

**FROM SHERLOCK AND BUFFY TO KLINGON AND NORRATHIAN
PLATINUM PIECES: PRETENSE, CONTEXTALISM,
AND THE MYTH OF FICTION¹**

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“If Peter Ludlow is a journalist, then I’m a railroad tycoon whenever I play Monopoly.”

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1. On the Two Way Flow Between Popular Fiction and the Real World

There are those who would dispute the point, but a good case can be made that real world individuals are often characters in works of fiction. So, for example, London and Baker Street are characters in Conan Doyle’s *Sherlock Holmes* books, and New York City is often a character in Woody Allen movies. When, in *Annie Hall*, Albie Singer pulls Marshall McLuhan from the line at a theater and gets him to debunk some bad McLuhan exegesis, I believe that it is really Marshall McLuhan who is a character in that movie and who is doing the debunking. Cases like this can be multiplied (nation states, famous persons, historical landmarks, familiar food, drink, modes of transportation, and indeed most of the furnishings of works of fiction are real). There are puzzle cases (for example, are Bill and Hillary Clinton characters in *Primary Colors*? Is Albie Singer supposed to be Woody Allen?) but these don’t undermine the idea that real individuals (and substances) somehow inhabit fictional worlds.²

Less often remarked are the cases where objects begin their existence in works of fiction—typically popular fiction—but somehow manage to spill out into the real world. Characters don’t step off the screen as in Woody Allen’s *Purple Rose of Cairo*, but less dramatic cases can be found. A classic

example of this is the Klingon Language of *Star Trek* fame.³ Klingon is a language that began as a reference to a fictional language spoken by a fictional extraterrestrial race in a fictional universe. Yet, somehow, today there is a quasi-official Klingon language institute (<http://www.kli.org/>), people who speak Klingon almost exclusively, and alleged cases of persons who want to raise their children in Klingon-speaking households. Is it really Klingon? Well, that might depend on whether the makers of movies and television shows set in the Trekkie universe (or perhaps trekkie fandom) take the Klingon experts of fandom to be authoritative. Such feedback has been known to happen.

Even better cases are available if we expand our examples of popular fiction to include Massively Multiplayer Online Roleplaying Games (MMORPGs). These are online games (accessible via the internet) where players assume a character in a fictional (i.e. computer generated) environment and move about that environment, interact with other players, and change the environment in what might be thought of as a giant work of collaborative fiction (some games like *Lineage* and *World of Warcraft* boast millions of users⁴).

In a typical MMORPG one constructs an avatar—a cartoon-like character—that one uses to navigate the virtual world and through which one interacts with other users. One can build virtual homes, make virtual objects (e.g. weapons), virtual clothing, and modes of transportation. One can also organize with other users to create social institutions and objects including discussion clubs, virtual theater troupes, virtual mafias, and in-world newspapers which report on the activities of these virtual groups—my own newspaper, *The Second Life Herald*,⁵ being a case in point.

The case of game currencies is particularly interesting. MMORPGs typically have an official game currency in which nonbarter transactions take place. In *Second Life*, for example, the official unit of currency is the Linden Dollar. In *EverQuest*, the official unit of currency is the Norrathian Platinum Piece.⁶ These currencies begin their life as a kind of monopoly money having no real value outside of their value in roleplay within the game, but this quickly changes (and often against the efforts or the game owners). The currencies soon come to have a real world value, and an exchange rate that can be tracked on eBay and other exchanges such as Gaming Open Market that are established for precisely these purposes.⁷

It is important to understand that the activities within these MMORPGs can generate significant real world wealth. Persons in these games invest their time building objects, homes, and institutions, and these objects become prized. I may wish to buy a virtual home from an experienced virtual home designer so I will pay for it. If I don't have sufficient in-game currency to buy it I may well go outside of the game and buy the currency on eBay with US Dollars. The virtual home designer has, in effect, created some real world wealth.

Depending upon the competence of the game developers, the currencies of these games can be more or less as stable as real world economies—more stable in many cases (over the past four years you would have been better off keeping your money in Norrathian Platinum Pieces than Argentinean Pesos and many other currencies). Particularly competent game managers such as Linden Lab⁸ watch the game money supply much as the US Federal Reserve tracks the US money supply.

The effect of all this is that the economies generated within these games are substantial. In a widely discussed study, the economist Edward Castronova (2001) has calculated that EverQuest, which has around 400,000 users (fewer than many other games) has a per capita gross domestic product that would make it the 77th largest in the world (just behind Russia but ahead of Bulgaria). In total, the economy of EverQuest is about the size of Namibia's. Norrathian Platinum Pieces are as real as many other real world currencies, it seems.

The mystery in this, of course, is how it happens. It was already difficult to see how real world objects could make it into a work of fiction; we were struggling with trying to understand how real individuals like Marshal McLuhan and New York City could get into fictional worlds. Now the matter is compounded: How on earth did Klingon and those Platinum Pieces become real?

I want to reemphasize that this is not just about money; certain kinds of fictional social groups and institutions also begin their lives as fictions within MMORPGs and spill out into other MMORPGs. For example, several of the “mafias” and user-created quasi-governmental organizations that were spawned in The Sims Online have moved on to other MMORPGs such as World of Warcraft, There, and Second Life.⁹ If it hasn't already happened it is easy enough to imagine these organizations also taking up operations in the “real world.”

