Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: Alice: Madness Returns
Platform: Windows, Playstation 3, Xbox 360
Genre: Action-Adventure
Release Date: June 14, 2011
Developer: Spicy Horse
Publisher: Electronic Arts
Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: American McGee and R.J. Berg

Overview

In the original game, *American McGee's Alice*, Alice Liddell was forced to fight her way through a dark, bloody, and macabre Wonderland twisted by her own guilt-induced madness after her parents and sister died in a fire that she believes she accidentally started. Having barely overcome the Queen of Hearts for control of her sanity, Alice recovered from the catatonic state she had entered at the beginning of the game.

Alice: Madness Returns continues the story of Alice as her sanity is once again assaulted, this time by the mysterious Dollmaker and his Infernal Train, a flying train in the shape of a Gothic church that destroys Wonderland in its wake. Alice must travel through Wonderland, searching for her lost memories and the truth of what happened during the night of the fire before the Infernal Train completely destroys Wonderland, and thus her own mind. Where Alice was able to learn how to cope with her own mind in the first game, *Madness Returns* forces her now to cope with the real world, and how it may try to assault her.

Characters

- **Alice Liddell** – The mentally damaged, nineteen year-old protagonist and playable character. Her family died in a fire that she believes she accidentally started. She's recovered a bit since the first game, but her mental state still isn't very stable. She's often hostile and argumentative, but also clever and witty. After her therapy sessions induce new hallucinations of Wonderland, she sees the Infernal Train destroying it and sets out to find out why, and how to stop it. In the real world, she has green eyes, shoulder-length black hair, a dreary, gray dress,

and a sickly complexion. In Wonderland she is an idealized version of herself, and although her outfit and the weapons vary throughout the imaginary world, her classic look is a blue dress with a white, blood-stained apron, while armed with a large, bloody kitchen knife called the Vorpal Blade. Her violent actions are juxtaposed against her small frame and the butterflies that trail after her when she jumps.

- **Cheshire Cat** – Alice's constant companion and guide in Wonderland, as well as the only true ally she has left. He often pops in to give Alice advice, or tell her what to do next, although he never physically helps. He's nearly as tall as Alice is, and so skinny that he appears to be just be a skeleton with gray fur on it. He's also covered with tattoos, has various ear piercings, and bloodstains on his yellow teeth.

- **Dr. Bumby/The Dollmaker** – Alice's psychiatrist. He is very famous amongst the community, mainly for the Houndsditch Home for Wayward Youth that he runs and his treatment method which involves helping children get over the traumatic events from their pasts by forgetting them using hypnotherapy. With their minds wiped clean, he then secretly uses his patients for child prostitution. He tries to use this treatment on Alice, the only witness to his crime years earlier. The Infernal Train destroying Wonderland is Alice's way of representing Dr. Bumby's attempt to make her forget about the imaginary world and her memories of the fire. In the real world, Dr. Bumby looks like a well off, Victorian gentleman. In Wonderland, he is the Dollmaker: a grotesque incarnation of his real self. He is a giant, with black sludge (referred to as "ruin") seeping from his mouth, his eye-less eye sockets, his ears, and his nose. He has a stunted pair of extra arms growing from his shoulders, and his main hands are attached to his wrists by wire, as if they were marionette puppets. The nails on his hands are long and cracked, and on one hand they're painted pink, while on the other they're painted red.

- **Mad Hatter** – An enemy in the first game, Hatter becomes a friend in the second. He and Alice form an uneasy alliance to stop March Hare and Doormouse, who have taken over Hatter's workshop and built the Infernal Train with it. Alice also hopes to get answers out of him concerning the origin and goal of the Infernal Train. Hatter is obsessed with tea and machinery, his workshop and realm taking on a steampunk theme. He is very large, with a head almost as big as Alice is. His skin is green, and from the neck down he is an automaton.

- **Carpenter** – He and his companion the Walrus have taken over as protectors of the Deluded Depths, an underwater area of Wonderland they believe to be hidden from the Infernal Train. This place is inhabited by fish-people who dress and live as if they are in Victorian England. Carpenter is in the process of putting a play together which Walrus will star in when Alice arrives asking him for help and information concerning the Infernal Train. Carpenter is very tall, with a peg leg

and red hair. He's also very eccentric and sympathetic to Alice, holding back what he knows because he thinks that will keep her safe.

