

**REWRITING CLASSICS THROUGH VIDEO GAMES:**

**VIOLENCE IN AMERICAN MCGEE'S *ALICE: MADNESS RETURNS* (2011)**

**REESCRITURA DE LOS CLÁSICOS A TRAVÉS DE LOS VIDEOJUEGOS:  
VIOLENCIA EN *ALICE: MADNESS RETURNS* (2011) DE AMERICAN MCGEE**



**Trabajo de Fin de Grado**

María del Carmen Garrido Flores

Grado en Estudios Ingleses

Tutora: María Losada Friend

Convocatoria: Junio 2017



## ANEXO II

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Nombre: M<sup>te</sup> CARMEN GARRIDO FLORES  
DNI: 49117859W Fecha: 11/06/2017

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**Abstract:**

*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) continues to be rewritten with modern technological media. This work analyses American McGee's adaptation of the classic to a video game entitled *Alice: Madness Returns* (2011). It proves how the original text transforms into a successful and attractive product regardless radical modifications, especially those related to violence. Psychological, physical manipulation and mental illnesses are the most exploited elements in the game, designed with attractive, original aesthetics that make players engage and enjoy exciting adventures. Based in Carroll's classic nonsensical work, the sense of nostalgia combines violent action with artistic value of a high graphic style producing an exciting experience for contemporary audiences.

**Key words:**

Adaptation; Video games; Violence; *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*; *Alice: Madness Returns*

**Resumen:**

*Alicia en el País de las Maravillas* continúa siendo reescrita a través de medios de comunicación tecnológicos. Este trabajo analiza la adaptación del clásico a un videojuego titulado *Alice: Madness Returns* (2011). Demuestra cómo el texto original se transforma en un producto de éxito y atractivo a pesar de las modificaciones radicales, especialmente aquellas relacionadas con la violencia. La manipulación psicológica, física y la enfermedad mental son los elementos más usados en el juego, designado con una estética atractiva y original que consigue hacer que los jugadores se enganchen y disfruten de aventuras emocionantes. Basado en la obra clásica disparatada de Carroll, el sentido de nostalgia combina la acción violenta con un valor artístico de alto nivel gráfico que resulta en una experiencia excitante para el espectador contemporáneo.

**Palabras clave:**

Adaptación; Videojuegos; Violencia; *Alicia en el País de las Maravillas*; *Alice: Madness Returns*

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## I. Introduction

Literary classics are being adapted to modern media in different ways. It is interesting to investigate how these adaptations are being made and how the changes in the narrative are affected to favour entertainment. Game designer American McGee took the original content and ideas from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There* (1872) and mixed them. The adapter produced a video game intended to be a sequel aimed at an adult public. Players can enjoy the classic fairy tale with new aesthetics, more action and gore elements: mainsprings of gamer's motivation to try a video game.

The author is known for having adapted other classics such as *Akaneiro* (2012), and *Grimm* (2008)<sup>1</sup> into video games. However, the adaptations based on Carroll's tale are significantly well-known in comparison. McGee developed his rewriting of the classic in three parts: two video games: *American McGee's Alice* (2000) and *Alice: Madness Returns* (2011), and a series of short films, *Alice: Otherlands* (2015). For the purpose of this paper, we will focus on the second game McGee produced: *Alice: Madness Returns* since the material it contains regarding violence and modern devices is richer and more interesting than the first video game.

## II. Theoretical Framework and State of the Question

### IIa. Violence and the Media

History Channel states in the online summary of their documental "A History of Violence as Entertainment": "The truth is that people have enjoyed a fascination with violence and bloodshed for thousands of years, dating back to the time of the Roman Empire, when men would go to fight and die in the gladiatorial arenas" (2012 n.p. n.pag). This means that the use of violence in today's media is not something fresh nor modern. Violence has been used as an attractive device before, but its level of acceptance has changed over the years.

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<sup>1</sup> *Akaneiro* (2012) is based on the story of *Little Red Riding Hood*. *Grimm* (2008) mixes elements from numerous Grimm's fairy tales.

In the source text, Carroll uses violence as a resource to create comedy. Bethany Kwoka (2009) states in “Humorous Violence in the Alice Books” that the use of violence as something to laugh at is something common in nonsense literature books such as *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. The rules of that world do not work according to our reasonable rules. In children’s books, if one of the characters trips and falls or it is beaten by another character, it is considered funny. The reader knows that there are no significant risks in the use of violence in the narrative and they find natural and enjoyable that the characters act violently in the narration (the Duchess shaking the baby, the cook throwing clutter at the Duchess, the Queen of Hearts wanting to behead everybody, etc). Speaking about Alice, Kwoka explains that “she demonstrates a complete lack of empathy towards the characters she encounters, which may explain her carefree use of violence” (*The Victorian Web* n.pag).

However, violence applied to an interactive medium like a video game cannot be inconsequential as this would result in something boring and disappointing for an adult audience. When users play McGee’s adaptations, they look for action, blood and excitement. Thus, for audiences who like violence, if Alice does not suffer damage nor causes damage, the sensation of empathy and emotion towards the game and the characters is lost. Several doctors, like Craig Kennedy and José María Gómez have stated that mankind is naturally attracted to violence and that they even seek it. Kennedy’s study: “Humans Crave Violence just like Sex” (2008), concluded that humans crave violence as they do for food or sex and that aggressive encounters have a rewarding sensation. Gómez’s research: “The phylogenetic roots of human lethal violence” (2016), points out that humanity has developed a higher tendency to kill each other, but that does not mean that they cannot control themselves. Thus, culture can be an influence for this type of behaviour.

