Lewis Carroll Review

The Reviewing Journal of the Lewis Carroll Society

Editor's Note: Lewis Carroll Review 48 is another of our special issues, this time devoted to the work of video game designer American McGee, whose games *Alice* and the more recent *Alice: Madness Returns* draw heavily on Carrollian influences. We are grateful to Franziska Kohlt not only for her review of the more recent game and its accompanying book, but also for her interview of Mr. McGee.

When Michael O'Connor in his review of Bryan Talbot's *Alice in Sunderland* spoke of "sea changes" in modern adaptations of Alice as Graphic Novels, a video game seemed close at hand. With *Madness Returns*, game developer American McGee puts forward the second of the sort, approximately ten years after the release of *American McGee's Alice*, which attracted wide attention, especially for the game's dark and morbid character design. For the sequel, McGee gathered a team of designers from diverse cultural backgrounds, which is reflected in the game's elaborate and innovative graphic

design, which alternates between bright and colourful fantasy landscapes and dark steampunk factories and consciously takes a new turn on Alice's journey into wonderland, embedding it in the framework of a twenty-first century interactive game experience.

The story is set ten years after *Through the Looking-Glass*, and centred around a grown up version of Alice Pleasance Liddell, whose family has been killed in a fire at their Oxford home. Following a mental breakdown Alice is struggling to remember the details of her family's death. After an episode in a mental asylum during the first game, Alice is now in therapy with the psychiatrist Dr Angus Bunby, a former student of her father, suffering relapses of "madness", which provides the main structuring device for the game, in which Alice uncontrollably drifts in and out of wonderland. Since her last visit as a child, wonderland has fallen into chaos, and is threatened by the destructive powers of an infernal train. In order to save her own peace of mind, Alice needs to save wonderland, and vice versa, by recovering the fragments of her lost memories, in order to reconstruct the events of the night in which her family died. Thus, the game's five chapters alternate between reality and wonderland, the latter being an episodic mental reworking of what she has experienced in the former.

The setting of the game is a blend of fact and fiction about the historical, literary and biographical background of the Alice novels. McGee, however, shifts the focus towards industrialisation in nineteenth century England. Alongside the personal trauma of Alice's loss of family, he explores the corrupting and destructive powers of industrialisation and modernity, and ultimately its consequences for the individual, which gives the game its dark tint. The backdrop for Alice's reality is thus not the idyllic Oxford, but the East End of London, with its poverty and criminality, prostitution and orphans, from which she departs into wonderland. Everything in the story has, compared to its original state, gone wrong, and whereas Carroll's Cheshire Cat states that "We're all mad here" in wonderland, in McGee's game everyone has not only gone mad, but turned evil, including a good part of Carroll's original wonderland cast. Thus the Carpenter, with the assistance of the Walrus, is leading a murderous burlesque theatre; a fictional aunt of Alice is running a brothel at the London docks; and the March Hare has turned the tea party ground into a tea factory, and has at Alice's arrival just disposed of the Hatter, who is resurrected as a bionic steampunk machine-man. Rather than a strict depiction of the historical London, McGee uses

the city as a canvas, and rather than a strict continuation of Carroll's wonderland, he lets Alice dive into unknown depths of it, and thus into unknown regions of her own mind.

The game is overcrowded with details and allusions to Carroll's works and other children's stories as well as nursery rhymes, together with references to nineteenth-century journalism and sensationalism, and influences from underground culture and modern-day fashion. The amazing potential the combination of all this facilitates is explored to the utmost in Alice's phantasms, in whose design McGee himself stated, he wanted the game designers to "go nuts". Alice makes her way through wonderland, to fight its terrors, which are essentially her own, armed with the Vorpal Blade, a Hobby Horse, a Tea Pot, and a Pepper Grinder (which she receives from the Ugly Duchess to recapture her lost pig snouts) which guide Alice through the game.

Each level comes with its individually themed design, of which especially the fashion aspect should appeal to the game's female players, drawing on, amongst other subcultural influences, the Japanese Gothic Lolita style. Against all rules of gravity Alice balances over vanishing castles of hovering game cards high up in the sky, becomes a water creature to follow the Mock Turtle, shrinks to make her way through a doll's house, slides through the frozen remains of the Caucus Race, and penetrates the organic, Lovecraftian Red Queen's Domain in order to find the last key to the secret – what really caused the house-fire. The amount of detail and imagination put into the level design seems sheerly limitless, and is further supported by atmospheric music.

