

# A new “quasi” solution to the paradox of fiction

## The Limits of Fiction (Collège de France)

Louis Rouillé

FNRS / Liège

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## *Captatio benevolentiae*

- ▶ Radford (1975)’s “paradox of fiction” (PoF) is about the emotions we all experience when consuming fictions.
  - ▶ They are arguably *the main reason why* we consume fiction in the first place.
  - ▶ They are *typically* directed at fictional characters (e.g. pitying Anna Karenina, feeling distress for Desdemona, etc.)
- ▶ I hereby claim that I have a new solution to the PoF:
  - ▶ and if you know this problem, you probably think that I am either completely deluded, or hopelessly self-confident.<sup>1</sup>
  - ▶ *Indeed*, there is almost no part of the PoF that has not been discussed, and 50 years of philosophical discussion has been inconclusive...
- ▶ *Yet*, my “solution” is genuinely new: I am quite confident on this one.
  - ▶ Though is it really a *solution*? you will tell me!
  - ▶ This is why I put “quasi” before, so I can rhetorically fall back on the idea that it was not meant to be *genuine* solution...
  - ▶ Also because I will argue against the “emotion premise” (like Walton),
    - ▶ though I will argue for “quasi-selves” (and not “quasi-emotions”).

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<sup>1</sup>If you did not think either, probably you should, because you seem to have *far too much* confidence in me!

# Plan

Charting the logical space of solutions

Temporary, layered agencies

Quasi-self as temporary, layered agencies

Concluding remarks: on the multiplicity of selves

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## The inconsistent triad

- ▶ The PoF is a standard paradox, and here is the inconsistent triad:
  - (1) One does not believe in the existence of fictional characters, situations, and events.
  - (2) To have an emotion toward something, one must believe that it exists.
  - (3) One experiences emotions toward fictional characters, situations, and events.
- ▶ Solutions to the paradox...
  - ▶ Standardly deny either of (1), (2), and/or (3) to save the *possibility* of fictional emotions
- ▶ ... or not.
  - ▶ *No solution view*: fictional emotions are simply *irrational* (Radford 1975).
  - ▶ *Hidden problem view*: the PoF points to a deeper problem about the normativity of (fictional) emotions (Gaut 2003), (Friend 2020).
    - ▶ The *genuine* question is: “what are the reasons which explain (fictional) emotions?”
    - ▶ The *genuine* difficulty is: emotions are complex states integrating (at least) phenomenological, cognitive, and motivational components.

## Tweaking (1)

- (1) One does not believe in the existence of fictional characters, situations, and events.
- (2) To have an emotion toward something, one must believe that it exists.
- (3) One experiences emotions toward fictional characters, situations, and events.

### ► Ways of denying (1):

- (1a) One does **temporarily** believe in the existence of fictional characters, situations, and events (Suits 2006)
- (1b) One does **perceptually (but not cognitively)** believe in the existence of fictional characters, situations, and events (Quilty-Dunn 2015)
- (1c) One does not believe in the existence of fictional characters, situations, and events, **but one is under the cognitive illusion that fictional characters, situations and events exist** (Schaeffer 1999).
- (1d) One **does believe** in the existence of fictional characters, situations, and events **in the fiction** (Langland-Hassan 2020).

## Tweaking (2)

- (1) One does not believe in the existence of fictional characters, situations, and events.
- (2) To have an emotion toward something, one must believe that it exists.
- (3) One experiences emotions toward fictional characters, situations, and events.

### ► Ways of denying (2):

- (2a) To have an emotion toward something, **no cognitive condition** (Ledoux 1998), (Robinson 2005)
  - “Non-cognitivism” (see (Dos Santos 2017) for criticism)
- (2b) To have an emotion toward something, one must **have a representation of it** (Lamarque 1981), (Carroll 1990).
  - “Anti-judgementalism” (Gaut 2003), “Thought theories”, or “broad cognitivism” (Friend 2016)
  - Does it do justice to the “aboutness” of emotions? to the motivational component? (Walton 1990)
- (2c) To have an emotion toward something, one must believe that it exists; **and to have an emotion toward a fictional thing, one must imagine that it exists** (Gilmore 2020), (Currie 2020)
  - The “substitutional approach” (Friend 2022), or a kind of disjunctivism (emotions are either real, or fictional).
  - *Idea*: real emotions track truth; fictional emotion track fictional truth
  - *Pb*: is it possible to rely on the distinction? (Friend 2022); we need a way to distinguish “mainline” from “borderline” emotion (without begging the question) (Stecker 2011).

