Breaking the Fourth Wall:
The effects of Metareference and Direct Address in Fictional Narrative

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Abstract

This study looks at the effects of breaking the fourth wall on the engagement and enjoyment of a narrative. Four versions of a short story were created, with varying levels and instances of breaking the fourth wall, and presented to participants. These participants then filled out an attention check, and then a short survey asking them several questions about their experience with the narrative. In total, 107 participants were run, and 29 were excluded due either to failing to finish the survey or failing to receive at least 80% on the attention check. None of the regressions run reached statistical significance, although there was a noticeable trend that participants in the High condition (the condition with the most breaking of the fourth wall) showed more liking for the character that did so (Death) than the character that didn't (the man). This research explores a new way of approaching the study of narrative by attempting to bring the fields of the humanities together with the scientific application of Cognitive Science, using knowledge from both fields to better understand narrative in the mind.

Preface

Hello there, readers. Because this is not a typical Cognitive Science topic, this will not be a typical Cognitive Science paper. Oh sure, there's an experiment, and

down below I talk all about the methods and the results, what their implications are, etc. But hopefully you and I can also have a little fun with this.

What I've just done is break the fourth wall by directly addressing you, the audience, as well as by referencing the medium that I, the voice in your head, am speaking to you through (i.e., a senior thesis article). For those of you who don't know, the fourth wall is the imaginary barrier between a narrative with its own characters and moving along its own narrative timeline, and the audience. I'll provide a better explanation down below, but for now, that's all you need to know.

I'll begin this paper by introducing my overarching thesis, talking about the universality of narrative – how we're constantly seeking it out, creating it, and immersing ourselves in it, even when we don't realize it. Then I'll give a brief overview of the evolutionary basis of fiction, or some theories on why we create and revel in stories that we know aren't real. I'll explain the fourth wall in more detail, and I'll give you plenty of examples of how it can be broken using literature, theater, film, and television, as well as why breaking it is such an interesting phenomenon. Then I'll move into detailing my experiment, explaining my methods, the process of creating my stimuli, running the experiment, and so on. You'll get to find out the results of the experiment in detail, and then lastly, I'll create some narratives of my own, and theorize why we got the results we did. But enough of this – lets get to it.

Introduction

Narrative is a human universal – a fundamental way in which we organize and perceive the world around us, as well as our own inner mental worlds. We all

tell and experience stories, and have done so since the very beginnings of our species. In fact, we tell and seek out stories so frequently that it might be called an addiction. There are the obvious examples: studies conducted in the 1990's show that we spend the largest portion of our leisure time in the fictional worlds of books, movies, theater, video games, and television shows (Gleick, 1999). With the increasing accessibility of these mediums of story over the internet, these numbers may have even increased since the studies were conducted. Beyond the obvious, there are still hundreds of other examples: histories, religious stories, communal stories, national stories, our personal narratives, music, personal communications - we can see it in unexpected places like business (especially sales), politics, courts of law, and even in science. As an example, sports casting is almost entirely narrative creation – will the star tight end continue his success? Will a team's heartbreak last year spur them on to win this year? Sportscasters create narratives around the stats that many love to engage with, and argue for or against. We're immersed in story all the time, in all sorts of ways, because our minds are built to organize information narratively. When these external types of narratives aren't available, we even create our own in the form of daydreams or fantasies. Studies found that participants had about two thousand daydreams a day, at an average of 14 seconds each – the total of this imaginative play added up to about half the participants' waking hours, or a third of our lives in total (Klinger, 2009; Killingsworth et al., 2010). We even continue our narrative creation into our unconscious, dreaming up plots while we sleep. Granted, they don't always make sense narratively the same way a book might, but it is undeniable that our brains are playing with and fitting together

narrative elements while we lay unconscious. Researchers suspect that we even dream throughout the night, constituting another third of our lives (Flanagan, 2000). As Murial Rukseyer put it, "The world is made up of stories, not atoms." (Rukeyser, 1968). We devote an enormous amount of time and mental activity to experiencing and creating stories, many of them fictional.

In addition, we all tell the same kinds of stories. Christopher Booker, in his book titled *The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories*, details 7 basic plots into which all stories fall (though really it's 9, as he adds on two more at the end). Jonathan Gotschall, author of *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human* goes even further, and narrows down the types of stories to just one in a conversation with *Edge*;

> We think of stories as a wildly creative art form, but within that creativity and that diversity there is a lot of conformity. Stories are very predictable. No matter where you go in the world, no matter how different people seem, no matter how hard their lives are, people tell stories, universally, and universally the stories are more or less like ours: the same basic human obsessions, and the same basic structure. The structure comes down to: stories have a character, the character has a predicament or a problem—they're always problem-focused—and the character tries to solve the problem. In its most basic terms, that's what a story is—a problem solution narrative. (Gotschall, 2014)

Not only do we generally find the same forms of narrative, but we find similar themes. Paul Bloom, author of *How Pleasure Works: The New Science of Why We Like What We Like* comments on this phenomenon, claiming:

> Good stories have universal appeal. While the particulars of *The Sopranos* would be impossible to follow by anyone from a sufficiently different culture…the themes – worries about children, conflicts with one's friends, the consequences of betrayal – are universal. (Bloom, 2010, pg. 164)

He goes on to say that this isn't an effect of the stories, but rather an effect of our evolutionary human nature:

> The popularity of themes having to do with sex and family and betrayal, for instance, is not due to some special feature of the imagination, but rather because people are obsessed, in the real world, with sex and family and betrayal. (Bloom, 2010, pg. 165)

The widespread presence of stories both in the world and in our minds, along with the similarities seen in the content of the stories, seems to argue for an evolutionary basis for our love of stories. Additionally, it suggests that the love of stories seems to be based on innate and habitual processes in the mind. Another piece of evidence comes from the phenomenon of spontaneous play in toddlers. Around the age of 2 and onwards, children begin playing games of pretend and make-believe. (Singer & Singer, 1990) Children don't have to be taught to play, and they're good at recognizing it and participating (Skolnick and Bloom, 2006a; Onishi, Baillargeon, and Leslie, 2007). Interestingly enough, dogs also exhibit this behavior, with specialized signals such as "play bows" that indicate a sort of "make-believe" fight (Bekoff, 1974). The presence of this kind of imaginary behavior in an animal so genetically distant from humans seems to suggest that the beginnings of this storytelling addiction are evolutionarily ancient, though much more research needs to be done into this phenomenon, as well as into our more genetically similar relatives' understanding of narrative before a definitive claim can be made. It is, however, interesting to note that the modern *Canis familiaris* often grows up in a home with humans, and have been shown to understand certain social cues very well, better even than primates (Hare & Tomasello, 2005). It's clear, however, that humans have a much more developed perception and understanding of stories. It

has been shown that even small children have a healthy folk knowledge of many different aspects of narratives and fiction. Children are not only able to consciously and reliably distinguish between reality and fiction (Skolnick & Bloom, 2006), they distinguish between the improbable and impossible in fiction (Weisberg & Sobel, 2012), they tell stories in recognizable patterns and forms (Stone, 1992), and they have highly sophisticated and subtle rules for not only distinguishing between reality and fiction, but between separate fictional worlds as well (Weisberg & Bloom, 2009; Skolnick & Bloom 2006a; Skolnick & Bloom, 2006b). The question is, how do we explain this seeming evolutionary basis?