My own experience with the *Alphaville Herald* is a good illustration of this general point about in-game social objects acquiring a kind of uptake outside of the game. When I first entered a MMORPG called The Sims Online I named one of my characters Urizenus, declared him to be the editor of a newspaper called *The Alphaville Herald*, and set up a blog to chronicle virtual events within the game. After blogging a series of articles that discussed unsavory aspects of the gameplay, and further articles critical of the game owner Electronic Arts (EA), the Urizenus account was terminated by EA. When I blogged the termination story along with other stories of online events, I found that many of the stories were picked up by “real world” media outlets including Salon.com, *Wired News*, *The New York Times*, CNN, NPR, BBC Online, *The Boston Globe*, *The Detroit Free Press*, Italy's *Corriere della Sera* and *La Stampa*, France's *Liberation*, Spain's *El Pais* and Moscow's *Izvestia*.¹⁰ Many readers and media outlets (in particular the reporters) suddenly took the *Herald* to be a genuine newspaper. It was no

longer just a newspaper in the game, it was a newspaper almost everywhere. Again, the pressing question is how such a thing can be possible.

In this paper I want to advance a thesis that is highly contentious and no doubt quite difficult to believe on first hearing. How do we explain the two-way flow between fictional and real worlds? How do fictions become real? Answer: they don't become real; they always were real. There is no such thing as fiction, and there are no such things as fictional objects. There are, however, certain predicates that are only satisfied in limited contexts of use, and this gives the illusion of different kinds of entities (fictional objects), and different modes of existence (fictional existence).

More specifically, the idea is this: In the case where we have props or actors involved, certain predicates ('is a vampire', 'is a stake', 'are fangs', 'is a slayer') may be true of those props and actors in limited contexts of usage. For example, consider *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* star Sara Michelle Geller. The predicate 'is a vampire slayer' may be true of Sara in certain limited contexts (e.g. when she acts or when we watch the show and are caught up in it). In a case where there is no actor involved (as when we read a book that has not been adapted for theater or screen) we can say that certain general claims (e.g. 'there is a slayer having certain properties') are true in a limited context (as when we read the book).

This proposal will bear certain important similarities to *pretense theory*—the idea that one is engaged in a pretense that such-and-such is the case (for example, the pretense that Sara Michelle Geller is a slayer)—but differs in one important respect: The core notion of pretending is dropped altogether. Rather than saying that in certain contexts we are pretending that such and such is the case, I will argue that in those contexts it is simply true that such and such is the case (albeit true only in those contexts). Once the relevant contexts are identified, the notion of pretending and/or the introduction of a PRETEND operator in the semantics become redundant exercises at best. From the point of view of the semantics of "fictional" discourse, the PRETEND operator plays no interesting role and is arguably harmful in that forces semantic theory to abandon the principle of semantic innocence and leads to a number of difficult semantic puzzles.

Although the conclusion is *reasonably* straightforward (if provocative) the path to the conclusion is not short. Getting there will require that we first take up several important topics. I'll begin (section 2) with the introduction of pretense theory and then turn (section 3) to some of the puzzles that have arisen with trying to deploy a PRETEND-that operator. In section 4 I'll show how the new, apparently harder, cases like Norrathian Platinum Pieces and Klingon help illuminate the path to the proper treatment of more traditional cases like Sherlock Holmes and Buffy. In section 5, I'll begin to lay out the (off the shelf) tools that we will need to deploy in the positive proposal and in section 6 I'll put together the pieces in a kind of rough draft of the thesis. I'll then take up an apparent problem about identity (section 7), and will

conclude (section 8) with some general thoughts about the project and the general doctrine of the myth of fiction.

2. Pretense Theory

To understand this proposal, it will be useful to consider the theory that I am reacting against—namely *pretense theory*. Perhaps it would be better to say that I am *building on* pretense theory, for I think that pretense theory gets quite a bit right, and I'm not sure I can explain the positive proposal without having the pretense theory on the table. According to pretense theory (associated most closely with the work of Kendall Walton) when we engage with a fictional work we are involved in a kind of pretend play or pretense.¹¹ Accordingly, when an actress like Sara Michelle Geller plays Buffy the Vampire Slayer she is doing just that: playing as or pretending to be a slayer. When we watch the program and are engaged by it, we too may be pretending that there are vampires, and that there is a slayer named Buffy. We may be pretending that Sara Michelle Geller is Buffy. Notice that this view is distinct from the usual supposition that Sara Michelle is representing Buffy or engaged in mimesis.

In my view pretense theory is a clear advance; it skirts a number of intractable difficulties about representation, and is easily extended to handle a broad class of cases. Indeed, this basic approach to fiction is so popular and so extensible that it has been taken up across the board in philosophy as a foil against all sorts of suspect entities. Don't like an ontology with abstracta like numbers? Well, we could adopt a pretense theory about mathematical objects—we merely engage in a useful pretense that they exist (a pretense that is especially useful when we are engaged in science).¹² Don't like odd entities like flaws in arguments, holes in cheese, or the average man? Pretense theory can be invoked again: We are merely pretending that there are such things. Do you like possible world semantics but not the ontology of all those worlds and counterparts? You can be a pretense theorist about them.¹³ Worried about the reality of moral claims? Pretense theories are available here too.¹⁴

One of the more helpful aspects of pretense theory is the idea that certain of our activities of pretense serve as props which “generate” the fictional object within the pretend circumstance. For example if we are playing vampires and slayers and I use a drinking straw in lieu of a real wooden stake, then the straw is a prop and we can say that “in the fiction” or “in the pretense” the straw is (generates) a stake. This is handy, because it gives us something that might serve as a hook to hang our talk of fictions on. That is, fictions are often based on *something* real—at least in cases where we act out the fiction.

