

# Fantasy and the Referential Language

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# Fantasy and the Referential Language by Allen Stroud

Which do you fear more, the creature hiding under your bed, or the dragon that awaits you at the end of your quest?

In his study of *Sarrasine* (1830) by Honore de Balzac, Roland Barthes described the five narrative codes (Barthes: 1974). The fifth explained was the referential code, an appeal to memory, where the writer invokes the story experience of their reader in the narrative.

“Although entirely derived from books, these codes, by a swivel characteristic of bourgeois ideology, which turns culture into nature, appear to establish reality, ‘Life.’ ‘Life’ the in the classic text becomes a nauseating mixture of common opinions, a smothering layer of received ideas.”

Barthes R. *S/Z*. (London: Farrar, Straus & Giroux Inc, 1991), Page 206

Barthes identified this quality of sameness and reinforcement in the works he studied. Each supports the other works it relies upon, helping reinforce similar images and patterns. Much of the idea overlaps with narrative structural theories too, Vladimir Propp’s seven stage quest that he identifies as being part of folk tale (Propp: 2003), Vogler’s journey (Vogler: 2007), Christopher Booker’s *Seven Basic Plots* (2004), Tzvetan Todorov’s equilibrium (Todorov: 1971), and many more. These structures infer that stories must conform to patterns and by providing us with a frame, encourage our evaluation of those stories against the pattern, rather like using tracing paper. We find the similarities of theme, outcome, character and more as the frame has become part of the way in which we look at stories. Stepping away from the frame and identifying ways in which stories do not conform, thereby demonstrating their originality is much harder, as there is less familiarity to work with.

In the genre of fantasy, there is a prevalent idea of nostalgia that appeals to us by inventing a world we wish we could escape to and explore. The escape itself is part of this process, making fantasy the purest idyll and diversion. The ‘familiar difference’ is essential. A simplified place, where evil is given physical form and defeated provides a cathartic release, so long as the writer seduces us with Turkish Delight. To establish this appeal, we see the referential code manifest on a number of levels. Perhaps one of the most direct examples is Willy Wonka’s *Chocolate Factory*.

‘Augustus!’ shouted Mrs Gloop. ‘Augustus, sweetheart, I don’t think you had better do that.’ Augustus Gloop, as you might have guessed, had quietly sneaked down to the edge of the river, and he was now kneeling on the riverbank, scooping hot melted chocolate into his mouth as fast as he could.

Dahl, R. *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (London: Viking, 1995), page 96.

Each of Wonka’s inventions reflects a childhood fantasy made real and so speaks directly to the imaginative whim that inspired it. Later in each scene, Dahl uses this process to appeal to one of the characters, using their hidden desires to reveal character flaws and adding a moral lesson to the

outcome, but the first appeal to memory (Barthes: 1974) is the important element in establishing our connection and appreciation.

The use of referential concepts and language is also why stories such as *Ready Player One* (2011) by Ernest Cline and *Among Others* (2012) by Jo Walton work so well on a particular group of readers, who connect with the nostalgic names invoked by these two first person narratives. New meaning is added to the old texts as they are incorporated into the new story. Sometimes that meaning is used the plot or puzzle and sometimes so we might identify better with the character. Connecting with someone through a shared experience is part of our everyday life and so connecting with a character through their professed interest in a video game or book you may have read is a very natural device.

The blend in fantasy between character and setting is also connected to this nostalgic process. In much fantasy owing to the world construction, the setting is treated as a character in many respects and is given much more time and wordage than any other the writer might elect to describe.

Michael Moorcock also describes the use of setting in fantasy and the particular requirements placed on genre writers to emphasize this element.

An intrinsic part of the epic fantasy is exotic landscape. This dream-scenery is fundamental to the success of any romantic work, from Walpole to Ballard; it is often the substance of such work, and no matter how well drawn their characters or good their language writers will appeal to the dedicated reader of romance according to the skill by which they evoke settings, whether natural or invented.

