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Research · March 2016

DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.1.1046.1843

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Contextualizing Paper for  
MA Practical Project module  
(EA606-G-SU)

Itai Leigh (PG 145747)

Monologue Tutor: Zois Pigadas

Head of Course: Robin Sneller

## ***Willing Suspension of Disbelief?***

**A study of the role of volition in the experience of delving into a story**

*"The magician takes the ordinary something and makes it do something extraordinary. Now you're looking for the secret... but you won't find it, because of course you're not really looking. You don't really want to know. You want to be fooled."*

— The Prestige, Director Christopher Nolan, 2006

In this paper I present several angles, trying to understand the degree and the nature of will that takes place in the suspension of disbelief, or in immersion into a narrative we receive. I believe an understanding of the nature of the phenomenon can be, apart from intellectually interesting, doubly beneficial for actors. On one hand it is clearly desirable to have the power to modify the extent to which an audience would tend to get rapt or lost in a project we are creating (whether to elevate it for a more emotional reaction, or reduce it to allow more intellectual deliberation about its themes). On the other hand as actors such understanding can be used in order to improve our techniques of immersing ourselves in the imaginary world of the character we are to portray.

## Introduction

The phrase “willing suspension of disbelief” was coined in an autobiographical literary discourse, published in 1817 by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, an English poet, literary critic and philosopher, under the title *Biographia Literaria*. In its 14<sup>th</sup> chapter Coleridge mentions the conversations he had had with William Wordsworth, an English poet, which inspired the cooperation of the two in writing the anthology *Lyrical Ballads* (1798). Those conversations often revolved around “the two cardinal points of poetry, the power of exciting the sympathy of the reader by a faithful adherence to the truth of nature, and the power of giving the interest of novelty by the modifying colours of imagination” (Coleridge, 2013 (1817)) .

For the collection, he explains, it was agreed that Wordsworth would write poems about everyday life’s matters trying “to give [them] the charm of novelty”, whereas Coleridge would write poems about supernatural matters (at least in part), trying to evoke emotions resembling those that might arise while experiencing such phenomena and believing them to be real. “[T]o transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that **willing suspension of disbelief** for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith [bold added]” (Coleridge, 2013 (1817)).

To understand Coleridge’s meaning we can refer to records of a lecture he delivered in 1818 on *The Tempest*, where he compared dream and play (or novel): “in sleep we pass at once by a sudden collapse into this suspension of Will and the Comparative power: whereas in an interesting Play, real or represented, we are brought up to this point, as far as it is requisite or desirable, by the Art of the Poet

and the Actors, and with the consent and positive Abidance of our own Will. We *chuse*[choose] to be deceived” ((Coleridge, 1987, p. 266) mentioned in (Ferri, 2007, p. 10)).

In both occurrences the conscious effort performed by the receivers of the art works are prominent. Much evidence exists for the notion of a deliberate suspension of reality judgement or ignoring of the existent beliefs for the benefit of experiencing art works prior to Coleridge’s formulation (Ferri, 2007, p. 9). Considering Kant’s notion of the unique kind of pleasure from (and judgement of) art as a distancing one — what he called “disinterestedness” (Ginsborg, 2014), and Shakespeare’s prologue in *Henry V* (“Piece out our imperfections with your thoughts;.... Think when we talk of horses, that you see them” (Shakespeare, 1993 (1599))), is sufficient to see that the idea was not new.

In this paper I shall not aim for a historical depiction of the process of our understanding of the matter, but rather try to use existing literature in shedding light on one aspect of the phrase — the amount of control one has over one’s suspension of disbelief.

In stating that, I should note that I am interested in the amount of control we exert over our believing in the reality of the narrative (or at least not disbelieving in it). In that sense, reviewing other theories which do not coincide with that phrase (“suspension of disbelief”) shall still be regarded as relevant in this paper.

The paper is divided into two parts. In the first I review and discuss a theory relying mostly on neurological findings by Norman H. Holland, and in the second I deal primarily with a couple of psychological theories which I see as interconnected — the Transportation theory and Donald W. Winnicott’s theory introducing the potential space.

