

APTARA	JAAC	jaac12163	Dispatch: February 17, 2015	CE: AFL
	Journal	MSP No.	No. of pages: 10	PE: Haider Sahle

FLORIAN COVA AND AMANDA GARCIA

The Puzzle of Multiple Endings

ABSTRACT

Why is it that most fictions present one and only one ending, rather than multiple ones? Fictions presenting multiple endings are possible, because a few exist; but they are very rare, and this calls for an explanation. We argue that such an explanation is likely to shed light on our engagement with fictions, for fictions having one and only one ending seem to be ubiquitous. After dismissing the most obvious explanations for this phenomenon, we compare the scarcity of multiple endings in traditional kinds of fiction to their profusion in the case of interactive fictions. This contrast poses a challenge to accounts of our engagement with fictions in terms of games of make-believe. We conclude that solving this puzzle is likely to improve our philosophical understanding of fictions.

I.

Most of what appears natural and obvious might reveal itself to be very puzzling once properly put into question. In the past twenty years, philosophical understanding of fiction has greatly benefited from philosophers' ability to reveal what was puzzling and problematic in what seemed rather brute and mundane characteristics of our engagement with fiction. This translated in a series of paradoxes: the paradox of fiction, obviously, but also the paradox of tragedy, the paradox of horror, the paradox of suspense, and even the paradox of junk fiction.¹ Each of these paradoxes, once formulated, gave rise to multiple discussions that, at best, allowed us to deepen and further our understanding of fiction and, at worst, revealed what we did not yet understand about it.

The present article adds a new member to this less and less selective club of puzzles about fiction. In Section II, we ask why fictions tend to present a certain feature that has never been put into question so far and argue that an adequate theory of our engagement with fiction needs to give an explanation for this state of affairs. In Section III, we show that many potential explanations for this phenomenon are problematic and that there is no

obvious, easy way to answer or dissolve the problem. Finally, in Section IV, we argue that one of the most prominent theories about the way we engage with fictions seems to be particularly ill at ease in the task of explaining this problematic feature of fictions. In the end, we hope that asking this question will allow for a better understanding of the way we engage with fictions and of the nature of fiction itself.

Without further ado, let us ask the question: *why do fictions tend to have one and only one ending?*

II.

Pick a novel at random on your bookshelf or think about the last movie you saw. There is a high chance that this novel or film offers one and only one ending. Indeed, novels or films presenting multiple endings—that is, different authorized endings, none of which are favored by the author—are quite rare and unusual. Thus, we do not expect to be confronted with different fates for one and the same character or different resolutions for the same story. If we read a novel in which the author proposes two official endings, we are likely to be surprised. To put it simply: we

are used to have fictions offering one and only one ending because this is what most of them do.

Surely, some DVDs' bonus sections give us the possibility to see alternate endings that were shot but not kept in the definitive version of the movie. But, in this case, there is one and only one *authorized* ending: the alternative endings that are proposed in the DVDs do not play a role in our engagement with the fiction.² If the film ended with the main character dying, it will not be much of a relief to learn that, in an alternate ending that was not retained, he or she survived to live happily ever after (this might even make things worse, by stressing what might have happened in the fiction but never did). Playing a role in the enjoyment we experience *around* the fiction is not enough to be part of the fiction itself either. For instance, fan fiction, and the alternative endings it proposes to some of our most favored stories, cannot compete with the official endings of these stories.³ No matter how big their efforts, fans cannot save their heroes simply by writing different endings. Neither can they determine the ending of an open-ended story by writing their preferred resolution. So the abundance of fan fictions is perfectly compatible with the claim that multiple endings are rare.⁴

More complex are cases of novels or films that, due to certain historical contingencies, exist in different versions each presenting a different ending. For example, Dickens's *Great Expectations* famously underwent a change in ending just before publication so that two different versions of the novel exist in print (in fact, most versions in print now offer both endings). Similarly, certain movies (such as Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* or Terry Gilliam's *Brazil*) exist in different versions featuring different endings, because production or distribution have cut them to best fit what they thought the audience's taste in certain countries to be. However, in both cases, it is neither a defining feature of these fictions that they present alternate endings nor something intended by their authors.

Thus, we must distinguish between the notions of alternate endings and multiple endings. Only the latter imply competing, authorized endings and obey the artistic intentions of the author. The former, on the contrary, are the result of accidents or foreign interventions on the work.⁵ Thus, even if *alternate* endings were relatively easy to come

by, this would still be no evidence against the claim that *multiple* endings are scarce.

