

The Fictional-Real Interface in Harry Potter Series: A Possible-Worlds Theory Approach

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Abstract: This paper investigates the ways in which Possible-Worlds Theory account for the text world phenomena of the *Harry Potter* series. The *Harry Potter* books are considered the prototype of the crossover genre and also the main force behind the rise of the crossover genre as a marketing trend. Two books are selected from the series, namely, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* and *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, for their special status regarding adult readership and awards. Possible-worlds theory is a well-established approach to fictional worlds from literary theory and narratology. The theory can account for a number of phenomena including, for example, the relationship of the fictional world with the world we call 'actual', the introduction of different kinds of impossibilities into the fictional world, the study of character's private worlds, the tellability of a fictional world which can be the reason behind its appeal to a wider readership, and potentially its commercial success, the relationship or potential linkage between different fictional worlds which can be manifested through instances of intertextuality or allusion, and so on. In this paper, I particularly focus on the relationship between the fictional world and the actual world in the light of Ryan's (1991) accessibility laws. The study reveals that, by analysing the selected texts, the possible-worlds theory can account for the relationship between fictional worlds and the actual world as well as the introduction of impossibilities into fantasy text worlds. It also provides a useful classification of these impossibilities.

Keywords: Possible-worlds theory, accessibility relations, crossover fiction, *Harry Potter* series

INTRODUCTION

Possible-worlds theory is a well-established approach to fictional worlds of literary theory and narratology. It was originally developed by philosophers and logicians, and later adopted by a group of literary scholars, namely, Doležel (1976, 1979, 1980, 1988, 1995, 1998), Eco (1979, 1990), Maitre (1983), Pavel (1986) and Ryan (1991), particularly in the field of narratology. The basic premise of the theory is that, within a system of worlds, one world functions as the centre and a number of worlds function as satellites. The central world can be taken to represent the actual world and the satellites stand for possible worlds. Possible worlds are assumed to be similar to the actual world unless stated otherwise, according to the principle of "minimal departure" (Ryan, 1991). What makes these worlds possible is being linked to the world at the centre via what Ryan (1991, p. 32) calls "accessibility relations". The more accessibility relations are obeyed, the more a possible world is similar to the actual world. In the

case of fantasy fiction, a number of accessibility laws are violated since these worlds include impossible phenomena. Possible-worlds theory examines the relationships between fictional worlds and the actual world, which are relevant to distinctions between different genres. The theory accounts for the internal structure of the fictional world, by dividing it into an actual domain and a virtual domain, or a set of alternative possible worlds.

This paper investigates the ways in which possible-worlds theory account for the text world phenomena of the *Harry Potter* series. In this paper, I apply possible-worlds theory to two books of the *Harry Potter* series, namely, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* and *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*. I particularly focus on the relationship between the fictional world and the actual world in the light of Ryan's (1991) accessibility laws.

1.1 *Violation of Ryan's Accessibility Laws in the Harry Potter series, and particularly in Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban and Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*

Following Kripke's premise that possibility means accessibility from the world at the centre of a given system, Ryan (1991) has developed a typology of accessibility relations that link the actual world to the worlds projected by texts belonging to different genres (Semino 1997, p. 82). Ryan (throughout her work) refers to the relation which links various worlds of a given system and their possible alternatives as an accessibility relation. She argues that different values of accessibility relations will result in different definitions of what is a possible world and what is an impossible one. Hence, the wide range of possibility or accessibility, represented by the different values of accessibility relations, accounts for the many different ways in which fictional worlds may depart from the actual world. In other words, the different combinations of accessibility relations, i.e., which accessibility relations would be obeyed and which would be violated, would produce different genres.

Ryan (1991) notes that, within the possible-worlds framework, philosophers usually interpret the accessibility relation which links the world at the centre of a given system to the other worlds of that system as a logical one. Therefore, a world is accessible from the actual world if it respects the logical laws of non-contradiction and of the excluded middle. However, Ryan (1991, 1992) argues that it is obvious that the logical interpretation of the accessibility relation is not sufficient for a theory of fictional genres and proposes the following typology of accessibility relations (1991). In Ryan's terminology, AW stands for the Actual World, and TAW for Textual Actual World.