- **Caterpillar** – Worshipped by origami ant-people as a deity in the Mysterious East, Caterpillar is in a cocoon when Alice finds him. He often communicates with her telepathically on her journey to find him, and tells her that she needs to go talk to what is left of the Queen of Hearts to find out the truth about the Train and it's conductor. Caterpillar is massive, with green skin and colorful wings once he breaks out of his cocoon.

- **Queen of Hearts** – She was the main antagonist in the first game, trying to bring Alice out of her catatonic state by taking over her mind. Thus, she was the incarnation of Alice's madness. She is in very poor shape since Alice defeated her, and believes that when Alice returns to Queensland it is to finish her off, so she attempts to defend herself. Despite disliking Alice, the Queen is willing to help her anyways, if only to mock her inability to figure out what the Train is doing and who is behind it. The Queen is a mass of random tentacles, flesh, and body parts, spread all over Queensland. The puppet face that she uses in *Madness Returns* to communicate with Alice is that of Alice's sister, Lizzie. The Queen's puppet then looks very similar to Alice, but with tentacle arms, no legs, and a black and red dress. A crown floats above her head despite being deposed, and her mouth is full of pointed teeth.

Breakdown

Alice: Madness Returns continues a wonderfully dark reimagining of Lewis Caroll's original stories, exploring what happens to the imaginary world of Wonderland when it is injected with madness. Alice and her damaged mind are forced to assimilate into the real world in this sequel after spending a decade in an asylum. This makes the real world nearly as unfamiliar as the corrupted Wonderland of the first game. She mastered Wonderland and overcame the madness brought on by survivor's guilt, but now she has to deal with a new type of madness. This new madness is forced upon her by the real world, and she isn't fully equipped to defend herself from or even recognize it yet. As her tentative grip on reality is attacked, Alice has to piece together the truth of what is happening using the scattered clues that her subconscious sends her via the denizens of Wonderland. These clues help her learn to recognize the external threats she may face from the real world, and turn the narrative into an ironic tale of recovery where Alice has to embrace her madness in order to become functional in the real world.

The game switches back and forth between having the player control Alice in 19th century London, and Alice in Wonderland. The majority of the game is spent in Wonderland, but the scenes in London serve as transitions between different Wonderland areas. In London, the player sees how depressing Alice's existence is. London is dirty and sad, and most of the colors have a gray hue to them. All the player can do as Alice is run and interact with objects here and there. Alice is feeble and often powerless to her various caretakers, none of which truly care about her. It becomes understandable then

that the appearance of Wonderland and herself in Wonderland would be beautiful, colorful, and over-the-top. In Wonderland Alice can jump unbelievably far, shrink whenever she wants, and is an expert at hacking and slashing her way through those who would do her harm or take advantage of her. This is an aspect of herself that she lacks in the real world until the very end of the game. Only then do the real Alice and Wonderland Alice become one.

On that note concerning gameplay, it is important to understand that for the most part, gameplay and narrative are separate in *Madness Returns*. The game is a proud platformer, and as far as platforming goes, the controls and gameplay are great. There is very little character or narrative development that occurs while the player is actually playing, though. The majority of the story is told using quick cut-scenes, which often doesn't do the narrative justice. The player can also collect hundreds of hidden minor memories throughout Wonderland. When collected, these play audio of things that were said to Alice in the past by her family, nurse, nanny, doctor, lawyer, and therapist: Dr. Bumby. These memories serve mainly to give background information, but few of them do a good job of that.

This becomes a problem when the player has been doing nothing but platforming for an hour and a half, and forgotten where they are going and what their motivation is. Alice enters the scene on many minor conflicts within each area of Wonderland that don't get explained as the player plays through them. An example would be when Alice enters the Mysterious East in search of Caterpillar. When she gets there, ants made of paper that's been folded like origami (a.k.a. origami ants) who worship Caterpillar as a god are being slaughtered by wasps wearing samurai armor. Alice defends the origami ants and kills any samurai wasps she comes across. There is no real reasoning given for the war between the ants and the wasps, why Alice should be killing the wasps, why they should be concerned with killing her, and how any of it relates to the Infernal Train and the Dollmaker. They just become generic obstacles who's insertion into the narrative becomes questionable.