There are of course clear cases of fictions offering the appreciator multiple endings, and we all probably know a couple. For example, Krzysztof Kieslowski's *Blind Chance* and Penelope Spheeris's *Wayne's World* are two movies that actually propose to the viewer different endings to the same story. Similarly, there are books that present the reader with multiple endings, such as Julio Cortázar's *Hopscotch* or Amélie Nothomb's *Mercury*. Thus, fictions presenting multiple endings are *possible*, for a few actually exist—and they can be found in traditional forms of fictions and not only in interactive fictions, such as video games. This is an important thing to note, as we shall see. However, we must recognize that such cases are very rare and are the exceptions that prove the rule: as we pointed out earlier, we normally expect a traditional fiction to present one and only one ending.

But if fictions presenting multiple endings are possible, then there seems to be no necessity to the fact that most fictions actually present one and only one ending. This seems to be a contingent fact, waiting for an explanation. Thus, let us repeat our question: *why* is it that most fictions present one and only one ending?

Now, one might wonder whether this question is really relevant for our philosophical understanding of fictions and the way we engage with them. Fictions, like most human productions, are subject to fashions and present historically contingent features that, though fascinating, do not reveal anything deep about the way we relate to them. For example, it is an interesting question to ask when crime fictions first appeared and what led them to become so popular, but one might think that the answer to this question will not teach us anything relevant to a general and philosophical understanding of our engagement with fictions. However, it is interesting to note that, beyond the historical and contingent features of human productions, general and stable tendencies can be observed that most likely reveal important psychological truths about the way we appreciate these productions. Indeed, a growing body of work in cultural transmission suggests that cultural evolution is driven in part by what is called 'cognitive attraction.'⁶ Beyond fluctuations and trends due to historical and contingent circumstances, human productions

tend to favor certain features that turn out to be more historically stable than others because such features are more attractive to the human mind.

Let us take two examples to illustrate this idea: one in moral psychology and one in aesthetics. From the standpoint of moral psychology, Shaun Nichols has studied the way norms are culturally transmitted and hypothesized that our emotional responses play a key role in the transmission and stabilization of norms by making these norms more salient and more memorable.⁷ Comparing a popular and influential sixteenth-century etiquette manual to etiquette norms still accepted today, he found that norms the violation of which was more likely to inspire disgust were also more likely to be part of contemporary manners than norms the violation of which did not elicit disgust. These results suggest that disgust plays an important role in the stabilization and transmission of etiquette norms: norms prohibiting disgusting behavior tend to be more stable and are more likely to be transmitted. From this, Nichols inferred that there must be a “cognitive attractor” favoring these norms—that is, a psychological bias that explains their stability. In this case, the underlying psychological factor is disgust and its ability to make norms more salient and more memorable.

The same kind of reasoning can be found within the field of aesthetics. In a recent paper, Olivier Morin argues that the cultural evolution of portraits can be partly explained by the cognitive attraction direct eye gaze exerts upon us.⁸ Indeed, a great deal of psychological research shows that direct eye gazes in pictures, compared to slightly averted gazes, are more attention grabbing and more likely to arouse emotions. Additionally, direct-gaze pictures of faces are rated by subjects as more “likable” and “attractive” than their averted-gaze counterparts. Hypothesizing that these psychological features might make direct-gaze portraits more cognitively attractive and favor their cultural stability, Morin tracked the evolution of the proportion of portraits featuring direct gazes both in European Renaissance and through five centuries of Korean portraiture. In both cases, he found that, once introduced in an artistic culture, portraits featuring direct gazes tended to establish themselves and to gain popularity. Once again, these results suggest that the cultural stability of a given feature (here, direct gaze in portraits) might be a cue to the fact that

this feature is cognitively attractive (here, direct gazes are more attention-grabbing and arousing).

Let us now get back to the lack of multiple endings: the fact that many fictions present one and only one ending seems to be more than a contingent feature of fictions. There do not seem to be cultures in which it is the custom to present different endings when telling a story. Even in cultural spaces in which there exist fictions presenting different endings, such fictions are rare and do not seem to be frequently emulated. Thus, it does not seem absurd to think that having one and only one ending is a culturally stable feature of fictions. This means that there is probably something cognitively attractive about fictions having one and only one ending—something that makes such fictions more likely to be enjoyed and transmitted, and something that is probably tied to the psychological bases of our enjoyment of fictions. This also means that an appropriate and ultimately satisfying account of our engagement with fictions should be in a position to explain what makes fictions with only one ending more attractive. Thus, the question we asked is not the shallow puzzle it may appear to be at first sight; rather, we think, it dives deep into the psychological roots of our engagement with fictions.

iii.

While one might agree that the scarcity of multiple endings is an interesting phenomenon, one might also think that there is an obvious explanation for this fact, and that we need not appeal to hidden and mysterious psychological factors to explain it. Nevertheless, the task is not as simple as it might seem. In this section, we review the most obvious possible explanans for the rarity of multiple endings and show they are actually problematic or unpromising.

