**Beliefs, Make-beliefs, and Making Believe that Beliefs are not Make-beliefs**

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*Introduction*

In recent years, there has been a huge debate in philosophy regarding Walton’s (1990) proposal to conceive fictionality as make-believe. For Walton, make-believe is an *invitation*, or even a *prescription*, to imagine something. Such an imagination, moreover, is not free-floating, but is constrained by means of particular features of real individuals that Walton labels *props*. For such props work as a support for that imagination.

I agree with many critics (e.g. Friend 2008, 2001, 2012; Matravers 2014) that so understood, make-believe cannot yield the mark of fictionality. However, this failure does not depend on the problem that both fiction and reality involve both belief and imagination, as criticisms of Walton often point out.

Indeed first of all, by applying to mental representational states what Recanati (2000, 2011) and Voltolini (2006, 2016) have said as regards fictionally used sentences, on the one hand, I may suitably reconstruct the relevant kind of mental representational states that fiction typically involves as contextually unreal beliefs that, outside fiction, are either matched or non-matched by contextually real beliefs. I call these states *make-beliefs*, in order to underline that they are *genuine* beliefs, yet entertained, unlike real beliefs, in an unreal context. And on the other hand, I take real imaginations as mental states entertained in a real context, hence utterly outside fiction, that not only functionally differ from beliefs, hence from make-beliefs as well, but also are contextually matched by no make-beliefs.

Yet moreover, I want to stress that Walton’s failure has to do with the fact that the kind of make-believe that may yield the mark of fictionality is a different one. Indeed, by extending to make-beliefs the move that Recanati (2010) and Voltolini (2016) do as regards the issue of what makes fictional the fictional use of sentences, one must search elsewhere in order to appeal in terms of make-believe to a *specific* form of imagination that fiction distinctively involves, as Walton wished. One must indeed move away from the realm of norms and attain a cognitive realm in order to appeal to a specific kind of mental state yielding the mark of fictionality: a specific form of *metarepresentational* state. This metarepresentational state is a second-order representation concerning, as first-order representations, both real beliefs and the aforementioned make-beliefs, by representing that they contextually differ as regards the different worlds they involve. This metarepresentational state is the mark of fictionality, for it gives both necessary and sufficient condition for fiction. Its existence justifies some cognitive psychologists’ claim (Leslie 1987, Lillard 2002) that there is no fiction without being aware of it.

Finally, by representing such real beliefs and make-beliefs as first-order representations that are contextually different, this metarepresentational state makes it the case that the make-belief it represents is a belief held not merely in an unreal context, but in an unreal context counting as *fictional*. Let me call this metarepresentational state the proper state of *make-believe*, different from the make-belief that it involves as one of its representational components, yet making it a *make*-belief.

The architecture of this paper is as follows. In Section 1, I present Walton’s theory of make-believe as well as its drawbacks. In Section 2, I discuss how these drawbacks can be circumvented. I appeal to the notion of make-belief as a contextually unreal belief, by also explaining the sense I am appealing to contexts: *narrow* contexts, in Kaplan’s (1989) technical sense. Yet in Section 3, while acknowledging that not even make-beliefs provide the mark of fictionality, I appeal to the notion of a metarepresentational state of make-believe that is about both real beliefs and make-beliefs. I indeed attempt at showing how *this* state may provide such a mark, by simultaneously explaining how the make-belief that state is about is not a mere unreal belief, a belief in a merely unreal narrow context, but precisely a *make*-belief, a belief in a narrow fictional context.

*1. Walton’s Make-believe Account of Fiction and its Problems*

According to Walton’s (1990) influential account of fiction, fiction consists in making believe something. In its turn, make-believe is conceived *normatively*: as an *invitation*, or even a *prescription*, to imagine certain contents involving typically mere imaginary items – i.e., ‘things’ that do not really figure in the general inventory of what there is. This form of imagination is bounded by real facts concerning the real individuals, *props*, which are exploited in a make-believe game for such an imaginative purpose. Indeed, the fictional facts mobilised by that imagination depend on such real facts. Or better, sentences ‘about’ those typically mere imaginary items that are fictionally true, i.e., whose content one is invited to imagine, depend for such a truth on sentences about such props being really true. This holds not only in the case of naive childlike make-believe games, but also in the case of sophisticated literary make-believe games.

In Walton’s example, the real fact that there are three pieces of mud is exploited in order to invite one to imagine that that there are three pieces of cake. One may see this as a fact involving certain mere imaginary items – the pieces of cake – that holds in the world of a certain make-believe game, the world of the fiction. It is so to speak a fictional fact, which depends for its existence on the above real fact involving certain real items, the props – the pieces of mud. Yet, comments Walton in order not to be ontologically committed both to fictional facts and to fictional worlds, one may put things in linguistic rather than ontological terms. By virtue of the fact that the sentence “there are three pieces of mud” is really true, true in the actual world, another sentence, i.e., “there are three pieces of cake” is fictionally true, it is something whose content one is invited to imagine. As I said, moreover, for Walton literature is fictional in exactly the same way, by exploiting the very same imaginative mechanisms. For example, the real fact that in Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* a certain bit of text occurs is exploited in order to invite one to imagine that Anna committed suicide. The sentence “Anna Karenina commits suicide” is fictionally true, is something whose content one is invited to imagine, insofar as it is really true, true in the actual world, that in Tolstoy’s text a similar sentence occurs.

