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How does American McGee transform the story of Alice in Wonderland to fit a mature audience?

Alice: Madness Returns is a horror platform game released in 2011, which took the concept of Alice in Wonderland and breathed new life into it. It's the sequel to American McGee's Alice released a few years prior and was supposed to be the second instalment of a trilogy before the third game was cancelled. The game takes the century's old story of Alice in Wonderland and transforms it into a more mature story with a new experience for the player. This version of Wonderland is a representation of Alice's psyche, and it changes throughout the game as she remembers more of her past to save her Wonderland from destruction. It takes such a unique turn on the characters of Wonderland as well as of Alice while keeping their character traits intact.

American McGee is a retired game designer who had helped work on games in the past like Doom II, until he created his own video game franchise which helped refine a genre of parody. As normally we see parody in a more comedic perspective, poking fun at the original. While American reimagined Alice into a horror experience. American McGee's Alice was the first of its kind when taking an old children's fairytale and spinning into a much more dark and sinister way. We see this pattern a lot in the modern day with horror films like the dark Winnie the Pooh film: Blood and Honey released in 2023 or like the upcoming film based on Peter Pan, Peter Pan's Neverland Nightmare. American McGee's Alice was an innovative spin of the old tale, twisting it into a new story for an older audience to enjoy. Instead of finding a way out of wonderland, Alice must journey through it to uncover the truth about the death of her family and to overcome her survivor's guilt. The game at the end of each level switches back into the 'real' world showcased by a boring, dull version of reality to showcase the two sides of Alice and once she figures out the truth the worlds merge showcasing Alice knowing the truth.

'This subtle bend of serenity and vigour, of firmness and disembodied freedom, may be described as the particular configuration of the forces representing the theme of the work'. Art and Visual Perception – A psychology of the creative eye. Balance, p38.



Alice In wonderland has been around for over a century now as the years progress so has the story and the designs of the characters. While American McGee only changed parts to fit the aesthetic of the game, it keeps that recognisable dress and features of the story. This brings with it that instant association you get with the characters and the general premise of the story. With the original illustrations done by John Tenniel in 1865, it brings a darker atmosphere to the story. His uses of sharp, dark lines to portray a much more aware story with darker themes. From his line-work, you can see the different emotions of the character and the moodiness of the story. While in 1951, Alice



was adapted into a Disney animated movie. Which caused a lot of the darker storylines to be watered down to fit a younger audience like what they did with a lot of their adaptations. We see this art take a much different form than the original illustrations, with the use of bright colours reflected in wonderland and the cleaner line. It makes wonderland seem like much more of an inviting place, adding charm to fit a younger audience. We see in the Disney version that Alice tends to fit more into a stereotype of the time-period, looking like an average girl with blonde hair and blue eyes which was a symbol of innocence. American McGee's Alice had more creative freedom with his story over 60 years later. The dark long hair portrays a moodiness or glumness to the

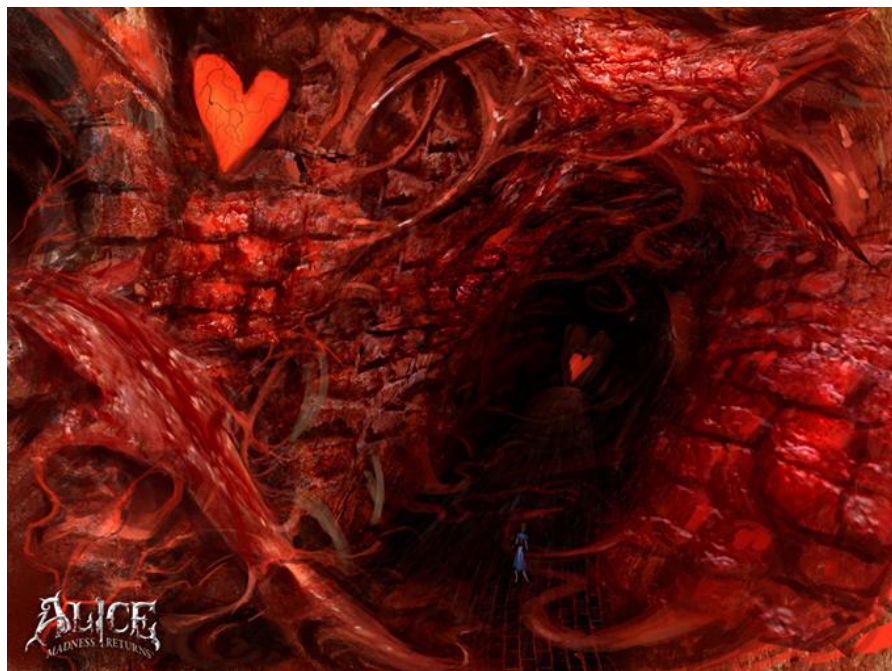
audience matching with the alternative fashion of the time. McGee uses semiotics to build on that instant recognition the audience would have, associating long dark hair with evil, maturity and darkness. Even the colour of her dress is reflecting the tone of the story. For example, Alice's baby blue dress from the Disney adaption, it's a gorgeous colour that helps reference Alice's more naive nature, her youth and her kindness. Using that soft colour to help show the audience that we recognise that soft baby blue in things like the sky, in the colours picked for young children clothing. While Alice in the game adaption's dress is darker, more muted colours while it still sounds out as the brightest feature of her outfit, this darker blue is to represent how Alice has lost that naïve part of herself, her trauma has changed her and made her into a shell of her former self. This is to show the audience how Alice has changed; we associated this darker more muted colours with decay, the loss of life and a much more mature story lines in media. Her dress in wonderland is a dark muted blue, it is still different from the dress she wears in the real world. Which is fully black and white, showcasing the lost of all colours representing the lost of her mind. Her clothes are simple making her blend into a crowd which is different from how she sees herself in Wonderland. In Wonderland, she still has a sense of herself shown in the colour still being in her dress, and how she hasn't lost all of her personality.