1. A first possible solution to the puzzle is to appeal to the notion of *immersion*. Here is not the place to give a full theoretical treatment of immersion, but it is widely accepted that immersion is a key factor in the enjoyment of fiction and that immersion—the feeling of being “lost” in a fictional world—is easier when the appreciator is not constantly reminded that what he or she reads is “just a fiction” and his or her attention is not redirected toward the

1
2
3 “real” world. This is why occurrences of char-
4 acters breaking the fourth wall are so likely
5 to break the flow of our engagement with fic-
6 tion and are mostly used for comic purposes
7 or distancing effect. Thus, one possible expla-
8 nation for the absence of multiple endings is
9 that they irreparably compromise immersion.
10 Indeed, by showing that there are multiple pos-
11 sible resolutions, such fictions would remind
12 the reader that what he or she is reading is
13 “just a fiction,” thus breaking the spell and
14 leading to an unsatisfactory experience for the
15 appreciator.
16

17 It might be the case that proposing multiple
18 endings undermines immersion. However, we do
19 not think that their undermining immersion is
20 enough to explain their scarcity. There are plenty
21 of things in fictions that are likely to undermine
22 immersion without making people unable to en-
23 joy these fictions. Comic books, for example, are
24 a very popular kind of fiction. Still, they contain
25 many features that undermine immersion. It is,
26 for example, customary for comic books to signal
27 the reader that fictional characters are referenc-
28 ing events that happened in a previous issue (or
29 even in a completely different series) while indi-
30 cating the exact references of the issue they should
31 purchase in order to grasp a better understand-
32 ing of the fictional events. Moreover, readers will
33 often have to wait a month between each issue
34 and thus have to take long breaks in their enjoy-
35 ment of the story. All these things contribute to
36 undermine immersion. Nevertheless, they do not
37 threaten immersion to the point that we cannot
38 enjoy the fiction anymore. Such comic books still
39 exist, which shows that people are able to enjoy
40 them. An immersion that is not total is compat-
41 ible with a great pleasure in the engagement with
42 a fiction and so is not enough to explain the scarcity
43 of multiple endings in fictions.

44 One might insist and point out that there is
45 something very distinctive about the way multi-
46 ple endings break immersion: being told about
47 previous issues and waiting for the next issue to
48 appear does not require the appreciator to take an
49 active stance and interact with the fiction. In both
50 cases, he or she can stay *passive*. On the contrary,
51 offering the appreciator multiple endings forces
52 him or her to take an *active* stance, by making
53 him choose what ending to read next. This *active*
54 dimension would be what utterly compromises

immersion and enjoyment in the case of multiple
endings.

However, once again, we do not think this so-
lution to be satisfying. First, it is not clear that
proposing multiple endings amounts to forcing the
appreciator to actively *choose* between these end-
ings. For example, Jonathan Lynn’s movie *Clue*
had three different endings, but only one by the-
ater, so that viewers could only view one ending,
chosen at random. Thus, proposing multiple end-
ings is not always synonymous with having the
appreciator significantly interact with the fiction.
This solution would only apply to special cases of
multiple endings, that is, those in which one has
to choose an ending and to choose it actively. But,
second, we do not even think this solution works
for the particular case of fictions in which the ap-
preciator has to actively choose which ending to
read. Indeed, it underestimates the active part the
reader plays in building his or her enjoyment of
the fiction, even in the case of traditional fictions.
For example, it is very frequent in contemporary
comic books to propose events and crossovers that
involve different characters from different series
and in which the reader has to read multiple ti-
tles and issues to get all the aspects of the story.
In these cases, it is common for some issues to
be presented as essential (they tell the reader the
main story and the key events) while other issues
are presented as optional (they are more focused
on subplots and secondary characters that are not
essential to the understanding of the main plot).
It is then up to the reader to choose which of
the optional issues he or she wants to read, and
this will affect his or her experience of the fiction.
Even among the essential issues, it often happens
that several of these issues tell events that happen
in parallel (because they follow different sets of
characters), so that there is no official reading or-
der and it is up to the reader to choose which of
these issues to read first.⁹ Such “events” are often
much appreciated by comic books readers. Thus,
it seems that the enjoyment of fiction is fully com-
patible with the reader’s taking an active role in
his or her engagement with fiction and deciding
what to read next. It is not even clear that this
active engagement actually undermines apprecia-
tors’ immersion.¹⁰

2. Another approach would be to focus on the
idea that a tight chain of fictional events, one
that appears necessary, is more pleasing for the

audience. It is generally considered a virtue for a story to be constituted by a series of events that seem to follow smoothly from each other, without incoherence, explanatory gaps, or deus ex machina interventions—and thus to inspire what we will call a feeling of ‘necessity.’ Indeed, it seems that the more the development of characters and events makes sense and follows a logical expansion, the better the story. Hence Racine’s tragedies (and classical tragedies more generally) are particularly praised for the sentiment of inevitability they generate thanks to the polished interlacing of scenes and events.

