‘Is it Mad to Pray for Better Hallucinations?’: From Carroll to McGee; from Children’s Novel to Horror Action-Adventure Video Game

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Introduction: *Alice*'s Cultural Codex

In 1865, Charles Dodgson, under the penname Lewis Carroll, released a children's text written innocuously for and about Alice Liddell, which would go on to become one of the hallmarks of not only Victorian children's literature, but of a vast cultural literary consciousness, carrying a strong legacy of its own more than a century after its conception. His *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass* originally detailed a lighthearted, whimsical tale of wonder and creativity as the reader followed the girl's adventures through a world where rules no longer mattered. While the fantastical creatures and events around her were certainly curious and perhaps even unconventional for their time, the suspension of disbelief applied to what ultimately amounted to a 'fairy tale' allowed the reader to embrace it all as figments of a girl's harmless imagination, a benign escape. As *Alice* has aged over the decades, however, it seems to have shed many of those childish elements, and has been altogether divorced from its second original identity as a partially political text, in favor of maturity. In modern media and culture, Alice and her wondrous world have adopted new meanings, veering away from harmless whimsy into the realm of instability, reality distortion, and even insanity, all topics better suited for adult fiction than the children of Carroll's audience. The tumble down the rabbit hole itself has become a catchphrase for "unreality," where the laws governing society and sanity have been erased. In the modern conscious, Alice's story no longer embodies tea parties and garden daydreams, but evokes a sensation of 'creepiness': one thinks first of altered realities and anxieties, of the Cheshire Cat's unsettling grin or the Hatter's incomprehensible riddles. How did this transition happen?

Alice's digital reincarnations are manifold: she has been reimagined for films and games, and portions of her story have become such iconic cornerstones that they have appeared across

wholly unrelated texts as well. Scholars are hyper-aware of the way that Carroll's tales have moved through various stages of adaptation, that "multiple incarnations of each have placed these stories into cultural consciousness. Even those who have never read the original print text from the turn of the century are probably aware of the story's kernel" (Martin 145). *Alice* has become ingrained within our social understanding not necessarily through Carroll's story, but through the fragmented icons that have persisted and manifest in later renditions: the Cheshire Cat, the Mad Hatter, the White Rabbit and his pocketwatch. As Martin describes, our understanding of *Alice* exists in "the nebulous realm that we might most simply identify as cultural knowledge" (145).

Arguably, for *Alice*, the most crucial point of contact for the contemporary audience is the 1951 Disney film; moreso than Carroll's book, this adaptation is where the majority of modern consumers first experienced Alice's adventures. In their examination of what they term the "chronology of encounter" surrounding Alice's afterlife, Bonner and Jacobs remark on their experience with undergraduate students, stating that "it seems evident now that childhood texts are increasingly being targeted for adaptation to capitalize on adult nostalgia for them" (Bonner and Jacobs 38). This definitely seems to be the case; even more recently than the Disney film, Tim Burton's well-known adaptations – though he calls them 'sequels' or 'expansions' – of Carroll's books come to the forefront when one thinks of the Alice tales. Already, here, the story begins to take a different tone from the 1951 version, which, as a stereotypical Disney production, had still been marketed for children. Burton's aesthetic deviates from that script: though still fantastical, it is less innocent than its predecessors. Bonner and Jacobs point to the lack of song in particular as something that separates it from previous incarnations, and that even though the Mad Hatter's final dance "may lead us to recall the high spirits of the earlier film, this

one has none of the childlike communality of shared performance. Those seeing this as their first encounter are likely to share more of Alice's own bewilderment in the world that recognizes her but of which she has no knowledge, than viewers familiar with other versions" (46).

The authors gesture already to the alienation of the viewer in relation to Burton's films, the sensation of returning to something which is familiar in foundation, but otherwise altered and even -- as the films revolve around a plot involving war and combat absent in Carroll's original text and its Disney version -- perhaps hostile. This movement towards the familiar but unfamiliar, a tension between intertextual acknowledgement of the existing *Alice* as a cultural icon and the creative liberties designers can take to make the stories of Wonderland their own, becomes the focus of the popular 2000 computer game *American McGee's Alice* and its 2011 sequel, *Alice: Madness Returns*. In both of these games, the aforementioned bewilderment of entering a world that recognizes the player but which the player does not recognize is evident from the very onset. In *American McGee's Alice,* after the introductory cutscene that contextualizes the game world, Alice descends into Wonderland. Immediately, the Cheshire Cat appears in front of her, instantly recognizable to the player for his signature grin, but otherwise skeletal and sickly, a distortion of Carroll's original:

> Alice: You've gotten quite mangy, Cat, but your grin's a comfort.
>
> Cheshire: And you've picked up a bit of an attitude. Still curious, and willing to learn, I hope.
>
> Alice: Wonderland's become quite strange. How is one to find her way?
>
> Cheshire: As knowing where you're going is preferable to being lost, ask. Rabbit knows a thing or two. And I, myself, don't need a weathervane to tell which way the wind blows. Let your need guide your behavior. Suppress your instinct to lead. Pursue Rabbit.

From the first piece of gameplay dialogue, the player is aware that they must not only suspend reality as they proceed through this version of Wonderland, but also their previous

understandings of Alice and her imaginary world. Alice's role as the player's avatar mirrors the player's own sense of confusion; even she does not know how to "find her way" anymore. *Madness Returns* opens with the Cheshire Cat as well in a scene that parallels its predecessor. Upon her return to Wonderland, Alice states "at least the place I've landed is somewhat familiar"; a few lines later, the Cheshire Cat tells her "A new law reigns in this Wonderland, Alice. It's very rough justice all around. We're all at risk here. You… be on your guard" (*Madness Returns*). Fawcett describes this moment as a kind of anti-introductory introduction: "[the Cat's] initial statements give no introduction, presuming not only a relationship between the avatar and the nonplayer character but also the relationship between the player and the character" (Fawcett 494). Additionally, it presumes an existing relationship between the player and the text of origin just as the first game does. The game is entirely dependent on intertextuality; only by being familiar with Carroll's text can the player then be appropriately unfamiliar with McGee's.

The assumption of familiarity does not stop there; much of what makes *Madness Returns* such an effective game when played after *American McGee's Alice* are the moments of continuity. After the initial scene with the Cheshire Cat, Alice proceeds further into the Vale of Tears, to see her Vorpal Blade – a blood-stained meat cleaver that serves as her first and primary weapon in the game – lodged in the skull of a dead creature. Players of *American McGee's Alice* would recognize the beast as the Jabberwock, and the image itself is a gesture to the events of the previous game, where the Jabberwock functioned as both a crucial plot point and as a major boss. That the player finds the Vorpal Blade still embedded in its skull creates a seamless feeling of continuity between titles. Likewise, the Duchess features as a minor nonplayer character early on in *Madness Returns*, where Alice finds her stirring a pot in her house in the Vale of Tears. In

American McGee's Alice, the Duchess is a villain and acts as the player's first boss fight. Insane and cannibalistic, she attempts to devour the Mock Turtle and then later Alice when she confronts her. When Alice defeats her, the Duchess sneezes so intensely from the effects of her own pepper grinder turned weapon that her head explodes. Befitting the topsy-turvy rules inherent to Wonderland, she appears again in the sequel, alive and whole, without explanation – she is not the only character to do so: both the Cheshire Cat and the White Rabbit meet gruesome ends in *American McGee's Alice*, only to return inexplicably in the sequel; it begs the question why characters such as the Jabberwock and the Gryphon remain dead, but in Wonderland, there are no rules or consistencies. Alice then speaks to the Duchess, who has apparently reformed in more ways than one:

> Duchess: Ah, it's you again Alice. You may approach.
>
> Alice: Why would I do that? You want to eat me.
>
> Duchess: yes, well you taught me manners and I've lost my taste for mad women; strictly a porcine diet for me. Everything's better with bacon, don't you agree? Of course you do. Now, there are Pig Snouts scattered about…go fetch them for me. But take care of the pests that block your way. Pepper them up if they do. They need spice and you're just the dish – ehm – girl to season them for me. You'll find that grinder serviceable.

Again, the dialogue points directly to their encounter in the prequel, and perceptive players familiar with the first title will realize that the Duchess is not as rehabilitated as she claims. Her Freudian slip aside, the Duchess' new appetite for pork pays homage to pig meat as being slang for human flesh, particularly through the use of the term "long pig." It is also worth noting that the Duchess' pepper grinder, which had been a staple of her appearance as an antagonist in the first game, then becomes one of the weapons in Alice's arsenal in the sequel.