The topic of violence is used to attract audiences in other media; especially in the cinema. In *Violence and the Media* (2003), Cynthia Carter and C.Kay Weaver point out that “violence has played a central role in the history of cinema” (42). They conclude that “film representations of violence are intrinsically connected to the social, cultural, economic and institutional ideologies of their production and reception” (69). Depictions of violence in cinema, television and software continue to be attractive to the adult public since it is part of our society. We are attracted to stories that are familiar to

us, but we can be even more interested in those narrations if violence is added.

## IIb. Formal Mechanisms of Video Games

The story of Alice and the eccentric locals of Wonderland has been adapted to a wide range of media including movies, theatre, TV series or even thematic parks. *Alice: Madness Returns* (abbreviated to *AMR* from now on), however, is an adaptation to an interactive and more personal medium: the video game. It is important to understand how video games work and why they are a good medium to experience the use of violence in a classical story.

Watching a film or a play is an immersive experience in which the spectator is overwhelmed with strong emotions, but it stills remains as a passive action. The public cannot get involved in the story nor collaborate in the decisions the characters make. However, video games go beyond that. Playing a video game consists of receiving a rewarding experience from the exchange of emotions between the players and the characters they control. Linda Hutcheon explains in *A Theory of Adaptation* (2013) how different is to experience a video game in comparison with other media where there is no interaction: “In playing a videogame [...] we are involved even more directly, physically and mentally, as we concentrate intensely and respond physiologically” (130).

Video games make use of many different devices in order to forge a relationship between the player and the characters and environment that is involved in the game. Most games start by showing a tutorial to the player, which is a fundamental lesson of the controls and rules they need to be familiar with during the whole experience. In *AMR*, the player can make Alice move in any direction, jump, shrink, dodge and protect herself using the controller. This game can be played with a third person shooter (TPS) perspective or a first person shooter (FPS) which means that the player can see the game observing the figure of Alice from the back or through Alice’s own eyes. This makes the experience more personal since the protagonist and the player are put in the same perspective.

*AMR* is a platform video game where the player has to clear obstacles. In a platform game, the character is limited to certain spaces when moving throughout the stages of the game. Alice has to walk down corridors, jump on unstable chunks of

ground or slide down slopes conveniently set. The necessary clues to proceed are shown on the screen thanks to a Heads-Up-Display (HUD) that informs the player about crucial information. The data on screen include: Alice's remaining sanity (portrayed as a bar made of roses that loses its petals when Alice is hurt), the weapon she is using at the current moment, and additional knowledge such as which enemy she is targeting at or which button is needed to be pressed to proceed<sup>2</sup>. The obstacles the player has to overcome include solving riddles and puzzles and defeating the enemies Alice finds in her way.

Most video games begin and end with a cinematic cutscene. A cutscene is a video where the player cannot get involved in what is happening. Cutscenes usually show dialogue and interaction among the characters and unexpected events happening before the eyes of the players, who are unable to change the course of the story at that moment. Some cinematics act as flashbacks to explain events that are not shown during gameplay because they happened off of the limits of the story or they are just memories. The plot is developed through the gameplay and cinematics, often supplying the player with hidden information about the characters that is not directly nor explicitly shown (this is known as "lore"). After the final cutscene, the game ends. Some games leave an open ending that could lead to new stories; others simply conclude by completing the goal of the game. *AMR* shows us an inconclusive open ending.

Moreover, *AMR* is divided into six chapters. Each chapter is, at the same time, split into smaller parts. As the player keeps playing, the game automatically saves after completing an objective and it is impossible to go back. During gameplay, the characters can talk and interact too.

As a whole, video games differ heavily from other media. Thus, they need to be analysed and presented as a more immersive and empathetic genre than a movie or a book. As video games are a relatively modern medium, most of the sources used to discuss this topic are retrieved from electronic sources. American McGee's newest video game is relatively recent, but still, we can find a considerable amount of online articles, reviews, comments, thesis and opinions<sup>3</sup> about the game that analyse or

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<sup>2</sup> See fig. 1 in the appendix

<sup>3</sup> Famous and influential game sites such as *IGN (Imagine Games Network)*, *Metacritic*, *Vandal* and *Gamespot* have contributed writing their reviews and articles about the game. Likewise, the gamers have contributed with up to 8,000 rates of positive feedback and more than 570 comments on *Steam* (a digital

compare the original text or other versions. Published sources that look deeply into the Lewis Carroll and *Alice in Wonderland* subjects can be found. However, none of them has discussed *Alice* in video games. Published and unpublished sources will be taken into account both to understand the original text and to compare it to the video game adaptation. In addition, these sources and the biography will be cited using the MLA7 format.

In this paper, the violent topics seen in *AMR* are analysed and compared to the source text. The situation of the evolution of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* has been analysed and discussed before. The original story has suffered modifications, especially in the character of Alice, who is now targeted at an adult public: most of the *Alices* portray her as a teenager or adult.