If this capacity to inspire a feeling of necessity is indeed an important and appreciated quality of stories, then multiple endings are obviously problematic, for they seem to dramatically threaten this feeling. As a consequence, the engagement with a story with multiple endings might be less rewarding than the engagement with a work leading to a unique ending—for the first appears to weaken the feeling of necessity and might even give an impression of arbitrariness. The rarity of the first kind of stories would then be easily explained by the fact that they are less enjoyable.

However, though inspiring this feeling of necessity might be a plus, it is not an essential or even a dominant feature of fiction. Indeed, some very popular fictions do not seem very apt to inspire such a feeling. TV shows that have run for many years and been written season by season without any idea of where they went—like *Little House on the Prairie* or *Desperate Housewives*—can hardly be seen as inspiring such a feeling, and it is very easy to see that they could have ended differently. Still, they managed to be quite popular. Similarly, the recent *Twilight* saga featured a girl torn between two possible lovers, and fans of the saga have vehemently argued throughout the saga’s publication about whom she should end up marrying. This makes clear that none of these two solutions felt more necessary than the other, and there were enough indeterminate elements within the fiction to make both endings plausible. Still, the saga was very popular and even gave birth to a new genre (the so-called ‘bit-lit’). Thus, fictions can survive and thrive even if they do not evoke this feeling of necessity.

Moreover, it is not even clear that multiple endings are incompatible with such a feeling. Indeed,

though multiple endings can be used for comic purpose (as a means of breaking the fourth wall), it turns out that they can also be a means of stressing the determinism our lives are subject to by allowing a representation of the famous “butterfly effect” and reinforcing the feeling of necessity. Thus, Kieslowski’s *Blind Chance* tells three different stories about a man running after a train and how such an ordinary incident could influence the rest of the man’s life. Depending on whether he catches his train or not, the consequences for his life are dramatically different. The use of multiple endings illustrates the terrible determinism that reigns over our lives and how minor changes in initial conditions can have terribly different effects. This infuses each of the stories that are told with a sense of necessity that is not, in fact, incompatible with the presentation of three distinct fates.¹¹

Interestingly, the feeling of necessity felt by the reader sometimes finds an echo in a feeling of necessity felt by the author him- or herself. Although the author of fiction is not limited by facts in the same way as the author of nonfiction, there are still constraints on the creation of fictional works. Psychological coherence, verisimilitude, and genre conventions, to name but a few, are examples of the principles that can guide the author in his or her creative process and give the impression that a story *must* end in a particular way.¹² This aspect of creation could also be used to explain away the rarity of multiple endings: the feeling of necessity inherent to the creative process would make multiple endings very unlikely, different endings being ruled out progressively by the different principles at work during the creation of a story. While this explanation is interesting, it will be difficult to apply to all cases. First, this feeling of necessity need not be shared by every creator; some, on the contrary, might conceive of creation as an unlimited realm of creativity, where “anything goes.” Second, the principles that constrain creation can be broken, adapted, or rejected, thus weakening the (felt) necessity that stems from them.¹³ Third, the principles of creation do not lead inevitably to one and only one resolution to a story. Psychological coherence might rule out Emma Bovary living happily ever after without determining the exact manner of her misery. Although, once again, the value of felt necessity could explain why multiple endings are not canonical, it can hardly explain why they are so scarce.

Another limitation of this last version of the solution is that it focuses on the producers of fictions rather than on their appreciators. Thus, it only works if we think that what explains the cultural success and prominence of certain features in fiction is that they displease producers of fictions. But this seems a very strong and implausible thesis. Rather, the abundance of junk fiction suggests that many authors are ready to produce fictions they are not satisfied with as long as they please the audience and guarantee them some financial success. This might seem a very pessimistic remark, but it would be absurd to deny the existence of fictions that are produced only to make money or to make a “buzz,” rather than to satisfy the creative and artistic exigencies of their producers. Thus, the fact that certain kinds of fictions would be psychologically unsatisfying for the producers is not enough to explain their scarcity—they would also have to be unsatisfying on the reception side, which brings us back to the first version of this solution, which we have already rejected.

3. So far, we have played the game in accordance with the conclusion we reached in the previous section: that the scarcity of multiple endings should be explained on the basis of psychological factors involved in our appreciation of fictions. However, one could refuse to play by those rules and think that the answer to our question has nothing to do with deep psychological features of our engagement with fiction but is only an uninteresting and ultimately contingent byproduct of *material limitations*. Such an objection would go like this: to propose genuine and interesting multiple endings, books, plays, and movies would have to be much longer and much more complex than they already are. Sure, books or movies as we know them could already have proposed multiple endings (they sometimes have—as we saw), but they could not have used them to their full potential. Now that books and films exist in an electronic format, in machines that support immense amounts of data, and that they allow appreciators to engage with multiply branching narratives, we should observe an explosion of fictions with multiple endings. What limited their existence so far was not that they were less engaging than traditional forms of

fictions—just that we did not have the technology to develop them in a satisfying way.