Both of these instances highlight McGee's awareness of the prevalence of continuity and adaptation in his games. Both titles not only refer back and forward to each other, but to the wide

cultural net that Carroll's tales have woven, both predicated on and entirely independent of his original creation. Any designer hoping to adapt *Alice* must also be aware of the same, that "in the wake of postmodern theories of pastiche… cultural production draws on – and adapts – a host of prior cultural productions" ("Adaptation as Compendium" 195). Elliot looks at the Burton films, noting ways in which the filmmaker has chosen to do so: the Red Queen and the Queen of Hearts are "two literary characters packed into one filmic character," and the film combines both of Carroll's works into one homogeneous piece in the final scene "as Wonderland cards take on Looking Glass chess pieces" (194). McGee employs similar tactics; his games are notably positioned as sequels to Carroll's original text; the player is meant to realize that the events of Carroll's stories did take place in their imagined past. *American McGee's Alice* is then set in 1875 after a traumatic house fire takes the lives of Alice's family, an event that lands her in the asylum for over ten years and informs the plot of both titles. Thus, when Alice returns to Wonderland in the first game and observes that it has become "quite strange", she is going back to the world of Carroll's books, albeit one that has been distorted. Because he is placing the games as sequels to the original text, McGee must retain a degree of faithfulness that a completely independent adaptation may not have to. He nods to Carroll frequently throughout both games while using the author's ideas as springboards for his own imagination and, other times, using the "cultural knowledge" of *Alice* to broaden the scope of gameplay.

American McGee's Alice begins by immediately connecting the player with the hyper-text: the opening cut-scene pans over a copy of what the player assumes to be Carroll's original *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* as the voices of the storybook characters play over the background; because of the presented image, the player associates the moment with the Hatter's tea party. Then, as the scene becomes more hectic and verges into Alice's memories of the house

fire, the pages light on fire and the voices change, trying to wake her up. Martin crucially notes that while those unfamiliar with the original *Alice* may easily mistake the "Smoke and Fire" chapter of the book open on the screen as a direct reference, such a chapter never actually existed in Carroll's work. The displayed page is merely inspired by the hyper-text with an illustration emblematic of Tenniel's woodcut style. Instead, McGee "visually declares his transformation of Alice" by emulating Carroll enough while not providing a perfect copy; he is "literally rewriting the print text to set up the game narrative" (Martin 148). Various other elements of the games recall elements of the original as well; like Burton's re-imagining, McGee collapses both Carroll texts into one: he, too, combines the Queen of Hearts and the Red Queen into one figure. The white chess pieces are the only rebel force fighting against the Queen's rule in McGee's Wonderland. Therefore, the Pale Realm level in the first game consists of the player, as Alice, attempting – and failing – to save the White Queen from a beheading while fighting off animated red chess pieces, each distinct class (pawn, knight, etc.) with its own arsenal of attacks and combat strategies. The Queen's iconic card guards that swarm Alice at the end of Carroll's story also plague McGee's Alice throughout Wonderland with spears fashioned into the four card suites. In *Madness Returns*, the guards manifest instead as animalistic undead that burst from the ground and pursue Alice through the Queensland level in accordance with the degradation of Queensland into a wasteland of a graveyard following the player's destruction of it in the prequel. They are accompanied by audio of wolf-like snarling and howling, and the player realizes that these are the re-animated card guards Alice previously killed. In his first title, McGee remains more faithful to Carroll's design of the card guards, but then uses that design as a creative launch point in his sequel to demonstrate his own imagination. As Martin says,

"McGee never lets the player forget where his inspiration comes from, but he doesn't allow the source text to restrict his creativity" (Martin 149).

Even *Alice*'s paratext becomes a foundation for adaptation within McGee's creation; Tenniel, the illustrator for Carroll's novels, was widely known for his work as a political cartoonist during the time that he worked on Carroll's drawings. He, too, made use of cultural appropriation, contributing to the post-modern thought of production being "always-already-adapted"; in her analysis on the visual culture of the *Alice* books, Frost points to the image of the Frog Footman from the Pig and Pepper chapter of Carroll's tale and then to an image of "The Wolf and the Dog" by the French artist J.J. Grandville, a contemporary of Tenniel. "It's fairly obvious", she says, "upon looking at these two images that Tenniel drew upon Grandville's work in his production of these characters" (Frost). Many of the characters of the *Alice* books therefore took inspiration from life outside of Wonderland due to Tenniel's political work:

> "The Hatter, perhaps the most popular Alice character except for Alice herself, was likely modeled on Theophilus Carter, a sort of zany inventor of the day… Tenniel was also known for his political caricatures of figures like Benjamin Disreali and William Gladstone, both of whom were British politicians and prime ministers in this era. It has been suggested and is widely believed that Gladstone is the goat and Disreali is the man dressed in white paper in [the] illustration from the beginning of *Through the Looking Glass*" (Frost).

Because of this, Carroll's work takes on elements of political satire, or at the very least comments on and reflects life outside of Wonderland. McGee makes the same moves with the distorted characters of his Alice's imagination; rather than reflecting prime ministers and politicians, however, the inhabitants of her Wonderland take on the altered appearances of those she knows. The Duchess bears a striking resemblance to Nurse D-, one of her caretakers at Rutledge Asylum. Heironymous Wilson, the doctor responsible for Alice's treatment at the asylum and one of the few benign individuals in her life, possibly informs her conception of the

White Rabbit and the Caterpillar. The most obvious parallels are that of the Queen of Hearts, who represents Alice herself in the first game and both Alice and potentially her sister Lizzie in the sequel, and the Dollmaker that attempts to take over and destroy Wonderland, bearing both physical resemblance and similar function to the figure of Dr. Bumby, who tries to corrupt not only Alice, but also the other residents of Houndsditch. Thus, the political inspirations for Carroll's text become the basis upon which McGee models his own Alice's projections. Tenniel was Carroll's political cartoonist, but in the games, Alice becomes her own.

McGee's ability to effectively adapt various elements of Carroll's tales into his own style while never straying too far from the canon shows how versatile *Alice* is and continues to be. Its mutability enables it to take various forms, but in order to understand how it can particularly transform into a well-rounded video game, one must look back to Carroll's initial design.

Book to Interactive Screen: *Alice*'s Gaming Potential

At first glance, McGee's use of titular symbols of the *Alice* books seems to adhere to Aarseth's perspective on the use of cultural icons in video game adaptations of literature; he discusses the video game's reliance on "the spectacular, the spatial and the idiosyncratic" in its effort to "develop events and way points that will nod to the story of the original work, whereas keeping a firm eye on the bottom line of game play quality" (Aarseth 2010). This sounds analogous to McGee's invention of *Alice,* though Aarseth looks specifically at the video game adaptation of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, criticizing their lack of narrative faithfulness to the original work:

> The narrative affinities and affordances shared by books and films are not shared by games. In other words, we are not witnessing cross-media storytelling, but rather cross-media spectacle making…Furthermore, the main game event elements, such as collecting jellybeans and fighting various monsters, are not derived from the narrative works, and

> correspond to nothing in them… There is no "world" or "universe" as such being transferred between media platforms – only partial and more or less faithfully represented elements. (Aarseth 209-10)

Admittedly, many of his criticisms could also apply to McGee's Alice. From a purely narrative standpoint, McGee's creation bears little resemblance to the innocent travels of Carroll's Alice; much like Burton's films, the emphasis is placed instead on combat necessary to defeat an evil force that threatens the safety of Wonderland and of Alice herself, and the player likewise fights his or her way through hoards of various monsters. The toy weapons, though occasionally based on objects from the original text – the Croquet Mallet, Vorpal Blade, and Teapot Cannon, for instance – are only references, and some of them, such as the Ice Wand and the Blunderbuss, are "not part of Carroll's world at all", but rather "pulled form a larger gaming arsenal" with little direct correlation (Martin 150). In *Madness Returns*, a vital part of the gameplay consists of searching for fragments of Alice's memories which manifest as glowing bottles and, when collected, provide the player with insight into the game's underlying story. Like the jellybeans in Aarseth's analysis, teeth are also a collectible item which the player can harvest by defeating enemies, but which are also found scattered throughout the levels, either in plain sight or hidden in breakable objects. Though these teeth have no foundation in Carroll's original *Alice*, they play a practical role in the game as the currency needed to upgrade weapons, and also gesture to the larger cultural framework generated by Carroll's legacy; though anachronistic, they seem to fit in perfectly well with Alice's world.

