

Writing about Harry Potter

toward a corpus study of in-universe and real-world perspectives in
online (fan) encyclopedias

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Puzzling fact

Why I 'married' a cartoon character

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There is a word in Japanese for people who are obsessed with video games and anime - *otaku*. An increasing number of otaku now say they have fallen in love with anime characters and given up on the idea of real-world romance, reports the BBC's Stephanie Hegarty.

Source: <https://www.bbc.com/news/stories-49343280>

Puzzling facts

- ▶ This phenomenon is not isolated:
 - ▶ It is a trend in Japan which is now studied by anthropologists (Giard 2021);
 - ▶ related to the more global, general phenomenon now known as **fictosexuality**.
- ▶ The motivations for this “augmented love” are not so clear:
 - ▶ Psycho-social disorders?
 - ▶ Economic interests?¹
 - ▶ Political statements?
 - ▶ Some people (including **Akihiko Kondo**) claim the right to legally marry non-human creatures, including fictional characters.
 - ▶ Moreover, fictosexuality is often associated with asexuality (LGBTQIA+), and as such argued to be against heteronormativity and gender binarism (see the **fictosexual manifesto**).
- ▶ The phenomenon echoes the story of Pygmalion and Galatea (cf. book 10 of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*)
 - ▶ Interpreting this myth is not so clear either.

¹See the development of **otome games** whose goals “is to develop a romantic relationship between the female main player character and one of the usually male, secondary lead characters”.

Why is this puzzling?

▶ *Intuition:*

- ▶ Marrying someone presupposes that that someone exists.
- ▶ But fictional characters do not exist!
- ▶ So how are we supposed to marry them?

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Metafictional perspective

- ▶ The puzzling fact points to a distinction between two *perspectives* one can take toward fictional characters:
 - ▶ *either* one looks at them from the vantage point of their fictional universe;
 - ▶ *or* one looks at them from the real world.
- ▶ Peter Lamarque and Stein Olsen (1994: 144) nicely illustrate the distinction in the following way:

Who created Frankenstein's monster? One answer, from the internal perspective, is of course: Frankenstein. Only from the external point of view must the reply be: Mary Shelley.

Linguistic problem

- (1) Frankenstein's monster was created by Victor Frankenstein.
 - (2) Frankenstein's monster was created by Mary Shelley.
- ▶ Semantic features:
 - ▶ A *fictional statement* (1) is typically true (or false) in the fiction but not in reality;
 - ▶ a *metafictional statement* (2) is typically true (or false) in reality but not in the fiction.
 - ▶ **Csq**: there is a semantico-philosophical problem about the fictional *term's* semantic contribution...
 - ▶ ... reference or not reference?
 - ▶ A *fictional name* can be used in these two contexts of use; while other names cannot!
 - ▶ General linguistic problem:
 - ▶ How does this difference of *perspective* reflect linguistically?

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Some examples of external perspective statements I

- (3) Frankenstein's monster does not (really) exist.
- (4) Frankenstein's monster is a (purely) fictional character.
- (5) Mary Shelley created Frankenstein's monster.
- (6) Emma Woodhouse is the protagonist of Jane Austen's 1815 novel *Emma*.
- (7) Watson is the homodiegetic narrator in the Sherlock Holmes stories.
- (8) Humbert Humbert is an unreliable narrator.
- (9) Holmes was killed off by Conan Doyle, but later resurrected. (Lewis 1978: 38).
- (10) Austen might have made her character Emma less attractive by giving her a worse temper. (Everett 2013: 195).

Some examples of external perspective statements II

- (11) Emma Woodhouse is happier than Emma Bovary.
- (12) My neighbour is in love with Emma Woodhouse.
- (13) Agatha Christie admired Sherlock Holmes.
- (14) Colin Radford pities Anna Karenina. (Radford 1975)
- (15) David Copperfield is widely thought to be based on Dickens himself, incorporating many elements of his own life. “**David Copperfield (character)**”, *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia* (accessed February 13, 2022).
- (16) In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, “Bertha Mason” is portrayed as being a false name for Antoinette Cosway. “**Bertha Mason**”, *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia* (accessed February 13, 2022).
- (17) Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern in Stoppard’s play are the same characters as in Hamlet’s play.

