

---

# A Flawless Masterpiece: genre, fictional pleasure and immersion (*The Big Bang Theory*, *Indiana Jones*, *Pride and Prejudice*)

**Annick Louis**

---



## **Pour citer cet article**

Annick Louis, « A Flawless Masterpiece: genre, fictional pleasure and immersion (*The Big Bang Theory*, *Indiana Jones*, *Pride and Prejudice*) », *Fabula / Les colloques*, « Narrative Anomalies and Impossible Genres / Anomalies narratives et genres impossibles. Impossible fictions / Fictions impossibles », URL : <https://www.fabula.org/colloques/document11143.php>, article mis en ligne le 19 Novembre 2023, consulté le 12 Août 2024

---

# A Flawless Masterpiece: genre, fictional pleasure and immersion (*The Big Bang Theory*, *Indiana Jones*, *Pride and Prejudice*)

**Annick Louis**

---

An impossible fiction can be defined as a fiction of impossible worlds, or a fiction containing “goofs” (incongruities, continuity errors, anachronisms, etc.). It appears that the concept also references the violation of plausibility, which is likely to fascinate and generate intense hermeneutic activity. However, another sort of impossible fictions exists: fictions that are impossible not because they present incongruities but rather because they display some sort of incoherence in the narrative structure. More specifically, I would like to argue that the economy of the narrative structure may sometimes present weaknesses, or flaws, which may disrupt the quality of the fiction and interfere with fictional immersion, and that this may lead to forestalling fictional immersion. However, if fictional immersion is challenged, the fictional world does not necessarily crumple, unless the emotional investment of the reader or the spectator should depend on it being flawless. The “economy of the narrative” refers to the fact that every item narrated serves the goal of the story, in different ways and depending on the *genre* of the text. For instance, in a novel, the descriptions of places or of the feelings of the characters do not advance the plot, but they contribute to its comprehension. They create a state of fictional immersion and bolster the ability to imagine the world portrayed. So, they have other functions that cannot be considered as flaws in or interferences with a fiction. We may consider that the perception of the genre of the narrative plays a pivotal role given that the reader is likely to judge its coherence according to the laws of the genre.

To exemplify the case of impossible fictions, I will dwell on an example, taken from one work of fiction, the TV series *The Big Bang Theory* (2007-2019), created by Chuck Lorre and Bill Prady. In Season 7, episode 4, “The Raiders Minimization”, (S7, e4) the character’s discussions revolves around a fiction that seems to be ruined by the discovery of a “structural flaw” involving the hero in the story. After analyzing their arguments and reactions towards this case, we will examine the representation of fictional immersion in the show, and the close relationship that immersion seems to entertain with the emotional investment of readers and viewers and with the

pleasure a fiction can elicit for them. This will lead to a better understanding of the cases where the quality of immersion is preserved despite incoherencies, as well as to examine what makes this preservation possible.

## What ruins a fiction?

Created by Chuck Lorre and Bill Prady *The Big Bang Theory* revolves around five characters living in Pasadena, California: Leonard Hofstadter (Johnny Galecki) and Sheldon Cooper (Jim Parsons), both physicists at Caltech, who share an apartment; Penny (Kaley Cuoco), a waitress and aspiring actress who lives across the hall; and Leonard and Sheldon's similarly geeky and socially awkward friends and co-workers, aerospace engineer Howard Wolowitz (Simon Helberg) and astrophysicist Raj Koothrappali (Kunal Nayyar). The four friends have little social skills, but as the narrative develops, Leonard, Sheldon and Howard engage in romantic relationships: Leonard with Penny, Howard with Bernadette, and Sheldon with Amy Farah Fowler, a biologist, suffering from social anxiety too, both presenting some characteristics of the autistic spectrum.

