Reverse uchronia as a test case for fictionality

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Plan

Reverse uchronia: the phenomenon

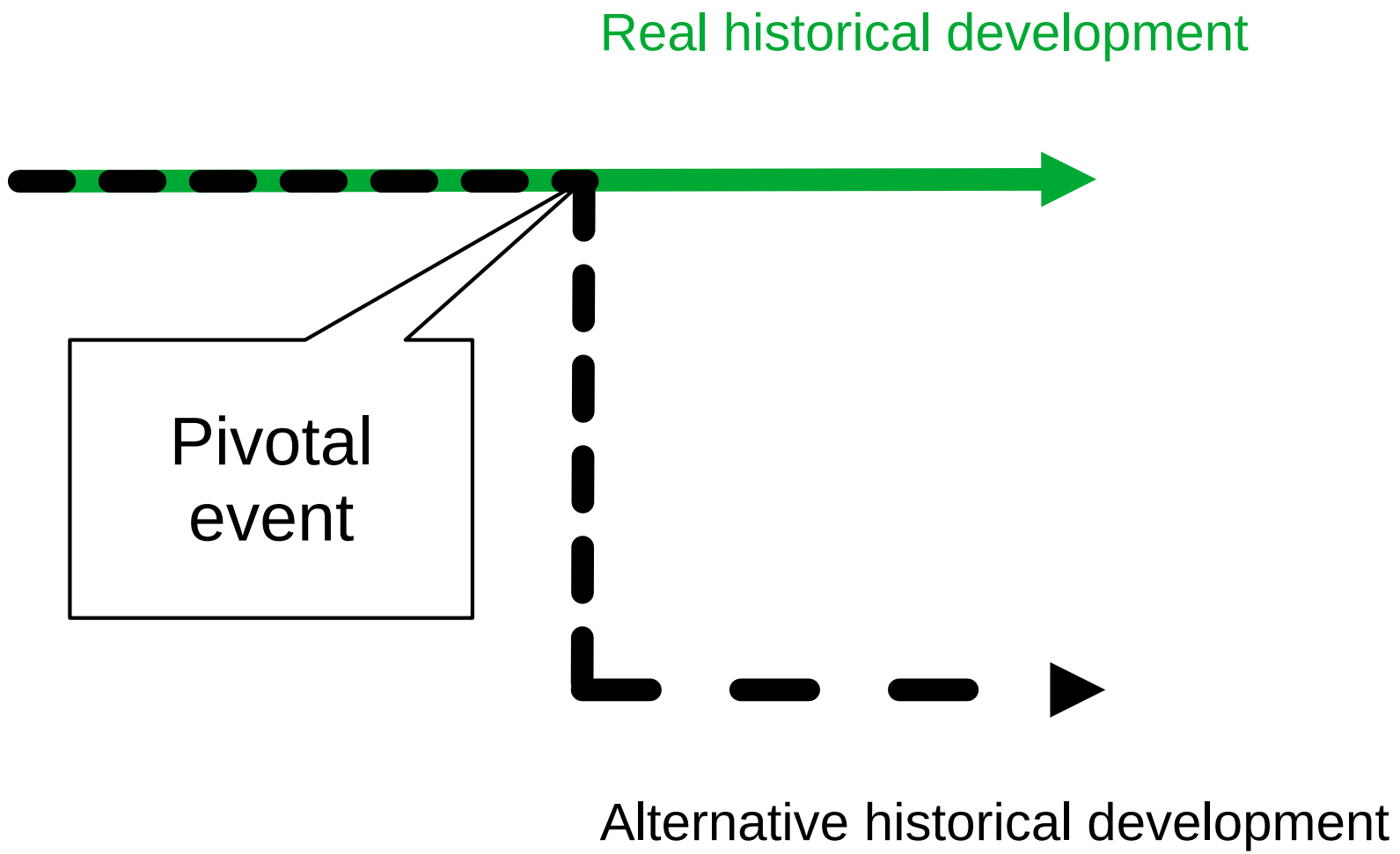
Reverse uchronia: the challenge

What is Uchronia?

