Notes on Willing Suspension of Disbelief
by Greg Martin

Terminology

The willing suspension of disbelief is a term most often used to describe the mechanisms of assimilation required to appreciate an invented situation, particularly a work of drama or fiction in film, theater, or literature. To use the term "willing suspension of disbelief" is really just a fancy way to say "belief", though the underlying complexity of the double-negative corresponds to the complexity of the term: if "belief" is simply to state "I believe", then "willing suspension of disbelief" implies "I believe because I agree to overlook certain factors that would otherwise cause me to not believe". The term was coined by literary figure Samuel Taylor Coleridge in his work from 1817, titled *Biographia literaria or biographical sketches of my literary life and opinions* (phrases.org.uk):

> "In this idea originated the plan of the 'Lyrical Ballads'; in
> which it was agreed, that my endeavours should be directed
> to persons and characters supernatural, or at least romantic,
> yet so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest
> and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these
> shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief
> for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith."

As a general rule an invented situation is considered to be more believable when the requirements for willing suspense of disbelief are kept to a minimum. The balance of "believability" is extremely fragile and the slightest inconsistency can compromise the credibility of an otherwise acceptable account of fictional events. At the very least, even the most outrageous tales must maintain internal consistency to work. For example, the vast majority of people would be uncompromising in their unwillingness to believe a story carried by a newspaper attempting to depict the events of an episode of "Star Trek" as real events, perhaps thinking the story was a joke. But Trekkies have no problem enjoying the events within the universe created by the show as long as the events occur within the confines of the boundaries it has established for itself.

Opportunities for the application of willing suspension of disbelief have exponentially multiplied with the use of twentieth and twenty-first century technologies and media. The dissection of familiar examples of willing suspension of disbelief will familiarize the reader of this essay with the substance of this subtle phenomenon. Though discussing any single topic mentioned in this essay could easily be expanded into a complete essay or even a book, the topics are mentioned briefly and assembled here as a set for the purpose of illustrating

a rough portrait of the essence of willing suspension of disbelief. Subsequently upon reading this essay the reader will hopefully posses the faculties required to more readily recognize one's own behavior while willing suspension of disbelief. A strong sense of the sources and psychology involved in this process help to maintain an honest, balanced, and healthy existence rich with authenticity and understanding.

Opportunities for the Application of Willing Suspension of Disbelief

The following list is a brief inventory of common situations where narrative success depends upon the willingness of an audience to suspend disbelief. The common factor for the success of each opportunity listed below is the willingness of an audience to overlook a fundamental lack of believability under normal circumstances. While failure is often due to a mere breech of continuity that can vary by degrees, the triumph of willing suspension of disbelief can result in transcendent experience.

The First Artists
The oldest surviving documented example of a developed sense of willing suspension of disbelief is painted on the walls of caves in Europe. It is likely that long before making permanent marks people had been telling stories and tales that provided ancient folks the opportunity to exercise willing suspension of disbelief, but the leap required to pull those stories out of the air and visually flatten them on the wall for all to see should be considered one of the most profound moments in the development of human thought.

Movements in Art
A marked leap in the complexity of the terms for willing suspension of disbelief occurs periodically throughout the course of humanity. Pre-historic sculptural objects and various painted forms imbued with spiritual meaning, and early examples of architectural structures built for high moral purpose are examples of the willingness to suspend disbelief in the sole function of objects as practical tools. Ancient cultures established lasting artistic traditions within the genres of theater, dramatic literature, science, and mathematics. During the Renaissance era new knowledge and technology generated art forms that reached uncanny levels of realism and demanded a lesser degree of willing suspension of disbelief for success. During the industrial revolution the development of photography required still a lesser degree, while simultaneously impressionist painters marked a reversal of sorts for willing suspension of disbelief by challenging the belief that they were actually making art through the breaking down and simplifying of visual forms. Echoing the confusion and rapid changes experienced in the wake of the industrial revolution, the modernists continued further exploration of the breakdown of classical form: in the shadow of the theory of relativity, cubism,

and later dadaism and surrealism, tackled the collapse of physical and philosophical form and mass production with objects, paintings, and performances that begged for increasing generosity from patrons to willingly suspend disbelief that these actions were not those of artists. The synoptic moment when willing suspension of disbelief was no longer necessary for the success of a work of art occurred when abstract expressionism finally destroyed the requirement for a painting to be anything other than paint on a surface. Contemporary performance and conceptual art have ushered that moment into the digital age by demonstrating that opportunities and requirements for willing suspension of disbelief pertaining to the assimilation of art can be deceivingly fluid.

