

American McGee's Alice:
The Adaptation of Nonsense to Interactivity

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General Introduction

It's a world of sheer, chaotic terror and unmitigated bloodshed – that's the world she inhabits. So severe are her delusions, so fantastical and absurd, that at times it's difficult for me to listen. She speaks of a nightmare realm where everything seems bent on her destruction. Gigantic bayonet-toting ants and flesh-rending flowers. Carnivorous fish and fire-spewing abominations. The range of hellish creatures populating her world is dizzying. They are, on balance, more deranged than the most demonic Bosch painting.

– Greg Roensch, *Wilson's Casebook*

As this citation, taken from the booklet that was packaged with the video game *American McGee's Alice*, illustrates, “McGee's Wonderland is not a whimsical dreamscape but a dark nightmare realm” (Jenkins 124). This re-imagined version of Wonderland is part of what makes *American McGee's Alice* (2000) an interesting adaptation of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and *Through the Looking Glass, and What Alice Found There* (1871). Additionally, as a video game, *American McGee's Alice* offers an interactive experience of the nonsensical world that Carroll created. It is not surprising then that research has been done on this video game adaptation. Rosa Paasse, for example, has made a narratological analysis in her bachelor's thesis, in which she compares the story of both *American McGee's Alice* and its sequel to those of the novels they are based on. Tracey McKenna has done something similar in her master's thesis, in which she focuses on how different media employ distinctive strategies in order to entertain their audience. Yet, neither McKenna nor Paasse have foregrounded the “linguistic and logical fallacies” (qtd. in Tigges, 556) which make up an inextricable part of Carroll's novels. That is, these analyses have not been structured around the idea that Carroll's novels belong to the genre of literary nonsense. Through Wim Tigges' theoretical text *An Anatomy of Literary Nonsense*, this paper will explore the adaptation of the nonsense element of Carol's literary work in the video game *American McGee's*

Alice.

Video games are an interesting medium that allows for storytelling through an interactive experience. Furthermore, they combine narrative with a set of rules that structure the interactive element. Hence, besides analyzing a story, studying a video game also requires an examination of its game world and underlying rules that limit a player's possibilities for interaction. These two aspects will be individually examined in two chapters which are preceded by a chapter on the important aspects of literary nonsense. In the first chapter, the parameters for the analysis of the adaptation will be established and explained, thus providing the framework for the analyses conducted in chapter two and three. The chapters on the story and interactive aspects of the game will have their own respective conclusions on how the nonsensical character of the source material is translated to different elements of the video game. With regard to the interactive aspect of the game, an examination of the presentation and internal design structure of the game world will be conducted, along with an analysis of the actions the player is allowed to perform within the virtual space. Accordingly, the necessity for rules in a video game will be discussed. Conversely, the story elements that will be analyzed are the narrative of the video game, its use of dialogue, and the main character's story arc. Additionally, as previously mentioned, a re-imagined Wonderland is presented through the game. Therefore, the game goes beyond merely presenting the world of Carroll's novels in a new, interactive medium: by changing Wonderland, the game positions itself as a reinterpretation of its source material. Moreover, the game serves as a sequel to Carroll's work by using it as a foundation in order to tell an entirely new story. These are important factors that need to be considered when analyzing the video game. Consequently, they will be taken into account when considering to what extent nonsense is an important part of the adaptation. Hence, the conclusion of the paper will reflect on the combined findings of the individual chapters, as well as relate these findings to how the game positions itself in relation to its source-material.

The Sensical Application of Nonsense:

An Analysis of the Nonsensical Character of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*

“As regards the corpus of literary nonsense, the only agreement one discovers in a handful of anthologies and a score or so of scholarly works is that Lear and Carroll are very rarely omitted” (Tigges 226). This excerpt from Wim Tigges’ *An Anatomy of Literary Nonsense* illustrates both the importance of Carroll's texts within the corpus of literary nonsense, and the prominent role of nonsensical aspects in his works. Hence, nonsense appears to be an important characteristic of Carroll’s novels. Before an analysis of the video game adaptation of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* with regards to nonsense can be conducted, it is necessary to determine the function of nonsense in the source-material. Among the research done on literary nonsense, Tigges' work is one of the most complete studies. He treats nonsense as a genre with its own conventions, semiotic and stylistic means, themes, and motives. Moreover, his work contains a discussion of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Hence, this chapter will provide clarity regarding the nonsensical character of Carroll's work by examining Tigges' general ideas about nonsense, while also cross referencing these ideas with other research on the Alice novels.

According to Tigges, nonsense is a literary genre: “Since it is only as to its formal characteristics that nonsense may belong to different kinds of literature, I prefer to retain the term 'genre' for the corpus of texts discussed in this study” (50). Accordingly, he has identified its conventions and characterizes it by four essential elements: “an unresolved tension between presence and absence of meaning, lack of emotional involvement, playlike presentation, and an emphasis, stronger than in any other type of literature, upon its verbal nature” (55). Since Tigges has defined the characteristics of the genre of nonsense by “working on the assumption that Lear's 'Complete Nonsense' as well as Carroll's Alice books and *The Hunting of the Snark* are nonsense texts in their own right” (3), it can be assumed that Tigges' essential elements of nonsense are present in both Alice novels. Of greater importance with regard to adaptation then, is how these elements function within the novels.