#### IIc. Former Studies on the *Alices*

When talking about classic adaptations and specifically about Carroll classics' rewritings, we find authors who formerly discussed this topic and analysed the situation of *Alice in Wonderland*. Currently, the source texts have been looked into by many adapters, designers and writers. To begin with, it is important to distinguish what is an adaptation and what is not. Brian McHale (2012) distinguishes three categories of versions in "Things then did not delay in turning curious": Some Version of Alice, 1966–2010". McHale distinguishes remakes, allusions, and rewritings. The versions that are as accurate as possible to the source text are considered remakes. Allusions simply make reference to individual elements of the source text or mention it in a vague way. Rewritings leave intact most of the original content but making small changes. McGee combines both classics and bases his work on the result, directing the video games as sequels of the books, hence making them impossible to count as remakes. *AMR* is also adapted to a new medium: the video game, turning it into an adaptation. The aesthetic and themes are altered so as to make the game more appealing adult players.

An expert in the topic, Linda Hutcheon, discusses the world of adaptations and the process of adapting. She discusses the fundamental questions of the *what*, *why*, *who*, *how*, *when* and *where* looking deeply into previous works that have been adapted to a wide range of media like film, plays, opera, theme parks or video games. According to

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distribution platform where games can be purchased and played).

Hutcheon, “multiple versions of a story exist laterally, not vertically” (169), meaning that adapted works should not be seen as hierarchical to the original text as they are not superior nor inferior, just different and unique. The author states that adaptations have an element of familiarity and contempt and she explains how the audience perceives the adapted work in different forms depending on the context. According to Hutcheon, part of the pleasure of adaptations comes from repetition (of the original) with variation (4).

In 1991, Donald Rackin discusses the critical reception of the *Alice* books in *Nonsense, Sense, and Meaning* and points out that “Until well into the twentieth century [...] the *Alices* were seen almost exclusively as children’s literature” (20). The books offered a good entertainment for those children that were used to read stories that contained educational purposes. Victorian children, argues Rackin, could feel identified with Alice as a realistic heroine for them (21). However, the story of the little seven-year-old girl started getting to adults hearts too. Rackin points out that “In the 1920s and 1930s, a number of prominent authors and literary critics discovered that the delightful Alice fantasies that had captivated their generation as children continued to engage them as adults” (21). The *Alices* issues were seen as something beyond what a child could comprehend, and the figure of Alice began receiving attention again, leading to the beginning of the *Alice* evolution and change. Another important fact about the books is that up to the mid-1960s, the criticism started treating “the two books as if they were a single text” (27). This fact will be of extreme importance in the analysis of the modern adaptations of *Alice*.

Emily Aguilo-Perez looks deeply into the adaptations where the character of Alice is the one who suffers most changes. In “Appearing Otherwise: Changing Alice into the Woman of Wonderland” (2015), she argues that one of the main differences between the recent versions of Alice in comparison with the original text is the fact that most authors choose to reinterpret Alice as an adult woman to appeal the contemporary public: “Alice is no longer the seven-year-old girl from the books; she has now grown into a woman, and, more importantly, her change seems to develop parallel and according to the perspectives of popular culture” (n.pag). Aguilo-Perez also points out that sometimes she is portrayed with a high sexual purpose: “The modern image of Alice is usually more mature and darker than the original; moreover, her clothing, which is supposed to be that of a little girl, is now targeted at adult women” (n.pag). She

also points out that McGee's *Alice* is a combination of adulthood and childhood since she still wears the traditional outfit that we see in Tenniel's illustrations<sup>4</sup>.

Inevitably, the original seven-year-old Alice that appears in the book has been compared with the other "Alices" that have been rewritten and interpreted over the course of the years. In her master's thesis: "The Modern Alice Adaptations in Novel, Film and Video Game from 2000-2012" (2012), Tracey McKenna examines the treatment in various elements like the narrative, language and characters in different forms of media *Alice* has been adapted to. In her conclusion, she states that authors make use of available strategies in order to entertain the audience. They stay faithful to the original text but alter elements that prove to be aimed at giving a rewarding experience to the public: "By changing Carroll's stories so that the narrative follows the hero's journey [...] audiences are provided with a variation of *Alice* that is built on a formula which audiences have proven to enjoy" (73).

Moreover, recent analysis and comparisons between the video game and elements of the books are found. According to Koen Lijffijt (2016), the nonsensical sense of the source text, which is an essential element of Carroll's literature, is not especially important in *American McGee's Alice*. In fact, Lijffijt concludes in "*American McGee's Alice: The Adaptation of Nonsense to Interactivity*" that McGee's work is not focused on nonsense, but rather he creates a solid reason for Alice to be in Wonderland: her mental insanity, differing profoundly from the original perspective of the novels. Yet, none of these authors has explained why McGee chose to incorporate such a violent atmosphere to his re-interpretation, nor why is this element a successful addition that aims to entertain the players of today. The use of violence, gore and abuse and its consequences affect not only the characters of the game but also the player. These topics make the video game rich in content and desirable for modern audiences who seek action and mystery incorporated in older narrations.

To better comprehend the similarities and differences of Carroll's text and McGee's adaptation, it is necessary to know the sequence of events that take place from Carroll's books to McGee's second game: *AMR*. The story goes from the seven-year-old Alice found in the Victorian text to what goes on years later until the girl becomes an adult. The circumstances turn extremely violent: death, murder, rape and destruction are

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<sup>4</sup> See fig. 2 in appendix.

constant in the game, and the players see how to innocent Alice changes into a savage heroine.

