

Article

What Makes a Version of a Work a *Version of That Work*?

Alberto Voltolini 

Department of Philosophy and Education Sciences, University of Turin, 10124 Torino, Italy;
alberto.voltolini@unito.it

Abstract: In this paper, I want to defend the following claim. There is a good chance of keeping the Meinongian account of the individuation of fictional works and applying it to the individuation of versions of such a work, provided one properly takes into account some factors characterizing the make-believe games underlying the production of such versions, namely factors characterizing having to do with the remaking of such games, in order to explain why such versions are versions of that work, not mere individual works just as any other.

Keywords: fictional works; work versions; remake of a storytelling game

1. Introduction: The State of the Art

In this paper, I want to defend the following claim. There is a good chance of keeping the *Meinongian* account of the individuation of fictional works and apply it to the individuation of versions of such a work, provided one properly takes into account some factors characterizing the make-believe games underlying the production of such versions, namely factors characterizing having to do with the *remaking* of such games, in order to explain why such versions are *versions* of that work, not mere individual works just as any other.

As one well knows, Meinongianism is one of the main approaches to the issues of metaphysics and the ontology of fictional entities first, and derivatively of fictional works (Reicher 1995), for that approach traces back to the work of the Austrian philosopher Alexius Meinong, who plays a very important role in the history of Western philosophy because of his very liberal view on ontology—the doctrine studying what there is in the overall realm of beings—and of his metaphysical view concerning the nature of the entities that we accept as figuring in that realm. According to Meinong (1960), objects are individuated primarily in terms of their core properties (*Sosein*), which they possess independently of whether they exist; for him, the overall realm of beings indeed consists both of existent and of non-existent entities.

Now, it is natural to interpret this account as covering also the case of fictional characters, which are the paradigmatic case of non-existent entities. In this interpretation, although they do not exist, fictional characters are individuated primarily in terms of the properties that are mobilized in the narrations concerning them. Thus, the non-existent fictional character Sherlock Holmes is individuated primarily as a brilliant yet cocaine-addicted detective living in London at 221b Baker St., having a close friend named Watson, etc., since there are the ways Conan Doyle describes him in his narrations. This interpretation has an immediate bearing on the issue of the individuation of fictional works, where fictional characters exhibit their deeds. According to the Meinongian account, fictional works are sets of propositions, including both what is said and what is implied in a story, which involve fictional characters (e.g., Zalta 1983; Voltolini 2006). Notoriously, it is very hard to fix the real borders between what is said and what is implied in a story (on this



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see, e.g., Albrecht 2022; Jacquette 1996, pp. 260–64). Yet for our present purposes, we may content ourselves with the following characterizations. Tendentially on the one hand, what is said in a story includes both what is explicitly expressed *overtly* by the story's narrator, whether this is a (admittedly reliable) character in the story or a *fictional agent*, a sort of ideal perspective from which a story is told (Currie 1990; Predelli 2020; Voltolini 2021), and what is explicitly expressed by that narrator *covertly*, e.g., when the narrator uses language figuratively, ironically, humorously On the other hand, what is implied in a story includes what is implicitly assumed both via the endorsement of certain principles of generation (e.g., the *Reality Assumption*, the assumption that everything that is really true is also fictionally the case, unless excluded by the work (Friend 2017), or even the *Genre Assumption*, the assumption that the story belongs to a certain literary genre), and via certain inferences that are somehow legitimated by the fiction, in order to make it coherent, cohesive, elegant So in Alessandro Manzoni's *The Betrothed*, the narrator explicitly and overtly says that the miserable-girl Gertrude replied to the mischievous-guy Egidio's greetings; explicitly but covertly says that Gertrude accepted Egidio's courtship; implicitly assumes that Gertrude, qua human being, had a pancreas and lets one implicitly infer that she had an intimate relationship with Egidio.

I think that the Meinongian account of the individuation of fictional works is the most viable one. Yet in order to see why this is the case, I must take a step back and see what are the further options on the market (Lebens and von Solodkoff 2024).