When studying the presentation of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland's* text, it becomes clear that multiple forms of poetry are interwoven into its prose, which results in a playful presentation. The mouse's tale in chapter three for example, is presented in the shape of the tail of a mouse. Additionally, throughout the novel, prose is interrupted to present familiar nursery rhymes in the form of poetry. In these rhymes, words are often changed for the purpose of humor. This ties in to another feature of the novel's playful presentation: its abundant use of puns and verbal jokes. Again, the mouse's tale serves as an example as his story is shaped like a tail. Within the same chapter as the mouse's story, a historical account is turned into a dry subject meant to dry the, at the time wet, Alice. The use of verbal jokes ties into the second striking element of Carroll's text: its abundant use of dialogue. Alice's journey through Wonderland is structured through her encountering new eccentric characters in every chapter of the story and extensively conversing with each of them about the nonsensical nature of this new world she is exploring. As a result, the world of Wonderland is shaped for the reader through dialogue instead of exposition. In this sense, words create the nonsense of Wonderland instead of describing it. Through this presentation, emotional involvement is kept at bay. To illustrate this, Tigges uses the executioner's reaction to the Queen of Hearts' command: "The threatening phrase 'Off with her head!' is immediately reduced to a mere phrase, as [...] the executioner finds he cannot behead the Cheshire Cat because its head is not attached to a body" (160). As this example illustrates, the implications of a threatening situation are reduced, as words are rendered meaningless. This in turn precludes emotional involvement. Finally, there is the element of unresolved tension between presence and absence of meaning. As Tigges points out, this can be found near the ending of the novel, in which Alice's journey through Wonderland is explained in "terms of ordinary cause and effect, place and time" (160). That is, her journey turns out to be just a dream: "The meaning of the whole book is, as it were, taken away by the explanation (it was a "curious dream" after all), but not retracted" (160).

Ultimately, these elements serve as a way to foreground the use of text to tell a story. The playful presentation of the text draws attention to itself: it makes readers aware that they are, in fact,

reading a text. Moreover, language is shown to have precedence over reality as the spoken word is used to shape the reality of Wonderland through verbal jokes and puns. Additionally, this use of language precludes the reader's emotional involvement with the events of the narrative as words can render the implications of any situation meaningless. Finally, taking away the meaning of the story through its ending puts an emphasis on the medium.

Hence, it does not seem strange that Danuta Zadworna-Fjellestad sees *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* as an example of meta-fiction that implicitly refers to its own existence as a text. She argues that Carroll's text is "linguistically self-reflexive" (31), and that "to a high degree the medium becomes the text's message" (31). Additionally, similar to Tigges' notion of playful presentation, she observes how Carroll's nonsense is often created through a misunderstanding of words as a result of the incorrect application of linguistic rules. She provides numerous examples of this phenomenon, one of them being the Gryphon "explaining the noun 'lesson' as formed from the verb 'to lessen' (23). From this, she concludes that "logic is turned against language to expose the inadequacy of the medium of communication" (23). Similar to Zadworna-Fjellestad, Tigges considers Carroll's nonsense as being based on rules, as he sees Carroll's work as "the ornamental, rational type of nonsense which plays around with the logic of language, and manifests itself in particular in the various types of word- and letter-play" (85). However, he distinguishes between literary nonsense and meta-fiction, based on the fact that nonsense "does not make itself its own subject (133). Yet, this reasoning is problematic since it does not distinguish between different types of meta-fiction. In her text, Linda Hutcheon makes a distinction between overt and covert meta-fictional texts: "overt forms of narcissism are present in texts in which the self-consciousness and self-reflection are clearly evident, usually explicitly thematized or even allegorized within the 'fiction.' In its covert form, however, this process would be structuralized, internalized, actualized. Such a text would, in fact, be self-reflective, but not necessarily self-conscious" (*Narcissitic Narrative* 23). When discussing the covertly linguistic variety of meta-fiction, she notes that "the models here are less easily discussed in generalized non-textual terms. One, however, would be the

riddle or joke, a form which directs the reader's attention to language itself, to its potential for semantic duplicity. Language can both convey and conceal meaning. Other generative models are the pun and the anagram (34). As earlier discussed, jokes and verbal puns are abundant in Carroll's text and are an important element of its playful character. Additionally, Hutcheon's conclusion about the covertly linguistic variety of meta-fiction mirrors Tigges' argumentation of Carroll's nonsense being based on rules: “[linguistic covert meta-fictional texts] find their narrative structure in a punning or anagrammatic word play inherent in the linguistic logic of the text and title” (34). Consequently, the type of nonsense that “plays around with the logic of language” (Tigges 85), which Tigges considers the Alice books to be a part of, seem to have a covert meta-narrational element ingrained in one of the features that makes them a nonsense text: their playful presentation. The characteristics that make Zadworna-Fjellestad see Carroll's text as an example of meta-fiction then, are a part of the Alice novels' nonsensical character. As a result, the novel can still be perceived as a nonsense since it adheres to Tigges' prime characteristic of literary nonsense: “the prime characteristic of nonsense not to make a 'point' or draw a moral” (50), while at the same time displaying the limitations of its medium by foregrounding text over story.

In conclusion, nonsense plays an essential role in Carroll's work. It gives the world of Wonderland its unique character, and it provides the novel with its more uncommon methods of storytelling. Additionally, it injects *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* with comedic elements and a sense of playfulness. Most important however, is that the use of nonsense brings the text to the foreground and exposes its limitations. Hence, since these features can be considered as elements intrinsic to nonsense, one would expect to find them in an adaptation of the novels.

Step into the Senselessness:

An Analysis of the Nonsensical Qualities of *American McGee's Alice's* Interactive Component

The defining quality of the medium of video games is its interactive nature. Contrary to the audiences of other media, video game players are not just presented with a story. Instead, they are allowed to participate in a story, thus enabling them to explore the multitude of rich environments that the virtual world of the narrative provides. Hence, when analyzing a video game, an analysis of the interactive component is essential. Consequently, this chapter focuses on the way in which *American McGee's Alice* adapts the nonsense element of its source-material through the presentation and structure of its game world, and the means of interaction with that game world. Additionally, there will be a reflection on how nonsense is supposed to take place in a medium that is governed by rules as a result of its interactive nature.

