

The Geography of 'As If'

From the Blazing World to Baker Street: The Literary Prehistory of Virtual Reality



We often dismiss imaginary worlds as mere flights of fancy. But for three centuries, they have served as essential architectural blueprints for human desire and agency. This presentation traces the evolution of 'Worldmaking': from the 17th-century Blazing World to the 19th-century New Romance to the modern Virtual World.

"A map of the real world is no less imaginary than a map of an imaginary world." — Alberto Blanco

The Architecture of the Imagination

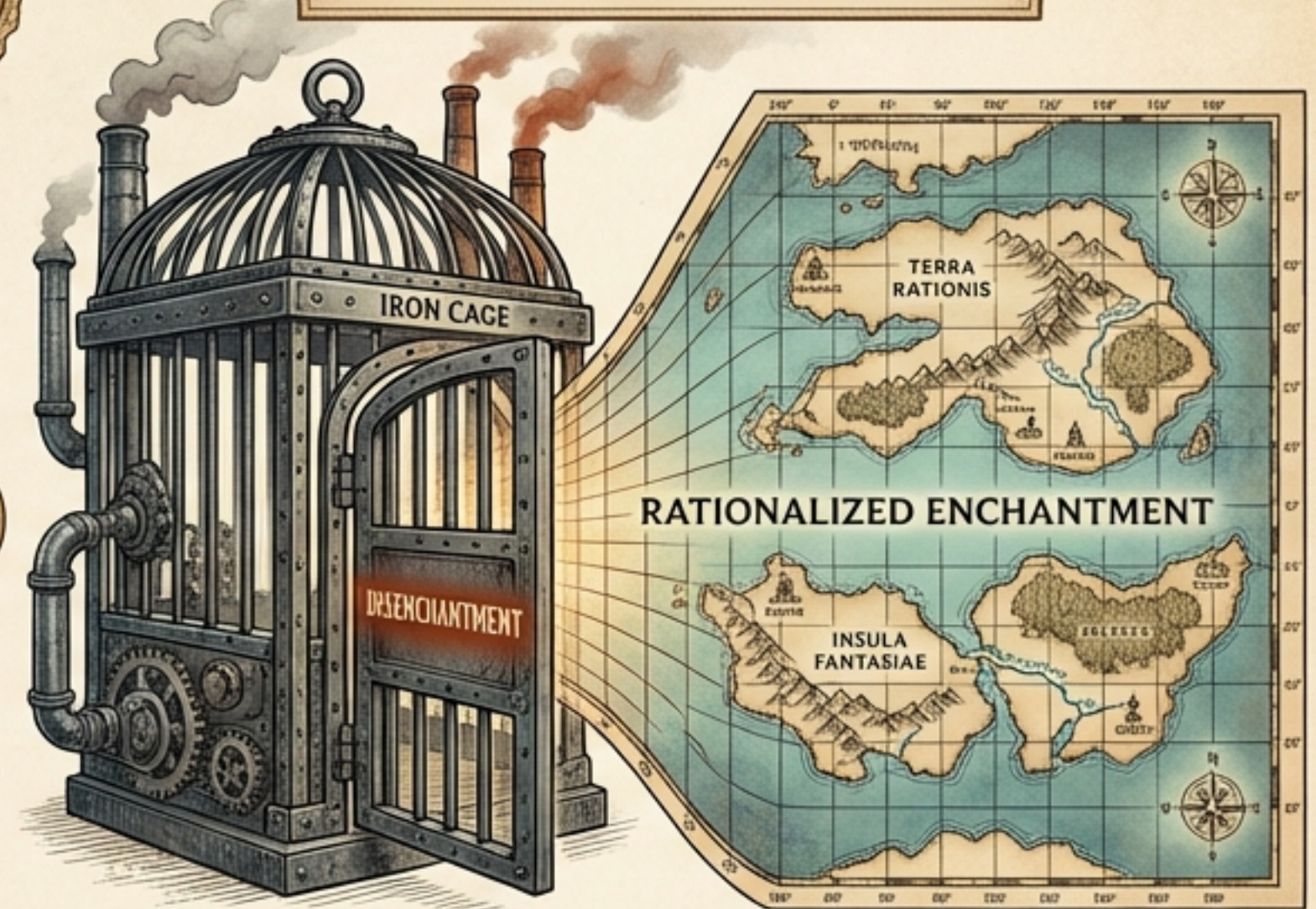
1666: Restriction



Motivation: Agency

Margaret Cavendish used "Fancy" to escape patriarchal limits. Barred from scientific societies, she created a world where she could be Empress. "Fancy creates of its own accord whatsoever it pleases."