A first alternative option is *textualism*. According to textualism, a fictional work coincides with its text, as individuated in morphosyntactical terms (Goodman and Elgin 1986). A second such option is *artefactualism*. According to artefactualism, a fictional work is a composition that traces a set of sentences back to a moment of origin and to certain authorial intentions (Thomasson 1999).¹ Then comes *evenentialism*. For evenentialists, fictional works are happenings, historical doings in which one utters something (Davies 2004). The last option is *eliminativism*. According to eliminativists, properly speaking, there are no fictional works, there are only copies linked via certain translation relations (Lebens 2015).

All these alternative options are problematic. To my mind, eliminativism is the less convincing one. Not only does it rely on an implausible conception of what counts as a translation relation, since for it "the translation relation holds between two sentences, in a given context, if they both express the same proposition, in that context, with sufficiently similar style and tone" (Lebens and von Solodkoff 2024, p. 59), yet what about translations of pastiches like *Finnegan's Wake*, to say nothing of translations of sheer nonsenses like *Jabberwocky*? But also, it can hardly account for what we will be concerned with in this paper, namely, work versions. How can different literary productions be versions of the same fictional work, since there is no translation relation, not even a homophonic one, holding between them (versions of the same work can well be semantically different)?

Yet also the other options fare no better. Textualists do not explain the 'Menard' puzzle, as revived in Thomasson (1999), Voltolini (2006): two even contemporary authors (Cervantes and an admittedly idealized Menard, living next door to Cervantes without each knowing the other) may write exactly the same morphosyntactically individuated text and, however, generate two fictional works concerning different fictional protagonists. But also, evenentialism is affected by a variant of the same problem: how can one account for Cervantes and Menard progressively enacting two different works, since, unlike events, processes are not individuated spatiotemporally?

Granted, artefactualism avoids this problem by appealing to different origins, notably different authorial intentions, respectively affecting the different compositions. So, for artefactualism, Cervantes' *Don Quixote* and Menard's *Don Quixote* are different compositions.

Yet it leaves open the issue of how a fictional work is made. Does not a fictional work also consist of propositions? Had Cervantes written an utterly different novel in the very same lapse of time, would not we say that the resulting composition amounts to a literary work different from *Don Quixote*? Yet if this is admittedly the case, how can such propositions be individuated?

In this respect, Meinongianism is better, since it is not affected by the above problems. First of all, as I said, according to it, fictional works are individuated not in terms of syntactic vs. (spatio)temporal features, but in terms of set of propositions. Moreover, such propositions may be individuated in terms of the fictional characters they are about.² Hence, Cervantes' *Don Quixote* and Menard's *Don Quixote* are different fictional works, not because they involve different compositions, but because they are ultimately individuated in terms of the different Don Quixotes they are respectively about (Voltolini 2006). Furthermore, Meinongianism must not be a Platonist theory, as its appeal to propositions, normally taken as mind-independent, abstract entities, *free idealities*, as it seems to suggest. For what ultimately individuates propositions, i.e., fictional characters, may be taken to be mind-dependent, *abstracta*, *bound idealities* generated in time (Ingarden 1973; Husserl 1975; Thomasson 1999). Yet, unlike compositions (Caplan and Matheson 2004), such characters are everlasting, since they mobilize *sets* of properties, the properties explicitly or implicitly predicated of a fictional character in a story,³ insofar as they are correlates of such sets (Castañeda 1989; Voltolini 2006).

Yet this way of individuating fictional works in terms of their fictional characters that are in their turn individuated (at least in terms of necessary conditions: Castañeda 1989; Voltolini 2006) by property sets has an obvious consequence. If a fictional character changes one of such properties, it becomes an utterly different character: two fictional characters whose properties overlap but for one property are different. Hence the fictional works in which such characters respectively figure are different as well, because of the different propositions they respectively contain.

Some people hold that this consequence is unpalatable, since it forces characters belonging to series of novels, or even literary cycles, to be different ones. For example, the Sherlock Holmes of *A Study in Scarlet* and the Sherlock Holmes of *The Sign of the Four* are different Holmeses, for they are individuated in terms of different property sets: what Holmes does in the first work differs from what he does in the second work.