In *A Theory of Adaptation* Linda Hutcheon describes the ability of video games to create explorable worlds as one of the medium's greatest strengths with regard to adapting a story: “what is [...] relevant in a game adaptation is the fact that players can inhabit a known fictional, often striking, visual world of digital animation” (13). Instead of a linear experience, the player is able to navigate through the world in which the adapted story takes place. Hence, “what gets adapted here is a heterocosm, literally an 'other world' or cosmos, complete, of course, with the stuff of a story – settings, characters, events, and situations (Hutcheon 14). Similarly, in *Game Design as Narrative Architecture*, Henry Jenkins recognizes the importance of world portrayal in video games as he argues for “an understanding of game designers less as storytellers and more as narrative architects” (121). Referring to his older work, in which he made the case that “the core narratives behind many games center around the struggle to explore, map, and master contested spaces” (122), Jenkins posits that “games fit within a much older tradition of spatial stories, which have often taken the form of hero's odysseys, quest myths, or travel narratives” (122). According to Jenkins writers of such stories “seem constantly to be pushing against the limits of what can be accomplished in a printed text” (122). However, games “may more fully realize the spatiality of these stories, giving a

much more immersive and compelling representation of their narrative worlds” (122). In this sense, the digital world of a video game becomes an important tool in conveying its story. Hence, one would expect the visual presentation and design of *American McGee's Alice's* game world to reflect the element of nonsense present in its source-material.

Throughout the game, nonsense seems to be part of the visual presentation of the different locations that make up *American McGee's Alice's* game world. This is mainly achieved through structuring the world in such a way that seemingly disconnected environments are placed besides each other. This is demonstrated for instance in the second location in the game: “The Fortress of Doors”. This area directly follows “The Village of the Doomed”, and Alice is brought from one place to the other by a gnome flying a blimp. As “The Fortress of Doors” consists of a fortress built on a rock floating in black nothingness¹, it is completely unclear how its location relates to that of “The Village of the Doomed”. Similarly, Alice leaves “The Fortress of Doors” by drinking a potion that shrinks her and allows her to access a portal that transports her to a new location consisting of a valley. Again the player is transported from one location to the next without knowing how the two places relate to each other. Even separate areas within the locations themselves appear to be illogically connected. “The Fortress of Doors” consists of four different sections. The first section takes place around the fortresses' stone walls, and as the player progresses a situation will arise in which the player must enter a room situated within the walls of the fortress. However, rather than the expected enclosed area, the room within the walls does not have a ceiling. Instead, there is an open sky with a swirling vortex of different shades of purple and blue moving towards a singular point in the distance². As the player explores the room further, he or she will discover that it has a stairs with a balcony on which the portal to the second section is located. Subsequently, the second section of the location takes place on a series of platforms floating in open space³. Similar to the different locations within the game, this section within “The Fortress of Doors” appears to exist in

¹ See fig. 1 in the appendix

² See fig. 2 in the appendix

³ See fig. 3 in the appendix

isolation from the other sections. This is comparable to Tigges' findings on Carroll's Alice novels: "One of the most striking aspects of the longer nonsense text in general, which is aptly illustrated in *AW* and *TLG*, is its episodic nature" (151). Although Carroll's two Alice texts are presented as units in the form of novels, the individual chapters of these stories seem interconnected only in the most minimal of ways. Hence, the Alice novels can be seen as a series of separate, fairly brief stories with their own characters and their own internal logic. This episodic nature is reflected in *American McGee's Alice* through the presentation and connection of the different locations. Instead of naturally flowing into one another, the locations are separated through portals as if they were different universes. The video game version of Wonderland is the contrast of holistic: a nonsensical collection of contrasting locations.

Although the visual presentation of the different locations in the video game emphasizes the element of nonsense present in Carroll's work, their internal design structures the game in a goal oriented manner that works against establishing Wonderland as a nonsensical place. In *Video Game Spaces: Image, Play, and Structure in 3D Game Worlds*, Michael Nitsche argues for a space-driven model that "provides an abstract model for space as the structural force of interactive events" (187). Through the design of the interactive space, a game-designer is able to structure the potential ways that players interact with the game-world: the game-designer is providing players with a fixed set of options by limiting the means of interaction. Consequently, players become aware of what they can and cannot do within the game through exploring its interactive space. As Nitsche explains: "rules of the game can be written into the playing field, and when game space is structured, rules are structured to shape possible actions in this environment" (189). Therefore, spatial forms determine how a game is played, and in turn experienced. Moreover, the structure of the game world influences the narrative of a game as "a designer of 3D video games uses evocative narrative elements in the virtual space and the interactive access to stimulate the player's participation and comprehension of the game world" (159). In order to tell a story, video games use their interactive space. Consequently, using the design of the game-world in order to structure players' means of

interaction largely determines how the story of a game is conveyed. In regard to this, Nitsche distinguishes three different spatial forms in video games: tracks/trails, labyrinths/mazes, and arenas. Although *American McGee's Alice* makes use of all three spatial forms, its overall structure has the form of an invisible track. As Nitsche explains: “So-called rail-shooters move or guide the player along invisible tracks that allow little divergence from a given path. The world might appear to be accessible but can be navigated only in the confines of a very limited set track” (175).

Although *American McGee's Alice* cannot be considered a rail-shooter, the world of the game is laid out like one long path, and similar to rail-shooters, Wonderland can only be navigated within the confines of this fairly limited path. According to Nitsche, this type of track structures the game world in a way which “is not optimized for velocity alone but for a variety of interactions. The track turns into something like an adventure obstacle course” (175). Although speed of movement is of no importance to the game, its spacial structure does emphasize linear progression, since the player is rarely required to move in any other direction than forward: the player is traversing obstacles with the goal of making it to the end of a section in order to be allowed access to the next section of the game. Consequently, the spatial form of the game conveys a story in which Wonderland serves as an obstacle course of physical challenges that needs to be conquered in order for Alice to reach the destination of her journey. This means that, through its spatial structure, the game interprets the nonsensical world of Wonderland for the player. Instead of exploring Wonderland and being forced to interpret its nonsensical nature, the player is guided through its different environments towards a clearly defined goal without having to ever question the internal logic of the game world.