However, evoking material limitations will not suffice to answer our question. Sure, advancements in technology might favor new and more interesting uses of multiple endings, but multiple endings do not actually require this kind of technology. As an example that traditional paper books are perfectly able to handle branching narratives and stories with multiple endings, one might cite the famous “gamebooks” (or “Choose Your Own Adventure” books), in which the readers, impersonating a fictional character, have to choose their own path (and their own adventure) through the fiction. Created in the 1970s, these books found a simple, yet efficient way of proposing multiple endings in a single volume.¹⁴ Another, more recent example can be found with the French series of comics entitled *Destins* (*Destinies* in English): *Destins* is a fourteen-volume series of comics, built as a branching narrative. Volumes 2 and 3 are both direct yet different sequels to volume 1. Similarly, volumes 4 and 5 both present alternate sequels to the events described in volume 2, while volumes 6 and 7 present alternate sequels to volume 3. This could continue ad infinitum, but all branches of the narrative actually collapse in a single resolution, the fourteenth volume.¹⁵ However, though *Destins* ultimately proposes one and only one ending, it did not have to, and it shows that branching narratives with multiple conclusions could be developed in an interesting way even without the help of the most recent technological support.

Another objection to this dissolution of the problem is that the facts do not seem to support its prediction: the technology to develop fictions with multiple endings has been around for quite a while now, and the boom of fictions with multiple endings is still to come. Two examples can be given.

The first is the case of interactive fictions. Developed mostly on computer, then through the Internet, interactive fictions generally present themselves as fictions in which the appreciator plays the role of a given character and has to fill in a text box with commands indicating what the character he or she impersonates will do (for example, “ask a question” or “remain silent”). For example, in the interactive fiction *Alabaster*, the appreciator plays the role of the hunter who has

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54

been ordered to kill Snow White and can dialogue with her before deciding whether to kill her or not. He might thus discover that the Queen has good reasons to have Snow White killed and that Snow White is not what she seems.¹⁶ Interactive fictions have been around for a while now (it is often considered that the first interactive fiction was Will Crowther's *Adventure*, released in 1977). In fact, they were already popular by the start of the 1980s. Thus, the technological support for fictions with multiple endings has been out for more than thirty years: if that was the only obstacle to the development of fictions with multiple endings, then surely we should have seen their number grow by now.

Our second example, which suggests the same conclusion, is the example of visual novels. Visual novels are mostly unknown in Western countries, but the term refers to a particular kind of video game, presented as illustrated narratives (similar to graphic novels) and in which the appreciator plays the role of the main character, taking decisions that will influence the course of the story. Like interactive fictions, visual novels typically offer multiple endings.¹⁷ For example, a famous visual novel, *999: Nine Hours, Nine Persons, Nine Doors*, offers six different endings.¹⁸ Visual novels are generally released for computers and video game consoles, and most of them use a very simple display technology: a fixed image is displayed on the top of the screen while the text is printed at the bottom. Given that computers and video game consoles have been around for a while and that visual novels do not require very advanced technology (compared, for example, to full 3D video games), it seems unlikely that fictions with multiple endings did not develop only because we lacked the relevant technology.¹⁹ Thus, the reason of their rarity should be sought at a more significant level.

iv.

Now, one might think that we just shot ourselves in the foot. By giving interactive fictions and visual novels as an example, did we not just falsify our claims that fictions with multiple endings are rare or that their number did not increase in the past years? We could try to circumvent this objection by claiming that, even if interactive fictions and visual novels do exist, they are few and not very popular. While such an evasion tactic might

succeed in the case of interactive fiction, it would just be a blatant lie in the case of visual novels. Indeed, though they are relatively unknown in Western countries, visual novels represent way more than half of the video games that are produced in Japan. Thus, the scarcity of fictions with multiple endings might just be a cultural peculiarity that does not reveal anything important about our engagement with fiction.

This might be, but one should highlight something very important about both these interactive fictions and visual novels that sets them apart from traditional kinds of fictions, such as *Anna Karenina* or *The Lord of the Rings*: they ask readers to play the role of a character in the story. Just like gamebooks, they address the appreciator using the second person as if he or she was part of the fictional world: we are not to choose another person's adventure, but—as the expression points out—our own adventure. Now, when one takes interactive fictions in which the appreciator is not addressed in the second person or asked to play the role of a character within the story—what are more correctly called hypertext fictions—then we see that proposing multiple endings ceases to be the norm. In such cases, the potential of electronic books is rather used to propose nonlinear experiences in which the reader can experience different chapters of a story in any order, without a particular order being the good one—or, most often, to allow the reader to read the same story by jumping from one character's point of view to another's, thus multiplying the possible experiences of the very same story. Multiple endings (when there is an ending, since hypertext fiction allows for narratives with circular and infinite structures) are far from compulsory in hypertext fictions and not that frequent.