The Written Word
The physicality of printed words requires a complicated methodology of agreement among readers that like markings posses like meaning. For writing to make any sense at all a reader must willingly suspend disbelief that the meanings of the words may have changed between readings. Furthermore, a reader must be willing to suspend disbelief that the symbols creating written language bear sense and convey meanings that refer to objects and concepts in the real world that are in fact not the symbols themselves. Seeing the word "dog" in print immediately conjures images of the animal commonly defined as such, and unconsciously it is understood that the printed word "dog" is not an actual dog. Reading the word is not seeing the animal. When a reader is confronted by an unfamiliar word or a foreign language, the failure of willingness to suspend disbelief that the word conveys a valid meaning causes a lapse in the ability of the reader to leap from the written word to the intended meaning of the word. Also, common opportunities for the application of willing suspension of disbelief relevant to development of themes in narrative literature, including continuity and plausibility of character behavior, plot design, and the like, constitute similar (if not identical though possibly somewhat more lenient) conditions to those required for theater and cinema.

Theater
In relative terms the willing suspension of disbelief required by a theater patron is obvious and opaque. A darkened room surrounding a brightly lit stage must be ignored. The people on the stage recite the same lines and wear the same costumes and go through the same motions repeatedly with each performance. The invisible wall between the audience and the actors ("the fourth wall") must remain intact. Stage sets and costumes must at least be vague representations of real places and clothing. Actors must play roles realistically without going overboard. The breech of any of the above conditions will provoke a failure of the fictional facade that will challenge the audience to willingly suspend disbelief. And like literature, theater is also subject to narrative failures, gaps in plot, and unrealistic characters and situations. Incidentally, comedic theater often candidly

exposes familiar opportunities for the application of willing suspension of disbelief to create humor by amplifying an unlikely event or even completely reversing the expected outcome of a situation.

Cinema
Like live theater, the audience of cinema must ignore a darkened room and focus on a specific event. But instead of the event consisting of real people and objects there is only a wall of projected light depicting images. Telling a story with a moving image liberates storytellers by demolishing the necessity for events to occur in real time and three dimensions. The careful editing of images captured through the eye of the camera serves to catalyze the abstraction of events of all kinds to be presented as moving photos on a flat plane, with recent advances in digital technology profoundly expanding the capability of cinema to push the limits of the willingness of an audience to suspend disbelief. But as always success depends upon the overall plausibility of the effort. On top of traditional dramatic and literary issues concerning the establishment of supportable characters and narrative form, the technical complexity of film is exceedingly difficult to control. While a tiny oversight may provide an opportunity for skepticism, a major blunder can be insulting to intelligence. Inconsistent lighting and make-up, inexplicable changes in wardrobe or prop arrangement, unsynchronized audio and visual imagery, bad special effects, gratuitous plot twists, gaps in plot, quick editing and zooming, unfocused camera lenses, overly grainy or poorly exposed film, missing film frames, damaged film, poorly staged fight scenes, lack luster love scenes, cameras and stage crew members in view, lighting rigs and boom mikes in view, stunt gear in view, just to name a handful of obvious examples, are all examples of lapses in continuity that expose an underlying falsehood and usually cause an unwillingness to suspend disbelief.

Magic
Magicians use optical illusions and deceptive "smoke and mirrors" subterfuge to deceive an audience into seeing an event that has not really occurred. Everybody knows that an event performed under the pretense of a "magic trick" implies the occurrence of an untrue event. Nevertheless a good example of slight-of-hand that fools the eye can be a great source of wonder and enjoyment due to the willingness of an audience to suspend belief in what they know they are seeing is not what is really happening. While a mediocre magic trick is usually obvious, making willing suspension of disbelief difficult, a truly artful magician will challenge the audience by removing all opportunities that typically require the willful suspension of disbelief, sometimes even to the effect of outright belief.

