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Games and Self-Imagining, a Comparative Media Perspective[1]

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Comparing Media

The aim of this article is to shed light on the mechanisms evoking self-imagining in different media with a focus on computer games. Before zooming in on the topic of self-imagining, however, it is useful to ask to what extent computer games can be compared to traditional media such as literature and film. At the 2005 Digital Arts and Culture conference, Espen Aarseth presented a short paper titled "The Perception of Doors: Fiction vs. Simulation in Games." In this paper he claims that there is a fundamental difference between 'the virtual' as it is found in online worlds, computer games, virtual reality environments etc. on the one hand and fiction as it exists in traditional, fixed, non-participatory media such as novels, films, comics etc. on the other. Important to note is that Aarseth does not aim for an extension of the notion of fiction so that it would encompass computer games but rather declares the independence of the virtual realm to which he refers as "a different type of world, between fiction and our world" (2), a quality Jesper Juul will later describe as half-real (Juul 2005). For Aarseth, computer games simulate a reality rather than narrate it and should hence be seen as fundamentally different from fiction rather than as one of its modalities. If we were to accept this point of view, comparison between more traditional narrative media (such as literature and film) and computer games would turn become problematic.

As a definition of 'reality', Aarseth refers to Philip K. Dick's somewhat cynical description of it as "that which, when you stop believing in it, doesn't go away" (quoted in Aarseth 2005, p. 1). Fiction, then, is that which is imagined and will automatically go away when a person stops imagining. For Aarseth, reality is that which exists independently from a person whereas fiction cannot exist without someone imagining it. The virtual, then, is semi-real; it is not real in the sense that reality is real, but neither is it as exclusively dependent on the subjective imagination as fiction. As an illustration of the difference between the virtual and the fictional, Aarseth proposes to look at the phenomenon of painted-on doors in computer games. Because of a lack of computing power or design resources, or simply not to divert the player too much, many computer games contain objects such as doors which are not coded as entities of the simulation but exist only as dummy polygonal shapes or textures. When moving their avatar through a corridor, for example, a player could observe a door, try to walk through it, and only upon zooming in on it notice that it is a blown-up bitmap rather than a modelled door. These 'fake' doors, which are meant as mere ornament, often coexist with actually modelled doors that open. For Aarseth, the painted-on, ornamental doors are fictional because they only exist as a door when the player imagines them as such whereas modelled doors are virtual because they function as a real door within the simulated world. They are not

real in the sense that a real door is real, but they nonetheless function independently from the imagination in that they open and close within the simulated world.

If we were to accept Aarseth's radical distinction between the fictional and the virtual, comparing self-imagining across media would become problematic. If the status of doors in fictional forms such as novels and films is fundamentally different from that of virtual doors in computer games, then the same must be true for characters. And if the status of fictional characters is radically different from virtual ones, then our relation to them must be different from the outset as well. But are doors and characters in novels or films as radically different from those in games as Aarseth implies? Is the difference between, say, a door described in a novel and one shown in a film not at least as great? Indeed, it can be claimed that the shape of a door in a novel is 'invented' by the reader whereas that in a film can actually be seen! Is the question of what constitutes fiction then not a matter of cultural acceptance rather than essence, and is it not possible that games, as they move more firmly into the mainstream, will become accepted as just another manifestation of fiction like film has eventually been accepted? Aarseth's observations usefully point to a clash between different types of representation, but they hardly justify a claim to ontological difference. If we would transpose the discussion from the realm of computer games to that of toys, for example, Aarseth's position would imply that the eyes and mouths of LEGO men belong to an ontologically different category than their arms and legs because the latter can move and the former cannot. This article will take a more moderate position in claiming that, despite differences in engagement, the fictional and the virtual depend on the same imaginative faculties of a person and can therefore be studied and compared within one theoretical framework.