## Tweaking (3)

- (1) One does not believe in the existence of fictional characters, situations, and events.
- (2) To have an emotion toward something, one must believe that it exists.
- (3) One experiences emotions toward fictional characters, situations, and events.

### ► Ways of denying (3):

- (3a) One experiences emotions toward **real people we associate with fictional characters** (Charlton 1984)
- (3b) One experiences **quasi-emotions** toward fictional characters, situations, and events (Walton 1978, 1990, 1997)
  - There are ongoing debates about what Walton’s view precisely is:
  - see in particular (Friend 2022) for an opinionated review of this recent literature.
  - I follow the traditional reconstruction of Walton’s “quasi-emotion” response here (Lamarque 1991).



## Taking stock

- ▶ At least all of the colored expression have been argued to misdescribe the facts, and so breed controversies:
  - (1) One **does not believe** in the **existence of** fictional characters, situations, and events.
  - (2) To have an emotion toward something, one **must believe that it exists**.
  - (3) One experiences **emotions** toward **fictional** characters, situations, and events.
- ▶ I am going to focus on perhaps the last uncontroversial word which opens the door to a yet never discussed solution:
  - ▶ “One”

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## The new solution

- (1) One does not believe in the existence of fictional characters, situations, and events.
- (2) To have an emotion toward something, one must believe that it exists.
- (3) One experiences emotions toward fictional characters, situations, and events.

- ▶ (3) is intuitively *false*, because it is not *one’s empirical self* who experiences the fictional emotions, but rather a projection of one’s empirical self into the fiction.
  - ▶ *In other words*: experiencing fictional emotions consists in ascribing *genuine* emotions to a *quasi-self*.
  - ▶ If you do not like “quasi-self”, think “projected self”, “simulated self”, or “imagined self”, or whatever.
- ▶ **General idea**: fictional immersion triggers a split-personality mechanism:
  - ▶ one projects part of one’s self into the imagined content;
  - ▶ while the location one’s *empirical self* is the real setting.<sup>2</sup>
- ▶ *Formally*:
  - ▶ in (1), “one” refers to the empirical self only;
  - ▶ in (3), “one” refers to the quasi-self only;
  - ▶ (2) is in fact *ambiguous*.
  - ▶ In all cases, no contradiction.
- ▶ The PoF was based on an equivocation of “one”.

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<sup>2</sup>Take Walton’s behavioural point: if I do not rush to rescue Desdemona, it is not because I feel quasi-distress (as opposed to distress) for her, but because I do not self-ascribe the distress I feel – so I am not the man, so to speak.

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## Games

- ▶ Recently, Nguyen (2020) proposes to analyse in some details “suitsian games”:
  - ▶ *To mind*: Suits (1978) rejects Wittgenstein’s famous idea that games cannot be defined,
  - ▶ and, in a wonderful socratic dialogue between The Grasshopper, Skepticus and Prudence (as well as other characters), he defines games as
    - ▶ “voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles.”
  - ▶ Schematically, games are analysed as:
    - (a) *Pre-lusory* goals: what actually needs to be done (e.g. put the ball in there);
    - (b) *Rules*: what counts as regular moves (e.g. dribble around when you have the ball);
      - ▶ *Lusory* goals: if (a) is achieved by means of (b), then you score.
- ▶ Nguyen (2020)’s aim is to show that this opens up a sophisticated “motivational structure”:<sup>3</sup>
  - ▶ *Roughly*, it invites embracing a *temporary* and *layered* agency
    - ▶ **Vocab**: “inner” vs. “outer” agent; in other places “full” vs. “gaming” agency.

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<sup>3</sup>Nguyen’s general dialectical purposes consists in arguing that game-design is the art of agency, something like *agency sculpture*, as well as aesthetic and ethical consequences of this view.