(A) *Identity of properties* (abbreviated A/properties): TAW is accessible from AW if the objects common to TAW and AW have the same properties.

(B) *Identity of inventory* (B/same inventory): TAW is accessible from AW if TAW and AW are furnished by the same objects.

(C) *Compatibility of inventory* (C/expanded inventory): TAW is accessible from AW if TAW includes all the members of AW, as well as some native members.

(D) *Chronological compatibility* (D/chronology): TAW is accessible from AW if it takes no temporal relocation for a member of AW to contemplate the entire history of TAW.

(E) *Physical compatibility* (E/natural laws): TAW is accessible from AW if they share natural laws.

(F) *Taxonomic compatibility* (F/taxonomy): TAW is accessible from AW if both worlds contain the same species, and the species are characterized by the same properties. Within F, it may be useful to distinguish a narrower version F, stipulating that TAW must contain not only the same inventory of natural species, but also the same type of manufactured objects as found in AW up to the present.

(G) *Logical compatibility* (G/logic): TAW is accessible from AW if both worlds respect the principles of non-contradiction and of excluded middle.

(H) *Analytical compatibility* (H/analytical): TAW is accessible from AW if they share analytical truths, i.e. if objects designated by the same words share the same essential properties.

(I) *Linguistic compatibility* (I/linguistic): TAW is accessible from AW if the language in which TAW is described can be understood in AW.

Hence, a fictional world can be accessible from the actual world if it shares a common geography and history, the same species, the same stage of technological progress, the same inventory, and so on. The distinctions among genres rely on the number of accessibility relations linking the fictional world to the actual world. The greater the number of accessibility relations, the shorter the distance from the actual world to the fictional world. Realistic fictional worlds, for example, are produced when all accessibility laws are obeyed. However, a realistic fictional world sometimes has an expanded inventory, i.e. it is similar to the actual world and is governed by the same set of laws but includes some native members. Fairytales and fantasy stories are created by lifting F/taxonomy and E/natural laws. Lifting taxonomic laws allows the fictional world to be populated by entities that do not belong to the taxonomy of the actual world such as fairies, dragons, unicorns, ghosts and so on. Lifting natural laws, on the other hand, makes it possible for the fictional world to include anthropomorphic animals, people with supernatural powers and so on. Science fiction results from lifting the narrower version F/taxonomy as well as D/Chronology. In addition to the possibility of time travel, fictional worlds in this genre include manufactured objects that do not reflect the same level of technological progress in the actual world, such as humanoid robots, interplanetary transport vessels, and so on.

The fantasy world of *Harry Potter* includes an enormous variety of impossibilities. These impossibilities can be divided into the following categories, according to which of Ryan's (1991) accessibility laws they violate.

1.1.1 Impossibilities Resulting from Lifting Physical Compatibility (Natural Laws), Taxonomic Compatibility (Taxonomy) and Compatibility of Inventory

The violation of Physical, Taxonomic and Inventory compatibilities is one of the most important features of the worlds projected by the *Harry Potter* series. The fictional world of *Harry Potter* violates the physical and taxonomic laws of the real world as well as the compatibility of inventory, since it accommodates magic and includes taxonomically deviant creatures as well as magical objects that do not belong to the real world. It should be noted, however, that these compatibilities are broken in a wide variety of ways: some global and others more local. I will divide these violations into what I will call *global breakages* and *local breakages*. Global breakages involve those violations which affect the structure of the fictional world. This kind of breakages can be identified in the *Harry Potter* world in the way the fictional world is modelled upon the actual world, particularly in relation to notions and institutions that are not normally specified in children's fantasy fiction such as the government, the educational system, the financial institutions, the mechanics of the postal system and so on. Local breakages, on the other hand, relate to the detailed furnishing of the fictional world. These breakages can occur either through the introduction of entities or objects that bear no resemblance to the actual world or through anchoring the magical elements to the real world. The latter can be divided into three types, namely, variants of known species/objects, shape-shifters, and fusion of characteristics. I will provide examples of these breakages below.