The four boys are ardent fans of the Indiana Jones movies (as well as of Star Trek, Star Wars and other blockbusters). "The Raiders Minimization" shows Sheldon initiating his girlfriend Amy to *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, the first Indiana Jones adventure, which he describes as one of his "all-time favorites". The movie tells the story of the archeologist Indiana Jones engaged in searching for the mysterious and supernatural Ark of Covenant before it might fall into the hands of Adolf Hitler and his regime, who seek to employ the Biblical artifact's power to establish their dominance over the world. After watching the movie, Amy states that it was "very entertaining despite the glaring story problem": she argues that the character of Indiana Jones plays no role in unknitting the plot line, that if he were not present in the script, the plot's outcome would turn out exactly the same; the Nazis would still have found the ark, taken it to the island, opened it up and all died "just like they did". Even worse: it is Indiana Jones who unwittingly hands the Ark on a silver platter over to the Nazis by descending into the "Well of Souls", in an Egyptian excavation site, disobeying those who keep the secret. And it is Indiana Jones who shuns it and, instead, allows the villains to seize it and ship it to an island in the Aegean Sea. In other words, to Amy's eyes, the hero's actions have no influence on the narration whatsoever. Also, let us note the use of the adjective "glaring", which shows that for Amy this flaw is conspicuous. Besides, what she sees as a "story problem" – what we call a "structural flaw" – is that the actions of the character embodying the hero for Sheldon and his friends have no role whatsoever in the happy ending. Therefore, the structural flaw pointed by Amy is not a narrative incoherence, a flaw in the

chronology of the story, a continuity error, or a goof, but a matter that has to do with the status of the character, Indiana Jones, and his characterization as hero.

Subsequently, Sheldon brings forward her arguments to his friends Howard, Leonard and Raj, and says that the character of Indiana Jones is “irrelevant to the story”. However, as they all had praised the movie for being “perfect”, they endeavor to prove that Amy is wrong. With this aim in mind, they put forward the following arguments: Howard advances that the Nazis were digging in the wrong location, the only reason they recover the ark is because Indiana Jones found it in the first place; Leonard replies that they were only exploring the wrong place because Indiana kept the medallion: without him they would have possessed the medallion and dug in the right place.

In order to understand why Jones is so relevant here, we must put this situation in context. Indiana Jones, by then, was already an American franchise – which now includes five movies, four created by George Lucas and directed by Steven Spielberg, and one by James Mangold, featuring Henry Walton “Indiana” Jones Junior, a professor of archaeology: *Indiana Jones and the lost Ark*, 1981; *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*, 1984; *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, 1989; *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the crystal Skull*, 2008; *Indiana Jones and the Dial of Destiny*, 2023. The Indiana Jones movies, as well as television series like *Relic Hunter* and video games such as *Tomb Raider*, stage archaeologists viewing legends, myths, and literary texts as historical truths, which prompts them to engage in thrilling adventures, journeys, and scavenger hunts, a trend probably initiated by the self-taught archaeologist Heinrich Schliemann (1822-1890). The most famous precedent is, undoubtedly, the character of Allan Quartermain in the novel *King's Solomon's Mines* by H. Rider Haggard (1885), adapted to the cinema many times (let us also mention *The Secret of the Incas* by Jerry Hopper, 1954). The archaeological quest, which engages affects and imagination, transformed the discipline into an adventure and the archaeologist into a hero (see Zintzen, 1998; Voisenat and Lagrange, 2008, p. 87-126; Bercé, 2008, p. 61-86). The *Indiana Jones* movies harness this tradition of popular archaeology, which postulates that underneath the legends lie facts to be unearthed.

Returning to “The Raiders Minimization”, the first conclusion to be drawn is that the discussion arose between Sheldon and his friends tackles the importance of the hero, and his relevance to the plot; the fact that he plays a main role participates of the pleasure they experience in the narrative and the reason they view it as perfect. In other words, for Sheldon and his friends, who think highly of the movie, the narrative is perfect because Indiana Jones carries out the action, and, in parallel, his actions turn him into a hero. Sheldon and his friends were not the only people unsettled by Amy’s interpretation of the Indiana Jones movie. Despite the series’

huge success, this episode of *Big Bang Theory* deeply affected the community of fans, and ripples were felt across the media. Amy's statement upset Indiana Jones fans, who, like the characters of the TV series, tried to rebut her arguments. The world has since split into two camps: those who agree with Amy and those who disagree with her. We also ought to analyze this episode in comparison with "The 21-Second Excitement", (S4, e8) where Sheldon, Howard, Raj, Leonard camp out at night outside the theater to be allowed in and to watch a full-length version of Indiana Jones – endowed with only 21 extra seconds -, while Amy, Bernadette and Penny enjoy a girls' night out. When they find out that they will not be able to get a seat, Sheldon steals the film rolls; thus, the episode can be seen as highlighting the importance *Raiders of the Lost Ark* has for the group of friends.