Basically, Walton has remained faithful to this account of fictionality throughout his philosophical career.[[1]](#footnote-1) Yet his account has been subject to many criticisms. Friend (2008, 2011, 2012) has probably raised the strongest attack to it (for similar criticisms, see also Matravers 2014). The notion of fiction Walton mobilises via make-believe, *walt-fiction* as she nicely labels it, is not our ordinary notion of fiction. For, says Friend, it provides neither sufficient nor necessary conditions of fictionality. On the one hand, it is *broader* than our notion. Also nonfictional works invite their readers to imagine something, for example what it is for someone to live in different places or times, to have different experiences, etc. Consider the description of Disraeli’s house in Simon Schama’s *History of Britain: The Fate of Empire 1776-2000*, in which the reader is invited to imagine various things. The same is true of philosophical works such as Berkeley’s *Dialogues*. On the other hand, it is *narrower* than our notion. Many fictional narratives – historical novels first of all, but not only – invite us not only to make-believe, but also to believe what they tell.

These criticisms are powerful. Yet one may wonder whether, in looking for the mark of fictionality, one is really forced to conceive make-believe as an invitation to imagine. As we will see in Sections 2-3, there are two *different* kinds of mental representational states that one may appeal to in order to differently account for fiction as make-believe. For, as we will see in Section 3, the second one provides the mark of fictionality one is looking for, by also showing how the first one has to do with fiction. Here they are:

1) a contextual modification of belief (*make-belief*);

2) a *metarepresentational* state of *make-believe* that is about different first-order representational states of belief and of make-belief as a contextual modification of belief, by contrastively comparing them as regards their location in different contexts.

Thus, make-belief and make-believe are mental states of different kinds, a first-order and a second-order one. Yet, by means of its contrastive representational content, the second kind of state shows why the first one is a *make*-belief, i.e., an unreal belief counting as entertained not in a mere unreal context, but in an unreal fictional context.

*2. Make-beliefs*

Let me start by remarking that in his (1997) discussion of fear in fiction, Walton has interestingly clarified, or even modified, his previous (1978, 1990) account of the same matter. Instead of saying, as he previously did, that fear in fiction is a mere mental surrogate of fear yet endowed both with the same phenomenology and its typical behavioral and physical manifestations (*quasi-fear*, as he labeled it in 1978), Walton now remarks that such a state is a *genuine* fear. In other words, it is *the very same kind of state* that is also entertained in real life, utterly outside fiction. Simply, in the case in question the state is entertained in an unreal context, fixed by the relevant make-believe game. In that context, one entertains a genuine emotion of fear addressed to a mere imaginary something that exists in the world of that context only – indeed, it does not figure in the general inventory of what there is. To stick to Walton’s example, in the context of the relevant make-believe game one is genuinely afraid of the green slime, the protagonist of the horror movie one is attending.

Let me call this emotion, i.e., fear in an unreal context fixed by a make-believe game, *make-fear*. Make-fear is a modification of fear just in the minimal sense involving a context *shift*: make-fear is a genuine fear yet entertained not in a real, but in an unreal context of the above sort.

One may generalise this account as regards other kinds of mental states that fiction involves. Obviously enough, one may not only be afraid of, but also craving for the protagonist of a movie or of a novel. Now, that craving is *make-desire*, in the sense that it is a genuine desire, yet entertained in the unreal context fixed by the make-believe game involving that movie or novel. In this sense, make-desire is not a *sui generis* counterpart mental state that affects fiction, just like the *i-desire* that Currie (1995, 1997, 2010, 2013) postulates for accounting for desire within fiction. Instead, it is a genuine desire; namely, it is *the same kind* of mental state of desire that is entertained outside fiction. Simply, the desire is entertained in an unreal context of the above sort, thereby being a minimal modification of a real desire in that contextual sense.

Likewise and more importantly, one can deal with belief in fiction as *make-belief* in the very same sense. Indeed, if one makes fear of a green slime as the protagonist of a movie, then one also makes believe that it is dangerous. This means that in the relevant unreal context, one both has that fear and that belief. Likewise, if one makes desire an attractive lady, say *O*, the protagonist of the corresponding *Story of O*, then one also makes believe that she is charming: in other words, in the relevant unreal context, one both has that desire and that belief. Thus, make-belief is a genuine belief that is however entertained in the unreal context fixed by a certain make-believe game; it is a modification of a real belief in this minimal sense. Once again, a make-belief is not, in Currie’s (1997, 2013) terms, an *i-belief*, taken as a *sui generis* counterpart mental state that affects fiction.[[2]](#footnote-2) Instead, it is just a genuine belief, that is, *the very same kind* of mental state of desire that is entertained outside fiction, which is however entertained in the relevant unreal context.[[3]](#footnote-3) The comparison with Currie on this concern is very important. For when one appeals to make-beliefs so conceived just as Currie does to i-beliefs, one can notice that a make-belief is not just one mental representational state among others (make-fears, make-desires…) affecting a subject that is involved with fiction, but it is rather the *typical* state that affects that subject when so involved.