- A *uchronia* is an alternate history fiction, which imaginatively explores "what if" scenarios, e.g.:[1]
  - what if the Nazis had won World War II? (Harris 1992 *Fatherland*);
  - what if Africa had colonised Europe? (Waberi 2009 *In the United States of Africa*).
- So uchronias share a common history with the real world up to a *pivotal event*:
  - it is important that *world history* diverges, otherwise any realistic fiction counts as a uchronia.
    - *ex*: Sherlock Holmes moving into 221B Baker Street is not supposed to be a pivotal event in history;
    - nor is Fabrice Del Dongo's participation to the battle of Waterloo, since his presence did not change the battle's outcome.
  - *Upshot*: regular (realistic) fictions use real history as *background* whereas uchronia *foregrounds* real history.

[1] Charles Renouvier coined the term in 1876 (in his *Uchronia (Utopia in History), an Apocryphal Sketch of the Development of European Civilization Not as It Was But as It Might Have Been.* he explores the question: what if Christianity did not become a state religion endorsed by the Roman empire?) See (Saint-Gelais 1999) for more examples and studies on the genre.

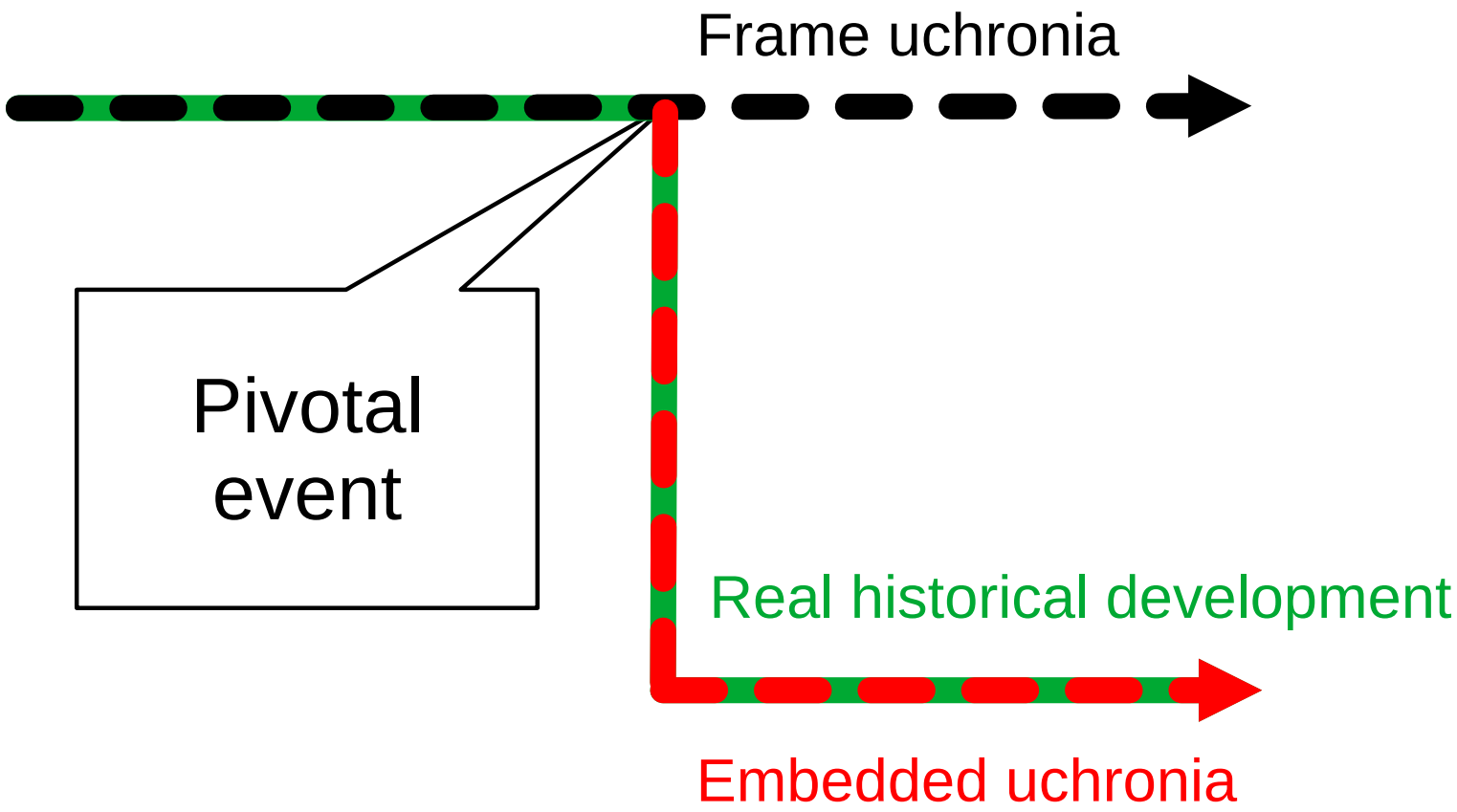
Schematic representation of uchronias



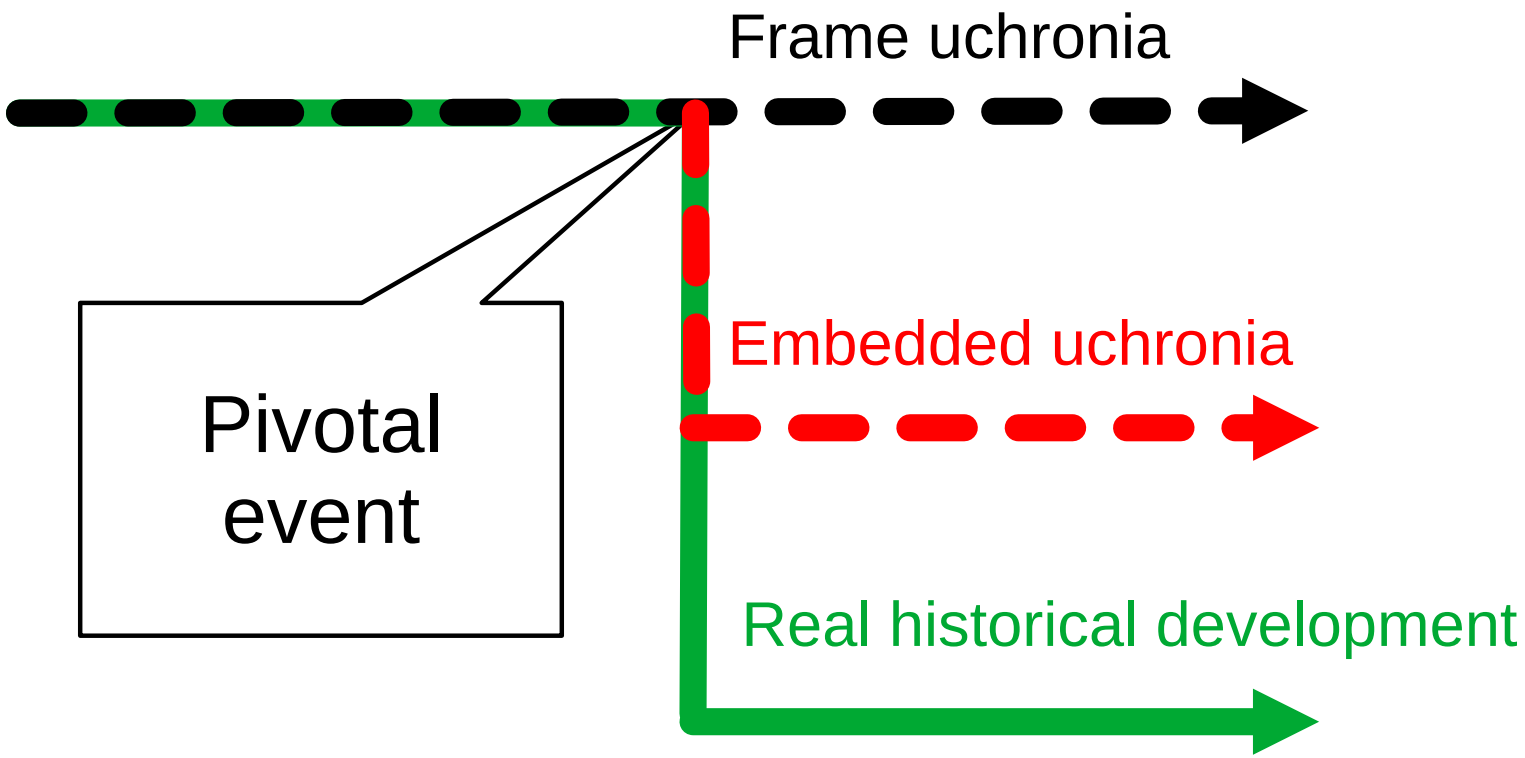
Embedded uchronias