## On pleasure and fictional immersion

During the rest of "The Raiders Minimization", considering that Amy's interpretation "ruined" *Raiders* for him, Sheldon seeks revenge by trying to debase one of Amy's favorite fictions. Before analyzing the implications of the idea that a fiction can be ruined, let us recall Sheldon's attempts at 'defaming' books, comics, and TV series. First, he lays his eyes on *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen, but he declares, after completing its reading, that it is a "flawless masterpiece": "he has too much pride, she has too much prejudice, it just works". In other words: it is a flawless masterpiece because the story is well balanced, and this makes it impossible to ruin it for Amy. One could argue that in this case Sheldon's argument concerns the structure of the narrative.

He then selects two works that present different kinds of "flaws". One is *Marmaduke*, the comic strip by Brad Anderson, published between June 1954 and 2015. Sheldon pinpoints that in the comic the family has a massive dog that causes nothing but problems, but still, they keep it, which is not quite plausible. Sheldon here points up at the implausibility of the fictional pact, which is also the basis of the comic. And he assumes that shedding light on the implausibility of the pact may well ruin it for Amy. The work he then assails is *Little House on the Prairie*. In the TV series (1974-1982), he pinpoints some details that are unlikely: the doctor has a telephone but at the time telephones were only to be found in large cities; the characters eat peanut butter, which became common foodstuff produced sometime later though... In other words, there are anachronisms in the narrative, which can be considered "goofs", involuntary mistakes made by the director.

In sum, Sheldon points at three different kinds of impossible fictions. In the case of *Marmaduke*, fictions appear to be impossible because of unlikelihood, implausibility.

In the case of *Little House on the Prairie*, goofs will render it impossible because they are historically inaccurate. However, if the examples provided by Sheldon contain implausibility, anachronisms, or goofs, what Amy points in *Raiders of the Lost Ark* is an incoherence in terms of the narrative matter – and therefore not what is considered as a goof, even if “internal incoherencies” (or contradictions) may well be viewed as such. Her arguments do not concern contradictions that make it impossible to build a fictional world, (Dolezel, 1998), or “unrealistic fiction” (Richardson, 2015; Alber 2016). According to Amy, it is not a contradiction but an essential characteristic of the narrative structure: Indiana Jones is indeed the main protagonist, the hero, who acts, struggles, fights, although his actions have no influence on the outcome of the fictional plot. On the contrary his interventions might have helped the representatives of evil and even been an obstacle to his own eventual triumph. One might say that she reads the character of Indiana Jones through the lens of Greek classics: Indiana Jones acts like a blinded Greek classical hero. But let us bear in mind that being aware of this does not spoil the movie for her; although, like the other girlfriends, she is no huge fan of Indiana Jones, but still enjoys it. Let us recall too that her disappointment derives from the fact that Sheldon announced that she was going to lose her virginity, and he meant her virginity as an Indiana Jones’ viewer, but she suggests that she expected sexual intercourse.

However, concerning *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, Amy’s perspective is questionable. For we may say that even if the hero did not alter the unfolding of the plot, what matters for the reader in this fictional narrative is to enjoy watching his feats and to admire his character. Indeed, one of the conventional features of the adventure film is to present a positive hero fighting evil. He usually triumphs (but not always), survives and continues to stand up for good, justice, and the preservation of a specific way of life, usually associated with western democracy (are not the adversaries of Indiana Jones all Nazis, or linked to them?). The goal of the narrative is to show how good triumphs over evil, how the hero changes the facts or the world. Yet, adventure novels or movies also aim to underline the hero’s struggle, to show how a hero behaves and showcase the importance of fighting evil. Especially in this case, because nobody (except the screenwriter) knows that the opening of the ark will trigger the death of the Nazis. What makes Indiana Jones’ actions meaningful is this ignorance and his determination to keep on fighting. Let us also add that although it is not Indiana Jones that defeats evil, he triumphs because the mission he has undertaken is consistent with the reason for which the ark was created.