This form of contextualism applies to mental states the very same contextualist account that Recanati (2000, 2011) and Voltolini (2006, 2016) have applied to the so-called *fictional* use of sentences, i.e., the use in which sentences are employed within make-believe games. When uttered in such a game, a sentence has a fictional truth-conditional content relative to a fictional narrow context of interpretation. This account generalises to such sentences the account that Kaplan (1989) originally provided for indexical sentences, i.e., sentences containing context-sensitive terms such as indexical terms (first of all, personal and demonstrative pronouns). This is a *minimal* form of contextualism, for it allows one to assign truth-conditions to fictionally used sentences in context, just as it happens with indexical sentences. According to Kaplan, as amended by Predelli (2005), a *narrow* context of interpretation is a set made by the saturation of a fixed numbers of circumstantial parameters (typically: agent, space, time, and world) that enables a sentence to have certain truth-conditions relative to that context. As a result, an unreal *fictional* narrow context is a narrow context of interpretation whose world parameter is a saturated by a *fictional* world, i.e., the world in which the vicissitudes narrated in the fictional use of a sentence unfold. Now, in Kaplan’s account an indexical sentence, say “I am American”, obtains certain truth-conditions once it is paired with a certain narrow context in which, say, Barack Obama is the agent – it is true iff Obama is American in the world of the context, the actual world in this example, which is actually the case. Likewise, a sentence in a fictional use obtains certain fictional truth-conditions once it is paired with an unreal fictional narrow context whose world is a certain fictional world: it is true iff things go in a certain way in that world. Moreover, it also obtains a fictional truth-value: if things so unfold in that world, the sentence is fictionally true, fictionally false otherwise.

Clearly enough, in this form of contextualism Walton’s ontological scruples as regards fictional worlds are respected. For a world of make-believe is invoked just for *semantic* reasons. Indeed, it is postulated only in order for that sentence to have a fictional truth-conditional content and a fictional truth-value. But nothing is said not only as regards the metaphysical nature of that world – the postulation says nothing as to whether that world is possible, or whether it is a set of worlds rather just a single world – but also as regards the ontological commitment to that world, i.e., as to whether that world really figures in the general inventory of what there is.[[4]](#footnote-4)

On the basis of this contextualism, a fictional use of a sentence can be distinguished by another use of such sentence, i.e., its *historical* use. In the historical use, a sentence has real truth-conditions once it is coupled with a real narrow context, i.e., a narrow context whose world parameter is saturated by the actual world, and it is really true if in the actual world things unfold as it narrates in such a use.

Let me apply this account to mental states. As I said, a fictional use of a sentence amounts to the fact that such a sentence has fictional truth-conditions in an unreal fictional narrow context, while a historical use of that sentence amounts to the fact that such a sentence has real truth-conditions in a real narrow context. Likewise, I may now say that, just as a real belief is a genuine belief yet entertained in a real narrow context, thereby having real truth-conditions in that context and a real truth-value, a make-belief is again a genuine belief, yet entertained in an unreal fictional narrow context, thereby having fictional truth-conditions in that context and a fictional truth-value.

This contextualist way of putting things has fundamental repercussions for the present discussion. Indeed to begin with, armed with the above notion of make-belief, I can accommodate Friend’s criticisms to Walton by differently conceiving the role of beliefs and imaginations when respectively involved in fiction and in reality.

First, instead of saying that fiction also involves beliefs, as Friend does, one may say that fiction involves make-beliefs, i.e., beliefs entertained in an unreal fictional narrow context, whose truth-conditional content however coincides with that of the corresponding real beliefs, i.e., beliefs that are entertained in a real narrow context. This notably holds when such states concern real individuals that also figure as protagonists of the relevant fiction: in their respective context, both the belief and the make-belief are about a real individual that figures in the domains of the worlds of both contexts – the actual world, the fictional world – by predicating of her the same thing.

Once this is the case, second, instead of saying that fiction essentially involves imagination, as Walton himself underlines, one may say that fiction typically involves make-beliefs that are not matched by corresponding real beliefs, i.e., beliefs in real narrow contexts. In this respect, nothing prevents fiction from also involving *make-imaginations*, i.e., imaginations that are entertained in an unreal fictional narrow context. But these make-imaginations are not what, by following Walton, one normally takes to be the imaginations that fiction involves. For properly speaking, the latter states are instead make-beliefs that are simply not matched by corresponding real beliefs. Thus, make-imaginations are typologically different from make-beliefs. Make-imaginations are mere contextual modifications of imaginations, just as make-beliefs are mere contextual modifications of beliefs.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Hence third, the same must hold as regards real imaginations and real beliefs. Instead of saying, along with Friend, that non-fiction involves imagination just as fiction does, one may say that in real narrow contexts, one entertains real imaginations that are not matched by make-beliefs, i.e., beliefs entertained in an unreal fictional narrow context.[[6]](#footnote-6)

At this point, one may wonder whether this proliferation of mental states is necessary. Why must one distinguish between make-beliefs and real imaginations? If this distinction is unjustified, the other distinctions – the one between make-beliefs and make-imaginations, the one between real imaginations and make-imaginations – are ready to collapse as well.

But this proliferation is not *ad hoc*. To begin with, the basic distinction is the one between beliefs and imaginations. For they are different mental states since, as many people claim (cf. e.g. Everett 2013), they have a different functional, hence inferential, role. Unlike imaginations, when linked with other states (typically, desires), beliefs prompt to action. Moreover, the same distinction holds also as regards make-beliefs and make-imaginations, since they respectively are genuine beliefs and imaginations yet entertained in unreal fictional contexts. If one is involved in such a context, unlike one’s make-imaginations, one’s make-beliefs (when linked with other states, typically make-desires) prompt one to act in that context.[[7]](#footnote-7)

One would clearly grasp this point if the unreal context in question were straightforwardly a *possible* rather than a fictional context. Entertaining a *possible* belief differs from entertaining a real belief, since the former but not the latter is held in an unreal possible context. Ditto for a possible imagination and a real imagination. But entertaining a possible belief differs from entertaining a possible imagination just as entertaining a real belief differs from entertaining a real imagination, insofar as they differ with respect to their different contextual consequences.

