

New Media Nonsense: Experiments in Collage Adaptation of Alice's Adventures in Wonderland

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Abstract

The Alice Adaptation Project explores literary nonsense and the process of adaptation through the creation of a multimedia collage work (film, music, and text) combining elements of the original literary nonsense work, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, by Lewis Carroll, and multiple film adaptations. The collage process used combines systematic and interpretive techniques to itself create nonsense. This process, corresponding to the new media art techniques described by Lev Manovich in *The Language of New Media*, reveals a relation between narratives and databases as a nonsense occurrence.

1 Introduction

Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, a work of literary nonsense written in 1865, has inspired adaptation in various media for over 100 years. Beginning with the 1903 film directed by Cecil M. Hepworth, there have been dozens of film adaptations, yet there are still at least two Hollywood adaptations in development (*Alice*, directed by Marcus Nispel, and *Alice in Wonderland*, directed by Tim Burton) (Internet Movie Database). Adaptations in other media range from American McGee's *Alice* videogame (Internet Movie Database) to the massive collection of musical works by David Del Tredici (Del Tredici).

The Alice Adaptation Project at University of California, Santa Barbara explores this adaptation universe while creating a multimedia adaptation of its own: a collage¹ work drawing

1 The term "collage" is used within this text to describe the work (in its entirety) developed by the Alice Adaptation Project. This term, as opposed to "montage," was chosen to avoid the suggestion of an intended filmic orientation. "Collage" used here is intended to suggest only an artistic creation combining multiple media sources and not to imply a lack of continuity, as is often the usage in visual art. The term "montage" is used in the text to refer specifically to film montage techniques and the usage of the term in *The Language of New Media* (Manovich). Purely out of the traditions of the specific media and of the project's past practices, the terms "film montage," "sound collage," and "text montage" are used to describe the individual media elements combined to create the work.

from film visual, film soundtrack, and the original text. Specifically, the project uses the technique of collage to examine how nonsense is created within the literary text and how this element of nonsense is translated into various media.

2 Conceptual Development

In his book *Philosophy of Nonsense: The Intuitions of Victorian Nonsense Literature*, Jean-Jacques Lecercle states, “nonsense text requires to be read on two levels at once -- two incompatible levels: not 'x means A' but 'x is both A and, incoherently, B'. In other words, nonsense deals not in symbolism but in paradox” (20). The Alice Adaptation Project extends this analysis by stating that nonsense occurs when a rule is enforced (“x must be A”) and simultaneously broken (“x is B and therefore must not be A”). The categories of rules enforced or established within *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* include language rules, logical rules, physical rules, and etiquette or society rules.

These rules are typically those accepted to be true by the reader. The original text states, “either the well was very deep, or she fell very slowly, for she had plenty of time as she went down to look about her and to wonder what was going to happen next” (Carroll). And the fall concludes, “suddenly, thump! thump! down she came upon a heap of sticks and dry leaves, and the fall was over” (Carroll). The rule being broken in this case is a physical rule, namely gravity, as a person cannot regularly fall down very slowly nor can a person falling down a very deep well be protected from injury by sticks and dry leaves.

However, the text does not entirely ignore the rule of gravity, as the story might have done by stating “Alice glided slowly down.” Our attention is drawn to the fact that Alice is falling for an extended period of time. Additionally, our sense of logic is satisfied as explanations are given for how the fall could take an extended amount of time. In this way, the text acts to be both rule abiding and rule breaking, so that while a fantastical event is imagined, a connection with reality is maintained.

The Alice Adaptation Project focuses on the physical rules of space paradoxically broken and enforced within the Alice texts. Specifically, the project examines the section of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and its adaptations where Alice falls down a rabbit hole (or well) and attempts to pursue the White Rabbit through a small locked door. This section breaks rules of space as Alice shrinks and grows and finds herself suddenly in new locations. At the same time, rules of space are established: Alice cannot fit through a door that is 15" high, Alice must eat or drink in order to grow or shrink. This category of rules was chosen because, while represented in both written and film texts, the method of representation varies between texts. This variation reveals both media-specific techniques and artistic decisions made in adaptation.