The plot of “The Raiders Minimization” may derive from discussions between the script writers. We know that they form a collective: 34 persons took part in *The Big*

*Bang Theory* and this episode was written by Chuck Lorre, Jim Reynolds and Tara Hernandez, and the Teleplay by Steven Molaro, Steve Holland and Maria Ferrari. As such, it reflects the perspective of several script writers, who probably are aficionados of the film. Therefore, I consider that *The Big Bang Theory's* episode gives flesh to a debate on the relationship between the perception of a flaw in a narrative and the pleasure readers and film viewers may find in it. One can therefore argue that the episode fictionalizes a theoretical debate on art reception. As its title suggests, reducing the role of Indiana Jones in the movie to the minutest degree also reduces the value of the movie in the eyes of Sheldon and his friends. In other words: if the hero plays no role in establishing justice, the viewer's pleasure is too undermined—what Sheldon calls “ruined”.

At this point, one may conclude that there is a connection between fictional disruptions, fictional immersion, and narrative pleasure. But, at the same time, disruptions, anomalies, and flaws are acceptable within the frame of the *genre* with which a work is identified. In this case, although Sheldon, Raj, Howard, and Leonard come to the conclusion that Amy is in the right, they are unable to recognize that other characteristics of adventure films can be source of the pleasure and the fascination they experience—as for example: the efforts, physical in particular, that Indiana Jones expends in the movie turns him into an exemplary character, which turns out to be the key feature of the film, beyond his successful deeds. Nevertheless, for the characters of *The Big Bang Theory* there is no doubt that the fact that Indiana Jones' actions have no impact on the outcome of the movie is a logical contradiction, one that spoils the fiction.

My hypothesis is therefore that the episode postulates the existence of a link between narrative disruptions due to fictional flaws and the demand for fiction in the audience. I will name it “fiction requirement”: an expectation of the readers or the spectators regarding a work of fiction that induces a particular mental posture, which in turn implies an interpretation of the work. The disposition of the characters in this case is equally oriented towards the reception of a work of fiction and towards a genre whose normative traits and characteristics are identifiable for them and are a source of pleasure. What is staged in *The Big Bang Theory's* episode is the relationship between this blueprint and the pleasure of the viewer. But also, that the situation is impossible to solve: the fanatical adherence of Sheldon and his friends to the Indiana Jones film series (and of many viewers of this episode of *The Big Bang Theory*) does not seem to outlive the realization that the hero fails in what he undertakes. The questioning is therefore of the genre but also of a definition of what a hero is.

The fascination of a defective structure and its flaws, which is very often difficult to grasp, is the question tackled by Gregory Currie in *Arts and Minds*, in his chapter on

*The Tenant of the Wildfell Hall* by Anne Brontë (1848). His interpretation is centered on the narrative mode, in order to rehabilitate the novel, which has constantly been considered a second-rate work. Currie argues that what renders the novel a failure is also what is fascinating: the extensive use of empathetic effects in order to make the reader sympathize with feelings and actions of the characters from whom one would otherwise be alienated. The idea that a flaw in the story is also what is captivating echoes with the *The Big Bang Theory* episode, it makes an effect at both the cognitive and the emotional levels.

One last observation about the reader's or viewer's pleasure. At the very beginning of the episode, Amy's first reaction after watching the movie is to state: "I enjoyed it. When you told me I was going to be losing my virginity, I didn't think you meant showing me *Raiders of the Lost Ark* for the first time." To which Sheldon replies, "My apologies. I chose my words poorly. I should have said you were about to have your world rocked on my couch." The comic relief of the scene comes from the fact that Sheldon does not understand that Amy was expecting to engage in sexual intercourse. The episode thus suggests a mirroring experience between Amy's expected and disappointed sexual pleasure and Sheldon's spectator pleasure, which is nevertheless ruined by his girlfriend's comments.

## Genre and fiction requirement

Considering the effect that the lack of coherence of a narrative structure may have on readers or spectators, it is crucial to understand if the quality of immersion is preserved despite incoherencies, as well as to understand what makes this preservation possible. As Schaeffer argues, fictional narratives tend to solicit immersive simulation more than factual narratives, the latter allegedly emphasizing accuracy and veracity rather than the immersion effect (Schaeffer, 2021, p. 155). The episode of *The Big Bang Theory* shows that when fictional immersion is challenged by structural flaws or narrative incoherencies, the fictional world does not necessarily vanish or collapse. However, part of the satisfaction, and the pleasure of the reader or spectator is effectively unsettled. This characteristic is not incompatible with the construction or the maintenance of the fictional world, but it does affect its reception and the value given by readers and critics.