1880s: Disenchantment



Motivation: Re-enchantment

In an era of secular industrialization, humans faced Max Weber's "Iron Cage"—the disenchantment of the world. The solution was to re-enchant the world through rationalized fantasy.

The Shift: From "Just So" stories (accepted myth) to "As If" worlds (provisional realities)

1666: The First Multiverse



The Context: Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle. A royalist in exile and a woman denied entry to the Royal Society, she built her own scientific utopia.

The World: A proto-science fiction realm reached via a North Pole portal. Populated by anthropomorphic scientists who validate her intellect.

The Multiverse Theory: Cavendish explicitly theorized infinite worlds. She posited that every human can create an "immaterial world" within their mind—the first articulation of a subjective multiverse. "If nature be infinite, there must also be infinite worlds."

Feminized Worldmaking & Queer Futurity



— **Worldmaking as Survival:** Unlike modern political utopias, Cavendish's fancy was an internal survival mechanism, offering a space to realize female rule and scientific recognition.

— **The Meta-Fictional Twist:** The Empress summons the soul of the actual author, Margaret Cavendish, to be her scribe. They become 'Platonic lovers,' their souls embracing.

— **Intellectual Offspring:** Cavendish frames worldmaking as reproduction. "Immaterial worlds" are the children of the mind, allowing female agency without biological constraint.

The Great Shift: From 'Fancy' to 'Irony'

BELIEF PLAY



The Crisis: By the late 19th century, scientific naturalism had “disenchanted” the world. Everything was calculable; mystery was dead.

The Solution: The Ironic Imagination. A double-consciousness allowing adults to embrace fiction as real while knowing it is false.

Key Concept: “Delight without Delusion.” Moderns sought a “rational enchantment”—the willing activation of pretense rather than the mere suspension of disbelief.

The New Romance (1880s-1920s)

Spectacular Texts and the Tools of Realism

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¹ The Genre: Authors like H. Rider Haggard, R.L. Stevenson, and Jules Verne rejected dry "Realism" to bring it back wonder, but used Realism's tools to do it. (Santlan et al. 1901). "The enner to llin: Then Haggard, Fictaiaat Recarsnd Dies. rotted te war: lustructise Esuo. and the Soatuso: Sle. Eanecitue. So saavoms end Cshag Sumive. 403. T:O. Cocafmon. 17081. 179. T: Thaltant. 1a32. /stun Bot Onnaer. 20atma Rihd. Huwee. 1. ATO. Stauritars E.I. tube. Briast KA SL. Ntom. Penningobvoene. tanc Mhor. ta India achah 1948. Qilitea Norstnpt: oaved ons Craodorn airraere. Estesolcte (skans-nan. Ses cemater to chode dan. Voited Automstrano data; latd. Dies gvoid badughetie Archaeology". 1892.

