

Player Identification in *American McGee's Alice*: a Comparative Perspective

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I analyse personal identification in three incarnations of *Alice in Wonderland*: the original novels, the 1950s Disney animation film and the computer game *American McGee's Alice*. After presenting the research corpus, I lay out the analytical framework derived from Kendall Walton's theory of representational artefacts as props for evoking imagining in games of make-believe. From this perspective, the *Alice* heritage relies on spectacle rather than plot to entertain. This spectacle differs across media as each medium's strengths are played out: language-play in the novels, colour/motion/sound in the film and challenges in the game. There are two types of imagining involved: objective, whereby a person imagines a scene outside of himself, and subjective, in which case the imagining revolves around a version of himself. Both the novels and the film primarily evoke objective imagining whereas the game invites the player to be introjected into the Alice character evoking subjective imagining. The picture is not unambiguous, however, as the novels and the film stage a broad array of subjectifying techniques and the game objectifying ones. This gives us some indication as to the nature of representation which, to be of interest, presents a tension between here and there, between the self and an other.

ALICE IN MEDIUMLAND

The original novel *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (AAIW) was published in 1865 by Charles Dodgson under the pseudonym of Lewis Carroll. It was based on a story he had invented for three little girls when they were rowing a boat on the Thames. It deals with a little girl *Alice* who struggles with growing up. She is sitting in a garden with her elder sister who is reading a book and she is wondering how one can read a book without pictures or conversation in it when she sees a white rabbit with a watch and follows it. This leads her into a rabbit hole and into a fantastic world filled with talking birds, gryphons, mock turtles and crazy royalty who want but to play croquet and behead people (a punishment that is never actually carried out). The book sketches a vague, dreamy atmosphere through which Alice wanders, wades almost, meeting creatures, experiencing adventures, but never really according to a plan. At the beginning of her journey, a problem is introduced – Alice needs to go through a tiny door – and one could think that the rest of the story would be a systematic quest to retrieve the key and a way of becoming smaller. This is not the case, however, as the story wanders off, leading Alice through her own peculiar world of wondering, events happening in a continuous associative chain without a clear goal. Halfway through the novel, Alice finds a mushroom allowing her to control her size and go through the tiny portal. This is more due to accident than purpose however. Overall, Alice is very much impotent and she regularly expresses her frustration at what is happening to her. In the epilogue, the rational universe is reinstated when Alice wakes up in her sister's lap and her sister praises her ability to fantasise, emphasising its importance in later life.

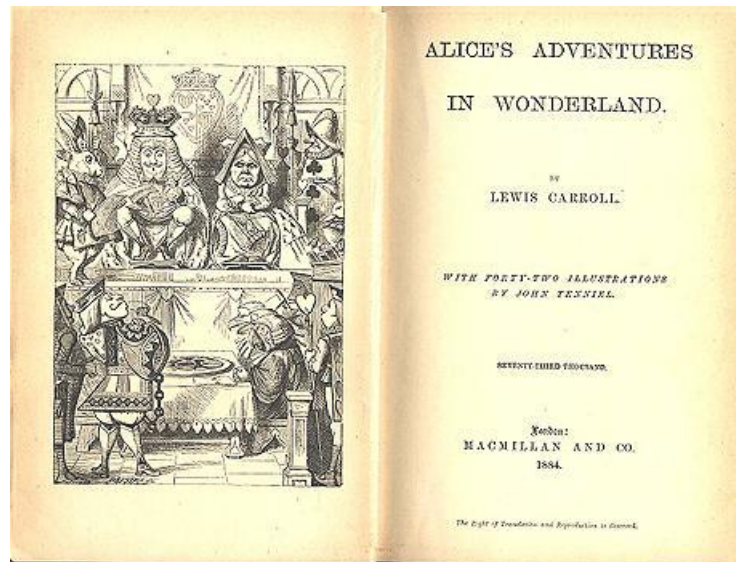


Figure 1: *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865)

AAIW is usually described as an example of 'literary nonsense', a genre that is known for its play with language, literary convention and logic. The techniques used in *AAIW* include nonsense (e.g. "Why is a raven like a writing desk?"), absurdity (e.g. unbirthdays), neologism (e.g. jabberwocky) and faulty cause and effect (e.g. the mouse trying to dry the other animals by reading an extremely dry text). The novel was published with illustrations by John Tenniel which are an integral part of the text. Each book has a running theme. In *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* it is a deck of cards: Wonderland is reined by the queen of hearts and her card soldiers function as hoops in a game of croquet for example. In *Through the Looking-Glass* the underlying theme is a game of chess which is reflected in the characters' appearances and in Alice being referred to as a pawn, reflecting the dreamy impotence with which she 'is moved' through her world of wondering. Interestingly, both a deck of cards and a game of chess include royalty who are eagerly depicted as incompetent throughout and as downright mad more often than not. The choice of games as running metaphors is also significant as it reflects the novel's interest in playfulness. Tenniel's artwork reinforces the card game metaphor and has had a tremendous influence on later versions of *AIW* including those discussed in this paper.