## Players

- ▶ Distinction between *striving* vs. *achievement* play.
  - ▶ An *achievement* player is one who *merely* wants to win;
  - ▶ their purpose for playing is identical with their in-game goal.
    - ▶ e.g. suppose the in-game goal is to beat the king, then as a player, I simply will do all I can to beat that king;
    - ▶ including, if needed, efficient training.
- ▶ By contrast, a *striving* player is one who does not merely want to win.
  - ▶ *It is not* that they want something *else* than winning, which they can acquire *through* winning (e.g. money, fitness, fame, education, etc.)
  - ▶ *It is not* that they want to avoid winning (e.g. being nice to a kid, playing forever, etc.)
  - ▶ It is that they want to *struggle*, they do not want a cheap victory.
- ▶ Evidence for striving play (Nguyen 2020: §2):
  - ▶ *The chess master*: you know you will lose
  - ▶ *The good match*: Nguyen and his wife
  - ▶ *Stupid games*: these are designed to lose (e.g. *Twister*, drinking games without a winning condition)

## “Agential fluidity”

▶ A striving player

*acquires, temporarily, an interest in winning for the sake of the struggle. Thus, striving play involves a motivational inversion from ordinary life. In ordinary practical life, we pursue the means for the sake of the ends. But in striving play, we pursue the ends for the sake of the means. We take up a goal for the sake of the activity of struggling for it. (Nguyen 2020: 9)*

▶ In other words:

- ▶ *Practical life*: set up goals (“enduring ends”), and find ways to achieve the goal.
  - ▶ If there are more efficient ways, one is always tempted to use them.
- ▶ *Gaming life*: set up rules (i.e. “inefficient ways”)<sup>4</sup> of achieving pre-lusory goals (“disposable ends”), so that you can enjoy the struggle.
  - ▶ Looking for more efficiency is irrelevant.

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<sup>4</sup>They are Suits “unnecessary obstacles”.

## Self-manipulation and layered agency

▶ Two layers of agency...

*In striving play, the inner layer involves taking on motivations to succeed in the game's term – to win, and to win by achieving whatever the game specifies as the goals. The outer layer involves those motivations which brought us to the game in the first place – and interest in aesthetics, fun, fitness, or whatever. (Nguyen 2020: 56)*

▶ ... embedded in one another.

*These motivations of the inner layer are justified by the motivations of the outer layer, but that justification isn't phenomenologically active during the game. We do not hold both layers in the forefront of our consciousness. We hide our larger reasons from ourselves for a time. (Nguyen 2020: 56)*

► In sum:

*Striving play involves a complex process of agential layering, where players create and deploy a temporary agency, nested inside their primary agency, with its own particular ends and modes of practicality. And it's important to think of this as a layered agency, rather than a changed agency, since the temporal agency is still under the justification thumb of the overall agency. (Nguyen 2020: 69)*

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## The motivational structure of games of make-believe

- ▶ (Linguistic) fictions are *props* in games of make-believe (Walton 1990):
  - ▶ the important part is *games*: and we *play* with the prop and ourselves;
  - ▶ fiction spectators are striving players, because there is no winning at stake.<sup>5</sup>
- ▶ The “disposable end” of a fiction is thus not winning, but *being curious about the fictional characters, events, etc.*
  - ▶ It is a “knowledge game”, so to speak.
  - ▶ When reading a fiction, you need to play at being interested in learning about the plot;
  - ▶ just like “collecting tokens” this interest is disposable, when you close the book, it is done.
- ▶ The rules are simple: just read from beginning to end in order.
  - ▶ Fictional emotions will be the typical *moves* in the game;
  - ▶ they are ascribed to a fictional agent,
  - ▶ i.e. the temporary, layered agency who is being curious about the fictional characters.

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<sup>5</sup>Or marginally so: think of “whodunits”.

## A note on contemplative games

- ▶ Perhaps you think that the analogy between (regular) games and fictions breaks down because it is too thin.<sup>6</sup>
- ▶ Let’s discuss one potential problem with this analogy: the distinction between interactive vs. contemplative games.
  - ▶ In an interactive game, being moved and making moves go together;
  - ▶ in fiction, one is moved but does not move.
    - ▶ Cf. emotion phenomenology without the motivational component.
  - ▶ How is that possible?
- ▶ *The answer*: the quasi-self is located at the “fictional periphery” (Predelli 2020)<sup>7</sup>
  - ▶ *To mind*: the fictional periphery is not *another* fictional world, but an invisible setting in the middle of the fictional world.
  - ▶ As Théophile Gautier nicely writes in *Le Capitaine Fracasse*:  
*L’écrivain qui fait un roman porte naturellement au doigt l’anneau de Gygès, lequel rend invisible.*

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<sup>6</sup>See (Nguyen 2020: §6-7): though he resists reducing striving play to games of make-believe, and I took the opposite perspective.