Playing the Imagination

The theoretical foundation of this article, mainly because of its dealing with self-imagining, will be American philosopher Kendall Walton's work on representation as make-believe (1976, 1990, 1993). Walton starts from the observation that imagining and make-believe are a fundamental part of human nature. Children spend large amounts of time on apparently purposeless and dysfunctional make-believe activities such as making up stories, acting them out, impersonating others, playing with toys, dressing up, imitating grown-ups, etc. They engage in these activities alone and with peers, adding an element of negotiation to the mix. Sometimes they start playing like that, without clearly identifiable triggers, and sometimes they start associating based on objects or events occurring in their environment, often using these objects as props in their play. Walton's claim, then, is that, as we grow up, whilst we obviously reduce the amount of time that we engage in make-believe, we far from ban it from our lives. Rather, we direct it towards a different category of objects and activities and we give it different names such as literature, art, culture, theatre, cinema etc. For Walton, the mechanisms that are at work when a grown-up looks at a painting or reads a book are the same as those triggering a child into imagining that they are a cowboy upon noticing a revolver-shaped tree branch. Artefacts devised for representing such as novels, films, paintings etc. are meant to trigger a person into a playful form of imagining. They seduce a person into imagining the scenes suggested by their words, colours or moving images. In Walton's terms, representation (or

mimesis) is a process whereby a person is prompted into imagining a scene and enters a game of make-believe in which the representing object serves as a prop.

Walton's work presents a useful alternative to perspectives such as the sender/message/receiver model derived from mass-communication theory and structuralist semiotic models in that it does not see a representation as such because of a supposed relationship with a real object (its referent) or because it is part of a linguistic or communicative act. Rather, in Walton's theory, an object represents something because it makes us imagine that something by drawing us into a game of make-believe. This is useful when we want to look at computer games as a form of representation in that it removes the need to double the computer as a sender or see the game as a 'message' from the game designer. Moreover, it removes the need to see game play as an endless series of communications between man and machine or visuals and interactivity as discrete signs or symbols. Rather, representation is seen as a process of imagining, of engaging the human ability to think of and visualise objects and scenes. Computer games are artefacts designed to engage us in imaginative play either alone or with others. Humans are imaginative creatures and we have devised a highly diverse set of tools for sharing that imagination of which a computer game is just one of the more recent manifestations.

Walton's framework is not entirely unproblematic, however. The most fundamental challenge it faces is the question of the status of non-fiction – say a newspaper article, a biography or an animal documentary – vis-à-vis the real world. On the one hand, the theory states that all representation is a matter of make-believe, of objects evoking scenes in the imagination of the beholder. On the other, Walton presents his ideas as a logical framework, as a theory of how fiction should be seen as a species of truth. By assigning a primary role to the imagination, however, the fundamental status of truth in fiction becomes shaky. When you accept that the meaning of images and text depends on someone's imagination, it becomes hard to claim that it consists of fundamental truths. Walton recognises this problem and makes several attempts at solving it. He fails to question the logical underpinnings of his theory, however, and, rather than rethink his notion of fictional truth, opts to redefine the concept of representation altogether by restricting it to fiction. Fiction only *represents* reality whereas non-fiction maintains "another relation that may obtain between representations and things in the world, (…) matching" (108). For Walton, "'matching' is complete correspondence between a representation and something in the world. (...) [A] man-picture matches a man if the man is in every detail exactly like 'the man in the picture'. A story matches a person if that person is and does everything that a character in the story is and does" (Ibid.). But how can a picture match a person in every respect when it is flat and static and how can a story do so when it fails to describe their every thought, wrinkle, heartbeat? In a way, Walton underestimates the power of his own make-believe framework which indeed makes all representation relative to a person's imagining, reinterpreting non-fiction as a question of intention and pretence. A documentary and a newspaper article are just as 'fictional' in the sense of 'imagined' as a movie or a novel except for the fact that they are *intended* and therefore *pretend* to correspond to a reality. Interestingly, when it comes to computer games, non-fiction was already a problematic category anyway as it is difficult to see how, say, a WWII game can be non-fictional when the outcome of its events are undecided, which is a prerequisite for it to qualify as a game.