As mentioned before, however, it is not precisely a faithfulness to narrative that makes a good *Alice* adaptation; after all, Carroll's original text seems to eschew narrative entirely, focusing more on the patterns, puzzles, and riddles used to generate that particular Wonderland sense of wonder. Yet, in McGee's games, it is precisely narrative that takes precedence, rather

than, as Aarseth suggests, gameplay. The tale of both games is one of trauma and subsequent recovery, as Alice struggles to comprehend and come to terms with the reality of the house fire; the plot focuses on "using the cliches of traumatic memory as something one must repeat and resolve" – notably, "through narrative enactment" (Fawcett 492). Following the descent into Wonderland while trapped in her room at Rutledge Asylum in the first game, Alice is informed that the only way she can heal is by saving Wonderland. When she encounters the Caterpillar, the one most knowledgeable about the events in Wonderland and who she spends the first half of the game searching for to learn the truth, he tells her that her adventures through Wonderland are an imagined quest to save herself:

> Caterpillar: Ah Alice… you've returned.
>
> Alice: But Rabbit never told me why… and now he's gone.
>
> Caterpillar: Why? Wonderland is severely damaged. You must set things right. That's why.
>
> Alice: I barely recognize this terrible place. What is it to me?
>
> Caterpillar: It's home… Well, it could be. Having lost what you loved, you nearly wiped us out. You've started to rebuild. Your task, however, and your pain are not over.
>
> Alice: Why must I suffer…?
>
> Caterpillar: Because your mind is fouled by self-deception. Even your fantasies have fragmented into tortured versions of themselves. You are wracked with guilt because you survived, and you dread the prospect of a life alone.
>
> Alice: What do you think I must do?
>
> Caterpillar: Destroy the Queen of Hearts. Wonderland, and your entire world can become whole again. I need to rest now. You need to regain your human size. Grow up, Alice. Embrace the truth.

Though the mechanics of gameplay are difficult – combat itself in *American McGee's Alice* is as much a puzzle as it is combat – the player never forgets that there is motivation for Alice's

presence in Wonderland, that the motivation has its basis in narrative events that take place outside of battling monsters. Supplementing this is the paratext surrounding the game; players can access Wilson's diary from the title screen, which expands on the story surrounding Alice's stay in Rutledge Asylum. As the player reads through Wilson's entries documenting Alice's condition over the course of her years there, one realizes that they correspond to the events of the game. The diary documents reality while the player is immersed with Alice in Wonderland, and Wilson's accounts of Alice telling him about the Pale Realm and her fight against the Queen of Hearts gives narrative context to the gameplay. In *Madness Returns*, the importance of story becomes even more pronounced, eclipsing mechanics entirely. Looking at the games' narrative of traumatic memory, Fawcett aptly points out that, in the sequel. "the game is an immersive visual space: there are very few moments that require quick-play reactions and split-second reflexes. Combat is challenging, but not overwhelming, enabling the player to focus attention on the memory fragments, consistent patterns and slight visual cues" (495). Compared to the first game, combat in *Madness Returns* is simpler, more reminiscent of the "hack-and-slash" system that many other action platform games use. Though Alice still retains an arsenal of various weapons, the player does not have to strategize as much about which weapon is best for which type of enemy beyond choosing between whether to attack at melee or range. For example, in *American McGee's Alice*, the Vorpal Blade is only one of many weapons, and as situational as the others. It is only capable of one quick slash or of being thrown as a projectile, its advantage over other weapons being that it does not deplete a finite source of Strength of Will. By contrast, in the sequel, the Vorpal Blade is now capable of executing a succession of quick combo attacks and becomes a staple of combat, easy to default to. The effect is, as Fawcett suggests, that the player, no longer required to concentrate as much on overcoming enemies, devotes greater

energy to digesting and understanding the story. This emphasis on narrative becomes even more prevalent through the game's heavy use of cut-scenes between levels to grant further insight into Alice's psyche, and of reality sequences where Alice – and the player – is back in London. These reality sequences contain no combat or weapons, and the player simply maneuvers Alice to speak with various nonplayer characters; the sole purpose of these sequences is to expand on and advance the plot of the story. By alternating between Wonderland's combat and puzzle-heavy universe containing memory fragments and clues to Alice's greater mystery, and London's stark, dreary reality sequences, *Madness Returns* effectively places the focus not on the minutiae of defeating each monster, but on Alice's chronicle to unearth a shattered past.

Discussing why *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and its sequel are particularly suited for adaptation into the video game interface necessitates returning first to Carroll's work and adjusting our understanding of what it means to be a 'text'. Crucially, Carroll's stories were never intended to be simply texts in the sense of words, and both he – and Alice – emphasize the importance of visuals. Indeed, the opening chapter begins with Alice, bored by her sister's book which has "no pictures or conversations in it… "and what is the use of a book," thought Alice, "without pictures or conversations?" (*Alice's Adventures* 1-2). Carroll's novellas are peppered through with Tenniel's images, based on the author's own drawings from the story's pre-publication form, and it is these images that have remained etched into our cultural consciousness when Carroll's exact words and tale have eroded away: "the pictures constitute such an integral part of the text that we tend to associate the Alice-novels with immense visual powers, despite the fact that… Carroll practically hardly gives any precise physical description of his characters" (Kerchy 4). Kerchy notes that, in spite of Carroll's lack of description of what Alice herself looks like, we have come to embody her within Tenniel's illustration, a "nearly

consensual association of Wonderland with the mental image of a blonde little girl in a blue pinafore" (4). As a result, it becomes impossible to talk about *Alice* without also talking about Tenniel's images, in a manner which Frost terms the "integrated-image text" (Frost). It then becomes easy to see how *Alice* has become the center of so many visual adaptations; if the images form the locus of our cultural cues, then a designer already has a strong foundation to draw from; symbols are easy to reach, and visual connections are easy to make.

Though McGee's Alice does not have the same blonde hair audiences have come to associate with Carroll's story, she retains aspects of Tenniel's original design. Her dress is different enough to fit in with the rest of her horrific surroundings, but keeps the Victorian model. One of her many outfits in *Madness Returns* is, in fact, the blue pinafore of Tenniel's illustrations. Of course, the images of McGee's games are hardly limited to the character of Alice herself; the games themselves are visually stimulating and expansive. Because Carroll tells us so little about Wonderland's appearance, adaptors are free to imagine it as they please. Each of the levels in both *American McGee's Alice* and *Madness Returns* are sprawling and phantasmagorical in different ways, inspiring within the player a sense of wonder akin to Alice's own in the original text – though in the player's case, it is often tinged with horror. The ending of *American McGee's Alice* showcases the particular importance of visuals as, upon the Queen of Heart's defeat, various locations in Wonderland which the player has already navigated are returned from their twisted forms to their previously idyllic settings by flashes of light. More than simply knowing that Wonderland has been restored, the player receives gratification from watching the poisonous lakes return to fresh water, the hostile thorny roses and fungi to picturesque garden flowers. In the sequel, McGee pays more direct homage to Tenniel's work by constructing the majority of the narrative around two-dimensional cutscenes drawn in the style of

Tenniel's illustrations. They contrast directly with the high-definition 3D modeling of the other cutscenes and the rest of the game, and thus stand out and draw the player's attention. Though these cutscenes themselves are often macabre and gruesome, the woodcut 'look' of them situates the player within the hyper-text, allowing him or her to associate the affective visuals with Carroll's work. Combined, McGee's creation requires a full engagement of the senses; the player listens to dialogue as they explore mystical fields or grotesque rooms; the experience is both textual and visual, much like its source text. The universe of the games becomes a "symbolic space" through which "visual representations of memory, dreams, and traumatic events…engage with that which is beyond language" (Fawcett 506). Or, perhaps more fittingly, McGee's Alice echoes her own sentiments at the beginning of Carroll's novel; in one of the collected memories, Nan Sharpe is overheard saying of Alice: "every picture tells a story. You wouldn't tolerate a book without pictures when you were a girl" (*Madness Returns*).

Beyond the implementation of image, however, *Alice* as a tale is so appropriate for the video game interface because it in itself functions much like one. Written by a logician and mathematician, *Alice* reads as a series of patterns and puzzles with a disconnected story. The reader does not question how she gets from place to place, attributing the loose narrative to the mystique of Wonderland. The result, as Elliot phrases it, is that the novels follow a very formulaic structure, where Alice must "find the key, become the right size, in order to get through the door into the garden" ("Adaptation as Compendium" 195). This particular kind of frame makes *Alice* easily transferrable to a gaming interface, since it so closely follows the steps of an action-adventure plot, and McGee's games have often been classified as "action-adventure", as Alice follows a series of quests in order to advance through Wonderland. In fact, the opening sequence in the Pandemonium level mirrors Carroll's chain of events almost exactly.