Figure 2: *Alice in Wonderland* (1951)

The second incarnation of Alice is the 1951 animation film *Alice in Wonderland* produced by Walt Disney. Rather than faithfully recreating the story from Lewis Carroll's book, it is a free adaptation picking elements from both *AAIW* and *Through the Looking-Glass* and mixing them together into one loose episodic chain. There are many differences between the books and the animation film in terms of atmosphere, pacing and artwork with the most significant ones being related to dialogues and characterisation. Jokes and rhymes are moved between scenes or even books (e.g. the text read by Alice's sister in the opening screen and the un-birthday ridicule) and characters are depicted more extravagantly so as to generate additional suspense, most notably the queen of hearts, who is a rather sad and dysfunctional figure in Carroll's work, but who becomes a fierceful enemy in the film. In the same vein, in the book it is only the Knave of Hearts (a minor character) that is on trial with Alice being a witness whereas in the film it is Alice who is charged. Moreover, like earlier Disney animation films such as *Fantasia* (1940), *Alice in Wonderland* relies strongly on comedy, dance, singing and action rather than storytelling as its main source of amusement. The film is known for its cheerful and dreamy atmosphere and its use of bright colours epitomising the Disney style. Due to its popular format as a full feature animation film and the Disney name behind it, *Alice in Wonderland* has for many people become *the* venue to Carroll's work, if not the only true incarnation of *Alice*.

“GAME, OR ANY OTHER DISH?”

The main focus of this paper will not be on Carroll’s or Disney’s work, however, but on the computer game *American McGee’s Alice* (2000) which was developed by Rogue Entertainment and published by Electronic Arts. *Alice* is a 3D third-person action-adventure game also including platform and puzzle game play elements. It is set in a version of Wonderland which is reminiscent of Carroll’s creation but also adopts elements introduced by Disney’s adaptation (e.g. Alice using her skirt as a floating device). Rather than recreating the original chain of adventures, the game is set several years after the books (and the film). There has been a fire at Alice’s home in which her family died. Alice survived, but due to her traumatic experience, she has developed psychiatric problems and has been placed in a mental asylum. Parallel to her mental instability, her fantasy world has drifted into insanity. Wonderland has been taken over by dark, evil forces controlled by the Queen of Hearts, who has become an even more formidable enemy than in Disney’s interpretation. When Alice is given her old cuddly rabbit by the psychiatric nurse, it starts to speak and summons her to once again descend into the rabbit hole and deliver wonderland from the evil queen. Until this point, *Alice* is very much a traditional ‘save the world from an evil genius’ story.¹ Apart from that, it also conforms to the computer game convention presenting a main character who is to descend into a world of darkness, learn its ways and travel to its very centre where the source of all problems resides. After eliminating this source, which usually involves defeating a superboss, the world can rewind to its earlier, positive state and the protagonist can return home as a hero.² Throughout the game it becomes increasingly

¹ This type of plot has become increasingly popular in Western popular culture after WWII. This may not be a coincidence as the form can be seen as a response to the danger posed to humanity by the existence of nuclear weapons, a danger which had become all too clear after the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The ‘evil genius’ stories can then be seen as a cathartic response to the fear of nuclear conflict whereby the restoration of power in the hands of the (human) hero and the ultimate defeat of evil serve as a comfort, a way of coping with man’s impotence in the face of global nuclear destruction (see also Van Looy 2006).

² This conventional format, which has become an integral part of the computer game cultural legacy and is present in games ranging from *Pacman* (1980) to *Tomb Raider* (1996), was popularised by the tabletop role-

clear that Alice's struggle is in fact not just a struggle for Wonderland, but also one to regain her own mental health. At the end of the game, after defeating the Queen of Hearts and a deranged alter-ego, the player is shown a cut-scene depicting the regeneration of Wonderland and a happy, confident Alice leaving the mental asylum.

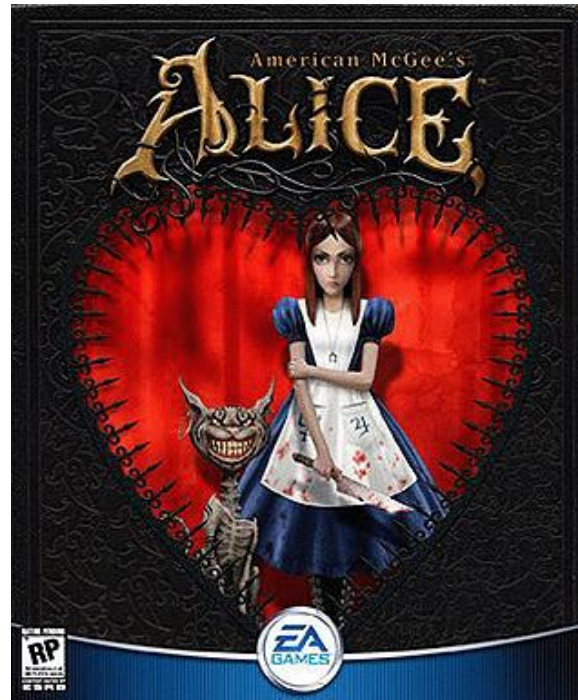


Figure 3: *American McGee's Alice* (2000)

Alice is primarily a fighting game involving a lot of stabbing and shooting (throwing knives, firing magic, invoking demons etc.) at myriads of playing card soldiers, evil chess pieces and other kinds of monsters whose relation to *AIW* is overall obscure. The choice of fighting as the main game play element can in part be attributed to the choice of the middleware on top of which the game has been designed, i.e. the 3D graphics/physics engine created for *Quake III Arena* (1999), a multiplayer first-person shooting game. Every few levels, which are designated as areas of Wonderland, Alice has to fight one of the subbosses, e.g. the Jabberwock, the Red Queen, the Tweedle etc., and finally the superboss: the Queen of Hearts. Apart from these fighting sequences, the game contains plenty of platform game play whereby Alice has to jump on floating leaves, moving cogwheels, use her skirt to

playing game *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974), which was in turn influenced by Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* (1954), more specifically the descent of Frodo and his party into the Caves of Moria (see also Van Looy 2008).

float on sources of hot air, climb ropes etc. Puzzles are also frequent and involve finding your way through mirror labyrinths, discovering secret combinations, pulling levers to open doors, luring game characters into following you to stand on platforms etc. Most of these puzzles and platform challenges are further complicated by the presence of enemies who will fire explosive devices blowing Alice off her platform and cause her untimely death. Every so often, the game is interrupted by a cut-scene telling parts of the story or giving hints as to how to proceed to the next level. Thereby the *AIW* heritage is used as a background frame, but only seldom as more than that. Gone is the original dreamy atmosphere which is replaced by puzzles, goals, branching storylines, advising characters etc.

