**Imagination and the Permissive View of Fictional Truth\***

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Imagination comes with varying degrees of sensory accompaniment. Sometimes imagining is phenomenologically lean (*cognitive* imagining); at other times, imagining involves or requires sensory presentation such as mental imagery (*sensory* imagining). Philosophers debate whether contradictions can obtain in fiction and whether cognitive imagining is robust enough to explain our engagement with fiction. In this paper, I defend the Principle of Poetic License by arguing for the *Permissive View* of fictional truth: we can have fictions in which a contradiction is true, everything is true, or nothing is true. I show that imagination-based worries about impossible, unlimited, and empty fictions can be shown to be about sensory imagination and that sensory imagination isn’t necessary for fictional truth.

Fiction; imagination; fictional truth; philosophy and literature

1. **Introduction**

Philosophers debate whether impossible, unlimited, or empty fictions—fictions in which a contradiction, everything, or nothing is true—can exist (Deutsch 1985; Wildman and Folde 2017; Wildman 2019; Xhignesse 2016, 2020, 2021). An important issue in the debate is whether we’re capable of imagining the impossible. But just what kind of imagining are we concerned with?

Imagination comes with varying degrees of sensory accompaniment, and the philosophical literature makes a broad distinction as a result. The traditional distinction is one between *propositional* imagination—imagining that there is a tiger—and *objectual* imagination—imagining the tiger itself (Yablo 1993). Objectual imagination (or enactment imagination) tends to stand in for imaginings that require sensory presentation, and propositional imagining for ones that don’t (Goldman 2006; Tooming 2018). Some (Kind 2001; Langland-Hassan 2020; Nanay 2023) disagree with this characterization, suggesting instead that propositional imagination, too, involves sensory presentation.[[1]](#footnote-2)

However, the sensory vs. non-sensory distinction is orthogonal to the propositional-objectual distinction since one can propositionally imagine a sensory detail (for example, that a curtain is on fire) and objectually imagining something—say, the perfect day—doesn’t always involve sensory imagining. The former distinction is about the manner of imagining; the latter distinction is about the content of imagining. So, instead of the propositional-objectual distinction, I’ll focus on the *sensory*-*cognitive* distinction. Sensory imagining involves or requires sensory presentation; cognitive imagination doesn’t.

In this paper, I defend the *Principle of Poetic License*, that “for any class K of propositions, there is a story (abstractly conceived) in which every proposition in K is true” (Deutsch 1985: 202).[[2]](#footnote-3) I do so by arguing that we can have fictions in which a contradiction is true, everything is true, or nothing is true. Impossible, unlimited, and empty fictions can (and do) exist. Call this view the *Permissive View* of fictional truth. I show that imagination-based worries about impossible, unlimited, and empty fictions are about sensory imagination, that sensory imagination isn’t necessary for fictional truth, and that worries about cognitive imagination’s sufficiency for fictional truth are not strong enough to sway us against the Permissive View.

One might think that there is no special connection between fiction and imagination, and so our inability to imagine something doesn’t count against its ability to be fictional in the first place. For the paper, we’ll adopt the view that imagination is a crucial ingredient in fictional truth (à la Walton 1990, Currie 1990, and Stock 2017) so we can see that even if there were a special connection between imagination and fictionality, the inability to imagine something shouldn’t count against its capacity to be fictional.

Nonfiction aims at truthfulness, its content bound by what can be expected to be true. What about fiction? Is there a limit to what can be expected to be fictional? The way we answer this question will not only affect how we engage with fiction, but also influence how we understand the fiction-nonfiction distinction. Properly understanding the limits of what can be fictional also help us clarify just what is at stake when we encounter imaginative resistance, a selective refusal to accept some things to be fictionally true.[[3]](#footnote-4)

In the next section, I’ll argue that our worries about impossible fiction are phenomenological in nature. The *Argument from Visual Fiction*shows that we’re less likely to resist impossible content in drawings, suggesting that our resistance to impossible fictional content weakens once we get a sensory grasp of what the content is like. The *Argument from Trivial Difficulty*shows that we fail to imagine all sorts of things for trivial reasons and that we don’t routinely infer “φ can’t be fictional” from “we can’t sensorially imagine φ.” Lastly, the *Plea Against Revisionist Interpretation* shows that assuming the Permissive View to be false has social and aesthetic costs and argues that it would be better if our theory of fictional truth could avoid such costs. In the sections following, I’ll show how cognitive imagining is robust enough to explain our emotional engagement with fiction and explain how seeing imagination as a skill can alleviate worries about our imaginative limits. I’ll conclude by applying the lessons from impossible fiction to universal fiction and empty fiction.

1. **Impossible Fiction**

**2.1 Introducing the Problem**

Impossibility is usually understood to involve different “levels.”[[4]](#footnote-5) Physical impossibility concerns states of affairs that involve the violation of a physical law. Examples: the hyperdrive engine in *Star Wars*, which allows travel faster than 1,000 light years per hour, and Argon gas that is unstable at room temperature. Metaphysical impossibility is considered more restrictive than physical impossibility since many things that are physically impossible—such as travel faster than the speed of light—are metaphysically possible. Examples of (controversial) metaphysical impossibilities: a triangle having four sides and time travel to the past that changes the past.[[5]](#footnote-6) Lastly, we get logical impossibility when it is true both that *φ* and *¬φ*. If someone tells you that it is both raining and not raining, they’ve described a logical impossibility.[[6]](#footnote-7) A fiction inspired by a paradox might also produce a logical impossibility.[[7]](#footnote-8)

When philosophers debate about impossibility in fiction, they focus on the logically impossible. Physically impossible content such as talking animals tend not to worry philosophers. Metaphysical impossibility such as time travel that changes the past worries more philosophers. Many philosophers are fine with logically impossible fictions (Deutsch 1985; Currie 1990; Walton 1990, 1994; Byrne 1993; Phillips 1999; Matravers 2003), but others draw the line here, with a typical attitude being something like: ‘Unless something involves a clear contradiction, then we ought to be able to construct a fiction about it’. (Le Poidevin 2007: 174).