Once things are put this way, my basic distinction between a make-belief and a real imagination clearly holds: the former has unreal consequences, the latter has no real consequences. Granted, both a make-belief and a real imagination do not have real consequences, but only because the former is recognised as a belief held in an unreal context. For without that recognition, as I will show in detail in the next Section, it would have real consequences.

This said, let me show cases of the above three different mental situations. As regards the first one – fiction involving both beliefs and make-beliefs – let me consider the *incipit* of Alessandro Manzoni’s historical novel, *The* *Betrothed*:

(1) That branch of the Lake of Como, which turns toward the south between two unbroken chains of mountains, presenting to the eye a succession of bays and gulfs, formed by their jutting and retiring ridges, suddenly contracts itself between a headland to the right and an extended sloping bank on the left, and assumes the flow and appearance of a river.

In conformity with the contextualist account of fictionally used sentences developed by Recanati and Voltolini, it turns out that (1) is both a fictional truth and a real truth. For on the one hand, it is a fictional truth once it is fictionally used in the make-believe game of *The Betrothed*, so that it has a certain fictional truth-conditional content when paired with the relevant unreal fictional narrow context and it is true in the fictional world of *The Betrothed*, the world of that context. Yet it is also a real truth once it is historically used. Thus, it has the same real truth-conditional content when paired with the relevant real narrow context that has the actual world as its world parameter and it is true in that world. Indeed, the actual geographical situation of the relevant area in Northern Lombardy, Italy, is just as Manzoni describes it; the lake of Como, which figures in the domain both of the actual and of *The Bethroted*’s world, is located in both worlds as (1) says in both contexts.

Now, once one moves from the linguistic to the mental level, it would be imprecise to say that *The Betrothed* prompts a belief in what (1) says. Instead, one should say that one both believes it when one is involved in a real narrow context – e.g., when reading (the relevant part of) Manzoni’s text as a historical work – and makes believe it, i.e., one believes it when one is involved in an unreal fictional narrow context – e.g., when reading (that part of) that text as a fictional work.

As regards the second situation – fiction as merely involving make-beliefs – consider the *incipit* of James Joyce’s *Ulysses*:

(2) Stately, plump Buck Mulligan came from the stairhead, bearing a bowl of lather on which a mirror and a razor lay crossed. A yellow dressinggown, ungirdled, was sustained gently behind him on the mild morning air.

(2) is just a fictional truth. Indeed, when fictionally used, it has a fictional truth-conditional content once it is a paired with an unreal fictional narrow context and it is true in the fictional world of that context – *Ulysses*‘ world – for so things unfold there. Now, instead of saying *à la* Walton that what (2) says must be imagined, one should say that one makes believe it, i.e., believes it in that unreal fictional narrow context, but this make-belief is matched by no corresponding belief in a real narrow context. This can be easily seen once one realises that “Buck Mulligan” is a fictional name that is actually empty. Thus, when it is historically used, (2) cannot be true in the actual world, the world of that real narrow context that such a use mobilises. Hence, in the narrow unreal fictional context, where the name instead refers to a certain mere imaginary individual, one may believe that such an individual comes from the stairhead etc. But in a real narrow context, where the name refers to nothing, one correspondingly believes nothing.

In this respect, appealing to a narrow context also for mental representational states allows such states to be satisfied or unsatisfied in the world of the context. Indeed in the case of (1), one and the same thing, which is both a make-belief concerning what is narrated in a historical novel and a belief concerning the same thing yet entertained in a real narrow context, has truth-conditions that are satisfied both in the world of the unreal fictional narrow context and in the actual world, the world of that real narrow context. Yet in the case of (2) things are different. For the make-belief expressed by (2) and concerning what is narrated in a nonhistorical novel typically has fictional truth-conditions that are satisfied in the world of the unreal fictional narrow context, *Ulysses*’ world, while if there is an, admittedly different, real belief that (2) also expresses, it has different real truth-conditions that are not satisfied in the actual world.

The third situation – non-fiction involving real imaginations – just reverses the second one. In a real narrow context, e.g. while reading Schama’s *History of Britain*, one may imagine the truth-conditional content of:

(3) Hughenden Manor, Disraeli’s country house, has a terrace full of peacocks.

For this is the real truth-conditional content that (3) has when paired with a certain real narrow context whose world is the actual world. Yet this real imagination is matched by no corresponding make-belief. For there is no unreal fictional narrow context in which one believes (3) as said, or even suggested, by a corresponding novel. Indeed, no fictional use for (3) occurs, so as to provide it with a certain fictional truth-conditional content – allegedly, the very same truth-conditional content (3) has in its historical use.

The merits of appealing to make-beliefs as genuine beliefs in an unreal fictional narrow context do not end here. First of all, this appeal makes true Gibson’s (2007) remarking (*contra* Friend) that one cannot both believe that *p* and make-believe that *p*, if one has fixed a certain evaluation attitude. For one may take that attitude as an expression of the narrow context one is involved in. One believes that *p* in a real narrow context, and yet one may also make believe that *p*, but precisely in a different unreal fictional narrow context, as the case of (1) has already shown.