'While it is obvious that parts of a work may be parodic without the entire text being so labeled' A theory of parody – The Teachings of the Twentieth Century art forms by Linda Hutcheon. Introduction, p18.



While this game maybe a parody of Alice, American has made it his own While American McGee twisted this charm to fit his own game and story, while this wonderland is set in a much darker tone it still has the sense of wonder. The different landscapes and unique and beautiful in their own way. He uses bright colours sparingly to really draw your attention to the different features of the story. It is a difficult thing to be able to balance the darker colour palette in games like these as you still have to create something visually interesting for the players to look at. Balancing that darker muted colour palette while adding those pops of colours to draw your eye towards what they want you to see.

‘Every painting or sculpture carries meaning. Whether representational or ‘abstract’, It is ‘about something’; it is a statement about the nature of our existence.’ Art and Visual Perception – A psychology of the creative eye. Shape, Simplicity, p62.



While the game is a horror, it needs this off-putting scenery to really entrance the player into this universe. We see the games uses of semiotics in the concept art here, using both meanings of the colour red to create this unsettling feeling to disturb the player. We see the red with the double meaning, having the heart there to represent love and warm while the rest of the scenery is for the second meaning of danger, blood, fire. The game is all about Alice's perspective and how Wonderland is being destroyed because of the detrition of her psyche. Alice even mentions this herself when she sees the destroyed state of Wonderland, saying things like, *‘My Wonderland is shattered. It's dead to me.’* and *‘Wonderland has become quite strange. How is one to find her way?’* finally *‘The destruction of Wonderland, is the destruction of me?’*. The deeper we travel into Wonderland, the more disturbing the world around us becomes as if Alice is mind is

protecting her from finding the truth. We even see that in another piece while most of the colours are muted but the castle is glowing red making us immediately think of danger, fearing what could be inside that is causing that ominous colour. While this area in the game is the Queen of Hearts castle, where Alice doesn't want to go because of her hatred for the Queen. It's like a reflection of Alice's mind making the castle glow red to try and ward her away, scaring her with the association of danger. The mind trying to stop her from coming closer as a way of protecting her by making the castle even more disturbing. While Alice knows she must continue forward to figure out the truth, the red reflecting her love towards her family.

'Gaetano Kanizsa puts it this way: "We have been able to become familiar with the things of our environment precisely because they have constituted themselves for us through forces of perceptual organisation acting prior to and independent of experience, thereby allowing us to experience them"' Art and Visual Perception – The psychology of the creative eye. Shape, The influences of the past, p48.



In conclusion, American McGee was able to transform the story of Alice in Wonderland into a story of its own. A gorgeous story about the struggling mind of a young girl, faced with her family's death. He uses the influences from the original illustration of Alice in Wonderland to set this darker tone for the story. Originally bypassing the Disney adaption as it tends to water down the darker, more mature tale, but in the end, he went back to reference it, learning to take inspiration from all adaptations to create that instant recognition. He brings perspective into the story with a more mature angle which was a hit for his target audience, starting the trend that has only become more popular. His work is such an inspiration to those wanting to get into horror art, his knowledge of colours and anatomy helped him create such a unique game design.

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