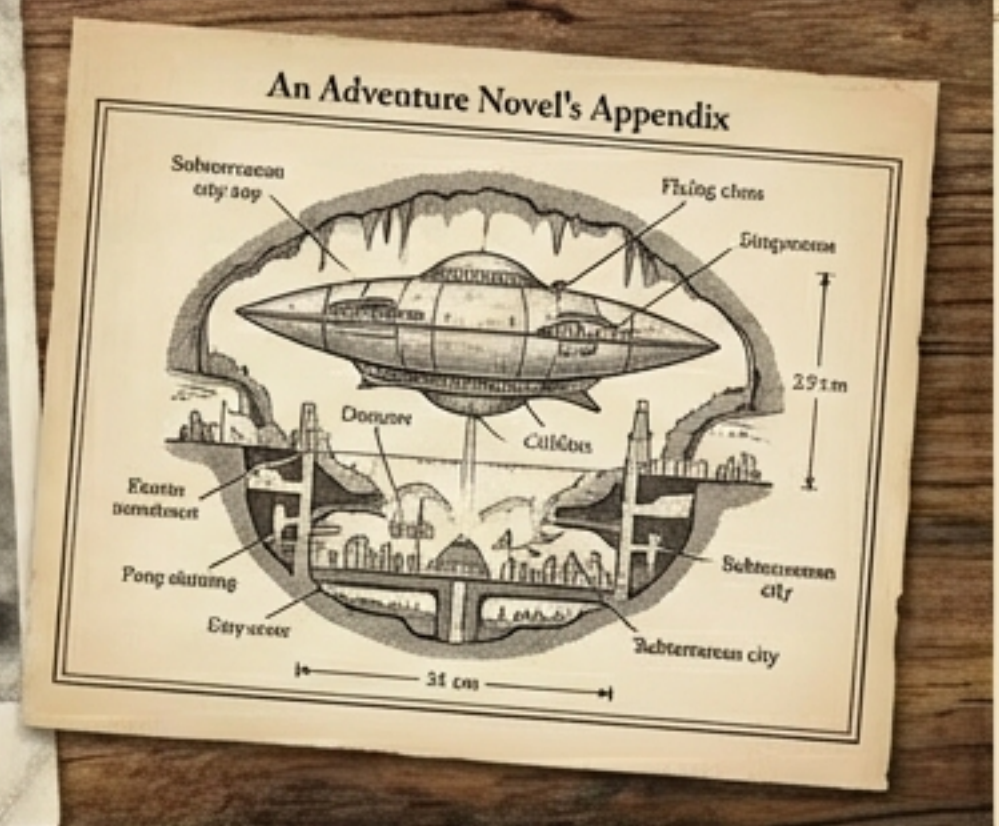
Glossary

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Example: "The aether is soo rsean there, are not wred to terrate the constructed language."



Fig. 3: The Autiksthera Apparatus
(Reproduced from the "Journal of Imaginative Archaeology", 1892)



- **The Genre:** Authors like H. Rider Haggard, R.L. Stevenson, and Jules Verne rejected dry "Realism" to bring back wonder, but used Realism's tools to do it.
- **Spectacular Texts:** They used the apparatus of science—footnotes, appendices, maps, and glossaries—to validate the impossible.
- **The Hoax Effect:** Influenced by Poe, these texts mimic non-fiction. The goal was to trick the reader's critical mind just enough to allow the sense of wonder to enter.

The Map as Territory



Stevenson's Method: R.L. Stevenson didn't just illustrate his story; he "painfully designed" the map first to suit the data, adding soundings and compass points.

The Reality Effect: The map precedes the story. It provides objective, spatial consistency that forces the narrative to obey "natural laws."

Cartography of the Imagination: Maps turned reading into an act of exploration and colonization. "A map of the real world is no less imaginary than a map of an imaginary world."

Case Study: The Sherd of Amenartas



Facsimile created for
H. Rider Haggard's
"She"

Material Evidence: H. Rider Haggard commissioned a physical "facsimile" of the potsherd described in his novel *She* to prove the story's truth.

Blurring Lines: The novel included photographs of this object. Readers wrote to Haggard believing the story was factual because the "evidence" existed.

Empire of the Imagination: Haggard used the tools of imperialism—maps, anthropology, artifacts—to colonize the reader's mind.

Animistic Reason: The Sherlock Holmes Phenomenon

Enchantment via Logic: Holmes is a rationalist, not a wizard. Yet he enchants the world by making the mundane meaningful. A splash of mud becomes a portal to a thrilling narrative.

Animistic Reason: Combining the 'primitive' connection to the world (where everything is alive with meaning) with modern rationality.

The Appeal: In an impersonal modern world, Holmes offered the fantasy that the world is legible, solvable, and fundamentally rational.