The Superhero
Some of the most fascinating situations in fiction occur when characters posses superhuman strengths and abilities. A well-fabricated superhero who might be

"faster than a speeding bullet, more powerful than a locomotive, and able to leap tall buildings with a single bound" can provide the template for an infinite variety of fantastic tales. Obviously a subscriber to this brand of fantastic reality must be ready to willingly suspend an ample supply of disbelief in order to avoid moments of complete incredulity. Interestingly, an audience will tend to grow bored with a perfect superhero who never fails. People need to identify with fiction on some human level and for this reason are more likely to willingly suspend disbelief for a flawed hero. Flesh-and-blood vulnerability, such as and the need for heroes to conceal their true identities to protect their families, or even a superhero who has a debilitatingly volatile temper or smokes cigarettes despite the health risks, helps ground superheroes in a way that makes their trials and adventures more endearing and available and provides the consummate platform for a compassionate reception ripe for willing suspension of disbelief. Through imaginative allegory and insightful social commentary the very best of these tales have actually entered our own cultural mythology.

Retroactive Continuity ("Retcon")
Retroactive continuity, or "retcon", is a curious literary device used specifically to restore acceptable conditions for an audience to exercise willing suspension of disbelief that may have deteriorated over time due to inconsistencies and conflicts that inevitably arise in long-running series. Aptly named, retcon is applied to revitalize reader interest by rationalizing and reorganizing incongruous events, revitalizing lifeless story arcs, and even bringing dead characters back to life. Similar in form to real-world historical revisionism, good retcon is usually exceptionally clever and often highly controversial. An extreme and desperate act of retcon, called "reboot", gives a show the opportunity to negate the events from a previous trajectory by setting back the entire timeline or completely restarting the canon of the show.

Breeches of Acceptable Conditions for Willing Suspension of Disbelief in Film and Television

Jump the Shark
"Jump the shark" is named after an event that occurred in a three-part episode of the television show *Happy Days*, first aired September 20, 1977. During the episode, one of the main characters, Fonzie, played by Henry Winkler, is portrayed leaping over a shark while water skiing. Viewers decried the event preposterous, feeling pushed too far over the line of narrative decency. The insulted audience blamed the network for staging the event as a desperate attempt for ratings. "Jumping the shark" has come to define the moment in a show's (or actor's or director's) history when credibility is severely compromised due to an unforgivable breech of acceptable conditions for an audience to willfully suspend disbelief. Credit for the trope has traditionally gone to Jonathan Hein,

who first published it in this context on his website *jumptheshark.com* on December 24, 1997.

Just a Dream
Sometimes the occurrence of outrageous events that would be unbelievable under normal circumstances are explained as having all been a dream. The acknowledgment of the act of dreaming breaks the rules of reality set up by the dream, and therefore destroys the conditions required for events in the dream to have occurred. Though fictional events turning out to have been just a figment of a character's imagination usually turn out to be disappointing to an audience, when carefully employed this device can be a powerful metaphor for the concept of willing suspension of disbelief itself. Examples of "just a dream" include the premise of the movie *The Wizard of Oz*, and the entire ninth season of the television show *Dallas*.

Badass
An exciting fictional character performing unbelievable feats of uncompromising physical skill and penetrating intelligence and has the uncanny ability to always be in the right place at the right time is known as a "badass". Typically a badass can work through a ridiculously dangerous situation without sustaining serious injury while many minor characters are getting wounded or killed in the same situation. A successful viewing requires the audience to suspend the sense of disbelief that in reality the character would have no chance of survival.

Only a Flesh Wound
This term describes an event where a fictional character (typically a "badass") sustains an injury that in normal circumstances would require a long period of recovery or incapacitation, but the character miraculously recovers very quickly. Sometimes explained by supernatural forces (examples: Wolverine from the *Xmen* comics, and everyone on the island in the television show *Lost*) though most often never mentioned at all, this is a circumstance that should be a breech of the acceptable conditions for willing suspension of disbelief but is so common that is almost always overlooked by the audience. A spoof on this trope is expertly executed in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* by John Cleese's Black Knight, who claims that his severed limbs are "just a flesh wound". By reversing the expectations of willing suspension of disbelief an overtly obvious breech can provide a comedic effect.

Crazy Prepared
Batman is the classic example of the physical impossibility of a character's infallible ability to always have the tools for the job within arm's reach.