It's less clear what we are to say in the case of a novel or forms of fiction that are not performed with physical props. Walton (1990; chapter 2) suggests

that perhaps spoken words, linguistic forms, or, in the case of imagination, a kind of mental data structure might serve as a prop. An alternative would be to say that in these cases we are not engaged in a pretense *about* something, but rather that we are pretending *that* such and such is the case. When we read, for example, we are pretending *that* the world is such that a certain state of affairs holds in it. There need be no props except perhaps for the actual world itself.

The basic idea behind pretense theory can be incorporated into the semantics of natural language in the following way. (I'm not saying all the practitioners would put it exactly this way. Walton wouldn't, for example.) There is a pretense operator which we can call PRETEND. We can quantify over anything we choose so long as the quantification takes place safely within the scope of the PRETEND operator. For example I can quantify over unicorns so long as the quantification is within the scope of PRETEND, because then it merely follows that I am pretending that there are x's, such that those x's are unicorns. Typically we won't bother making PRETEND explicit. If I am watching Buffy and say to you "Buffy just impaled a vampire", I won't bother with PRETEND because you and I know that we are engaged in pretense—it goes without saying. The operator is almost always implicit and unvoiced, but it is always there. Or at least that is the theory.

Others, including Lewis (1983), have proposed operators of this form, so we need to be careful in contrasting the Lewisian proposal from the pretense theory proposal. For Lewis, the "it is a fiction that" operator worked just like modal and tense operators worked within his program. In the modal case one is quantifying over possible worlds and in the tense case one is quantifying over future and past times and events. The fiction operator is like this in that one is quantifying over other worlds—fictional worlds—which are inhabited by individuals like Sherlock Holmes (or his counterparts) etc.

Whatever may be said about the merits of modal realism, it is hard to see that thinking of fictions along the lines of possible but unactual individuals preserves our intuitions about fictions. There is a great deal of discussion of this elsewhere, including Kripke (1973), so I set it aside for now, noting only that the central problem will have to do with our intuitions about cases like Superman (i.e. even if some individual showed up from a planet named 'Krypton' with an 'S' on his chest, a red cape, and superhuman powers, we would not want to say that it was Superman). In a nutshell, given the supposition that Superman doesn't exist and is not based on a real life individual, there *couldn't* be Superman. He can't exist in *any* possible world. Possibilia just aren't reasonable candidates for fictional objects.

One advantage to the Lewisian theory, however, is that it does do a good job of handling the commingling of fictional and real objects. In effect, both kinds of objects are on a par. Pretense theory has a way of doing the same thing by relying upon props (at least in the cases where props

are available), but taking advantage of props in this way requires some deft footwork. Several examples from the semantics literature illustrate just how carefully we must step and just how crucial props (or at least something like them) are to the whole enterprise.

3. Troubles with PRETEND-ing

Commingling fictional and real objects doesn't seem like *too* big of a problem when real life objects and individuals are introduced into the fiction—in that case we have what amounts to quantifying in.¹⁵ There is an individual, Marshall McLuhan, such that we are pretending that Albie Singer pulled him out of line at the theater. There are, of course, standard problems about quantifying-in that have been familiar for half a century now, but at least they have the virtue of being familiar if not entirely tractable. For example, if we are pretending that we are flying to the Morning Star, are we thereby pretending that we are flying to the Evening Star? In some cases that will be part of our pretense and in some cases not. Consider a case where it isn't (for example, suppose we are pretending to be pre-Babylonian space travelers). Now it looks like we want to give 'the morning star' narrow scope with respect to our pretend operator to reflect that we have the intention to go to, say, the Morning Star and not the Evening Star. But wait! We may still want to say that it is the real Morning Star that is a character in our fiction and that we are flying to. So what do we do? If we keep the descriptions outside the scope of the PRETEND operator we lose the distinction between the thing we are pretending to do (fly to the morning star) and the thing we are not pretending to do (fly to the evening star). If we tuck the descriptions within the scope of PRETEND, then we are pretending that there is a morning star and, in effect, we are losing the insight that we wanted the actual planet Venus to be a character in our little fiction. No surprise that these puzzles should arise here, and at least we have some idea what the solution strategies are and where they break.¹⁶

More intricate are the cases where we have what might be called "quantifying out". Cases like this are familiar in the aesthetics literature as well, though perhaps not exactly thought of in these terms. The most familiar case is (1)

- (1) Sherlock Holmes is smarter than any living detective.

To see the potential problems here, first notice that here we can't stick the whole sentence in the scope of the PRETEND operator as in (1a).

- (1a) PRETEND (Sherlock Holmes is smarter than any living detective)

The first problem with (1a) is that its truth conditions are consistent with a case in which it is part of our pretense that all living detectives have been replaced with inept detectives. Accordingly, one might go for the fix of pulling the quantification over living detectives outside of the scope of PRETEND.

(1b) [any x: living detective x] PRETEND (Sherlock Holmes is smarter than x)

But this doesn't solve the problem, either, for (1b) is consistent with a case in which it is part of our pretense that all living detectives have been dumbed down.

A further possible concern—a more subtle one to be sure—is that it may not be part of our pretense that Sherlock Holmes is smarter than any living detective. This may just be a fact that we deduce or observe (for example, on reading the Conan Doyle novels I may remark that “no living detective could be that smart.”)

One might try exploding the comparative into a kind of bi-clausal analysis, giving PRETEND scope over only one of the clauses, as in (1c).

(1c) there is a degree d, such that PRETEND (Sherlock Holmes was smart to degree d), and No living detective is smart to degree d.¹⁷

This strategy has several weaknesses, however. In the first place, it does not seem necessary that my assent to the truth of (1) should require that there be some specific degree of smartness (some numerical quantity) such that Holmes is smart to that degree. If you asked me “precisely how smart is Holmes?” I would probably want to answer by saying “I have no idea; I'm just saying he's really smart—smarter than any living detectives.” The problem of course, is that we are groping for something that we can safely quantify over across these contexts—and even the *de re* quantification over degrees is highly suspect.