A Brief Review of the Evolutionary Basis for Fiction

The evolutionary origins of fiction have long been a topic debated by researchers; why would an animal, otherwise streamlined for survival and reproduction, spend so much time and energy contemplating and exploring worlds that do not exist? Some theorize that fiction works as an escapist pleasure – life is difficult and dull, filled with all sorts of confusing and unhappy events, but fiction allows us to leave our own lives for a while and experience things we might never get to in real life. This same account has been offered up to attempt to explain religion, and the criticism is the same for both – if fiction is escapist, why do you find so many situations that you would never want to experience in real life, such as kidnapping, or murder? We ride roller coasters and watch horror movies because it's thrilling and terrifying, but we'd never want to truly be free falling from dangerous heights, or trapped in a house with a killer. There is no doubt that people

use fiction to escape from their lives, and gain immense pleasure from it, but this cannot be the evolutionary basis for it.

There are certainly many other exaptive uses for fiction today that may have been adaptive – Gotschall compares story to the hand; a multi-purpose tool, able to help us in many different ways (Gotschall, 2012). He illustrates a few possibilities; fiction may have acted as a sexually selected trait, displaying mental acuity and creativity to potential mates, or it may have been a way to bring communities together, to create bonds between people. However, these claims are often regarded as "just-so stories", for they are unfalsifiable and you could argue a great many number of reasons that storytelling may have evolved. These are certainly things that storytelling can do, but there's no evidence that they are the evolutionary reason that narrative in the mind evolved.

Many researchers now suggest fiction was adaptive for variations of simulator model functions, where fiction allows us to engage in counterfactual reasoning in order to "test drive" hypothetical actions and situations. Our hypotheses "die for us" as we plan ahead, creating mental simulations and sending them into imaginary situations to attempt to predict the outcome. There is some neural evidence for this theory – in the 1990s, a type of neurons was discovered which was dubbed the "mirror" neuron. These neurons, when stimulated by watching someone perform an action, activate the same pathways that would be used if we were also doing the action. It is theorized that these mirror neurons do the same when we experience fiction, giving us the same experiences the real life

stimuli would evoke (Iacoboni, 2008). There are disagreements what exactly we evolved to simulate, however.

Stephen Pinker, author of *How the Mind Works*, and Denis Dutton, author of *The Art Instinct: Beauty, Pleasure, & Human Evolution*, both support theories that claim that fiction is a way for us to simulate and prepare ourselves for the problems of the real world (Pinker, 1997; Dutton, 2009) – and there is some evidence for this. Stories, as Dutton notes, are about the human experience, and more specifically, they're about human conflict. Children's play is filled with darker themes, such as theft, getting lost, getting bitten, and even murder (Gotschall, 2012). Children are also more likely to pick more realistic narratives, which might indicate that they're more concerned with real-world problems in narratives (Weisberg et al., 2013; Barnes et al., 2015). These children may be attempting to prepare themselves for a time when they might have to deal with these situations in real life.

Similarly, Janet Burroway argues that fiction may act as a simulator model not specifically for real-world problems, but for real-world emotions (Burroway, 2011). Fiction allows us to experience all kinds of emotional reactions in a safer space – think again of why people might go to the horror movies, or ride the rollercoasters I mentioned above. We want to experience those emotions, the fear and the adrenaline, but we don't want to put ourselves in a situation where we could actually get hurt, or truly fear for our lives. The same explanation can be used for sad movies. People often love movies that make them cry; they get the emotional experience without having to deal with the consequences of any sort of real-world event that would've evoked the same emotions. Fiction allows us to

experience these emotions and practice dealing with and reacting to them in the real world.

Or, as Lisa Zunshine posits, the world of fiction could have acted as a training ground for our cognitive processes, a place to strengthen and practice all kinds of mental skills pertaining to important behaviors, like social interaction (Zunshine, 2006). There are a few studies that support this idea – people who engage more with fiction have better social skills, as measured by empathy and sociality tests (Oatley & Mar, 2008). In addition, pretense play has been linked to higher levels of cognition in children, and heightened perspective-taking abilities (Bergen, 2002). Children also prefer stories with more people in them, and more characters with mental states, which may indicate that these children enjoy practicing their social skills and theory of mind through fiction (Barnes & Bloom, 2014).

However, others such as Paul Bloom and Tamar Gendler argue that our love of fiction is an accident, a by-product of other mental processes. This theory stems from the idea that many of the processes our brains evolved to keep us alive and interact successfully with the world around us are also activated by fiction, and we wouldn't have been able to eliminate our reactions to the fictional without entirely eliminating those essential processes needed for survival. Gendler theorizes that this causes an inability to fully separate fiction and reality, regardless of what we might believe or even know about the "reality" of the stimuli we're experiencing. Distinct and unaffected by our conscious beliefs, she calls this phenomenon "alief" – an unconscious, associative reaction (Gendler, 2008; Gendler, 2009). According to Gendler, imagination gives rise to behavior through alief – imagining something

affects our behavior because we respond to certain cues in our imaginings unconsciously, treating them as if they *were* real, and then acting accordingly – despite whether we consciously believe our imaginings aren't reality. It was Hume who first noticed this discordance between belief and associative reactions to stimuli – he notes:

> To illustrate this by a familiar instance, let us consider the case of a man, who, being hung out from a high tower in a cage of iron cannot forbear trembling, when he surveys the precipice below him, though he knows himself to be perfectly secure from falling, by his experience of the solidity of the iron, which supports him; and though the ideas of fall and descent, and harm and death, be derived solely from custom and experience. (Hume, 1874)

To give a more modern example, as well as the one that Gendler uses to illustrate her concept so wonderfully: the Grand Canyon skywalk, which is a horseshoe-shaped bridge with glass floors, allows tourists to see straight down to the canyon floor 2,000 feet below them. Thousands of tourists travel here every year to experience the thrill of the winding whipping around them as they seem to float above this natural wonder – only to find that they can't do it. They believe it's safe, as they watch others venture out, and read all the engineering and safety facts about it in the brochures, but they remain too scared to set a single foot on the glass floor. This unconscious, belief-discordant reaction is alief at work, and why we often react to fiction as though it were real. Just as the tourist's alief is reacting to the height of the skywalk and saying "Danger! Don't go out there!" in spite of their beliefs about its safety, our alief reacts to fiction in the same way, despite whatever beliefs we may have about its fictional nature. And so, referring back to the concept presented in Paul Bloom's quote in the introduction, stories aren't problem-solution based or

full of social characters or about similar themes because they're for practicing these things; they have these features because we have other mental mechanisms that make us focused on certain themes, seek out social people, and work to solve problems in the real world, and our aliefs make us react to both equally.

Whether our fiction processes are by-products from processes designed to work in the real world, or adaptive processes that are important in fiction for the same reasons that they're important in real life, it's clear that perception of the fictional is tightly intertwined with the processes we use to perceive reality. The possible bases for these processes are also not necessarily exclusive – it may be that many of these different theories are partially right. These processes, whether adaptive or accidental, have shown that fictional experiences can affect our real-world experience, and do so on a daily basis. What happens, however, when fictional narratives cross the boundaries into reality on purpose?

Breaking the Fourth Wall: Examples from Diverse Media

"Breaking the fourth wall" is actually a more colloquial term for a metareference, which is defined on Wikipedia as "a situation in a work of fiction whereby characters display an awareness that they are in such a work, such as a film, television show or book, and possibly that they are being observed by an audience." The colloquial term comes from the idea that especially in the naturalist theater of the 19th century, the fourth wall was "the invisible wall which is imagined to exist across the front of the stage in proscenium-arch staging, which separates the audience from the actors and through which the audience can see but the actors

cannot." It was a trend in this time to adhere strictly to this separation between audience and actors, but as theater moved into the 20th century, the trend reversed and it became common to break this barrier, playing with and subverting the space between audience and performers (Mangan, 2013). This was not a new technique, however – examples of breaking the fourth wall go all the way back to the ancient Greeks, whose choruses and characters might often address the audience.