Soap Opera Rapid Aging Syndrome
"SORAS" refers to a condition demonstrated by characters who age more rapidly

than other characters on the same show. The most flagrant cases involve babies who become teenagers over the course of a few years while other cast members age appropriately. Birthdates of characters are often changed to accommodate plot lines, or an older actor replacing a younger actor for the same part. SORAS is generally accepted according to the degree of the offense and skillfulness of how it is handled by the show, with extreme cases causing public outcry and requiring revisions. Examples of SORAS famously include the character of Andy on *Family Ties* who was born during season three and SORASed to age four for the beginning of season five, and multiple characters from virtually every long-running American soap opera. The term "un-SORAS" is also sometimes used to describe characters who have been made younger.

Chuck Cunningham Syndrome
Another term named for an event occurring on the show *Happy Days*, Chuck Cunningham was the third and eldest child of the Cunningham family when the show began in 1974 but was written out of the show in 1975 and scarcely after referred to again. Essentially erased from the canon of show, the unmemorable character was forgotten by the audience and for that reason this trope serves as a good example of how easy it is for an audience to willingly suspend the disbelief required to accept a situation in fiction that in reality would be extraordinary and awful.

The Other Darrin
This trope is named for the *Bewitched* character Darrin Stephens, played by Dick York from 1964 to 1969 and Dick Sargent from 1969 to 1972. The switch from York to Sargent was executed without any kind of explanation on behalf of the show. With no alternative but to assume that York's and Sargent's portrayals were of the exact same Darrin, the willingness for many viewers of the show to suspend a sense of disbelief that Sargent's Darrin was not a different Darrin than York's Darrin was challenging. Variations of this breech include: a stunt double who is obviously not the same person as the actor credited for the role; an explanation for a noticeable actor switch is integrated into the plot (facial reconstructive surgery after an accident, or "Magic Plastic Surgery"); the failure to completely cover-up an actor switch (a few old scenes sneak into the final cut after the scenes of the original actor are re-shot with a new actor – known as "The Other Marty" after Marty McFly from the movie *Back to the Future*, which retains a handful of scenes shot with Eric Stolz as Marty before he was replaced by Michael J. Fox); a being who can regenerate or change forms at will (known as "the Nth Doctor" for being famously applied repeatedly during 30 years of production of the British science fiction television series *Dr. Who*, where 10 lead role actor changes altering the physical identity of a time traveling alien have been written into the oeuvre of the show).

More information about tropes can be found at tvtropes.org and wikipedia.org.

Transcendence

An exceptionally powerful or emotional performance or work of art may incite a transcendent experience or achieve transcendence outright. The virtuosic ability of Johannes Vermeer of Delft to seemingly capture the actual fabric of a moment of time, the quality of a marble Gian Lorenzo Bernini sculpture to appear soft and fleshy, or the sheer legacy of Leonardo Da Vinci's enigmatic *Mona Lisa* are all customarily accepted to be transcendent examples of works of art that far surpass even the most delicate elements commonly requiring the willingness to suspend disbelief for appreciation.   Similar notions of transcendence are attained through the discourse of music, literature, mathematics, and theology.

The periodic shifting of the frontiers of human consciousness constantly requires fresh willingness to suspend disbelief. Throughout the course of human history art has imitated and intuited new forms of communication, transportation, thinking, technology, and progress in general. Advances in the efficiency of distribution have greatly enhanced the availability of information and magnified the difficulty of determining truth.

Somewhere along the way, the edges that separate reality and fiction began to blur. Can we be absolutely certain that George Washington chopped down a cherry tree, or an apple fell on Isaac Newton's head, or Benjamin Franklin flew a kite in an electrical storm? We assume these stories are true mostly because we have heard them so many times. We believe Lazarus was truly dead and Jesus brought him back to life because the story is in the Bible and the Bible is the word of God. Do we know the Bible is the word of God because it says so in the Bible? Regardless of the authoritative value of hearsay, faith or scientific proof, in the end the point of each story is not even necessarily that it is a true account of events, but rather it is a device to teach a valuable lesson or establish the credibility of an interesting person (real or fictional) whose existence is valuable to us in some way. Our sense of willing suspension of disbelief is summoned: in order to accept these events as truth we must refuse to believe the stories are not true. We suspend disbelief in untruth and engage in the act of *willingness to believe*. Examples of this kind of willing belief abound in ancient and contemporary religions, politics, and especially news media. In many cases the successful campaign of truth twisting or even outright untruth can greatly contribute to inflating the egos and infrastructures of entire governments and societies.