Knowing that she has to follow Rabbit, Alice proceeds until she watches him vanish into a key hole into which she cannot fit. The following cutscene with one of the nearby nonplayer characters shows her asking how she can become small, to which the gnome replies that the Fortress of Doors "holds such secrets" (*American McGee*). When she asks another gnome how she can get into the Fortress of Doors, he tells her that she must speak to the Gnome Elder, who then tells her that the key to the Fortress is a particularly rough diamond that lies in the Card Guards' compound. The player's quest then becomes longwinded: he or she must fetch the key, accompany the Elder into the Fortress of Doors, fight through monsters in order to collect the ingredients for the potion that will turn Alice small so that she can finally proceed through the keyhole after Rabbit into the Pool of Tears level. Interestingly, this 'quest' structure which forces the player to interact with nonplayer characters and the environment in order to "alter the world of the game" defies the usual understanding of a "game", where the focus remains on the mechanics of play; instead, action-adventures like McGee's games fit more "under the extended definition of interactive fiction and are not necessarily best understood under the rubric of games" (*What is your Quest* 45-6).

In her analysis of *Alice* in particular, Salter also gestures to another trait that makes Carroll's original text game-like. Wonderland's required suspension of disbelief makes linearity optional, giving designers like McGee more room to explore creatively without having to worry about connecting the pieces: "Alice and her Wonderland are inherently non-linear: though they are both constantly in flux, the order of experience from moment to moment has no major impact on our understanding of her adventures. The White Rabbit is our tour guide to digital space, fretting over time even as it passes by him, loops around, and begins again without warning" (*Alice in Dataland*). In Carroll's work, this non-linearity manifests in the time-space leap

between chapters; how does Alice get from place to place? As the reader, we do not know, and are not expected to care, instead connecting the gaps in logic with our own imaginations. McGee realizes this too; in *American McGee's Alice,* Alice travels from level to level not by moving through continuous space, but through the use of portals that propel her from one level to the next. Often, the visual layout of each level is vastly different from the last, and it would be difficult for a developer to bridge the gap between, for example, the creaking, haunted woodwork of the Skool in the Fortress of Doors to the open, grey pastures of the Pool of Tears. It is much easier for Alice to simply jump into a portal which then inexplicably transports her to a very different landscape. The sequel also features similar use of portals, though they manifest as doors with fire behind them, symbolizing that the movement from level to level corresponds with Alice's navigation through her memories of the house fire. Aside from the presence of the door, the settings on either side are equally completely different.

However, Carroll's leaps across time and space can also be understood as madness – perhaps the events between chapters are blank because they represent gaps in memory. At least for the reader, it might feel so, since we have no knowledge or recollection of what might have happened to Alice in that time. Madness is how McGee adapts these moments, at least in *Madness Returns*, where the reality sequences in London are often perforated by Alice's hallucinations, during which time neither she nor the player know what is truly happening to her before she descends into Wonderland again. When Alice meets Nurse Witless on the rooftop of her house to see the pigeons, she asks "do you mean to harm me? To send me back to the asylum?" Her back turned, Witless replies "I won't say no. I've got a thirst you could photograph." At this point, her head distorts and becomes the head of the Jabberwock from the previous game, her voice likewise distorting – Alice is experiencing a hallucination as Witless

continues: “need a drink. More than my whistle needs whetting!” The ground beneath Alice begins to shake and crumple apart and she falls through the hole into Wonderland. The player does not know what happened to Alice in reality, and when we return to London again, the scene is completely different (*Madness Returns*). If not for Alice’s words to the Cat – “Very upsetting journey, but I’m rid of Pris, or whatever she’s become” – that give the player an idea that Alice may have pushed Witless off the rooftop and killed her, we would never be able to fill in the logical gap. But Witless’ fate is the only one that the player is given a hint to; often, the reality sequences are as disjointed as Carroll’s chapters. Occasionally, nonplayer character dialogue tells us what had happened to Alice in reality while she and the player were in Wonderland, but the scenes themselves are disconnected to create the sense of narrative that is so Carrollian.

If we conceptualize *Alice* as a more game-like, interactive interface where the reader is encouraged to associate him or herself with Carroll’s character, then it becomes easy to see how McGee adopted the same tactics to create his titles. Carroll’s intent from the outset is possibly even one of immersion into the story, as he declares in the prefatory poem that children “In fancy… pursue / The dream-child”, meaning that there is a sense in which they actively accompany or participate in adventures with the dream-child in Wonderland rather than passively observe her there” (Schatz 96). The emphasis on dreams and Wonderland’s dream-like quality is important, as Schatz notes, and “both the rabbit hole and the looking-glass metaphorically reflect the reader’s immersion in the dual frontiers of dreams and the child’s mind” (95). More than just the story of Alice that invites the reader in to join, however, is the physicality of the book itself; far from being a passive observer, the reader is in fact pulled into Wonderland through the use of image:

> Certainly, the first editions of the *Alice* books not only encouraged readers to figuratively follow Alice into Wonderland and Looking-Glass Land, but they also required readers to

> physically move themselves into the dream worlds with her by turning the pages. The entrance into Looking-Glass Land is, literally, a case of moving pictures. The layout of text and illustrations… creates the potential for optical illusions and visual phenomena that are then activated by readers' hands. (Manning 167)

Already from the first edition, the reader is encouraged to participate and become an active part of their own experience. The trend of immersion only continues with subsequent adaptations of Alice, still in text form. Salter describes the Alice app. for the iPad, where the reader can download an interactive version of Carroll's text. The story comes "fully illustrated with simple interactive elements…a pocket watch that tilts the screen, a falling jar of marmalade, an expanding and retracting Alice, and other such simply moving parts that are placed alongside the text. The childlike elements seem to suit the story even as they encourage the reader to skip past the static pages to find more movable goodies" (*What is your Quest* 163). Once again, image supercedes written text and becomes the anchor to which we associate ourselves with the *Alice* tales, and the interactive model that "seems to suit the story" collapses *Alice* further and further into the the most interactive of storytelling structures: the video game.

The character of Alice herself functions so effectively as a game avatar due to "her own status as a fish out of water in Wonderland: like a player in a platformer, she dives into a world of new logic systems and masters their ordering to advance". Likewise, Salter indicates that even in the original novel, Alice retains this avatar-like quality: "she interacts, she experiences, but she is not physically at risk. She is simultaneously there and not there, existing between and rejecting the false binary of real and imaged, of real and virtual" ("Alice in Dataland"). Alice's introduction to Wonderland in the Carroll books foreshadows the player's own bewilderment when he or she enters McGee's Wonderland for the first time; for both, it is an out-of-body experience of an entirely different life. The player associates with Alice, who both navigates Wonderland and remains distinct from it, "retaining a corporeal human form amidst the strange

two- and three-dimensional creatures and settings she encounters" (Bonner and Jacobs 42). In McGee's games, the immersion becomes evident even through gameplay that presses against the fourth wall, further closing the gap between player and Alice-avatar. In the first title, the two bars on-screen governing the player's gameplay – depleted by being hit by enemies and by using up ranged attacks with Alice's weapons, respectively – are characterized not by their usual action-adventure names of "health" and "magic power", but by "Sanity" and "Strength of Will". Thus, as the meter in each bar drops, the player's performance is conflated with Alice's increasing instability. In *Madness Returns*, when the Sanity meter is close to empty, the screen takes on a muted, fuzzy appearance and cracks appear from the edges to symbolize Alice's fracturing mental state. When she is struck by an enemy, the edges of the screen pulse red to create a more visceral sensation within the player. *Madness Returns* also allows the player to switch from the standard third-person over-the-shoulder view of the avatar to a first-person more reminiscent of the FPS genre, further merging player and avatar by allowing the player to look through Alice's eyes.