Some examples of external perspective statements III

- (18) Holmes is more famous than any real detective.
- (19) Mickey Mouse is a pop culture icon. Kroon, Fred and Alberto Voltolini, “**Fictional Entities**”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2018 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.).
- (20) Darth Vader is in the top 15 most famous fictional characters of all time.²
- (21) The relentless failure of Bouvard and Pécuchet to learn anything from their adventures raises the question of what is knowable. “**Bouvard et Pécuchet**”, *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia* (accessed February 13, 2022).
- (22) Holmes symbolizes mankind’s ceaseless striving for truth. (Lewis 1978: 38).

²<https://www.scrolldoll.com/most-famous-fictional-characters-of-all-time/>

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Co-predication as mixing perspectives

- (23) Sherlock Holmes is a fictional detective created by British author Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.³
 - (24) Watson's best friend was created by Conan Doyle.
 - (25) The King of the Mountain Trolls is one of Ibsen's most colorful characters.
- As (Everett 2013: 164) puts it:

We cannot reasonably take utterances of (25) simply to be pieces of internal discourse since, in the world of Peer Gynt, the King of the Mountain Trolls is a real creature rather than a fictional object of Ibsen's creation. But we cannot straightforwardly take them to be pieces of external discourse either. For in reality there are no Mountain Trolls, so the description in (25) fails to genuinely denote anything. At the very least, utterances of (25) seem to require us to mix our perspectives, adopting an internal perspective when evaluating the description and an external perspective otherwise.

³Wikipedia, *The Free Encyclopedia*, “**Sherlock Holmes**” (accessed February 13, 2022).

The parafictional: a third category?

(26) In Jane Austen's *Emma*, Emma Woodhouse is a handsome, clever and rich young woman.

► Puzzling observations:

1. (26) is true *in the real world*: this is a typical feature of the metafictional.
2. “Emma” in (26) pretends to refer to the flesh-and-blood individual: this is a typical feature of the fictional.

► This suggests a third kind of use for fictional names (Recanati 2018):⁴

	<i>Genuine assertion</i>	<i>Pretend assertion</i>
<i>Pretend reference</i>	Parafictional	Fictional
<i>Genuine reference</i>	Metafictional	

⁴Note that there is 4th possible use, which corresponds to talking about a fictional character, *qua* fictiona, within the fiction. This corresponds to what is usually called *literary metafiction*, or “reflexive fictions” (Friend 2007).

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“Real-world” (or “out-of-universe”) and “in-universe” perspectives

- ▶ Interestingly the fictional/metafictional distinction corresponds to the (non-philosophical) distinction between fan-wikis and Wikipedia:
 - ▶ Both *are* encyclopedias: systematic, objective, neutral point of view (i.e. aiming at intersubjective knowledgeable content).
 - ▶ If we compare (parts of) Wikipedia and (specific) fan-wikis, they share a lot of information, but:
 - ▶ they either emphasise real-world (wikipedia.org) or in-universe (fandom.com) perspective;
 - ▶ they distinguish themselves (“we’re not a fan-wiki” on Wikipedia; “we’re not Wikipedia” on a fan-wiki);
 - ▶ all this is self-conscious and consensus-based (i.e. emerging from discussions between wiki editors).

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- ▶ One can find a “**Manual of style/Writing about fiction**” on wikipedia.org.⁵
- ▶ Reading the discussion, the general feeling is that the fictional/metafictional distinction is both *helpful* and *detrimental*:
 - ▶ There are (very) long discussions to motivate the distinction:
 - ▶ i.e. the understanding (and interpretation) of this distinction is not *that* natural;
 - ▶ there is a lot of “threats” associated with the distinction.
 - ▶ One of the main point of discussion:
 - ▶ *how much* in-universe should be allowed?
 - ▶ *how long* the plot section?

⁵The “project page” was created in 2006, and is still discussed today. Wikipedia was launched in 2001 and became the 1st online encyclopedia in 2007.