The other tripwire here is that PRETEND is a *hyperintentional* operator; like ‘believes-that’ anything within its scope may be sensitive to substitution down to the lexical level at least. Accordingly, any analysis we introduce within the scope of PRETEND is not guaranteed to preserve truth value, even if the analysis is otherwise logically equivalent to the analysandum.

If we are prepared to bite this fusillade of bullets, the general strategy still fails when we consider cases that are only slightly different. Consider (2)

(2) Bertrand Russell resembled the Mad Hatter

Ignoring tense for the moment, the issue is where to stick the PRETEND operator. We obviously don't want to stick it over the whole thing, because we aren't *pretending* that Russell resembled the hatter. He *did* resemble the

Hatter. Accordingly, we want Russell (and the relational predicate “resembled”) to be outside the scope of PRETEND and the Hatter to be inside the scope of PRETEND. One idea would be to try to find something that degrees of smartness did in the previous case, but this time things don’t work quite as smoothly. What is the missing ingredient—the thing that we can get away with quantifying over *de re*—this time? One possibility would be to introduce images:

- (2a) There is an image *x*, such that Bertrand Russell resembled *x*, and PRETEND (the Mad Hatter looked like *x*)

Are we really pretending that the Mad Hatter resembles a particular image? (Notice here that the hyperintensionality of PRETEND rears its head again.) And what does it mean to resemble an image anyway? It seems odd, after all, to say that I resemble a picture of myself.¹⁸ Of course the picture may resemble me, so we might think that reversing the order of the ressembler and resemblee will help here:

- (2b) There is an image *x*, such that *x* resembled Bertrand Russell, and PRETEND (*x* resembled the Mad Hatter)

But now we have two problems. We have the original problem that when we truly utter (2), it doesn’t *seem* like we are pretending that some image resembled the Hatter, nor is it even clear what that would mean to engage in such a pretense. If the Mad Hatter is the target (i.e. the resemblee) then what is it to pretend that a picture resembles him? But the second problem is that Russell has now gone from being the ressembler to being a resemblee. That certainly doesn’t seem right.

Nor does it help to dispense with the resemblance relation altogether in favor of something like isomorphism as in (2c).

- (2c) There is an image *x*, such that Bertrand Russell is isomorphic to *x*, and PRETEND (the Mad Hatter is isomorphic to *x*)

Quite apart from what it would mean for a fictional object to be isomorphic to an image (or anything, for that matter), and quite apart from the issue of what it means to quantify over pictorial images (assuming there are any), there is the issue of whether it is really a pretense of ours that The Hatter is isomorphic to that or any other image. This suggests that what The Hatter looks like is under our control to some extent, but that certainly doesn’t seem right either. Do we need to introduce quantification over pretenses now, so that we say *there is* a pretense according to which Russell resembles The Hatter? Or do we need to specify a specific pretense? But whose? And how?

The general problem of quantifying out gets even worse if we consider Peter Geach's (1967) Hob, Nob, and Cob case and convert it into a case where they are pretending there are witches rather than just deluded into thinking that there are witches.

- (3) Hob is pretending that a witch blighted his mare and Nob is pretending that she didn't do that but that she put a pox on his sow and Cob is pretending that she considered doing those things but baked a cake instead

Now the issue is that there are three different pretendings at work. No single pretense operator covers all of these cases. So when in the successive pretenses we find the anaphor 'she', what exactly is that supposed to be picking up? If you think telling a story about this will be easy, first read the last 40 years of literature addressing Geach's puzzle.

4. Learning from Klingon and Norrathian Platinum Pieces

Given the existence of cross-narrative entities (things that can apparently inhabit both "fictional" and real worlds) here is a bit of advice: don't be a pretense theorist! As an alternative we can say that, 'is a vampire slayer' will be true in contexts where Sarah Michelle Geller is acting or we are watching her act, but false in others (like when she goes to her martial arts class). Moreover, we needn't take the contexts in which 'is a vampire slayer' are true as being metaphysically special. They are obviously special in *some* respects, of course, but what makes them special are certain social facts and not deep metaphysical differences between fictional and non-fictional existence.

We can illustrate this alternative perspective by considering cases like Norrathian Platinum Pieces and Klingon. Consider the following sentence.

- (4) Norrathian Platinum Pieces were fictional but now they are real

Given the existence of props in pretense theory, you might think that the talk of currency here is a bit of a red herring, since what one really is interested in is how certain representations in a computer program (for current purposes, the props) once had no value and now have a value. That is, what we really mean when we say that they were fictional but are no longer is something like the following:

- (4a) Norrathian Platinum Pieces always had value in the game and now they have real world value

So revised, this now appears to be similar to the case of Sherlock Holmes being smarter than any living detective discussed above. For example, if we try to deploy a PRETEND operator and give it scope over the whole sentence we have the following

- (4b) PRETEND (Norrathian Platinum Pieces always had value in the game and now they have real world value)¹⁹

But this isn't right because it says that we are *pretending* that the Platinum Pieces have real world value. But that isn't a *pretense*; they *do* have real world value. Accordingly, following our strategy with Sherlock Holmes (quantifying over degrees of intelligence) we might quantify over values—understood as monetary values—and data structures as in (4c).