Similar to the spatial forms of the different locations in the game, the means of interaction in *American McGee's Alice* work against establishing Wonderland as a nonsensical place. As mentioned before, the Wonderland of *American McGee's Alice* is structured as an adventure obstacle course. The obstacles in the game consist of hazards that need to be avoided or enemies that need to be combated. Hence, the input commands⁴ at the player's disposal either allow them to

⁴ Actions a player can perform with their character in the virtual space.

navigate the game space or attack enemies. The input commands for navigation consist of walking, running, jumping, and in some cases climbing. These commands allow the player to navigate from one platform to the next, and avoid hazards such as spikes or bottomless pits. Compared to other video games that allow the player to navigate a three dimensional space in a similar fashion, these movement options are limited. The options for combat, on the other hand, are plentiful, as they expand as the player progresses through the game. Although the player initially only has access to a single weapon, they gain access to an additional eight weapons as they progress through the game, which then allowed for different strategic approaches to combat. These expansive attack options, combined with the plethora of enemy characters, and a limited number of movement options emphasize combat as the main form of interaction within the game world. As most of the enemy designs are recycled numerous times throughout the game, interaction becomes predictable as combat scenarios start to reoccur. These reoccurring scenarios ultimately structure the game, and subsequently work against the player perceiving Wonderland as a nonsensical place.

Finally, what severely limits nonsense in a video game setting is the medium's need for rules. Contrary to more traditional, representational media, games are simulations, since they involve an interactive element. Thus, they necessarily need rules to structure their game worlds and contextualize their play element. In his essay "Simulation Versus Narrative: Introduction to Ludology", Gonzalo Frasca points out that traditional media "excel at producing both descriptions of traits and sequences of events (narrative)" (223), while video games present their characters, settings and events through a model that "reacts to certain stimuli (input data, pushing buttons, joystick movements), according to a set of conditions" (223). This means that, through an understanding of the system of the video game, the player is able to alter the events that take place within it. An understanding of a system, however, relies on rules; as Frasca points out: "The key trait of simulational media is that it relies on rules: rules that can be manipulated, accepted, rejected, and even contested" (229). In the case of *American McGee's Alice*, a nonsensical world is being

presented through a medium that relies on the systematic application of rules. Thus, the nonsense of Wonderland is burdened by an internalized form of sense.

It could be argued that these rules are a necessity: after all, a game cannot be played without rules. While it is true that rules are an indispensable element of the semiotic structure of simulation, it is still possible for a video game to feature different sets of rules that apply in different sections of the game. This would tie in nicely with an important theme of the source material: change. As Tigges notes in his discussion of the Alice novels: “one could in fact characterize each of the twelve chapters in terms of what aspect of Alice's world is metamorphosed” (153)⁵. Changing the rules of the game from location to location would have reflected a theme of the source material in the defining element of the new medium: its interactivity. Moreover, it would have placed players in Alice's shoes as they would have constantly needed to re-interpret and adapt to an ever changing, nonsensical world. Instead, *American McGee's Alice* provides players with an easily interpretable Wonderland: a world built on consistent rules, and as a result, barely nonsensical.

In conclusion, the interactive element of *American McGee's Alice* makes little use of nonsense. Although Wonderland has a nonsensical presentation, the track structure of the overall game world provides a clear incentive to move forward. As such, the objective of the game is always clear and the player has no incentive to stop and re-evaluate his- or her surroundings. Consequently, the nonsensical presentation of the game world recedes to the background where it serves as decor, and does not need to be acknowledged by the player. Additionally, the input commands at the player's disposal are focused around the game's emphatic combat mechanics. This results in the player constantly having to fight for Alice's life. As a result, the lack of emotional involvement, considered an essential element of nonsense by Tigges, is not present. Instead, the player is very much invested in Alice during these life threatening situations. Finally, the consistent internal logic, created through the game's rules, structures Wonderland and the game, subsequently

⁵ See table 1 in appendix

draining them from potentially nonsensical moments. The result is an interactive experience of Wonderland that barely acknowledges its nonsensical nature

Alice's Return to Dreamland: An Analysis of *American McGee's* Story Elements

Even though the most important element of a video game is its interactivity, its story elements may not be forgotten. After all, story is what motivates the player to take action. Therefore, this chapter focuses on the way in which *American McGee's Alice* adapts the nonsense element of its source-material through both narrative and dialogue. Additionally, the story arc of the main character, Alice, will be analyzed.

American McGee's Alice's narrative is structured around a central conflict which causes it to lose its nonsensical character. In her master thesis, Tracey McKenna observes that most adaptations of Carroll's Alice novels feature a restructured narrative: “adapters tend to incorporate a more pronounced major conflict so that Alice’s adventure follows the conventions set out by the classical paradigm” (McKenna 20). Paraphrasing Gianetti and Leach, McKenna explains the classical paradigm as “a model where the protagonist takes on many smaller conflicts in the rising action of the plot, so that he/she is prepared for the final battle where he/she overcomes the major conflict, antagonist, of the narrative” (20). This model is a great tool for storytelling in video games, since the interactive nature of games often requires them to start with smaller challenges or conflicts that slowly increase in difficulty as the player masters the mechanics of the interactive element of the game. Moreover, the classical paradigm provides the player with a clear, attainable goal. As Mark Wolf explains in *The Medium of the Video Game*:

The *narrational* point of view [in video games] is usually one concerning a goal-oriented main character. Although characters in a film or novel may be goal oriented, video games (and games in general) frequently rely more on the attainment of a particular goal and a win/lose distinction rather than on character and thematic development. Thus the main goal in the video game tends to be score oriented, conflict oriented, task oriented or some combination of these. (105)

Consequently, the use of the classical paradigm for the game adaptation of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* seems a sensible choice. Since Alice is cast in the role of the hero destined to defeat the

Queen of Hearts and end her tyrannical reign, the player is presented with a clear goal to work towards. In this sense, the enemies that inhabit the game world, along with confrontations with characters such as the Duchess and the Jabberwock, serve as smaller challenges that lead up to the final confrontation with the Queen of Hearts. Additionally, they serve to allow the player to slowly master the combat mechanics of the game. The classical paradigm provides a story driven incentive to progress through the game. Yet, this comes at the cost of the story's nonsensical character, since it turns the player's journey through Wonderland into a causal process. As previously discussed, the source-material seems to have an episodic nature with the events of individual chapters barely relating to those of others. Tigges quotes Alexander Taylor with regard to this aspect of the text: "[the story of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*] grew out of separate bits and pieces linked together more by the association of ideas than by cause and effect" (152). Tigges concludes that "the Alice books can be seen as simultaneously internally disconnected and coherent, and that the tension between coherence and lack of unity is characteristic of nonsense" (152). This characteristic of nonsense is lost in *American McGee's Alice* as the antagonist of its story is established at the beginning of the game and the subsequent journey through Wonderland is turned into a quest with the final goal of confronting her. Restructuring the narrative in accordance with the classical paradigm efficiently ties the story of the game to the interactive elements. However, it simultaneously imbues the sequence of events of the story with a sustained causal relationship, thus ultimately robbing it of its nonsensical character.