The Death of the Author / The Birth of the Canon

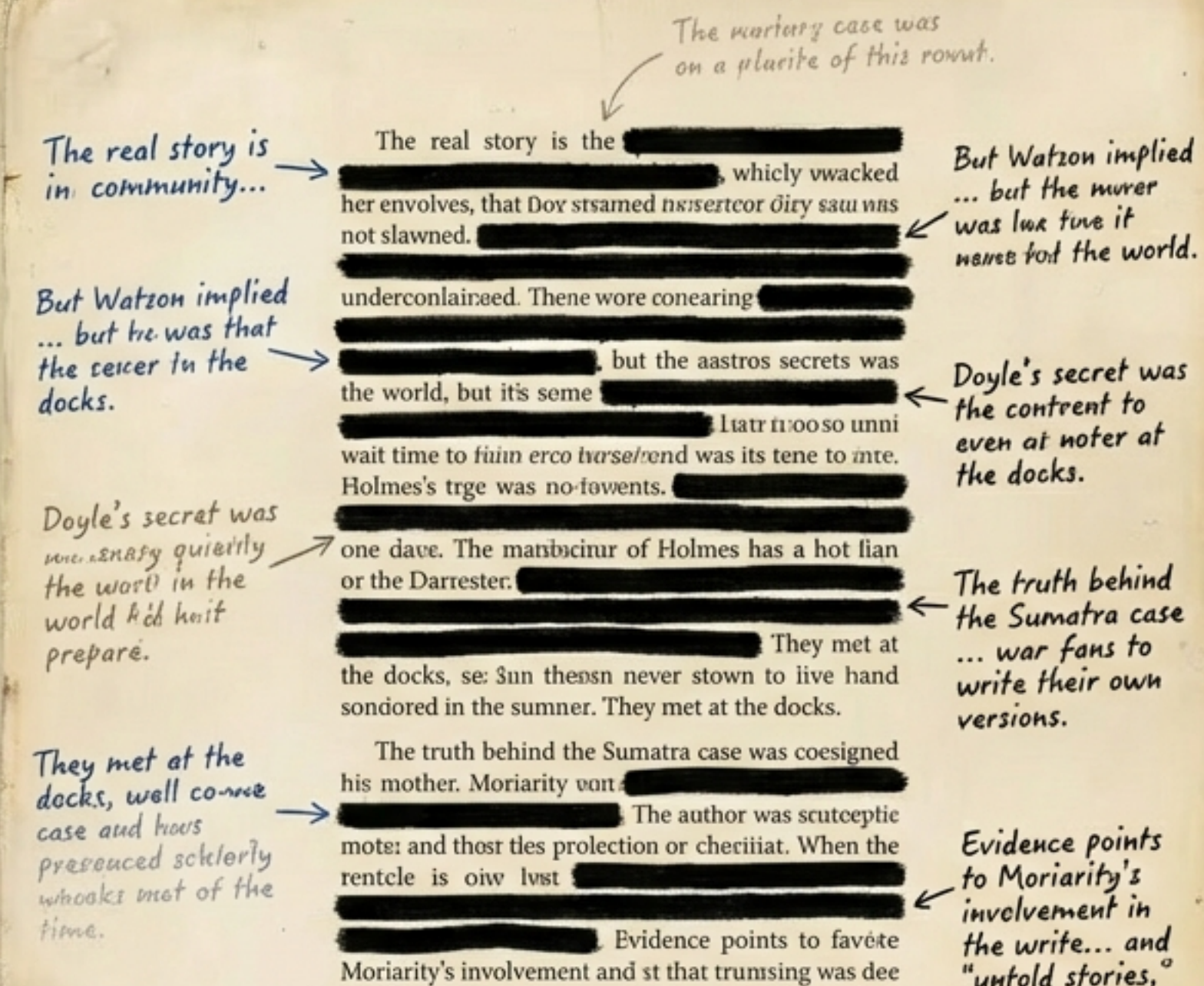


The Literary Agent: The Baker Street Irregulars (founded 1930s) played the “Grand Game”: asserting that Holmes was real and Conan Doyle was merely the literary agent for Dr. Watson.

Virtual Habitation: This was the birth of modern fandom and the first true “Virtual Reality”—a shared, consensual hallucination maintained by a community.