Writing about fiction (accessed 02/02/2023)

- ▶ Main threat/pb to be addressed:

[§3] Strictly avoid creating pages consisting only of a plot summary.

- ▶ Take-home message:

[§1] Articles about fiction, like all Wikipedia articles, should use the real world as their primary frame of reference. As such, the subject should be described from the perspective of the real world, in which the work of fiction [...] and its publication are embedded. [...] Real-world perspective is not an optional criterion for quality, but a rather basic requirement for all articles.

“In-universe” on Wikipedia: why not?

1. It breeds “fancruft”⁶;
2. It blurs the distinction between reality and fiction;
3. It encourages original research (forbidden on Wikipedia).

[§1.1] An in-universe perspective describes the narrative (or a fictional element of the narrative, such as characters, places, groups, and lore) from the vantage of characters within the fictional universe, treating as if it were real. Many fan wikis and fan websites take this approach, but it should not be used for Wikipedia articles. An in-universe perspective can be misleading to the reader, who may have trouble differentiating between fact and fiction within the article. Furthermore, articles with an in-universe perspective are more likely to include unverifiable original research due to reliance on the primary source.

⁶There’s a (roughly) **2004-2007 debate** on this term on Wikipedia, which is something like a derogatory term.

How to avoid “in-universe” perspective?

- ▶ *Answer*: mix perspectives!
- ▶ “Primary sources” are those for “in-universe” perspective:

[§2.1] Primary information is gathered from primary sources about the fictional universe, such as the original work of fiction or an affiliated work. [...] Even articles with the strictest adherence to a real-world perspective still source the original work.

[Examples:] - the birth and death dates of fictional characters;

- performance statistics or characteristics for fictional vehicles or devices;

- history of fictional locations or organizations;

- background information on fictional creatures;

- and the plot itself.

[§2.2] Publications affiliated with a particular work (such as fan magazines) are mostly not considered suitable secondary sources about the primary works

► “Secondary sources” are those for “real-world” perspective:

[§2.2] Secondary information is external to the fictional universe; it is usually taken from secondary sources about the work or the fictional world it describes, or from primary and secondary sources about the author and the creation of the work.

[Examples:] - author, creator, or other key figures in the creation process (e.g., the cinematographer for films or notable translators for novels);

- production company and/or publishing house;*
- design and development (at all stages of the work's creation);*
- real-world factors that influenced the work (or an aspect thereof);*
- actors who portrayed a character (and their approach to the depiction);*
- foreign translations;*
- sales figures (for commercial offerings);*
- reception by critics and the public;*
- critical analysis, including discussion of themes, style, motifs, and genre; and*
- influence on later creators and their projects.*

Why mixing?

► The real world is mixed:

[§3] For fictional elements, details of creation and other relevant real-world information are more helpful if the reader understands the role of that element within the work. This often involves providing succinct plot summaries, character descriptions, or direct quotations.

[§3.3] When characters or other elements from fictional works are notable for their own standalone article, it is acceptable and often necessary to include a narration of that element's role in the events of the work(s) they are a part of. However, such narration must employ out-of-universe style and include real-world descriptors. Characters should not be presented as if they are real persons, fictional settings should not be treated as a real place, and so forth. Since such articles are presented with a mix of elements related to the fictional narrative alongside elements related to conception, development, and reception, editors must be sure these articles clearly define the fictional aspects with out-of-universe language to avoid confusion.

[Conclusion (point 2):] Use a balance of primary and secondary sources: both are necessary for a real-world perspective.

► Co-predication and parafictional style is good (enough):

[§1.1] For example, instead of introducing the character as "Gandalf was a powerful wizard", write "Gandalf is characterised as a powerful wizard", or "Gandalf is a wizard who appears within the works of J. R. R. Tolkien".

[§3] By convention, [synopses] should be written in the present tense (known in this use as the narrative present), as this is how a real person experiences the story. [...] At any particular point in the story there is a "past" and a "future", but whether something is "past" or "future" changes as the story progresses. It is simplest and conventional to recount the entire description as continuous "present".