TURNING THE TABLE: REPRESENTATION AS PLAY

Before moving on to a close analysis of the material, it is useful to stand still at the theoretical implications of this process. Since the inception of game studies around the turn of the millennium, authors of the so-called ludologist school (see e.g. Aarseth 2001, Juul 2001) have been fending off attempts by so-called narrativist scholars to approach computer games as a form of narrative. For ludologists, computer simulations and games are fundamentally different from more traditional, narrative media such as novels and film and treating them as such would be to deny their specificity. “Simulation is the hermeneutic Other of narratives; the alternative mode of discourse, bottom up and emergent where stories are top-down and pre-planned” (Aarseth 2004). Narrativists, on the other hand, note that most computer games are framed by a background story and that the emergent events during game play are experienced through this frame, so why not see it as a (new) kind of narrative? Since the beginning of this discussion several scholars have made attempts to reconcile the ludologist with the narrativist approach, mostly by proposing a broader notion of narrative encompassing both traditional and more emergent types of stories (see e.g. Ryan 2001, Zimmerman 2004). Ludologist scholars, however, have regarded these attempts at reconciliation as further instances of narrativist expansionism or at best as examples of “marching backwards into the future.” Until now, as far as I know, no study has made the opposite move, i.e. to approach not just computer game play, but also other types of engagement with representations as forms of play, and that is exactly what I set out to do in this paper. From this perspective, reading novels, watching films and playing computer games

are closely related activities which are ‘comparable’ (as in ‘can be compared within one analytical framework’) as all three of them are seen as variations of the primal human urge to imagine and play.

The starting point of my attempt is American philosopher Kendall Walton’s theory of representation. In his book *Mimesis as Make-Believe: on the Foundations of the Representational Arts* (1990) he looks at how man deals with representations (reads novels, looks at paintings, photography, watches films etc.) as a form of pretence similar to children’s play. Children devote enormous quantities of time and effort to make-believe activities, a preoccupation that appears naturally and universally, unrelated to any specific culture or social group. The urge for children to engage in playful activities and the needs that these address are fundamental and Walton rhetorically wonders whether they could disappear as we grow up. His conclusion is that they do not: they evolve (11). Adults still play games of pretence when they look at a painting, a photo, read a novel or watch a film. These activities appeal to the same imaginative faculties of a person. They are a type of mental evocation based on an object, a ‘prop’ in Walton’s terms, a form of imagining shaped by structures in image, language, sound, behaviour etc. A person can watch the clouds and imagine seeing a locomotive, read *Murder on the Orient Express* (Christie 1934) or watch *Strangers on a Train* (Hitchcock 1951). In all three cases the perception of a train is triggered – ‘prompted’ in Walton’s lingo – by sensory data. The ‘imager’ engages in pretence play, generating perceptions based on the forms and structures from the representation. He willingly suspends disbelief and enters a game of make-believe in that he consciously accepts that what is being represented are objects, people and places whilst he *knows* that they are words, pictures, brush strokes, light or geometric modelling. “We should expect viewers of paintings and films, spectators of plays, readers of novels and stories to participate in the games in which these works are props much as children participate in games of cops and robbers, cowboys and Indians, dolls, and mud pies. They do. There are differences, to be sure – important ones. But they must not be allowed to obscure the underlying similarities” (Walton 1990: 213).

From this perspective, computer games are just another form of representation; they are artefacts created by man to function as props for individual and collective games of pretence and

imagining.³ Computer game players pretend that the images, sounds and behaviour of the entities presented by the computer simulation are in some way coherent and meaningful, *as if* they were actual. Like most toys, drawings, descriptions, and so forth, most computer models are representations of other, real-world phenomena replicating some of their formal properties so as to trigger the player into imagining the scene. By focussing on the individual or collective engagement of the player with an object of representation, Walton's approach acknowledges the singularity of every engagement with such an object and allows to take into account the player's contribution both in terms of actual play, but also in terms of imagining and linking with earlier experience. This is a radically different approach from the traditional communication scheme of [sender-message/medium-receiver], which tends to look at representation as a form of transmission rather than engagement. Walton's framework takes the receiver's interest in imagining as a starting point and his engagement with a representation as a basis for analysis. Thus more attention is paid to notions such as experience, interpretation and interaction as well as various other forms of user contribution and input. This makes it possible to move away from the perspective of gaming as a process of receiving and 'taking in' a fixed object to one of gaming as an event, an active engagement into imagining and interacting by one or more players using an artefact created for that purpose.

THE MEDIUM IS THE MONSTER

An important question when taking a comparative approach is that of medium-specificity. How do you compare representations which are constructed using different technologies (e.g. book, film, software), deal with different constraints and conform to different conventions? How do the medium's intrinsic characteristics shape or even determine the content and how do we deal with that in our analysis? In the traditional sender/medium/receiver communication scheme, the medium is central and it is the process of encoding and decoding of the message that receives the main focus. Walton's framework does away with the imperative to take the medium as a starting point by zooming in on the 'receiver's'

³ Please note that I am not defending an essentialist stance here. I am not claiming that books or films *are* games, but rather that, by looking at them as such, we can gain insight into the relationships between media and strengthen the theoretical basis for analysis of story and identification across them.

engagement with a representation and the images evoked by this activity. Books, films and computer games are different in that they employ different types of signs, treat time differently, organise interaction with the ‘imager’ differently etc, but they are at the same time very similar in that they all function as representations used to stir the imagination. They are human creations produced to help people imagine certain scenes, objects, situations etc. and respond to their need for fantasy to deal with (or escape from) their everyday lives or just to be entertained.

