

Research shows we all experience fantasy differently, which determines how much we enjoy it

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Whether you love the "Harry Potter" series or despise it, there may be a psychological explanation behind your opinion.

Russell Webster, Kansas State University doctoral student in psychology, Sherwood, Ill., recently discovered that people experience [fantasy](#) differently, which explains why some people enjoy it more than others.

According to Webster's research, people participate in fantasy at different levels of cognitive and emotional intensity, which helps determine how much they enjoy a fantasy book or movie.

"With films like the 'Lord of the Rings' and 'Harry Potter,' there are so many aspects that attract people to them," Webster said. "Fantasy is a general framework with which people can work in. You have fantasy, but then you also have action, drama, relationships and other things happening within it."

For the research, Webster defined fantasy as a type of narrative -- such as a book, film or piece of art -- that includes supernatural, unreal or impossible aspects in it. This differs from [science fiction](#), which often has an explanation behind an incredible power.

Webster conducted two studies: one involving written narratives and another involving visual narratives. For the written narratives,

participants read a passage describing the sunrise and had to imagine themselves as either watching the rising sun or flying toward it. For the visual narratives, participants looked at a painting that featured a man floating in the sky and a man sitting in a cottage. Participants had to imagine themselves as either the man floating or the man in the cottage.

"We wanted to see if we could predict people's subjective vividness of their imagery," Webster said. "We also assessed people's engagement: how much they enjoyed it, how much they were immersed in it and how they felt afterward."

To understand people's experiences with the narratives, Webster looked at two very similar yet different [personality traits](#): fantasy proneness, which is the tendency to experience more intense daydreams and fantasies; and absorption, which is the tendency to be absorbed by mind-altering tasks. Fantasy proneness relates to what is going on in a person's mind, while absorption deals with what is going on in a person's heart.

People with higher fantasy proneness traits experienced more vivid imagery, but not as much emotional engagement, according to Webster's research. People with higher absorption traits were more emotionally engaged in the narratives and were in a more positive mood at the end.

"If the heart is invested, that's where the enjoyment comes from," Webster said. "What's also interesting is that while some people reported seeing more vivid images, that doesn't necessarily determine how emotionally engaged they are or how much they enjoy it."

That explains why some people find the fantastical images in "Lord of the Rings" or "Game of Thrones" visually appealing but they may not enjoy the movie or show as a whole.

The type of fantasy narrative -- whether written or visual -- might also

make a difference in enjoyment. A person has to put more effort in reading and imagining written narratives than visual narratives.

"It might be easier to engage in a visual narrative because you have a picture in front of you," Webster said. "It is easier when there is a motion picture, because there are moving images, action and drama. There's not just the fantastical element."

Webster also discovered that even in situations that don't include fantastical elements, people still inserted fantasy into them. For instance, when participants higher in fantasy proneness or absorption were imagining the rising sun in his first study, they were more prone to imagine themselves flying.

"They seemed to inject supernatural elements into narratives that don't involve fantasy," Webster said. "This shows that people might try to create their own experiences and their own fantasies in everyday life through daydreaming."

Webster attributes resurgence of the fantasy genre in recent years to improved film production capabilities. The technology behind special effects has finally reached a point where filmmakers can create fantastical elements on screen that are both believable and enjoyable to watch.

"It all goes back to it's a good story," Webster said. "People like good stories."

Webster's research appears in a recent issue of the journal *Imagination, Cognition and Personality*. His doctoral adviser is Donald Saucier, associate professor of psychology. Webster is planning a few follow-up studies that deal with supernatural powers and how people perceive them.

Provided by Kansas State University

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