For me, however, there is no such unpalatability, provided that one appeals to a *sameness* relation weaker than *identity* that relates all such characters, thereby contributing to generating a general fictional character out of such characters—a general Holmes, in the previous example (Castañeda 1989; Reicher 1995; Voltolini 2006, 2012).

The real problem is another. For Meinongians, also versions of the same fictional work that differ only for the ascription of a single property to a fictional character turn out to be different *oeuvres*, since they contain different fictional characters. Yet if this is the case, what makes it the case that they are different *versions* of the *same* work, instead of merely being different fictional works like any other? For example, we are normally told that Manzoni's *Fermo and Lucia* is a version of *The Betrothed*, actually its first version. Yet, since it is made of a fictional character whose name is "Fermo" and not "Renzo", hence Fermo and Renzo are different characters, for they have different properties starting from their different names, it is definitely a different fictional work. So, what makes it the case that it is a version of *The Betrothed* rather than an utterly different fictional work?⁴

In the next Sections, by appealing to pretense plays, notably storytelling games of make-believe underlying the formation of fictional works, I will try to provide what is my favorite answer to this problem (Section 2), by also considering some possible objections and replies (Section 3).

2. The ‘Pretense’ Solution

As many people acknowledge, fictional works do not come from nowhere. They are underlain by forms of pretense play, or make-believe games (Leslie 1987; Walton 1990). From a linguistic perspective focused on mere storytelling games (of make-believe; from now on, I take this specification for granted), such games are constituted by fictional uses of sentences (Currie 1990; Recanati 2000; Voltolini 2006) in which someone (possibly, even a plurality of storytellers) tells a story by making believe that there are things that have certain properties *F, G, H . . .*

In actual fact, mere appealing to storytelling games does not solve the problem Meinongians must face. For, just as any other fictional work, a version of such a work is underlain by its proper storytelling game. Yet, my claim is different, since it does not involve storytelling games *per se*, but *operations* on such storytellings. Since things having to do with *protractions* of storytelling games are the very factors that explain how different fictional works count as constituting the same series of works, or more emphatically, as different episodes of the same literary cycle, it is quite likely that things having to do with *remakings* of storytelling games can instead explain how different literary productions are different versions of the same fictional work.⁵

Let me recap how the above story goes as far as literary cycles are concerned (Voltolini 2006, 2012). To begin with, in standard games, say a ball game, the protraction of a game requires that someone intends to protract that game for some more time. Likewise, as regards to storytelling games, the storyteller of a new tale (whether she is the same or not as the storyteller of a previous storytelling game) must start that tale with the intention of *protracting* a previous storytelling game, so that a new episode of the same tale takes place. She must *inter alia* intend to make believe that the *very same* (concrete) individual that was thought of in the previous storytelling game as being so-and-so is (also) such-and-such. Typically at least, one merely makes believe *that* there is such individual, thereby not ontologically committing to anything outside that make-believe game.⁶ For example, in the second octave of *Canto 1* of the epic *Orlando Enraged*, in impersonating the narrator Ludovico Ariosto says the following:

In the same strain of Roland will I tell/
Things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme,
/On whom strange madness and rank fury fell,
/A man esteemed so wise in former time
thereby showing that he intends to continue to tell the same story told by Matteo Maria Boiardo with his *Orlando in Love*, by now making believe that a certain individual, the paladin Roland, already fallen in love with the fascinating Angelica, the princess of Cathay, becomes mad for her. Outside that make-believe game, there is no Roland, nor any Angelica for that matter.