Recently I had the privilege of attending a presentation by Ian Bogost from Georgia Tech on research he has been doing on gaming platforms, more specifically on how the technical constraints of the 1977 Atari 2600 game console influenced the games that were produced for it, their offspring and ultimately computer game culture at large. Indeed, when we look at the evolution of computer games since the 1960s, technology has been a constant driving force, particularly the increase in computing power following Moore’s law. More computing power means better graphics, smoother animation, more complex artificial intelligence, interaction etc. What Moore’s law does not explain, however, is in what way this increase in computing power will be used (or even if it will be used at all). Game culture is shaped by games’ underlying technology, but that technology is at the same time shaped by culture, i.e. the games that are built on top of it. Platform studies can be a useful addition to our understanding of the genesis and evolution of computer games, but it also carries the danger of resorting to technological determinism. It is all too tempting to look at a game’s platform, formulate a few generalising rules based on its underlying technology and then look for elements which could fit their predictions. As will become clear in the rest of this paper, in the case of *Alice*, the medium undeniably shapes the message, but it does not determine it. Studying platforms makes sense, but only when it is grounded in a broader theory of use whereby the technological viewpoint can be combined with social, cultural and ad-hoc perspectives.

When we look at *American McGee’s Alice*, the closest thing that we can find to a platform is its underlying middleware, the *Quake III Arena* (1999) engine.⁴ Quake is a first-person

⁴ Other, less specific candidates that could be analysed as *Alice*’s platform include the personal computer, the x86 instruction set, assembly/C++ and the OpenGL standard. The reason why the Quake engine is chosen here is

shooting game and its engine was very much tailored to accommodate that format. Despite the fact that *Alice* tries to evoke a different kind of atmosphere than *Quake*, it is clear that it was strongly influenced by its underlying technology.⁵ First of all, the interface *feels* similar: the way in which the menus are laid out, controlled, how they react, how you can toggle between the menu and the game etc. Secondly, the game play is very much derived from what had already been programmed for the game engine, i.e. running around, jumping on platforms, swimming and fighting monsters by stabbing and throwing weapons at them. Often these elements are restyled to fit the *AIW* theme, e.g. the flamingo stick a.k.a. billy club is a weapon derived from the scene in *AIW* in which the Queen of Hearts orders Alice to play croquet using an ever disobedient flamingo as a mallet. It is not much more than polish though. The weapon implementation is largely taken over from that in *Quake*. There is no, say, ‘reimagining weapon’ whereby Alice can transform parts of her own wonderworld or a cuteness weapon causing the monsters to start to like her. I particularly missed an implementation of some sort of grow/shrink tool as this theme is so fundamental to Alice’s world. One blatant example of repurposing is the health system using on-screen red and blue columns which are referred to as ‘sanity’ and ‘will’, but which are very much modelled after health power and ammunition (you need to fill the will-column in order to use the ice wand for example). Other elements adopted from *Quake* include effects such as fog, mirror images, portals and water. Finally, throughout the game, there is a sense of being in a world that is floating in space which is typical for engines such as *Quake*’s, using spacey patterns as backgrounds for reasons of rendering speed.

On the other hand, it would be unfair to claim that *Alice* *is* *Quake*, only in a different package. The negotiation between the *AIW* theme and the game platform is performed in the frame

because it is closest to the actual game content. This indicates the relative nature of the ‘platform’ concept to the type of analysis that you are carrying out. A paper discussing the virtues of object-oriented programming would probably take C++ as a basis, one focusing on 3D libraries would look at OpenGL and one comparing PC to console games would consider the personal computer to be *Alice*’s ‘platform’.

⁵ American McGee, the lead designer of *Alice* used to work for id Software, the makers of *Quake*, which explains the choice of its engine. Also of interest is that, at id, McGee worked on *Doom* (1993), whose influence can also be felt in *Alice*, especially in terms of atmosphere.

story and the cut-scenes. By setting the game several years after her earlier adventures and by introducing the insanity theme, the player is steered away from the original characters and artwork to accept the fact that Wonderland has changed because it has gone insane in accordance with Alice's mental problems. This insanity topos then accommodates the game play which is very much a question of fighting your way in the right direction, an activity which is foreign to the original *AAIW* which lacks both violence and direction. Cut-scenes also play a major role in the negotiation between cultural heritage and available technology. Most notable in this regard is the introductory cut-scene which consists of one long camera move going from Alice as a child, happily dreaming in her bed with a rabbit cuddle in her arms and an open copy of *AAIW* on her desk, to a fire breaking out because of her cat Dinah pushing an oil lamp off the table, to a grown-up Alice locked up in a mental institution after her parents' death. This cut-scene is clearly one of the more successful instances of negotiation between the *AIW* material and the actual game, others being some of the scenery and the puzzles in which Alice becomes a chess piece. All in all, it must be admitted that the platform on which *Alice* was built has strongly influenced its game play framing its constraints and thus shaping its content. This can also be said for both other 'implementations' which I am looking at in this paper, however, i.e. the original books and the Disney film.