## **Neurological Implication of Non-Action**

Norman N. Holland, a literary critic, suggested in a series of articles (Holland, 2003) (Holland, 2008) an explanation for the sense of reality accompanying a narrative that we know is fictional. He argues that in coming to experience a work of art, be it a painting, a book, a movie or a play, we know we need not and cannot act to change it. This understanding prompts us to shut down the system that acts and plans action, but neurologically shutting down this system shuts down the reality-testing system with it.

Holland cites several neurological works demonstrating the strong bond, and even the dependence, of the reality-testing on planning of action. Assuming we do shut down the action-planning system, we are left with the default belief status towards what we comprehend. Here Holland brings understanding of our belief system in a Spinozan way, that is to say that we cannot comprehend without accepting a proposition and only later can we assess whether to reject it or not (more on this to follow). Altogether that means we end up believing in what we understand (the story) as long as we do not plan to act (Holland, 2008). Once we do plan to act, after the film is over or when we want to reach for the popcorn, the reality-testing mechanism kicks back in.

If we take on Holland's explanation, it is quite evident that the suspension of disbelief towards, or more accurately the belief in, the content of an art work we experience is an **involuntary** byproduct of our understanding of our passive role in experiencing art generally. However a couple of points should be explored, trying to decide the model's validity, namely, the premise of our believing prior to disbelieving and the connection between the action planning system and the reality-testing system.

### **Activity and Reality**

First I shall point to several failures in the notion of Holland's binding of the action-planning system and the reality-testing faculty. To demonstrate this connection, Holland enlists the difference between the experiences of watching a movie in a cinema and on DVD at home. He argues that the control bestowed on us watching it on DVD prevents us from shutting down the action-planning system and thus destroys the effect of believing in the fiction in front of us. Apart from neglecting the whole range of differences between the two experiences (such as public/private space, uniqueness/mundanity of activity, Screen size, etc.), Holland in my opinion draws on a false premise — that we cannot get the same effect experiencing a narrative when we control it (at least partially). One just needs to mention the success of Netflix to debunk the notion of failure which Holland attributes to viewer-controlled movie experiences. If we want to go further, I would argue that the same effect of suspension of disbelief occurs in much more receiver-controlled situations such as video-games (especially quests and first-person shooter games, which provide strong senses of immersion into their imaginary worlds).

Another question regarding this connection arises when we think of some scenarios in which the spell is quite instantly broken by a factor from within the art work. For instance when we see a break in the conventions of the medium (e.g. boom mic in the frame of a film, an actor tripping over his lines or forgetting them in the theatre) we are jerked out of the effect without having to act or plan to act at all. I deliberately refer to examples in which the effect is intact until the occurrence of an event within the art work, so as not to be challenged on account of the question whether the planning-system even got

shut off in the first place, which connects to the question how deliberate this shutting-off action is. Looking at an example like the ones I refrained from here, Holland justly notes that “developing a critical viewpoint or even imagining a critical article as you read a novel” is accompanied by a pleasure that “differs from simply enjoying a work of art for its own sake and does not entail ‘poetic faith’” (Holland, 2008, p. 318). We can say, in his terms, that in his example we do not shut-off the action-planning system. But in the examples I noted above the viewer is already rapt in the story, in the imaginary world, and is ejected from it by a reaction of her psyche to some breaking of the rules (conventions). It is obvious that she does not need to act or plan to act in any other way than she did prior to the breach of convention, and it is normally the case that this fact is obvious to her as well. In that I want to say — the termination of the suspension of disbelief cannot be reasonably connected to an ignition of the action-planning system, that is to say, to the opposite of what Holland asserts is the cause for it. In the same arena but even less conforming with the mechanism Holland asserts is in action is the termination of the effect by an inconsistency in the plot of the story or some other element in the imaginary circumstances that makes the viewer question the credibility of the story, although she knew perfectly well from the start that it was fictional. Her relative position to the story, in terms of action, did not change. But something within the imaginary world itself (rather than like previously — in the medium that delivered or constructed it) breaks the spell and renders the effect impossible, although the viewer was immersed in the story before the event.

Aristotle acknowledged the way inconsistencies may spoil the effect, and added the notion of a skilful poet (or playwright) who is able to counter it and get away with irrationalities in the play. He also claimed that such irrationalities or discrepancies may go more easily undetected in the medium of literature than in theatre (and, I assume, film) (Aristotle, 1902, pp. 95-97). In this matter we can see Aristotle’s attitude towards the effect — he, as Holland, treats it as an involuntary mood, brought forth by the talent of the poet: “the absurdity is veiled by the poetic charm with which the poet invests it” (Aristotle, 1902, p. 97). But as mentioned before, Holland’s model fails to explain the reason for the effect being broken by irrationalities and absurdities in the plot, as Aristotle calls them.