The Bard himself, William Shakespeare, dabbled in breaking the fourth wall as well. Though he's famous for his many different beautiful soliloquies and asides, which are theatrical devices used to convey the thoughts of characters, one of his most famous speeches serves to break the fourth wall between performers and audience:

If we shadows have offended,
Think but this, and all is mended,
That you have but slumber'd here
While these visions did appear.
And this weak and idle theme,
No more yielding but a dream,
Gentles, do not reprehend:
If you pardon, we will mend:
And, as I am an honest Puck,
If we have unearned luck
Now to 'scape the serpent's tongue,
We will make amends ere long;
Else the Puck a liar call;
So, good night unto you all.
Give me your hands, if we be friends,
And Robin shall restore amends. (Shakespeare, 1894, Act V, Sc. I, Lines 440 - 455)

At the very end of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Puck addresses the audience directly, suggesting that if they've been offended by what they've seen, they merely pretend that they were dreaming. While this may seem like conciliation by a playwright nervous about his work's reception, he's also using the technique of

breaking the fourth wall to cast doubt upon the events of the play. Were they a dream? Does their significance change if they were? What's the connection between entering a theater and suspending one's disbelief for a few hours and laying down in bed and dreaming for a few hours? How does a dream work? Breaking the fourth wall adds a complexity and nuance to the work, and may serve to increase engagement with the narrative not only while it's occurring, but after patrons have left the theater. It may even allow us to create more of a personal connection to Puck, who we've seen capering about throughout the play, but who we are now having a direct interaction with for the first time.

Another example of this type of metareference can be seen in Bertholt Brecht's work. Brecht encouraged his actors to use what he dubbed "alienation" techniques – separating oneself from the character, and addressing the audience. In the epilogue of his work *The Good Person of Szechwan*, he even leaves the main tension and climax of the play unresolved, and instead, a player emerges onto stage and addresses the audience:

> Ladies and gentlemen, don't feel let down:
> We know this ending makes some people frown.
> We had in mind a sort of golden myth
> Then found the finish had been tampered with.
> Indeed it is a curious way of coping:
> To close the play, leaving the issue open.
> Especially since we live by your enjoyment.
> Frustrated audiences mean unemployment.
> Whatever optimists may have pretended
> Our play will fail if you can't recommend it.
> Was it stage fright made us forget the rest?
> Such things occur. But what would you suggest?
> What is your answer? Nothing's been arranged.
> Should men be better? Should the world be changed?
> Or just the gods? Or ought there to be none?
> We for our part feel well and truly done.

> There's only one solution that we know:
> That you should now consider as you go
> What sort of measures you would recommend
> To help good people to a happy end.
> Ladies and gentlemen, in you we trust:
> There must be happy endings, must, must, must! (Brecht, 1965, pg. 109)

This epilogue encouraged the audience to tackle the issues presented in the play beyond the theater, without providing an answer. Brecht, writing during the time of Hitler's ascent to power in Germany, seems to be attempting (similarly to Shakespeare, but even more obviously) to use the technique of breaking the fourth wall to more fully engage audiences in the narrative and questions raised by the work. However, we must also question whether this type of technique, instead of more fully engaging the audience in the issues of the work, actually has the opposite effect of startling the audience and breaking off their immersion in the narrative and its themes. When a character that, up until that point, has been confined to the fictional world suddenly breaks into reality, or alludes to the fact that it's there, it may be incredibly jarring for audiences. Especially when you consider that Brecht is refusing to give us any closure, which may have upset audiences further.

As new mediums of narrative emerged, methods of breaking the fourth wall evolved as well, especially for comedy. As film became popular, writers and directors began experimenting with this technique. Though not the first, the Marx brothers used direct address as well as other subtler methods of metareference to great comic effect. For example, Groucho Marx was famous for turning to the camera and winking, letting the audience in on the joke. Jim Abrahams, David Zucker, and Jerry Zucker, the writers of classic spoofs such as *Airplane!* and *Top Secret!* also break the fourth wall in different ways – for example, at one point in *Top Secret!*, a

character says the line, “I know. It all sounds like some bad movie.” at which point both characters onscreen stop and slowly turn towards the camera. (Top Secret, 1984). Mel Brooks didn’t so much as break the fourth wall as smash it down and trample on the remains in his films *Spaceballs, Blazing Saddles*, and *Robin Hood: Men in Tights*. In *Blazing Saddles*, the character Hedley Lamarr says during a speech, "You will only be risking your lives, while I will be risking an almost certain Academy Award nomination for Best Supporting Actor," referencing, of course, the very fact that Hedley Lamarr is a character being played by an actor. At the end of the movie, the big fight scene even breaks out of the set – houses are revealed to be flat set pieces, falling over in the chaos, and then the main characters go to see the premiere of *Blazing Saddles* – within the movie *Blazing Saddles*. (Blazing Saddles, 1974) In *Robin Hood: Men in Tights*, during the famous archery scene, everyone on screen pulls out their scripts to make sure that they’re following it correctly. Brooks even manages to reference his own works at the end of *Robin Hood: Men in Tights*, when Robin names Achoo Sheriff of Rottingham. Everyone yells, “A black sheriff?!” to which Achoo responds by looking at the camera and saying, “Why not? It worked in *Blazing Saddles*.” (Robin Hood: Men in Tights, 1993). There are dozens, if not hundreds of other famous examples from movies like *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off*, the *Muppets* movies, Woody Allen’s movies, and the *Austin Powers* series, just to name a few.

Breaking the fourth wall is a tradition that continued on in other mediums as well, however – though less common, many different types of literature make use of direct address and other forms of fourth wall breakage. For example, the short story

The Egg by Andy Weir is written almost entirely in direct address. Young adult books like Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* series, or Jonathan Stroud's *Bartimaeus Trilogy* contain instances of direct address: Percy warns readers at the beginning of each book of the dangers of reading further, while Bartimaeus quips and jokes with the reader throughout, by way of footnotes inserted into the text. Below is Percy's opening address to the audience in *The Lightning Thief*:

> Look, I didn't want to be a half-blood. If you're reading this because you think you might be one, my advice is: close this book right now. Believe whatever lie your mom or dad told you about your birth, and try to lead a normal life. Being a half-blood is dangerous. It's scary. Most of the time, it gets you killed in painful, nasty ways. If you're a normal kid, reading this because you think it's fiction, great. Read on. I envy you for being able to believe that none of this ever happened. But if you recognize yourself in these pages - if you feel something stirring inside - stop reading immediately. You might be one of us. And once you know that, it's only a matter of time before they sense it too, and they'll come for you. Don't say I didn't warn you. (Riordan, 2005, pg. 2)

And then the story unfolds, with Percy acting as a first person narrator. Each of these series was wildly successful, selling millions of books. Markus Zusak's critically acclaimed novel *The Book Thief* also contains a narrator who addresses the audience and spent over 230 weeks on the New York Times Best Seller list. The narrator in *The Book Thief* is Death, who's exhausted by his job yet unable to leave. He draws the audience into the story with three simple sentences: "If you feel like it, come with me. I will tell you a story. I'll show you something." (Zusak, 2006, pg. 9)

Television has also made great use of these techniques in recent years. Shows such as *Scrubs*, *The Office*, and most recently *House of Cards* all break the fourth wall in various ways, to varying effect. In *Scrubs*, the main character, John "JD" Dorian

functions as an intra-digetic narrator, defined in *Narrative Theory and the Early Novel* as:

> One who exists within the storyworld of a particular text and transmits a story that is framed by the extradiegetic narrative level. Here, one of the primary narrative's characters is the narrator of a story within that narrative, and his or her audience is another character.