Yet moreover, the storyteller’s intention to protract a previous make-believe game is only a *necessary* condition for *that* game to be protracted. It is not in fact a *sufficient* condition for that game to be protracted, since that intention (like any other intention) may go unfulfilled. This unfulfillment may occur for two reasons: either that intention is seen as thwarted, given the attitudes of *further* participants in the new storytelling game that an utterly new make-believe game has started—for example, even if we supposed that, by writing of a guy named “Leopold Bloom”, Joyce wanted to protract the same storytelling game already involving Homer as storyteller, since there is no shared recognition of Joyce’s intention and acceptance that Joyce’s storytelling game is a protraction of that game, Joyce’s storytelling of *Ulysses* does not count as a protraction of Homer’s storytelling—or, what the storyteller of the new game happens to make believe ‘about’, the individual whose story is being told is too distant, chronologically or qualitatively, from what the storyteller of the original game made believe. To adapt an example from Thomasson (1999), if someone intends to protract a storytelling on a human being by making believe that she is now a *rock*, the new storytelling will not count as a protraction of the previous one.

So, another necessary condition is required for the protraction of a storytelling game to occur. In standard games, in order for a game to be protracted further participants must recognize the original intention to protract the game and act accordingly. Likewise, further participants in the storytelling game must both *recognize* the storyteller's protracting intention and *agree* that the new game is just the old game protracted. Again, this is just a necessary, not a sufficient condition for that game's protraction. Indeed, no such recognition-and-acceptance by itself prevents the storyteller in question from telling an entirely new story, albeit possibly resembling an earlier one.

Yet furthermore, the storyteller's intention together with both the audience recognition of that intention and its agreement with it may well function as *jointly sufficient* conditions for the protraction of a make-believe game. Only in this case does the new storytelling really amount to protracting the previous storytelling game.

Finally, once one has individuated what constitutes a protraction of a storytelling game, one can account for the fact that the *oeuvres* respectively underlain by different stages of one and the same storytelling game count as episodes of the same literary cycle, for the protraction *grounds* the cycle, at least in the sense that the latter *existentially depends* on the former: necessarily, if the latter exists, the former exists as well.

For example, unlike the Joyce's case, since Dante intended to protract the storytelling game inaugurated by Homer that there was a guy named "Odysseus", or "Ulysses", who did phantastic travels across the sea, and people recognized this intention and agree with it, we take *Canto XXVI* of the *Divine Comedy's Inferno* as a new episode of the story of Odysseus/Ulysses.

Once I can tell the above story about the case of cycles, I can also tell a similar, although slightly more sophisticated, story about the case of versions.

In the case of versions, first of all, as far as the relevant storytelling games are concerned, one must reshape the relevant author's intention and audience's recognition and acceptance. In a standard game, new versions of the game are based on the players' intention to play the game again. So first, in storytelling games, instead of intending to protract a previous storytelling game, the storyteller must intend to *remake* the same game. So for example, in her telling *Lo's Diary*, the Italian writer Pia Pera intended to remake the storyteller game that originally involved Vladimir Nabokov as storyteller, for she intended to tell Lolita's story again, yet from another point of view, not Humbert Humbert's, but precisely Lolita's one.

Clearly enough, this remaking intention is necessary but not sufficient. One's remaking intentions notwithstanding, a storyteller may end up telling something utterly different from the previous tale; hence, what is performed is not recognized and accepted as a remake of the previous storytelling game. His possible recognized intention notwithstanding, nobody would have accepted that Homer's storytelling *Odyssey* was a remake of the *Ilyad's* storytelling. Homer merely told a new story very much inspired by the original one.

So second, another condition for the remaking of a storytelling game is necessary. Also in standard games, the original intention must be recognized and accepted. For example, the same guys must collectively agree on playing cops and robbers again. Likewise, the audience must recognize the original storyteller's intention and agree that the new storytelling game is a remake of the original one. Once again, this condition is necessary but not sufficient: accepting something as a storytelling remake does not *eo ipso* amount to that remake. If some people took Ariosto's storytelling of *Orlando Enraged* as a remake of Boiardo's storytelling of *Orlando in Love*, they would be wrong, precisely because, as we have seen before, Ariosto's successful intention was to protract, not to remake, that game.