Plot summaries and similar recaps of fictional elements (like a character's biography) should be written in an out-of-universe style, presenting the narrative from a displaced, neutral frame of reference from the characters or setting. [...] For example, instead of starting a plot summary with "It is 2003", which puts the reader in the frame of reference of the work, start with "In 2003", which extracts the reader from that frame.

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the focus of SOME areas of the proposal is too much on "not using information out of the universe", instead of focusing on "writing from an out-of-universe perspective". You cannot explain the usage and representation of the iconic figure Darth Vader, without explaining that within StarWars the character embodies the role of "The Evil Badguy". This is universe information that is required to explain the usage of the icon within culture. Listing pure data (actor, time, movies) is useless, dare I say even without meaning, without describing the FUNCTION of the character within the universe. Saying something about Batman (which no one would argue doesn't belong in Wikipedia) is useless by not mentioning that he is a "selfmade superhero deeply scarred by the murder on his parents" and that this selfmade + vulnerability combined are the aspects that makes him one of the more loved comic heros, because people can easily identify themselves with that. Without some of that context of the story, the explanation of why he is "easily identified with" is useless. Ergo, universe information should be used as context to the out-of-universe events, popularity, reaction etc.

- TheDJ (talk • contribs • WikiProject Television) 23:06, 31 May 2006 (UTC)

That same information can be conveyed from an out of universe perspective. And cited. If there isn't a reliable source to cite for that (there would easily be in this case) then your characterization of Batman as that is original research. You're misunderstanding what out of universe perspective means. It's not that we ignore important elements of the story, just that we don't talk about them from the perspective of the story. - **Taxman Talk 12:35, 1 June 2006 (UTC)**⁷

⁷*Wording* (Archive 1)

To write an article about a fictional subject which fails to actually describe any detail of the actual plot/character/wheatever is absurd. Sandpiper 21:29, 1 July 2006 (UTC)

[...] To imply that both "in-universe" and "out-of-universe" perspectives are equally welcome at Wikipedia is clearly not the intent of this style guide. You and I may not happen to like using the "out-of-universe" perspective, but the consensus that formed this guide clearly favors it as the preferred writing style. [...] -GentlemanGhost 22:06, 1 July 2006 (UTC)

Maybe the guideline should say that the best articles use a combined style that skillfully merges both "out of universe" and "in universe" perspectives, always, of course, making it clear which perspective is being adopted at any one time. What is abundantly clear is that articles with no "out of universe" perspective are not acceptable, and articles with only a throwaway reference at the beginning to the fact that the article is about a fictional concept, are only paying lip-service to the idea of giving the real-world context of what is being written about. But equally, there are cases where the "out-of-universe" style overwhelms the "in-universe" information. Kind of a tension between style and information content. But I think this basic tension arises because "in universe" information that has little "real world" context will not usually be of interest to anyone except fans. [...] Carcharoth 02:05, 2 July 2006 (UTC)

*Well, the problem is that we don't want a combined in- and out-of-universe style, for the reasons listed in this header and in previous discussions. That was rather the point of this guideline, and the view of those who have supported it. - A Man In Black (conspire | past ops) 03:02, 2 July 2006 (UTC)*⁸

⁸*In/out universe comparison* (Archive 2)

Th[e out-of-universe] approach avoids leaving the reader lost in an "in-universe" style where they encounter unfamiliar concepts and names and are still left still in the fictional universe at the end of the article. We want readers to feel they are back in this world! :-) Much of this may already be implied in the guideline, but does this sound reasonable and can it be worked into the guideline in any way? **Carcharoth 10:16, 5 July 2006 (UTC)**

[...]