- Uchronias are fictions, and so uchronias within uchronias are a particular case of a fiction within a fiction.
  - in some cases, an author within the alternative history writes a uchronia with the same pivotal event as the frame uchronia and narrates our real history as a fiction;
  - I will call a uchronia within a uchronia which narrates the real history a *reverse uchronia*.
- Interestingly, the practice of reverse uchronia is conventionalised from the beginning of the genre:
  - Virtually every uchronia either hints at our history as a fictional history, or develops it.
  - so much so that when in *The Man in the High Castle* (Philip K. Dick 1962) the embedded uchronia *The Grasshopper Lies Heavy* is introduced, Dick in fact thwarts the reader's expectations!
    - In *The Man in the High Caslte*, the Axis Powers won against the Allies in 1947 and the story unfolds in 1962.
    - In *The Grasshopper Lies Heavy*, the Allies defeated the Axis Powers, but it is Rexford Tugwell who gets elected US president in 1940 instead of Roosevelt's being re-elected (and many other interesting mismatchs).

Embedded uchronia 1: reverse uchronia



Embedded uchronia 2: thwarting expectations



Conventionalised expectations

- This possibility of making as if real history was a fiction is arguably one the hallmarks of uchronias.[2]
- A good case is Louis-Napoléon Geoffroy-Chateau 1836/1841 *Napoleon and the Conquest of the World 1812-1832: A Fictional History*:[3]
  - what if Napoleon won the Russian campain in 1812?
  - Napoleon eventually becomes the wise ruler of the entire planet, which is one big monarchy!
    - The book contains a lot of details about technical and scientific achievements (weather control, flying automobiles, typewriters, making see water drikable, etc.)

[2] Carrère (1986) thereby identifies the genre as a way of imaginatively "correcting history" where it has gone wrong and elaborates that it is a "literature of regret". He further identifies reverse uchronias as an attempt to change the past (against the reality principle), which places such text on the side of "unnatural narratives" (Richardson 2015; Alber 2016)

[3] *Napoléon apocryphe. 1812-1832: histoire de la conquête du monde et de la monarchie universelle.*

- At one point, Geoffroy writes a chapter entitled "A So-called History":[4]:

  People have guessed my intentions, and they sense that I wish to speak of that so-called history of France, from the capture of Moscow to the present day — a history embraced by some strange whim, which is reproduced everywhere in all manner of forms and so widely disseminated that, in centuries to come, posterity will doubt whether this novel is not, in fact, history.