Moreover, one can dispense with Stock’s (2011, 2017) different attempt at accounting for the possibility of both believing and making believe that *p*. In Stock’s account, when one is involved with fiction, one has imaginations that, unlike one’s beliefs within such an involvement, are connected with other states of the same kind; namely, with other imaginations. More precisely, “if a person *K* propositionally imagines that *p* at time *t*, then either i) *K* doesn’t believe that *p* at time *t*; or ii) *K* does believe that *p* but occurrently conjoins in thought [in imagination] *p* and some further proposition *q* (or is disposed to do so), where *q* is not the content of any belief of hers at time *t*“ (Stock 2017, p. 147). Yet if talking about imagination in fiction must be replaced by appealing to make-belief as a genuine belief in an unreal fictional narrow context, such an inferential difference is no longer required. For sometimes, one may both believe that *p*, hence that *q*, *r* … in an unreal fictional narrow context, and believe that *s*, hence that *t*, *u* … in a real narrow context. While some other times, one both believes and makes believe the same thing, hence also the same consequences of that thing, by entertaining the relevant beliefs in both a real and an unreal fictional narrow context.[[8]](#footnote-8)

An example of the first kind of situation – believing and making believe different things – occurs when having to do with Conan Doyle’s tales. In the unreal fictional narrow context paired with such tales, I believe that Holmes lives in Baker St. 221b, hence also that he lives in London. But when I step out of fiction and locate myself in a real narrow context, I believe instead that there is no such street number, hence that no one named “Holmes” lives there.

An example of the second kind of situation – believing and making believe the very same thing – occurs when having to do with historical novels. As regards *The Betrothed* again, I believe, in an unreal fictional narrow context, that Como is in Italy, and thereby I also believe in that very context, that, since Italy is in Europe, Como is in Europe. But when I locate myself in a real narrow context, I also believe that Como is in Italy and that, since Italy is in Europe, Como is in Europe.

Let me recap the results obtained in this Section. By appealing to make-beliefs, instead of saying that fiction typically involve imaginations, one may say that it typically involves make-beliefs, i.e., beliefs in an unreal fictional context. When, following Friend, one says that fiction also involves beliefs, one may instead say that it involves make-beliefs, i.e., beliefs in unreal fictional narrow contexts, which are matched by real beliefs, i.e., beliefs in real narrow contexts, unlike what is typically the case. And when, still following Friend, one says that non-fiction also involves imaginations, one may instead say that in a real narrow context, non-fiction involves real imaginations that are not matched by corresponding make-beliefs, i.e., beliefs in an unreal fictional narrow context.

*3. Metarepresentational Make-believe*

So far, so good. Clearly enough, however, by so appealing to make-beliefs I have possibly found a way to dispense with Friend’s criticisms of Walton, but I have not found yet any alternative mark of fictionality. Indeed, in saying that fiction *typically* involves make-beliefs conceived as beliefs in an unreal fictional narrow context, I have not found a necessary condition of fictionality. It is quite possible that there is a piece of fiction that does not involve make-beliefs, but just one of those other alternative states: make-desires, make-fears, make-imaginations etc.

Nor are make-beliefs sufficient conditions of fictionality. For in actual fact, what I have said so far merely justifies me in claiming that make-beliefs are beliefs entertained in an *unreal* narrow context; namely, a context different from a real context because its world parameter is saturated by a world that is not the actual one. But I have found no justification yet that allows me to say that make-beliefs are beliefs entertained in a *fictional* narrow context, as I did so far. By themselves, narrow contexts are just set-theoretical entities, which differ just in the saturation of their circumstantial parameters. One may indeed entertain beliefs in other narrow contexts that are not real, yet they are not even fictional. For example, as I said before, one may entertain beliefs in an unreal *possible* narrow context, i.e., a context different from a real narrow context because a possible world different from the actual one saturates its world parameter. Or one may entertain beliefs while dreaming, hence in an unreal *oneiric* narrow context, i.e., a context different from a real narrow context because the unreal world of the dream saturates its world parameter.[[9]](#footnote-9) Yet neither a possible narrow context nor an oneiric narrow context is a fictional narrow context, i.e., a narrow context that essentially involves fiction. Thus, as regards fiction, how can I be justified in saying that the relevant make-beliefs have to do with a *fictional* (narrow) context?

Once again, one may apply to mental states the solution that Voltolini (2016) has provided to the linguistic issue of what makes *fictional* the fictional use of a sentence. For even as regards a sentence, the same problem may arise. Indeed, one may critically remark that what has been said so far merely justifies the idea that a fictional use of a sentence can be explained in terms of semantically linking that sentence with an *unreal* narrow context, but not the idea that a fictional use of a sentence can be explained in terms of semantically linking that sentence with a *fictional* narrow context, whose world is fictional and not merely possible, or oneiric. In other terms, what makes it the case that the unreal narrow context in terms of which one analyses what a fictional use amounts to is *fictional*, rather than merely possible, or even oneiric?

Well, the answer to the two questions with which I respectively concluded the two previous paragraphs is exactly the same. What makes a sentence *fictionally* used is also what makes a genuine belief a *make*-belief, rather than a possible belief, an oneiric belief, etc. The unreal narrow context of make-beliefs, as well as of fictionally used sentences, is not a mere unreal context, but precisely a *fictional* context, since those sentences are used and those beliefs are entertained in a mental situation involving a *metarepresentational state of make-believe* that is about both real first-order beliefs and unreal first-order beliefs, in order to represent them as contextually different. This metarepresentational state of make-believe is the mark of fictionality: it is what fiction essentially involves.[[10]](#footnote-10) Let me explain.