We reach the same conclusion with visual novels. To our knowledge, there is no visual novel that does not require its appreciator to play the role of a particular character within the story. In addition, the vast majority of visual novels propose multiple endings. This suggests that there is some kind of deep and fundamental link between proposing multiple endings and being a fiction in which the appreciator plays a role. For the sake of simplicity, let us call such games 'interactive fictions,' and let us oppose them to traditional fictions (that is, fictions such as your everyday novel, in which you are not explicitly invited by the fiction to *be* or *play a given role* within the fiction). And with

1
2
3 this distinction in mind, let us rephrase our original
4 problem: why is it that, in traditional fictions,
5 there are so few multiple endings, since such things
6 are perfectly possible and feasible?
7

8
9 v.

10
11 Let us ponder over the distinction we just traced
12 between interactive fictions and traditional
13 fictions. Earlier, we suggested that the lack of
14 multiple endings in traditional fictions reveals
15 something deep and interesting about the way we
16 engage with these fictions. If this is true, and if
17 interactive fictions do not lack multiple endings
18 but welcome them, this suggests that the psy-
19 chological bases of our enjoyment of interactive
20 fictions might be fundamentally different from
21 the bases of our enjoyment of traditional fictions.

22 Such a conclusion might not sound very sur-
23 prising, but we still need to understand what dif-
24 ferentiates traditional and interactive fictions and
25 explain what makes the first averse to multiple
26 endings and the second prone to branching nar-
27 ratives. That interactive stories should by nature
28 propose branching narrative, which may involve
29 multiple endings, is obvious. But that traditional
30 fictions should resist them is not.

31 To see how far we are from understanding what
32 explains the difference between the ways we ap-
33 preciate both kinds of fiction, it is interesting to
34 note that one of the most influential philosophi-
35 cal accounts of how we engage with fictions actu-
36 ally fails to account for the difference between the
37 two kinds of fictions in respect to their relations
38 to multiple endings.

39 The account we have in mind has been ad-
40 vanced and refined by Kendall Walton: it claims
41 that our engagement with fictions, including tradi-
42 tional fictions, should be understood on the model
43 of games of make-believe.²⁰ According to this ac-
44 count, fictions should be conceived as *props* in
45 appreciators' games of make-believe. When read-
46 ing a novel like *The Lord of the Rings*, I am to
47 imagine the story of Frodo and the One Ring, for
48 example, by making-believe that I am listening to
49 this story or witnessing these events. The role of
50 the novel is thus not fundamentally different from
51 the one a doll could play in a children's game of
52 make-believe: it is a device helping the apprecia-
53 tor (or, rather, the player) to construe and play his
54 or her own game of make-believe.

Now, if fictions are just props in games of make-
believe, it is hard to understand why multiple
endings should be rare: in fact, we would expect
plenty of them. Take Shakespeare's play *Romeo
and Juliet*. In its present state, it offers the possi-
bility for few different games of make-believe. But
what if Shakespeare had written three different
endings to the play (for example, one in which
only Romeo dies, and one in which they both live
happily ever after)? Then the play would allow
for three times more authorized games of make-
believe: it would be a much more efficient and
interesting prop. To take contemporary gamers'
vocabulary, it would have a much higher 'replay
value.'

The problem is made even more acute if we
compare the frequency of multiple endings in fic-
tion in relation to their frequency in children's
games of make-believe. Indeed, proponents of the
make-believe account of our engagement with fic-
tions often begin by proposing children's games as
the paradigmatic cases of make-believe and then
proceed by claiming that our engagement with tra-
ditional fictions is a particular kind of such games.
However, it is not clear that the engagement with
traditional fictions can be understood in terms of
make-believe, and many philosophers have re-
sisted this idea. Yet there are cases that more
clearly and less controversially involve instances
of make-believe: gamebooks, role-playing games
such as *Dungeons and Dragons*, and video games
are all kinds of fictions that share crucial features
with games of make-believe. In all of these fic-
tions, the appreciator, who is also a player, plays
a particular role and can make decisions accord-
ing to this role and the settings of the game. So, if
the make-believe account of our engagement with
fiction applies to anything, it must surely apply to
such fictions.

And, indeed, in such cases, we observe exactly
what the account in terms of make-believe should
predict: multiple endings are plenty and very pop-
ular. Although the first video games were very
crude storywise and rarely offered multiple end-
ings (and only as a reward with no major conse-
quences in terms of plot), multiple endings have
rapidly grown in number to become something
that is now eagerly expected and even requested
for certain types of games.²¹ For example, in 2012,
the video game *Mass Effect 3* was highly criticized
for proposing only three—and very similar—
different endings, a number many players felt to

be largely insufficient. This shows that, in fictions that clearly are kinds of make-believe games, multiple endings are considered as an asset and are not something people are reluctant to engage with.