The use of magic in the *Harry Potter* world can be seen as a global breakage since it is one of the defining features of this world. The fictional world of *Harry Potter* is divided into two co-existing worlds, namely, the wizarding world and the Muggle world. Hence, the inhabitants of this fictional world are divided into two groups according to which world they belong to: the magical people who belong to the wizarding world, i.e. wizards and witches who can use magic, on the one hand and the Muggles who are devoid of magic and belong to the Muggle world on the other. The use of magic can take a variety of forms including, for example, using wands, charms and spells, as well as potions. Charms and spells include, for example, the Patronus Charm (a charm used to repel Dementors through conjuring a silvery light in the shape of an animal out of the end of one's wand to act as a shield against Dementors), and the Fidelus Charm (a complex charm involving the magical concealment of a secret inside a single, living soul). Examples of potions, which are liquids with magical effects created by mixing certain amounts of different ingredients in a cauldron, include: the Polyjuice Potion (a potion that makes one assume the appearance of someone else for a short period of time), and the Wolfsbane Potion (a potion made for a werewolf to help him keep his human mind when transformed).

Other global breakages can be seen in the way the social system of the wizarding world has been modelled upon that of the actual world. The wizarding world has a central government which is represented by the Ministry of Magic, an educational system to prepare young wizards and witches by teaching them all arts of magic (e.g. Hogwarts School), and so on. These institutions violate natural laws in the ubiquitous use of magic. In the following, I will point out a number of global breakages by showing how the institutions of the wizarding world are modelled upon real world counterparts.

The government running the wizarding world, as represented by the Ministry of Magic, can be seen as a global breakage. The Ministry of Magic, with its various departments and high

officials, is modelled upon the real-world governments. The departments and offices in the Ministry include, for example, the department of Magical Law Enforcement which can be seen as corresponding to the police in the real world; the Aurors, i.e. a group of very skilful wizards and witches who work as dark-wizard catchers, corresponding to the special forces; the Wizengamot to the courts of law; the Department of International Magical Cooperation to the real-world office of foreign affairs or the United Nations; and so on. The Ministry administration may bear resemblance to the real-world government administrations. However, the Ministry is depicted as corrupt throughout the series. Its high officials are power-seekers who care only about remaining in office. In the end of *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, for example, Fudge refuses to believe that Voldemort has returned. He thinks that Dumbledore wants to take his position as Minister of Magic, and takes all measures to keep his office including launching a campaign in the wizarding newspapers against Dumbledore and Harry in order to damage their credibility, interfering at Hogwarts by sending one of his high officials to inspect the school, and so on. Later, in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, when the Ministry is controlled by Voldemort, bureaucracy and oppression reach their peak in making attendance at Hogwarts compulsory and initiating a registry of Muggle-born wizards and witches, who have become discriminated against under the new regime, to investigate how they have obtained their magical powers. To summarise, the Ministry of Magic resembles some real-world governments in its functions, structure, and administration. Adult readers, more than children, may be able to detect the parallels and correspondences between the Ministry and some of the real-world governments. This can contribute to the crossover status of the *Harry Potter* series.

A further global breakage can be identified in the structure of Hogwarts School. Hogwarts was founded by four of the greatest witches and wizards in the history of the magical world: Godric Gryffindor, Salazar Slytherin, Helga Hufflepuff, and Rowena Ravenclaw. The school is divided into four houses which carry the names of the four founders of Hogwarts. The interior structure and design of the school building is magical: the stairs can move; the entrance to each house is guarded by a magical painting which requires each student to provide a password, decided beforehand, in order to be allowed access into his/her house; and so on. The school system at Hogwarts is modelled upon real-life school systems. Hogwarts resembles real-life schools in the following aspects: the presence of classrooms, textbooks and assignments, detention, schedules of subjects for each year, exams, and so on. However, it violates both E/Natural Laws and F/Taxonomy in many aspects. Students usually spend seven years at Hogwarts and finally graduate as fully mature witches and wizards. The teachers are highly experienced witches and wizards who teach students the various branches of magic. In the first school year, students are sorted, according to the qualities of their characters, by the Sorting Hat, a magical talking object, into the four houses of the school. The school subjects taught at Hogwarts cover the various branches of magic. They include Potions (creating liquids with magical effects), Transfiguration (the magic of transforming or changing one object into another), Divination (the branch of magic which tries to unravel the mysteries of the future), Charms (using wands to cast spells), Defence against the Dark Arts (using spells against the harmful magical creatures and dark wizards), Care of Magical Creatures (learning about the lives of magical creatures), and so on.