Entertaining Alice

To evaluate the applicability of Walton's framework to cross-media comparative research into self-imagining, a case-study has been carried out. For ease of comparison, three instances of *Alice in Wonderland* were picked, i.e. the 1865 novel by Lewis Caroll, the 1951 Disney animated film and the 2000 computer game *American McGee's Alice* developed by Rogue Entertainment. The main goal of the analysis has been to look at the strategy and techniques employed by the various works to engage a person in their content, analyse their effects on the mental positioning of the imagined self, and relate these to their respective media and technologies. After introducing the three works under consideration, the analysis describes the techniques used for entertainment and the relations these bear to the medium's specific characteristics. In the next section, Walton's concepts of subjective and objective imagining are introduced to describe the relative positioning of the imagined self vis-à-vis the imagined scenes and events. These concepts will then be applied to the *Alice* material. Finally, the outcome of the analysis will be fed back to the theoretical framework which will result in a number of theoretical considerations and directions for future research.

The original novel *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll was published in 1865. It is a story about Alice, a little girl who tumbles down a rabbit hole into her own fantasy world filled with talking animals, mythological creatures and crazy royalty who seem only interested in playing croquet and beheading their subjects. The book sketches a hazy, dreamy atmosphere through which Alice wanders from one encounter to the next without a clear plan or observable progress. It is generally seen as an example of 'literary nonsense', a genre that is known for its play with language, literary convention and logic. Walt Disney's 1951 animation film *Alice in Wonderland* is an adaptation using elements from both the original book and its sequel *Through the Looking-Glass* (Carroll 1871). It heavily relies on comedy, dance, singing and action as sources of amusement. It is known for its cheerful and dreamy atmosphere and its use of bright colours epitomising Disney's style. *American McGee's Alice* (2000), finally, is a 3D third-person action-adventure PC game featuring puzzle and platform game elements. Rather than being a direct adaptation, it is a continuation set about a decade after the original and inspired by Carroll's books and the Disney film. A fire in Alice's home has killed her family. Alice has survived but she has developed psychiatric problems and has been placed in a mental asylum. Along with her mind, Alice's imaginary wonderland and its inhabitants have drifted into insanity. The player's task is to assume Alice's role, return to Wonderland and set things straight by defeating the evil Queen of Hearts. Reaching this goal will make Alice recover from her mental problems, leave the asylum, and step into the world as a newborn, confident young woman.[2]

When comparing the three works, it is clear that they deal with the same content, which could be referred to as 'story', but that would not be entirely justified as the film uses elements from two Alice books and the computer game tells a different story altogether. In fact it can be argued that *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* is not a story in the traditional sense in the first place. There is an exposition and then a disruption of the equilibrium as Alice tumbles down the well. From that moment, however, the story loses direction, largely failing to move towards any definite climax or resolution. Rather, it turns into a meandering associative journey through Alice's

fantasy world which functions as a framework for introducing colourful characters, absurd situations and playful spectacles. Interestingly, despite their use of different media, this basic structure is present in all three incarnations only in a slightly different form. Despite the fact that they use different techniques to entertain, the three works present a common strategy in that they focus on playful spectacle rather than tension-building to engage the imagination. The book makes extensive use of different types of word-play such as nonsense (e.g. "Why is a raven like a writing desk?"), absurdity (e.g. unbirthdays), coinage (e.g. jabberwocky) and different types of bent logic such as faulty cause and effect (e.g. the mouse trying to dry the other animals by reading an extremely dry text). Not all of its techniques can be directly tied to the medium, however, as a lot of the spectacle is visual rather than verbal. There are the famous illustrations by John Tenniel, but there is more and this is where Walton's approach pays off by focussing on the evoked imagining, the process of representation rather than the material characteristics of the representing object. Indeed, many of the scenes depicted in the book primarily rely on visual rather than verbal play for entertainment. One example is the growing scene in the rabbit's house in which Alice is forced to lie down and eventually put her arm through the window so as not to wreck the construction. Finally, there are scenes which are at the same time visual and action-based, most notably the croquet match towards the end of the book, but more on that below.