<sup>7</sup>Alternative terminology: “fiction secondaire” (Vuillaume 1990), “game world” (Walton 1990), “‘secondary’ story world” (Walton 2013). See also the standard structuralist model for narration distinguishing between story and discourse (Culler 2011).

## More on the fictional periphery

- ▶ Take a traditional heterodiegetic narrative fiction like Jane Austen’s *Emma*:  
*Emma’s teller not only never crosses Emma’s path, but is in principle prevented from doing so, since, in some sense, that teller and that lady fictionally inhabit different domains. (Predelli 2020: 46)*
- ▶ Yet, there is *semantic overflow*:  
*That boundary [between the core fiction and the fictional periphery], though inevitably in place, is also a porous frontier. Emma’s fictional teller cannot fictionally kiss that handsome young lady or kick her father. Yet, fictionally, he can speak of them, and he can do so by means of using their names. (Predelli 2020: 53)*
- ▶ Fictional emotions is all about the other end of the telling: the “heterodiegetical narratee”.
  - ▶ A *contemplative* fiction is one where the narratee is located at the periphery;
  - ▶ this explains the “being moved without moving”:
    - ▶ the rules of the game prevents from acting out our emotions.



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## Wrapping up

- ▶ I took Walton (1990)’s analysis of fictions as games of make-believe quite seriously:
  - ▶ Suits (1978)’s definition of games is thus relevant;
  - ▶ Nguyen (2020)’s argues that in games (board games, cards, sports, etc.) we play by endorsing a temporary, layered agency.
    - ▶ this complex motivational structure is conspicuous in striving play, where the inner agency goes for winning, and the outer agency goes for struggling.
  - ▶ In (contemplative) fictions, the “agency” is reduced to a minimum, by being placed at the fictional periphery (Predelli 2020).
- ▶ This split-personality mechanism is relevant for the PoF:
  - ▶ the (fictional) emotions are triggered the usual way, by learning some relevant pieces of information;
  - ▶ they are genuinely felt: they are *located* in the empirical self;
  - ▶ but they are not self-ascribed.
    - ▶ they are ascribed to a quasi-self, a projected self, a temporary agency.
  - ▶ So I deny (3) without denying that the emotions are real.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>Maybe for this reason my solution aligns with Currie (1990)’s solution in terms of “simulated emotions”, though I am not sure.

## Further problems about identification

- ▶ Self-projection (and identification) is complex:<sup>9</sup>
  - ▶ In particular, one can psychologically identify with some gaming agency, though one recognises a metaphysical distance.
  - ▶ From a linguistic vantage point, first-person talk is tricky in this context.
    - ▶ Compare: “I win the race”; “I am dead again”
  - ▶ The acquisition of self-projection is interesting (learning to engage with contemplative fictions vs. interactive fictions)
  - ▶ There are also moral problems about self-ascribing virtual actions (see the “gamer’s dilemma” Luck (2009); (Rouillé 2024))
- ▶ Moreover, I hold that the empirical self is more fundamental than the many projections of one’s self:
  - ▶ However, maybe it is a fact that a normal human self construction requires projection as a fundamental mechanism;
  - ▶ and there is a story to be told about how a multiplicity of selves can be sustained, entertained, and managed (more on “agential fluidity”).

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<sup>9</sup>All these complex problems are orthogonal to problems about fiction and fictional emotions.

## A poem by Fernando Pessoa/Ricardo Reis (1935)







*Countless lives inhabit us.  
I don't know, when I think or feel,  
Who it is that thinks or feels.  
I am merely the place  
Where things are thought or felt.*

*Vivem em nós inúmeros;  
Se penso ou sinto, ignoro  
Quem é que pensa ou sente.  
Sou somente o lugar  
Onde se sente ou pensa.*







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