Additionally, much of the immersion in the games originates from the sense of agency that the player receives from controlling Alice, and the corresponding sense of agency that Alice possesses within the gameplay. In the original Carroll novel, Alice is, for the most part, a passive observer, consuming her Wonderland surroundings. However, at certain points, she displays the power to exert dominance over the land of her imagination, as she "does to the Wonderland creatures when she dismisses them as nothing but a pack of cards" (qtd. in "Alice in Dataland"). Thus, as Salter attests, "Alice's identity is grounded in her ability to reject or accept even the rules of the reality she is presented with, through her own reading of Wonderland" ("Alice in Dataland"). This trend continues through the mini-game attached to Burton's film adaptation,

where, “instead of being passively consumed” like the film itself, the game invites players to “engage in the action…to ‘master abilities’, defy ‘optical illusions’, solve ‘challenging puzzles’, and conquer ‘formidable adversaries’” (“Tie-Intertextuality” 199). As an action-adventure game, of course, McGee’s titles do the same, allowing the player to control Alice and smash boxes, engage enemies, leap platforms, and wield weapons to claim her sanity with her own hands. In Wonderland, Alice is a force to be reckoned with, and she manages to fight her way to the Queen of Hearts – or the Dollmaker – and save Wonderland despite overwhelming odds. Though she expresses grief over the deaths of her allies such as Gryphon, Rabbit, and Cheshire Cat in *American McGee’s Alice*, she just as quickly picks up her Vorpal Blade again to face the next monster. When Alice enters the Vale of Doom in *Madness Returns* after another hallucinatory episode, Cheshire Cat remarks on this necessary tenacity:

> Alice: The train is perfectly capable of terrifying me, Cat. You should find another job. Is there really so little hope?
>
> Cheshire: There’s even less. And if fear paralyzes you, we are lost.

The safety of Wonderland depends on her ability to take responsibility and take action, and the strength she acquires in Wonderland eventually transfers into reality in the final scene of *Madness Returns* where she confronts Dr. Bumby in the train station: “Alice snatches his pocket-watch, the tool of his psychological control; then morphs from the Alice of the real world into the Alice of Wonderland, exhanging her pauper’s rags for her steampunk attire before shoving Bumby into the path of an oncoming train. The steam-powered locomotive becomes the Infernal Train of vengeance, as Alice channels the violence of the Carroll originals to reclaim her agency” (Farrell 49). Her murder of Dr. Bumby, who had been responsible not only for the death of her family but for the misery of countless other children, represents her first active move in the reality sequences in order to regain her physical and mental freedom.

However, Alice's powerful sense of agency in Wonderland stands in direct contrast to the powerlessness she experiences in reality. Her story centers around her feelings of guilt and helplessness surrounding the death of her family and, as the player later discovers, her blindness and inability to help the children around her at Houndsditch from being abused and sold into sexual slavery. During the reality sequences, there is no combat involved; the player simply moves Alice through the London setting, interacting with various nonplayer characters; in these moments, she is often victim to her own delusions. Fawcett aptly notes that "the player moves Alice through Victorian London, but has no demonstrable power. Often, the player does not control her movement, but is an observer of her discussions with characters likr Dr. Bumby, Nurse Witless, Nanny Sharpe, and Barrister Radcliffe. The player cannot alter Alice's interactions in London: in the real world, Alice is a powerless young woman" (Fawcett 499). Nowhere is this sense of helplessness more profound than in Alice's hallucination of Rutledge Asylum. The player navigates Alice, bound in a straitjacket with her head shaved and a glassy stare on her face, through the imagined reconstruction of the asylum's halls and rooms. Along the way, she encounters altered forms of her previous caretakers, such as the orderlies that taunted and sexually harassed her. These are twins noted in Wilson's diary who became the basis for Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum in Wonderland. She also experiences disturbing hallucinations of her time in treatment, accompanied by images of blood-soaked rooms and deranged patients. The player, like Alice, cannot fight off or escape these horrific images. These reality sequences, hallucinated or otherwise, "stand in stark opposition to [Alice's] violent response to the Ruined creatures both before and after [the] interlude… It is this perpetual sense of powerlessness that colors Alice's visions of Wonderland" (Fawcett 507). And more than that, this sense of powerlessness is where one aspect of the games' horror genre originates.

Daydreams to Hallucinations: Why *Horror?*

In Carroll's imagination, Wonderland is certaintly not an inherently frightful place. Though its residents are quirky and its physical and social laws strange, the word "wonder" when Carroll uses it does not extend to the same level of graphic violence and psychological horror displayed in McGee's incarnation. However, scholars have noted that Carroll's Wonderland "does not necessarily exclude dark or violent concepts"; even if not overtly horrific, it still "represents an alternative to pathological renditions of dreamscapes" (Schatz 113). The dreamscape, then, is what predicates much of *Alice*'s potential for horror; the blending of reality and illusion, though playful in Carroll's rendition, easily becomes the object of anxiety and instability. For Carroll, writing at a time when childhood imagination was "very quickly morphing into evidence of a weakened constitution and a possible indication of a nervous disorder – both precursors of madness", Wonderland becomes Alice's escape from the dull and boring real world (99). He explores the creativity of a child's "abstraction, fancy, and daydreams" to create a harmless, positive portrait of childhood imagination; however, the prevailing medical perception at the time *did,* in fact, discourage daydreams in children as signs of burgeoning mental illness (101). The anxiety that children may never be able to tell the difference between what is real and what is fake permeates Carroll's writing – and, indeed, at times Alice herself blends the two, making it impossible for the reader to separate reality from Wonderland:

> At the story's offset, we are told that Alice, bored by her sister's book (it contained no pictures), and feeling "very sleepy and stupid" on a hot summer day, sees "a White Rabbit" dash near her. The term "White Rabbit" is capitalized here, which may suggest that it is *the* White Rabbit, in which case Alice may already be in Wonderland, so to speak, and perhaps asleep. But if Alice sees a real rabbit, and then, in her half-dreaming

> state, imagines that the real rabbit is speaking, then this is an example of a conflation of reality with fantasy. We are not told which is the case. (Schatz 106)

With this obscure description in mind, where it becomes possible for the reader to infer that Alice cannot separate reality from dreams, it is easy to see where the slip into madness and horror can begin. McGee takes this principle and uses it as the basis of his games. Various memories in *Madness Returns* refer to Alice's preference for daydreams starting from a young age, and she is admonished for it by her caretakers, such as Nan Sharpe: "if you spent as much time practicing as you do in 'Wonderland' you'd be the next Sullivan. Or Gilbert. One of them" (*Madness Returns*). Sharpe also adopts the rhetoric of the time in Alice's hallucination: "I told your mother, dear. You were a distant and stubborn child, too content in her her own world. Young women need to leave their Wonderlands. The real world is not so wonderful. You'll need to grow up" (*Madness Returns*).

McGee also, like Carroll, never makes it quite clear whether what Alice – and, therefore, the player – sees is real or simply a figment of her hallucinations, though here Carroll's whimsical visions of a talking rabbit take on a horrific tone. In the opening sequence of *American McGee's Alice*, the screen shows Alice in her bed at the asylum with her stuffed rabbit in her arms. The toy then looks up at her, and we are shown Alice's shocked expression before accompanying her descent into Wonderland. Much as Schatz says about the scene in Carroll's book, the player is never told whether this is real. *Madness Returns* is fraught with such instances where reality and fantasy collapse as well; the aforementioned scene between Alice and Pris Witless on the rooftop constitutes one such instance. There is specifically something about the use of visual hallucinations that befits *Alice* in particular given the importance of the image. Perhaps it gestures back to the Victorians' own preoccupation with the instability of the photographic picture, which could be used to "both capture and misrepresent realities…the

Victorians seem to have maintained an uneasy relationship with a technology that proved wildly popular and came to permeate their lives" (Manning 158). Manning goes on to root the anxiety of vision in Carroll's text, citing that "the *Alice* books contain the oft-repeated phrase "looking anxiously", or some variation of it, and this visual tension permeates both the photographic space of Wonderland and the cinematic space of Looking-Glass Land" (169). This "visual tension" persists into the highly cinematic space of McGee's games too, as the player begins hesitating to trust what they are seeing on screen. In the reality sequence after Alice confronts Radcliffe, her family's lawyer, and presumably experiences a psychotic episode, she wakes up again to the same room, but now it is empty and abandoned. Radcliffe has disappeared along with all of the objects in the room; the player has no idea how much time has passed or what has happened in that interim time, and Radcliffe is never seen again in the game. When Alice steps back outside, fiery hints of the Infernal Train have infiltrated London's real space, and she rounds a corner to see the ground breaking away in the distance and Wonderland's Infernal Train moving through the hellish sky. Given the dialogue of Alice's psychosis that frames the game, the player understands that this is likely a hallucination, but the visual collapse of London into Wonderland makes that conclusion tentative at best.