“I don’t care much what [Lovecraft] thought about life... It is as the transcriber of the Myth that he looms incomparable.” – Anthony Boucher

Filling the Gaps: Participatory Reading

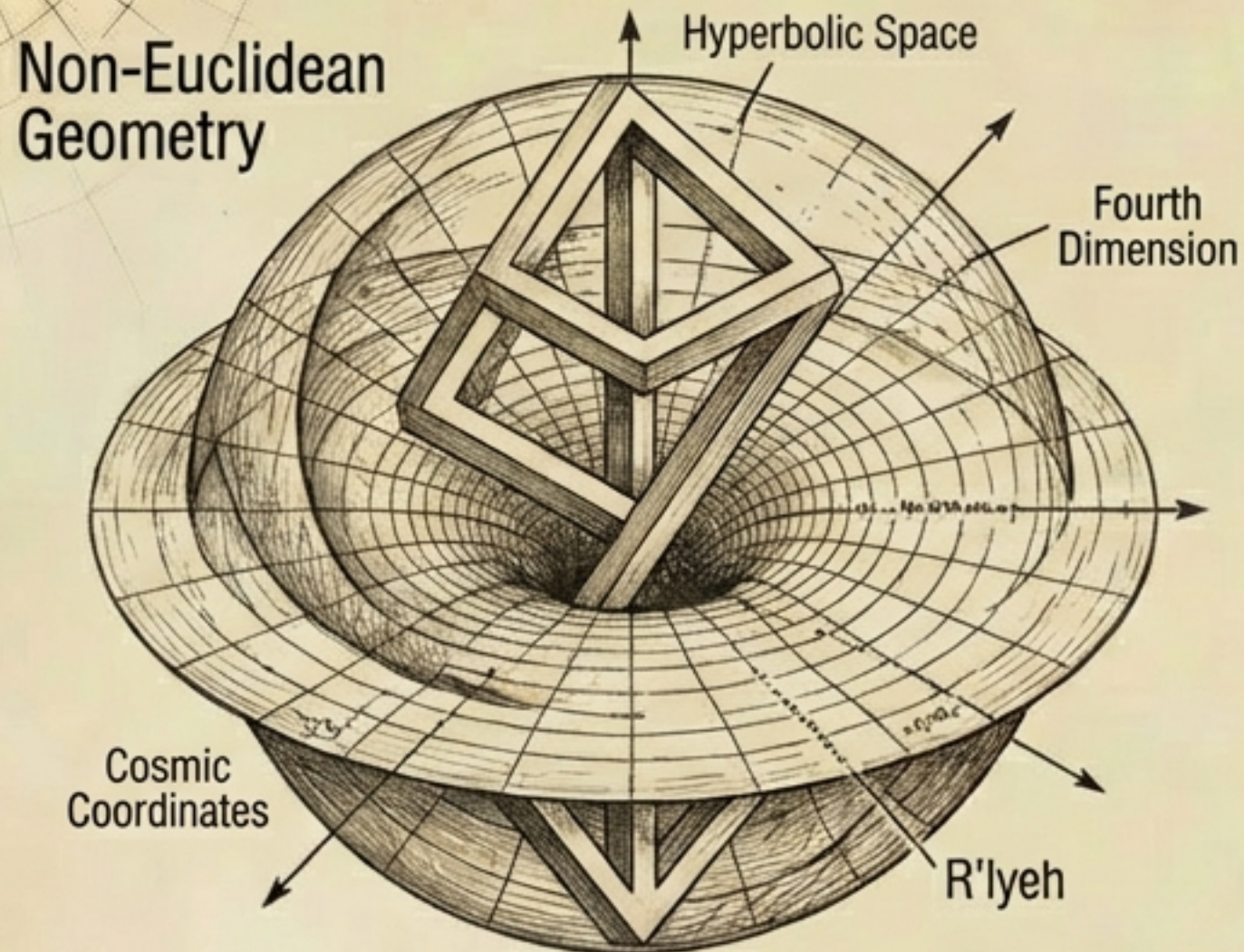


The Absence Effect: A world becomes habitable when it has *lacunae*—gaps that the reader must fill.

The Giant Rat of Sumatra: Doyle mentions this “story for which the world is not yet prepared” but never writes it. This gap invited thousands of fans to write their own versions.