This functions as a more nuanced form of wall breakage than the type used by Mel Brooks or other comedic films and television shows. JD narrates his own story, but the narration oftentimes merges with the dialogue of the show, or is affected through direct address to the camera. Sometimes they even play with the expectations that creates, however – in the episode "My New Suit", JD repeatedly addresses the camera, as if attempting to break the fourth wall and address the audience, but at each turn the montage reveals the presence of another character who is listening, effectively from the same place that the audience is. This, while not truly direct address, is a metareference to the technique of direct address fourth wall breaking, and plays on and subverts the expectations of the audience to comedic effect. (Savorelli, 2010)

The "mockumentary" television show *The Office* makes use of similar techniques – the character of Jim is famous for turning to the camera and giving it a bewildered or exasperated look when his coworkers do something particularly absurd. *The Office* also includes documentary style interviews with characters, who are speaking to an audience. These breakages of the fourth wall became not only common throughout the show's run, but a mark of the show's style and humor. Later on in the series, the camera crew even become active characters within the narrative. These techniques are more nuanced than they first seem, however, as the

audience they are speaking to and looking at is not truly us, but the audience of the documentary that is being made within their fictional world. Thus, while these are fourth wall breaking techniques, and situations often arise because of or for the benefit of the camera, it can be argued as to whether the characters are truly breaking the fourth wall, as the presence of the documentary crew adds an extra layer between the actors and us as the audience. This is another example of playing with the boundaries between audience and actors.

This ambiguity doesn't exist in the show *House of Cards*, where the ruthless politician Frank Underwood often turns to the camera and directly addresses the audience, usually to give power-hungry advice. Whether sitting or walking, he looks directly into the camera to explain or (more frustratingly for audiences) not explain his actions. This is, interestingly, also a rarer example in film and television where breaking the fourth wall is used not for comedy, but for drama. Another example of breaking the fourth wall being a dramatic technique rather than a comedic one occurs in the film *Fight Club*, where Tyler Durden several times addresses the audience. At one moment, the "film" of the movie even catches fire and begins to burn, referencing its own medium.

Most recently, the blockbuster hit *Deadpool* starring Ryan Reynolds debuted to enthusiastic audiences, and broke the fourth wall in many, many ways – as the character of Deadpool (or his secret identity Wade Wilson) is infamous for doing. His comics and graphic novels are full of references to the fact that he knows he's a comic book character, that he knows he's being watched by an audience, references to his writers, his illustrators, and so on. The film continued this tradition by

comically breaking the fourth wall in many different ways, perhaps most notably when Deadpool sarcastically remarks, “Do you really think Ryan Reynolds got this far on his superior acting ability?!” The movie also features several moments where Deadpool addresses the audience directly, explaining parts of the narrative or cracking jokes. At one point, Deadpool addresses the audience to explain a flashback, and then within the flashback addresses the audience again. He gasps, then says, “Fourth wall break inside a fourth wall break! That’s like…sixteen walls!” not only breaking the fourth wall twice, but metareferencing the technique as well. The film breaks the fourth wall in other ways though – at one point, Deadpool is seeking help from the X-men, and rings the doorbell of their house (previously seen in X-men movies filled with familiar characters such as Wolverine, Professor X, Storm, Jean Grey, and so on). When the door is answered by Negasonic Teenage Warhead and Colossus, Deadpool jokes about the conspicuously missing X-men, remarking, “It’s a big house. It’s funny that I only ever see two of you. It’s almost like…the studio couldn’t afford another X-man.” Here Deadpool isn’t directly addressing the audience, but he’s revealing knowledge about the film he’s in, and casually poking fun at the limitations the executives had when making the film. The film even references Ryan Reynolds’ earlier *Green Lantern* box office flop when his character remarks, “Please just don’t make the suit green!” Deadpool isn’t the only character to break the fourth wall, however – his best friend Weasel, in reference to a man who has walked into the bar and is asking to speak to Wade, says, “That guy over there came in looking for you. Real Grim Reaper type. I don’t know, maybe it’ll

advance the plot," directly referencing the narrative structure of the film. (Deadpool, 2016).

The Current Research

It's clear that this is a technique that has been used to great effect, and to different effect, over a long history spanning many different mediums of narrative. From raising complex issues and questions, and forcing audiences to consider them, to the laugh out loud comedy of Mel Brooks or gleeful rule-breaking of *Deadpool*, to the rising tension and drama of *Fight Club* or *House of Cards*, breaking the fourth wall (and in particular breaking the fourth wall through direct address) has been used to influence and affect the audience in many different ways. The question remains, however, whether this technique is one that audiences enjoy, or whether it increases their engagement with the narrative. The breaking of the fourth wall (and for the purpose of this study, we will be focusing on direct address as the main form of breaking the fourth wall) can be startling – many find it jarring, to suddenly feel like they must transition from passive observer, unseen and unnoticed by the characters, to active participant, obliged to contribute in some way. After all, it is called "breaking" the fourth wall – which doesn't exactly evoke a gentle image. It may make people uncomfortable to suddenly feel like they're part of the story, that they're a character in the story or even vice versa, that the characters have intruded into reality. There is also an argument that breaking the fourth wall breaks the illusion, and ruins the suspension of disbelief. By breaking the fourth wall, the

characters are acknowledging that the narrative they're enacting isn't reality, which some may find sours the experience, or ruining the magic, one might say.

On the other hand, some find it incredibly whimsical and entertaining – there's a reason that the examples given above are all from incredibly popular stories. *Deadpool* has earned over $759 million worldwide, and is still in theaters earning more as of the date of writing. Breaking the wall, instead of being a startling, uncomfortable experience, might allow audiences to connect more fully both emotionally and intellectually with the characters. Direct address might allow audiences to more fully develop an emotional connection with the character, for they feel like they're more directly engaging with the characters somehow. By breaking that wall, it might actually both invite audiences further into the world of the narrative, as well as inviting the characters and issues presented in the narrative out into the real world to be interacted with and examined. Breaking the fourth wall may create an opportunity for a dialogue to exist between reality and fiction, allowing the passage of ideas and emotion to flow more freely between the world of the narrative and the world of the audience.

As I began to explain above with the television shows and through the many different ways it is possible to break the fourth wall, it is an incredibly nuanced technique. There's no black and white for what is breaking the fourth wall and what isn't, because the space between audience and characters can be played with and subverted and built up again in so many ways. In this study, we focus solely on direct address as a method of breaking the fourth wall, and admit that that has many limits. We have no prediction for what effects trying to control the variable of fourth

wall breakages will have on participants reading our story – though we're anxious to see. We also actively acknowledge that trying to control a literary device like this while still presenting a coherent, rich, and entertaining story is difficult – there are many different semantics and subjective assessments that go into judging a story, and yet we're still hopeful that we may be able to find interesting, valid results.

Though breaking the fourth wall is a phenomenon that is well documented throughout its use in theater, film, television, and writing, it is a phenomenon that has been neglected by scientific study. Almost no scholarly research exists on breaking the fourth wall. Our aim with this study is to begin the scientific exploration into the effects of breaking the fourth wall. We hope that by bringing our knowledge from the arts and humanities, and using our cognitive science methodology to scientifically test it, we can better understand how narrative works in the mind, and even be better equipped to create better, more entertaining stories.

Methods

Creation of Stimuli

In order to test this hypothesis, we set about designing an experiment based around several versions of a short story. The short story, about four pages in length, was a creative project written with Death as the main character, who often directly addresses the audience during the scene as a diegetic narrator. Taking this piece, we then set about creating four different conditions – one where Death addresses the audience eight times (High), one where Death addresses the audience four times (Medium), one where Death addresses the audience twice (Low), and one where

Death never directly addresses the audience (None). This gradient was created not only to make sure that there was a condition with no fourth wall breakages and a condition with them, but to test whether breaking the fourth wall more would lead to stronger or weaker effects.

