real world. But there are occasions in which things don’t go quite this smoothly. Consider the case of Robert Parker’s detective novels that take place in Boston. Being realistic in tone, these novels involve very little modification of the real world. But in one of his novels, Parker writes that his detective drove the wrong way down a one-way Boston street, leading to letters by angry Bostonians. What’s going on here? Common sense tells us that Parker got it wrong. It is not as if he has created a fictional world where Boston has a subtly different driving pattern; he just messed up. The readers were complaining, justifiably, that he did an inadequate job in creating his fictional world. In contrast, it would be ridiculous for someone to complain about how unrealistic it is for the denizens of Bikini Bottom to be cooking at the campfire even though they are underwater—this is an intentional modification of the real world and should be understood as such.

Such cases are easy to identify as errors, but things are often not so easy. Consider again McEwan’s novel *Saturday*. Near the end of the novel, a violent criminal named Baxter is pacified by a young woman reciting a poem. As part of a critical review, Banville (2005) complains that this is ‘a remarkable response from the kind of thug [Baxter] is portrayed as being’. Is Baxter’s response really a mistake on McEwan’s part? Yes, if McEwan really is trying to depict a perfectly realistic world. No, if McEwan should instead be read as having purposefully created a world where such things can happen. Of course, one might argue that McEwan’s creation of such a world is artistically flawed, that his world is uninteresting, unimaginative, and morally suspect—and Banville argues all of these things. But this is different from accusing McEwan of ignorance or carelessness. The crucial issue here is our ability to tell the difference between a mistake, like Parker’s wrong-way street, and a purposeful depiction.

Another illustration of this boundary between mistakes and deliberate violations comes from a *Far Side* cartoon by Gary Larson. The cartoon depicts a male mosquito coming home after a long day’s work, hanging up his hat in the entryway, and complaining to his mosquito wife that he’s had an exhausting day spreading malaria to thousands of people. Larson reports getting mail from concerned readers about this cartoon, informing him that it is the female mosquito, not the male, who does the biting (Larson 1989: 124). His response is that none of his readers had a problem with the fact that his cartoon mosquitoes lived in houses, wore clothes, or spoke English, so why should they care about the mosquitoes’ gender roles? But in this case, Larson is wrong, and the readers are right.
Larson’s cartoon changed the rules in such a way that allowed the mosquitoes to behave like humans, but it did not switch the roles of male and female mosquitoes. It is tempting to argue that all bets are off in cases that are as far from reality as *Far Side* cartoons, but the letters from readers indicate otherwise. They clearly expected certain laws of reality to be violated and certain ones to be upheld.

Porous boundaries

Much research has shown that both adults and children separate reality from fiction. Despite this fundamental separation, this boundary can occasionally be porous; there are cases in which we treat fictional events as if they were real. This is particularly so when it comes to our emotional reactions. One long-standing puzzle in philosophy arises from the fact that we are moved by the fate of fictional characters in much the same way as we are moved by real events (e.g. Radford 1975; Walton 1990; Clark and Van Der Wege 2003; Gendler and Kovakovich 2005). This is puzzling because of the apparent conflict between feeling bad about the death of Anna Karenina, say, and knowing full well that no such person exists.

Facts, not only emotions, can pass through the reality/fiction boundary; we can use fiction to form beliefs about the real world (see Gendler, Ch. 9 below). It is no secret that people often seek out certain types of fiction (historical novels, for example) because they want a painless way of learning about the real world. Much of the appeal of Arthur Golden’s novel *Memoirs of a Geisha* is that it accurately depicts what it is like to be a real geisha. The publication of *The DaVinci Code* led to a booming tourist industry in Scotland. The novel claimed that the Holy Grail was buried under a certain church in Scotland, so people visited the church to look for it, despite their awareness that the book is a work of fiction. In general, much of what we believe to be true—about police procedure, for instance, or life aboard a submarine—is, for many of us, acquired through fiction.

These porous boundaries can sometimes cause confusion. Robert Young, who played the title role in the television show *Marcus Welby, M.D.*, reported getting thousands of letters each week asking for medical advice (Real 1977: 121). The actor later exploited this confusion by appearing in commercials as an authority on the health benefits of Sanka decaffeinated coffee. Presumably people sending the letters and watching the ads were fully aware that *Marcus Welby, M.D.* was not a documentary and that Robert Young was not really a doctor. But for some reason, they could not resist the inference that Young would know a lot about medicine because the character did. In general, it seems to be particularly difficult for people to avoid drawing conclusions about actors based on the roles that they play.

These confusions illustrate the importance of similarities between the real world and fictional worlds. Often these similarities lead people to make correct inferences about the real world based on a fictional one, as when we read historical fiction. But similarities can also fool people with cases like *Marcus
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Welby, M.D., where exportation of information from the fictional world to the real world looks like it should be licensed, but isn’t.

The issues we have discussed in this section present genuine challenges to our theory of how fictional worlds are created. Problems with crossovers, issues of character identity, the differences between mistakes and deliberate violations, and the nature of the boundary between reality and fiction are not easily solved. But there is a sense in which our theory predicts that they shouldn’t be. Our goal in this chapter has been to create a theory that captures our common-sense understanding of fiction, and, in many cases, common sense does not give us clear intuitions about the issues raised here. It is genuinely confusing for people to determine which characters could meet in a crossover, or which properties of a new James Bond or Batman should be imported from previous versions of the character. In future research, we hope to determine more precisely how people think about these difficult issues and to refine our theory of world creation based on these intuitions.

BEYOND FICTION

The focus of this chapter has been fictional worlds, but we should conclude by noting that that there are other non-real worlds that children and adults deal with. These include the worlds that we invoke when planning the future, the worlds that we create when we daydream, the worlds that scientists use when constructing models or thought experiments, and the worlds created by very young children when they pretend. Indeed, the fact that young children are adroit at keeping their pretend worlds separate (see Harris 2000) raises the possibility that the creation of multiple worlds might be a unlearned default for how imagination works.

An investigation of the nature of the relationship between planning and fiction, particularly in children, could prove fruitful in discovering not only how, but also why, we create fictional worlds. We hope that gaining a greater understanding of the issues raised in this chapter can help us to understand this (uniquely human?) ability to think far beyond our current surroundings.

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