### **III. Adapting Alice**

#### **IIIa. Designing the New Alice**

McGee's *Alice* tells the story of what happened to Alice ten years after the events in Carroll's novels. Still a child, Alice witnesses the death of her whole family when their house catches on fire, and she becomes an orphan. Eventually, this event makes her lose her head, and Alice becomes mad to the point of being sent to Rutledge Asylum hoping to recover from her mental illnesses. When Alice starts showing signs of improving she revisits Wonderland. Alice's psychological condition is directly tied up to Wonderland in the game, and when she comes back, the land has become a twisted and gruesome place due to the tyranny of the Queen of Hearts. Thanks to the Cheshire Cat's guidance, Alice can get rid of the problematic inhabitants of Wonderland (the Jabberwocky, the Duchess, the Caterpillar), who try to kill her following the orders of the Queen. Alice eliminates her enemies and reaches the Queen of Hearts' domains, murdering her and returning to the real world to be at peace and finish her therapy. In the final cinematic cutscene of the game, we can see how Alice leaves the asylum while smiling, letting the player know that her sanity is now back. The experience of the game ends like this, leaving an open end where it is the player who has to guess what will happen from then on.

In the sequel, *AMR*, a year has passed since Alice left Rutledge Asylum and now she is living in an orphanage in London: Houndsditch Home for Wayward Youth. There, she receives therapy from Dr Angus Bumby, a psychiatrist who is the head of the institution and the one who helps the orphans forget about their insufferable past by using hypnotherapy. Alice is now sane enough to be part of society, but the broken memories of the loss of her parents and her older sister continue to chase her, and Alice even thinks the fire that burnt her house was her fault. One of the days the doctor sends Alice to collect some pills at the pharmacist, she gets distracted following a stray cat, and after having a vision of seeing some monsters and her own caretaker trying to attack her, Alice suffers a breakdown, and she is transported to Wonderland through a hole

that opens beneath her feet. There, she is informed by the Cheshire Cat that a new ruler is controlling Wonderland: the Dollmaker. Cheshire tells Alice that she needs to find the source of Wonderland's corruption in order to understand her own mind.

The events of the game contain plenty of adult themes, most of them related to violence. Alice must slay her enemies, deal with the pressure of watching her own mind tearing into pieces and recollect her broken memories to find out what happened the day of the fire. Wonderland is being destroyed by an Infernal Train, and new enemies with doll faces menace to kill her. After murdering some of her former acquaintances in Wonderland, Alice encounters the Queen of Hearts, who is aware of the state of weakness in her mind. The Queen is not the main antagonist this time, but the Dollmaker, who is the one who creates the monsters that disturb Alice in her journey: the enemies she must fight in order to bring peace to Wonderland again. The Dollmaker has Dr Bumby's appearance, but his proportions are distorted; showing long arms and sharp nails and teeth. This enemy turns out to be the real Dr Angus Bumby, who was manipulating Alice during their sessions to alter her memories and touch her without consent. After recalling her memories, Alice remembers that the doctor was in the house the day that her family died. Dr Bumby set the house on fire that night after raping Alice's older sister, trying to erase the evidence. He had been manipulating Alice's mind so as to get rid of those memories. When Alice discovers this, she defeats the Dollmaker in a final battle at the end of the game and leaves Wonderland to return to the real world. There, she gathers the necessary strength to push the psychiatrist into the rails of an oncoming train, putting an end to his life.

Plot twists like these prove to be fruitful and appealing for the present-day player, who enjoys discovering such intricate events happening. The change in the argument in McGee's video games is directly related to the topic of violence. Although violence is often used in children's literature (including *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*), the purpose of its involvement is not the same as what is portrayed and used in a product aimed at young adults. The incorporation of explicit violence and adult themes make the game attractive for the generation of gamers that enjoy such contents. The story is interesting for users that already know the classic tale, but also for those players that are new to Wonderland and its mysteries. As we will discuss, violence has its function and reasons in *AMR*.

The inclusion of violence in Carroll's tale was not something strategically planned nor done for commercial purposes, as many adaptations had done before just to get the attention of the public. McGee chose to make the story gruesome not to sell the video game, but to depict how the story could have gone if the narration had continued as he explains in *The Art of Alice: Madness Returns* (6).

### IIIb. Adaptation of Motivations and Inspirations for the Game

When talking about his creation, McGee writes in the introductory pages to *The Art of Alice: Madness Returns* (2011) that it was somehow spontaneous. He remembers that the idea for the reinterpretation and adaptation of the Alice universe came into his mind while driving and listening to music with relatable lyrics. As he was listening to his playlist, he started imagining his own twisted version of Wonderland, as the song used the word "wonder" in its lyrics. He admits that the early versions of Alice that his team imagined lacked what he was actually seeking for. However, his colleagues Terry Smith and Norm Felchle helped him settle down the basic concepts of *American McGee's Alice* later. *Rogue Entertainment* game developer brought the project to life two years later with the aid of many artists and of course, American McGee.

*Electronic Arts Company* released the game even though they did not expect much from it. However, *Alice* sold over 1.5 million copies and was received with a great critical acclaim. About the changes in the characters and environment that the game presents, McGee explains: "The idea was to present something classic and dark—not necessarily my own vision of what a "dark" *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* might be, but a vision that felt like it could be a natural extension of the world and characters in Carroll's books." (6).