However, in the game's conception, the borders between fact and fictionality are sometimes blurred. Whereas some details, such as the boat trip on the "golden afternoon", are fact, and a few minor inaccuracies in the historical background are not too distracting, personally, I found the semi-fictionalisation of Alice's family confusing. The family consists of Mrs. Liddell, Elizabeth Liddell, her younger sister Alice, and their father Arthur Liddell, dean at Oxford University, with an interest in photography. Interestingly, in the process of recovering her memories, her father reminds her of the White Knight she once encountered in the Looking-Glass forest. Although Carroll is referred to multiple times throughout the game, he is never prominent in the story, and aspects of him can be found in other characters, including Alice's father. An intrusion into the family sphere, which reworks aspects of paedophilia, sometimes attributed to

Carroll, also finds its way into the game, however by other means. However it is worth mentioning that McGee clearly stated that he burnt down Alice's past in the game, in order to create his own story, thus avoiding controversial issues.

Madness Returns is in many ways a true twenty-first century, postmodern pastiche. It combines silhouette-film snippets, arcade-mini-games and puzzles, Carroll's and other texts, and many extra-literary influences in order to create a new interactive wonderland. The game experience is enhanced by add-ons provided through social media, such as an online storybook app on Facebook, a Twitter stream, and McGee's own blog. Photos of artful fan-made costumes can be found, and Alice cosplay[1]-competitions have been advertised there.

The release of the game was followed by *The Art of Alice: Madness Returns*, an artbook, which gives insight into the games graphic genesis, which is the basis for a range of branded merchandise, ranging from character figures to Alice's dress, which furthers the in- and out-of-game experience of *American McGee's Alice: Madness Returns*. The book also offers the opportunity to admire those ideas which did not make their way into the final game, which includes a level in the style of M.C. Escher's graphics.

The game is on many levels a genuinely enjoyable experience. From a technical point of view, it is neither infuriatingly hard to get into, nor too simple, and in graphic terms the game is a quantum leap ahead of its predecessor, which comes as a free download with the purchase of the game. Each level is full of surprise and detail, and a more profound knowledge of the original texts only enhances the experience. By merging a multitude of influences McGee creates a unique and multi-layered adaptation of the Alice-material, which deserves the attention of any Alice enthusiast. The game is available on XBOX, Playstation 3, and PC. A look into the accompanying art-book, like the game itself, is also most warmly recommended.

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3. Cosplay – Costume play, Japanese custom of dressing up as computer game, manga- or anime- characters

An Interview with American McGee

Conducted by Franziska Kohlt, 8 October 2011, London, UK

In October 2011 American McGee, game developer and founder of Spicy Horse Games kindly agreed to be interviewed on his game *Alice: Madness Returns* (2011), sequel to *American McGee's Alice* (2000), for a change not by a game magazine but by a student of English Literature, who was keen to explore the connection of his game and a story which is 150 years old this year. After a signing at a major cartoon and science fiction store, I met up with American and his fiancée, Alice, in a London curry-house, where American told me more on the background of the game, his characters, his inspiration and why young, male game-developers should not be designing girls' clothes.

F: How did you come to decide to make a computer game about Alice? Why Alice?

A: I had been given the challenge by my employer at the time, E[lectronic] A[rts], to come up with a game idea. And so I had gone off, and I was sneaking about different ideas and trying to brainstorm and at the time I was driving in my car along the coast of California and I was listening to this song, and the word 'wonder' was in this song.[2] It had actually turned out to be that they had sampled a dialogue from a movie called *The Dark Crystal*. At the beginning of the movie there is a guy that who says "this is the age of wonder". He had a crystal in his hand that had cracked. The word 'wonder' – it's just like something clicked in my head, and I thought it would be really, really amazing to take wonderland, and represent that in a game world, and make it ... grown up. At the time and actually for most of my life I've been interested in darker, and more twisted things. So we know that alongside that, it was going to be those Nine Inch Nails, Marilyn Manson, Rob Zombie and so on, and there was another song at the time by Rob Zombie, which was called "Living Dead Girl", and this was kind of combined, together, in my mind. And that was it! That was the game I should make! It should have this dark wonderland, it should have this kid, that's Alice, she could be that living dead girl. That was formed, crystallised, almost in an instant, that I just knew who she was, what she was, what she wanted to do. So that was how it all came about. And when I sat down and began writing this out, that