Like the book, the Disney animated film follows Alice on her episodic journey through Wonderland. Also like the book, the story is more of a frame than a tension-span, more of an introduction to and excuse for doing amusing things than a narrative build-up. What is different, however, is the nature of the spectacles that are staged. Whereas the book's main emphasis is on word-play, rhyme and logic-games, the animated film plays out the assets of its medium by focusing on colour, movement and music. As in his earlier hit film *Fantasia* (1940), Disney relied on high-profile composers, animation artists and voice actors to create engaging characters and high-quality songs and choreographies. For example, the aforementioned drying scene is skipped altogether in favor of a caucus race, which is turned into a joyous yet chaotic round-dance of a colourful bunch of animals dragging Alice with them. Another example is the croquet match which was already a visual and action-oriented scene in the book. In the film, it is spun out further with a manly, Miss Piggy-like Queen as the star of the show and an undersized king as a clownish figure trying to placate his ill-tempered wife. Highly accentuated by sound effects and music, the scene depicts the card soldiers jumping into place so that their sovereign's croquet shot cannot miss them. Not all spectacles are visual, however, as Carroll's dialogues and rhymes still play an important role and some scenes present a hybrid between visual and verbal humour such as the one presenting the caterpillar puffing out his words in smoke from his hookah as he recites a nursery rhyme.

American McGee's Alice, finally, similarly presents the exploration of Wonderland and the encounters with its inhabitants as the main drivers of the experience. Although the events are reframed by a different story, by the game format and by its underlying technology, which is derived from the first-person shooter game *Quake III Arena* (id Software 1999; for a more extensive discussion see Van Looy 2008), the underlying strategy is similar. The Alice 'situation' is used as a background providing story elements, characters and scenery against which architecture, weaponry and game play are presented. It serves as a frame and an alibi for introducing all kinds of

spectacles and challenges: mostly fights and jumps, but also chases, puzzles and labyrinths. Like its predecessors, *Alice* primarily uses the Wonderland setting and its characters for showing off its medium's strengths. Also like its predecessors, however, the picture is far from black and white. Apart from game elements, *Alice* also draws extensively on non-medium-specific techniques such as characterisation, visuals (most notably architecture), animation, dialogue and even word-play and rhyme. Thus, when comparing the game to its predecessors, it becomes clear that it employs a similar strategy, i.e. present a broad array of spectacles to generate entertainment. Without the non-medium-specific elements such as the Wonderland setting, the themed visuals, the characters, Carroll's rhymes and especially the Alice character, the game experience would be significantly poorer.

Imagining a Self

From Walton's perspective, all three works are designed with a similar purpose in mind, i.e. to evoke imagining. As such, they anticipate their own use and provide a role for the person engaging with them. This implicit role manifests itself in the object's material characteristics – e.g. the size of the book, the number of frames per second for the film or the controls for the game – and in its content. The book, for example, is written in such a way that it seems as if someone is telling Alice's story to someone else and that you as a reader happen to be the latter. The film turns the viewer into an onlooker who happens to follow Alice jumping from one spot to the next with each cut, changing angle and distance and sometimes moving along with her. The game, finally, most blatantly presents a role, i.e. that of a player controlling Alice by handling different controls such as the mouse and keyboard which are mapped onto the character's movements. As such, the player is to 'become' Alice while playing the game, accept her mission, background, limitations and goals for the length of the playing session. These acts of role-taking are not necessarily conscious processes and they do not automatically coincide with self-imagining. The reader of *Alice's Adventures*, for example, will automatically assume the role of the listener, but might at the same time imagine being Alice. Similarly, the film presents a structure of temporary associations with camera standpoints, but the focus is on the Alice character. The game, finally, is somewhat different in that a player more consciously assumes the role presented to them. Also, the associative mechanisms tend to overlap more as one is to assume the Alice role, play her rather than listen to a story about her or follow her from a distance.

