

# The Unfinished Story of American McGee (Journalistic Piece)

## Alice Madness Returns: Intro Trailer

(The video will open with the starting cutscene to Alice Madness Returns, setting the visual tone)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RwyoaSA-0wg>

## Introduction Segment

When people talk about American McGee's Alice, the conversation often begins with the series' striking visuals. A twisted reimagining of Lewis Carroll's classic, one that presents Wonderland as something far more unsettling than the version many of us grew up with in Disney's 1951 animation.

Over the years, darker interpretations of Alice in Wonderland have appeared time and time again. And perhaps that isn't surprising. Even the original text carries a sense of unease, moments that make you pause and wonder whether this was ever meant to be a purely innocent children's story. After all, the Queen of Hearts' obsession with beheadings is hardly subtle.

Yet despite all these reinterpretations, American McGee's version always felt special to me. It wasn't simply darker for the sake of it, but rather far more personal. As though Wonderland itself served a deeper purpose than just a spectacle.

Granted, I haven't seen every retelling of Alice in Wonderland, that would be simply impossible. But given that American McGee's Alice has since become one of early gaming's cult classics, and a gothic masterpiece, I am naturally drawn to it.

And before we delve any deeper into that world, I want to step back for a moment, and have a look at the person who imagined it all. Because to understand this version of Wonderland, we first need to understand American McGee himself.

# The Early Life and Upbringing of American McGee

American McGee's upbringing wasn't exactly a blueprint for stability. Raised by his mother, a free spirited artist and self-described hippie, American had a number of stepfathers, while his biological father was largely absent, with a one violent encounter at the age of 13. So, as you can probably tell, he was set up for success from an early age.

At 16, McGee came home from school only to find his house completely emptied out. His mother had sold it in order to start a new life and fund her partner's gender reassignment surgery, leaving behind only a few personal belongings, and most importantly, his computer. Suddenly thrown into independence, McGee dropped out of school and began taking odd jobs to survive.

It was during this period that he began to teach himself how to code, not because he had a lifelong dream of making video games, but because computers were one of the few constants left in his life. At the time, video game design wasn't a clearly defined career path, especially for a teenager barely scraping by.

You may wonder why a developer's chaotic, dysfunctional childhood is so relevant to the history of Alice. Well, McGee himself has pointed to these experiences as a major influence on the dark, tragic, and psychologically rich tones of the Alice series.

Jarvis, insert this clip [https://youtu.be/ADpXfOIS\\_HE?t=289](https://youtu.be/ADpXfOIS_HE?t=289) right here

"Fucked up weird ass childhood" -

<https://www.wired.com/2000/12/the-great-american-mcgee-game>

## McGee's Early Career

After navigating this chaotic childhood and surviving early independence, McGee found himself at the doorstep of one of the most influential studios of the early 90s - id Software. For those unfamiliar, id Software was the powerhouse behind revolutionary first-person shooters like Doom and Quake. These weren't just games, they were technological marvels that helped define the entire genre.

McGee joined the team as a level designer, a role that would allow him to experiment with creating immersive spaces. He worked on Doom II, contributing to its iconic level design, and later helped craft some of the early Quake projects. At id, he learned how to guide the player's emotion through space, lighting, and pacing - skills that would become essential later on in his career.

Despite his talent, McGee's position at id wasn't all smooth sailing. He was ultimately fired from the company, a moment he later described as:

**“Probably the most meaningful day for me... was the day I was fired. I felt a mixture of terror and freedom that was so significantly powerful”**

Because nothing says “creative growth” like being unceremoniously shown the door by some of the biggest names in gaming. McGee has said he still has no idea why he was fired, but recognises it was most likely due to internal politics and his own failings.

Determined to keep on shaping video games his own way, McGee reached out to EA, a major publisher known for both sports titles and ambitious experimental projects, right before they set their minds on the path of destruction and pure evil. Unlike id, EA could offer McGee not just a pay check, but the resources and a platform to realise a creative vision on a larger scale.

At EA, McGee pitched a concept that was unlike anything in the market at the time. A dark, psychological reimagining of Alice in Wonderland. He didn't just propose a licensed adaptation, he pitched a world that was emotionally captivating, a Wonderland that reflected human trauma and resilience as much as it did fantasy.

EA saw the potential, enough to greenlight the project, and McGee was given the chance to bring his unique vision to life.

## Why Alice?

So, why Alice? Why would a game designer fresh out of id Software, with a background in first-person shooters, decide to take on one of the most beloved children's stories and turn it into a dark, psychotic journey?

For McGee, it wasn't just about telling a story, it was about exploring human emotions through fantasy. He was always drawn to Alice in Wonderland as a teenager, not necessarily for its whimsy, but for the underlying unease hidden in Carroll's original text.