Moorcock, M. *Wizardry and Wild Romance* (Austin: MonkeyBrain Books, 2004) page 45.

It is here we begin to see how Fantasy writing goes further than establishing a referential structure, which other genres might also do. Fantasy writers collaborate in a subconscious codification of their work in genre specific language that speaks to an informed audience of readers. This language takes the form of objects, species, races, characters and more. This is the megatext, a codified language (Brooke-Rose: 1983). The megatext exists in many other genres that prioritise diversion, idyllic escape and simplified world. It remains evolving and illusive, but familiar.

Our need to define and understand the world around us is not an exclusive trait to fantasy, but it does evidence itself in a genre where the writer can construct an entire world in which to tell their stories. The obsession with definition and rationalisation of each concept transcends one writer's work to pollinate another. In some modern writing this need to define runs parallel and counter to the idea of employing myth and encouraging the reader to speculate.

That said, systemisation has its place and proponents. Defining and limiting the potential of wizards helps a writer rationalise a scene and guards against the use of Houdini. It can also create identification. After all, who hasn't aspired to be Hermione Granger or Harry Potter?

I like magic systems. That's probably evident to those of you who have read my work. A solid, interesting and innovative system of magic in a book is something that really appeals to me. True, characters are what make a story narratively powerful—but magic is a large part of what makes the fantasy genre distinctive.

Sanderson, B. (2007) *Sanderson's First Law*. [Online] Available from (<http://brandonsanderson.com/sandersons-first-law> [Accessed 30<sup>th</sup> September 2015]).

J. R. R. Tolkien's work looms over both mythmakers and systemisers. His meticulous approach to constructing Middle-Earth is systemic in many aspects. Language, historical events and lineage are all carefully laid out in metric. The origin of creatures are explained in varying degrees, some completely, others with dark hints. Yet his best magic remains abstract.

Gandalf's eyes flashed. 'It will be my turn to get angry soon,' he said. 'If you say that again, I shall. Then you will see Gandalf the Grey uncloaked.' He took a step towards the hobbit, and he seemed to grow tall and menacing; his shadow filled the little room.

Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Fellowship of the Ring* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 1997), page 33.

A bridge between this and the author's inclination to systemise is in the way in which Gandalf as a character provides us with a frame of reference to the high fantasy elements of the story. It is through Gandalf we glimpse the hierarchy of magical power, with the Dark Lord Sauron above Saruman, the Witch King of Angmar and Gandalf himself. The way in which Sauron's ring offers an opportunity for any of these individuals to 'trump' the other is also part of the metric. However, as this frame is explained by a character within the story it remains subjective and abstract. The expressions of magic tend to be couched in perceptions of threat and menace, rather than the physical manifestations of power favoured by later writers. It is this abstraction that allows the wizard to retain potency as we speculate over their limitations.

The shadow that Middle-Earth casts over all in its wake is long. The referential image of Tolkien's Elf, Orc, Troll and Goblin informs any story that invokes the same. These become archetypes to contradict or reinforce. At times, the latter proving the easier course, particularly when the reader is more willing to accept it. The inclination to systemise further is also part of the tradition. The rise of roleplaying games provided vast catalogues of generic creatures drawn from their folk tale roots and washed clean so they might appear in any new fantasy world, whilst character classes translate the functional archetypes of Propp and Vogler into the perfect adventure party.

All writers are readers and as such, our experience of our genre colours how we write. The priorities of games encourage a different form of abstraction. Players are driven towards tests, puzzles and achievements, with narrative built as reward. Part of the toolkit is a set of shortcut phrases to overcome the grind. Readers of fantasy all know 'food restores health' and 'spell cards' are limited. In many, the detail of combat is especially prized. Many of these genre-isms are poured into related fiction as we gamers try our hand at stories. This can be a conscious or unconscious process, but it does manifest itself in a form of cypher. Sometimes this is acceptable to the reader and sometimes not. In general, subconscious acceptance comes when meaning is easily shared, but conscious rejection is stirred when the shortcut is not understood or reveals superficial depiction of the activity behind it.