SPECTACLE IT IS

The *AIW* heritage is in fact light on story throughout, which is odd as we all know it first and foremost as that, or we think we do. When we look more closely at the material, however, it becomes clear that the story is more of a loose, associative frame than an actual plot. Rather than introducing a conflict and having it develop and lead to some sort of climax and resolution, the chain of events is no more than an alibi for creating a fantastic dream-world, introducing amusing, topsy-turvy characters and doing all kinds of silly, playful things. At the beginning of the book, Alice wonders how one can read books without pictures and dialogue. What follows is a book filled to the rim with dialogues and pictures. But that is not all. The story line is constantly being interrupted for all kinds of spectacles, like an action film is interrupted by car-chases or a comedy by jokes. The technique used most often and arguably most successfully is word-play, usually with a logical or semantic twist like when the

Duchess nonsensically endorses Alice's view that the flamingo might bite her by stating that indeed "flamingos and mustard both bite" (Carroll 1865/1994: 45), after which Alice remarks that mustard is not a bird, which the Duchess equally nonsensically confirms. Another example is the Mock Turtle episode which the Queen explains is "the thing Mock Turtle Soup is made from" (46). There are countless examples of word-play such as the drying scene whereby the mouse starts reciting an extremely dry text in order to dry the animals (10-11). Or when the pigeon logically deduces that girls must be some sort of serpent because both species eat eggs (25). Apart from word-play and jokes that are part of the main storyline, another technique used in *AAIW* is to interrupt the narrative and embed some fragment that is unrelated to either Alice's story or Wonderland as an environment. These fragments can be a rhyme like that of the lobster (52) which is a parody of an at the time well-known nursery rhyme, or a story in verse like that of father William (21) which continues for pages and includes several illustrations. One odd example is the Mouse's tale (13), an embedded story whose text, after the mouse starts telling it, breaks out of the regular typography and starts narrowing and slowly winding down the page to end at the bottom, resembling the tail of a mouse. Thus it is at the same time an instance of word-play (playing with the phonetic similarity between the words tale and tail), an embedded story, an illustration, and a Tristram Shandy-esque symbolic representation of Alice slowly fading, her thoughts slipping away as she is no longer listening to the mouse's tale, but looking at its tail and dozing off.

Another way of creating suspense is much less word-related and this is where Walton's perspective truly distinguishes itself from medium-focused approaches. *AAIW* is an extremely visual story, not just because of Tenniel's artwork, but also because of the scenes that are depicted in the text. A lot of description is left to the pictures which are an integral part of the text. Apart from that, however, there are many scenes which rely on visual imagination by the reader in order to produce their effect. Thus the book *AAIW* fulfils its function as a prop in a game of make-believe, as it is used by the reader as a 'tool' to help him imagine certain scenes and thus be entertained. One example of a highly visually oriented scene is that in which Alice starts growing after she has entered the Rabbit's house (15). She loses control over her body entirely as she grows beyond the measurements of the house (a symbolical representation of the lack of control over having to grow up). First she kneels

down on the floor. Then she tries lying down with her arm curled around her head and eventually even that is no longer sufficient and she is forced to put one arm out of the window. After having stopped growing, another, equally visual action-scene ensues in which Alice blindly tries to grab the rabbit outside the window who panics and runs away. These scenes, although evoked by words, are primarily visual and function in very much the same way as a film clip would defying any extreme form of media determinism. Finally, there is a riddle in *AAIW*, i.e. the famous “Why is a raven like a writing desk?” (33) which is presented to Alice by the Mad Hatter. Whilst not a puzzle in Aarseth’s (1997) ergodic sense (it does not refrain the reader from progressing in the work), it does play a game with him as the text for a while pretends that there is an answer to the riddle before eventually dismissing it. Thus *AAIW*, despite being a book, can be said to employ several techniques not dissimilar to those in a film or a game.

Like the books, the Disney animation film uses Alice’s story primarily as a framework for doing other things. It does so in a different manner, however, laying other emphases and focusing on different techniques for staging spectacle. Whereas the main star of the book is language through word-play, logic games, rhyme etc., in the film it is primarily movement/colour and song/music that are used to entertain. As in his earlier hit *Fantasia*, Disney relied on high-profile composers to write songs, artists to create a colourful atmosphere and characters, and high-level screenwriters and choreographers to create the animations. When we look at the animal-drying scene, for example, which in the book involves the mouse trying to dry its audience by reading a dry text, in the film this part is skipped. Instead, the story focuses on the caucus race which turns into a song and dance performed by a joyful bunch of animals dragging Alice with them in a merry-go-round fashion. Another example is the croquet match almost at the end of the film which in the book is already an action-based scene, but only takes a few paragraphs. In the film, however, it is spun out with the manly Miss Piggy-like Queen as the star of the show. When she swings her flamingo mallet and completely misses the hedgehog which is supposed to be the ball, the king kindly urges it on after which all the card soldiers jump into place so that the poor creature cannot miss them. Highly-accentuated by sound effects and music, this scene is arguably the most successful one in the entire movie. Thus the film uses its medium’s strengths such as colour, movement and sound to its

advantage, but it does not do so in the radical manner that a deterministic perspective would predict. Word-play is scarcer in the film, but it is still present. In the caterpillar scene for example, language is central, but it is supplemented by sound and movement as the caterpillar puffs out his words in smoke from his hookah and recites a nursery rhyme.