Philosophers who deny that logically impossible states of affairs can obtain in fiction can be broadly divided into two camps: those who are committed to the view that fictional worlds are possible worlds, and those who are committed to the view that our inability to imagine contradictions bars them from being fictional. Since there’s been extensive discussion on why impossible content poses a problem for the view that fictional worlds are possible worlds, in this paper, I’ll focus on the second group, those who are worried about our inability to imagine contradictions and use that as a reason to bar contradictions from being fictional.[[8]](#footnote-9)

Why is the second group against the Permissive View? The common (but controversial) intuition that imagination is a guide to possibility might make one hesitant to admit that we can imagine a contradiction. Chalmers (2002) argues that *ideal* *positive conceivability*—the ability to perceptually imagine a situation on rational reflection—can entail possibility, and thereby argues that we are unable to coherently imagine contradictions (that is, in full detail without misrepresenting the imagined situation). We don’t want a contradiction to be one way the world might have been, so we don’t want to count it as conceivable or imaginable. Extending this to fiction, if something isn’t imaginable, it can’t be fictionally true.

Worrisome ramifications aside, one might also wonder whether we’re capable of imagining contradictions in the first place. In Xhignesse (2021)’s words:

we cannot imagine contradictions and other logical or metaphysical impossibilities because we have no idea how to do so directly—and neither does any author. We can easily describe such impossibilities by relying on a meta-language, and can perhaps represent them to ourselves indirectly by such means; but we cannot use our imaginations to directly represent them, and thus cannot embed them into the living fabric of our stories. (3173)

Xhignesse’s thought is that our inability to directly imagine something makes it impossible for us to meaningfully engage with it. If φ were fictionally true, we should be able to perceptually represent φ to ourselves to recognize it as an embedded part of the story. Yablo (1993) says that we come to believe X as possible in the act of imagining X, that “to imagine an X is thereby to enjoy the appearance that an X could exist” (30). If we can’t directly represent a contradiction to ourselves, then we can’t enjoy the appearance that it can exist.

One might also worry about the principle of explosion: under classical logic, if a contradiction obtains in fiction, then everything is true in that fiction. If everything is true in a given story, how could we reason about the contents of the story? How would inference work in a fiction like that? Would all fictions containing a contradiction be the same story where everything is true?

Mortensen, Leishman*et al.* (2013) rejects the principle of explosion by appealing to visual fictions that depict the impossible (more below on visual fictions). Priest (1997) argues that we take contradictions at face value when reading stories, that is, we don’t reason that the story contains all sorts of random truths as a result of the contradictions. Based on this readerly phenomenology, Priest motivates paraconsistent logic for fiction. The aim of this paper isn’t to pick out the best logic for impossible fiction, but since classical logic is *prima facie* troublesome for impossible content, let’s stick with classical logic for now. Why exactly would it be bad for fictional truth to “explode” in a story?

I think the nature of the worry stems from the expectation that fictional content ought to supply information about what a given fictional situation is *like*. Contradictions disrupt this. Philosophers might think contradictions under classical logic would be bad because, with an explosion of fictional truths, we wouldn’t know what to make of the story, or what kind of story we’re dealing with; there would be no beginning or end, no plot, and no discernible characters since everything is true. By this light, contradictions would pose a problem under paraconsistent logic, too; even if they don’t lead to explosion, they still leave unclear just what kind of situation we’re dealing with. “Sylvan’s Box” describes a box that is both empty and filled. Just how should the reader imagine this box? The difficulty of logical inference also remains, which is a potential stumbling block for interpretation.

Notice that spelling out the worry about impossible content leads to sensory imagination, the ability to hold in mind a sensory presentation of a particular object or situation. We might try to do without the word “imagination,” but paraphrases asking what kind of situation we’re dealing with, or what kind of box is involved in the story, all have to do with how we’re supposed to mentally pick out the peculiar box. We might not know how to work with the fiction, or feel like we’re losing the thread of the story. But these are aesthetic defects, and being aesthetically bad and failing to be fictional are two different matters. These worries are ultimately about readerly experience, not fictionality. The worry isn’t over what is so according to the fiction—that bit is clear. In fact, we wouldn’t even be having this discussion unless we understood the unusual nature of the box! “Sylvan’s Box” clearly involves a box that is both empty and filled.[[9]](#footnote-10) What kind of imaginative activity is authorized or encouraged around the box, on the other hand, is less clear—and debates about impossible fiction concern this latter question.

To develop the view that worries about impossible fiction are about sensory imagination, and that a challenge to sensory imagination isn’t sufficient to deem something unfit for fictionality, I’ll provide two arguments and a plea.

* 1. **Argument from Visual Fiction**

I appeal to visual fictions to show that when it comes to the visual medium, we’re more comfortable admitting that there are impossibilia involved. It’s not uncontroversial that a drawing can depict a logical impossibility (more on this below), but it seems that, comparatively speaking, we’re more likely to acquiesce to an inconsistent drawing than to an inconsistent story. If that’s right, we can locate more precisely the source of our discomfort with contradictions in fiction. When it comes to contradictory fictional content, it’s sensory imagination or phenomenology that we get stuck on, not logical inconsistency *per se.*

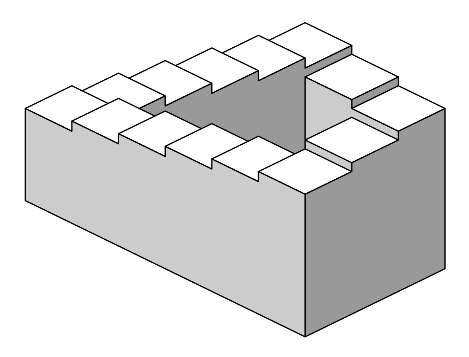
A quick note on “visual fiction”: fictions can take the form of many media, and not all fictions are stories or narratives, which are representations of two or more events that are temporally or causally connected.[[10]](#footnote-11) Visual works can be fictions, too.

Consider the following drawings, which have been discussed in similar contexts. The first piece by Escher was inspired by Penrose’s[[11]](#footnote-12) inconsistent triangle (Mortensen, Leishman *et al.* 2013: 437). The drawing represents a physically and mathematically impossible (and therefore logically impossible) waterfall:



Escher himself had called the depicted building impossible (Mortensen et. al 2013, 429).