I disagree with Carcharoth [...] on several points. First of all, it is the lack of in-universe information that is likely to leave the uninitiated reader at a loss because he has no guidelines as to how everything fits together in the context of the novel. He will have a lot of raw data, held together at one end by the real-world creative process, but totally loose at the other, preventing the reader from having any feeling or idea of the actual piece of art. As for restricting in-universe passages to plot summaries, I strongly disagree. They are needed in character characterizations to show what type of figure this is the author has created. I can't answer the "Why?" and the "How?" with any credibility if I don't establish the "What?" first. Describing a character just from the outside is not going to do the character any more justice than if I try to describe the guy next door without trying to walk in his shoes. Such short passages for characterization are standard in reader's notes and also common in academic publications I've seen. –OliverH 21:24, 24 July 2006 (UTC)

Even the "what", though, can be described out-of-universe. The character is a product of its creators. What the character is like and how he/she/it acts are products of the creators. Grounding character descripts in out-of-universe language entails describing not only the "what", but who gave them those traits, how, when, and why. There's not really mutual exclusion here. The danger with remaining in-universe is that the elements other than "what" and "when" tend to be glossed over. Here's a passage from Jabba the Hutt, a featured article:

Jabba the Hutt's physical appearance is as grotesque as his character and reinforces his personality as a criminal deviant. As Han Solo puts it in Return of the Jedi, Jabba is a "slimy piece of worm-ridden filth". Film critic Roger Ebert describes him as "a cross between a toad and the Cheshire Cat", and astrophysicist and science fiction writer Jeanne Cavelos gives Jabba the "award for most disgusting alien." Science fiction authors Tom and Martha Veitch write that Jabba's body is a "miasmatic mass" of flesh that shakes as he laughs.

*Notice that relevant points are sourced either to the film itself or a critic. The description is clear, yet is sourced to a real-word (out-of-universe) point of reference, either a film or a writer. — TKD::Talk 09:42, 25 July 2006 (UTC)*⁹

⁹*New "in a nutshell" suggestion (Archive 3)*

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Fan-wikis are “in-universe”

- ▶ The fictional/metafictional distinction is also essential on the fan-wikis.
- ▶ They typically write *manuals of style*, which are the mirror image of that of wikipedia.org:
 - ▶ articles are divided into two groups, i.e. the in-universe and out-of-universe articles
 - ▶ On **wookieepedia**, there is a “real-world article” tag;
 - ▶ on the **Harry Potter wiki**, there are banners signalling “out-of-universe” content:

This article is not part of the *Harry Potter* universe.

This article covers a subject that is part of the real world, and thus should not be taken as a part of the *Harry Potter* universe.

The distinction also appears in the “canon”

- ▶ In *canonisation* practices/rules:
 - ▶ they make explicit which sources are reliable for (which) in-universe purposes
 - ▶ In Harry Potter universe, the canon is very well organised (in order of priority: 1. what JKR wrote; 2. what she contributed to; 3. licensed material)
 - ▶ On Wookieepedia, there was a huge controversy around Walt Disney acquisition of Lucasfilm (between 2012 and 2014), which resulted in a distinction between “canon” and “legends”... and thus a sophisticated canonicity structure.
- ▶ There are issues concerning *copyright*, but the main point of these rules is to handle contradictions.

Jokes?

- ▶ The Harry Potter wiki seems to duplicate a lot of real-world content into the in-universe perspective:
 - ▶ e.g. there is a real-world **J.K. Rowling**, and a corresponding in-universe **one** who wrote the **the in-universe counterpart of the seven real-world Harry Potter books**, etc.
- ▶ One can find a dedicated banner for this “inside joke”:



“Is this all real? Or has this been happening inside my head?”

The topic of this article is of a real-life subject that has been mentioned “in-universe” in a **canon** source. The **Harry Potter Wiki** is written from the perspective that all information presented in canon is true (e.g., **Hogwarts** really existed), and, as such, details contained in this article may differ from real world facts.

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Aim and structure of the corpus

- ▶ **Pb:** are these “styles” objectifiable?
- ▶ The idea would be to compare how the same information is presented from both perspectives;
- ▶ I thus constructed a 3-part corpus:
 - ▶ Fictional information:
 - ▶ Internal perspective: pages + discussion of fictional characters on fandom.org
 - ▶ External perspective: pages + discussions of fictional characters on wikipedia.org
 - ▶ Metafictional information:
 - ▶ pages + discussions of books (and JK Rowling) on fandom.org *and* wikipedia.org
- ▶ Expectation: no significative difference in style for the metafictional information; but some for the fictional information.
 - ▶ Though I do not know which features exactly...
 - ▶ Ideas? Help?

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