

Engaging With the Unreal: Introduction to the Special Issue (Vol. 45, No. 2)

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This is a special issue of *Imagination, Cognition, and Personality* that deals with fantasy and cognition. People engage with the unreal continuously in daily life. These engagements can take various forms. Bilbo the hobbit is not real, yet I can read about him in the novel *The Hobbit*, I can pretend that he is my dinner guest, I can watch him run around in the movie *The Hobbit*, I can remember that he grows really old and other features about him. Other ways of engaging with the unreal include watching television, playing computer games, daydreaming, and engaging in virtual reality. In this way, people interact with, encode, store, retrieve, and think about information that extends beyond their immediate reality. Analyzing how people engage with the unreal is central to understanding imaginative thought, media consumption, narrative engagement, virtual experiences, and aspects of human communication such as role play and pretend play.

The aforementioned phenomena reflect on fundamental questions about belief, cognition, imagination, and memory. For instance, is imagination reserved for engagement with the unreal, and belief for engagement with what is real, or is

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imagination the capacity through which we simulate both real and unreal representations? Are there differences between the imagination of plausible events (i.e., episodic simulation) and that of implausible or even impossible events (i.e., fantastical imagination)? What is the nature of the interface between the real and unreal? Can the unreal affect us in terms of beliefs, knowledge, and personality – if so, how? How can theories of human memory account for memory of events which are not based on lived experience and which are not believed to be real? How do people distinguish between what is real and unreal in online cognition and memory? And how can we identify the boundaries of fiction and reality through technological features and user behaviour in digital-media-based content? Are some people better at engaging with the unreal, such as through the living or embodiment of the imaginary during role-playing games and acting, than others?

Building on these questions, the purpose of this special issue is to shed light on these phenomena from the perspectives of various disciplines. The issue draws together research on topics such as cognition, memory, imagination, literature, and pretence by researchers from fields such as cognitive science, psychology, literary studies, media studies, and anthropology.

The term fiction can refer to several things – a particular storytelling genre as well as the fictional status of some information – so to efficiently argue for its roots in various psychological phenomena, it needs to be broken down to sub-elements. The opening paper of this collection does exactly that: Webster et al. offer a cross section of fiction by analysing behaviours related to fantasy experiences through the ‘rock-star popularity’ of fantasy literature like *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, comic conventions, cosplay, and role-playing games. To define fantasy, the authors present a range of criteria: fantasy content has to break reality and the experiencer has to willingly suspend disbelief. This foreshadows conscious information processing of fantasy content meaning that the underlying cognitive processes involved in fantasy experiences differ from those linked to imagination and magical or religious beliefs.

Next, Lindahl et al.’ paper examine the relationship between one’s personality, and their preference for specific armies in the tabletop game *Warhammer Fantasy Battle*. In the game, each army (or ‘faction’) has a canonical tone which, more than mere preference for playstyle, has behavioural implications in terms of financial investment, painting preferences, and consumption of para-literature for the game-world.

Holmes et al.’ paper discuss the concepts derived from the developmental literature on the distinction between the real and the imagined, referred to as *cognitive quarantine*. The authors study to what extent the imagined and the fantastical permeates the quarantine of real beliefs. Participants created fictional characters (as they might in a game like *Dungeons & Dragons*) and had these characters engage in moral dilemmas. The authors then examined the degree to which the character’s identity impinged upon the player’s own (real) identity, as well as examining a number of predictors thereof. The authors provide preliminary evidence that the cognitive quarantine between fantasy and reality is far from water-tight.

Next, van Mulukom uses a variety of imagination paradigms to test multiple modes of imagination and differences in feelings of realness, including the episodic simulation of plausible and implausible yet personal events, a similar imagination of first-person potential scenarios, and of third-person scenarios and fictional person scenarios. The aim was to investigate reality monitoring, and to uncover (i) which characteristics of imaginings (e.g., detail, emotionality) influence feelings of 'realness', (ii) whether certain personality traits (absorption and fantasy proneness) contribute to the extent that imaginings feel real, and (iii) how that might differ between different types of imaginings. It was found, through three studies, that feelings of realness are reliably predicted by the ease of imagining and absorption into the imagining, providing partial evidence for the fluency hypothesis of reality monitoring. On an individual differences level, both imagination personality traits contributed to increased feelings of realness, with a particular role for fantasy proneness supporting more fantastical imaginings.