In an 2001 interview with Game Developer, McGee admits that making his version of Alice wasn't a result of him **“forcing that darkness on the story, it just seemed to come naturally”** out of Carroll's writing.

And honestly... he's not wrong. Because once you start looking into Lewis Carroll, or Charles Dodgson (dogsun), the man behind the pen name, things get complicated very quickly.

# The Controversy Of Lewis Carroll

You see, Alice wasn't purely a fictional character, she was in fact a real girl. Alice Liddell, daughter of Henry Liddell, a prominent academic and dean at Oxford, was born on May 4th 1852. Dodgson became acquainted with the Liddell family in the late 1850s and quickly formed a close bond with their children, particularly Alice and her sisters.

He would often entertain them with whimsical stories. And it was during a fateful boating trip on the River Thames (Tems) that Alice was enchanted by one of his imaginative tales. She urged him to write it down which ultimately would become the foundation for Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, a book that would go on to shape children's literature for generations.

But the story of its author is... far less whimsical.

Beyond writing, Dodgson was also a mathematician, logician, and an enthusiastic early photographer. Many of his photographic subjects were children, particularly young girls, including the Liddell sisters. Some of these images depicted children in varying states of dress. Viewed through a modern lens, those photographs raise some uncomfortable questions.

Many have debated his intentions for well over a century. Some argue that his friendships with children reflected the Victorian era's romanticised view of childhood innocence. Others point to patterns in his relationships, particularly how many of his friendships with young girls appeared to fade once they reached adolescence, as something more troubling.

What complicates matters further is that much of Dodgson's personal correspondence and diary entries were destroyed after his death, leaving historians with frustrating gaps in the records.

Even his relationship with the Liddell family ended suddenly in 1863 under circumstances that remain unclear. To this day, no one knows exactly why.

Meanwhile, the real Alice Liddell grew up and lived a life far removed from Wonderland. She married, had three sons, and later endured immense personal tragedy when two of them were killed during the First World War. Her husband would pass away not long after, leaving her to navigate much of her later life alone.

She died in 1934, long after the strange story written in her childhood had become one of the most famous works of literature in the world.

And whether intentional or not, these circumstances gave Alice in Wonderland an undercurrent that feels far stranger than the cheerful Disney version many people grew up with.

Which is exactly the thread that American McGee would later pull on.

By December of 2000, McGee's vision had taken shape as a full game: American McGee's Alice.

# American McGee's Alice Premise

(Segment opens with the original trailer)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fg4FG0kCMBU>

After a tragic fire destroys her family home, Alice Liddell is left emotionally scarred and confined to the mental asylum. Haunted by trauma and the loss of her childhood innocence, she is drawn back into Wonderland - but it is no longer the whimsical, curious world she once knew.

In McGee's vision, Wonderland has mirrored Alice's fractured mind. To survive and restore balance, Alice must confront the physical manifestations of her own fears. Ultimately facing the Queen of Hearts, whose tyranny embodies control, rage, and repression.

At its core, the game is about navigating the intersection of trauma and imagination. A dark, psychological fairy tale where the environment, enemies, and narrative all reflect the inner workings of a mind struggling to heal. In McGee's hands, Wonderland is not just a fantasy world.

## What Made The Game Stand Out

So, what made American McGee's Alice stand out back when it released? For many players, the answer was immediate, it looked like nothing else on the market. At a time when games would still largely focus on realism or sci-fi, Alice embraced something else. Wonderland was dark, grotesque, and strangely beautiful. Till this day, I find myself captivated by this admittedly outdated game, which speaks volumes about its artistic direction.

**“Oooh it's black and white... I dunno if I like it”** <https://youtu.be/J03TySIQT2Q?t=246>

Visually, the game wasn't designed to shock for the sake of it. Every warped piece of scenery felt intentional, as though the world itself had been damaged alongside Alice. Full of twisted surrealist visuals. Wonderland didn't feel evil in a traditional sense, it felt wounded.

What truly elevated the experience was how the game told its story. American McGee's Alice didn't rely heavily on exposition or lengthy dialogue. Instead, narrative was communicated through atmosphere and the environment. The player learns about Alice not because the game explains her trauma outright, but because the world behaves as though it remembers it. You aren't told Wonderland is broken, you see it.

Even the gameplay reinforced this idea. The enemies Alice faces are grotesque, uncanny versions of storybook creatures, less like monsters and more like manifestations of trauma. Her weapons, most notably the iconic Vorpal Blade, symbolise something important - agency.

Combat isn't about power fantasy, but about reclaiming control in a world that has stripped it away.

At the time, this kind of emotional cohesion between gameplay, narrative, and visual design was rare. McGee wasn't just creating a dark version of Alice in Wonderland, he was using the medium to explore internal struggle in a way that felt uniquely suited to video games.