Yet moreover, it is quite likely that, unlike the protraction case, remaking intentions and remaking recognition and agreement are not jointly sufficient conditions of remaking a

storytelling game.⁷ Provided that the storyteller(s) and their audience agree, in protraction one can make believe whatever one wants. Calvino's storytelling of *The Non-existent Knight* is a protraction of Ariosto's storytelling 'about' the imaginary warrior Bradamante, although his storytelling is quite different from Ariosto's one. Yet in remaking, no such authorial freedom is allowed. There must be some sort of overlapping between the original storytelling and the new storytelling, otherwise the latter would not count as a *re-making* of the former. This constraint is typical of remaking in general. Whenever one remakes something—a cake, a house, but even a game—one makes a (creative) reshuffling of the original stuff that was involved in what one reshuffles, in which some part of that stuff is preserved, while some other is possibly lost (I say "possibly" because sometimes a remake simply amounts to a mere rearrangement of the original stuff). So, a third necessary and jointly sufficient condition for remaking a storytelling game must be added, namely that the original and the new storytelling somehow overlap, by making believe both in the original and in the new storytelling that a certain guy has some properties. In storytelling *The Betrothed*, as we have seen, Manzoni changes, among other things, the name of its main male character ("Fermo" rather than "Renzo"), but he keeps that the two main characters of the original story he told, Fermo and Lucia, are poor people hindered in their attempt at getting married.

Finally, once a remake of a storytelling game is in force, everything goes as in the case of protraction: an existential dependence holds between versions and storytelling remakings. Something counts as a new version of a fictional work iff it depends, for its existence, on the existence of a remake of a storytelling game, in the sense that necessarily, if the new version exists, then that remake exists as well.

3. Objections and Replies

To begin with, one may wonder whether the aforementioned third condition for remaking a storytelling game must be somehow restricted, by singling out essential features of the game that must be preserved both in the original and in the new storytelling.

Frankly, I doubt that any such appeal to essential features may work. Even if the original storytelling game and its remake must have some features in common, and that remake and a *further* remake of the game must have some features in common as well, it is quite possible that there is no overlap between the features of the original game and the features of the further remake. Clearly, any remake must be a remake of a *storytelling game*. But this is a mere functional condition that says anything about the concrete features that are preserved. Compare the following: a remake of a church must be a church as well, so as to play the functional role of a church, but the new church may be made of marble, whereas the original one was made of wood, and so on and so forth.

Moreover, one can wonder whether the first aforementioned condition, remaking intentions, is really necessary. Suppose that a storyteller completely forgets the story she originally told, by ending up telling a story that strongly resembles the original storytelling. Would not this count as a remake of that storytelling?⁸

As regards to this doubt, two options are available: Either one appeals to the unconscious intentions of the storyteller or anyway to the existence of an underlying causal process linking the first storytelling to the second one, as when one happens to sing in the shower a song that one has actually heard some days before. In this case, the new storytelling counts as a remake of the original storytelling. Or there is no causal-intentional link whatsoever linking the first with the second storytelling performance. In that case, the latter does not count as a remaking of the former, for the situation is pretty analogous to the Cervantes–Menard case we have already discussed, but for the fact that the two storytellings are performed by the same person. In the Cervantes–Menard case, although

Menard's storytelling strongly resembles Cervantes' storytelling, since there is no causal-intentional relation between the two guys, Menard's storytelling does not count as a remake of Cervantes' storytelling.

Finally, one can wonder whether the second aforementioned condition, recognition of and agreement with the storyteller's remaking intention, is really necessary. Suppose that someone writes a story and then puts it in a drawer. Some years later, she reopens the drawer and modifies what was written on it. Would not this count as a storytelling remake?⁹