The same observations can be extended to other kinds of interactive fictions—gamebooks and role-playing games are considered to be better when they offer multiple pathways and endings—and even children’s games of make-believe: although entirely scripted games of make-believe are possible, a lot of children will tend to resist those who want to impose on them all they have to say and do, leaving them no choice whatsoever.²² A good game of make-believe necessarily imposes constraints on the player, but it also has to leave him or her some freedom of action for there to be an actual instance of playing.

Thus, if fictions are only props in games of make-believe, we should expect fictions with multiple endings to thrive, and this prediction works remarkably well when we look at fictions that are clearly similar to children’s games of make-believe. This success makes even more blatant and puzzling the failure of this very same account in the case of traditional fiction. Surely, we can play purely linear games of make-believe in which we make no choices, but there is no explanation for the fact that traditional fictions are *only* used for such peculiar games of make-believe, when we know that they can technically support multiple endings and still be enjoyable and aesthetically pleasing.

That one of the most developed philosophical accounts of fiction fails to explain the rarity of multiple endings in fictions makes the problem all the more pressing—in particular when the make-believe account seems to work well for interactive fictions. What makes multiple endings in traditional fictions unattractive? It seems very likely that our engagement with traditional forms of fictions rests on very different psychological bases than our engagement with interactive fictions. More precisely, though it is plausible that our enjoyment of interactive fictions involves playing a certain amount of games of make-believe, this does not seem to be the case for our enjoyment of traditional fictions.

Although we did not provide a definitive explanation for the rarity of multiple endings, discussing this phenomenon enabled us to stress the existence of a puzzling phenomenon that was never addressed before as well as a crucial difference between our enjoyment of and engagement with

two different kinds of fiction. A complete and satisfying account of our engagement with fiction should explain what difference there is between our engagement with traditional and interactive fictions, a difference that should account for the abundance of multiple endings in the second case and their scarcity in the first.²³

FLORIAN COVA

Swiss Centre for Affective Sciences, University of Geneva

Campus Biotech, Uni Dufour
1211 Geneva 4, Switzerland

INTERNET: florian.cova@gmail.com

AMANDA GARCIA

Swiss Centre for Affective Sciences, University of Geneva

Campus Biotech, Uni Dufour
1211 Geneva 4, Switzerland

INTERNET: am.garcia@outlook.com

1. For the paradox of fiction, see Colin Radford, “How Can We Be Moved by the Fate of Anna Karenina?” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes* 49 (1975): 67–80. The paradox of tragedy was already discussed by Hume in *Of Tragedy*, and has known a renewed popularity in recent years. See, for example, Aaron Smuts, “Art and Negative Affect,” *Philosophy Compass* 4 (2009): 39–55. The paradoxes of horror, suspense, and junk fiction are discussed, respectively, in Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror, or, Paradoxes of the Heart* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Robert J. Yanal, “The Paradox of Suspense,” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 36 (1996): 146–158; and Noël Carroll, “The Paradox of Junk Fiction,” *Philosophy and Literature* 18 (1994): 225–241.

2. This is not to deny that determining which ending is authorized might in some cases be difficult, nor that some movies might have multiple authorized endings. In the case of cinematic works, the question of authorship is in effect complicated by the multiplication of creators involved in the production of the work. Nevertheless, our point still subsists that most works will present only one authorized ending, which will in most cases be easy to identify.

3. Fan fictions are stories created by fans that complete, widen, or modify the universe of a fictional work. The idea is to extend the pleasure of the engagement with the fictional universe either by developing indeterminate aspects of the original story or by altering parts of the existing story.

4. And it is interesting to note that fan fictions, like most traditional fictions, tend to propose one and only one ending, which suggests they clearly do not work as an exception to our initial observation.

5. Such cases pose interesting problems: do we have only one fiction with different endings or two different fictions? Taking into account authorial intentions, we can rely on the fact that only in the case of multiple endings did the

author intend the story to have different endings. In the case of alternate endings, it seems plausible that the author intended the story to have a unique ending. Thus the case of alternate endings offers us different stories (or versions of a story) with only one ending, while multiple endings concern one and the same story (or version of a story).

6. For a review, see Dan Sperber and Lawrence Hirschfeld, "The Cognitive Foundations of Cultural Stability and Diversity," *TRENDS in Cognitive Sciences* 8 (2004): 40–46.

7. Shaun Nichols, "On the Genealogy of Norms: A Case for the Role of Emotion in Cultural Evolution," *Philosophy of Science* 69 (2002): 234–255.

8. Olivier Morin, "How Portraits Turned Their Eyes Upon Us: Visual Preferences and Demographic Change in Cultural Evolution," *Evolution and Human Behavior* 34 (2013): 222–229.