Later on, McGee moved to Los Angeles and met Ken Wong, who became his art director in *AMR* when the production for the sequel started. With his idea for the second game in mind and the collaboration of many artists, McGee founded *Spicy Horse* game developer company. After insisting to *Electronic Arts* to continue the saga, they received enough budget to produce the video game. Ten years passed since *American McGee's Alice*, and when looking at his new creation, McGee realises it is one of the most beautiful video games he has ever seen (7).

As it may be expected, the video game retains many of the original elements

from the books. The characters, environment and dialogues are based on those seen in Carroll's stories and work as an extension of that world, this time directed primarily to an adult audience. However, even if the overall outcome does not resemble much that of the source text, the players still accept and enjoy the modifications or additions done to the apparently innocent, children's narrative. Hutcheon explains that in nowadays' adapted works, when stories are changed from one medium to another, we cannot expect to find a close similarity with the source text, since there may be none: "The "success" of an adaptation today, in the age of transmedia, can no longer be determined in relation to its proximity to any single "original," for none may even exist" (*A Theory of Adaptation* xxvi). Nevertheless, it is clear that the video game created by McGee is a rewriting of what is originally found in the books. In fact, he does not consider his work to be especially different from that portrayed by Carroll's pen in comparison with other interpretations as he stated in 2000 in an interview: "Making this version of Alice wasn't much of a stretch from the original fiction. In comparison, I think the Disney version is further away from the original than Alice ended up." (*Prima Official Guide* 276).

*AMR* acts like a twisted sequel to Carroll's classics and American McGee's first work. Many may wonder if McGee's rewriting of the tale is credible or faithful to the apparently innocent and childish story written by Dodgson, but for the author, his extension of Alice and her universe is something that he thinks true to the essence of the books. Born in Texas, McGee was raised surrounded by a strong religious environment that he did not accept. He fought against that religion imposed on him but learned how to take advantage of the tenets of it, retrieving its dark concepts. McGee talks about this for *Gamasutra* video game website: "I just have a taste for that darker side of things—it's the way my aesthetic goes" (*Interview with American McGee* 1).

It would make no sense for McGee's Alice to be similar to the Alice found in the 19th-century books since she is now a woman and she has been through a lot to become who she is now. However, her roots still lay in that seven-year-old girl who did not even know who she was when the Caterpillar asked her. When questioning the dark aesthetic of the game, McGee comments: "Really, turning Alice dark wasn't a result of me forcing that darkness on the story, it just seemed to come naturally out of [Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*] when I read it" (1). McGee confesses to

*Gamasutra* that several persons have told him that his version of Alice is truer than that of Disney. Certainly, many people agree that *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and its sequel were not children's literature. The hidden meanings of the jokes, puns and comparisons found in the source text were likely to appeal the adult readers in a different way than the children perceived them, especially the occult politic and religious jokes. Martin Gardner (2001) gives examples of this in *The Annotated Alice*.

We can find a lot of similarities and differences between the versions, but the main element to analyse is the character of Alice. McKenna points out that the characters in the adaptations are redefined to fit the narrative structure and the limitations of the medium in which they are adapted (38). The author states that a high number of writers decide to change the protagonist into an adult woman since the audience is more likely to feel identified differently with her that way (38-39). About McGee's Alice, McKenna states that "the development and portrayal of Alice is critical to the success of the game" (42). Although it is inevitable to compare the original work of Carroll to this version, it also makes no sense to judge the way McGee portrayed the events of the story in order to give it its distorted undertone. New times require new perspectives and ways of portrayal for the modern audiences. According to Hutcheon, the key to success for an adaptation relies on the fact of being made "both for knowing and unknowing audiences" (120-121). However, this classic is still well-known for today's audience, as recently we have received many contemporary versions and remakes of *Wonderland* and its inhabitants, like Tim Burton's *Alice in Wonderland* movie. Hutcheon points out that "knowing audiences have expectations—and demands" (122), and that explains the change in aesthetic and dynamics in the video game. The communities of fans who already enjoyed Dodgson's protagonist now feel satisfied when looking at McGee's Alice and seeing how much she has changed, but also how strong she has become. There were a lot of support and fascination with the outcome of this project<sup>5</sup> and, even though the source of the anecdote seems to be completely different, the violent elements added to McGee's video game work in a successful way complementing what Carroll imagined that fructiferous summer day.

What makes violence outstanding is that users enjoy the fierce content of the

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<sup>5</sup> In 2013, American McGee founded a Kickstarter page where *AMR* fans donated 222.377 dollars in order to continue the story of Alice in the form of short movies.

game and they can even feel identified with the characters and situations as playing is an immersive experience. Adding the bloodshed and gore to the plot has proved to generate attention among the players and lovers of *Alice in Wonderland*, which leads us to the question why violence so attracts the adult audience. Video game developers are aware of the trend violence has generated before in other media, and they adapt it to create their projects. Some video games are centred on physical brutality, like *Grand Theft Auto* (1997) while others have a plot based on more psychological issues as in *Heavy Rain* (2010).

In *AMR*, elements of physical and psychological violence are combined so as to give the player a significant and personal experience, showing sympathy and empathy towards the character of Alice, who is struggling to remember her memories after having visited Wonderland before in a bad mental state. These elements affect the characters and Wonderland and create an interesting plot line in which players need to keep progressing to discover the truth. Violence does not only mean getting involved in a fight or using inappropriate language against others. It can also involve manipulating the mind and body of someone; twisting their memories and abusing their intimacy and decisions.