### **Belief and Comprehension**

Even if we do accept the connection between action-planning and reality-testing and their being shut down for the duration of our experience of a work of art, in order for that to mean that we believe in a work of art while experiencing it we need to accept the Spinozan connection between comprehension and affirmation.

As Daniel T. Gilbert, a social psychologist and a writer, explains (Gilbert, 1991), before Spinoza's work the prominent notion of our processing of propositions was that of Descartes. According to it, first we understand a proposition and then we assess its veracity — true or false. This model is both intuitive and appealing as a practical mechanism that deals very well with malfunction. If for some reason the second stage was not reached, the proposition stays neutral and the mechanism can recognize it as not being assessed. On the other hand, Spinoza's model seems both unintuitive and impractical. In his model, comprehension comes hand in hand with affirmation. In a second stage we assess whether to reject the proposition or certify it, leaving it accepted as before. In a breakdown of such a mechanism, not reaching the second stage could result very easily in false propositions being left accepted. Gilbert continues to explain that because resources are needed in order to pass the processed information from one stage to the next, in case of resource depletion the system reacts by outputting the information of an earlier stage. Thus, in our case we should be able to judge whether our minds work in a Cartesian or Spinozan way, by subjecting it to resource depletion and see whether we end up with unassessed propositions or accepted false ones.

Gilbert argues that the effectiveness in which governments throughout the history have practiced indoctrination based on the assumption that beliefs are more easily instilled in people with depleted cognitive resources, shows that disbelief and doubt are much more effortful cognitive operations than belief. In support of this claim he also refers to a literary review of a stream of studies showing the distraction effect — distraction enhances persuasive impact in a subject who is exposed to a persuasive message in certain situations (Baron, Baron, & Miller, 1973). Distraction acts as a competition with our processing of a proposition, according to Gilbert. Our cognitive resources need to be used both for the distraction and for the proposition, depleting the resources on hand for the proposition processing.

Still, there seems to be an unsettled facet in regard to the Spinozan notion of belief-comprehension entanglement. As Gilbert lays neatly the possibilities — the fact that disbelieving and doubting are more complex mental operations, and take longer to achieve is very established. But the notion of unity for comprehension and belief is not resolved; they might be two distinct stages.

Just for the sake of entirety, I shall address the two parts of the established fact before continuing to the unity problem. For the complexity difference, Gilbert adds two observations regarding the development of our minds as children, as windows into incomplete mechanisms as they are being built: 1) linguistically, the denial functionality of the word “no” (as opposed to the rejective or non-existent functionalities) comes at a very late stage of child development; 2) Young children are more prone to accept proposition uncritically, even when their inexperience is taken into account. For the length difference I shall quote one study (a later study than Gilbert's paper) which, using functional magnetic

resonance imaging (fMRI) showed directly that belief assertion is a faster operation than both false assertion and uncertainty tagging (Harris, Sheth, & Cohen, 2008)<sup>1</sup>.

Now to the unity problem. Because we can be quite convinced now that acceptance precedes rejection (or at least it is a more basic mental state and an easier one for the brain to achieve) we would favour the Spinozan model over the Cartesian one. But the Spinozan model not only puts acceptance prior to rejection in a sequence of mental operations, it unites acceptance and comprehension. Among other studies mentioned in his paper, the most direct one to address this was a series of three experiments Gilbert conducted with two other colleagues, Douglas S. Krull and Patrick S. Malone.

