

OVERVIEW

Let me begin with a confession: I get very emotional when watching sport...For those 90 min...calling it a matter of life or death does it a disservice. More than anything else, the outcome of the match matters – and the severity of my emotional states corresponds to this presumed significance.

But once the whistle blows and the match is over, something funny happens: I march off to the pub with my friends, and am quickly laughing and light-heartedly chatting. It is as if the significance of the heart-breaking loss (or, more rarely, uplifting win), which earlier felt like the whole focus of my being, simply vanished. The outcome no longer matters. Indeed, if you asked, I would say that it never did. (Wildman 2019, p. 261)

Does not describe our experience of sports fandom. Super Bowl XLII.

Puzzle of Sports Fandom

Wildman: why do we act as if sport matters when it *does not*?

Kung/Klein: why *do* sport and the outcome of sporting events matter in the way that they do? In particular, how can we care about something is, admittedly, “only a game”?

Guiding Thought

- Use Kendall Walton’s (1990) well-known imagination-based theory of art. Walton himself (2015) tries this approach. Care about sport the way we care about fictional characters.
- Walton’s own attempt to use his theory of art, as well as attempts by Wildman (quoted above) and Moore (2019) fall short.
- Solution is to understand sports fandom as a social phenomenon and hence a *collaboratively authored fiction*.

References

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I. WALTON'S Theory of ART

Artworks are props in games of make-believe.

Make-believe is understood as imaginative play, like pretend play that children engage in.

A *prop* is an object, a device, that both *prompts* and *prescribes* imaginings.

- Prompt: causes imaginings.
- Prescribe: direct participants to imagine certain claims are true what is *fictionally true* or just *fictional* in the game of make-believe according to *principles of generation*.

Principles of generation dictate what participants are *supposed* to imagine.

Engaging with art is imagining the authorized fictional truths the artwork dictates and responding appropriately.

Richness: principles of generation for many types of art, from novelistic fiction to abstract art to music to poetry to photographs.

Example 1: Stumps and Bears

Children walking through the woods decide to play “bears”; imagine each tree stump they encounter is a bear. *Fictional* that each stump is a bear.

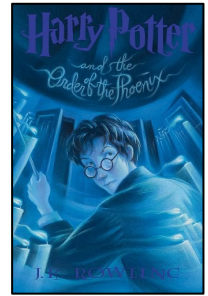


- Reflexive props.
- Fictional but no imagining: one child refuses to play along; no one notices a particular moss-covered stump.
- Imagining but not fictional: a rock is mistakenly imagined to be a bear.

Example 2: Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix

Words on the page dictate what to imagine about the fictional world of Harry Potter in his fifth year at Hogwarts.

Sentences make *fictional* certain facts: Dolores Umbridge is the new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher. Harry has a particularly acute case of



adolescent rage. Something important is hidden in the Department of Mysteries.

Many fictional details not explicitly stated in the novel are filled in according to principles of generation. (E.g., human beings, both muggle and wizard, have hearts, bleed, and are mortal. London is in the south of England.)

II. PARADOX of Fiction and Walton's SOLUTION

Engaging with artworks evoke (what feel like) desires and the full range of human emotions. You (seem to) feel fear frustration and anger at Umbridge's unfair and particularly cruel form of corporal punishment when Harry is in detention. You (seem to) want very badly for Umbridge to receive her comeuppance. You (seem to) feel devastating sadness when a major character dies at the end of the novel.

Why feel sad when no living person died? *Paradox of fiction*.

1. “We experience (genuine, ordinary) emotions towards fictional characters, situations, and events.
2. We do not experience (genuine, ordinary) emotions when we do not believe in the existence of the objects of emotion.
3. We do not believe in the existence of fictional characters, situations, and events.” (Friend 2016, p. 217)

Walton's Solution

Make-believe, or i-belief, is the imaginative analog of belief.

Deny 1). Quasi-desire and quasi-emotions, or i-desires and i-emotions, are the imaginative analogs of desires and emotions.

Recreative theory of imagination (Currie & Ravenscroft 2002). Visual imagination similar to vision. Make-beliefs similar to beliefs. Quasi-emotions and quasi-desires similar to emotions and desires. Imaginative analog does not play the usual functional role. Nobody reading *Order of the Phoenix* calls the police to report a murder in the Ministry of Magic.