#### **IV. Types of Violence**

##### **IVa. Psychological Manipulation and Physical Violence**

From the years Alice spends in the sanatorium, we do not know much as this is not portrayed in the game. Nonetheless, thanks to the lore we know Alice suffered and still suffers from what happened those years. Alice attempted suicide as we can see bandages on her wrists in the initial cinematic cutscene of the first game. The original “We’re all mad here. I’m mad. You’re mad” (87) of the Cheshire Cat in Carroll’s classic goes real in McGee’s *Alice*. In fact, her madness is one of the leading causes Alice goes back to Wonderland after having been there originally because of a dream. Wonderland is tied up to her mental state, and the more unstable the girl becomes, the more twisted the land appears. As a matter of fact, if Alice loses all her sanity remaining (portrayed as the health bar made of roses) while she is in Wonderland, she is supposed to die in the real world.

Even though madness is associated with Wonderland and its locals, we do not appreciate any real allusion to mental institutions in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. However, McGee decided to go beyond the mere supposition that the characters were mad in the source text and turned it into something real, rewriting the character of Alice as a patient in a mental hospital. During the events of *AMR*, we can see flashbacks that show Alice while she stayed at the mental institution, showing the caretakers and doctors mistreating her. Not only did the doctors treat her inappropriately during those years, but in the game, Alice also suggests that they did not care about her at all: "Everyone here has an excuse for doing nothing. Reminds me of the asylum" (*AMR*, chapter 2: *Deluded Depths*). While Alice is in the asylum, it is evident that she has been mistreated severely by the staff who were supposed to take care of her. She appears completely bald, probably because the doctors shaved her head. She wears a straitjacket, and she seems to be frail and unable to move around too much. Later in the game, we see a cutscene that shows Tweedle dee and Tweedle dum performing a lobotomy to Alice, even though this is an anachronic device since the first lobotomy was performed in the early 20th century. Alice shaved head leads us to two conclusions. The first one being the existence of the lobotomy surgery and the second one: shaving as a punishment for bad behaviour.

As an example of how violent and improper sanatorium care could be in the 19th-century, there is the real case of the patient Carolyn Hart, who arrived at Brookwood asylum in June 1871, as narrated in *Madness, Suicide and the Victorian Asylum*, by Anne Shepherd and David Wright. Carolyn was 26 years old and suffered from suicidal mania. While she was in the asylum, she attempted to commit suicide five times, and the doctors described her as noisy, abusive, destructive and foul-mouthed (193). Similarly, Alice's behaviour in the asylum has been described as "volatile and unpredictable [...] a danger to herself and others" by *The Illustrated London News* (*AMR*, chapter 1: *Hatter's Domain*) in the game. There were some occasions when she was forced to wear a strong dress or jacket, and she behaved in such an adverse manner that "orders were given to shave her head as a punishment" (193). Although it is unknown if McGee was inspired by a specific case, it is clear that Carolyn and Alice present similar stays during their treatment. The graphic violence both in the patients' behaviour as in the response of the asylum's staff is also evident and used as a

mechanism to develop the parts of the game where her sanity is relevant.

After staying for ten years in Rutledge, Alice starts living in Houndsditch Home under the care of Nurse Witless, one of her former carers in the asylum. In the game, the girl's appearance is shown as severely thin with pale skin and dark circles under her eyes, suggesting that she does not take much care of herself or that she is so stressed by her memories and the therapy that she is unable to rest. The Alice in the book appears as curious, with long curly hair and full of life. McGee's Alice is skinny and miserable, but somehow hopeful since she keeps fighting to recover her sanity. Her hair is straight and dark, and her apparel is very similar to the one pictured by Tenniel in his illustrations when she is in London and in Wonderland<sup>6</sup>.

In the orphanage, Alice receives treatment from Dr Bumby. By hypnotising Alice, Angus Bumby retrieves the information she remembered about the day of the fire and manipulates her memories with the intention of erasing himself from any piece of memory Alice could have about him. This Dr Bumby is the same character that later will haunt Alice in her Wonderland as the Dollmaker, sending his puppets to her with the intention of doing harm and destroying her mind and body. The Dollmaker sets up the Infernal Train which is wrecking Wonderland. This is a metaphor of the therapy and Alice's memories as the Dr Bumby had tried to erase Alice's recollections from the day of the fire. The protagonist is in some way aware of it, and she understands that Wonderland is part of herself: "I'm devastated. Look what's become of my beautiful valley!" (*AMR*, chapter 3: *Oriental Grove*). Alice's therapist convinced her that change is something good, somehow expecting her to think that the destruction of her memories is the best for her sake. Cheshire Cat, as her spiritual guide, is responsible for reminding her that "different denotes neither bad nor good, but it certainly means not the same" (*AMR*, chapter 1: *Hatter's Domains*).

No matter how much does Alice try to put her memories in order, the state of her sanity impedes her from organising her thoughts and distinguish what is reality and what is fantasy. Her mind is directly connected to what she imagines in her Wonderland as if it were some sort of terrible nightmare. Not only is her mind twisted, but her body also suffered every time she was unconscious. Previously, Dr Bumby had sexually abused Alice's older sister: Lizzie. The fire in the house was caused by Bumby so he

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<sup>6</sup> See fig. 3 in appendix.

could erase the evidence of having raped Lizzie that night. Alice was only a child when she witnessed it, but her subconscious reminds her of those events in the form of the Queen of Hearts in Wonderland: “That noise wasn’t Lizzie talking in her sleep” (AMR, chapter 6: *Infernal Train*). Now that the old sister is gone, it is Alice’s turn to be raped by the unscrupulous therapist. At the end of the game, Alice finally remembers everything that has been done to her, and she faces the doctor to tell him she is strong enough to punish him: “You’ve used me and abused me, but you will not destroy me” (AMR, chapter 6: *Infernal Train*). When players discover that Alice is a rape victim they feel sympathy and wrath knowing their heroine has been corrupted. However, this is an incentive for players to complete the game and get revenge, similar to what a watcher can feel when the villain’s actions are revealed in a movie, and the spectators wait impatiently for the protagonists to get their deserved happy ending.