Here’s another drawing that gives us an impossible object, the Penrose Stairs:



Pick a corner closest to you, and if you go clockwise, you’ll continue to descend… until you come back to the place you started. The stairs are descending and not descending. Like the waterfall, the stairs are mathematically impossible since they violate a theorem which says a continuous function defined on a closed loop cannot be everywhere decreasing (or increasing) (Mortensen, Leishman *et al.*:437).

It’s an open question just what kind of content can be perceived, or what we see in an illusion, though many philosophers think drawings can depict impossible figures (Priest 1999; Sorensen 2002; Blumson 2010; Mortensen, Leishman, *et al.* 2013; Elpidorou 2016; Leddington 2022). A drawing can depict a nonexistent thing without ontologically committing to it (Mortensen, Leishman, *et al.* 2013: 426). Sorensen writes that Escher pretends to record geometrically impossible scenes, and insofar as geometry and logic seem comparably abstract, we should believe logically impossible scenes, too, can be depicted (2002: 365). We seem to have an asymmetry: we more or less readily admit that Escher drawings feature impossible architecture, but we’re less willing to admit that “Sylvan’s Box” really features an impossible object.

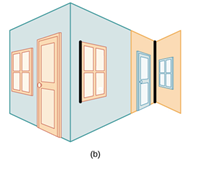
I think this is because drawings immediately give a visual sense, even if illusory, of what those impossibilities are like. They do the phenomenological work for us, so we don’t question what’s depicted. There’s no gap in sensory imagining, so we don’t doubt that the impossible content forms a part of the fiction of the work. Cowling and Cray (2022) write that comics often include inconsistent truths, and I think comics, like drawings, are comfortable with contradictions because the medium includes images.

Impossible drawings suggest that impossible objects can be depicted, or at least made fictional; all it takes is a representation of an impossible object. If this is so, we might think impossible objects can be represented through a written medium as well, even if it’s unclear how we ought to sensorially imagine them if encountered without a visual representation.

One might point out that we experience a contradiction in a drawing only when we consider the whole image. When we take the image in a piece-meal fashion, the contradiction isn’t overt; the Penrose triangle, for example, is impossible only because of jointly inconsistent parts (Blumson 2010: 146). Lewis (1978), Stalnaker (1984), and Hanley (2004) take a similar “partition” approach to explaining away contradictions in prose fiction, saying that fictionally *φ* and fictionally *¬φ* can be perfectly fine as long as we don’t also insist on fictionally *φ* ^*¬φ*. However, this strategy of avoiding union doesn’t work for works where the contradiction plays a causal role. Priest’s “Sylvan’s Box,” for instance, includes two people who are puzzled by the box, making it unlikely that both are mistaken or unreliable. So while the localizing strategy might work for some instances of impossibilities, it won’t work as a general strategy.

One might also think: these drawings are illusions! Illusions create a tendency to believe a falsehood (Mortensen, Leishman, *et al.* 427), so for depictions involving illusions, the perceptual content—what we *think* we’re perceiving— should not be considered the “actual content” of what’s depicted.

So, yes, (A) involves an illusion; it encourages us to believe a falsehood (that the two parallel lines are of different lengths). We wouldn’t say that what’s represented in (A) are two lines of unequal length. But what about (B)?



(B)

(A)

I think there’s a case to be made that the orange wall on the right *is* taller than the nearest orange window to its left in this fictional house.[[12]](#footnote-13) Context turns an illusion to a fictional truth by prescribing how we’re meant to interpret the illusory content.

Illusions are visual situations that strongly tempt the viewer to form false beliefs about what they’re seeing. In contrast, depictions of impossible situations present no such temptations: the viewer is correct to believe that an impossible thing is depicted. In an illusion, the representation is deceptive, but in a depiction, what is being represented can be impossible without the representation itself being deceptive. Our perceptual apparatus can be fooled in situations that are visually similar to our actual environments (like a Trompe l’oeil):



But in the Escher drawings, there is nothing the viewer is deceived about or tempted to be deceived about. When it comes to impossible images, “[n]othing is hidden and nothing is falsely believed. It is obvious that *no* such 3D object *can* exist” (Mortensen, Leishman, *et al.* 2013:427, emphasis theirs). Visual fictions depicting impossibilia are distinct from illusions.

One might insist that no impossibilia is genuinely depicted in any of these examples, and that strictly speaking, nothing is depicted, because the suggested content is only being hinted at through an illusion. I want to linger over this supposed difference between an impossibility “actually” being depicted and an impossibility only being “hinted” at through illusion. Elpidorou (2016:19) asks: can we really draw a distinction between seeing an apparent contradiction and a real contradiction? There is no “real” contradiction that we can genuinely observe since it can’t be instantiated in the actual world—so any contradiction that we perceive will be in appearance only, i.e., in representation only. Pictures of impossibilia can only be *de dicto*, and never *de re* (Sorensen 2002: 343). Only the representational kind of impossibility can exist, so we should count them when we see them.

The *Argument from Visual Fiction* points out an asymmetry in how we treat impossible states of affairs in visual fiction and prose fiction. When it comes to visual fiction, we’re willing to admit that something impossible is depicted, but we hesitate more when prose fiction describes an impossible scenario. This is because impossible drawings don’t challenge our sensory imagination (since it “shows” us what the impossible thing would look like). Our trouble with impossible fictional content, then, stems from our trouble with sensory imagination—something that is not crucial to understanding fiction. The next argument elaborates on this point.

**2.3 Argument from Trivial Difficulty**

Sometimes we read in a manner that doesn’t involve much sensory imagining, but that doesn’t get in the way of understanding fictional content. When we skim, for example, we absorb material without necessarily visualizing anything. If one has aphantasia—the inability to form mental imagery—then one’s reading experience is always devoid of visual accompaniment. But, again, this doesn’t pose a problem for concept uptake in general.[[13]](#footnote-14) Aphants are encouraged “not to sweat the details”, and to “pull out things that matter”, that is, to focus less on sensory details and more on the propositional content (Lander 2021). Understanding what is fictionally true is to build a mental model of the story, and this activity doesn’t require sensory imagination.