As regards a bit of fiction, one entertains a certain metarepresentational state. First of all, it is a *metarepresentational* state, for it is about: 1) a representation concerning the actual world – typically, a real belief - held in a real narrow context; 2) a representation concerning an unreal world – typically, an unreal belief – held in an unreal narrow context. Moreover, it is a *specific* metarepresentational state, for it represents the first representation as contextually disconnected from the second representation. Only once one entertains *this* metarepresentational state, one is entitled to take the second representation as a make-representation – typically, a make-belief – i.e., as a genuine representation (belief) yet concerning a *fictional* world.

This metarepresentational state is distinctive of fiction. To begin with, it is a *necessary* condition of fictionality. Many people (e.g. Perner 1991, Nichols and Stich 2003) have maintained that in order to have fiction, one must entertain different representations in different models, one addressed to the real world and another one addressed to an unreal world. For me, this difference matches the difference between a real and an unreal context in which representations are entertained. Yet this mere appeal to multiple representational models is not enough. Indeed, if one did not also entertain a certain metarepresentational state, in merely entertaining in different models two different representations – typically, a real belief and an unreal belief – the first addressed to the actual world and the second addressed to an unreal world, one would at one and the same time exhibit a form of dissociated *actual* behavior respectively resulting out of the motivational influence of such representations. For one would not recognise that the two representations are paired with different narrow contexts.

This plainly follows from the fact that, as I said before, *qua* mere contextual modification of a given real belief, an unreal belief (or any other unreal mental representational state for that matter) is just the very same kind of mental state as that belief (or that state). As I said before, this involves that it shares the same inferential role as that belief (or that state). Both *qua* real and *qua* unreal, a belief contextually leads to the very same pattern of thought and actions. Hence, if a make-belief is not recognised as such – i.e., as a belief in an *unreal fictional* narrow context – by means of the relevant metarepresentation, it prompts the very same piece of *actual* behavior it would prompt if it were real. Yet in attending fiction, one does not exhibit this sort of behaviour. This depends on the fact that entertaining the above metarepresentation, which says that the second representation (typically, a belief) is contextually disconnected from the first representation (typically, a belief), makes the second representation *actually* ineffective behaviourally. *Only at that point*, one may legitimately say that such a representation is entertained *offline*, as people appealing to the multiple models approach put it (e.g. Nichols and Stich 2003; see also Currie and Ravenscroft 2002). In other words, although the make-belief that is one of the representational objects of the above metarepresentation is still a genuine belief yet entertained in an unreal context, its being embedded into that metarepresentation prevents it from playing an *actual* inferential role. The metarepresentation indeed says that the belief entertained in an unreal narrow context is contextually disconnected from another belief, the belief entertained in a real narrow context, which is also embedded into that metarepresentation. If there were no such metarepresentational awareness, the unreal belief would not be recognised as such; hence, it would have an actual effect. As Lillard (2002:104) says, there is no fiction without one’s being aware of its fictional character.

Let me explain this point by means of examples. On the one hand, let us go back to the green slime case. In this case, first of all, in a real narrow context one entertains the representation (the belief) that this is a cinema screen, typically expressed by the corresponding historically used sentence, as addressed to the actual world: one really believes that this is a cinema screen. Moreover, in an unreal narrow context one also entertains the representation (the belief) that this is a green slime, typically expressed by the corresponding fictionally used sentence, as addressed to an unreal world: one unreally believes that this is a green slime. Finally, one also entertains the metarepresentation that the first representation and the second representation are contextually disconnected. Thus, this metarepresentation enables the second representation to count not merely as an unreal belief entertained in a mere unreal narrow context, but as a *make*-belief entertained in an unreal fictional narrow context that is indeed understood as addressed to a *fictional* world. This final metarepresentation is necessary in order to explain why one does not actually get out of the cinema in panic. For it prevents that make-belief, when not recognised as such, to have an *actual* inferential role. In a nutshell, the metarepresentation acts as an inner voice saying “it’s all make-believe”.

Yet on the other hand, consider what happened in the Lumiere Brothers case, if the anecdote is right. In this case, first of all, in a real narrow context people entertained the representation (the belief) that this is a cinema screen, typically expressed by the corresponding historically used sentence, as addressed to the actual world: they really believed that they faced a cinema screen. Moreover, in an unreal narrow context they also entertained the representation (the unreal belief) that this is a locomotive, typically expressed by the corresponding fictionally used sentence, as addressed to an unreal world: they unreally believed that they faced a locomotive. Yet finally, they did *not* entertain the metarepresentation that the first representation and the second representation were contextually disconnected. Thus, the inferential role of their second unreal belief was not actually blocked. Indeed, they actually got out of the cinema in panic, notwithstanding the fact that they still realised that they were in a cinema. Hence, they simultaneously exhibited a form of dissociated behavior.[[11]](#footnote-11)

The psychological literature also documents such cases of dissociation. Consider people affected by the Cotard illusion. They believe they are alive (in a real narrow context), they also believe they are dead (in an unreal narrow context), and they live with that dissociation, by simultaneously actually exhibiting an incoherent form of behavior. Some weak forms of the Capgras syndrome are of the same kind. Consider people living with their wives even when taking them as impostors. They believe that a person is an impostor (in an unreal narrow context) and thereby they complain about that with their friends. Yet they do not call the police and at the same time behave friendly with the ‘impostor’. For they also believe that such a person is their wife (in a real narrow context).[[12]](#footnote-12)

Clearly enough, I do not want to say that in a genuine case of make-believe, one cannot also perform actions induced by the relevant make-beliefs. Yet because of the relevant underlying metarepresentational state, such actions are contextually separated from real actions that are performed by virtue of also entertaining real beliefs.