In the first experiment subjects were shown proposition regarding a foreign language (A is B, whereas A is a noun in the foreign language, and B is a noun in English), and after each proposition, they were shown whether that proposition was true or false. On some occasions, a monotonous tone was

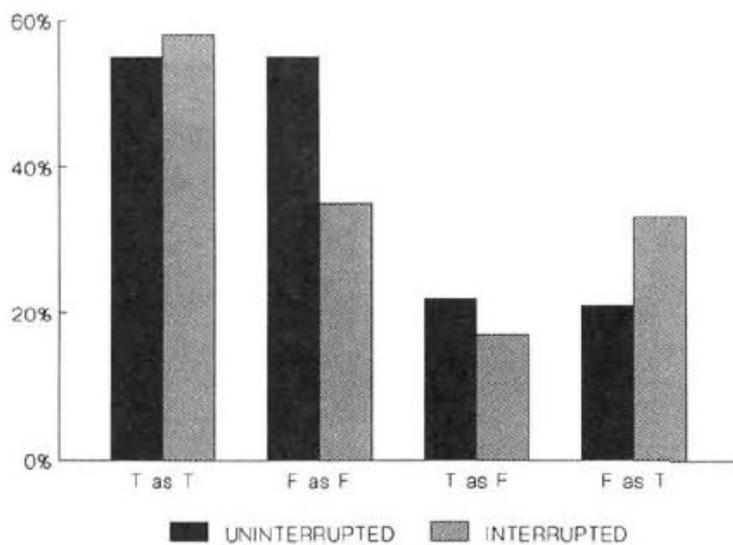


Figure 1 Taken from (Gilbert, Krull, & Malone, 1990, p. 604). "Identifications and misidentifications of propositions in Study 1" (the mentioned experiment). "T-as-T denotes true propositions that were identified as true, [F stands for False]...and so on"

sounded, prompting the subjects to push a button as fast as they could, and by that interrupting the process of the proposition's truth value. After all propositions have been shown, subjects were asked to recall for each proposition its veracity. The researchers found a strong tendency among subjects to recall false propositions (ones that have been marked false to the subjects by the computer) as true among those propositions that have had their false-value signal interrupted, whereas no corresponding tendency was shown for incorrectly recalling true-

propositions as false (Figure 1). This seems like a promising proof that belief is not merely more basic or easy a mental task than disbelieving, but rather that it precedes it in a sequential order. The interruption

<sup>1</sup> It also showed that the uncertainty tagging involves parts of the brain that are not involved in the other two operations. This part of the brain has been shown to be connected to error detection and response conflict (Harris, Sheth, & Cohen, 2008, pp. 143,146). This last bit of information might sound favourable to the Cartesian mechanism at first, but in fact it can be settled with both models, since in the Spinozan model we would expect some kind of race between certifying the already-accepted proposition and rejecting it, as we would expect a similar race in the Cartesian model (between affirming and negating the uncertain proposition).

didn't allow the subjects to reject the accepted propositions and thus they retained their true-value marker in subjects' memories (Gilbert, Krull, & Malone, 1990, pp. 602-606).

I shall refrain from bringing here the other two experiments (out of which, Gillbert referred to the third in the paper discussed before (Gilbert, 1991, p. 115)), and focus only on this one experiment, as it on one hand can potentially suffice to prove the rest of the hypothesis, and on the other hand the countering experiment I am about to mention is only a beginning point in reassessing these experiments. Following suggestions that the nature of the propositions have influenced the way their falsity was represented mentally, Uri Hasson, Joseph P. Simmons and Alexander Todorov facilitated new experiments based on the ones in the study above. The first experiment, and the only one I will touch upon here, was a variation of the experiment discussed just now (more accurately, a variation of a hybrid between that and the second experiment in Gilbert et al.'s study). They showed their participants faces accompanied by propositions regarding the persons shown in the pictures, and indicators whether these proposition were true or false. This is very much in line with the previous mentioned study. But in this case, each proposition used belonged (without the participants knowing about it) to one of the following categories: highly informative when true but not when false, highly informative when false but not when true, highly informative when both true and false and un-informative when either false or true. By "informative" they meant "how informative each statement would be about an anonymous 30-year-old person, if that statement was the only thing they knew about the person" (Hasson, Simmons, & Todorov, 2005, p. 568). For example, "Has a television at home" is a statement that is un-informative when true, but highly informative when false — this person is probably a bookish type. Occasionally, the participants were sounded a monotonous tone – either high pitch or low pitch, and they were instructed to push the corresponding button out

of two whenever that occurred. After all the propositions (with their accompanying face-pictures) were shown, the participants were asked to go through the propositions and indicate their veracity. The researchers anticipated, and indeed showed, that the results Gilbert et al. produced would be replicated only for the propositions that were un-informative when false, and that the results would not show the same effect (a tendency