Readers without aphantasia also routinely fail to imagine in a sensory way. Which leads me to the next argument. The *Argument from Trivial Difficulty* shows that we don’t need sensory imagination to recognize something as fictionally true since we already fail to sensorily imagine content without jeopardizing fictional content.

It might be difficult to know how we are to engage with logically inconsistent material. We might lose confidence that we’re mentally picturing what we ought to be picturing. But it’d be hasty to conclude that anything that eludes sensory imagining is ruled out from being fictional. What’s missing is the connection between imaginative difficulty and fictionality.[[14]](#footnote-15) I might fail to imagine some fictional content for mundane reasons; if a character draws a chiliagon, I won’t be able to precisely imagine each side’s angle (Priest 2017: 190). But it’d be rash to conclude from this that it is not fictionally true that a shape with a thousand sides was drawn.

Similarly, I might fail to imagine particular things while reading *Moby Dick* because I lack knowledge of whaling terms, or I might lose mathematical nuances in *The Three-Body Problem* because I just don’t know how to imagine infinities of different sizes. But, again, we wouldn’t conclude from these failures that *Moby Dick*’s whaling terms fail to refer or that it isn’t true that infinities of different sizes exist in the sci-fi story. If there are nonproblematic cases where sensory imagination can fail without jeopardizing fictional content, additional explanation beyond imaginative difficulty is required to show why impossibilia can’t be fictional.

(What about the idea that whatever can’t be imagined *in principle* is what can’t be fictional? This is an important distinction, but whether there is anything we can’t imagine in principle is the very thing we’re exploring, so for now I’ll simply note that Walton says it’s not what readers in fact imagine but what they’re *prescribed* to imagine that fixes fictional content (1990: 38).[[15]](#footnote-16) Accordingly, he explicitly admits that it’s possible for a work to prescribe imaginings that cannot be fulfilled (1990: 64).)

Why does a block in sensory imagination signal a problem with fictional content? What the block actually signals is a problem accessing some fictional content, but this is an epistemological issue, and not a metaphysical issue affecting what can and can’t be fictional. How and whether we understand something and how and whether something is the case are separate when talking about the actual world. They should be separate while talking about the fictional world, too. To ask how something comes to be true in fiction, or what grounds fictional truth, is to ask about the metaphysics of fictional truth, that is, what it takes for something to be fictional. On the other hand, to ask how we can know something to be true in fiction, or whether sensory imagining is required to understand fictional content, is to ask about the epistemology of fictional truth, that is, how we come to understand what’s fictional. Worries about our inability to sensorially imagine something do not affect the metaphysics of what can and can’t be fictional because they only affect the way we access fictional content.

The *Argument from Trivial Difficulty* highlights two features of our engagement with fiction: first, that we routinely fail to sensorially imagine fictional content without thereby jeopardizing it; and second, that we ought to recognize a metaphysics-epistemology distinction regarding fictional truth. The distinction matters because trouble with sensory imagination only affects the epistemology of fictional truth. The inability to sensorially imagine a contradiction has no bearing on the metaphysical question of whether contradictions can obtain in fiction.

**2.4 Plea Against Revisionist Interpretation**

Another reason to favor the permissive view concerns revisionism. I don’t quite have an argument, but holding anti-permissive views about fictional truth invites us to routinely engage in revisionist interpretations, and I have a plea against this practice. You know how annoying it is when you share something and a dude *always* corrects you with a “Well, actually…”? I worry that this is what philosophers do when we’re committed to the view that fictional content is bound by logical possibility.

As Xhignesse (2016: 152) puts it, what we have here is a disagreement over which approach comes at a cost to descriptive adequacy. Which threatens our ordinary commitments more, an approach that sets logical impossibility as a constraint on story-telling, or one that doesn’t? Xhignesse, Bourne, and Caddick-Bourne think that the Law of Non-Contradiction is more fundamental in storytelling than the Principle of Poetic License. I disagree.

Xhignesse (2021) writes that when it comes to impossible states of affairs, what people take to be imagination is actually *meta-imagination*, “a handy way of dodging imaginary constraints” (3184; *meta-conceiving* originates from Sorenson 2006). One way to meta-imagine is to indirectly imagine something; instead of imagining someone squaring a circle, we might imagine seeing a newspaper headline that reports that someone had squared a circle. “We forgive ourselves for not directly picturing something which we have no idea how to begin picturing” (Xhignesse 2021: 3184). In a similar vein, Bourne and Caddick-Bourne (2016) argues that “Sylvan’s Box” ‘encourages audiences to misdiagnose their own imaginings, which explains why they might misreport what is fictionally true’ (211).

I’m nervous about getting comfortable telling people what it is they’re in fact imagining, in part because it feels weird to clarify for others what their mental content is. We also end up with aesthetically unsavory results. Bourne and Caddick Bourne (2016), for instance, argue that *Groundhog Day* doesn’t actually involve Phil living the same day over and over. Instead, we witness Phil in a different possible world each day, and we get a representation of a new world each time the 6 a.m. alarm goes off. Bourne and Caddick-Bourne offer this interpretation because they maintain that fictional worlds are possible worlds, and a time loop is impossible.[[16]](#footnote-17)

This interpretation is unideal for two reasons. First, it goes against the widely received understanding of the work. The entire premise of *Groundhog Day* hinges on Phil becoming a better person through the repeated days, the curse of repetition lifting only when Phil becomes a person worthy of Rita’s affection. If it isn’t fictionally true that Phil lives through the same day countless times, not only the comedic effect, but the explanation for Phil’s transformation as well as the ceasing of the repetition, become unavailable.[[17]](#footnote-18) What makes *Groundhog Day* satisfying is witnessing Phil’s development, and “I don’t like its metaphysics” isn’t, or at least shouldn’t be, an immediate reason to override our widely shared aesthetic valuations and reactions.[[18]](#footnote-19)

Secondly, it’s one thing to say that fiction consumers are wrong about what they think they’re imagining when they engage with impossible content, and a whole different thing to systematically discount the creative intentions of fiction creators by explaining away all contradictory fictional content on principle. Say that I’m a fiction writer, and I set out to create an eerie fictional world where I have a physical body *and* I lack one, and I signal my intention to make that fictionally true by writing the corresponding sentences down and leaving no indication that narration is unreliable. To argue that no contradictions can obtain in fiction is to *de facto* override the fiction writer’s intentions. I don’t think intention is sufficient to fix content[[19]](#footnote-20), and I’m not saying that philosophers can’t or shouldn’t correct people when they’re in error, it’d be better if our theory of fictional truth didn’t require us to override creators’ intentions in such a systematic fashion. So, the *Plea Against Revisionist Interpretation* supports the Permissive View on the basis that it helps us avoid revisionist interpretations of fictions that would be unintuitive and unsatisfactory.