The postal system in the wizarding world can also be seen as a global breakage since it involves the use of owls, which are classified according to their speed. Another global breakage

can be identified in the wizarding media, which are modelled upon those of the real world. The wizarding media include official newspapers such as the Daily Prophet. There are also magazines published for specific fields or interests such as 'Which Broomstick' which publishes news about the latest models of broomsticks and recommends the best brands for readers. However, with media, natural laws are broken when pictures are involved. The pictures in newspapers and magazines are alive; people in photographs wave at readers and move. There is another magical aspect concerning the circulation of the newspapers which uses owls to deliver the papers.

Financial institutions in the wizarding world, as represented by Gringotts Bank, can also be seen as a global breakage. Gringotts is run by goblins, i.e. short and dark-skinned creatures with very long fingers, which involve a violation of taxonomic laws. However, Gringotts is modelled upon the real-world banks particularly regarding its services and high-level security measures. It offers many services including saving accounts, currency exchange (e.g. from wizarding money to Muggle money), and so on. In addition, the vaults, in which wizards and witches keep their money and valuables, are protected by complex enchantments. From the above, possible-worlds theory can account for the combination of the magical elements with real-world notions and entities.

Local Breakages can result from the introduction of entities or objects that bear no resemblance to the actual world and from anchoring magical elements to the real world. Some of the creatures used in the *Harry Potter* series bear no resemblance to the actual world, including, for example, Boggarts (creatures which take the shape of a person's worst fears), and Dementors ('soulless and evil' creatures: "They infest the darkest, filthiest places, they glory in decay and despair, they drain peace, hope, and happiness out of the air around them" (*Prisoner of Azkaban*, p. 140)). Anchoring magical elements to the real world, on the other hand, include variants of known species or objects, shape-shifters, and products of the fusion of elements of known creatures or objects. The variants of known species, which include ordinary animals with special powers such as owls, involve a violation of E/natural laws and also F/Taxonomy in a narrow sense. Owls are used in the magical world not only as pets but also as a method of communication since the magical world has an owl postal service. In the Post Office, owls are classified according to their power and speed. Owls break the Taxonomy law in a narrow sense since they resemble real-life ordinary owls but have qualities not possessed by ordinary owls: they understand what they are told; they show dignity, feelings of importance and even arrogance when they perform a job; they recognize the persons who are supposed to receive the mail; they can read since they know the recipients by the name written on the letter; and they know how and where to get to the recipients even when they are in hiding. Variants of known objects, on the other hand, violate inventory laws. They include, for example, flying broomsticks, the Hogwarts Express (a scarlet steam engine that takes the students at the start of the school year from Platform Nine and Three Quarters in the King's Cross Station, London, to Hogwarts School), the Knight Bus (a triple-decker, purple bus that provides emergency transport for witches and wizards), and Portkeys (everyday objects that are enchanted to bring whoever touches them to a specific pre-defined location).

The shape-shifters, such as the Animagi, can also be considered a local breakage, which involves a violation of E/natural laws. Animagi are "wizards who could transform at will into

animals'' (*Prisoner of Azkaban*, p. 83). The Ministry has a register of all Animagi of the century. Any witch or wizard who turns out to be an Animagus without being registered is punished by the Ministry and sent to Azkaban. Professor McGonagall is a registered Animagus who can transform at will into a cat. The secret of three unregistered Animagi is revealed in *Prisoner of Azkaban*: Sirius Black can transform into a dog, Peter Pettigrew into a rat, and James Potter, Harry's father, used to transform into a stag. The animal resulting from the Animagus transformation may carry some features of the wizard or witch. When McGonagall is transformed into a cat, the cat has the markings of the spectacles that the human McGonagall usually wears. When Pettigrew transforms into a rat, the rat has a missing finger in its front paw. It is the finger that the human Pettigrew had cut in order to fake his own death, framing Sirius Black as Voldemort's agent.