Consider the make-believe game Friedman and Leslie (2007) describe. In it, a child both believes that a cup manipulated by an experimenter is empty and makes believe that it is full. By really believing that it is empty, the child leaves it to the experimenter. Yet by also making believe in the game that it is full, he attempts at drinking from it. So, is the child exhibiting a contradictory piece of behavior? No, precisely because by means of the relevant metarepresentation he contextually separates the two performances. By virtue of believing in a real narrow context that the cup is empty, he leaves it to the experimenter. By virtue of believing in an unreal fictional context that the cup is full, he approaches it for drinking *within that context*. Yet precisely because he knows that the contexts are different, he does not mix up the two actions.

So as I said, make-believe in this metarepresentational sense is *necessary* for fiction. As the above examples show, in order for fiction to arise, one *must* entertain the above form of metarepresentation. Without that form, there is just a dissociated way of representing, actually behaviorally confusing, just as in the Lumiere case and in the Cotard and Capgras cases.

But make-believe in this metarepresentational sense is also *sufficient* for fiction. Something that displays such a form of metarepresentation is fictional, as the following two examples show. On the one hand, merely knowing that the Müller-Lyer figure is illusory has no fictional import. For granted, to know that one’s perceptual representation of it is false – indeed, one illusorily perceives that its segments have different lengths – means to entertain a metarepresentation, yet not the specific one we are searching for the purposes of fiction. It is a metarepresentation that merely says that such a perceptual representation, *qua* representation of the actual world, is inaccurate. On the other hand, in order for fiction to arise from this case, one must entertain a representation (a belief) in a real narrow context that these lines have the same length, plus another representation (another belief) in an unreal narrow context that these lines do not have the same length, and finally a certain specific metarepresentation, i.e., one’s awareness that such first-order representations are contextually disconnected, so that the second counts as a make-representation (a make-belief) in an unreal *fictional* context. This is what happens with René Magritte’s famous painting *The Treachery of Images*. In a real narrow context concerning the physical vehicle of the picture, one represents (believes) that this is not a pipe; in an unreal narrow context concerning what is presented by the picture, one also represents (believes) that this is a pipe; finally, one is metarepresentationally aware of such a difference between representations (beliefs) as located in their respective contexts, a real and a fictional one.

But there is not even need to appeal to such ideal examples. For, as some experiments in psychology of development show (Rakoczy and Tomasello 2004, Rakoczy et al. 2006), children start to understand pretense when they start to be engaged with this form of metarepresentational awareness. At a previous, non-metarepresentational, cognitive stage, they remain perplexed when merely both attending to an empty glass and assuming along with an experimenter, as if he were a confused guy, that the glass is full. But at a second, metarepresentational stage, they start smiling when they understand that the experimenter both represents the glass as empty and represents that the glass is full without mixing the two representations up in the same model, by virtue of her recognising them as contextually distinct.

Likewise, myths reveal themselves to be fictional only when they are accompanied by this form of metarepresentation. For simplicity’s sake, let me suppose that a myth is a written story to be read. Nothing would substantially change if it were an orally told story, so that it would involve not visual, but auditory representations. So, at a previous, non- metarepresentational, cognitive level, a myth involves that first, in a real narrow context, one visually represents the physical patches of ink one reads, and second, in an unreal narrow context yet not recognised as unreal, one also non-visually represents what those patches signify. Thus at this level, one may act in accordance with the story just as one would act in accordance with a *documentary* story, by erroneously assuming that the story involves individuals located in the real world, Just as a documentary story does. But *then*, once one recognizes that the second narrow context is, unlike the first one, unreal, thereby *metarepresenting* that the relevant representations respectively involve different contexts, a real context and an unreal context that now counts as a fictional context, one does no longer erroneously take such representations as belonging to the same context, as one did before recognising the mythical character of the tale. Hence, one acts accordingly, by taking the individuals the myth is about as populating not the real but a fictional world, as one normally does with a fictional story recognised as such.

One may object that this form of metarepresentation is not sufficient for fictionality. For even in the case of being aware that one has to do with a representation of the present time different from a representation of a past time one exhibits this kind of representational triad, yet one where no fiction is involved.

Right, this is another case of metarepresentational awareness that is useful in order not to confuse the present with the past, as one would do if in presently seeing a photograph, one did not recognise that it represents a past event. Yet this is not a case of genuine make-believe. For the *content* of this metarepresentation differs from the content of the make-believe representation as regards the *contexts* of the two first-order representations involved. Indeed, unlike the make-believe case, the two contexts that are respectively paired with the representations that are recognised as contextually distinct differ in the *time*, not in the *world*, parameter of the contexts. The first representation – say, a perception – is paired with a real narrow context whose temporal parameter is saturated by the present time: it is a ‘now’-representation. The second representation – say, a memory – is paired with a real narrow context whose temporal parameter is saturated by a past time: it is a ‘then’-representation.[[13]](#footnote-13)

All in all, therefore, having the above sort of metarepresentational state of make-believe is both necessary and sufficient for fiction. Thus, *this* sort of make-believe provides the mark of fictionality we were after.

Before concluding, let me give a theoretical assessment of the present view. In taking fiction as essentially involving this form of metarepresentational *mental state*, this account of fiction wants to square with Walton’s overall idea that fiction involves a *specific* form of imagination. Indeed, the metarepresentational state of make-believe has nothing to do with imagination per se, nor can it be reduced to the first order make-belief that is simply one of the representations it is about.[[14]](#footnote-14) Yet it is a mere *cognitive* account that loses any reference to *normativity*, which instead plays a substantive role in Walton’s account. As you will remember, for Walton make-believe is an *invitation*, or even a prescription, to imagine. In the present account, normativity comes into the fore only *later*; namely, when one must assess whether a certain make-believe game is *correct* or not. It is so, when it is played *in conformity with* how it was played by its originator when she was endowed with the relevant metarepresentation.