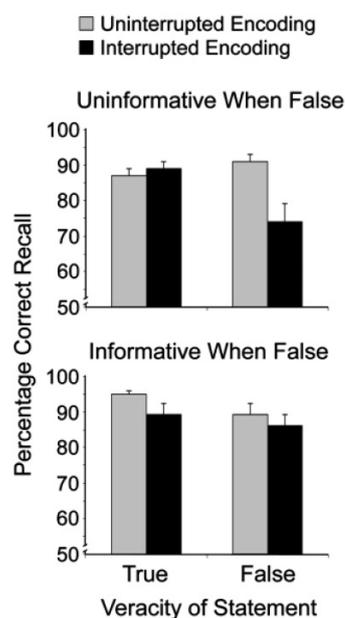


Figure 2 Taken from (Hasson, Simmons, & Todorov, 2005, p. 569). "Percentage of correct recall of statements' truth or falsity in Experiment 1" (the mentioned experiment)"as a function of whether the statements were presented as true or false and whether their presentation was interrupted or uninterrupted. The top panel presents data for statements that were uninformative when false (e.g. *this person drinks tea for breakfast*), and the bottom panel presents data for statements that were informative when false (e.g. *this person is loved by family members*)."

to recall false propositions as true when interrupted) for the propositions that were highly informative when false (Figure 2). They concluded that it is possible that mentally, comprehension does not necessitate belief. They noted that the results of that experiment are consistent with the Cartesian model, and wrote “It seems that extant evidence in favor of the Spinozan hypothesis does not generalize to statements that convey meaningful information when the statements are false” (Hasson, Simmons, & Todorov, 2005, pp. 571,566-569).

## **Belief or Not Belief**

What Holland does not take into account, and what might reveal his claim as insufficient and the whole above discussion as irrelevant is an idea stressed in psychologist Jerome S. Bruner’s book *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*: we have two different kinds of thinking — analytical and narrative:

“There are two modes of cognitive functioning, two modes of thought, each providing distinctive ways of ordering experience, of constructing reality. The two (though complementary) are irreducible to one another. Efforts to reduce one mode to the other or to ignore one at the expense of the other inevitably fail to capture the rich diversity of thought.

...They differ radically in their procedures for verification. A good story and a well-formed argument are different natural kinds. Both can be used as means for convincing another. Yet what they convince *of* is fundamentally different: arguments convince one of their truth, stories of their lifelikeness” (Bruner, 1986, p. 11).

To be accurate, in his paper Holland does refer to the psychological notion of fast uncritical thinking taking place simultaneously with slower critical thinking, and quotes psychologists Deborah H. Prentice and Richard J. Gerrig: “Fictional information is persuasive because it is processed via some nonsystematic route” (Holland, 2008, p. 314). Holland uses Gilbert’s suggestion to consider the cognitive faculty working as the perception system: we see and react before we finish evaluating whether we need to do anything at all (Gilbert, 1991, p. 116) (for example if it looks like we are about to bump into someone we will swiftly manoeuvre and only later might realise we didn’t have to change our course). He claims, as was discussed previously, that later on, upon completion of the narrative, the second system comes into work and thus renders the narrative fictional. The obvious flaw is that as a common experience we do not believe in the fictional world as we experience it more than we do afterwards. The fictional world *feels* more real while we experience the story, but we don’t *believe* it is. As philosopher

Kendall L. Walton exemplifies, if a person called Charles watches a horror film featuring a great green slime, he can feel as though he is afraid of the slime, but the fact that he has no inclination to act as though a slime really threatens the city (he does not phone his family to warn them or to the police to report the threat, nor does he have any inclination to do so) must make us reject any notion that he believes in the fiction, even partially (Walton, 1978, pp. 7-9). One might argue that this strategy is surely eviscerated in opposition for Holland's explanation, for if our belief was facilitated originally by our shutting down the system that plans actions it is perfectly logical that we wouldn't take any action had we been presented a situation that in real life would prompt one. In other words in Holland's model knowing in advance he was not going to act towards the film, Charles made it impossible for himself to act once the Slime was introduced, even though (in Holland's model) Charles believes it exists full-heartedly. As Holland treats non-fiction as fiction<sup>2</sup>, I would answer to such an argument that had Charles been watching the news, rather than a fictional film, he would have taken out his phone from his pocket and called his loved ones right there and then, not waiting for the narrative to be over, or in other words, not waiting for the action-planning system to kick back into gear.