3 Project Description and Methodology

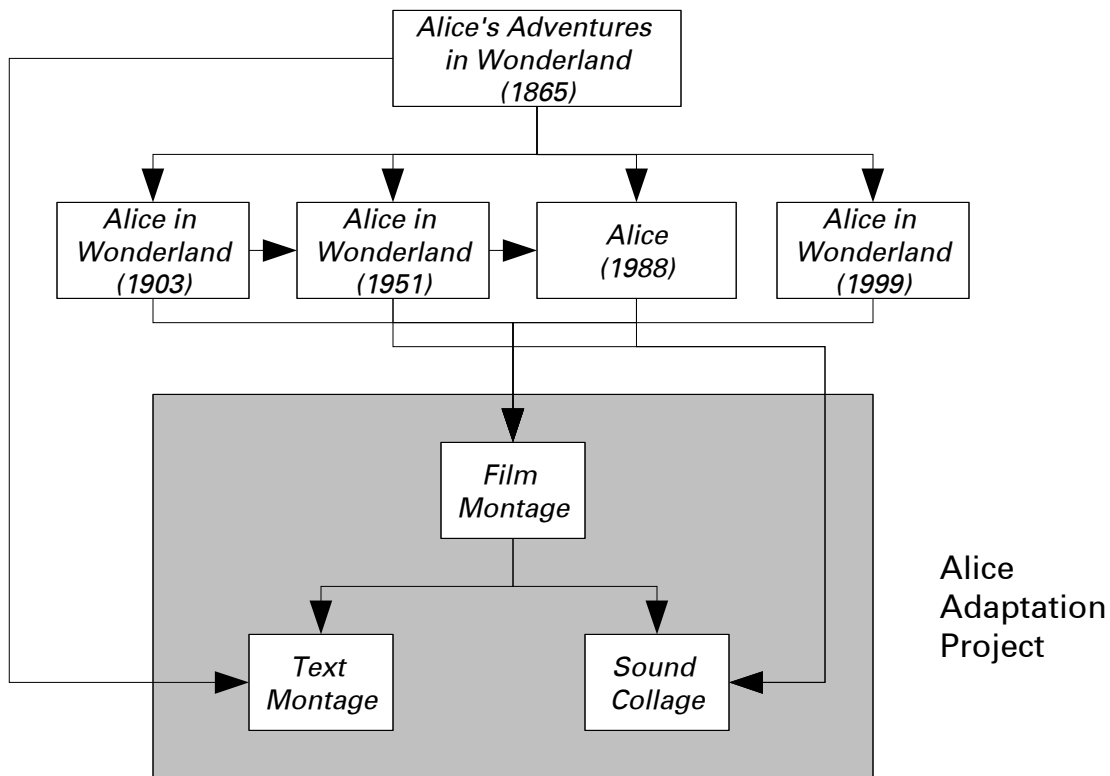


Figure 3.1: Relationships between the texts used and developed in the Alice Adaptation Project².

² The relationships marked between films are educated guesses as to which film text influenced the others. It additionally seems unlikely that the 1999 film could avoid influence of Disney's culturally iconic 1951 version, but this is not marked as not enough of the film was viewed to support this.

The adaptation work of the project contains three interrelated media elements. (The project also contains pure analysis elements, which are not discussed within this paper.) Chronologically, the first of these is a film montage work, which combines segments of four source films:

1. *Alice in Wonderland* (1903), a silent live-action film, directed by Cecil M. Hepworth;
2. *Alice in Wonderland* (1951), an animated Disney musical;
3. *Alice (Neco z Alenky)* (1988), a mixed live-action/stop-motion animation film, directed by Jan Svankmajer;
4. *Alice in Wonderland* (1999), a live-action television film, directed by Nick Willing.

The film montage itself inspired two additional derivations: a sound collage combining segments of the audio track³ from Disney's and Svankmajer's films and a text montage derived from Carroll's original text.

3.1 *Film Montage*

The film montage was created by dividing the section of the film adaptations into separate shots and classifying those shots based on the motion Alice is performing: falling, crawling, drinking, shrinking, etc. This process is primarily systematic.

Then, the montage was created by combining these shots in a sequence. The sequence was not chosen entirely systematically, although a systematic rule was considered (not always followed) in choosing the arrangement. This rule is "matching" on Alice's action, maintaining continuity in Alice's motion between shots. This serves to maintain a sense of continuity between shots, while the discontinuity in transitioning between film adaptations acts to break this rule, creating the element of nonsense within the work.

3.2 *Sound Collage*

The sound collage was created after the completion of the film montage. To create the sound

³ The audio corresponding to the segments of film used in the film montage.

collage, a similar system of classification was used to to divide the audio track in Svankmajer's *Alice* (primarily sound effects) and Disney's *Alice in Wonderland* (primarily music) into sound samples. The sounds classified represent the visual action in the film (falling melodies or crashing sound effects to represent falling).