Nonetheless, psychological and physical maltreatment do not remain void of consequence in the game: violence begets violence. Alice, who lost part of her idyllic childhood, was abused and mistreated by everyone surrounding her, causing her several psychological problems. At this point, nothing remains from the sweet, curious girl who swam in her own tears and overate cake in the classic book. The players know that all damage done to her will turn into the necessary motivation and strength that the protagonist will use to recover her sanity. Throughout the chapters of the game, Alice’s mental illnesses turn her into someone rebellious and violent with the sake of overcoming her enemies in Wonderland.

It is thanks to the use of violence that the game allows the player to progress to the final goal of getting revenge for Alice. If the players could not use the controller to get rid of the enemies, the excitement of killing the menaces that threaten Alice would be lost. It would be pointless to feel nervous or anxious if our character could not take damage from the world that surrounds her. Thus, Alice needs to protect herself from being killed. The insanity of the protagonist acts as a mechanism of self-defense, as the mental illnesses cause her to act in a violent way.

#### IVb. Mental Illnesses and Wonderland

Alice suffers from survivor’s guilt and often has hallucinations related to the day of the fire and Wonderland. When she is in London, Alice shows her real aspect: fragile,

unhealthy, and dull. When she is dragged to Wonderland, her physical aspect changes and now she shows better skin colour, longer hair, vibrant colours in her dress and makeup. This change in appearance is directly tied up to Alice's psyche, and it proves that she still feels strong enough to fight her inner demons. The Wonderland seen in the game is linked to Alice's mental state, which explains the dark undertone of the environment and its gruesome atmosphere. Throughout the events of the game, it is repeated several times that the destruction of Wonderland is the destruction of Alice and vice versa.

Many readers may have wondered if Alice and the characters of Wonderland really had some kind of mental illness or if what the girl sees is just part of her imagination inside a dream. In 1983, Dr H.A. Waldron analysed the issue of the Hatter's madness in "Did the Mad Hatter have mercury poisoning?" and denied the belief that the Hatter was simply affected by the mercury he may have used when crafting his hats. The expression "mad as a hatter" was common at Victorian times. Due to that, many thought that Carroll wrote this character having the mercury poisoning in mind, but Waldron concludes that the Hatter does not show any of the symptoms of the disease: "It could scarcely be said that the Mad Hatter suffered to any great extent from the desire to go unnoticed or that the dominant traits of his personality were shyness and timidity" (1961). *AMR's* Hatter is aggressive and eccentric, using his insanity as an excuse for hurting others that interrupt his tea party.

Similarly, Alice makes use of the fragile state of her mind to become more powerful and exterminate her enemies. As Alice's health bar represents her mental state, when only one rose remains, the player can activate the "Hysteria mode". Hysteria mode begins with Alice letting out a hoarse cry, as in someone screaming desperate. Alice's dress and skin turn completely white and her arms and apron are full of blood. Her eyes are also soaked in red, and her hair becomes shorter and messy<sup>7</sup>.

Hysteria, as described by Laura Briggs in *The Race of Hysteria* (2000), was "never just a disease" (246). Hysteria was almost exclusively diagnosticated to women and in many occasions was a poor attempt to classify several symptoms that belonged to other illnesses unknown by the doctors or was used as an excuse to control women's behaviour. In "Nineteenth Century Hysteria" (2003), Noor Niyar N. Ladhani points out

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<sup>7</sup> See fig. 4 in the appendix.

some of the many and varied symptoms attributed to the illness: “By the nineteenth century, the more common complaints ranged from tears and anxiety to ‘hysterical fits’ and seizures” (162). Ladhani also remarks that “the episodes were thought to be triggered by physical trauma or a sudden emotional change” (162). “Hysteria mode” depicts Alice showing an uncontrolled personality: she moves faster, slashing her enemies with the Vorpall Blade until they are crushed, and she becomes invulnerable meanwhile. In this limited time, the colours on the screen become monochrome except for the bright red colour of the blood. Additionally, the camera angle turns dizzy, slightly swinging from right to left. Alice’s mental state and Wonderland seem to be united as one. Just like Wonderland was a dream in the girl’s mind and Alice’s sister could even “sat on with closed eyes, and half believed herself in Wonderland” (143), now Alice’s insanity triggers that she comes back to the land.

“Madness is not a state of mind. Madness is a place” affirmed *AMR* launch trailer as a motto in 2011<sup>8</sup>. Madness takes the form of Wonderland, a place so real for Alice she can even lose her life if she perishes there. In fact, the theory of Wonderland being a place is also mentioned in the source text. When Alice asks the Cheshire Cat how can he know that she is mad, the cat answers: “You must be [...], or you wouldn’t have come here” (87).