As Bruner wrote, the cognitive mode of stories is essentially different from that of the arguments. This mode does not verify truth and consistency, but rather verisimilitude. It is that difference that makes factual information expressed within a context of a narrative persuasive. It is not that the analysis comes later or that the information is perceived through partially-shut-off-systems, but rather, there is no analysis at all because it goes through another route altogether. In a study that is widely regarded as one of the formulating works of the Transportation Theory, social psychologists Melanie C. Green and Timothy C. Brock showed that transportation (the degree in which a reader is immersed in the narrative) correlates with change of personal beliefs and attitudes in accordance with those embodied in the story. In their paper they wrote:

“Rather than amount of thought per se, transportation theory posits processing that is qualitatively different from the traditional systematic or heuristic modes described in dual-process models of persuasion (e.g., Chaiken, 1980; Petty & Cacioppo, 1981). Elaboration implies critical attention to major points of an argument, whereas transportation is an immersion into a text. Elaboration leads to attitude change via logical consideration and evaluation of arguments, whereas transportation may lead to persuasion through other mechanisms” (Green & Brock, 2000, p. 702).

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<sup>2</sup> As do all the researchers of psychology processes of narrative presented in this paper (apart from the Walton, who addressed fiction specifically).

## Transportation Theory

“The arguably most popular concept to capture the experience of being immersed into a narrative world is *transportation*” (Gnamb, Appel, Schreiner, Richter, & Isberner, 2014, p. 187). First conceived by Gerrig in his book *Experiencing Narrative Worlds: On the Psychological Activities of Reading* and later formulated by introducing a scale to measure the effect by Green and Brock (Green & Brock, 2000), transportation theory can be seen as the middle ground in terms of deliberateness towards the effect I am considering in this paper, and it captures more accurately the essence of the phenomenon, in my opinion, than Holland’s notion of belief in the plot as propositions. The theory’s name comes from Gerrig’s book, in which he uses two metaphors to organize the discussion — transportation and performance (the narrative *transports* the receiver as a traveller from the world of origin to the narrative world, and the receiver is *performing* the narrative using the imagination). He notes that both bear problematic associative characteristics in regard to effortfulness: one is deceptively passive, while the other is deceptively active. About the use of the performance metaphor, for instance, he writes: “Although some aspects of performance make explicit claims on attentional resources, a great number of “performance” acts are sufficiently routinized to take place outside of awareness” (Gerrig, 1993, p. 19).

In their study, Green and Brock held four experiments aimed to establish the connection between transportedness (in their terms) and change of personal beliefs and attitudes in accordance with those related to the narrative, as well as reaction towards the fictional characters featured in it. I shall point out the results relevant to our main topic<sup>3</sup>. In the experiments, the researchers tried to manipulate transportation by changing the instructions the readers follow while reading a story. Some were instructed to think of themselves as actors who need to act in the story and to imagine themselves in the imaginary world of the plot, pay attention to circumstances and the characters’ emotions, etc. while others were instructed to concentrate on the form of the written text, on the grammar and vocabulary. This was supposed to challenge a theory, called the Text Hegemony, attributing the primary determinant of transportation to the storyteller’s craft, to the text itself, rather than the situation or framing in which it is read (or heard or seen). Results of an examination of the Text Hegemony theory do not necessarily imply conclusions regarding the wilfulness of transportation, as it contrasts text and text-independent-situation (such as presentation of the text), both might be uncontrolled by the reader. Still, I claim that given the settings of the specific experiments in this study we can infer from one to the other, for the difference used between situations was specifically designed to be in degree of the

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<sup>3</sup> Although it is not relevant directly to our subject, I will point out one result that is relevant to an argument I used earlier on: both transportedness and changing of beliefs were not affected by the source of the story — fiction VS non-fiction.

readers' intentions to become transported. The findings show yet another middle-ground for us. One text, which scored highly in transportation in comparison with other stories, was used in the first three experiments, and another text, which scored more moderately in transportation, was used in the fourth experiment. The first experiment did not include varying instructions. The second and third experiments failed to demonstrate any significant difference in magnitude of transportation between the different instruction groups, which supports Text Hegemony, and a notion of automation for the immersion experience (our "suspension of disbelief"). In the fourth experiment, however, using a different text the researchers succeeded in demonstrating the instruction-related variation in degree of transportation (Green & Brock, 2000). This of course supports the opposite side, and a notion of deliberateness for the immersion itself. The difference in situations related to the opposing results was, as stated, the use of stories of two distinct transportingness baselines (as judged without manipulating the situation of reading). This could indicate an existence of a line on the quality scale for narratives (or at least their baseline transportingness) between voluntary and involuntary evocation of transportation. Such a cross-line could exist as a result of different processes that can set the phenomenon in motion, or that contribute to it.