At its root, however, *Alice* is not simply an image, but an *image-text,* and so the verbal and written cues must also play a part in destabilizing reality. Carroll accomplishes this through the use of riddles, rhymes, and "nonsense", confusing both Alice and the reader into a sense of "unreality". For instance, the Jabberwock poem consists almost entirely of made-up words and creatures, and yet the underlying plot and meaning of the poem is still coherent. Though the reader may not understand what "gyre"ing and "gimble"ing in the wabe entails, or what "borogroves" are or what "mimsy" means, he or she is still able to complete the picture in his or

her mind (*Looking Glass* 21). The language is topsy-turvy, but "it is linguistic representation that gains a pictorial quality. The disorientation by picturesque language is foregrounded verbally by literalised metaphors and idiomatic expressions" (Kerchy 4). In this way, reality is somehow made up of unreal or nonsensical parts, creating that same "visual tension", but through words. In McGee, the puzzles and riddles turn out to have actual, concrete answers; most notably, the famous nonsense riddle "why is a raven like a writing desk?", which never had a posited answer, becomes "how is the Queen of Hearts like a typhoon?" By correctly answering the Cheshire Cat's riddles, Alice in fact collects prizes for use in gameplay. But nonsense is still a part of Wonderland's psychosis; when Alice first encounters the Hatter, he is muttering nonsensical phrases, and the Tweedles' conversation in Alice's hallucination of the asylum is similarly meaningless. Even parts of the dialogue that are meant to help Alice and provide her and the player with clues throughout the game are difficult to decipher, however. As the Infernal Train destroys the Deluded Depths, the Carpenter attempts lead her towards the truth.

> Carpenter: I am not the enemy you seek, Alice. I tried to hide this bit of Wonderland from that beast. Appeasement is never clean. We must all play our assigned roles. Are you a pawn or a queen? An idiot or a practiced fool? However this turns out, consider the prospect that you have been misled, Alice. Then ask, by whom?

The Carpenter's use of what Schatz terms "semantically opaque expressions" (Schatz 110) confuses the player and forces him or her to reconsider the reality of the game, and what Alice has been seeing and thinking since the start. Once again, we return to the idea that seeing – and hearing – is not necessarily believing. If meaningless rhetoric is a Carrollion staple that forces us to challenge our understanding of "the relationship from representations and reality" (110) and consider the disturbingly blurred line between real and fake, then McGee's similar use of deliberately confusing rhetoric does the same, with an easy slippage into horror. Therefore, this blurred line allows McGee to create what Kryzwinska, in his analysis of surival horror video

games, calls “a pervasive experience of vertigo of the type that Lovecraft identifies as the most affecting form of Horror” (Kryzwinska 297) This “affect”, created from the relationship between “text and context, representation and the symbolic”, profligates McGee’s text, but begins within Carroll’s.

Subject to such affect, the player then begins to experience panic as the game strips away his or her autonomy and agency, returning the player to Alice’s sensation of powerlessness as her sanity crumbles around her, and inability to do anything to ameliorate the situation except continue fighting through Wonderland in hopes of finding a solution. As Kryzwinska notes, though video games create immersion and affirmation by allowing the players to “inhabit the guide of the ideal-ego” and experience the “framework of acting and doing as a hero would”, “self-affirmation is *not*, however, the foundation of the most interesting types of Horror” (Kryzwinska 296). She looks at the popular titles Silent Hill and Left for Dead as emblems of the horror game genre, based in evoking feelings of vulnerability and panic in the player:

> Silent Hill (1999) provides a classic example as it deliberately interferes with player performance by taking away the power to see what is coming and removing a player’s ability to read real space sound cues… Unnerved and blinded, unable to act as efficiently as would be expected, this tallies with the use of tropes of claustrophobia found across Horror and Gothic fiction to stimulate affect to produce sensation and emotion. Panic is of course a highly effective way to disrupt a player’s sense of self-assurance…The effect is that the usual sense of autonomy and self-determination that games promise to create is shaken. (Krzywinska 296-7)

The sense of claustrophobia that Krzywinska highlights often embodies McGee’s games, as the player faces hoards of difficult enemies throughout Wonderland, often multiple at a time. There are challenges that the player can take on which require them to either defeat all enemies thrown at them in a contained space or survive for a set amount of time by evading an onslaught, but perhaps the sequence that evokes the Gothic sense of horror most intensely takes place in the Queensland level, where the player is told early on to avoid one particular servant of the Queen

who is always lurking. Soon, the player encounters him: the Executioner, a giant, scythe-wielding monster whose attacks can easily kill Alice and who cannot be harmed in return, much like Silent Hill's infamous Pyramidhead figure. The Executioner repeatedly pursues Alice through Queensland, at times chasing her through a hallway, scythe whirling, and the player has to run as quickly as possible to what is often an exit too small for the Executioner to fit through. As soon as the player thinks they are safe, however, he appears again, sometimes while Alice is already fighting against other monsters. Eventually, Alice finds the cake labeled "Eat Me", which turns her large enough to easily – anticlimatically – kill the Executioner by stepping on him, but until then, the Queensland level is fraught with claustrophobia and a lingering panic of being found again. Just as Alice hunts the monsters through the beating graveyard, the Execution hunts her, and the player is reminded that, though the game grants both player and avatar agency within Wonderland, "it is equally possible to take that agency away to generate a strong and direct sense of loss and vulnerability" (Kryzwinska 297).

The horror of the Alice games are not only situated in gameplay events, however; the game also relies heavily on the use of psychological horror surrounding the anxieties of "growing up"; it can be argued that the tension between childhood and adulthood is where McGee's games acquire much of their disturbing nature. Like the tension between reality and fiction, this is not a contemporary concern unique to McGee's titles; anxieties surrounding the strangeness of growing up inform much of Victorian children's literature. Is a children's story meant for a child or for an adult audience? It is no secret that many children's stories contain elements of horror within them, or themes that many would consider unsuitable for a child; yet, only as adults do we locate these disturbing moments within the stories themselves. As kids, we rarely think twice about topics that should be gruesome or sobering, and often miss dark subtexts

entirely. In an analysis of the disturbing qualities of nursery rhymes, Rollin likens them to dreams “in that they have both latent and manifest content, their surface nonsense or simple narratives more or less concealing disturbing themes” (Rollin 105). Using the story of Humpty Dumpty, Rollin demonstrates how the rhyme’s lighthearted meter and language masks the realization that the rhyme is about someone who falls to their death – gruesomely, too, as even all the king’s horses and all the king’s men “couldn’t put Humpty Dumpty back together again”. Compounded on the common depiction of Humpty Dumpty as a humanoid egg, it is easy to see how such an image could slip into the horrific: altogether, the rhyme describes the gory death of a supposedly inanimate object turned human. The “nature of the text” simply acts as a diversion, and the “latent content of the rhymes often necessitates this diversion – the condensation and displacement of our attention” (Rollin 108). Rollin describes this diversive act as a “regression in service of the ego”; even in adults, it manifests as “a temporary engagement in childlike thoughts or actions that allows the ego time and space to deal with stresses” (107). In McGee, this becomes clearest in the Dollhouse level of *Madness Returns*. After realizing that Dr. Bumby is the one who murdered her family and that he has also inflicted and perpetrated the sexual abuse of children, Alice experiences a delusion of her flaming childhood home. When she enters it, she and the player are transported to the Dollhouse level, complete with tokens and icons of childhood: puzzle pieces, blocks, and dolls decorate the colorful landscape. She navigates and battles through this infantilized version of her own home in an attempt to reconcile childhood memories and come to terms with the truth behind them; the context and layout of the level itself function directly as such a “regression in service of the ego”. The player experiences the escape from – and subsequent unpacking of – Alice’s stresses alongside her, resulting in an experience

of "symbolic catharsis by working through the repressed memories and facing the aggressor without having to experience the initial trauma" (Fawcett 493).

When asked about whether he considers the *Alice* novels to be children's stories, McGee commented in an interview: "technically, no. But that's not to say that I would withhold that book…from the hands of a child… [T]he Alice books may have been written for and about a chid, but at the same time they contained commentary on politics that I doubt any child would comprehend or enjoy. Part of the beauty of the writing is that it can simultaneously serve two very different functions, and do both well" (qtd. in Martin 151). When Carroll's Alice first remarks on the tedium of her sister's book, which contains no pictures, she is speaking to a broader context surrounding the disconnect between youth and adulthood. Children do not understand concepts in the same way adults do, which explains why the Queen's obsession with beheadings does not resonate with as much morbidity within a child audience as it would within adults. Years later, McGee's Alice is on the cusp of adulthood, and her world is now colored with the dark themes of adult life that were scattered throughout her childhood Wonderland, but which she did not comprehend. The reality scenes in London are dreary, filled with themes of rape, prostitution, greed, abuse, and neglect. Radcliffe is primarily concerned with Alice's case in order to take advantage of a child survivor to embezzle the family inheritance, Witless is a sadistic alcoholic who takes advantage of Alice's orphaned state and manipulates her, and Alice's childhood nanny, one of the few who is still friendly to her, has turned to prostitution.