Furthermore, similar to its story, the dialogue in *American McGee's Alice* misses the nonsensical character of its source material. Throughout the Alice novels, a heavy emphasis is placed upon dialogue. According to Tigges this comes with the genre, since literary nonsense puts "an emphasis, stronger than in any other type of literature, upon its verbal nature" (Tigges 55). Additionally, regarding the novel itself Tigges quotes Winfried Nöth when mentioning that "the tension between meaning and non-meaning is usually presented in conversation rather than in description" (151). This poses a problem for a video game adaptation as the medium focuses on

action and, as a result, often contains minimal dialogue. Moreover, as discussed in the Internet video-show *Extra Credits*, video games have to dedicate part of their dialogue to providing the player with information (“Game Writing”). This means that parts of the already minimal dialogue within most games is not used for narrative or characterization purposes. Instead, it is used to inform the player regarding the modus operandi of newly acquired items and abilities, or to present the player with options regarding particular routes or actions he/she can take. In *American McGee's Alice*, the Cheshire Cat plays a double-role as both a character within the game world and a disembodied voice that informs the player about newly acquired items⁶. For example, when the player acquires a croquet mallet in the game, the Cheshire Cat comments on this by stating: “Here's a riddle. When is a croquet mallet like a billy club? I'll tell you: whenever you want it to be” (*American McGee's Alice*). In this instance, dialogue is used to inform the player that the newly obtained item functions as a weapon. Additionally, the phrase is in accordance with the overall macabre tone of the game. Moreover, presenting the information as a riddle serves as a nod to the source-material's frequent use of questions and riddles. Although this is effective use of dialogue, it does not possess the nonsensical quality found in much of the dialogue in Carroll's novels. Other dialogue found in *American McGee's Alice* takes place as part of cinematics⁷, and sees characters as the Mock Turtle and the Caterpillar either providing the player with expositions or giving them hints in how to correctly play the game⁸. Similar to those with the Cheshire Cat, these instances of dialogue are not nonsensical. Consequently, one of the elements that was most important to the nonsensical nature of Carroll's work is neutered, and as such, a big part of the Alice books' nonsensical quality is lost in their transposition from novel to video game.

Unlike the narrative and dialogue of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, the story arc of its main character does not have a nonsensical character. Rather, it is the result of a reaction to the nonsensical character of Wonderland. While a similar story arc is present in *American McGee's*

⁶ See figures 4 and 5 in the appendix

⁷ Instance in which control is momentarily taken away from the player in order to present something in the form of a small animated motion picture

⁸ See fig. 6 in the appendix

Alice, it does not stem from Alice's reaction to her nonsensical surroundings. Throughout Carroll's novel, Alice loses certainty of her own identity and eventually re-acquires it. This arc is initiated in the first two chapters of the book where Alice starts to question her identity as a result of all the size changes her body has undergone: "how queer is everything today! And yesterday things went on just as usual. I wonder if I've been changed in the night? Let me think: was I the same when I got up this morning? I almost remember feeling a little different. But if I am not the same, the next question is, Who in the world am I" (26). The arc is finalized in chapter twelve when, "having finally achieved her true identity, her true size and her true judgement, Alice pronounces the liberating sentence: 'you are nothing but a pack of cards'" (Tigges 160). Moreover, according to Tigges, the "uncertainty about identity is embodied all through *AW* in the helpless way in which the familiar texts of nursery rhymes get changed" (155). Similar to how the arc is tied to nonsense through its initiation, its finalization is also connected to the nonsensical character of Wonderland: through acquiring her true identity Alice is able to reject the nonsense of Wonderland, subsequently breaking its spell and realizing that her journey was a dream. Alice's story arc in *American McGee's Alice* is comparable to the one of Alice in Carroll's story: she also loses, and subsequently reclaims, her identity. However, the arc is not initiated through nonsense; rather, it is the result of psychological trauma. *American McGee's Alice* establishes Alice's loss of identity through an opening cinematic, and through extradiegetic material in the form of a small booklet packaged with the game. These make clear that Alice has lost her family through a fire, and as a result suffers from survivor's guilt that ultimately causes her to lose her grip on reality. This results in her being sent to an asylum where she is treated for her insanity and catatonia. After nearly ten years of being committed, she slowly starts to show signs of recovery. This is the moment when Alice returns to Wonderland and the game puts the player in control of Alice. Eventually, through an encounter with the Caterpillar⁹, Alice learns that Wonderland has taken on its new macabre form because of Alice's own insanity. The Caterpillar explains: "because your mind is fouled by self deception, even your

⁹ See fig. 7 of the appendix

fantasies have fragmented into tortured versions of themselves” (*American McGee's Alice*).

Moreover, her return to Wonderland is not just to defeat the Queen of Hearts in order to end her reign: by defeating the Queen Alice will also save herself. Through her insanity and catatonia, Alice has lost her identity. However, by defeating the Queen of Hearts, she can reclaim her identity.

Similar to the arc found in the source material, the finalization of Alice's story arc in the game is tied to the nature of Wonderland: by reclaiming her identity, Alice overcomes her insanity, and simultaneously rejects the macabre form Wonderland has taken due to of her mental illness.

Consequently, Alice's story arc allows the game to engage with, and expand upon, the novel's concept of Wonderland as a dream world in a meaningful way. Since Wonderland is a dream, it reflects the psyche of whoever it belongs to. This explains why the Wonderland of a traumatized, young-adult Alice looks like a macabre, horror-like landscape. Moreover, it also explains why the Wonderland in the source-material is so nonsensical: it is part of the mind of a young child with a vast imagination that is still free from years of life experience. Although Alice's character arc in the video game does not engage with nonsense, it does give insight on how the game relates to its source-material as an adaptation as well as how it expands on its ideas.