This was done keeping the semantic and literary material in each version as constant as possible. Most direct addresses were changed by simply taking out the word "you" in the sentence, or changing it to the corresponding indirect address, such as "they" or "he". See the table in the appendices for the complete list of changes. This was not always entirely possible, however, as the wording or content of certain sentences made it impossible to change it by merely dropping the "you." In these cases, we attempted to keep the semantic information as constant as possible.

Additionally, it is of note that many of these fourth wall breakages are of different, varying lengths. In order to operationalize and define what constitutes a single breaking of the fourth wall, we opted for a more nuanced definition, rather than simply counting the number of 2nd person pronouns. We defined a breaking of the fourth wall as "beginning with a direct address to the audience which breaks out of the narrative timeline of the plot, which may possibly be followed by more direct addresses, but ended by a return to the original narrative timeline, as evidenced by an action occurring or another character speaking." This allowed us to make use of and present a complex and interesting text to participants, rather than merely the equivalent of a children's picture book.

In order to control for these varying lengths of fourth wall breakages, we also defined and grouped them into Long and Short categories, Short being only a sentence (Examples 1, 2, 7, and 8 in the table above), and Long being anything over two sentences in a row with direct addresses (Examples 3, 4, 5, and 6 in the table above). While we suspect that duration of these breakages is an important factor when looking at the effects of breaking the fourth wall, the purpose of this study is more exploratory in nature, looking more broadly at the effects of the whole rather than attempting to narrowly parse out each aspect of a complex literary technique. It's unclear what effect longer durations of fourth wall breakages might have on enjoyment and engagement with the story, but we erred as much on the side of caution as we could. Future studies could (and should) be structured to look more closely at the effect of the duration of each fourth wall breakage, but for the purposes of this study, each version was created by changing an equal number of Long and Short breakages each time.

To explain it more thoroughly, the High condition was created first, with all eight fourth wall breakages in place. Next, the Medium condition was created by changing two short breakages and two long breakages from direct addresses into indirect sentences, leaving it with four fourth wall breakages. The Low condition was created by changing two more breakages, a long and a short, while keeping the already changed breakages constant, leaving two fourth wall breakages unchanged. And finally, the last two fourth wall breakages were changed, to create the None condition, where there are no direct addresses to the audience. See Figure 1 for more detail.

Process

The stimuli were presented to 107 participants through Mechanical Turk, Amazon's crowdsourcing internet marketplace. Participants were presented with instructions asking them to read the following story, pay attention, and complete some surveys about what they read afterwards. They were then presented with a random version of the story, one of the four conditions. After reading, they were then presented with a survey asking various questions about their engagement with the narrative, and their liking of the characters (See *Figure 3* for more detail). They were then presented with an attention check survey, which asked them five fairly easy multiple-choice questions about various details from the story, to make sure that they had truly read the story and attempted to engage with it (see *Figure 4* for more detail). Participants who did not achieve above an 80% on this attention check were discounted from the study. 8 participants were excluded due to failure to complete the survey, and a further 21 were excluded because they received less than 80% on their attention check, leaving 78 valid participants, roughly equally spread between conditions (17 in the High condition, 21 in the Medium condition, 19 in the Low condition, and 19 in the None condition). The data were analyzed using SPSS.

Results

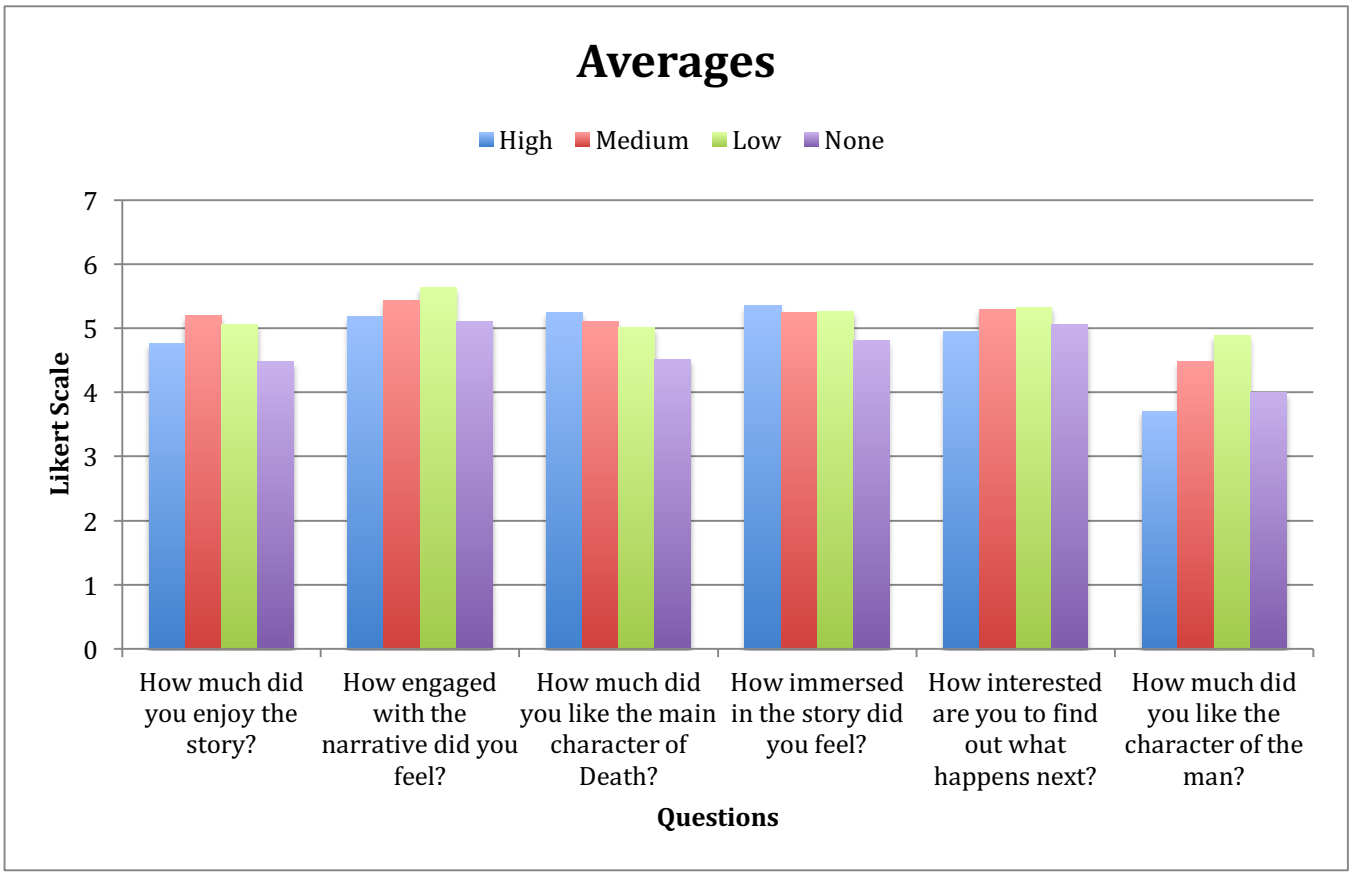

Figure 1: Bar graph of all the averages of responses, question by condition.

A linear regression was conducted using SPSS for each question based on the versions of the story, and no significant results were found.

A simple linear regression was calculated to predict how much participants enjoyed the story based on the condition. A non-significant regression equation was found $F(1, 76) = .474$, $p = .493$, with an R^2 of .006.

A simple linear regression was calculated to predict how engaged with the narrative participants were based on the condition. A non-significant regression equation was found F(1, 76) = .014, p = .905, with an R^2 of .000.

A simple linear regression was calculated to predict how much participants liked the main character of Death based on the condition. A non-significant regression equation was found F(1, 76) = 1.394, p = .241, with an R^2 of .018.