In *AMR*, Wonderland has different stages and maps. The player cannot surpass certain boundaries, but they may interact with the objects and platforms to progress in the game. By breaking obstacles and jumping into moving floors, Alice can keep going in her mission of restoring her mind. There are sound, colour and dangers everywhere: Wonderland feels like a real environment both for Alice and the player. Journalist Simon Parkin (2015) writes in *Death by Video Game*, that “Video games deal in tension and peril. This is true of most fiction, in which conflict is necessary to create drama, but in most video games the player is the subject of the stress and conflict” (28). Books are a static medium in this sense, the reader can get involved in the story as much as their imagination allows them, but it is impossible to interact and change the course of the actions of the characters. If Alice is threatened by her enemies, the player is responsible for controlling her in a successful way to get rid of them before they kill her. This

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<sup>8</sup> Curiously, Robert Douglas-Fairhurst thinks the other way around in *The Story of Alice* (2016), saying that Wonderland “is not a place, but a state of mind” (158). By telling her sister about the place, Alice creates a portal to that world that now everyone can visit just by imagining being there.

course of action and fighting is what keeps the player engaged in the game. Crushing enemies to progress and unlock new cutscenes are the main stimuli to succeed in *AMR*.

Violence is what makes action games so popular. If Alice had been adapted in the form of a soft, faithful video game with no other action than kicking Bill the Lizard out of the chimney (*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, 64), *AMR* would not have been rated M for "Mature" and the adult public would probably have lost interest in it. As Parkin points out, video games are "unashamedly violent" (124). However, killing enemies in a digital software does not make the murder real, that is why so many players find satisfying throwing off adrenaline in that way, or in Parkin's words, "there is no remorse for the game murder" (123).

## V. Conclusions

After analysing the topics of psychological and physical manipulation and the mental illnesses that affected the protagonist, this paper has shown that the narrative of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* adapted to the video game *Alice: Madness Returns* is full of elements of action and violence. These aspects of violence are essential to follow the narration and dynamics of the game as they constitute a major part of the gameplay. The players are genuinely attracted to these themes and seek to discover the gruesome truth behind Alice's story. *AMR* does not contain the playful and innocent essence of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. However, that is one of the main reasons for the game to be successful among adult players.

The extraordinary perspective provided by the game based on Carroll's novels creates a macabre Wonderland that results in a mixture of nostalgia and overwhelming emotions. McGee contributed to the video games medium by providing a narrative that was well-known by most players and added the elements of gore and struggle that creates a successful fiction. The change in aesthetics and plot line was done with the intention to provide a continuation to Carroll's novels. These changes feel natural for the players, who find normal for a game to be based on violence and action at the sacrifice of distorting the original meaning of the story. As a video game rated for adult players, *AMR* is successful based on the great amount of positive reviews, comments and elements of welfare common to other electronic games, movies or books. The

relationship between physical abuse, psychological torture and mental illnesses is well implemented in the plot and the setting of the story and it is directly related to the violence that the game contains.

As we have seen, violence could be perceived as an element of laughter in the source text, as the sense of humour of Carroll's novels was probably directed towards children. However, violence in McGee's creation is used as a device to attract the attention of the public. The game would not have been so popular if it lacked the consequences of violence both from the protagonist and the enemies that threaten her. The player can get easily engaged in the game thanks to the conflicts between Alice and the characters that surround her. A sense of nostalgia is to be found in the game, even if some of the characters have changed radically to the point of causing harm to others. Games allow players to experiment violence in a way that is fictional but at the same time, it helps relieve stress in a more powerful way than a book or a movie could do it. Playing video games is an immersive experience in which the player can feel easily identified and affected with the elements on the screen. In this sense, *AMR* offers an appealing involvement since the players get engaged with the narrative. The players that enjoy violent content find the violence contained in the mistreatment, gore, rape, madness and hysteria of the game as something exciting.

Of course, the research done up to this point does not allow us to reach a richer amount of conclusions. The study's main point is violence in a video game based on a classic; more specifically, physical and psychological damage done to the protagonist and the mental illnesses she develops due to that. The limitations of the research leave behind interesting topics to be analysed in regards to violence and its success such as how Wonderland is destructed bit by bit in front of the player's eyes or the symbolism in the visions of tortured and mangled animals and enemies throughout the game. Additionally, it would be of keen interest to take this research further: *Alice* as a virtual reality experience. The Mad Tea Party was chosen as one of the first scenes constructed for three-dimensional glasses (retrieved from *The Annotated Alice* 82). This supposes a next step from the video games medium as in virtual reality the player becomes the character itself and it is surrounded by the setting of the game. The question to be asked is, how would we experience *Alice*'s narration in three dimensions?

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## VII. Appendix



Figure 1.

Screenshot showing the health bar of roses lacking some of them (top left), the number of teeth the player has (a collectible), the enemy Alice is fighting and the weapon she is using (top right). From user xMifestofelx on *Steam*.



Figure 2.

Comparison between John Tenniel's coloured illustration of Alice in *Through the Looking-Glass* (left) and American McGee's Alice in *Alice: Madness Returns* (right).



Figure 3.

Comparison between the Alice in Wonderland (left) and the real Alice in London (right). The subconscious of Alice portrays herself as someone healthier and stronger, capable of fighting her inner demons. From *The Art of Alice: Madness Returns*.



Figure 4.

Hysteria mode Alice. She is enraged and covered in blood. Her objective at this point is to destroy everything that surrounds her.