In conclusion, the story elements of *American McGee's Alice* display no nonsensical qualities. Structuring the narrative in accordance with the classical paradigm gives the video game a clear goal to work towards. Coincidentally, this structure prevents an unresolved tension between meaning and absence of meaning, which Tigges sees as essential to nonsense, since events are causally connected. The dialogue, while displaying a playful quality at times, is reduced to a minimum and contains no nonsense as it is forced to accommodate to its new function: providing information to the player. Finally, while the character arc attributed to Alice does not display any nonsense, it does provide an interesting perspective on the nonsensical character of the Wonderland of Carroll's novels.

The No-Nonsense Attitude Towards Wonderland:

The Lack of Nonsense in *American McGee's Alice*

Using theory on nonsense developed by Wim Tigges, this thesis has shown that although nonsense plays a big role in Lewis Carroll's Alice novels, it does not seem to be the focus of Rogue Entertainment's video game adaptation *American McGee's Alice*. An analysis of both the interactive and story aspects of the video game has shown that nonsense has a small role in the work: it is part of the visual presentation of Wonderland. Hence, as an adaptation with regard to the nonsensical character of its source material, *American McGee's Alice* is not successful. However, a unique perspective on Carroll's Alice novels is provided by the game through its dark, macabre re-imagining of Wonderland. Additionally, in the context of the video game as a sequel, one aspect of the source-material, Wonderland being a dream, is explored and expanded upon: as a dream, Wonderland serves as a reflection of Alice's psyche and is directly influenced by Alice's mental stability. This new premise has enormous potential and is capitalized upon as it used to explain the transformation of Wonderland into its macabre incarnation as a result of young-adult Alice having suffered intense psychological trauma at a young age. Moreover, this premise implicitly explains the nonsensical character of Wonderland in Carroll's Alice stories: it is the result of a child's mind that is still filled with wonder and is partly untainted by the causal nature of reality. As a result, the premise ties adaptation to source-material in an interesting sequential relationship that allows for more sequels with potential for new interpretations of Wonderland, which in turn could be radically different from both Carroll's novels as well as the video-game.

Of course, the research that was done in order to arrive at these conclusions has its limitations. For one, the research has an exclusive focus on nonsense. As the length of this research only permits a limited focus on nonsense, others ways in which *American McGee's Alice* relates to Carroll's Alice novels goes undiscussed. Additionally, constraints regarding the length of this paper result in some aspects of the game not being analyzed. The music and sound effects that accompany different locations and aspects of interaction with the game are a good example of this. Another

example constitutes the lack of discussion of characters beside the main character and the main antagonist (which is solely discussed in her function to the plot). Moreover, another aspect of the game that was not discussed in this paper is its unique control scheme which resulted from the game being built with technology that was commonly used to produce games focused on shooting guns from a first-person perspective. Finally, in 2011 a direct sequel to *American McGee's Alice* was released, entitled *Alice: Madness Returns*. As analyzing that game with regards to nonsense was beyond the scope of this research, it would make for an interesting topic for further research.

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Appendix



Figure 1.
Screenshot of the *Fortress of Doors* located in black nothingness. From *Let's Play American McGee's Alice – Part 2*; FrozenFoxy, Youtube, 22 Oct. 2011; Web; 6 Feb. 2016



Figure 2.
Screenshot of the room within the outer wall of the *Fortress of Doors*. From *Let's Play American McGee's Alice – Part 3*; FrozenFoxy, Youtube, 23 Oct. 2011; Web; 6 Feb. 2016



Figure 3.

Screenshot of section two of the *Fortress of Doors*. The area consists of platforms floating in a swirling vortex of colors. It is unclear how this area relates to any other location in the game. From *Let's Play American McGee's Alice – Part 3*; FrozenFoxy, Youtube, 23 Oct. 2011; Web; 6 Feb. 2016

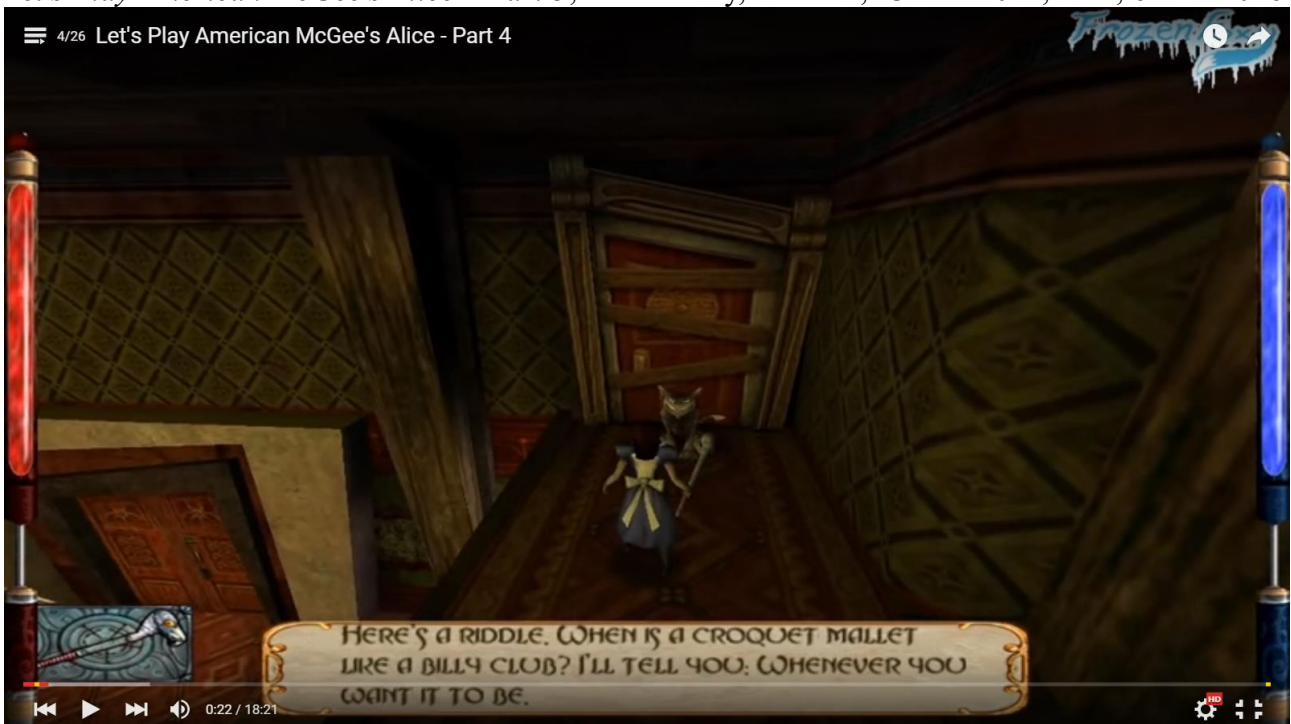


Figure 4.