A simple linear regression was calculated to predict how immersed in the story participants were based on the condition. A non-significant regression equation was found F(1, 76) = .921, p = .34, with an R^2 of .012.

A simple linear regression was calculated to predict how much participants were interested to know what happens next based on the condition. A non-significant regression equation was found F(1, 76) = .015, p = .903, with an R^2 of .014.

A simple linear regression was calculated to predict how much participants liked the character of the man based on the condition. A non-significant regression equation was found F(1, 76) = .352, p = .555, with an R^2 of .005.

We also conducted a regression to attempt to investigate the participants' perceptions and liking of the character of Death as opposed to the character of the man. To do so, we first had to create a new variable by subtracting the participants' scores for Question 3 (How much did you like the main character of Death) from their scores for Question 6 (How much did you like the character of the man), to create a variable we labeled "Difference". We then calculated a simple linear

regression to predict Difference based on the condition. A non-significant regression equation was found F(1, 76) = 2.851, p = .095, with an R^2 of .036.

This finding, though non-significant, seemed worthy of further investigation, and so we conducted post-hoc t-tests to explore the relationship between these two variables, and found that there was a significant difference between the scores for how much participants liked the character of Death (M = 5.24, SD = 1.88) versus the character of the man (M = 3.71, SD = 1.64) in the High condition; t(32) = 2.621, p = .013. In all other conditions for these variables, the findings were non-significant.

Discussion

Though the findings of this study are non-significant, there are still plenty of conclusions to be drawn from it. The one significant finding, that in the High condition people liked Death significantly more than the man, seems to suggest that breaking the fourth wall makes a character more likeable. We acknowledge that this is a seemingly large claim to make from such a small connection, but looking at the averages in *Figure 1*, the average liking of Death increased with each addition of fourth wall breakages, seeming to imply the same. Additionally, though the regression looking at the difference between people's likings of Death and of the man was non-significant, it was nearly significant. Perhaps if run with more participants, this effect would have become clearer and become significant. If this were true, it would seem to suggest that while fourth wall breakages don't necessarily guarantee more enjoyment or engagement, we tend to like characters who break the fourth wall better than those who don't when they exist in the same

narrative. It may be that this imbalance is caused by the fact that we are more readily able to connect emotionally and intellectually with a character that acknowledges us and that seems to know more about what's going on than a character who doesn't. This would suggest that breaking the fourth wall is more of a character trait than an element of an entire narrative. And when we look back at the examples presented above, we seem to find some informal, anecdotal evidence for this. As I noted, Deadpool is infamous for breaking the fourth wall – it's very much a part of the character, and because of that his stories are filled with metareferences. The same could be said for Jim in *The Office* – while everyone is interviewed, Jim is particularly notorious for his looks to the camera and interacting with the "audience" in comedic ways, and it's very much an expression of his character.

An explanation for why this character trait may lead to increased liking in comparison to other characters within the narrative is that breaking the fourth wall many times seems to convey a competency, or a knowledge or wisdom of some kind. We can see this both in Shakespeare's example as well as in the Percy Jackson excerpt, who both seem to display a superior knowledge. Even Deadpool and Mel Brooks' characters, though they play very different roles, display surprising knowledge, subverting our expectations and revealing a far greater understanding of their own world and its connection to the audience's than we first might suppose. Supporting this, competency is a trait that people look for when making social judgments, and though the interactions are complex, competency is often an attractive trait (Judd, 2005; Fiske, 2007). When creating characters, authors and playwrights and other artists may be able to use this knowledge to greater effect,

better understanding how to create likeable characters. They may even be able to use the technique of breaking the fourth wall better, as they may be able to understand its effects on audience's perceptions of the characters because of it.

Future studies in this field should seek to solve the problems associated with this study, while also continuing to push at the implications we've presented. For example, due to the attention check, we were only able to run ~20 participants in each condition. Running more participants may have given us more robust results, and strengthened the relationships between variables, as well as allowed us to make stronger claims about those relationships.

Future studies should also seek to explore different ways of presenting narratives. While we made a conscious decision to present a fully formed narrative, accepting all of the semantic and literary difficulties that might arise from attempting to control just one variable in such a complex work, this may not be the only or even the best way to study narrative. For example, it's difficult to pin the results down to one specific element, no matter how closely you attempt to keep everything else constant, because experiencing story is, by nature, incredibly subjective and personal. You can never guess what sorts of connotations and associations a participant may bring to the table, and presenting a fully formed complex story in terms of language, content, and theme makes the probability that those personal factors will play into the participant's assessment much higher. However, presenting a simpler narrative, whether in terms of language, structure, or content, seems to shortchange the complexity of experiencing a narrative, and you run the risk that what you're testing isn't actually applicable to more complex

narratives. However, we believe that it's important to explore all sorts of methods in order to better understand narrative in the mind.

Future studies might also seek to test different mediums of narrative – for example, film. Much of the work I've cited as examples of breaking the fourth wall come from film and television, and it's unclear how this might differ from breaking the fourth wall in writing or onstage. Additionally, while this study focused on direct address fourth wall breaking, there are, as mentioned above, many different ways to break the fourth wall. Different ways of breaking the fourth wall may have very different effects on audiences – for example, simply referencing the medium the character is in may be a gentler way to break the fourth wall than direct address, and so audiences may find it less jarring.

It's clear there's still a lot of work to be done in exploring not only breaking the fourth wall, but into narrative in the mind in general, but we hope that this study will pave the way for others to bring together the humanities and cognitive science, so that we may use both to further understand our storytelling nature.

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Appendices

Direct Address	Changed Version
1. "I like to think that after all this time, I'm a pretty good judge of **you** humans."	"I like to think that after all this time, I'm a pretty good judge of humans."
2. "**What, you think** just cause I'm Death doesn't mean I can't try to have a little fun**?**"	"Just because I'm Death doesn't mean I can't try to have a little fun."
3. "**I should explain;** I can choose how to present myself to **you** humans, but when I revert to my natural form, **you'll** inevitably project **your** own fears and images onto me. **You** all associate fear with the cessation of life, and very, very few can bear to acknowledge me directly. Completely unwarranted, of course, and a little bit hurtful, truth be told, but hey! that's humanity **for you**."	"I can choose how to present myself to humans, but when I revert to my natural form, **they'll** inevitably project **their** own fears and images onto me. **They** all associate fear with the cessation of life, and very, very few can bear to acknowledge me directly. Completely unwarranted, of course, and a little bit hurtful, truth be told, but hey! that's humanity **in a nutshell**."
4. "**I know what you're thinking –** 'If humans will just project what they fear onto **your** natural form, why bother presenting anything else?' **Well,** first of all, **don't feel bad about your ignorance – you're only human, after all. Second of all,** over the eons I've learned that appearing in whatever mythological form **you** humans are most likely to understand leads to fewer questions, and a lot less wasted time. **Third** of all, and most importantly, it's *way* more fun – hence the whole "scythe-wielding skeleton covered by a pitch-black cloak" shtick for this guy. For a while though, I'd regularly appeared as Charon, the Greek ferryman across the river Styx, and before that, the jackal headed Anubis had made even the pharaohs pee their tunics, just to name a few of the classics. **Hey, lets stick *you*** in a dead-end job for a few billion years **and see how *you* go about entertaining yourself.**"	"I've often asked myself, if humans will just project what they fear onto **my** natural form, why bother presenting anything else? First of all, over the eons I've learned that appearing in whatever mythological form humans are most likely to understand leads to fewer questions, and a lot less wasted time. Second of all, and most importantly, it's *way* more fun – hence the whole "scythe-wielding skeleton covered by a pitch-black cloak" shtick for this guy. For a while though, I'd regularly appeared as Charon, the Greek ferryman across the river Styx, and before that, the jackal headed Anubis had made even the pharaohs pee their tunics, just to name a few of the classics. **When you've been** in a dead-end job for a few billion years, **you've gotta find ways to entertain yourself.**"
5. "Lately, I've been finding that when I drop my guises, one of the more common images **you** humans project onto me is some kind of bland lawyer or tax collector, which is undoubtedly what this guy was seeing now. Makes me wonder about what exactly is going on in **your** world these days."	"Lately, I've been finding that when I drop my guises, one of the more common images humans project onto me is some kind of bland lawyer or tax collector, which is undoubtedly what this guy was seeing now. Makes me wonder about what exactly is going on in **the mortal** world these days."
6. "**You see, you** humans had gotten it wrong	"Humans have gotten it wrong for millennia.