For the composition process, a technique similar to that used in the visuals, creating a linear sequence of sounds, was initially considered. However, this method created too much discontinuity. Instead, the sound samples were layered to create continuity, a method common in sound collage works. The sound collage is intended to accompany the film montage, timed to play simultaneously, however, freedom was taken with the composition, so that sound events did not necessarily occur at the same time as their visual counterparts. (Samples of Alice speaking are played at times when Alice is not shown speaking, for example.)

3.3 *Text Montage*

Two text montage documents were derived from the film montage, as well. The one focused on within this text includes the following description:

This montage transcript attempts to match text from the original excerpt above with each of the film clips represented in our group's "Alice Adaptation" film montage. We began this process by creating a master Word document that identified each montage clip, and which listed below each clip any possible corresponding passages from Carroll's *Alice* work. After compiling this master document, we created this edited transcript by eliminating adjacent examples of repetition, and streamlining the adapted text to make it more readable. All the quotes here are directly from the original text, although in certain instances minor punctuation has been added and/or deleted.

The "streamlining" to improve readability resembles the methods in the film montage and

sound collage used to maintain continuity, again acting against the discontinuity inherent in the collage technique. While at present, the text montage acts as an independent document, a “transcript,” not intended to be read simultaneously with the other collage works, there are plans to integrate the text further. Perhaps as spoken word timed to the other works or as subtitles.

4 Project Analysis: New Media Nonsense

The three media elements were each developed with a process including classification, combination, and “smoothing” between combined elements. This process is the same one that Lev Manovich attributes to contemporary new media art in *The Language of New Media*. He describes the process as follows:

In the course of production, some elements are created specifically for the project; others are selected from databases of stock material. Once all the elements are ready, they are composited together into a single object. That is, they are fitted together and adjusted in a such a way that their separate identities become invisible. The fact that they come [from] diverse sources and were created by different people in different times is hidden. The result is a single seamless image, sound, space or a scene. (130)

Here, Manovich is using the term “compositing” as a generalized term of combining elements seamlessly with an intention of creating of continuity. This is contrasted with the concept of “montage,” which maintains discontinuity between elements. Placing the two techniques in historical context he states, “where old media relied on montage, new media substitutes the aesthetics of continuity” (Manovich 135).

While this may not explain much about the Alice Adaptation Project, except to title it as a “new media” work. However, the project may suggest something to new media. The project's

initial goal, that considered when choosing to develop a work that existed somewhere between continuity and discontinuity, was to create a work nonsense. Mirroring the technique as described by Manovich so well, one must wonder, is new media nonsense? Although a humorous notion, new media does appear to be in a struggle between the real world and the virtual, or more precisely, an existence outside of the physical world. New media art mirrors this struggle as a conflict between narrative and database⁴. The Alice Adaptation Project suggests that this struggle in itself can provide the same sort of excitement that Carroll's nonsense world gives to Alice. We may look outside our narrative-based world into a digital wonderland built upon our broken rule sets.

5 Conclusions and Future Work

At this stage, the Alice Adaptation Project does not seem to be reaching a conclusion. Instead, many paths of future development are open. As stated earlier, the project team hopes to integrate the text montage more closely into the collage work, creating a single experience (or a set of experiences derived from presenting any combination of these elements simultaneously). Likewise, adaptation in many media have not been explored due to time constraints. Interactivity has not been explored, but would need to be in approaching the video game adaptation.

On the analytical side, the question has too arisen as to whether a using a more systematic approach would have been more fruitful. The three media elements within the project vary greatly, from the text montage which very carefully sticks to a self-prescribed system to the sound collage which works primarily as an interpretive representation. Perhaps creating software to perform the entire composition process would be advantageous. In film

⁴“Database” is used as in *Manovich's* text to refer to a collection of media element. He describes the use of database in art, “Many new media objects do not tell stories; they don't have beginning or end; in fact, they don't have any development, thematically, formally or otherwise which would organize their elements into a sequence. Instead, they are collections of individual items, where every item has the same significance as any other” (194).

montage, for example, computer vision software could detect motion within the shots, defining the direction, magnitude, and speed of movement, which could then be automatically organized in order to provide objective motion matches (with each subsequent shot being chosen randomly from those which provide the proper amount of motion continuity). This situation would more thoroughly present the visuals as a database, with the narrative being only a secondary emergent element, possibly changing each time the software is run.

6 Acknowledgments

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