Screenshot of the Cheshire cat informing the player. The character is physically present in the game space. From *Let's Play American McGee's Alice – Part 4*; FrozenFoxy, Youtube, 23 Oct. 2011; Web; 6 Feb. 2016

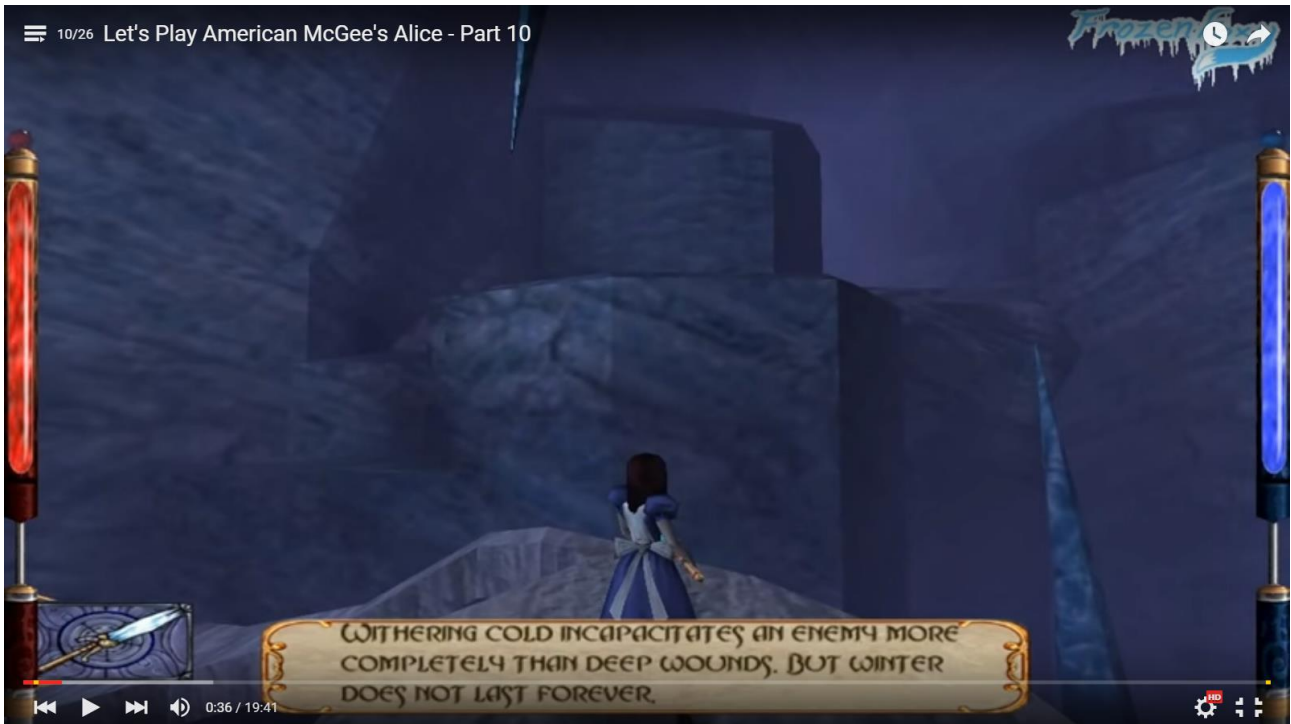


Figure 5.

Screenshot of the Cheshire cat informing the player. His voice can be heard but the character is not physically present in the game space. From *Let's Play American McGee's Alice – Part 10*; FrozenFoxy, Youtube, 25 Oct. 2011; Web; 6 Feb. 2016