Some of the taxonomically deviant creatures which appear in the *Harry Potter* series can be seen as a combination of elements of known creatures. Examples include fairies (tiny shining creatures with human-like bodies and insect wings), Thestrals (scaly winged creatures that resemble horses but can only be seen by those who have seen death), Hippogriffs (creatures having the bodies, hind legs and tails of horses, but the front legs, wings and heads of giant eagles), Centaurs (creatures having the bodies, hind legs and tails of horses, but the upper half, arms and heads of human beings), Merpeople (water creatures having the upper half of human bodies and the tails of fish), and so on. This sort of fusion of elements can also be seen in the magical objects which furnish the *Harry Potter* world. Examples of these magical objects include wands (magical sticks used to cast spells), live paintings (paintings speaking to and interacting with each other as well as with people in front of them), and the Marauders' Map (a magical map that looks like an empty piece of parchment, but with a certain spell, shows every detail of the Hogwarts castle and grounds as well as the whereabouts of all the teachers and students of the school at any time). It should be noted that some of the creatures in the *Harry Potter* series are borrowed from mythology, folklore or other fictional worlds, while others are not. The first group include, for example, fairies, centaurs, merpeople, hippogriffs, and so on. The second group is exemplified by Dementors which can be considered one of Rowling's creative additions.

As I have shown above, possible-worlds theory can account for the introduction of fantasy creatures and objects into text worlds and for the various types of these creatures and objects. It should be noted that the variety of fantasy elements and the degree of inclusion of real-world elements vary from one fantasy text world to another. The text world(s) projected by the *Harry Potter* series is distinguished by the number, variety and richness of details. This kind of variety, particularly in relation to the inclusion of real-world elements, may contribute to the story's crossover appeal.

1.1.2 *Impossibilities Resulting from Lifting Chronological and Logical Compatibilities*

Possible-worlds theory can also account for the introduction of other kinds of impossibilities into the fictional world. In this section, I consider the impossible phenomena that result from the violation of Ryan's (1991) Chronological and Logical compatibilities. In *Prisoner of Azkaban*, there is a violation of the law of D/Chronological Compatibility because there is a temporal relocation of characters within the history of the textual actual world. Through the use of the Time-Turner, which constitutes in itself a violation of B/Inventory and

E/Natural Laws, Hermione keeps going back in time during the whole school year in order to attend more classes and do more studying.

It's called a Time-Turner [...] and I got it from Professor McGonagall on our first day back. I've been using it all year to get to all my lessons.[...] I've been turning it back so I could do hours over again, that's how I've been doing several lessons at once, see? (*Prisoner of Azkaban*, p. 289-290)

In the final use of the Time-Turner, both Hermione and Harry go back in time in order to save Hagrid's hippogriff, Buckbeak, and Sirius Black. In this case, the lifting of D/Chronological Compatibility is accompanied by a violation of G/Logical Compatibility due to the impossible temporal and spatial co-existence of one and his/her past or future self. When Harry and Hermione go back in time, they co-exist with their past selves in the same place and time. They can see their past selves, follow their past selves to Hagrid's hut, and wait for their past selves to enter the gap in the Whomping Willow and to appear again.

'Shh! Listen! Someone's coming! I think – I think it might be us!

[...] yes I think it's us going down to Hagrid's!

'Are you telling me,' Harry whispered, 'that we're here in this cupboard and we're out there, too?' (*Prisoner of Azkaban*, p. 289)

'This is the weirdest thing we've ever done,' Harry said fervently. (*Prisoner of Azkaban*, p. 291)

Harry and Hermione go back three hours in time and trace their own footsteps. Hermione keeps repeating to Harry that they must not be seen by their past selves. When Harry suggests that they enter Hagrid's hut and grab Pettigrew, in the shape of the rat, Scabbers, Hermione replies:

'No!' said Hermione in a terrified whisper. 'Don't you understand? We're breaking one of the most important wizarding laws! Nobody's supposed to change time, nobody! You heard Dumbledore, if we're see –'

'We'd only be seen by ourselves and Hagrid!'

'Harry, what do you think you'd do if you saw yourself bursting into Hagrid's house?' said Hermione.