It is therefore necessary to dissociate narrative flaws, goofs, incoherencies from fictional immersion and from the pleasure experienced by the audience: they may challenge the immersion- they may also become an object of interest for spectators, who turn into "specialized goof hunters", as Olivier Caïra and Réjane Hamus-Vallée have showed in their recent study on the goof in movies (2020).



Similarly, the identification of a flaw, a goof, a narrative incoherence does not necessarily turn a fiction into an impossible one: they simply point out to the necessity to change one's cognitive attitude, to receive the fiction in a different cultural framework, that is, in the context of another *genre*. Inducing fictional immersion is mostly a technical problem, but anticipating what disrupts it, and which other narratological elements can replace what is perceived as fictional disruptions is a different matter than preserving the viewer's pleasure. As stated above, the importance of Indiana Jones as the hero of *Raiders of the Lost Ark* does not derive from the fact that his feats are efficient, but from the fact that he does perform them. In so doing he presents the spectator with an exemplary character, which constitutes an incentive to commit oneself intellectually and physically to ideals. Beyond the efficiency of his actions, Indiana Jones triumphs for his confronting evil and supporting humanist causes.

However, from the perspective of Sheldon and his male friends, his actions do not pay off, which also implies that their appropriation of the character is essentially emotional: they need him as a role model, but that role model must be successful in order to leave his mark on the world. This is evidence of their struggling to read the *genre*, as well as their need to make Indiana Jones a model in their lives, so that their own actions might have the desired consequences. At the end of season 12, the very last one, Sheldon is awarded the Nobel Prize he had been speaking of since season 1, the award he had coveted since he was a child. However, when he receives it, he emphasizes the fact that he was only able to obtain it thanks to his friends, and not through his own achievements. Thus, viewers are highly satisfied: Sheldon got his prize, but pinpointed that what matters is the journey, and the companionship.

## BIBLIOGRAPHIE

---

Alber Jan, *Unnatural Narrative: Impossible Worlds in Fiction and Drama*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 2016.

Banfield Ann, *Unspeakable Sentences: Narration and Representation in the Language of Fiction*, Boston, Routledge and Kegan, 1982.

Caïra Olivier, *Définir la fiction*, Paris, Editions EHESS, 2011.

Currie, Gregory, *Arts and Mind*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2004.

Doležel Lubomír, *Heterocosmica: Fiction and Possible Worlds*. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998.

Escola Marc, "Les métamorphoses du héros sériel" (*Télévision*, n° 9), *Fabula*, 2017 : <https://www.fabula.org/actualites/79925/les-metamorphoses-du-heros-seriel-appel-contributions-pour-le-numero-9-2018-de-television.html>

Genette Gérard, *Fiction et diction*. Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1991.

Hamus-Vallée Réjane and Caïra Olivier, *Le goof au cinéma. De la gaffe au faux raccord, la quête de l'anomalie filmique*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2020.

Lavocat Françoise, *Fait et fiction*, Paris, Seuil, 2016.

Pavel Thomas, *Univers de la Fiction*, Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1985.

Richardson Brian, *Unnatural Narrative, Theory, History and Practice*, Columbus, Ohio State University Press, 2015.

Saint-Gelais Richard, *Fictions transfuges. La transfictionnalité et ses enjeux*, Paris, Editions du Seuil, 2001.

Schaeffer Jean-Marie, *Les troubles du récit. Pour une nouvelle approche des processus narratifs*, Paris, Editions Thierry Marchaisse, 2020.

---, *Pourquoi la fiction ?* Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1999.

---, *Qu'est-ce qu'un genre littéraire ?* Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1989.

Voisenat Claudie (ed.), *Imaginaires archéologiques*, Paris, Éditions de la MSH, 2008.

Voisenat Claudie and Lagrange Pierre, *L'ésotérisme contemporain et ses lecteurs. Entre savoirs, croyances et fictions*, Paris, Centre Pompidou, 2005.

Walton Kendall, *Mimesis as Make-belief*, Boston, Harvard University Press, 1990.

Zintzen Christiane, *Von Pompeji nach Troja. Archäologie, Literatur und Öffentlichkeit im 19. Jahrhundert*, Vienne, WUV Universitätsverlag, 1998.

## PLAN

---

- What ruins a fiction?
- On pleasure and fictional immersion
- Genre and fiction requirement

## AUTEUR

---

Annick Louis

[Voir ses autres contributions](#)

Université de Franche-Comté/CRIT, [annick.louis@ehess.fr](mailto:annick.louis@ehess.fr)