- (4c) There is a value v , s.t. PRETEND (Norrathian Platinum Pieces (the data structures) had v) and now they have v

Assuming we are prepared to go along with the reduction of Platinum Pieces to electronic data structures (would we do the same with US Dollars?) the analysis fails in one important respect: the pretend value of Platinum Pieces may bear little relation to the value that they eventually come to have. Consider the case of Simoleans, which are the currency of the Sims Online. A million simoleans will make you quite wealthy in the game, with the ability to build homes etc., but you can buy that amount of simoleans on eBay for \$25 US.

Accordingly, one might think that the proper analysis should be to incorporate the idea that the platinum pieces had pretend value but now have real value. (Think about “real value” as meaning a recognized value outside of the game in the broader marketplace).

- (4d) There is a value v , s.t. PRETEND (Norrathian Platinum Pieces—the data structures—had v) and now there is a value v' , such that they—the data structures—have v'

The interesting thing about this move is that it effectively drops the notion that Norrathian Platinum Pieces were ever fictions—they were real world objects which played a role in our pretense (as props) and which now have been invested with real world value.

But now we need to pause and ask what if anything the PRETEND operator is doing at this point. If it is the case that the data structures (more accurately the rights to access and use these data structures) had a value v when the game began (and in the context of the gameplay only), and now they have a value of v' (outside of the narrow game context). We aren't really engaged in any pretense at all at this point. The shift from “pretend” to “real”

is just a shift in the application conditions of a predicate so that it now holds in a broader context.

The same idea holds in cases where the props were merely linguistic—as in the case of Klingon. The pretense theorist would want to say that there was something which we pretended to be part of a language (a handful of utterances in a few episodes on the Star Trek show) and which are now fragments of a real language. So, for example, we might say that the utterances made by actors in the original Star Trek show were mere sounds that we pretended to be a language, and now we take them to be part a real language. But what work is the talk of pretense doing here? It is surely harmless to say that the predicate ‘speaking Klingon’ was initially true only in the narrow context of their uttering certain things on the television show, and that now the predicate ‘speaking Klingon’ is true of those utterances (and many others) in a much broader social context.

Notice that in both the case of Platinum Pieces and the case of Klingon, the so-called fictions themselves didn’t undergo any intrinsic change. The few utterances in the Star Trek episode did not change, but the greater world changed: people began speaking a language that incorporated those fragments (and that was based on those fragments). The Platinum Pieces did not undergo an intrinsic change either; the markets (eBay etc.) simply began to invest a value in them (put another way, people were willing to pay for them).

If this line of thinking is correct, then we don’t need to think about fictional objects becoming real; we should rather think about objects which have values in certain narrow contexts but come to have possibly different values which hold in a broader class of contexts.

This general line of thinking works smoothly when we consider cases in which props are available, even if those props are just data structures, but what of other cases where there are no props and where it is less clear that we are engaged in a kind of context-sensitive value assignment. As we will see, the cases like Klingon and Norrathian Platinum Pieces can be illuminating here. Indeed, if we return to the cases that puzzled us in section 3, we find that a PRETEND operator can be dispensed with in these cases as well, and indeed that once we do so we can make a bit more headway (if not resolve the puzzles once and for all).

Here is one way to think about the more traditional cases of cross-narrative discourse. When we truly utter a sentence like (1),

- (1) Sherlock Holmes is smarter than any living detective.

we are simply considering a hybrid context which includes both the actor who portrays Holmes and all the living detectives, and we are saying that in this context it is true that the actor is Sherlock Holmes and that he is smarter than any living detective.

Of course we might not base our utterance of (1) on a performance, which means we may not have an actor available to predicate these things of. Two possible moves are now available to us. We can either follow Walton (1980, ch. 2) and argue that there is still a relevant object which could serve as a prop for Holmes, or we could simply say that in such a case we are making a general claim: there is an individual who is Sherlock Holmes and who is smarter than any living detective. In this case our main prop is perhaps the world itself or a relevant situation. In the relevant context, it is true to say (of the world/situation) that there is an individual who is Sherlock Holmes etc. I've left out details here, because there are numerous directions one can go at this point. One could say that there is a property of being Sherlock Holmes, or one could say that the name 'Sherlock Holmes' stands proxy for a description, etc. For current purposes I am indifferent as to which choice is made on this question.

Similar considerations apply to (2).

(2) Bertrand Russell resembled the Mad Hatter

If the sentence is true, then there is a context broad enough to include both Russell and some actor that, in the context, is the Mad Hatter. Or, if (2) is based simply upon our reading or an illustration, then the relevant context includes a general state of affairs in which it is true that there is an individual who is the Hatter and has certain properties.

Of course if we move in the direction of treating (1) and (2) as being general claims, Geach's case of Hob, Nob and Cob will remain problematic for us. Since, in effect, the current proposal dispenses with pretense altogether, the analysis of (3) would be something along the following lines:

- (3a) Hob is in a context c_1 , such that 'a witch blighted Hob's mare' is true in c_1 , and Nob is in a context c_2 , such that 'the witch didn't blight Hob's mare but did put a pox on his sow' is true in c_2 and Cob is in a context c_3 in which 'the witch baked a cake instead' is true in c_3 .

What we need for this to work is a supercontext c , that will include all of the subcontexts in play in (3a). If we think it is "the same individual" in each of the sub-contexts, and if we don't believe that there is actually an existing individual that is the subject of Hob, Nob and Cob's concerns, then our super-context c introduces a general claim of the following form.

- (3b) In the context c , it is true that 'There is an individual x , such that Hob is in a subcontext c_1 , such that ' x is a witch and x blighted Hob's mare' is true in c_1 , and Nob is in a subcontext c_2 , such that ' x is a witch and x didn't blight Hob's mare but x did put a pox on his sow'

is true in c_2 and Cob is in a subcontext c_3 in which ‘x baked a cake instead’ is true in c_3 ’.