**2.5 Error Theory**

Let me conclude this section by doing a bit of error theory: if sensory imagining is not in fact required to understand fictional truth, why does it seem important for fictional truth? Green and Brock (2000) suggest that our recognition of fictional truth is closely tied to transportation, a high level of immersion in the fictional world. Sensory imagining makes it easier for fiction consumers to form new beliefs about the fictional world. Transportation makes it less likely for readers to experience imaginative blocks because being “sent” to a different world had already invited them to imagine what that world is like.

Transported individuals had less capacity and motivation to disbelieve some content (703, 708) or problematize contradictions (710). Highly transported readers were more accepting of stories; the more mentally immersed one was in the story, the less likely one was to doubt or question something (711). Richly phenomenological imagining involved with immersion helps with fictional content uptake, and this might explain why we think sensory imagining is indispensable to fictional truth. But, again, to say that a particular mental activity helps with fictional content cognition isn’t to say that fictional content is generated, determined, or grounded by it.

Having argued that sensory imagination isn’t necessary for fictional truth, in the next section, I’ll argue that cognitive imagination is sufficient for fictional truth.

1. **Cognitive Imagining’s Relevance and Sufficiency**

Stock (2017: 25) argues that sensory imagining isn’t always required to appropriately engage with a work of fiction, and an example from Van Leeuwen (2013: 222)— imagining that elves live forever—shows when readers can’t be expected to sensorily imagine a fictional truth (“it’d take too long!”, says Van Leeuwen). Impossible fiction might be another instance where sensory imagining isn’t required and where cognitive imagination might suffice.

Xhignesse (2020) argues that cognitive (for him, ‘propositional’) imagining isn’t relevant to the question of whether impossible content can be fictional. Figuring out what’s fictionally true requires *reflective reading*, a holistic approach with high epistemic standards. Reflective reading requires an all-things-considered judgment aimed at (deep) comprehension, and cognitive imagining, given its light requirement for us to simply imagine *that* something is the case, doesn’t fit the kind of reading we engage in when asking about fictional truth.

I agree with Xhignesse that figuring out what is true in a story involves a holistic approach to the work. But we’ve seen that skimming can be enough to provide a grasp of what’s fictionally true, so sometimes comprehension can be reached even with a bare-bones imagination. There seems to be a mismatch in the comparison: “cognitive (propositional) imagining” should be contrasted with “sensory” imagination, and “reflective” imagining should be contrasted with “imagining-on-the-go.” The first distinction has to do with how sensory-rich our mental accompaniment of reading is; the second has to do with how holistic our interpretation is. Cognizing what’s true in the story can require reflective reading if getting to the content requires a holistic interpretation of what is true in the story (for example, if there’s a twist at the end), but at other times, cognitive imagining can suffice.

Having shown that cognitive imagination is relevant for fictional truth, let me show why it’s sufficient for fictional truth. Kung (2010) argues that assignment, a ubiquitous feature of imagining, allows us to imagine the impossible:

We have tremendous power and flexibility in imagining because we can fix via assignment what is the case in our imagined situation to an almost arbitrary level of detail. . . I can imagine my great-grandmother even though I have no idea what she looks like; maybe I form an image of a woman who looks like Cyd Charisse or Madame Chiang Kai-Shek. That doesn't make it Cyd Charisse that I'm imagining. I'm imagining that the woman who looks this way is my great-grandmother, as she is labeled. The question of how I know this - how I know that it is my great-grandmother I am imagining, rather than some other woman - doesn't really make sense. (626)

I think Kung is right. The contents of our imagination, including cognitive imagination, can be fixed through stipulation, and stipulation is enough to let us imagine even the impossible (632). Sensory imagination, on the other hand, requires a more meaningful connection to the sensory presentation that accompanies the imagining; what’s imagined determines whether sensory imagining is carried out correctly, and there is a “matching” relationship between the sensory presentation and what is meant to be sensorially imagined (Tooming 2018:685, 690).

Thinking about how assignment works helps us see why sensory imagining isn’t crucial for the recognition of fictional truth. Even in cases where we do have rich phenomenal imagining, it’s not at all clear that the sensory experience is what’s doing much of the work in determining what it is that we imagine. Blumson (2010: 148) writes that resemblance is insufficient to determine what’s represented by a picture—and if we apply this to mental pictures, resemblance is also insufficient to determine what’s sensorially imagined. Campbell (2002) argues that we shouldn’t consider (mentally) seeing objects as a way of grasping thoughts about objects, but beginning points that can be further refined (136). In the example Kung discusses, the fact that he sensorially imagines a woman who looks like Madame Chiang Kai-Shek doesn’t challenge the fact that he’s in fact imagining his great-grandmother. Sometimes is stipulation, and not sensory imagining, that fixes the content of imagination.

The perceived difficulty of imagining a contradiction might have to do with the fact that we don’t have readily available mental images that would represent a situation which would verify the inconsistent proposition (Tooming 2018: 694; Yablo 1993: 29). In fact, inconsistent fictional truths might fall into what Chalmers (2002) calls the “twilight zone,” a class of statements that are neither negatively conceivable (i.e., not immediately rule-out-able) nor positively conceivable (i.e., perceptually imaginable). This would be a significant result since Chalmers thinks no statement falls into the twilight zone.