McGee also appropriates elements of social-political Marxist critique that ran in the undercurrent of Carroll's original *Alice,* elements that only the adult reader would be able to grasp and which become symbols of Alice's transition into the realities of adulthood within the game's narrative. Because of the importance of Tenniel's illustrations in Carroll's works and his

more well-known status as a political cartoonist, the *Alice* stories have assumed a political aura that cannot be divorced from the original text. Frost gestures to this when she examines Tenniel's cartoon "The Patient Ass", which depicts an ass being "crushed under the weight of increasing income taxes"; Frost notes that "these would have been works that people in Tenniel's time might have known him for, and therefore when they picked up the Alice works, they would have known that there might be some subtexts running through Tenniel's illustrations. This would have changed the way they read the texts" (Frost). As she points out, these motifs still echo in today's popular culture, and the fact that they are much more overt in *Madness Returns* indicates Alice's maturation from the days of her old Wonderland where she – and her childhood audience – would not have recognized the satire. Part of Wonderland's first level in *Madness Returns* consists of the Hatter's factory, a steampunk landscape complete with rusty brass, gears, and steam vents. Here, Alice has to help the Hatter, who has been overthrown by his friends the Dormouse and the March Hare much in the style of an industrial worker strike. The latter two have dismantled the Hatter's machinated body and Alice must collect his limbs to make him whole again. As the player progresses through the level, the Dormouse's voice – unhinged, a clear sign of his own mental instability – plays over a public announcement system in the background, and the dialogue is a blatant satire of industrial capitalist doctrine: "a good worker is a live worker, free to live and work. A bad worker is a dead worker and vice versa. Don't be a bad worker. Bad workers are slaves, and dead. Pay day for good workers has been postponed indefinitely. Pay day for bad workers is cancelled" (*Madness Returns*). This repeats over and over as Alice advances through the factory, and eventually becomes a background drone that adds to the level's atmosphere of Marxist critique, allowing the adult player to view the game –

and Carroll's novels – more clearly "not only as a children's story but also as it illuminates adult knowledge and experience hidden within the text" (Martin 152).

The growing cynicism and grimness that comes with a child's eventual encounter with and acceptance of adult reality therefore informs a large part of the games' narrative structure. *Madness Retuns* effectively presents Alice's young adult state as one mired in a "culture of distrust… Alice, disenfranchised as both child and mental patient, is mistreated and, as a result, damaged by her various caregivers" (Fawcett 502). The perpetrator of the game's most heinous crimes is also her therapist and the owner of Houndsditch Home where she lives, an adult figure who ought to be trusted. Instead, Bumby manifests as Wonderland's Dollmaker, and in the final battle in the Infernal Train, Alice directly combats his grotesque hands, connected to his body by strings, while they make crude gestures and grab and assault her body, mirroring Bumby's sexual appetite for children in reality. Fawcett notes that the story is continuously grim; though Alice is never physically abused, the threat hangs over her constantly, and "she is left powerless in the face of the adult world that disregards her" (503). In fact, the game capitalizes on horror associated with the body, especially the body of the child. Though certainly much darker than anything in Carroll's *Alice*, the preoccupation with anxieties regarding the body begin in Alice's 1865 experiences in Wonderland. "Curiouser and curiouser," she famously exclaims at the start of the book's second chapter after eating the cake, "now I'm opening out like the largest telescope that ever was! Good-bye, feet!" (for when she looked down at her feet, they seemed to be almost out of sight, they were getting so far off)" (*Alice* 15). Alice's uncertanties regarding her feet continue as she imagines them taking on a mind of their own now that they are so far removed from her head: "but I must be kind to them," thought Alice, "or perhaps they won't walk the way I want to go!" (16). The rapid changes in Alice's stature and the alienation from

her own body point to the instability of puberty, where an adolescent's body acts strangely and seems out of one's control. This natural anxiety then treads into the disturbing when one considers the implications of such instability and disassociation, and becomes the genre of body horror that runs through McGee's titles.

Enemies in *American McGee's Alice* explode into bloody chunks of flesh when beaten with the croquet mallet, and the whole of *Madness Returns'* Dollhouse level brims with disturbing images of the "dehumanized child" (Fawcett 500), which represents Alice's struggle to come to terms with the reality of Bumby's pedophilia and the misery he has inflicted on other children. Physicality is never represented as positive within McGee's world; Fawcett points out that "all sex in the game is presented as abhorrent: Alice's sister Lizzie is raped; Alice is warped and threatened by Dr. Bumby; Alice's Nanny Sharpe is a prostitute attacked by a former client; the children at the care home are pimped out. Sex is the center of trauma in the game, as is its association with children" (Fawcett 505). The Insane Children scattered around the Dollhouse (and throughout all of Wonderland in the prequel) serve as the Wonderland projections of Houndsditch's other residents, the residents of Rutledge Asylum, or both. In *Madness Returns*, they are depicted as victims of severe physical trauma, with flayed skin and covered in blood. Alice encounters one of them in her hallucination of Hyde Park; the child's body has been bisected and she drags herself along the ground, leaving a bloody trail. When she pleads for Alice's help, she replies "Why do you suffer? The Queen's tyranny is just a memory. She has no power over you, does she?" indicative of Alice's blindness towards the suffering of the children around her at Houndsditch (*Madness Returns*). Later, in the Dollhouse, she encounters the other Insane Children at the symbolically named Fort Resistance, at which point she understands what has been happening to them:

> Insane Child Leader: The unstable are more than merely mad! They have other parts. The Dollmaker will deprive them of what remains of their deranged souls! They need care.
>
> Alice: I know their pain. I would assist, but, is sanity required for the job?
>
> Insane Child Leader: A limited quantity. You're not mad enough to be rejected. You're like them, of them in a way. But not them. I should say, not us, for I'm them, but you're on your way. The way is clearly marked.

The sexualization and suffering of children comprises the last of the ugly realities of adulthood that Alice must realize in order to face and overcome the trauma of her repressed memories, and the layout of the Dollhouse level reflects this in its disturbing architecture filled with structures fashioned out of dolls' bodies; "disembodied parts like eyes, hands, brains, hearts, are incorporated into the architecture. Larger doll-bodies form the passages Alice must travel through, transgressing their form in a way that is intentionally invasive" (Fawcett 505). Towards the end of the game, as Alice pieces together the events from the night of the fire, recalling Bumby's presence in the house, she says "centaurs don't live in Oxford", as she had originally convinced herself that Bumby's shape in her house was that of a mythical creature. Crucially, she must reject the fantasies of her childhood psyche in order to face the truth, and does so when she confronts the Dollmaker at the heart of the Dollhouse: "Am I not the most wretched and selfish of fortune's fools? Oblivious, I live in a training ground for prostitutes; my mentor is an abuser and purveyor; I've been complicit with my sister's murderer, and the killer of my family, as he corrupted my mind!" (*Madness Returns*). Later, in the Infernal Train, she learns the truth about what happened to her sister in a similar fashion, as the Queen of Hearts tells her "and that noise wasn't Lizzie talking in her sleep…there are no centaurs in Oxford. Make your survival mean something, or we are all doomed!" (*Madness Returns*) Therefore, the threat in the Alice games concerns the "dehumanization of the child and the industrialization that surrounds it" (Fawcett 500). Both these themes are present in Carroll's work. Though not to the

same degree of overt horror, they provide a foundation from which to broach darker adult themes of bodily corruption and abuse, informing McGee's designs that center around "the manipulation of space around a human body," around the "navigation of a vulnerable figure through a three dimensional threat-filled landscape" that form the basis of survival horror.