for millennia. It isn't precious metals or gems buried with the deceased that buy **your** way through to the afterlife, or whatever **you** care to believe comes next. It's their stories**, *your* stories**. What use could I possibly have for earthly trinkets? **Your** experiences, **your** memories, are what I collect."	It isn't precious metals or gems buried with the deceased that buy **their** way through to the afterlife, or whatever **they** care to believe comes next. It's their stories. What use could I possibly have for earthly trinkets? **Their** experiences, **their** memories, are what I collect."
7. "**You** humans are all the same – no respect for the job."	"Humans are all the same – no respect for the job."
8. "**You** humans never learn."	"Humans never learn."

Figure 2: Addresses in the story, in chronological order. Changes between the various versions have been bolded.

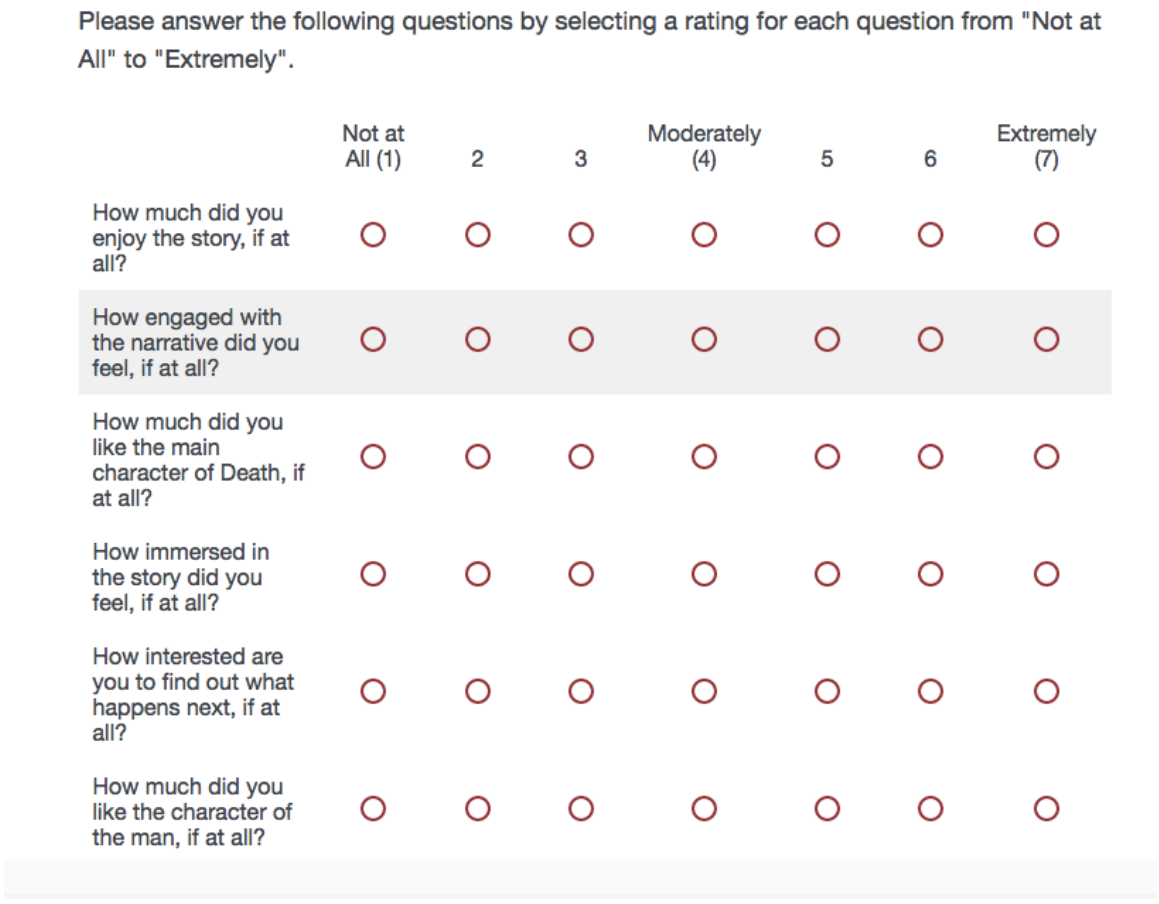

Figure 3: The survey questions participants were presented with and asked to fill out.

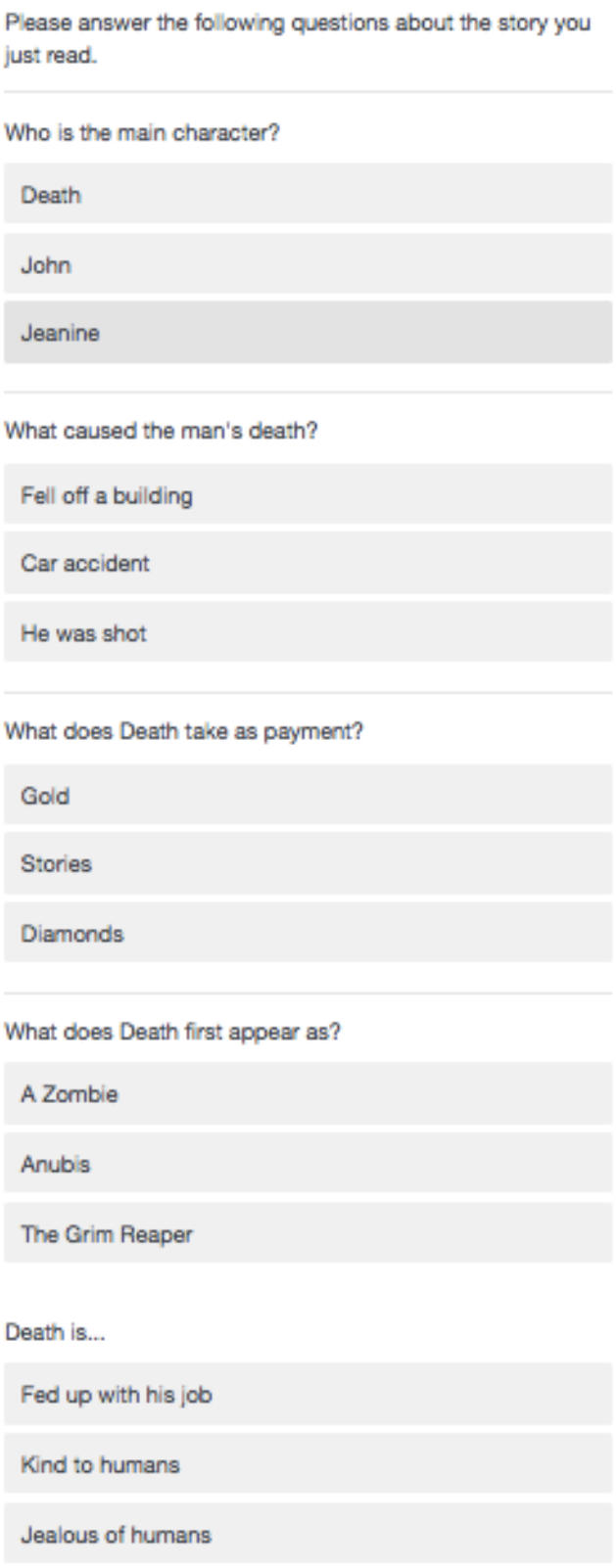

Figure 4: The attention check administered after the survey questions.