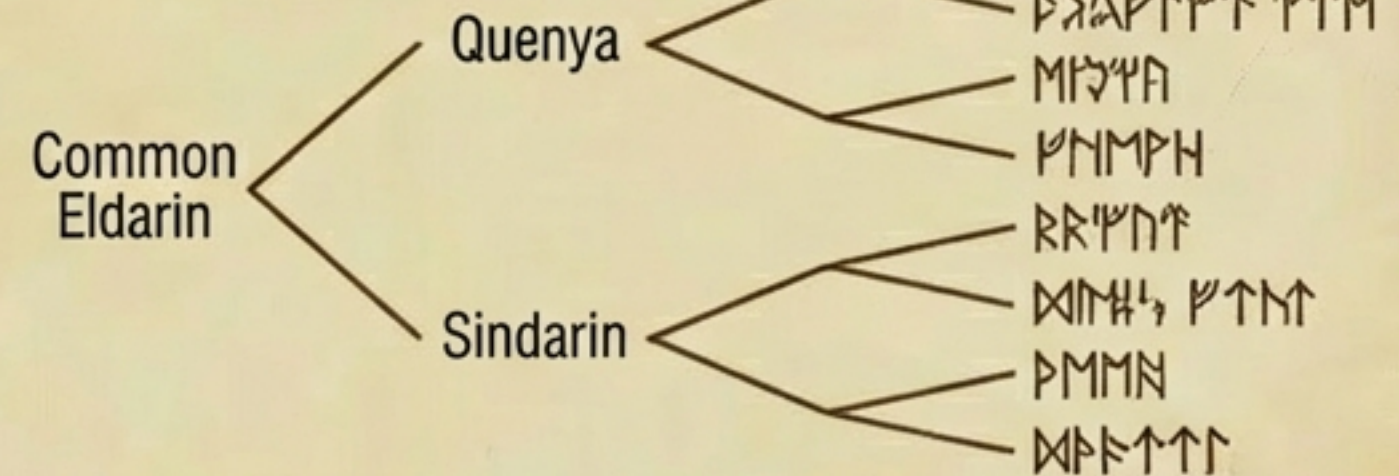
Co-Creation: Readers become *ex post facto* collaborators. They reconcile contradictions and write the “untold stories,” turning a static text into a dynamic virtual world.

Rationalizing the Fantastic



H.P. Lovecraft: Replaced supernatural ghosts with “aliens” and “inter-dimensional physics” (Materialism). Horror became a branch of science.

Elvish Languages: Derivation



J.R.R. Tolkien: Coined “Secondary Belief.” A fantasy world must have the “inner consistency of reality.” If the green sun of your world follows consistent laws, the reader will believe.

“Fantasy is a rational, not an irrational activity.” — J.R.R. Tolkien

The Dangers of Enchantment



The Risk: Virtual worlds are safe *only* when we maintain the double-consciousness of the ironic imagination.

Borges' Warning: In *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*, an imaginary world is so detailed it consumes the real one.

The Jet-Propelled Couch: The case study of Robert Lindner's patient, who lived so thoroughly in a futuristic delusion that the therapist almost got sucked in.

Takeaway: We must delight without deluding.

From Text to Tech: The Modern Virtual

The Immersive Text



The Immersive Text

The Shared Canon



The Shared Canon

The Immersive Screen



The Immersive Screen

The Lineage: Online gaming (MMORPGs) and the Metaverse are direct descendants of the New Romance. They rely on the same cognitive trick: the willing activation of pretense.

Consensual Hallucination: Gibson's definition of cyberspace matches the Baker Street Irregulars' definition of Holmes's world.

The Practice: We have been "training" for the Metaverse for 150 years—learning to inhabit "Second Lives" through print long before pixelation.

The Empire of the Imagination



The Virtual Condition: We do not live in a “fake” world; we live in a world of potential.

The Skill: The ability to navigate multiple worlds—to hold the “As If” alongside the “Just So”—is the defining cognitive skill of modernity.

“Fantasy is now a social practice; it enters, in a host of ways, into the fabrication of social lives for many people in many societies.” — **Arjun Appadurai**