The difference between willing suspension of disbelief for reality versus fiction concerns the effects of lack of success. For a fictional account the consequence of the failure of willing suspension of disbelief is an apathetic audience, while for a real account the failure of willing suspension of disbelief indicates a malicious

lie or deliberate misrepresentation of events. While the former may introduce a humorous gesture, the latter can present health issues and legal ramifications. The success of willing suspension of disbelief makes it possible for us to drive down a two-lane highway and pass within inches of oncoming cars the same way it allows us to accept that Superman can stand on a similar highway and stop a speeding car in its tracks using the force of his own body.

The difference is obvious in exaggerated situations but can very dangerously transparent when the boundaries overlap. Grainy images of UFO's and mythical beasts of the forest offer enough information for many people to suspend disbelief that no such things exist. The pressures of forces like denial, blind hope, drugs, mental illness, or plain old gullibility can mask the boundaries of reality with astounding influence. Digital physicists are approaching mathematic proof that it is more likely that reality as we know it is wholly a construct of computer technology, similar to the universe presented in the Wachowski brother's *Matrix* movie series (www.nytimes.com/2007/08/14/science/14tier.html). How do we know what is real? How can we verify the truth? And with more and more of our information now coming through open and un-regulated sources like internet blogs and Wikipedia we are constantly confronted by the crossroads of a meta-truth determined by the gravity of consensus. We all agree that 2+2=4 but what if we are all wrong? The agreement counts for something even so. Truth reached as a function of compromise must be simultaneously and contradictorily considered fundamentally "most completely true" and "categorically false", relying more on willing suspension of disbelief than on fact or evidence for substantiation.

Willing suspense of disbelief has become as natural an act to most contemporary folk as breathing air. Long gone are days when a film of an oncoming train could clear a panic-stricken theater. It occurs so unconsciously that it actually happens in reverse - we have become so accustomed to living so much of life in other states of reality that real-life events sometimes seem fictional. We experience the sense that an event in real life feels like a scene from a movie. We are comfortable to emulate fictional reality by acting like fictional characters or acting out events in real life that are familiar to us from watching movies and playing video games. What was once a tool used as a mirror to help us better understand ourselves has become a permeable doorway through which passage is readily available. Have we become too willing to suspend disbelief, to the extent of compromising our health and sanity? In real life there are real consequences. There is no rewind button and there are no replays.

The loss of an available boundary between art and life has rendered the spirit of artistic transcendence moot. There is no longer a gap to transcend. Everything art becomes a function of some sense of reality in a Baudrillardian sense of simulacra. This does not mean that the apocalypse has visited the art world. On

the contrary, with this door open artists are now nearly infinitely free to work however they wish, with the only limiting factor to define what constitutes a work of art being the context in which it is presented.

But this freedom is a double-edged sword that makes producing a valid work of art exceedingly difficult. The potential to do anything and call it art calls specific attention to the circus act of establishing the conditions for willing suspension of disbelief. An artist who calls a simple act like shaving alone or breathing a work of art must somehow within that act avoid creating an opportunity for an audience to willingly suspend disbelief that *this is **not** art*. The ancient ultimate struggle of the artist to build something that unquestionably transcends the conventional edifice of art has been turned inside out.

This duality of the willing suspension of disbelief creates a perforation in the fabric that separates fiction from reality, bridging them together and, like a page out of Jorge Luis Borges story, providing an opportunity for the egress of ghosts of print and memory and entities of collective conscience. As the malleability of reality is readily available to professional actors and other such pathological liars then so true is the reverse for the characters portrayed and the lies themselves who we traditionally perceive to reside on a more ethereal plane.

The potential for the transmutation of entities between realities quickly becomes a philosophical freight train that can be ridden beyond the terminal of tangible time and space, where nothing is real and everything is purely a construct of the mind, including the mind itself. But patience for the perfect recipe for conditions of willing suspension of disbelief will be rewarded with the corporeal disinterment of the bones of our folk legends as the church bells ring in the picture books and the toys in the closet come to life.

Sources

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Suspension_of_disbelief
http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/WillingSuspensionOfDisbelief
http://www.mediacollege.com/glossary/s/suspension-of-disbelief.html
http://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/suspension-of-disbelief.html