The short story, High condition:

Death

I felt the familiar tugging sensation that signaled an appointment take hold. I resisted for a moment, relishing the sharp pain that flashed across my consciousness, before giving in and allowing myself to be drawn into the mortal world. In the split second before I materialized fully, I got a look at the guy I was coming to accompany. I like to think that after all this time, I'm a pretty good judge of you humans.

He carried the look of a man past his prime, a man who had once been relatively handsome but now was weighed down by a dull office job and a family that constantly needed attending; a man with dreams long since put aside and forgotten. He was starting to bald, and his gut bulged under his shirt. He struggled fearfully to his feet as I approached, taking shape.

"What….what're…who're you?"

I waffled between the different speeches I could give, but I decided to go with a classic. By this time I'd given the same spiel so many times I barely even had to think about it, but honestly, I should be awarded for my performances. I'd gone with the Grim Reaper today. My voice boomed, and I made myself grow a little taller, though I towered over him already. A grinning skull emerged from the cloud of darkness I'd created, and a cloak settled around it. A razor sharp scythe appeared in my bony hands, and though I spoke, the skull didn't move.

"Across the millennia I have been worshipped as a god; I have been known by thousands of names, from Ankou of the ancient Bretons, to Mictlantecuhtli of the Aztecs, to the unspoken names given to me by every creature since the beginning of time; in your language, I am known simply as Death –" I paused for dramatic effect - "the reaper of souls." And now close with a thunderclap. Nice. That should do it.

He jumped about a mile, and his ruddy face drained of what little color there had been. The air crackled around us as the thunder faded. What, you think just cause I'm Death doesn't mean I can't try to have a little fun?

"I – I'm….dead?"

The horror showed on his face as he looked up at me. Geez, this guy was a sap. At least he'd grasped the concept pretty quickly. Some of them didn't realize they were dead for days, or even weeks. Some took years to come to terms with it.

I clapped my hands together, affecting a much brisker tone.

"That's right! Your time on Earth has ended, and now you must come with me."

"I can't be dead. There's no way! I have a dinner date with – Jeanine! Oh crap, she's gonna kill me if I bail again!" He began frantically checking his pockets, undoubtedly looking for his phone.

The irony of this statement made a slight whistling sound as it flew right over his head, but I decided to let it slide. I slowly let the frightening appearance I'd taken on fade away, the darkness contracting into a new form.

"You don't even look like Death anymore! What happened to the whole grinning skull, black cloaked guy holding a scythe?"

I should explain; I can choose how to present myself to you humans, but when I revert to my natural form, you'll inevitably project your own fears and images onto me. You all associate fear with the cessation of life, and very, very few can bear to acknowledge me directly. Completely unwarranted, of course, and a little bit hurtful, truth be told, but hey! that's humanity for you.

He looked almost indignant now, as if I wasn't providing the death experience he'd always dreamed of as a child. I wondered if he realized how silly he sounded. I doubted it.

I know what you're thinking – "If humans will just project what they fear onto your natural form, why bother presenting anything else?" Well, first of all, don't feel bad about your ignorance – you're only human, after all. Second of all, over the eons I've learned that appearing in whatever mythological form you humans are most likely to understand leads to fewer questions, and a lot less wasted time. Third of all, and most importantly, it's *way* more fun – hence the whole "scythe-wielding skeleton covered by a pitch-black cloak" shtick for this guy. For a while though, I'd regularly appeared as Charon, the Greek ferryman across the river Styx, and before that, the jackal headed Anubis had made even the pharaohs pee their tunics, just to name a few of the classics. Hey, lets stick *you* in a dead-end job for a few billion years and see how *you* go about entertaining yourself.

I looked down at myself, but I couldn't see what he was seeing. Whatever he was projecting, it was based on his personal fears, and he didn't even realize he was doing it. It was easy enough to guess at though.

Lately, I've been finding that when I drop my guises, one of the more common images you humans project onto me is some kind of bland lawyer or tax collector, which is undoubtedly what this guy was seeing now. Makes me wonder about what exactly is going on in your world these days.

"That was the old model; we just upgraded recently, and up until now we were getting great reviews from our customers."

I smiled nice and wide, but he just stared at me, struggling to comprehend.

"Alright, look," I said, dropping the smile, "What's the last thing you remember doing?"

"Um…I got up, went to work like normal this morning – went out to lunch with some coworkers – I had to work late, but I was hopping in the car to head home, and then…I don't remember. But I feel fine!"

"Have you looked around?"

For the first time since I had appeared, he took his eyes off of me and glanced around.

"My car!"

Not twenty yards away from the road was, presumably, his Subaru, sitting crumpled and forlorn. It appeared to have rolled several times before slamming into a large evergreen. The deployed white airbag was visible from where we stood.

"What…what happened?"

"Could've been another car, but there's no one else here."

It was true. There weren't even any cars on the road.

"Some kind of deer could've jumped out and spooked you." I shrugged. "Maybe you fell asleep at the wheel. Could've been any number of things, really. I'd even say you might have done it on purpose, if not for the dumbass look on your face." I inspected my nails.

He slowly tramped through the grass down to the wreck. I followed at a distance. He stopped at the driver's side window and stared down at his still body. Blood dripped quietly from a wound in his head.

"I…" He cleared his throat. "I got this car in, uh, '04. Traded in the Dodge, and drove off in this. I got it for the kids, y'know? The wife wanted safety, and it was supposed to be one of the safest cars on the road."

There it was. That little tidbit was just enough to give me a glimpse into his life, and to pay his way through. You see, you humans had gotten it wrong for millennia. It isn't precious metals or gems buried with the deceased that buy your way through to the afterlife, or whatever you care to believe comes next. It's their

stories, *your* stories. What use could I possibly have for earthly trinkets? Your experiences, your memories, are what I collect.

That small shared story was enough for me to get my foot in the door, so to speak, and allowed his memories to surge out of him. They seemed to seep out of his pores, multicolored wisps of smoke that were constantly shifting in both color and shape. Touching them would send me into a whirlwind of all his memories, emotions, dreams, thoughts, fears, and experiences, all in the space of time it would take this guy to blink. I carefully collected and stored each and every wisp without indulging myself, though the guy remained ignorant of it. It's the deal we made millennia ago; He would be the teller of stories, and I would be the keeper. I sometimes wonder if the deal was truly as fair as it had seemed. But then maybe He wondered the same.

The silence stretched as he took in the scene of his death.

"How 'bout now? Believe me yet?"

"Yeah. Yeah I believe you." He was significantly quieter now.

"Well, come on then. Time to go." You humans are all the same – no respect for the job. I was hoping he'd be a little more compliant now that he'd seen his own corpse, but no such luck.

"Go…where?"

"Disney World."

Completely nonplussed, he stared at me as I kept a straight face.

I sighed, nice and loud, to let him know that making fun of him was getting old.

"Onwards. You're going on."

He'd already opened his mouth to ask the next question, but I cut him off.

"And don't bother asking, 'cause I can't tell you."

He shut his mouth, then opened it again, and pleaded in a childlike voice,

"But…I don't wanna go."

You humans never learn.

"Listen pal, everybody dies."

I paused to let that sink in.

"Any other pointless thoughts? Questions? No? Excellent! Let's go."

I turned and walked away. After a moment, he followed, and our surroundings began to melt away. It's about time. After all, I've got a schedule to keep.