Note: ongoing debate in imagination literature whether i-desire and i-emotions are necessary. E.g., Kind (2011) argues they are not. We agree with Kind, but for purposes of this paper, our application to sport compatible with either view.

III. WALTONIAN Sports FANDOM

"It is hard to resist comparing the avid sports fan to the playgoer who sheds bitter and voluminous tears over the tragic fate of Romeo and Juliet, and twenty minutes later has a jolly good time with her friends at an espresso bar. The fan imagines that the outcome matters immensely and imagines caring immensely—while (in many cases) realizing that it doesn't actually matter much, if at all. She is caught up in the world of the game, as the spectator at the theater is caught up in the story. Afterwards, like the playgoer, she steps outside of the make-believe and goes back to living her life as though nothing much had happened—even if the home team suffered a devastating and humiliating

defeat. It's just a story; it's just a game."
(Walton 2015, p. 77)

NFL game a prop in a game of make-believe. Engaging with the game prompts imaginings. Like novels, can generate fictional desires, care, emotions.

Content of NFL make-believe?

- In addition to real-world concerns that one has in the outcome of the game, one is supposed to imagine that the game matters a great deal (p. 78).
- Spectators' affective responses to whatever real-world concerns they have with the game can serve as reflexive props; a small sensation of excitement at a successful third-and-long conversion is imagined to be much greater sensation responding to a fictional concern (p. 78).
- Frequently fans imagine, in a fairly indeterminate way, that the opposing players are the "bad guys" and that the preferred team is the "good guys," and fictionally desires that the good guys triumph (p. 79).

Paradox of Sport (Wildman 2019).

1. How much we care about something cannot (rationally) exceed the amount we believe it matters.
2. We do not believe that the outcomes of sport/competitive games matter very much.
3. We care a great deal about (some) sport/competitive game outcomes.

Wildman denies 3). Fictional that we care about the sport and the outcome. Quasi-care, react with quasi-emotion.

Worries

Wildman's framing is strange. We would not say that art doesn't matter. Why say that about sport? Compare paradox of fiction.

Stear (2017) objection. Walton/Wildman sports fandom fiction is very thin.

- “The make-believe sporting-worlds of Walton’s theory seem very thinly differentiated from the actual world. Walton tells us only that, in the make-believe, we care very much about events that actually matter little to us. That’s it” (Moore 2019, p. 252).
- According to Walton/Wildman/Moore, an NFL game is a prop like a novel. But nothing in the game itself explains why a fan should root for one team over another. The game itself is a prop for fans of *both sides*, so how could the game *on its own* make team A the good guys for one set of fans and team B the good guys for another set?

IV. FANDOM as COLLABORATIVE Fiction

Walton/Wildman/Moore mistake is thinking the *game* is the prop. Sports fan engage with the game *as part of* engaging with the *season*, the *team*, the *sport*. Individual games more like chapters of the novel. What supplies the content in between the games?

Other fans

How do children learn to become fans?
Fanbase identity: Raider Nation, Packer Nation.

Sponsors

Michael Jordan, Nike Air Jordan XII, “Tell Me” ad. Ad copy: “Tell me I can no longer fly. I want you to.”



Fantasy Games

Teams and Players

Present a compelling and entertaining product to fans. All the tools of storytelling and modern PR. NFL Films.

Media

Two roles for sports journalists: reporting and *storytelling*.

In sum: sports fandom fiction more like **folklore** than a novel. Partly oral tradition. Mix of fact and story and myth.

Richer fiction explains differences between opposing fans watching the same game, quasi-emotions. *Reject* quasi-cares.

V. Why Not BELIEF?

Our view offers richer make-believe. You might still wonder, “Well, why not say that we simply *believe* (rather than *imagine*) all that stuff?”

- Fit between emotions, behaviors, and beliefs.
- Outright myths.
- Narrative completeness. Fan ignorance. Luck.
- David Drucker: “...actually sports rivalries between friends can be very enriching to the friendship, whereas we have seen lately, political rivalries between friends and family are debilitating” (Isgur 2024).