Interestingly, Geach’s case turns out to be very similar in form to the cases of Sherlock Holmes being smarter than any living detectives and Russell resembling the Mad Hatter. All three cases involve a reporter being in a supercontext that includes both the “real” and the “fictional” object(s). Notice that dispensing with operators makes this operation go much more smoothly.

5. Some Off-the-Shelf Resources

Before I develop the positive proposal any further it will be useful to review a couple of ideas that have been circulating in the semantics literature, and which I at least have been drawn to for independent reasons.

5.1 *Contextualism*

Recent work in epistemology, for example by Lewis (1996), DeRose (1992, 1995, 1999), and Cohen (1998) has advanced the thesis of contextualism in epistemology. In short, contextualism is the idea that the verb ‘knows’, and many other predicates, are context sensitive in a way that radically effects their truth conditions. Whether or not my knowledge claim is true may depend upon the context of utterance. Different contexts may have different standards of knowledge. For example, my claim that I have hands will hold up nicely in an ordinary conversation and in a court of law, but may not meet the standards of knowledge that hold in a philosophy classroom where Cartesian doubt is often on the table.

Other predicates are like this as well, of course. Whether the predicate ‘flat’ truly applies to a surface may depend upon our interests. Is the surface flat enough for us to take a leisurely hike? Flat enough to play bocce ball? Flat enough to play pool? Flat enough to be a frictionless plane?

Sometimes philosophers have fallen into the trap of thinking that like ‘flat’, ‘know’ is a linearly graded predicate and that the contexts differ only in how high the relevant standards of knowledge are. I don’t think this is right, for reasons that I outlined in Ludlow (2004); knowledge claims vary across many different dimensions. It’s not just the degree of justification that might be relevant, but other factors could be relevant as well, including the source of evidence, the interests of the conversational participants, etc. Some knowledge claims might hold up in a court of law but not a scientific journal, while others might hold up in a scientific journal but not a court of law. The standards do not form a natural gradient, but cross-cut each other.

5.2 *Socially Dynamic Predicates*

‘Flat’ and ‘know’ are species of what more generally we might call *socially dynamic predicates*: these are predicates whose contexts of application may be extremely subtle to the social environment, often with surprising results. A good example of this phenomenon is found in Chomsky’s (1995) discussion of ‘water’ and ‘tea’.

Consider a case where someone has dumped a great number of tea leaves in the water supply for your city. What comes out of the tap is still water—albeit impure water. It is water that has been adulterated with tea leaves. But if we are at a restaurant and order tea, we may receive something that is chemically identical that came out of the tap. This time we call it tea. How could it be that the same chemical substance could be water in one context and tea in another?

One plausible story is simply that the predicates ‘tea’ and ‘water’ are socially dynamic, in that whether a particular chemical substance falls under their extension will depend upon context—even down to social and institutional context. The exact same stuff is water in one context (at home, coming from the tap) and tea in another (served at a restaurant—even if water was ordered). Put another way, the term ‘tea’ is true of the substance in one context, but not both. In the restaurant context ‘tea’ is true of the substance. In the alternative context where the water supply has been compromised, ‘tea’ is not true of the substance, but ‘water’ is.

In this regard, predicates like ‘knows’ and ‘flat’ are also socially dynamic. There are contexts where ‘knows’ might be true of me in relation to a particular justified belief, but other contexts in which ‘knows’ is not true of me and the belief. As the contexts shifts so does the extension of the predicate.²⁰

6. Putting the Pieces Together

Given the resources that we marshaled in the previous section we are now in a position to employ them in a more complete story about the myth of fiction. The basic idea is simple: the extension of ‘vampire’ is context sensitive and socially dynamic. Thus, there are contexts in which the predicates ‘x is a vampire’ and ‘x is a slayer’ are true of real world individuals. In particular, there are cases in which ‘x is a vampire’ is true of David Boreanaz (Angel), and ‘x is a slayer’ is true of Sara Michelle Geller (Buffy). The same point holds for sentences which describe events and states of affairs. To wit: there are contexts in which ‘Buffy slew a vampire’ are true.²¹ Notice that in all these cases we can dispense entirely with the PRETEND operator for the simple reason that the PRETEND operator is adding nothing here apart from some philosophical conundrums. For similar reasons we can dispense with the supposition that pretense is playing a role in these cases. Whether

we want to say that it's true that in that context Buffy slew a vampire or that 'Buffy slew a vampire' is true in that context (I'm personally neutral on the formulations), pretense plays no role in the semantics.

What goes for so-called canonical cases of fiction also holds when we return to our cases of events within MMORPGs. What happened exactly? How did a pretend newspaper become real? How did the Norrathan Platinum Pieces become currency with a stable rate of exchange against major world currencies?

The key to understanding these questions is this: it is misleading to say that *The Alphaville Herald* or the Norrathan Platinum Pieces somehow changed their ontological status from pretend or fictional to real. What in fact happened in the first case is that people became aware that *The Alphaville Herald* was covering stories of broader social relevance and this knowledge triggered the socially dynamic lexical semantics of the predicate 'is a newspaper', resulting in the recognition that the predicate was true of The Herald in a broader class of contexts than initially. At some point it became clear (to a critical mass of individuals) that *The Alphaville Herald* was properly understood as being in the extension of 'real newspaper' in default-contextual cases, and not just in-game contexts.

The contexts in which 'x is a real currency' could be said of Norrathan Platinum Pieces expanded for similar reasons. Platinum Pieces did not undergo intrinsic changes, but came to be assigned a stable value by external markets like eBay. This in itself did not suffice to make them a 'real currency'. At some point, the markets recognized Platinum Pieces as entities that could be regarded as viable currencies, and the domain of discourse was thus expanded to include them in default-contextual cases.