Some philosophers worry that cognitive imagining (or propositional imagining *qua* imagining that doesn’t involve sensory presentation) isn’t a kind of imagining at all. Kind (2013) argues that cognitive imagining that minimizes its difference from presupposing, stipulating, or entertaining might be too thin a notion to count as imagining.“Philosophers aren’t clear on what precisely more is required more to count as imagining and not merely presupposing,” Kind writes, “but they do think imagining is more robust, requiring more active engagement than merely supposing” (2013: 151; Tooming 2018: 688). Contrast this view with Everett’s, which defines imagination along functional lines. He argues that the kind of thin imaginations “lacking the sort of phenomenology that typically accompanies creative imaginings” that constitute, say, counterfactual reasoning, are still species of imagination (2013: 15).

I’m sympathetic to Kind’s worry, but I don’t think cognitive imagining’s precarious status as a kind of imagination threatens the Permissive View. *Whatever* it is that we define or categorize cognitive “imagining” to be, I want to take that mental action and say it’s good enough for establishing contradictory fictional truths since it is good enough to help us understand what is true according to a story.

With that said, I think we can maintain a meaningful distinction between cognitive imagination and supposition. Briefly: Kung (2010) thinks non-sensory/cognitive imagination tends to be subject to imaginative resistance in ways supposition tends not to be (632). Or we might think the difference comes down to the implied point of the mental action. “Suppose that *φ*” strongly implies that one should be ready to consider the consequences of what one is supposing. Supposing feels like preparation for something more, whereas imagining might or might not be.

Regardless of what we think cognitive imagining really is, another worry for cognitive imagining is that it isn’t robust enough to explain our affective reactions to fiction. Again, it’s not clear what exactly the difference between imagining and presupposing is, but there’s a sense that imagining involves more activity or investment than merely supposing. Fiction can elicit powerful emotional reactions, and insofar as cognitive imagining is phenomenologically lean, one might worry that it can’t explain how and why fiction affects our emotions in powerful ways.

I have two responses. First, it’s not obvious that “merely supposing” is unable to incite emotional reactions. Price (1969: 192) writes that the “entertaining of propositions is the most familiar of all intellectual phenomena” and that “it enters into… many of our conative and emotional attitudes as well.” Arcangeli (2017), too, argues that “merely supposing” can be enough to give rise to affect, which would mean that cognitive imagining, too, might be enough to give rise to affect. Being asked to presuppose certain states of affairs—such as a cat being eviscerated or one’s children being sick—can lead to affective responses, and supposition or cognitive imagination can generate affective reactions in an “indirect way” by triggering a more phenomenological imagination that leads to an emotional response (742). Even if cognitive imagining isn’t directly connected to our affective system, mentally beholding that something is the case can lead to the kind of emotional engagement we see with fiction when it invites sensory imagination to also get involved.[[20]](#footnote-21)

Second, we might say that what makes something fictionally true is not necessarily the same thing that makes us emotionally react to fictional content. For example, a Waltonian might think that it is the prescription to imagine that determines what is fictional, but it’s what we in fact imagine that leads to affect. Even if cognitive imagining isn’t robust enough to explain our affective reactions to fiction, recalling that the thing that grounds fictional truth may not be the same thing that produces our emotional responses gives us room to acknowledge cognitive imagination’s phenomenologically lean nature without denying its ability to help us grasp fictional truth.

In the next section, I’ll argue that considering imagination to be a skill can help us assuage our worries about cognitively imagining contradictions.

1. **Improving One’s Imagining**

Kind (2020, 2022) argues that we should think of imagining as a skill that we can improve with training and practice. We routinely talk and act as if imaginative abilities differ across persons, but this insight hasn’t shaped contemporary philosophical discussions of imagination (2020: 335). If imagination is an improvable skill, then the inability to imagine some content might just mean that one hadn’t learned how to imagine such things yet.

Let’s take Kind’s suggestion and understand cognitive imagination (or propositional imagining qua imagining that doesn’t involve sensory presentation) as a skill (2020: 338). What does it take to imagine well in a cognitive manner? When we ask what it takes to be a good imaginer, we need to consider the different ways we use imagination:

In transcendent uses, we aim through our imaginative exercises to transcend the world in which we live. Paradigmatic instances of transcendent imagining involve the production or consumption of fiction, games of pretense, and daydreaming. In instructive uses, we aim through our imaginative exercises to learn about the world in which we live. Paradigmatic instances of instructive imagining involve mindreading, problem-solving, and thought experimentation. (Kind 2022: 37)

Given the distinction between transcendent and instructive imagining, we see why improving cognitive imagining doesn’t seem straightforward: we put cognitive imagination to both kinds of uses. For example, when we read a plot summary of a novel, cognitive imagination is put to transcendent use since we use the imagination to go beyond the actual world. Cognitive imagination is used instructively when we suppose a contradiction for a reductio proof to eventually learn what’s true of the real world.

Seeing that cognitive imagining is put to both transcendent and instructive uses lets us see the different ways in which it might be improved. One’s ability to remove constraints to imagining based on the actual structure, law, and facts of the world is helpful for transcendent uses of imagining, while one’s ability to impose the actual structure, law, and facts of the world, or at least adhere to such limits while imagining, is helpful for instructive uses of imagining (Kind 2022: 38).

When and how would we know when cognitive imagining is carried out accurately? Since it doesn’t require sensory accompaniment, quality of phenomenological accompaniment isn’t relevant to cognitive imagining’s accuracy. I suggest that we take a dispositional approach: to imagine well cognitively is to be disposed to reason in accordance with the imagined content. This test requires that the imaginer both remove constraints and add back constraints. This way of understanding cognitive imagining’s accuracy condition suffices for fiction engagement.

One of the elements that matter to imaginative quality is experiential resources (Kind 2020: 39), so cognitive imagining can be improved with more experiential (or theoretical) resources. For example, imaginers unfamiliar with theoretical physics or pure math might have a harder time cognitively imagining superposition or infinities of different sizes than a physicist or a mathematician might. Acquiring knowledge and experience can allow one to imagine in a broader capacity.