However, there are enemies that work within the narrative, and it is believable that Alice would be attacking them. An example would be Alice's return to Queensland. This is one of the most anticipated and visually horrifying moments of the game. When Alice arrives she is greeted by a familiar set of enemies: the Card Guards. Except, Alice killed all the Card Guards in the first game, so now they're monstrous, zombified versions of their old selves. There is a history between Alice and the Queen's minions, and fighting them makes sense within the narrative and doesn't feel too unbelievable or repetitive.

The other believable set of enemies are the Ruin monsters and the killer dolls. The ruin monsters are just piles of black sludge that take various forms using doll and machinery parts. It is very clear throughout the story that the Ruin represents a corruption of Wonderland, and part of the mystery aspect of the game is where do they come from. The same goes for the killer dolls. Alice is told by the Insane Children living in the Dollhouse region of Wonderland that the killer dolls belong to the Dollmaker, who has also named himself the new ruler of Wonderland. It makes sense that Alice would fight

them too. And as the player draws closer to the confronting the Dollmaker himself, it becomes clear that the Ruin and the dolls are related, and that the Dollmaker is the one corrupting Wonderland. Alice just needs to find out who the Dollmaker really is.

The story behind the Dollmaker is that he is a representation of Dr. Bumby and his actions in the real world that Alice has failed to recognize. The Dollmaker kidnaps Insane Children within Wonderland, turns them into dolls, and then forces those dolls to do his bidding. In the real world, Dr. Bumby uses his hypnotherapy to wipe clean the memories of the children who are under his care, and then uses them for child prostitution (making them "dolls" in a sense). This is a fate Alice is headed towards as well. Dr. Bumby is also so intent upon erasing her memory because she was the only witness who saw Dr. Bumby start the fire that killed her family. Throughout the game Alice collects major memories in which she remembers seeing someone else break into the house, rape and murder her older sister Lizzie, then start the fire. Because of her survivor's guilt, though, Alice had forgotten all of this.

All of these memories are shown to the player via a series of 2D cut-scenes. The major issue with these cut-scenes is that they very clearly show Dr. Bumby starting the fire. Despite very clearly showing this, though, Alice is unable to realize it is Bumby until after seeing the Dollmaker in Wonderland. This first meeting with the Dollmaker should be more of a shocking moment of realization right before the climax. It certainly could have been had the player not been shown beforehand that Bumby was the true murderer. There is too much foreshadowing within the game pointing to Bumby, or at least the foreshadowing is too obvious. The player doesn't experience the same moment of shock and realization as Alice when she first lays eyes on the Dollmaker and sees that it looks like Bumby. And the fact that Alice couldn't recognize Bumby in the memories beforehand when the player could makes her reaction seem a bit unbelievable as well.

But even if the player has no idea that Bumby is behind Alice's madness and the fire, it's uncertain that his/her reaction would be much different anyways, and that is because there hasn't been enough development done on the Dollmaker or Bumby's character. *Madness Returns* does an excellent job of coming up with very dark and creative characters that instantly grab one's attention. And the way Alice's subconscious represents what is happening in the real world using grotesque Wonderland metaphors is very well thought out as well. This is what makes the encounter with the Dollmaker the most satisfying moment in the game. However, there hasn't been nearly enough development of Bumby, the Dollmaker, or even Alice to make this moment as shocking as it could have been.

This is a major weakness of *Madness Returns*. It is full of very interesting and well thought out characters who never really get developed, and who are only around for one or maybe two zones. The disconnect between gameplay and narrative becomes very apparent here. These great characters only get a few minutes of face time during cut-scenes in which the player cannot even interact with them. The player can only watch the scene play out. The player is not given the chance to start to really love the quirky yet dark nature of the Mad Hatter. Or grow suspicious of Carpenter. Or respect Caterpillar.