This is not to say that everyone is prepared to agree that *The Alphaville Herald* was ever a real newspaper—witness the remarks from Jeff Brown in the epigraph at the beginning of this paper—nor is it to say that everyone recognizes Norrathan Platinum Pieces as a real currency. But uptake is not something that happens by universal consensus, and the opinions of individuals, no matter how well placed, don't count as much as the markets and institutions that recognize and assign important social properties as default-contextual.²²

There might be some temptation to object at this point that the initial (pre-uptake) contexts in question are precisely the fictional contexts—that is, contexts in which we are engaged in a kind of pretense. This move might have some merit if there was some single property or identifiable class of properties which we could identify as the property (or class of properties) of being fictional. But what would this property or class of properties be? At best we can enumerate a number of circumstances that we might take to be canonically fictional, but even if we construct such a list (and what an extensive list it would be) what have we added when we label such context fictional? Have we really added anything? That is, once the relevant contexts

are identified and we know that they are contexts in which ‘Buffy is a slayer’ might be true, what do we accomplish by insisting that the operator PRETENSE be invoked?

The point here can be given more force if we consider all the different ways in which we can engage in speech which is not true omni-contextually. Relevant contexts range from television shows to movies to Theater to children playing in the back yard to fan fiction (fanfic) to discussions that are introduced as thought experiments to discussions where we humor someone who believes that we generally take to be a falsehood (e.g. talking to children about Santa Claus or the Easter Bunny) to the cases discussed above involving MMORPGs.

7. Identity Statements

If there is a worry about this analysis it seems to come when we start making identity statements that hold between, for example, actors and their characters. I wanted to say that Sara Michelle Geller is not merely playing a slayer—she is a slayer in that context. The first thought is that a kind of identity statement holds.

(5) Sara Michelle Geller is Buffy Summers (The Slayer)

We certainly say things like this (or at least we certainly hear things like this), and two questions naturally arise: can we avoid treating this as an identity statement, and if we can’t, how badly will things go for us? The answer to the first question is ‘probably’, and the answer to the second question is ‘not badly at all.’

One *could* treat names of fictions as being exclusively predicational.²³ So for example ‘Hamlet’ is short for the predicate ‘is Hamlet’ and this predicate is true of anyone one that (for example) puts on tights and reads the Hamlet part in Shakespeare’s play. There are difficulties with this view that are familiar to any theory that attempts to deploy a predicational theory of names. I don’t doubt that such theories can be defended, and indeed perhaps that is the proper analysis of names once one works out technical issues about accounting for the rigidity of names across possible worlds. (Presumably rigid properties are deployed.)

I wouldn’t want to tie this theory to the predicational theory of names, however, so it is worth considering what one might say about identity statements here. On such a view, both the terms ‘Sara Michelle Geller’ and ‘Buffy Summers’ would refer, albeit to distinct individuals with different modal profiles that just happen to overlap spatio-temporally.

On this view identity statements would work just like familiar accounts of the statue and the clay. A number of authors have held that the statue and the

clay from which it is made are distinct entities with temporarily overlapping space time worms and radically different modal profiles. Sara Michelle and Buffy would be a similar case, albeit with one interesting difference. There are many actresses that could potentially play Buffy (indeed another one did in the pilot), but a given statue made from a particular lump of clay could not have been made from some other lump of clay. Fictions, unlike statues, can be realized over and over in many different substrates.

While ordinarily in the case of the statue and the clay we suppose that only *that* piece of clay could have made *that* statue, fictional characters appear to be able to survive the destruction of their physical hosts and reappear elsewhere with a new host. That is a fancy way of saying that, for example, different actors can be Hamlet. This doesn't introduce new conceptual difficulties unless one can isolate a single context in which two actors are the same character, and only then if one assumes transitivity to hold in this context (and that a character can't have multiple instantiations in a single context).

Finally, what of actors themselves? On this theory they are not individuals that represent or pretend to be things like kings and vampires and slayers; they are rather individuals who, in certain contexts, just *are* kings and vampires and slayers. A successful actor is one who is able to expand the context in which these predicates hold true (or perhaps it is better to say that they lead their audience into the relevant contexts). Actors do not imitate, nor even create realities, so much as they are context expanders. Similar considerations apply to authors of literary and other non-performance based 'fiction.' The authors do not describe or represent states of affairs nor are they engaged in a pretense that these states of affairs hold. They are simply people who expand the contexts (or lead us into contexts) in which the states of affairs described in the work are true.

8. Conclusion

The line I have been advancing in this paper is that there really are no fictions per se, and that 'fictional' statements are merely statements that hold true in a limited class of environments. What then of the case of the fictions that became real? As we have seen, it might make more sense to think that they were always real, but that a kind of change did take place in which, over time, predicates like 'is money', 'is a newspaper', 'is a language' could be truly said of things in a broader class of contexts.

Thus it is not so much that Norrathan Platinum Pieces or Klingon suddenly (or gradually) became real. Rather the context in which predicates (including 'exists') could truly be uttered of them gradually expanded. This might be driven by any number of factors, ranging from the interests of people, to the number of persons entering into the context, to the entrance of recognized political and legal institutions into the context.

Now I fully recognize that a pretense theorist can tell a story similar to this. Perhaps the expanding interests of persons or institutions license our dropping of the *PRETEND* operator, but it is I think worth pondering whether the basic notion here is really one of pretending or whether there might not be many ways in which one can engage in artistic, scientific, and legal pretense. Do these all really answer to a single primitive property? Or is it rather the case that all of these cases are different, and that their reach and application are fluid—just like the contexts that they inhabit. I would suggest that the more fruitful line of investigation might lie with setting aside operators like *PRETEND* and thinking about the dynamic nature of these predicates and the conditions and contexts in which they truly apply to real world objects and situations.