We can certainly imagine something that we never experienced. But thinking of the kind of experiential knowledge that might help cognitive imagining lets us ask what other contexts might help or hinder cognitive imagining. For instance, Liao (2016) shows that genre considerations lead to differing amounts of imaginative resistance. Genre, then, might be one feature that affects our cognitive imaginability with regard to fiction—and trying to further pinpoint the kinds of context that would allow one to cognitively imagine otherwise difficult content might count as a strategy to improve one’s cognitive imagination. Knowledge of conceptual developments within an art-world—say, being familiar with metafictional works from Borges and Unamuno—might also facilitate imagining impossible or empty fictional worlds.

If Kind is right that imagination is an improvable skill, arguments to the effect that we can’t cognitively imagine contradictions because we have no idea how to do it successfully might just mean that we haven’t learned how to do so yet. “A large part [of imagining a square circle or a nonexistent knight],” Xhignesse writes, “stems from our not being able to figure out exactly what is being asked of us, beyond imagining a square and a circle superimposed, or an empty but animate suit of armour” (2020: 3181). But given that people have varying imaginative capacities, one person’s inability to imagine something and another person’s (alleged) ability to do so should invite us to ask whether the latter individual is simply better at imagining (Kind 2020: 343). In addition, there’s room to disagree whether the mentally held content matches the content one is trying to imagine (Tooming 2018: 693), so disagreement over whether one can imagine a contradiction might come down to differing intuitions on what sensory presentation is sufficient to be considered one that “verifies” the imagined content.

If we move away from the assumption that what can be imagined is fixed, and that we can expand what can be imagined, then the inability to imagine something need not automatically spell the limits of what can be fictional.

1. **Unlimited Fiction and Empty Fiction**

If impossible fiction can exist, unlimited fiction and empty fiction can exist, too.

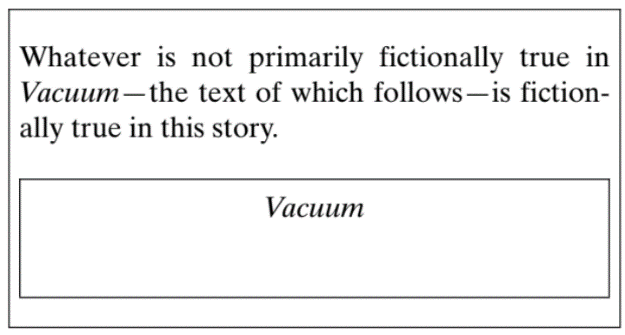
In an “unlimited” fiction, every proposition is true. Wildman and Folde (2017) argue that creating one is relatively easy: all you need is a contradiction to obtain in the story, and the principle of explosion will give you a story in which everything is true.[[21]](#footnote-22)

A potential problem for unlimited fiction created this way is that all contradiction-containing fictions would have the same content. This runs counter to the way we treat inconsistent fictions; we usually treat them as telling different stories. A proper response would take more space than I can take, but we might begin to allay this worry by noting that we need not equate story identity to story content. For example, even if two works of fiction completely overlap in fictional truths, different stories might be told depending on the truths they highlight, what truths are explicit (primary) and implicit (secondary), and how they bring our attention to the truths. Think of a sequel that “retells” a previously known story from a different perspective without introducing content that wasn’t already a part of the original. If this example shows how works might share fictional truths but differ in story identity, then the fact that unlimited fictions would, strictly speaking, all have the same content need not problematize how we treat contradiction-containing fictions to be telling different stories.

Xhignesse (2016, 2020) remains skeptical, arguing that merely stating something in the story isn't enough to make it true, our reading practices ought to limit what an author can stipulate, and we ought to be sensitive to the context of a work (for example, genre). Xhignesse (2020) also argues that creating an unlimited story isn’t as simple as inducing an explosion because readers take contradictions as a cue to engage with the work in a particular manner, and that logical contradictions are mostly confined to “phictions”—short stories that philosophers concoct for the sake of advancing some argument—which lack genuine status as a literary story. Readers don’t take fictional truths to explode even when they’re faced with a contradiction, and they’re unlikely to come across stories that contain contradictions anyway.

But Xhignesse’s points don’t have to do with limits of fictional content. The difficulties he points to have to do with the difficulty of creating a work that would have unlimited truths and the difficulty of getting the reader to engage with the contradiction at face value. The possibility claim I’m making—that everything could be true in a fiction under the right circumstances— is compatible with Xhignesse’s apt reminders.

Besides, there is a way to produce unlimited fiction without involving an explosion. Wildman (2019: 39) gives a clever example titled *Plenum*:



Since nothing is true in *Vacuum*, everything is true in the complement fiction *Plenum*.

We might think that unlimited fiction couldn’t exist because, well, what is it for a fiction to have no beginning and end? We like to know what a given fictional world is *like*. But, again, this worry focuses on a fictional world’s picturability. We just wouldn’t know what kind of story we’re dealing with, but we can understand that every proposition is fictionally true. If given a true-or-false quiz about it, we would mark all statements as “True” and pass.[[22]](#footnote-23) Resistance against unlimited fiction, like impossible fiction, is more about sensory imagination and readerly experience than limits of fictional content.

For the same reasons unlimited fiction should be accepted, empty fictions—fictions in which nothing is true—should be accepted. It might be that some fictions lack content because there is no discernible situation that obtains in the fiction. We already saw an example above (*Vacuum*), but empty fiction doesn’t require that the *work* of fiction be empty; it just means that nothing is true according to the work.

What about the phenomenological worry that we have no idea what it would be like to engage with an empty fiction? Wildman (2019) answers that readers are still free to imagine whatever they’d like as long as they understand that nothing is fictionally the case. When dealing with empty fiction, any sensory imagination that accompanies fiction engagement need not cohere with what’s fictionally true. Most fictions signal its content by inviting sensory imaginings (e.g., story book illustrations or films that show us what the protagonist looks like), but sensory imagination is neither necessary nor sufficient to determine fictional truth.