The game *American McGee's Alice* similarly adopts the *AIW* heritage as a background frame, deriving story elements, characters, weapons and game play from the original material. Like in the books and the film, the story is no more than a loose frame used to knit together all kinds of episodes taking place in different parts of Wonderland with different scenery, enemies and puzzles. Thus, like for its predecessors, the story is really not much more than an alibi for doing other things, i.e. what games are good at: fights, chases, jumps, riddles, puzzles and labyrinths. Many of these elements function as ergodic bottle-necks in that the player must master them before he can move on to the next part of Wonderland. Because the game is not a direct adaptation, but more of a sequel to the books and the film, its main theme changes focus from the growth pains of a little girl to her pains to get rid of her mental problems and face life again. The exploration theme is strongly 'ludified' in that it is imbued with a clear goal and clear rules as opposed to the earlier *AIWs*, in which dreamy association is more prominent than development. Again, however, it would be unwise to claim some sort of fundamental difference between the game and its predecessors. Like them, it is primarily an evocation of a world to be explored. It is inhabited by colourful characters and as the player is guided through it, he will be entertained by all kinds of spectacle, which can be examples of game play such as action-scenes or challenges, but which can also be other elements such as cut-scenes (often containing references to the original *AAIW* through rhyme and word-play), scenery and architecture.⁶

⁶ There are countless references to both the *AIW* books and the Disney film in *American McGee's Alice*. From a strictly ludologist perspective, these are largely irrelevant as they do not directly influence or steer game play – knowledge of the *AIW* heritage will hardly help the player solve puzzles or fight enemies for example. From a Waltonian perspective, however, they are significant as they change the way in which the player experiences the game environment and events. Both in the cut-scenes and the game play, there are plenty of 'comments' upon the original material which provide those players who are familiar with the books or the film with extra flavour to their gaming experience.

Thus, despite the fact that each medium tends to emphasise its strengths – language-play in the books, colourful animation and music in the film, action-sequences and puzzles in the game – they do not exclusively make use of them. The book also depicts highly visualised and action-oriented scenes and even a riddle; the film also uses language-play and the game uses all four of them and puzzles and other challenges. By abstracting away the material characteristics of the different media, it becomes clear how they are at the same time different from one another and very much alike in that they all function as artefacts to be used as a basis for imagining and use their strongest assets to do so.

OBJECTIVE VS. SUBJECTIVE IMAGINING

When looking at the different instances of *AIW*, it becomes clear that all three in some way reserve a role for a ‘receiver’. All three media function as artefacts made to be used in imaginative play – as machines if you like in the etymological sense of ‘devices that make’ you imagine – and they anticipate this use. When creating them, their makers have carved out a role to accommodate the person engaging with them. The books for example emulate a form of person-to-person storytelling. Their text is structured in such a way that it contains a voice recounting the events. It is as if the reader stumbles upon two people conversing, one telling the other Alice’s tale, with one difference, i.e. that the reader is invited to ‘become’ the latter, to take his role. Through the act of reading the book, he accepts to move to the receiving end of the narration, to listen to the words and on their basis reconstruct the story in his head: imagine scenes, events, characters and complete the representation using his imaginative faculties, filling in omissions as if he were constructing a dream. Similarly, the Disney movie anticipates a role for a viewing audience through countless techniques ranging from the use of linear perspective, which ‘places’ the viewer in the scene by projecting all distance unto two converging lines as if coming from his eyes, to the use of a moving camera, to the introduction of additional advisory characters and having Alice constantly talk to herself in order to emulate an omniscient narrator. The game, finally, most blatantly lays out a role for the player. Apart from using most techniques sketched above, it offers the player a container, i.e. a character within the virtual world, a goal, a plan and a series of possible actions which are mapped unto various controls (keys, mouse, joystick).

Before we go deeper into their workings and effects, it is useful to look at how media and techniques relate the ‘imager’ to the imagined events. In his research, Walton makes a difference between two types of imagining, i.e. objective and subjective.⁷ In the case of *objective imagining*, a person will imagine a scene without placing himself in a direct relation to it. One could imagine a battle taking place in the Napoleonic wars for example when visiting a memorial in Waterloo, Belgium or when looking at a painting or a film depicting it. Whilst every imagining can be said to be related to the person evoking it in one way or another – why else would he bother? – the relation is mostly indirect or objective (from Lat. *objectus*, ‘to place before’). The person will evoke the scene and the events, but he will not place himself within the imagined scene. *Subjective imagining*, on the other hand, does exactly that. When subjectively imagining (Lat. *subjectus*, ‘to place under’), the person who is imagining will place a version of himself within the imagined scene. He could, for example, imagine that he was a cannoneer in Napoleon’s army or that he was the Duke of Wellington, overseeing his army. In these cases he plays a part in his own imagining. The relation between an artefact and a type of imagining is not deterministic. One could visit the memorial but keep a distance and just wonder how it is possible that such cruel wars ever took place, or one could visit that same memorial and admire the courage of the soldiers who delivered Europe from Napoleon’s yoke, secretly wanting to be one of them. Many representations inject some form of subjectivity into the evoked scene so as to bring their subject closer to their audience. A memorial, for example, is placed on the exact spot where an event took place precisely to evoke the historical sensation, to reduce the distance between the visitor and the past events. Books and films have a whole array of techniques at their disposal for subjectifying the imagining (see below). Thus the matter is not one of binary opposition, but rather a gradual scale between objective imagining, whereby a person keeps his self-image strictly outside of the picture, and subjective imagining, whereby a self

⁷ Walton’s use of terminology in this respect is slightly different from my own in that he regards all imagining to be essentially self-referential or subjective (1990: 28). He then continues by differentiating between *de se* (about oneself, from the inside) and *de re* (about a thing, from the outside) imagining (31, 32). These conceptualisations largely coincide with my use of the terms subjective and objective imagining.

plays an active role in the imagined universe. Dreams, for example tend to be situated near the subjective pole.