## Special Interest Groups

Of course, not everyone was thrilled with McGee's vision.

Turning one of literature's most recognisable children's stories into a psychological horror video game was bound to raise a few eyebrows. For many, Alice in Wonderland existed primarily as the cheerful, colourful world popularised by Disney's animation. Seeing it transformed into something grotesque felt, to some, like a violation of a childhood classic.

And according to McGee, the backlash occasionally came from some very dedicated fans of Lewis Carroll's work.

In an interview with *Game Developer*, he recalled a strange encounter at the Game Developers Conference. A woman who belonged to the Lewis Carroll Society began loudly criticising the game, outraged at what had been done to the story. The funny part? She didn't realise she was speaking directly to the person responsible.

As McGee later joked, he stood there listening to her rant thinking, "Does this lady have any idea who she's talking to?"

According to him, that was actually one of the only negative encounters he experienced during development, and the situation became so absurd that he mostly just found it funny.

Ironically, the reaction from some unexpected visitors was far more positive.

During an early demonstration of the game at E3, Filmmaker Steven Spielberg briefly stopped by the demo booth, watched the presentation, and afterwards reportedly told McGee that it was "one of the truest renditions of the work" he had ever seen.

When the game released, critics praised its bold art direction and its willingness to take creative risks. While it wasn't a massive commercial blockbuster, it resonated deeply with players who were hungry for something different. It sold well enough, reviewed strongly, scoring around 85% on Metacritic. And perhaps most importantly, left a lasting impression. Players didn't just finish the game and moved on. They remembered it.

Over time, Alice became one of those rare titles that refused to fade. It circulated through word of mouth and many online forums. And for McGee, the story was never truly finished.

For years, he expressed interest in returning to Alice's world - not to repeat himself, but to continue her psychological journey. The original game had been about trauma's immediate aftermath. A sequel, he believed, could explore something far more complex. What happens when healing fails.

Eventually, more than a decade later, that opportunity arrived.

## **Madness Returns Premise**

**(opens with promotional videos to Alice Madness Returns)**

Alice Madness Returns opens years after the events of the original game. Alice Liddell remains trapped within a system meant to "fix" her, now living in an orphanage under psychiatric supervision. Though outwardly functional, her mind is still fractured, her memories incomplete, and her trauma unresolved.

When fragments of Wonderland begin resurfacing once more, Alice is pulled back into a version of the world even more unstable than before. This time, Wonderland isn't merely broken, it's being actively consumed. As Alice explores its collapsing landscapes, she begins to uncover suppressed memories surrounding the fire that killed her family. The deeper she travels, the clearer it becomes that Wonderland's destruction is not random. Something, or someone, is feeding on her repression.

Unlike the original game, which framed Wonderland as a damaged reflection of trauma, Madness Returns portrays it as a battleground between denial and truth. Healing, this time, isn't about survival, it's about confrontation.

Each environment in Madness Returns functions almost as a stage play, reinforcing Alice's deteriorating mental state. The Dollhouse, for example, is intentionally claustrophobic. Tight hallways, repetitive geometry, and disturbing imagery create a sense of confinement and loss of agency, the loss of innocence. The world feels artificial, like something assembled rather than lived in.

In contrast, the Vale of Tears appears empty. Vast open spaces stretch outward beneath muted skies, broken architecture sinking into water and mist. The colour palette is soft, the pace is slow, and the world feels exhausted rather than violent. This isn't a place of fear. It's a place of mourning.

What makes these environments so effective is how deliberately disconnected they are. Transitions between worlds are abrupt and dreamlike, not logical or geographic. Wonderland doesn't unfold like a real place. It collapses and reforms around Alice. This lack of spatial

continuity reinforces the idea that these aren't locations on a map, but fragments of memory stitched together by emotion.

Mechanically, the game leaned more heavily into platforming and combat than its predecessor. The movement was smooth, the combat more polished, and the presentation more cinematic. It was a modern game built on the bones of a cult classic.

## The DLC Controversy

Alongside the game's release came additional downloadable content, most notably themed dress packs that altered Alice's abilities and appearance. On paper, these were harmless extras. In practice, they became a point of frustration.

By 2011, downloadable content had already begun shifting from meaningful expansions to monetised add-ons, and EA, in particular, was becoming increasingly associated with this emerging model. What was once meant to extend a game's life was slowly turning into a way to fragment it.

Many fans felt the DLCs clashed with the emotional weight of the narrative. When a story is centred around trauma, exploitation, and psychological damage, locking gameplay advantages behind costume packs felt... uncomfortable. Especially when those costumes provided tangible gameplay benefits. (mention examples)

To many players, it symbolised a growing disconnect between McGee's artistic intent and EA's gruesome commercial priorities. A tension that would only become more visible in the years to come.