Preoccupation with eating and devouring also provides another angle of body horror that surfaces throughout Carroll's texts; as mentioned before, the Duchess is a prime example, found preparing soup when Alice first meets her. When she hands off her baby to Alice in order to prepare to play croquet with the Queen, Alice takes it out of the house, only to quickly find that it "has a *very* turn-up nose, much more like a snout than a real nose; also its eyes were getting extremely small, for a baby"; soon enough "it grunted again, so violently, that she looked down into its face in some alarm. This time there could be *no* mistake about it: it was neither more nor less than a pig, and she felt that it would be quite absurd for her to carry it any further" (*Alice* 87-8). The transformation of a human infant into an animal associated with consumption in itself contains shades of cannibalism, and it requires little stretch of the imagination to see how McGee invented his cannibalistic Duchess. The horror of consumption stretches further to the Walrus and the Carpenter as the two discuss the edibility of oysters; though the reader does not initially associate oysters with human characteristics – and it seems in fact natural that such characters would consume them – the line between what is edible and what verges on cannibalism has already been blurred by the transformation of the Duchess' baby. *Madness Returns* forces the player to realize this after Alice has recruited all the Oyster Starlets for performance in the Carpenter's show, only to arrive on the scene and witness them being devoured. Fitting with the ongoing motif of Alice moving through Wonderland in order to come to terms with dark adult

themes, the Walrus muses on the nature of death while consuming the screaming Starlets amidst grotesque bursts of oyster juice:

> Sword and crown are worthless here,
> I invite everyone to dance
> Laborers, lawyers, church and gown
> All make their little prance.
> This life is full of random death
> And heaps of grief and shame,
> So few are soothed by 'accident'
> You want someone to blame.
> Fire, plague, or strange disease
> Drowned, murdered, or, if you please,
> A long fall down the basement stairs
> None are expected, no one cares.
> I often must work very hard
> Sweat running down my skin,
> After the dance I then must rest
> And the eating can begin.

The Walrus' poem contains echoes of Absurdist thought with its discussion of the randomness and meaninglessness of death and tragedy. Kerchy locates these anxieties within the original *Alice*, stating that "the fundamental fears of the Unimaginable and the Unspeakable, of visual and verbal representational dead-ends/thresholds of sense, like anxieties concerning the tyrannical control over meaning and the anarchic proliferation of meaninglessness, go hand in hand, and constitute the kernel trauma of the implied reader/spectator Alice" (Kerchy 6). As Alice encounters these 'thresholds of sense' within the social and psychological structure of Wonderland, she and the player both experience a sense of horror originating from these various anxieties. When it was originally published, Carroll's books encouraged both children and adults to embrace a sense of anarchy, "to turn the staid Victorian world of strict morals and manners on its head…to delight in pure imagination and to experience the thrill of a good ghost yarn told for no other reason than the sheer pleasure of it" (Kendrick 22) The issue there, of course, is that

inverted rules can easily twist into a taboo space where only suppressed horror can fully manifest, and if we look at the *Alice* tales as the beginning of a cultural buildungsroman where the child moves from naivete on through adolescent development fraught with anxiety and into adulthood, then we can see how Alice herself "would continue to develop, adjusting from the physical and fantastical violence of childhood to the technological and psychological violence of the adult world" (Farrell 48).

Conclusion: Violence and the Legacy of Affect

In their experience with a class of undergraduate students discussing adaptation, Bonner and Jacobs remark on the importance of the order of encounter. As works are adapted, chances increase that an individual's first encounter with the work will not be through the hyper-text, but rather one of its cultural descendants: "we first noticed this from a student talking about the various Alice texts where it was obvious that her memory of her first experience of the story, characters and settings inflected subsequent encounters". After the student realized *Alice* was, at its conception, a children's story, "she was intrigued by the extra details, and tried hard to recast her experience to take account of the originating order, but it was clear that this could only be an intellectual exercise and that her core experience was to a significant extent unchanged" (Bonner and Jacobs 38). Taking this into account, what are we to make of the growing possibility that contemporary youth might first encounter Alice through McGee's games? It is far from improbable; video games have already, in many ways, matched film in cultural importance, and we may already be in a generation where one's first exposure to Alice's adventures may not be through Disney's innocent children's movie, but through one of Burton's, or even McGee's violent action-adventure game. The anxiety surrounding video games, of course, are different

than those surrounding film; in their foreward to their study *Empathy and Violent Video Games*, Happ and Meizer state that the difference lies in "video games' higher potential of immersion and its higher level of self-efficacy resulting from the interactive nature of the medium. Unlike movies and television, video games provide immediate and direct reinforcement and reward for successful actions through visual effects and sound" (Happ and Meizer 9). Do young people who play McGee's Alice games run the risk of becoming like Alice herself, unable to differentiate from reality and the inverted rules of McGee's Wonderland?

Happ and Meizer note that the debate over whether violent media has harmful effects on users has never reached any formal conclusion, though one wonders about McGee's brand of humanistic violence. Discussions of McGee call upon the importance of empathy; does the player associate themselves with Alice's character as she moves through Wonderland, partaking in her quest to complete her shattered memories and put an end to a manipulative abuser? Game avatars frequently serve as "a behavioral role model for the player, which may include behavior that is otherwise banned or sanctioned by society" (32). In a world like Wonderland, where social laws are already moot, this seems to be even more so the case, and Happ and Meizer go on to posit that "especially in contemporary violent video games, this may include norm-breaking behavior like killing other human-like characters. As there will be no direct negative consequences for engaging in such behavior, players regularly enjoy this breakout from their regular habits" (32). Of course, the human-like characters on-screen in the Alice games are divorced from real people; they are distorted monsters, and Kocurek suggests that "players are right not to feel sympathy for the monsters darting across the playing field… they are, by design, unsympathetic characters, mere impediments to game victory" (Kocurek 86). We, as players, are not meant to think anything of the Card Guards or the Ruin, or even the more humanoid Duchess

and Tweedles. After all, there is always a reason to kill them: they are insane and violent, and we are doing so in Alice's self-defense. However, Kocurek also notes that "the monsters on-screen, like monsters elsewhere, often represent human actors", which becomes especially notable when we consider that each of Alice's major enemies has a basis in her reality of London. At the end of *Madness Returns,* Alice simultaneously destroys the Dollmaker and murders his real-life counterpart. As she leaves the train station, she enters a London fused with the fantastical flora of Wonderland, and a voice overlay of the Cheshire Cat tells us that "forgetting pain is convenient. Remembering it, agonizing. But recovering the truth is worth the suffering. And our Wonderland, though damaged, is safe in memory… for now" (*Madness Returns*). The player is never informed of any consequences for Alice's actions, and considering that violence is the only endgame option, we are left to wonder whether the game presents it as the 'correct' path.

At the same time, it seems limiting to assert that McGee's violent and distubing material should be sanctioned, given that it revolves around a dark coming-of-age story. There are, after all, ties between "depictions of physical violence, and perceptions of real-world emotional or psychological violence" (Farrell 42), and Wonderland provides us with a contained, unreal space in which to realize and acknowledge those realities precisely so that we do not end up like Alice, with her repressed trauma. This is the direct result of the atmosphere of affect that McGee's Alice, and horror video games overall, create in order to embody and then diffuse tension through catharsis; the games draw from a deep well of Gothic influence in order to accomplish this, gesturing back to the tenets of Freudian psychoanalysis which have, whether inherently 'correct' or not, become our cultural inheritance. Bumby's Freudian approach to psychology permeates *Madness Returns*, and though the game is set two decades prior to Freud's work, "it is clearly his science that is being examined and critiqued" (Farrell 47). Even while the game

critiques such an approach, however, it simultaneously capitalizes on its ability to evoke an emotional response in the player. At its heart, after all, that is what a horror video game aims to do, and the fact that these Gothic themes prevail in horror titles and through video games in general demonstrates how "the Gothic mode is not only trans-national, but also trans-media" (Kirkland 119).

Where does this put *Alice* in terms of adaptation, then? Salter encourages us not to worry about whether the emergence of digital adaptations of traditional literature will steer future generations away from the canon, arguing that "the convergence inherent to these new forms of storytelling will have an effect far beyond these texts, reaching to the definition of literature" (*What is your Quest* 183). Already, she points out, both authors and their publishers are experimenting with convergent forms "both as part of marketing and as a way to fundamentally redefine a text" (183), and that we should remain open to a broader definition of "literature" in the coming future (185). As for faithfulness to the narrative? Certainly, in McGee's vision, we lose the innocent whimsy of Carroll's young Alice, the fanciful, weightless banter between her and the inhabitants of her Wonderland, but just as the students in Bonner and Jacobs' undergraduate class found their way back to Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* after encountering the Disney film, McGee's adaptation does not negate Carroll's original influence. Given that contemporary audiences are simply much more likely to engage in digital forms of storytelling rather than turn to the traditional paper novel, we ought to more productively look to media adaptation as a new platform through which to explore old stories. Perhaps this way, the new generation will find inspiration to return to the canon, even if they are coming from a long way down the chronology of encounter. At least in the case of *Alice*, it is the recurrence of the Gothic, and the pursuit of emotion and affect, that will keep us playing.

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