When discussing the relation between the imaginer and the imagined, i.e. the reader or viewer and a representation, Walton distinguishes between two types of imagining. When a person steps into a game of make-believe and starts imagining a scene based on an artefact, they can either place themselves within this scene or outside of it. When reading a poem such as John McCrae's "The Anxious Dead" for example, they are expected to imagine themselves to be a soldier in the trenches in the West of Flanders in the First World War, wishing the grenades would stop exploding and peace would come. By imagining this experience in such a way, they would place themselves within the imagined scene. Walton refers to this phenomenon as de se or *subjective imagining*. Your imagining is primarily concerned with yourself. Most dreams, for example, are subjective. When playing a tabletop war game simulating

the 1916 Battle of the Somme, however, the chances that one will imagine oneself to be one of the soldiers in the field are slimmer. Rather, one will take an outside perspective and analyse troop strength, movement, terrain, logistics, potential artillery targets etc. Hence the events imagined revolve less around a version of the player than around the abstract mechanics of the war game. This type of imagining Walton refers to as de re or *objective imagining*. The imagining mechanism in itself is not so different from that of subjective imagining, but the place the 'imaginer' reserves for themselves is. When imagining objectively, one does not reserve a role for oneself in the imagined scene. Rather, the self, even if it is given agency within the imagined events as is the case for the war game setup, will be imagined as an external entity looking in.

One possible objection against Walton's distinction is that one could argue that, in the case of objective imagining, there is no imagining of a self involved at all, that one either imagines being in the picture or refrains from imagining about oneself altogether. Whilst this perspective is not without merit, it fails to explain one important factor, i.e. the fact that when one engages in representation, there is always some sense of self-positioning involved. There is always some commitment, at least temporary, towards the imagined scene. Think of a cleaning person dusting off a picture of the royal family before moving on to the bookshelves. There is no commitment to or engagement with the picture in terms of representation, only an instrumental relation. When this same person would, in passing, stop at the picture and respectfully bow their head, however, their engagement with the representation of the family would become part of a game of make-believe, imagining that the image in the frame is actually the royal family. The bowing then symbolises their humility towards them. Or think of Eastern European protesters in the early nineties, pulling down a statue of Lenin. Their engagement with the artefact was far from instrumental: they were imagining themselves bringing down communist tyranny by symbolically pulling down one of its icons. Interestingly, this implies that neither the type of imagining nor the assumed role is determined by the work. A few decades earlier, fervent communist supporters may have imagined themselves to have been part of the communist revolution being lead by Lenin on the streets of Petrograd.

Finally, to complicate things even further, time-based representations present the additional challenge of continuous shifts in the equilibrium between objective and subjective imagining. The Lenin statue mentioned above presents a more or less constant configuration in time. One can therefore safely expect a person not to change their position towards it dramatically during one encounter (although one could walk around it and discover previously hidden aspects). Representations generated by books, films and computer games, however, are meant to develop over time, to present a flow of information rather than a fixed reference point. This stream of information can communicate different aspects of one fixed scene, as in a description, but most often it will present some kind of development involving one or more characters that are faced with a challenge and tracking their attempts at resolving it. As a story progresses, the perspective of the person engaging with it can shift (more often, but not exclusively, in novels and films; for some highly successful implementations of multiple-avatar games, see Van Looy 2003a). Moreover, by finding out more about a character and their predicament, one may become more sympathetic towards them or want to distance oneself from them. These changes

bear consequences for the way in which one imagines the depicted scenes and how one relates oneself to them.

To Be or Not to Be (Alice)