Lastly, Gander and Thompson study memory of fiction in their paper. Previous research suggests differences in memory qualities between memories resulting from reading about fictional events as opposed to factual events, with memories of fictional events being clearer. Attempting to replicate this result, while also measuring the degree of mental simulation as a possible explanation for a difference, was not successful across two preregistered studies. The authors' conclusions are that reading about fictional – as opposed to factual – events do not seem to involve a higher degree of mental simulation and does not produce differences in phenomenal memory qualities.

Based on the contributions to this special issue, we want to highlight two key themes for future research on engagement with the unreal. The first theme concerns classification and conceptual clarity in types of unreal situations and activities. Since engagement with the unreal can take various forms, future research could investigate the categorisation of situations and activities where people engage with the unreal in cognitive and behavioural terms – for instance, reading fiction versus playing table-top role-playing games. We also emphasise the need for conceptual clarity in terminology: For example, when researchers use 'real,' do they mean 'external' (as in reality monitoring) or 'non-fictional' (as in factual versus fictional reading)? When researchers use 'fiction', do they mean fiction proper, or are they discussing narrativity? Future research also needs to address several methodological challenges when studying engagement with the unreal. Gander and Thompson raise two methodological concerns. First, in comparative experiments, when labelling something as real and another as unreal/fictional – be it a stimulus, material or situation – researchers need to be sure that the participants' beliefs align with the manipulation. In this regard, there is a need for a valid measure of participants' beliefs about the stimulus' or actions' fictional status. The second methodological issue concerns the ecological validity of a situation and stimulus in laboratory studies. There is a risk that ecological validity is compromised by factors such as the limited length of fictional texts, researcher-imposed activity goals, or other artificial constraints in the study design. On a similar note, Lindahl et al.'s contribution reminds us to complement quantitative scales with qualitative methods such as interviews and qualitative questionnaires to gain deeper

understanding of participants' perception of fictional qualities. Another theme for future research highlighted by the contributions concerns the psychology of the real–unreal distinction. How do people understand what is real and what is not, and how do they avoid confusion between the two? In their contribution, Holmes et al. note that the concept of cognitive quarantine is an indispensable cognitive and philosophical concept in the study of pretence. However, little is known about how cognitive quarantine works, and how and when it is porous, allowing influence of the unreal on the real, such as when role play alters one's personality. Illustrating a corresponding phenomenon, van Mulukom brings up similar ideas related to how individuals with high levels of absorption or fantasy proneness, including actors, may blur the boundary between self and character when they imagine or act out the unreal as if it were real. Further research is needed to explore how this, along with other intense imaginative processes, might affect people's self-concepts and mental health, particularly for individuals with pre-existing vulnerabilities. On a similar note, Webster et al.'s article points out that future investigations could focus on how engaging with fantasy could have beneficial effects on emotion management (e.g., children might be able to improve their focus and resilience by pretending to be a strong fictional character), while also considering how these effects may be modulated by individual traits such as fantasy proneness and trait absorption. Providing a conclusion for future research on the reality-fiction distinction in memory, Gander and Thompson argue that researchers need to consider other mechanisms for the reality-fiction distinction in memory, in cases where memory characteristics do not play an operative role when the memory system distinguishes memories of real and fictional events (as has been shown previously with reality monitoring of memories of internal and external events).

We hope that the papers in this special issue provide a good starting point for answering questions about engaging with the unreal and its clinical, practical, and scientific implications for human psychology along with implications for storytelling, content production, interaction design for both unmediated and mediated experiences, and in understanding identity and social behaviours in virtual worlds.