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2. Crystal Method – 'Trip like I do'

she was a girl, had grown up, lost her family in a fire, all flowed in a really strange way. I mean, you can say it's rare, that you sit down to do something on purpose and have it work out, but if it comes as inspiration ... then it's always very easy, and that's how it felt. And since then, there was the first part, and now there's a sequel. It's never been difficult with these games, [to] tell these stories. It always felt very, very natural.

F: Did you like *Alice in Wonderland* as a child?

A: Yes, I did. But … I didn't grow up fantasizing about her, or idolizing her. I remember what I did like, and that was that she lived in her imagination. Because when I was a kid, we had no money and we had no way to buy things. My family would give me, instead of giving me toys, they would actually give me things to make my own toys with. So the concept of a girl that lived in her imagination had in such a spectacular and vivid way ... it was really appealing to me as a kid. It wasn't just Alice, it was anything, it was any of those tales where someone went off to another universe.

F: I noticed that, compared to the first game, there is much more intertextuality to the Lewis Carroll novels in *Madness Returns*. How did it come that you approached it so differently in the second game? There is much more Lewis Carroll in the game.

A: Well, she is more in the real world. In the original game she was in the asylum, she was really far away from the world. In fact, the idea there was that the threat of failing in the original game's mission would be to be completely cut [Alice] off from the world outside, even extended to [her being] lobotomised. The intention of the second game was to communicate that the peril is in the real world. It was physical Alice that was under threat, whereas in the first game, it was mental Alice that was under threat. And so the story art has got what you see in a lot of hero journeys, typical even in the Matrix, where the first battle is in the virtual space and then he's fighting battles in the physical space. And it's the conquering of those two places and the combining of those skills that allows the hero to overcome in the end – that's the exact same model I want to portray between the first and the second game. And that leaves space for a third game, if we ever get to make it, or if it's a graphic novel or whatever, where she is combining together to master the physical and the psychological. And in fact, what I want to do is Alice in Otherlands, where she can jump

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into someone else's mind and she can run around and set up their wonderland.

F: That sounds brilliant! When your game came out, some papers were asking whether it was "wrong" to make Alice so dark, and so goth-like. Do you think its "wrong"? What did you want your Alice to be like?

A: I think it is important people know that with the second game, EA was pushing us to make it much darker; they wanted more blood, more guts, more nudity, more everything sensational. And we did tell them, with the second game, as was the first game, that we had limits, that we had rules. And in those rules, [in] Alice's world, the world in which she lived, she is meant to be a real person. And that means that what she sees in wonderland has got to be something that could be there logically, by her virtually having seen it, or heard it, or smelled it, or tasted it in the real world. And that means that the degree of violence and the degree of darkness is in fact naturally limited by Alice as a character. And so it's funny that over the years, if you want go and get a rating for the original, it would get a teen rating now. And we knew when we were building this Alice, we knew that we were making an M-game[3], and that always felt funny to me because we were not trying to make an M-game, but we were trying to make a game that felt natural to her. So, ultimately, for me it's always about whether or not what we're doing could be something we feel comfortable about interpreting as true to her.

F: How did you construct the story? What were your main influences? What were your sources of imagination for the storyline? Where do you draw your inspiration from?

A: Ahm ... it's a simple thing to say is that I had a very dark childhood where I was growing up. I had a very colourful, interesting one, and sometimes [there were] violent and savoury characters and people and events around me. That's where a lot of it came from. In terms of inspiration, again, I always felt that I was trying to get out of the way of the story that was going to be told for Alice, and I wasn't trying to let my own interfere. Also some of my own experiences allowed me to be attracted to what was possible with the story, but I was trying really hard not to let it influence too strongly what was going on.

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3. M-Game – M-rating; M = Mature

F: Do you think there is any influence coming from popular culture? You mentioned musical influence on Alice.