When we apply the notions of objective and subjective imagining to the material at hand, at first, the picture seems clear. Both the books and the film depict the story of Alice from an outside point of view, a third-person perspective if you will, whereby the reader or viewer is invited to follow her on her quest through wonderland but never to actually imagine that he is part of it. He could of course imagine being the Mad Hatter or Alice having tea, but neither the book nor the film will induce him to do so. The game, on the other hand, is very much aimed at subjective imagining. Without the player taking up his role, there would be no meaningful game play. From a formal point of view, *American McGee's Alice* is a piece of software consisting of a computer simulation generating a virtual world, a scripted path through that world and a character (Alice) who is at the same time part of the simulation and whose behaviour is mapped unto a number of controls which are handled by the player. Thus, a computer game could almost be seen as a materialisation of subjective imagining whereby the artefact invites the imaginer to take an active role in its generative behaviour. In earlier research, I have referred to this observation as introjection (Lat. being thrown into) referring to the fact that games tend to require the player to take a role within the system together with its goals, possible actions, and career path (Van Looy 2006). Thus one could argue that the books and the film are media designed to produce objective imagining whereas the game is a machine for generating subjective imagining soundly placing the player within the scene. Whilst highly attractive, I will take a more moderate point of view in this paper, claiming that the books and the film are primarily aimed at objective imagining but that they contain highly effective subjective moments and that, conversely, the game is primarily aimed at subjective imagining, but implements important functional objective elements.

UNDER HER SKIN

Both novels, *AAIW* and *Through the Looking Glass*, utilise a conventional 19th century third-person perspective, i.e. an omniscient narrator telling the story not just as if he witnessed all events, but also knows everything about them, even the unperceivable. The narrator will for example pretend to know

Alice's thoughts and feelings and will occasionally show himself more directly, for example when commenting on Alice's behaviour or thought. When Alice has shrunk and cannot reach the key on the table, for example, she starts to despair and can only barely refrain from crying. When she advises herself to "leave off this minute!" the narrator jumps in and explains that "she generally gave herself very good advice (though she very seldom followed it)" (5). On one occasion the narrator addresses the listener/reader directly. When Alice is falling down the well, she is imagining how it will be to end up at the other side of the globe in New Zealand or Australia, and as she does so she rehearses how she will curtsy for her soon to meet Australians when the narrator interrupts and invites the reader to "fancy curtseying as you're falling through the air! Do you think you could manage it?" (2). Elsewhere the narrator (or is it the author?) reveals himself through the thoughts he is ascribing to Alice, for example when she remarks that "there ought to be a book written about me, that there ought!" (16). Finally, one time the author himself intervenes, giving direct advice to the reader: "If you don't know what a Gryphon is, look at the picture" (46).

Whilst using an omniscient narrator is an objectifying technique, there are numerous techniques used to subjectify the reading experience, most notably focalisation. By focalising through Alice, i.e. by describing events from her perspective, seen through her eyes, using her language style and conceptual framework, the reader is as it were positioned within Alice's head. Typically, the focalised stretches are presented as a sort of inner monologue strangely combined with a third person perspective and ornamented by word-play and bent logic. After creeping into the rabbit hole, for example, Alice falls into the well. As she keeps on falling and falling, she starts to wonder "Either the well was very deep, or she fell very slowly" (2). In a sense, the primal star of *AAIW* is not Alice herself but her fantasies and thoughts, with wonderland itself as one of them. When she is looking through a tiny passage into a beautiful garden, wondering how she could get through, she notices that she cannot even push her head through the doorway "and even if my head would go through," thought poor Alice, "it would be of very little use without my shoulders" (3). Or when she is getting smaller after having drunk from a little bottle, she is wondering when it will stop "for it might end, you know (...) in my going out altogether, like a candle" (4). Another example occurs when miniature Alice falls into a pool of her own salty tears, which she associates with a trip to the seaside she once made with

her family. “In that case (...) I can go back by railway (...) wherever you go to on the English coast you find a number of bathing machines [boats, jvl] in the sea, some children digging in the sand with wooden spades, then a row of lodging houses, and behind them a railway station” (8). The epilogue to the story, finally, which is set after Alice wakes up and Wonderland vanishes, is equally recounted by an omniscient narrator, but focalised through Alice’s sister on whose lap she fell asleep. “Lastly, she [Alice’s sister, jvl] pictured to herself how this same little sister of hers would, in the after-time, be herself a grown woman (...); and how she would gather about her other little children, and make their eyes bright and eager with many a strange tale, perhaps even with the dream of Wonderland of long ago” (63).

In a similar way, the Disney animation film presents a primarily objective account about a beautiful, playful little Alice discovering a wonderful fantasy world and experiencing exhilarating adventures. Arguably, it crafts an even more objectified experience for the viewer than the books in that it places the emphasis on Alice’s outward appearance and its relation to the fantasy world, which coincides with the typical techniques it uses for evoking spectacle, i.e. colours, movement, song, dance and action. All this makes Alice a more salient entity in a 3rd person sense. An additional factor is the presence of a camera standpoint which forces the viewer to take the role of an onlooker, particularly when it moves with the action in a panning or slightly tracking motion. Sometimes the moving camera is used as a storytelling device assuming the role of a sort of narrator, for example when Alice leans over the brook, sees her reflection in the water and pictures herself in another world, which forms a turning point in the film as it symbolically represents the shift from reality to Wonderland. However, the camera is also used to introduce subjectifying techniques similar to literary focalisation. When Alice falls down the well, for example, there is a brief shot from the edge of the abyss where her cat Dinah is standing, showing Alice tumbling down and then a shot looking up from Alice’s perspective, showing the cat looking over the edge. And when Alice lands, for a brief moment, the perspective is upside down as she is hanging with her feet from a bar, again evoking the experience of looking through Alice’s eyes. Whilst not as pervasive as literary focalisation, these techniques work in a subjectifying way, placing the viewer temporarily in Alice’s head. Finally, in Disney’s film, Alice is almost continually talking to herself. This is meant to replace

the typical inner monologue from the books which is impossible to represent in film without adding a narrating voice, which in turn would have diminished the subjectifying power of Alice's wondering.