Notes

1. An earlier version of this material was presented at the Philosophy and Popular Culture conference at SUNY Albany in April, 2004. I am indebted to the many participants in that conference for helpful discussion and to Bill Irwin both for discussion and for encouraging me to write up my talk. Thanks for additional helpful discussion go to Liz Camp, Stacie Friend, Hanna Kim, Jason Stanley, Kendall Walton, and Dean Zimmerman. Special thanks go to Hanna and Liz. It was Hanna's work in her forthcoming dissertation on the semantics of metaphor that started me thinking about these issues, and Liz provided a number of very helpful comments on the penultimate draft.
2. Thanks to Stacie Friend for bringing these cases to my attention.
3. Klingon is perhaps not the ideal example since large portions of the language were specified at the outset by Marc Okrand. This raises the question of whether Klingon might not have begun its career as a real world language. The worry is a bit of a distraction, I think, since however complete the original creator of Klingon intended it to be, it is not clear that he (or, more importantly, the show's creators) intended it to have any sort of life outside of the Star Trek fictional universe. It began its career as a fiction, although perhaps in a form that made it real world apt. Of course like invented languages that came before it (e.g. Esperanto), Klingon is a dynamic object that is subject to change with the practices of fandom.

The other thing to note is that in this parenthetical discussion we are working with an artificial (if commonly held) conception of language according to which it is a set of rules, established by convention, for purposes of communication. Recent work in generative linguistics has suggested that, to the contrary, the language faculty is part of our biological endowment, and is a parametric state of an innate representational system.

For Klingon to become real then, it would be necessary for children to be exposed to Klingon and form their own language. It would, in effect, be like cases where deaf children are exposed to the very limited sign language deployed by their parents, and yet locking onto a robust sign language only partly grounded in the

- data picked up from their parents. The result in that case and in our hypothetical Klingon case would be something like a creolization process. Children would be exposed to bits and pieces of prescriptive Klingon and emerge with something much more robust and in some ways very different. The result would, of course, really be a human language, but of course that doesn't mean it can't serve as the Klingon language in the fiction. The actors, after all, are humans.
4. Lineage is online at http://www.lineage.co.kr/linweb/lin_main.asp. World of Warcraft is online at <http://www.worldofwarcraft.com/>).
 5. Available online at <http://secondlifeherald.com/blog>. The newspaper began its life as *The Alphaville Herald*.
 6. EverQuest is a MMORPG run by Sony Online Entertainment with approximately 400 subscribers. Information is available online at <http://eqlive.station.sony.com/>.
 7. Gaming Open Market is online at <http://www.gamingopenmarket.com/>. eBay has an entire category devoted to online game currency, fully leveled avatars and virtual objects here: http://video-games.listings.ebay.com/Internet-Games_W0QQfromZR4QQsacategoryZ1654QQsocmdZListingItem. Unquestionably the largest dealer in virtual currencies is IGE, online at <http://www.ige.com/>.
 8. For information, see <http://secondlife.com> and <http://lindenlab.com/>.
 9. For information on Star Wars Galaxies, see <http://starwarsgalaxies.station.sony.com/>. For information on There, see <http://www.there.com/index.html>. For Second Life, see <http://secondlife.com>. For illustrations of guilds or social groups that have expanded their operations to other MMORPGs see the Alphaville Herald Interviews with Snow White of the Simulated Shadow Government (<http://www.alphavilleherald.com/archives/000036.html>) and Tony Gambino of The Gambino Family in The Sims Online (<http://www.alphavilleherald.com/archives/000301.html>).
 10. Links to all of these articles are available on the front page of *The Second Life Herald* (<http://www.secondlifeherald.com>).
 11. See, for example, Walton (1990, 2000), Crimmins (1998).
 12. See Burgess and Rosen (1997) for discussion of this view.
 13. See Nolan (2002) for a survey of recent work modal fictionalism.
 14. See Kalderon (forthcoming) for a defense of moral fictionalism.
 15. This is of course discussed in some classic 20th Century articles, including Quine (1980), and Kaplan (1969).
 16. See Crimmins (1998) for detailed discussion of this issue.
 17. Note the similarity between this analysis, and Russell's analysis of 'I thought your yacht was longer than it is'.
 18. There are of course cases where we can defeat this intuition. If I change my appearance so as to be more in accord with a particular picture, then we might say that I now resemble the picture. In this case there is a kind of figure-ground shift, where the picture has become the target of the resemblance relation and I have become the ressembler.
 19. If we are drawn to that idea that pretense should cover real world money too, we should recognize that this only obscures the distinction between fictional things and real things. We found it surprising that Norrathian Platinum Pieces seemed as real as Argentinean Pesos. It doesn't seem helpful to be told that

- both currencies are fictions and always were (along with Monopoly money). We want to know what accounts for the differences between these cases and why the relevant differences collapse on some occasions.
20. One option here is to follow Stanley (2000, 2000a, 2002b), Stanley and Szabó (2000) and think of the context sensitivity of these predicates being a feature of contextually triggered quantifier domain restrictions. I remain neutral on the use of that tool here.
 21. Are there also cases in which ‘Sara Michelle Geller slew a vampire’ are true? Probably so. This is a topic that we will consider in more depth in the next section of the paper.
 22. I am indebted to Liz Camp for helpful discussion here.
 23. Jason Stanley brought this possibility to my attention.

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