1. **Conclusion**

Aristotle writes in *Metaphysics* that it’s impossible for someone to believe the same thing to be and not to be at the same time (Book IV, Gamma). This, I’ve shown, doesn’t apply to fiction because logical possibility is not a limit for fictional truth.[[23]](#footnote-24) And the Permissive View doesn’t strengthen the conceivability-possibility link because it’s *fictional* content or truth that is being conceived as inconsistent. The permissive stance on fictional truth captures one way in which content presented as fiction is special and different from content presented as nonfiction.

Some might hear this “anything goes” slogan and worry that important constraints on fiction are being thrown out. If anything can be fictionally true, what about fictions that are produced for particular purposes? If anything can be fictional, does it still make sense to say that one interpretation of a work is better than another?

I think so. All I’m saying is that imagination-based worries about inconsistent, unlimited, and empty fictions concern sensory imagination, and that our ability to sensorially imagine doesn’t serve as a limit to what can be fictionally true.To say that fictional truth has no general imagination-based limit doesn’t mean that there can’t be any limits, especially ones specific to a particular work. Even while we admit that imagination can accommodate anything, we can equally believe imagination to possess an “element of rationality,” a kind of practical reason that connects the derived content to a creative aim (Scruton 1974: 99). Works call for us to imagine particular propositions for a reason; *Through the Looking-Glass* asks us to imagine strange and illogical content because Carroll wanted to convey an unfamiliar world. What we consider a good interpretation of a work should still be judged with sensitivity to the work’s contexts, including the creator’s aim and the work’s historical, textual, and formal features.[[24]](#footnote-25)

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1. Kind (2001) argues that all imagining involves sensory presentation, Langland-Hassan (2020) argues imaging can partly constitute propositional imagining, and Nanay (2022) argues that propositional imagining often relies on mental imagery because language processing involves mental imagery. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Routley (1979), Phillips (1999), and Wildman and Folde (2017) also defend the principle. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Though it’s related to the issue of whether contradictions can obtain in fiction, I won’t be engaging with imaginative resistance in this paper since it is a larger phenomenon than the one I am addressing. But briefly: one upshot of my conclusion is that the “fictionality puzzle” in imaginative resistance will require a wontian analysis. See Tuna (2020) for an overview of imaginative resistance and Tooming (2018) for a discussion that connects sensory (engaged) imagination to imaginative resistance. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. See section 1 of Mallozzi, Vaidya, and Wallner 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Metaphysical impossibilities can entail logical impossibility, so it might be difficult to draw a clear distinction between the two. A triangle with four sides or traveling to the past and changing the past might be metaphysically or logically impossible (or both) depending on the description. Thanks to the referees for this point. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. I’ll count analytic impossibility (e.g., “a pediatrician is not a doctor”) as a logical impossibility, especially ones that can be translated to fit the φ and ¬φ form. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. A fiction built on the lottery paradox, for instance, might produce contradictory truths that someone won the lottery and no one won-- given the right framing, distractions, etc., that is. Thanks to Harold Hodes for this example. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Lewis (1978), Hanley (2004), and Bourne and Caddick-Bourne (2016) argue that fictions can’t feature impossible states of affairs because fictional worlds are possible worlds. See Currie (1990: 54-55, 68-70), Walton (1990: 57, 64-66), and Proudfoot (2006, 26-34) for discussions against their view. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. The fact that interpretations to the contrary exist (e.g., Nolan 2007) doesn’t show that stories like “Sylvan’s Box” can’t contain impossible content. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. See Prince (1982: 4) and Lamarque and Olsen (1994: 225). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. Both the triangle and the stairs were actually conceived first by Reutersvärd (Mortensen, Leishman, *et al.* 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. I’ll remain neutral on whether we genuinely see a contradiction here or merely perceive the house inconsistently—and whether impossible pictures always make use of illusions. The main point is that illusions can lead to fictional truths, and that some pictures have impossible content. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. See Cavedon-Taylor 2022. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. See Walton 2006. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. A sceptic might worry an author can’t prescribe something that she knows to be impossible. One way out: the author must believe, then, that imagining a contradiction isn’t impossible. Our pre-theoretic intuition that fiction goes beyond the real world and its possibilities supports this move. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. I’ll remain neutral on whether the temporal experience depicted in Groundhog Day is actually metaphysically (or logically) impossible. What’s relevant in this context is that Bourne and Caddick-Bourne think so. See their ch. 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. We might allow flexibility in how Phil comes to experience the same day again and again. In addition to the “standard” interpretation that Groundhog Day “resets” for Phil, another arrangement is Phil traveling to different timelines such that he believes that he is reliving the same day (i.e., traveling back to his own past) but is actually traveling to different possible worlds’ Groundhog Day after the first day. Unlike Bourne and Caddick Bourne’s analysis, this option preserves the fact that a single Phil persists and repeats Groundhog Day, albeit in different timelines each time. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. Bourne and Caddick-Bourne argue that their interpretation is less odd than the traditional one (2016: 96). My intuition doesn’t align. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. I’m in agreement with Bourne and Caddick-Bourne (2016: 102) and Xhignesse (2016, 2020, 2021) in this regard. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
20. Williamson (2020) writes that the contrast between imagination and supposition is overblown precisely because the point of supposing A is typically to answer the question “what if A?” by mentally exploring the consequences, often by imagining them (15). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
21. One might worry about the explosion strategy since fictions aren’t (always) closed under entailment. But a fiction can be specified to have the right context (e.g. have classical logic or at least be governed by the principle of explosion) to bring about the intended effect (See Wildman and Folde 2017 for discussion). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
22. Bourne and Caddick-Bourne (2016: 208) argue that comprehension tests don’t actually show that readers understand the content of the fiction but instead test for impressions a fiction gives about its content. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
23. Though see Cook (draft) for how logic-semantics pairings might pose a limit to fictional truth. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
24. I'd like to thank Amy Kind for inviting me to write a blog post for The Junkyard that became the backbone of the paper, as well as Sara Aronowitz, Mark Crimmins, Nathaniel Goldberg, Harold Hodes, August Miller, Jonathan Weinberg, Michel-Antoine Xhignesse, anonymous referees, and audience members at the University of Arizona, Seoul National University, Sogang University, Cornell University, the 2022 International Fiction Colloquium, and the 2023 APA-Pacific for helpful conversations and feedback on previous drafts. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)