'I'd – I'd think I'd gone mad,' said Harry, 'or I'd think there was some Dark Magic going on–'.

'Exactly! You wouldn't understand, you might even attack yourself. Don't you see? Professor McGonagall told me that awful things have happened when wizards have meddled with time [...] loads of them ended up killing their past or future selves by mistake!' (*Prisoner of Azkaban*, p. 291-2)

Harry and Hermione manage to save Buckbeak, the Hippogriff, and proceed to save Sirius Black. Logical laws are further violated by another contradiction whereby Harry saves his past self as well as Sirius Black by conjuring the Patronus Charm to repel a large number of Dementors. Harry has never been able to produce a strong fully-shaped Patronus. When he and Sirius are attacked by the Dementors, he catches a glimpse of a person conjuring a Patronus on the other side of the lake. Harry guesses that their saviour is his late father, James Potter, since

the Patronus has assumed the shape of a stag. When he travels with Hermione back in time, Harry, desperate to see his father, runs to the lake against Hermione's warnings. He waits long time for his father to appear and conjure the Patronus. Seeing no trace of his father on his side of the lake and the Dementors almost killing his past self and Sirius on the other side, Harry finally utters the incantation "Expecto Patronum". A stag-shaped Patronus jumps from the tip of Harry's wand and drives the Dementors away from Harry's past self and Sirius. Harry attempts to explain to Hermione how he has managed to conjure that powerful Patronus.

'Harry, I can't believe it – you conjured up a Patronus that drove away all those Dementors! That's very, very advanced magic'

'I knew I could do it this time,' said Harry, 'because I'd already done it [...] Does that make sense?' (*Prisoner of Azkaban*, p. 301)

Harry's argument is illogical since it can be seen as circular: Harry's past-self has seen his future-self conjuring the Patronus and Harry's future-self is able to conjure the Patronus because his past-self has seen him doing it before.

As I have shown above, possible-worlds theory can account for the relationship between fictional worlds and the actual world as well as the introduction of impossibilities into fantasy text worlds. It also provides a useful classification of these impossibilities.

CONCLUSION

Possible-worlds theory provides a useful apparatus for examining the relationship of fictional worlds with the actual world. Within the possible-worlds approach, a fictional world does not take the actual world as its point of reference; rather, it constructs an alternative world which may or may not conform to the set of laws governing the actual world. The relationship between the fictional world and the actual world can be assessed by Ryan's (1991) accessibility laws. The more accessibility laws the fictional world respects, the closer it is to the actual world. Hence, Ryan's (1991) typology of accessibility laws makes it possible to perceive the relationship between the fictional world and the actual world as a continuum with one end representing realistic fictional worlds which respect all accessibility laws, the other end representing the fictional worlds which accommodate impossible phenomena, and at various points between the two ends fictional worlds of different genres ordered according to their closeness or remoteness from the actual world.

Possible-worlds theory accounts for the introduction of impossibilities into text worlds as well as for the types of these impossibilities. The theory can also account for the combination of the magical elements with real-world notions and entities. I have divided the impossible phenomena which may be encountered in the *Harry Potter* series according to which violations of Ryan's (1991) accessibility relations are involved into two groups: impossibilities resulting from the violation of Physical, Taxonomic and Inventory compatibilities on the one hand, and impossibilities resulting from the violation of Chronological and Logical compatibilities, on the other. I have pointed out that these compatibilities can be broken in a wide variety of ways: some global and others more local. Then, I have divided these violations into what I called *global*

breakages and *local breakages*. Global breakages involve those violations which affect the structure of the fictional world. Local breakages, on the other hand, relate to the furnishing of the fictional world. These breakages can occur either through the introduction of entities or objects that bear no resemblance to the actual world or through anchoring the magical elements to the real world. I have divided the notion of anchoring the magical elements to the real world into three types, namely, variants of known species/objects, shape-shifters, and fusion of characteristics of creatures and objects. It should be noted, however, that the variety of fantasy elements and the degree of inclusion of real-world elements vary from one fantasy text world to another. It should also be noted that the variety and complexity of the impossibilities introduced to a text world may contribute to a story's crossover appeal.

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