9. Let us take an example. In 2012, DC Comics launched an "event" called *Night of the Owls*, telling the story of Batman and his allies fighting living-dead ninjas disguised as owls (a.k.a. the Talons) and trying to take over Gotham City. The main story line is contained in issues 8–10 of the main series *Batman*, and one can grasp the essential elements of the story by reading only these three issues. However, because the Talons are many, they are fought simultaneously in different locations by Batman allies, so that the whole story of *Night of the Owls* spreads across twelve different series (such as *Batgirl* or *Catwoman*). It is up to the reader to decide how much of these additional issues (also called tie-ins) he or she wants to read and also up to him or her to decide in which order, since events are supposed to take place simultaneously. What the reader chooses ultimately impacts his or her overall experience of the story: the reader who sticks to the essential issues will have the feeling that the *Night* is short and that the Talons do not pose much of a threat, while the reader that goes through multiple additional issues will have the impression that the *Night* is long and the Talons formidable foes. Note that most readers are usually between these two extremes and make their own customized selection of additional issues.

10. One might think that our focus on comic books compromises the generality of our argument. However, the same points could be made using as examples nineteenth-century "feuilletons" (such as certain Balzac novels, some of which make references to each other) or contemporary TV shows (that decline themselves in spin-offs and are extended by "webisodes" — see, for instance, the new series of *Doctor Who*), thus leaving the appreciator an active part about what to watch and in which order.

11. Peter Howitt's *Sliding Doors* and Tom Tykwer's *Run Lola Run* are also movies that used multiple endings precisely to emphasize the weight small changes in initial conditions can have on our lives.

12. On this idea, see Amanda Garcia, "Fiction as a Creative Process," in *Fiction and Art, Exploration in Contemporary Theory*, ed. Ananta Sukla (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), forthcoming.

13. The questioning and violation of creative constraints is an important motor in the evolution of genres. The genre of absurd, for instance, can be understood as a reaction to our anxious research of meaning, and it naturally threatens any feeling of necessity in the appreciation of a story.

14. Bantam Books launched their influential *Choose Your Own Adventure* series in 1979 with Edward Packard's

The Cave of Time (Choose Your Own Adventure, #1) (New York: Bantam, 1979) that claimed to propose forty different endings.

15. The fourteen volumes of *Destins* are published by Glénat, under the direction of Frank Giroud.

16. For those who do not fear spoilers: it turns out that Snow White might be a vampire, which would explain the whiteness of her skin and the redness of her lips and the reason why the Queen is eager to get rid of her. Like most interactive fictions, *Alabaster* (<http://emshort.home.mindspring.com/Alabaster/>) can be downloaded through the website *Interactive Fiction Database*, <http://ifdb.tads.org/>.

17. Technically speaking, visual novels might be considered as interactive fictions. However, they are usually distinguished from paradigmatic interactive fictions on the basis of their massive use of the visual medium (hence the adjective *visual*) and of a multiple-choice interface (while other interactive fictions mostly use a different interface, like a command box, for example). Visual novels are also distinguished from paradigmatic interactive fictions by their origin: most visual novels come from Japan, while most classic interactive works come from Western countries.

18. *999: Nine Hours, Nine Persons, Nine Doors* was produced by Chunsoft and published by Spike and Aksys Games.

19. A slightly different version of the argument of material limitations could stress that the creation of stories with multiple endings involves much more time and energy than the creation of stories with only one ending. The rarity of multiple endings would not be explained by technological limitations but rather by a greatly increased complexity in the creation of the story. The first problem is that multiple endings do not necessarily imply creative complexity: determining the "right" ending, the one that evokes a feeling of necessity in the reader, might imply much more work than imagining a dozen of different endings. In addition, the fact that a kind of work is more difficult to create does not irremediably lead to its rarity, as the existence of poetry, historical fictions, and alternate histories shows.

20. Kendall L. Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundation of the Representational Arts* (Harvard University Press, 1990). Gregory Currie has defended a similar theory, notably in *The Nature of Fiction* (Cambridge University Press, 1990). He focuses on authorial Gricean intentions rather than on the function of artworks, as Walton does.

21. Although some early video games offered multiple "game over" screens, those hardly count as genuine alternative endings (with such exceptions as *Zelda II: The Adventure of Link*, in which the game over screen informed you of the consequences of your failure and what happened after your "death"). Similarly, the game *Metroid* proposed five different ending screens, depending on how fast you beat the game. But the only thing that changed was the protagonist's outfit (which could lead to the revelation that the protagonist was actually a woman, but changed nothing in terms of story: the only change indeed concerned what the player knew about the story, not the story itself.).

22. It is possible that certain children will prefer very scripted games, but this is hardly the case for all of them.

23. This research was supported by the National Center of Competence in Research (NCCR) Affective Sciences financed by the Swiss National Science Foundation (n° 51NF40-104897) and hosted by the University of Geneva.

Query

Q1 Author: Please confirm that given names (red) and surnames/family names (green) have been identified correctly.