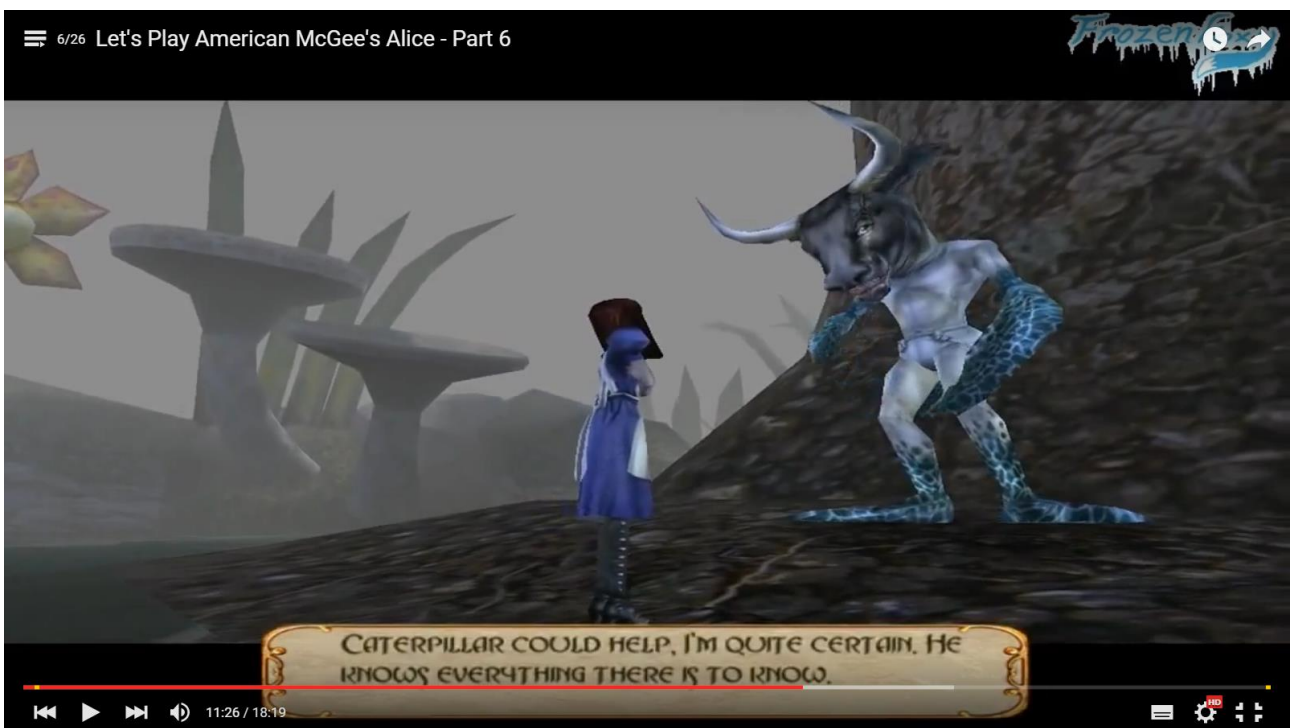


Figure 6.

Screenshot of a cinematic in which the Mock Turtle informs the player. The characters can be portrayed from a different angle now that control is momentarily taken away from the player. From *Let's Play American McGee's Alice – Part 6*; FrozenFoxy, Youtube, 24 Oct. 2011; Web; 6 Feb. 2016

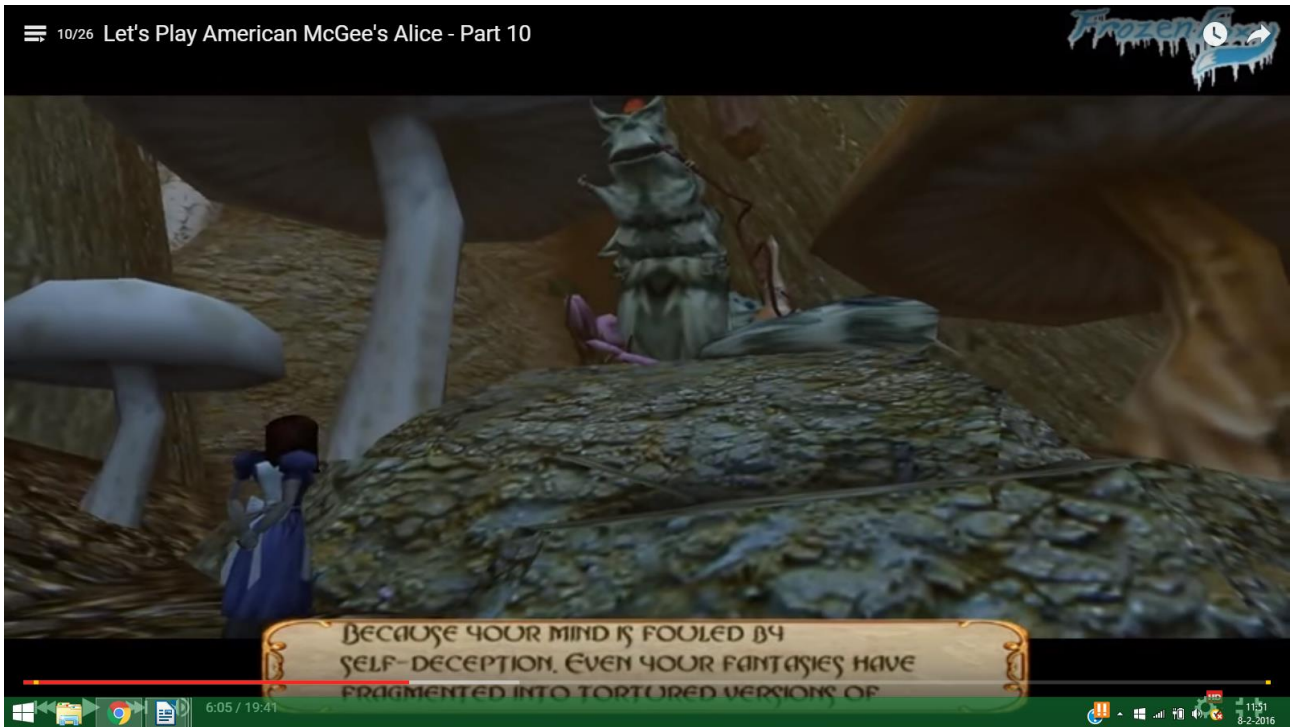


Figure 7.

Screenshot of the Caterpillar explaining why Wonderland has turned into a dark, macabre place. From *Let's Play American McGee's Alice – Part 10*; FrozenFoxy, Youtube, 25 Oct. 2011; Web; 6 Feb. 2016

Table 1.

Chapters of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* together with the aspects subject to change in each of them.

Chapter in <i>Alice's Adventures in Wonderland</i>	Title of chapter	Aspect subject to change
I	Down the Rabbit-Hole	Nature (disruption of order)
II	The Pool of Tears	Body, Measures and Mathematics
III	A Caucus-Race and a Long Tale	Language
IV	The Rabbit Sends in a Little Bill	Habitation
V	Advice from a Caterpillar	Communication
VI	Pig and Pepper	Social Order
VII	A Mad Tea-Party	Time
VIII	The Queen's Croquet-Ground	Games
IX	The Mock-Turtle's Story	Ethics and Education
X	The Lobster-Quadrille	Dance
XI	Who Stole the Tarts?	Justice
XII	Alice's Evidence	Order (restoration)

Source: *An Anatomy of Literary Nonsense*; Wim Tigges, 1988; Print; 7 Feb. 2016.

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- het overnemen van gedrukt materiaal zoals boeken, tijdschriften of encyclopedieën zonder aanhalingstekens en verwijzing;
- het opnemen van een vertaling van bovengenoemde teksten zonder aanhalingstekens en verwijzing;
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