Even here, in response, two options are available, a positive and a negative one. Let me here revert the order, by first describing the negative response. Just as any game, a storytelling game is a public activity with shared rules that requires more than one person to play (Wittgenstein 2009, I§202). Thus, whatever one does in one's closing and reopening of a drawer containing a manuscript to be changed does not amount to a storytelling game. Just as passing one good from one hand to another does not count as an episode of trade, since trade is a public activity (Wittgenstein 1978, VI§45). So, no storytelling game, a fortiori no remaking of it, occurs in the drawer situation. Alternatively and positively, one may allow for idiosyncratic games: indeed, are there no solitary games with cards? Yet such games can only occur on the background of shared games (Wittgenstein 1978, VI§§32, 41; 2009, I§204). One can play a solitary only on the background of shared card games. Likewise in jokes, one can mock oneself, but only on the background of jokes where one mocks someone else. Therefore, one can remake a storytelling in isolation, yet only on the background of shared storytellings. Hence, if Adam (supposedly the first human being on Earth) opened and reopened the drawer while changing the manuscript kept in it, this performance would not count as a storytelling remake. But when Eve comes along, he can play and tell a story with her.

4. Conclusions

All in all, notwithstanding its rigid identity criteria for fictional characters and fictional works, Meinongianism can account for the fact that certain literary *oeuvres* are actually different versions of the same fictional work. One must simply appeal to the fact that, underlying the production of fictional works, there are make-believe storytelling games in which one pretends that there are such and such things. In particular, one must appeal to the fact that the version of a fictional work is underlain by the occurrence of a remake of a certain storytelling game, in the sense that the former would not exist if the latter did not exist either, provided, however, that one gives adequate identity conditions for what counts as a remaking of that game.

Clearly enough, this solution has a limited scope. One talks of versions of a work even in cases in which no kind of make-believe seems to be involved, e.g., versions of an architectural, dance or musical work. So, in order to see what makes such versions variants of the same work, one should investigate what kind of relationship, if any, holds between such works and fictional works. But this will be the task of another paper.¹⁰

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Notes

- 1 Actually, Thomasson further distinguishes compositions from literary works, since the latter are also objects of aesthetic evaluation, but this further distinction is inessential for the present purposes.
- 2 Granted, not all Meinongians think that propositions constituting fictional works must be individuated in terms of fictional characters. For Orilia (2012), denoting concepts *à la* Russell (1903) may serve the same purpose. Yet this alternative risks to revive the ‘Menard’ problem, since both Cervantes’ *Don Quixote* and Menard’s *Don Quixote* should be plausibly individuated by the same propositions constituted by the same denoting concepts.
- 3 These are the properties which, depending on the kind of Meinongian theory one appeals to, are either *nuclear* properties (Parsons 1980; Routley 1980; Jacqueline 1996) or *internally predicated* properties (Zalta 1983; Castañeda 1989; Voltolini 2006) of their fictional characters.
- 4 Clearly the problem could be avoided if there were a contextual essence that enables to individuate two literary *oeuvres* as different versions of the same fictional work (in line with an analogous proposal made by Orilia (2002, 2006) for individuating fictional characters). Yet contextual reidentification is not transitive. The contextual essence that putatively individuates V_1 and V_2 as versions of the same work may not be the contextual essence that putatively individuates V_2 and V_3 as versions of the same work. Yet in actual fact, V_1 , V_2 and V_3 are versions of the very same work. Perhaps the case of the different versions of *Hamlet*, starting from the medieval Danish one to be found in Saxo Grammaticus’ *Gesta Danorum*, moving to the Icelandic version, the *Saga of King Rolf Kraki*, up to Shakespeare’s version, is a case in point.
- 5 As I said, the solutions I appeal to make reference to protraction vs. remaking of a certain storytelling game. All such things obviously presuppose that one independently provides identity conditions for a make-believe game as such. For an attempt at doing so, cf. Voltolini (2006).
- 6 As Evans (1982) puts it, these storytelling games are *creative*. Yet some other such games are instead *conservative*, since they make believe, of certain real individuals, that they do such and such things. See again Evans (1982).
- 7 I owe this suggestion to Francesco Orilia.
- 8 I owe this objection to Michele Paolini Paoletti.
- 9 See note 8 above.
- 10 I originally presented this paper at the *MITE online research seminar*, 17 April 2024, Macerata. I thank all the participants for their stimulating remarks.

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