  - Follows the description of the fall of the French Empire and the list of the restorations in Europe, as it in fact happened.
  - This chapter is a reverse uchronia.
- Geoffroy thereby presents our real history an *implausible* course of event, which triggers a characteristic alienation effect:

  Geoffroy skilfully exploits a reversal of perspective: viewed from the alternate-history world, historical reality is no longer subject to a judgement of truth but rather, just like a novel, to a judgement of plausibility – from which it does not emerge unscathed. [...] It is a dizzying passage, which judges reality by the standards of fiction and leads even the least suspicious of readers to suddenly find it "too good to be true". (Saint-Gelais 1999, p. 68)

[4] *Une prétendue histoire*

Plan

Reverse uchronia: the phenomenon

Reverse uchronia: the challenge

The problem of embedding fictionality

- Reverse uchronias are a specific type of a fiction within a fiction which disturbe our intuitions about this mechanism:
  - *intuitively*, adding a layer of fictionality should not change the logical status of a text;
  - *i.e.*, a fiction within a fiction (FwF) is a (kind of) fiction.
- FwF are possible (they exist), so any account of fictionality should explain how embedding works:
  - I guess nobody really thought it through, and took it for granted that such extension was trivial;
  - *basically*: whatever explains what counts as a fiction in reality explains what counts as a fiction if we shift to a fictional context.
- However, my claim is that no existing account can explain the difference between a reverse and a non-reverse case of FwF.
  - All theories of fictionality fail to account for reverse uchronias;
  - some are even incompatible with it being a possible case.
- I'll make the argument for *pretence theories*, *directive theories* and *declarative theories*.

Pretence theories

Th: a text is fictional whenever it is pretend asserted;[5]

- **Csq**: we have a FwF whenever a text is pretend asserted within a fiction.

- That does not rule out reverse FwF, but it cannot tell the difference between reverse and non-reverse cases of FwF.
  - Moreover, the fact that 2 subsequent acts of pretence can cancel each other calls for explanation...
  - *Prima facie*, the pretence theorist needs an additional notion:
    - not only a starting point and mechanism for pretence;
    - but also something like a *direction for the pretence*.
  - This remains to be done!

[5] See, inter alia, (Frege 1892; Macdonald 1954; Searle 1975; Lewis 1978; Everett 2013; Kripke 1973/2013; Predelli 2020).

Directive theories

Th: a text is fictional whenever it instructs the reader to imagine (rather than believe) its content, whether it is because of the @'s intentions[6] or because of a convention.[7]

- **Csq**: we have a FwF whenever there is a text that is either intended to be fictional or a conventionally[8] read as such within the fiction.

- Reverse uchronia lead this astray:
  - the fictional @ (or convention) directs the reader to imagine some content, but the real @ directs the reader to believe the same content:
    - The conflict in instructions is resoved in favour of the real @ (otherwise we lose the aesthetic effect);
    - so, whatever makes the text fictional within the fiction is trumped by the real author's instructions to recognise the text as non-fictional.
  - How we can sustain the fictional author's viewpoint in order to get the alienation effect?
    - *Recall:* the fictional author's intentions (or convention) *is not* to match reality, but to make something up.

[6] See in particular (Currie 1990; Stock 2017).
[7] See in particular (Lamarque and Olsen 1994; Friend 2012; García-Carpintero 2025).
[8] Presumably here because of the reality principle.

Declarative theories

Th: a text is fictional whenever the author performs a specific declarative speech act, whose effect is that the fictional content is made true in the fiction (or created).[9]

- **Csq**: we have a FwF whenever such declarative act is made within a fiction.

- Here we have a case of impossibility of reverse uchronia:
  - unless magic is real, one cannot declare real history into existence;
    - you can arguably declare some *institutional facts* into existence;
    - but clearly not physical events.
  - since the FwF is not true by accident, it means that the non-fictional part of reverse uchronia cannot be fictional;
    - consequently, the looking at real history (*qua* real history) through the lens of fiction is not possible.
  - Yet, reverse uchronia do exist.

[9] See in particular (Genette 1990; Abell 2020; Bergman and Franzén 2022; Aranda-Murillo 2025).

Conclusive citation

> *As the lion is nothing other, according to Valéry, than digested lamb, fiction is nothing other than fictionalized reality. (Genette 1990, p. 67)*

- As you can see, this is a citation within a citation...

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