Making a superficial analysis of the Alice material in terms of objective/subjective imagining is easy enough. For example, the book presents an account by an unclear source of a little girl falling down a well. As a reader, one is supposed to 'listen to' Alice's story, which is told in the third person by an omniscient narrative instance, one that knows absolutely everything: not just what is currently happening to her but also what went on before, her distant past and her inner feelings and thoughts. Logically, one would derive that *Alice's Adventures* is an example of an objective representation, an artefact meant to stir the reader into imagining Alice's amusing encounters from an outside point of view looking in. Similarly, the Disney animated film presents the viewer with a sort of off-road trip following Alice as she wanders through her dreamworld stumbling from adventure to adventure. Arguably, because of the sense of identification with the camera and the salience of the beautiful, blonde and blue-eyed, singing and dancing Alice, the film is an even more of a third-person experience than the book. Whereas in the book, it is primarily Alice's thoughts and fantasies as ultimately materialised in Wonderland itself that are the stars of the show, in the film it is Alice's outward appearance, her voice, movement etc. that are most prominent. The game then, finally, takes a different approach. Whereas the implied reader and viewer roles are only indirectly and passively related to the ongoing events presented through the narrator and director instances' mediation, in the game the player is invited to take the driver's seat themselves. Rather than listen to Alice's account or follow her from camera standpoint to camera standpoint, the player is expected to take Alice's role and fulfil her objectives. In other words, the player is meant to imagine that they *are* Alice, that they are a direct and active part of the imagined scene. Thus, the game could almost be seen as a device for subjective imagining, an active dream-generator as it were.

However, It is all more complex than it seems at first sight. Despite the fact that the Alice novel primarily presents itself as an objective (in the technical sense of outside perspective) account, it also aims to establish a strong emotional bond between the reader and Alice, stepping up the subjectivity of the experience. A first obvious indicator of this is that the story focuses on the Alice character leaving her only a few times for a brief embedded story or rhyme. One of the consequences of this close focus is that, as the story progresses and Alice is confronted with different challenges such as how to shrink her body or act in an absurd situation, the reader will almost automatically place themselves in her shoes and look for a solution. This type of emotional relation adds a significant degree of subjectivity in the imagining. On a micro-level, there are several techniques that are used to initiate and strengthen this, most of which revolve around creating temporary affiliations between the reader's and Alice's perspective. The most prominent one is focalisation, which consists of temporarily placing the reader in Alice's head by describing events from her perspective, seen through her eyes and using her language and conceptual framework as opposed to that of the omniscient narrator. Typically these focalised stretches present themselves as inner monologues combined with third person

pronouns. As she is falling down the rabbit hole and keeps on falling, Alice begins to wonder "Either the well was very deep, or she fell very slowly" (2). By presenting Alice's thoughts in this way, the narrator pretends to temporarily step aside and give the reader direct access to Alice's point of view. This is meant to draw the reader into the story environment and strengthen their identification with Alice.

In a similar way, the Disney film primarily places the viewer outside the depicted events, turning them into an onlooker sneaking after Alice from camera standpoint to camera standpoint. As argued before, it can even be claimed that the film, by focusing on Alice's outward appearance and by stimulating identification with the camera, presents an even more objective (again in the technical sense) representation than the book. Despite all this, the association with Alice is still a primary part of the film's strategy to increase the viewer's involvement. As in the book, the focus on the character itself already presents an invitation to take her perspective when Alice has to make a decision or deal with a difficult situation. When Alice is unjustly accused of high-treason and tried in a most conspicuous way, the viewer may place themselves in Alice's shoes and feel indignant at the injustice of the accusation, again creating a closer emotional bond. Moreover, like the novel, the film presents a number of techniques meant to reinforce this bond by temporarily closing the gap between the viewer's and a character's viewpoint. When the camera takes Alice's perspective, this constitutes a technique closely related to literary focalisation except for the absence of inner monologue. One example of this occurs when Alice is tumbling down the well and the camera switches to her perspective, first looking up at her cat Dinah on the edge of the Abyss and at the end of the fall turning the world upside down as Alice is hanging on her feet from a bar. Interestingly, this technique is not restricted to the Alice character: Dinah's perspective is taken to show Alice tumbling down the well. and the perspective of the rabbit is taken when the growth of Alice's legs pushes him violently out the door of his own house. Although the character association is more dynamic, the underlying technique and goal are similar to those in the book, i.e. to involve the viewer more closely in the character's predicament and subjectify the experience.