A: It's funny, you could say a lot and you could say none. It's a lot, because we're always – me, myself or the concept artists or the musicians or anybody who is working on the project – of course we're constantly exposed to what's going on in the world outside. But at the same time *Alice in Wonderland* presents a pretty interesting canvas in that there are already some guidelines, there are already characters, there's already an understanding of locations. And so, you're trying not to colour outside of the lines too much. But again, this time, the character, the tone were already established by the first game. And the first game, it was always a kind of 'growing out of'. Once we knew what Alice looked like, as a piece of artwork, you had this kind of gothy appeal to her, and the alchemy symbols which I have been doing research on, and the hair, and everything else grew as an extension of that. We had multiple Cheshire Cat concept images but you could tell that it was only the one that we ended up with that sat comfortably and naturally next to the Alice. And the same was true for the Hatter; we had different interpretations of what the Hatter looked like. There was only the one Hatter that made sense sitting there. It's like the thing created itself; it's strange to say but its true, things fit together rather naturally.

When I've done interviews before people kind of joked that I have a communication or a relationship with Alice herself, and that was actually very true when we were building this game. Often I find myself not trying to be the creative lead, instead I was trying to act ... to become a voice to Alice, and [to] make sure that some things they were trying to do – like lowering the front, or raising the dress, or bringing up the skirt – stuff like that wasn't natural, because it wasn't natural to her. And I don't mean to say "Yeah, maybe we should give her bigger breasts because that's gonna sell better" or "we should shorten her skirt because we must sell". But my position was always to try to go to defence with the product, on behalf of Alice, because this isn't who she is and what she is.

F: How was it to work within these two different cultural backgrounds. Your production team is mixed American and Asian. How did that influence the work?

A: Well, first of all, Alice is global. She's like number two, or number three best known fairytale story in the world. Red-Riding Hood is

probably number one, Wizard of Oz is maybe number two, and Alice number three, depends on whose camp you read. Alice is definitely known in China. The books are out and the film is out. I think most people incorrectly assume that people in China are cut off from the world. They are very aware, culture- and media-wise, especially media-wise. So it wasn't very difficult.

Actually, one of the reasons I went to China to build that studio was that everybody in the games industry had been using Chinese outsourcers to build the various objects to go into their war games and their racing games. So you had these massive numbers of artists, who were then put to task by remote masters, and who over the years had built up this amazing skill set but were never allowed once to go nuts on something of their own. So when I first came to Shanghai what I saw was this huge amount of outsourcing, but not a single place where someone said, hey you guys are doing the critical decisions, you guys take the risks. And so what we did was open the first western game studio in China where we gave people the opportunity to take their own creative leads. And to do that with Alice – the response was phenomenal! They went nuts; they had a really, really good time. They were just pouring forward the creativity and exploration; they felt really well for us, the product, and the team.

F: What came to my mind was that there is this Asian domain in the game, which obviously didn't come from the Alice book directly, so where did it come from?

A: I was reading all of the news that was coming out of London at [Alice's] time. And there was a tremendous amount of [Asian] news in the 1870s – 1875 being the year we set the game in – like the Emperor of Japan visiting or getting married, and trade relations to India and China. So there were things Alice would have been exposed to – Chinatown in London, the East India Company, and the idea of tea and all these things were here because of people's connections to the middle east. And all of that is what kind of led into validating the idea of the Asian section, because it fits in with London at that time.

F: Indeed. It's my favourite domain by the way, and being a girl, I would definitely buy the Asian dress Alice is wearing. Which brings me to the dresses. How important, do you think, was the aspect of fashion and style in the game?

A: Very, very, very, very, very important. Actually, that was the source of another argument between myself and the art director on the

project, who's a guy, and he tried to do some dress designs, and I told him, look, this is just not gonna work. They look and they feel like they were made by a boy. (The girls are laughing) You know, he's ... under thirty and he's just got a funny idea of females and the proportion and ... ah, you know what I mean. And so I told him, give it up and hand it over to Hong Lei, who is on the concept art team, and she just did up these dresses, and well, they are in the game, they are absolutely beautiful, they are very flattering: they were things that she would wear. She was in the cosplay[3], some of the girls [at the signing] were wearing cosplay. They were the things she felt like she had invested in and she as a designer could be proud of. So that was really important.

