ABSTRACT. Many philosophers suggest (1) that our emotional engagement with fiction involves participation in a game of make-believe, and (2) that what distinguishes an emotional game from a dispassionate game is the fact that the former activity alone involves sensations of physiological and visceral disturbances caused by our participation in the game. In this paper I argue that philosophers who accept (1) should reject (2). I then illustrate how this conclusion illuminates various puzzles in aesthetics and the philosophy of mind.

KEY WORDS: Currie, emotion, feeling, fiction, make-believe, tragedy, Walton

1. SETTING THE STAGE

Kendall Walton is now famous for his presentation and discussion of the following thought experiment.

Charles is watching a horror movie about a terrible green slime. He cringes in his seat as the slime oozes slowly but relentlessly over the earth, destroying everything in its path. Soon a greasy head emerges from the undulating mass, and two beady eyes fix on the camera. The slime, picking up speed, oozes on a new course straight toward the viewers. Charles emits a shriek and clutches desperately at his chair. Afterwards, still shaken, he confesses that he was “terrified” of the slime. Was he? (Walton, 1990, p. 196)

Walton thinks not. The reason: Charles’s condition is unlike that of someone in a genuine state of fear in certain crucial respects. (1) To have a genuine emotional response towards someone or something is to be related in a special way towards an individual. If Charles is afraid of the woman sitting next to him in the cinema, then the woman sitting next
to him is such that she is feared by Charles. But in the scenario presented by Walton, there is nothing that stands in that relation to Charles. Genuine emotions typically involve beliefs. Charles will fear the woman sitting next to him in the cinema only if he believes that she is threatening in some way. But Charles knows the green slime does not exist, and therefore knows that the green slime poses absolutely no danger to him.

(3) Genuine emotions put pressure on one’s behavior in certain distinctive ways. If Charles were genuinely afraid of the woman in the cinema, he would be motivated to flee and avoid any imminent danger. But Charles is not so motivated when he watches the green slime.

Despite these differences, though, Charles’s experience is similar in certain obvious respects to that of a person frightened of something real. The physiological and visceral changes in Charles are identical to those of a person genuinely afraid. A surge of adrenaline is released, he sweats, his skeletal muscles tense, his blood is redistributed, and his heart beats faster. Consequently, the feelings and sensations caused by these bodily disturbances in Charles are the same as those of someone afraid of something genuinely perilous.

In order to account for these similarities and differences, many philosophers have suggested that an adequate account of our apparent emotional responses to fiction would have to make an essential appeal to the role imagination or make-believe plays in eliciting our affective responses. Attitudes of make-belief are like beliefs insofar as they have propositional content, but they are unlike beliefs insofar as they need not involve full assent. Make-belief attitudes are like attitudes of “half-belief” in that they don’t involve full assent, but they are unlike such states insofar as they are rationally compatible with believing the negation of the proposition entertained. Attitudes of make-belief are like desires insofar as they are compatible with believing the negation of the content of the attitude, but they are unlike desires insofar as they do not aim at realization.

The make-believe theory takes its cue from the cognitive theory of the emotions. According to the cognitivist, an