An experiment aimed to address directly the question of transportation reliance on text VS reader was conducted by a group of psychologists (Gnamb, Appel, Schreiner, Richter, & Isberner, 2014). They used four stories, and each in four variations, out of which two instances featured a high-narrativity condition (flowing, natural organization of narrative), whereas the other two featured a low-narrativity condition ("the sections of the story were mixed up in order to disrupt the narrative flow" (Gnamb, Appel, Schreiner, Richter, & Isberner, 2014, p. 188)). Using a statistical analysis that is able to distinguish between trait effects (stable degree of propensity towards getting transported and variations between individuals) and situational ones (variation of transportedness within individuals' experiences of the different texts), they showed that both were significant in affecting the degree of transportation a reader experiences. They also mentioned that their results show a larger degree of situational effect than several previously studied situational effects on typical enduring individual traits (Gnamb, Appel, Schreiner, Richter, & Isberner, 2014, p. 191). Although the variance regarding individual propensity towards experiencing transportation cannot be said to imply much regarding transportation's deliberateness, the variance regarding texts, the transporting device, is quite convincingly supporting the involuntary characteristic of the phenomenon. One might counter this statement, saying that the difference between the texts might vary the degree in which the text seems appealing to readers, influencing their conscious decision whether to engage or not. I grant that this case is not as strong as

the previous study's case, where readers were instructed to directly try to engage or not<sup>4</sup>, but in conjunction to the previous study I think it does strengthen the notion of combination of voluntary and involuntary initiation processes the effect relies on.

### **Playing Through Life**

In the corner for the conscious effort in "suspending disbelief" I count Walton (Walton, 1978), who claims we reduce ourselves to the level of fictions when experiencing them. "Rather than somehow fooling ourselves into thinking fictions are real, we become fictional" (Walton, 1978, p. 23). In his theory, we do it by accepting ourselves as participants in a make-believe world that overlaps or includes the make-believe world of the plot. We pick up conventions and recognise them, putting us in specific roles towards the fictions we are receiving. When Charles watches the great green slime in a horror film, he plays a part of himself being afraid of the slime. Thus, if he watches the film with a friend, when the slime looks straight to the camera and progresses towards it, he might turn to his friend and exclaim "Yikes, here it comes! Watch out!" It is obvious that Charles does not really warn the friend, and one might assume he means "here it comes in the fictional world of the film" but the way this version feels out of place suggests the original is not a shorthand substituting for it. Instead, it is an utterance in the context of a make-believe world, in which Charles and his friend are afraid of the slime (or the film). Charles plays the role of a scared person. Walton suggests that our participation in the game of make-believe might be automatic but we do recognise a make-believe world including us and the narrative (Walton, 1978, p. 19).

Walton demonstrates his understanding in another situation — a little child playing with his father a simple game of make-believe. The father pretends to be a monster and lunges at the child. In response the child flees, screaming, while grinning delightedly. The child knows it's just a game, and he knows that in the world of the game he is in danger and is afraid (Walton, 1978, p. 13).

The categorization of our spontaneous emotions that arise within the context of experiencing fiction as fictional themselves is, at least, unintuitive, and unconvincing. But the evocation of the game into the understanding of these kinds of experiences is very valuable. Walton's notion of us playing an active part in relation to the narrative rings very true and I shall address several points regarding play and illusion in the hope that it will illuminate some aspects relevant to our topic.

Donald W. Winnicott, paediatrician and psychologist, developed the modern thinking of play as an important aspect in life and in therapy. The free play (as opposed to acting or the structured game) is

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<sup>4</sup> And in one experiment — to resist by actively searching for words that are complicated for a pupil in year four.

constituted of a fragile link between the inner and the outer worlds (the subjective and the objective) (Luria, 2002, pp. 88-89).