F: Were you aware of the fact that the real Alice actually had and Asian dress at the time? Lewis Carroll was a photographer, and the family made the girls pose in Asian-style dresses before a Chinese background.
A: Oh, I had no idea!

F: So at what point did you decide that Alice should become this gothy character?
A: I don't think I decided that. I thought that was already some kind of vibration I thought we were all aware of subconsciously. People had already linked Alice with a sort of underground culture, you know. She already was a captain, an icon of that feeling. Well, I didn't grow up a hippie; if I had, maybe she would have been more of a hippie – my mum was. I did grow up a Goth. When I was in high school, I was the kid with the black hair, the white hair, the blue hair, the green hair, depending on what week it was. So I thought it was just something natural. Also, when you look at Goth culture around the world, it links in to Victorian culture, whether they've been aware of it or not. In the US they are, [and] in Japan for example, where Alice is hugely, hugely popular. If you go to Japan they are very aware of the modern day Goth and the Victorian era style. And so again ... I had not invented something or come up with something creative there. I always felt like [I was] brushing the dust off something that was already very, very obviously there.

F: That brings me to the questions about the characters. We talked a lot about Alice. Another character that struck me as really interesting is the Doctor, the Dollmaker. And I was wondering whether that was

only me, or does he bear a strong resemblance to Sigmund Freud? What kind of character is he?

A: I was reading a lot about Freud and other people who were doing psychology and phrenology or any of the other versions of medicine of the mind at that time, so Jung was in that era too [sic.]. I don't think that we were trying to say that was Freud. We had a whole load of character-sheets, some of which made it into the book, of what he may look like. We wanted somebody who looked like you could trust him but they would ultimately be a really terrible person. So I don't think I was trying to or the team was trying to suggest anything that was alluding to Freud.

F: Another aspect related to the Dollmaker is the aspect of paedophilia, which has often been linked to Lewis Carroll. So how did that end up with him?

A: We took on a position, and when I say we, I mean myself and RJ[4], even with the first product, we were not going to be in the business [of] talking about, dealing with, passing judgment on, or otherwise including Lewis Carroll in these games or in the storyline, or in the fiction, or in the inspiration or anything. It really doesn't serve a purpose for us because these stories are about Alice. Actually, one of the aspects that is really critically important is … [her] being alone, there not being a connection to the past, [that] her family is dead – and that Carroll is as well. It wasn't just a burning down of her home, and her family, but the burning down that … path, right? That moment this Alice became the other Alice; she'd continue on, but it was a sort of fragmented world, a fragment of reality. In the real real world, she can continue on, and Carroll can continue on, but they aren't touched upon in this fractured world, the rest of the real world basically dies. That way we don't ever have to get into it. Because I think it's too far gone, that the time is ... it's just too muddy and who knows. It's not worth getting at; it's not our story.

F: The last point I'm going to be talking about is the Infernal Train. What function does the train have in the game?

A: We chose a train ... (laughs) You could say that, some of the less sensitive game interviewers are like 'What does that represent?', you know, some of that classic train-in-the-tunnel-thing. That wasn't the intention. The idea was to latch on to the industrial revolution that

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4. R.J. Berg – American's colleague

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invaded London at that time. That concept, like in Bleak House, the idea of the din of industrialisation, the noise, the smoke of it, the smell of it, the pollution of it. And the idea that the mechanisation of society was in fact destroying society – that was the kind of allusion we were making. The connection being made was that Alice has been a natural girl, this innocent mind was being taken over by what was taking over the world outside. That was as simple as it was. But then when we got to fuelling the train with the remains of the children, there is obviously a lot of symbolism going on there as well. It just came out conveniently, as we were writing it; it just naturally emerged.

F: I've got one last question – who's your favourite character in the game?

A: It'd have to be Alice. The others are, they're all part of her, some way or another. When I'd say, I like the hatter more than Alice – he's more like an aspect of Alice. And I like her as a whole. I like her as the inventor of all those characters. And that's what it is to me – Alice is the writer, Alice is the inventor, the creator of all of that. And I just think she's a really beautiful, powerful, and interesting person, and that's why I like her the best.

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