Hanu Rajaniemi's *Jean Flambeur* trilogy is filled to bursting with conceptual language, but there is no shortcutting, nor is there a hierarchy of familiarity and fluency. The text remains partially encrypted throughout and by doing so, invokes reader speculation. The concepts are referential, but not concretising.

The real problem is his identity signature, and that's what I need the gevolot Raymonde provided for. And I need Perhonen's quantum computation capability as well, to approximate the quantum state his Watch uses to identify itself.

Rajaniemi, H. *The Quantum Thief* (London: Gollancz, 2011), page 213.

In *The Tough Guide to Fantasyland* (2004), Dianne Wynne-Jones creates a systemiser's encyclopaedia that goes one step beyond the roleplayer's index. The book recounts the common ways in which writers make use of concepts when writing in the genre. This is a humorous take on the archetypes, stereotypes and tropes of fantasy. Her satire of much of these repeated forms genre allows us another frame by which to identify them. However, unlike the structural frames of before, we are seeing the way in which stories that make use of these ideas impose artificial limits and constraints upon the imagination by relying and concretising what went before them. By simply laying out these tropes in this form, Wynne-Jones highlights just how cluttered fantasy has become with baggage from those writing before. The new writer cannot ignore the clutter, because it is through this clutter that the reader will view their new story.

This drives at the heart of the dichotomy. Fantasy is a genre of escape and imagination. Why then are its popular texts constrained into similar nostalgic forms? Why must new worlds bridge from the old? Why must magic, which by its very definition is what we determine as the unexplainable in our everyday lives, become an instruction manual of fictional qualification? Why should monsters born from historical legend and superstition become statistics, or washed concepts devoid of their real world origins?

The easy answer to these questions is that each remains a balanced choice for the writer. The referential code and expectations of a reader will always be there. Associated reading is a much part of our omnivorous diet as our preference for pizza toppings. There is advantage to be found in both innovation and familiarity. A popular example of this in modern writing lies with George R. R. Martin's *A Game of Thrones* (2003); a vast fantasy epic couched in the familiarity of French and English history, yet often choosing to thwart the reader's expectations of plot. Characters are not just killed, they are killed in moments of risk, when we expect them to heroically succeed and earn reward. Magic in Westeros is about sacrifice, consequence and pain; demonstrating more connection with an older Dark Age tradition than any systemiser's instruction manual. Real world myth is reflected and translated just as real world history is reflected and translated, with demonstration, imprecision, speculation and abstraction, but with less working. The reader can only imagine what else can or cannot be done, just as the characters speculate over what they might solve and achieve.

"The old man had challenged the Lord of Light and been struck down for his impiety, or so the gossips told each other. Davos knew the truth. He had seen the master slip something into the wine cup. *Poison, what else could it be? He drank a cup of death to free Stannis from Melisandre, but somehow her god shielded her.*"

Martin, G. R. R. *A Clash of Kings* (London: Harper Voyager, 2003) page 109.

This is a passage from the second book. If 'Davos knew the truth' why mention the rumour? Because it invokes speculation as does the truth. The means of Melisandre's survival is not wholly explained,

it is abstracted, also inviting speculation. How did she know beforehand? What preparations made her immune? Etc.

A writer must choose how they appeal to memory (Barthes: 1974), but also how they define themselves as distinct and different from others. Without referential themes, there is no identification of genre, but without distinction there is no innovation. Each choice defines a readership by taste, interest and identification, but also connects with the next story they may read. The referential code exists whether we systemise, transplant and cleanse our writing or not. The only difference lies in where our influences lie and where our reader finds familiarity. Because of the latter, the systemisation and/or washing of concepts so they might appear in an invented world without baggage can never truly be achieved, nor do we really want it to be, in many respects.

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