It exists in “an intermediate area of experiencing, to which inner reality and external life both contribute. **It is an area that is not challenged**, because no claim is made on its behalf except that it shall exist as a resting-place for the individual engaged in the perpetual human task of keeping inner and outer reality separate yet interrelated [bold added]” (Winnicott, 1971, p. 2)

Whereas the subjective world offers us full control (over our imaginal world we hold total power, we are masters of every decision) and the objective world offers limitations and rigidity, the play area (also called “potential area”) allows us to reach fulfilment of vitality and self-expression but imposes a risk of reducing our control. The lessened degree of control makes surprising turns of events able to take place in the play. Because we are not in full control, the play can advance in paths we wouldn’t have been able to lead it through by ourselves, which when happens produces enjoyment and self-growth. So long as the link is not broken (too strong an emotional reaction or an inner or outer disturbances, such as hunger or outside scrutiny and judgement, can cause the play to stop), we can challenge ourselves in a safe environment (Luria, 2002, pp. 89-90). For example, a child may imagine a car racing up and down mountains. But linking it to a real-world toy car exposes it both to the risk and opportunity of it falling from his hand and challenging his imagination into a situation he might not have thought about. In the same way Winnicott suggests to consider the adult experiences of art, religion, imaginative living and creative scientific work. He emphasises the intermediate area as “unchallenged in respect of its belonging to inner or outer (shared) reality” (Winnicott, 1971, p. 10). Connecting it to the transportation theory, the experience of the narrative is not believed or disbelieved in the sense of cognitive elaboration thinking (argument assessments (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986)) but rather has its own domain. Here it is not challenged at all and the fact that it belongs both to the subjective world and the objective world (the movie, book, play is in the objective shared world on which we have no power) gives it its unique power. The faculty of experiencing this intermediate area is an important one for the mental wellbeing of a person and is developed from infancy. That can suggest a similar notion that has been presented also by Gerrig’s transportation theory and Walton’s role-playing scheme: the act of entering into the narrative experience could be a willing one that becomes automatic due to its high frequency of being practiced. That is to say, it may resemble walking. It comes to mind that walking is clearly a voluntary operation, unlike heartbeats. But when one desires an apple one does not think of walking at all, one just does it in an automatic fashion, on one’s way to take the apple from the counter.

As the last experiment to be brought forth in this paper, I want to note one that showed that self-control depletion increases transportation effect (Johnson, Ewoldsen, & Slater, 2015). The researchers

wanted to examine the claim that transportation is an endeavour an individual takes in order to expand her self-concept beyond its inherent limitations and to momentarily transcend it (Johnson, Ewoldsen, & Slater, 2015, p. 197). This way of understanding transportation binds it with Winnicott's formulation of the potential space in a very direct way — expansion of the subjective world by binding it to the objective one. They predicted that self-control depletion would impose a more limiting sense of the self-concept which in turn would motivate the participants to engage with the stories, an experience that would restore their self-control (by satisfying intrinsic motivations — competence, relatedness and autonomy — within the broadened limits of the self the narratives offer). It sounds a bit contradictory — as if from lack of ability to control her actions, the individual shall step actively into a yet another activity, but in fact it makes sense if we keep in mind that the individual is familiar with the kind of activity (narratives) and knows that it shall revive her. Consider the tiring activity of getting back home and climbing into bed in order to sleep after a long and exhausting day. The researchers did in fact find that self-control depletion boosted the transportation effect. But for our purposes it is hard to say whether this influence is caused by a voluntary action, triggered by the benefits of the engagement with the story (as their language in the paper suggests) or by an involuntary automatic reaction to the story that is strengthened by the fact that the self-control resources are low (when the ability of volition is impaired automatic processes take over more significantly than in a normal situation).

## **Final Words**

Interestingly, at the end we can become quite convinced that Coleridge's notion of the effect was fairly accurate, as far as we know today. Looking back at the two passages brought in the introduction, in both of them he puts the responsibility for the phenomenon both on the work of art (its creator, poet in this case) and on the audience.

Unfortunately it seems that the current understanding of the phenomenon is not yet complete and consistent enough to draw practical conclusions, but I do contend that it is beneficial for actors to understand the study that is being made and the progress it achieves.

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