The game *American McGee's Alice*, finally, primarily aims at evoking a subjective experience.⁸ By offering a person an active role in the computer simulation and a way of shaping the ongoing events, the game invites to take up a role in the virtual world and become a player rather than a spectator. Whereas the books and the film generate an objective experience by focusing on the depiction of the story, characters and spectacle, the game invites the player to become part of it, to shape its outcome. Think of one child telling another about his adventures in the zoo, seeing lions and snakes and such. This would be an example of one person offering another the opportunity to imagine a scene objectively based on his account. The situation changes, however, when this same child would invite the other to a game of make-believe. "Let's pretend that we are in the zoo and that Simba [the dog, jvl] is a lion." At this moment, the situation changes and both children can step into the imagined world and take part in collective, subjective imagining. Similarly, the *Alice* game is an open invitation to take up a role in a game of pretence and engage in a process of subjective imagining whereby the player steps into the imagined world. This process is facilitated by the frame story of the game which prepares Alice to become a vessel for the player by emptying her mind (declaring her mentally ill) and then imprinting her with goals (liberate wonderland of Queen of Hearts) for the player to take on. The camera is then fixed behind her and the player is handed control over her movements. One indication as to the subjectiveness of this type of game experience is the extent to which a person identifies with

⁸ Different game genres and games generate different experiences which can be more or less subjective. Action and adventure games in which the player controls an avatar tend to be more subjective than strategy and simulation games in which the player's role in the depicted events is more ghost-like, vague and external. Abstract games such as *Tetris*, finally, can be said not to involve any imagining at all although this is subject to discussion. Indeed, if they were imagination-neutral for all players, why would casual game designers invest so much in their concept, frame story, graphics and suggestive interaction. More research is needed in this area so as to come to a clearer picture in what way casual game concepts and graphics function for different player groups.

his vessel or avatar. Hence many game players will refer to their avatar as “I” and its surroundings as “here”, introjecting part of their self into the imagined scene.

Again, however, the verdict is not unambiguous. *American McGee’s Alice* decidedly aims at subjective imagining, but at the same time it softens its subjectiveness by implementing a number of objectifying elements. A first such element is the frame story which evokes an alternate reality, places the player’s avatar, i.e. Alice, in it, gives her a history (fire, loss of parents, mental disorder) and derives from this her game goals, all of which confront the player with a reality which is not his own. Even the choice of making an adaptation of *A/W* at all, can be said to be an example of objectification. Making a more neutral action-adventure game in which the player can customise his avatar and give it his own name, would probably have evoked a more subjective experience. A second objectifying element is the extensive use of cut-scenes in which the player loses all control over Alice as she acts out her role in front of a moving camera, which strengthens the impression of being an onlooker. A third element is the fact that the designers opted for a third-person visual perspective although the underlying Quake-engine was primarily built to be used in first-person play. The reason why a third-person perspective was chosen was probably to keep Alice within the player’s sight so as to facilitate complex jumping, but also to reinforce the presence of the *A/W* heritage. Finally, the scripted nature of the game and the extensive use of advisory characters, which can be seen as narrators in disguise (Cheshire cat, Troll Elder, mysterious oracle, Caterpillar, Gryphon), tends to objectify the experience as it reduces the player’s sense of independence and agency. In one such encounter, the anonymous oracle explicitly refers to the “endgame with the Queen of Hearts,” which catapults the player out of his subjective imagination into an objective meta-stance. Thus, to conclude, all three types of representation emphasise different elements of objective and subjective imagining, whereby the books and the film tend toward the objective side of the spectrum and the game toward the subjective. The picture is far from black and white, however, as every form tends to emphasise one type of imagining, but also implements elements of the other.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have analysed identification in three instances of *Alice in Wonderland*. Using Kendall Walton's theory of representation as make-believe, I have laid out various kinds of spectacle that are staged in the different media and I have indicated that whilst they tend to highlight the specific strengths of each medium, they are by no means medium-specific. The books emphasize language-play; the film colour, movement and sound; and the game competition; but they are by no means restricted to them. Subsequently I have introduced and developed Walton's concepts of objective and subjective imagining referring to the position of the 'appreciator' vis-à-vis the fictional events. When applying these concepts to the material at hand, at first the picture seems clear. Both the books and the film evoke a primarily objective experience whereby the reader and the viewer are positioned as an onlooker by using techniques such as omniscient narration and the moving camera, whereas the game tends to be subjective in that it explicitly urges one to step into the fiction and play a role in its unfolding. When looking more closely, however, the picture becomes more complex with the books and the film using techniques such as focalisation and personal perspective camera standpoints to 'subjectify' the experience whilst the game lays out a whole range of techniques such as frame story and 3rd person view objectifying the experience. At first, the ambiguity between objective and subjective experience in all three media seems disturbing as a clean solution would be more desirable from a theoretical point of view. On second thought, however, it need not surprise as the function of imagining and representation is precisely to combine different perspectives, to bridge the gap between a here and a there, between an imaginer and an imagined, between the subjective and the objective.

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