The game, finally, presents itself primarily as a system for generating a subjective experience. By inviting the player to step into Alice's role by controlling her movements and assuming her identity and goals, the game pushes them into the driver's seat. Whereas the book and the film invite one to 'follow' Alice on her adventures, the game invites the player to steer Alice through them. Moreover, by employing 3D modelling and by having the world revolve around the player when Alice looks around, from the beginning a deep association is established between the player and Alice as one unit, urging the player to imagine that they are Alice for the length of the playing session.

Nonetheless, there are several factors that work against the player imagining themselves to be in Wonderland. First of all, the player is expected to assume Alice's identity and not their own; they are not allowed to customise their avatar and give it their own name. Moreover, unlike its first-person technological predecessor *Quake III*, the game uses a third-person perspective keeping Alice's back firmly in focus throughout the game, again reinforcing the sense of otherness and distance between the representation and the player. Then there are the cut-scenes which regularly interrupt game play and which without warning wrest control over both Alice and the

camera from the player's hands. Cut-scenes serve such functions as explaining different aspects of game play or the game environment, providing background, progressing the story or generating suspense by introducing a boss fight, but their presence has the significant side-effect of greatly objectifying the experience by kicking the player out of their role in the game world. Thus, just like the book and the film present a sort of subjective counterweight to their primarily objective representation, the game deploys several techniques objectifying aspects of the otherwise subjective experience of game play.

Theoretical Considerations

There are several theoretical implications to the above observations that merit a more extensive discussion. First of all, there is the fact that self-imagining in representation turns out to be a complex and multifaceted phenomenon. It is neither binary nor linear, nor fixed nor constant. All three works show a built-in balance between objectivity and subjectivity. In the book and the film the objective position prevails, but it is complemented by techniques to draw a person into imagining themselves inside the narrative universe. The game, on the other hand, presents itself as a primarily subjective experience, but again the context and use of several counterbalancing techniques adds objectivity to the mix. How far the presence of this type of counterbalancing can be extrapolated to other media and/or works will be subject to future research, but if it can be extrapolated, this could tell us something about representation itself. Rather than being a clean, bottom-up, technology-driven affair, it seems that representation is more of a patchwork of techniques producing a hybrid experience, one in which a person is simultaneously invited to step into the depicted universe and to retain at least partly an outside perspective and vice versa, both legs stretched across the magic circle as it were. Returning to Walton's perspective of representations as tools to share imagining and insight, this hybridity need not surprise us. When sharing an experience, it is of primary importance to at the same time present a personal view and seduce the other to try the same perspective.

A final observation is that the game setup seems to almost automatically introduce a basically subjective experience as opposed to the book and the film which start from an objective one. One could try to deduce from this that when an artefact presents a person with the possibility to participate in the shaping of the representation, this automatically leads to a primarily subjective perspective. When a person is given agency, the result must be that they are more closely tied to the represented universe and therefore automatically imagine themselves in it. This claim can easily be falsified, however, when one looks at instances of electronic literature such as Geoff Ryman's *253* or interactive animation like Donna Leishman's *Deviant* (2004) in which the visitor is invited to 'direct' the story flow by choosing a link or clicking on objects rather than by playing a character. In these examples, despite the fact that agency is transferred to the reader and viewer, this does not result in a subjective viewpoint, quite on the contrary (see also Van Looy 2003b). Next, one could try again with the claim that it is not just agency that is required, but a gaming setup. In other words, the fact that the player is handed agency *and* given a role within the game universe with attached goals, rules and an identity should evoke a primarily

subjective experience. This would correspond to the above findings for *American McGee's Alice* which invites the player not just to steer the events, but to steer Alice through them so as to reach her goal of setting Wonderland and her own mental condition straight. Again, there are reservations, however, as a simulation game such as Will Wright's *SimCity* (Maxis 1989), despite reserving an active role with associated goals for the player and even a designated nomination (mayor), will not automatically lead to subjective imagining. Hence, it seems that not just agency and not just the game setup, but a game setup and a close association with an entity within the simulation are a prerequisite for a primarily subjective experience. Future research will further explore this claim and attempt to empirically validate it.

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Notes

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2   The main focus of this article is on the links between theory and material. For a more extensive discussion of the corpus, see Van Looy 2008.