Or despise the Queen of Hearts. Or even start to really fear this ominous being known only as the Dollmaker. The player is too busy platforming.

The game relies on the development done for these characters in the first game. If a player has played the first game they will have at least developed some investment in characters like Hatter, Caterpillar, Cheshire Cat, and the Queen. Unfortunately for Carpenter and the Dollmaker there is no previous game to give them some character development. But the game shouldn't be relying on the character development that occurred in a previous game. Alice has changed since then, and so have the characters who are in both games. But *Madness Returns* does not give them the chance to show how much they've changed.

There isn't always a complete disconnect between gameplay and narrative, though. The game combines the two well during two major instances. The first is during a sequence where Alice experiences a hallucination that finds her back in the asylum she spent a decade in. The player wanders the halls of the asylum as a shaved headed Alice in a straight jacket. The asylum is a combination of the real asylum, and the grotesque Wonderland version, during which Alice speaks to a handful of the real life characters who seek to take advantage of her.

The second sequence is the aforementioned meeting with the Dollmaker. In Wonderland, Alice meets the Dollmaker, boards the Infernal Train, speaks to Hatter, the Queen, and Caterpillar one more time, then fights the Dollmaker. Simultaneously in the real world, Alice confronts Dr. Bumby about his crimes at a train station. The player switches back and forth between the two mental states, both playing and experiencing the narrative as well. After Alice defeats the Dollmaker, she's able to overcome the madness that Bumby tried to force on her. London and Wonderland combine to form Londerland, a mix of both places representing Alice's learned method of coping with the real world by viewing it through the lens of Wonderland. She is able to find the confidence to stand up to Bumby, and pushes him in front of an oncoming train. Cheshire Cat then reassures the player that her memories are safe… for now.

Strongest Element

The strongest aspect of *Alice: Madness Returns*' narrative is the characterization of the denizens of Wonderland. This includes Alice and Wonderland itself, which can be treated as a character that represents her mind. The characters made famous by Caroll still hold onto many of their original defining traits. Those traits, though, have been put side by side with the darker aspects of the characters that come out as a result of Alice's madness. These characters instantly grab a player's attention and intrigue, promising so much more than the game ends up delivering. Still, the characterization does an excellent job of metaphorically representing madness and corruption using the various different characters that exist within her mind. They help Alice learn how to cope with unfamiliar the real world, as opposed to the first game which taught her how to cope with herself.

Unsuccessful Element

Where *Madness Returns* suffers most is its lack of integration of narrative and gameplay. The player will very regularly spend close to two hours (depending on how through they are being with finding the hidden minor memories) platforming, during which time there is nearly no plot development. The player will then be rewarded with a short cut-scene that shows Alice speaking quickly with one of the characters within Wonderland. The majority of the story is told in this manner, using quick cut-scenes that serve a rewards for hours of patient platforming. While the gameplay is well done, there is too much platforming and not enough investment in presenting the narrative in a more attractive manner or letting the player really feel like a part of it. The player even runs the risk of forgetting what their overall goal in any given region is because of how much time there is between cut-scenes, and how little they get to interact with characters that matter.

Highlight

The highlight of the narrative in *Madness Returns* is the scene where Alice rounds a corner within the bowels of the Dollhouse and first sees the Dollmaker, subsequently confronting him as well as Dr. Bumby in real life. This is the climax of the story, where the player first gets to see the Dollmaker and all his corruptive glory. The simultaneous interactions between Alice and the Dollmaker in Wonderland alongside Alice and Dr. Bumby in the real world shows the game at its best in terms of the metaphorical symbolism and representing the mental breakthrough Alice is able to achieve. As Alice and the Dollmaker fight aboard the Infernal Train, Alice and Bumby battle with words in a train station. After Alice defeats the Dollmaker (who represents the madness corrupting her mind), she is finally able to cope with the real world. The confident and strong Alice of Wonderland who was able to defend Alice's mind from itself is let free with the death of the Dollmaker. She enters the real world to help Alice finally stand up to Bumby and right the wrongs that have been done to her. In killing Bumby and the Dollmaker, Alice saves her own sanity and prevents future children from becoming Bumby's "dolls."