*4. Conclusion*

Walton is right in thinking that fiction is distinctively qualified by a specific kind of imagination, *make-believe*. Yet he is wrong in thinking that fiction amounts to make-believe taken as an invitation, or a prescription, to imagine something, as many of his critics rightly underline. For the specific form of imagination that distinctively qualifies fiction is the specific metarepresentation that a representation addressed to the actual world is contextually different from a representation addressed to another world. This second world can thereby count not as a mere unreal world, but as a *fictional* world. Indeed, entertaining that metarepresentation enables one to take the second first-order representation as a *make*-representation, typically as a make-belief: i.e., as a representation (typically a belief) that is entertained in an unreal fictional narrow context different from the real narrow context in which the first representation is entertained (typically also a belief).[[15]](#footnote-15)

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1. More cautiously, for Walton 2013 an invitation to imagine is a merely necessary condition for fictionality. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For Kind (2013, pp. 147-8), the postulation of i-beliefs and i-desires is a common practice among many simulationists about imagination. Goldman suggests that i-beliefs and i-desires actually are modifications of real beliefs and real desires in the sense I have pointed out. For imagination “is an operation or process capable of creating a wide variety of mental states” (2006, p. 47). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. One might immediately retort that mental representational states in fiction cannot be the same states as in real life, for they do not play the same inferential role (for example, fear in attending a horror movie does not prompt one to get out of the cinema). As I will say later, this is not the case. Indeed, in the next Section I will show how one’s entertainment of make-states in fiction has in the same context the same consequences. For the time being, however, it is enough to observe that, when mental representational states, notably emotions, are entertained in fiction *qua* (naturalistic) actors and not *qua* spectators, the very same sort of behavior is activated. Cf. Saint (2014, pp. 362-3). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. I am here following Predelli (1997). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Also Kind (2013) suggests that there is a kind of imagination that, as supporting our modal epistemology, must be distinguished from the imagination that amounts to a modification of belief. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. One may distinguish imaginations both from beliefs and from make-beliefs even in an utterly different approach. Cf. Langland-Hassan (2012, 2014). Unlike this approach, however, I do not hold that imagination differs from belief not as an attitude, but merely in terms of its specific kind of content (a counterfactual implication). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The fact that make-beliefs prompt one to act in their unreal fictional context is hardly noticed, since make-believers often are spectators of what happens in the world of the context, not protagonists of that context. Yet the distinction between spectators and protagonists is feeble, since spectators may be invited to join the protagonists (e.g. in a play). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. This inferential commonality is the affinity that many people hold as subsisting between belief and imagination (cf. e.g. Currie and Ravenscroft 2002) and that, in my account, should instead be applied to beliefs and make-beliefs. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Walton himself (1990, pp. 43-50) draws a comparison between dreams and fiction. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. In cognitive psychology, Leslie (1987) was the first at analysing fictionality in metarepresentational terms. For a survey of different metarepresentational accounts of fiction, cf. Meini and Voltolini (2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Clearly enough, these are the extreme cases. Many intermediate cases can be figured out in which the relevant metarepresentation tends to be pushed back in one’s mental background, so that the motivational force of the relevant representation in the unreal narrow context (the unreal belief) is not entirely suppressed. Cases of *transportation* go in this direction. Transportation is the phenomenon in which readers turn out to be immersed, both cognitively and emotionally, in the world of a narration, independently of whether the story that is narrated is real or fictional. As a result, their habits and stances, as well as their reactions, are affected by the story content. In particular, such readers may know that the story that is narrated to them does not concern the real world. Yet this does not prevent them from cognitively bracketing the real world while being absorbed by the world of the narration as if it were the real world, by endorsing a sort of Coleridgean ‘suspension of disbelief’. Cf. Green and Brock (2000). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Subjects described as entertaining forms of weak imaginative superstitions (cf. Ichino 2020) may be compared to those dissociated people. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Incidentally, this shows that the form of metarepresentational awareness that is involved in make-believe is very thin. Some people would indeed object that appealing to this form of metarepresentation in order to account for fictionality is too demanding. For it entails that people involved with fiction must master the relevant concepts (i.e. FICTION, MAKE-BELIEVE, PRETENSE). As regards young children, this is implausible. Cf. Langland-Hassan (2012). But it is not necessary that the relevant metarepresentation involves such concepts. For, as Meini and Voltolini (2010) have shown, that representation may simply be a *singular* metarepresentation that THAT [a representation in a certain narrow context, involving a *certain* world parameter] does not go along with THAT [another representation, or another token of that representation, in another narrow context involving *another* world parameter]. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Kind (2013) has also suggested that the imagination that qualifies fiction must be distinguished both from the kind of imagination that supports modal epistemology and from the kind of imagination that amounts to a modification of a belief. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. This paper has been originally presented at the conferences *The Fiction/Nonfiction Divide: Fact or Fiction?,* University of Auckland, March 19 2018, Auckland; *Belief and Imagination in Fiction*, Department of Philosophy and Education Sciences, University of Turin,December 4 2018, Turin. I thank all the participants for their very stimulating remarks. I also thank Fred Kroon for his important comments to a previous version of the paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)