Critical Reception

Andrew Sztein of GamingExcellence gave *Madness Returns* a 9.2/10, excellent on their scale. He praises the game's writing and gameplay as fantastic, but adds in that "motivations are sometimes scarce and the story can be difficult to follow. Considering this is a game that deals with themes of sanity, this may be on purpose, but it doesn't make the main storyline any easier to follow at times."

Alice Liang of 1up.com gave *Madness Returns* a B-. She explains that she enjoyed the "re-imagined supporting cast… who are at their core the same archetypes from the source material – only they've been placed in new and amusing situations and surroundings." However, Liang didn't enjoy how linear the game is, and laments that often "the player gets left feeling aimless and lacking in the motivational sense of urgency."

Peter Eykemans of IGN gave *Madness Returns* a 6.5/10, okay on their scale. Eykemans thoroughly enjoyed the environment within the game, as well as the characters. He praises the gameplay and platforming as well, but also adds that "in small chunks these

elements remain fun, but set against lengthy gameplay sessions they grow repetitive. As *Alice: Madness Returns*' bizarre mystery unfolded, the limits of the experience showed themselves."

The critical responses continually bring up issues having to do with how the narrative and gameplay aren't integrated very well. Too much of the platforming with too little plot development leads to gameplay feeling repetitive, aimless, unmotivated, and even linear. Integrating the narrative into the gameplay could, at the very least, help to alleviate the sense of aimlessness and lack of motivation, while making the story easier to follow with the play being constantly involved in it.

Lessons

- **Create memorable and unique characters:** Characters that can instantly grab a player's attention and interest have a leg up in establishing that player's personal investment in a character and the narrative that they are a part of. *Madness Returns* is full of such characters who are carried by the fact that they are dark and often brutal re-imaginings of classic characters twisted by madness.

- **Develop characters believably:** After hooking the interest of the player, characters need to hold that interest by presenting them in believable situations that create emotional investments in such characters. The most interesting characters in *Madness Returns*, such as the Hatter and the Queen, are only interacted with briefly, never giving the player time to connect to those characters. The one character who the player does get to see develop, Alice, often doesn't act believably, such as when she doesn't immediately realize that Bumby was the arsonist during the early memories.

- **Don't let the player forget why they're doing something:** In a game that either can't or shouldn't rely on its gameplay to entertain the player, time needs to be taken to get the player invested in the story and not feeling like they are aimlessly moving along doing nothing. There is so much platforming in *Madness Returns*, and it is so unrelated to the narrative that it causes players to either forget why they are doing something, or not be convinced that what they're trying to do is believable.

- **Integrate narrative and gameplay:** More often than not, cut-scenes tend to lack in the interactivity between the player and the game. A player should be able to interact with the other characters and the setting to become a part of the story, to feel like they are experiencing it, not having it shown to them. Cut-scenes may be unavoidable in cases, but *Madness Returns* makes the mistake of using cut-scenes to develop almost the entirety of the narrative. It creates a separation between the gameplay and the narrative, since the player doesn't have to actually do anything during the cut-scenes. There is good use made of the minor memories scattered throughout Wonderland to develop minor characters as well as Alice's backstory, though, but those don't contribute to the main narrative.

Summation

Alice: Madness Returns tends to be praised for its beautifully dark and macabre imagery, as well as the opportunity it provides to explore madness within a classic fantasy world. The narrative, though, tends to be written off because of its disconnection from gameplay. American McGee and R.J. Berg have presented the player with a great concept that often struggles to hold attention and belief. This is because the narrative has to compete with other aspects of the game and isn't always given the focus it deserves. But the game is still worth examining because it is a fantastic and creative concept with a handful of large mistakes that are worth learning from. Mainly there is a lesson to be learned about not letting gameplay overshadow narrative in a game that can't survive off its gameplay alone. Despite its shortcomings, though, *Alice: Madness Returns* is a satisfyingly horrific look into how madness can twist the seemingly innocent, and how one can learn to overcome their own demons as well as the ones set on them by others.