## Reception

When *Alice Madness Returns* released in 2011, the response from critics was mixed. Praise was directed toward its art direction, world design, and ambition. *Wonderland* had never looked this imaginative or emotionally charged before. The game's visual identity was unmistakable.

However, criticism followed closely behind. Combat repetition, uneven pacing, and platforming frustrations were common complaints. Some felt the mechanics struggled to support the story McGee was trying to tell.

Yet among fans, the response was far more passionate. Many connected deeply with Alice's continued struggle. Her refusal to be "cured" by forgetting resonated with players who understood trauma not as something that disappears, but something you learn to live with.

Over time, *Madness Returns* began to age differently than its reviews suggested. Video essays, retrospective reviews, and long-form analysis began reframing *Madness Returns* not as a flawed sequel, but as a deeply personal work constrained by its era. In an industry increasingly focused on monetisation and mass appeal, its sincerity stood out.

Fans revisited it not for mechanical perfection, but for emotional honesty. And slowly, the call for a third instalment grew louder. Petitions circulated. Campaigns emerged. Fans pushed for *Alice Asylum*, McGee's proposed continuation, a project meant to conclude Alice's journey once and for all. But *Wonderland*, it seemed, was once again at the mercy of forces beyond its creator's control.

## **Alice Asylum & The Design Bible**

For years, fans believed a third *Alice* game would eventually happen. The demand was there, the audience had only grown, and American McGee himself never seemed ready to abandon *Wonderland*.

In 2017, he began to work on something unusual. Not a pitch deck. Not a simple concept document. But a full on design bible.

The project was called *Alice Asylum*, envisioned as the final chapter in Alice's story - the piece that would transform the series from a cult duology into a complete trilogy. Rather than waiting for a publisher to show interest, McGee began developing the game's concept independently, slowly building a detailed blueprint for what the project could become.

The design bible eventually grew into an enormous document. Hundreds of pages outlining narrative direction, gameplay systems, concept art, environmental themes, and character designs. It wasn't just a loose idea, it was a fully realised vision. And perhaps most importantly, it was built with the community watching.

McGee regularly shared updates with fans through Patreon and social media, allowing them to see concept art evolve in real time. Artists, writers, and designers collaborated on the project for years, expanding *Wonderland* into something far larger than either of the previous games.

The premise itself was ambitious.

If the original American McGee's *Alice* explored trauma's immediate aftermath, and *Alice Madness Returns* examined the painful process of uncovering buried memories, *Alice Asylum* would have focused on something deeper - recovery.

The game would have explored Alice's life after the events of *Madness Returns*, where she begins to question whether Wonderland is merely a coping mechanism... or something more fundamental to who she is.

Wonderland, in *Asylum*, would not simply be broken. It would be evolving.

Concept art revealed surreal reinterpretations of classic imagery - vast mechanical landscapes, dreamlike environments that blurred Victorian London with Wonderland's impossible logic, and creatures that looked both familiar and disturbingly new.

Some locations would revisit places from earlier games, but transformed - not as nostalgic callbacks, but as reflections of Alice's changing mental state. The world itself would shift between beauty and horror, suggesting that Wonderland was no longer just a projection of trauma, but something Alice might finally learn to control.

In many ways, the project looked like a culmination of everything the series had been building toward. And visually, it was breathtaking.

Years of work from concept artists produced beautiful environmental paintings, intricate character designs, and entire narrative arcs mapped out in visual form. Even without a playable prototype, the design bible alone felt like a glimpse into a game that already existed somewhere. Fully imagined, just waiting to be built.

For fans, it felt like something rare. A creator returning to his work not because a publisher demanded it, but because he genuinely believed the story wasn't finished.

But there was one problem. Despite all this preparation, all this planning, and years of development work behind the scenes... The project still depended on **one company**.

And that company was **EA**.

## **EA Rejection & The Community Backlash**

**(Opens with a montage of EA's cruelty)**

For years, fans waited with hope rather than certainty. *Alice Asylum* wasn't a concept sketched on a napkin, it was a carefully crafted design bible, the product of years of collaboration. It was, in many ways, an answer to his own artistic restlessness, a chance to finish what he had started. But one thing remained unavoidable: EA owned the rights.

EA didn't invest in the design bible's creation, but they still controlled Wonderland. And when McGee presented *Asylum* to them, the response was cold. EA passed.

Not just "not now."

Not “maybe later.”

But flatly refused to greenlight the project.

For a game with a passionate fan base, a clear artistic vision, and a market hungry for something different, the rejection didn't make sense on paper. McGee had proven himself with two distinct Alice games. The sequel had cultivated a devoted following. And now there was a fully formed blueprint for a third entry. But in the boardrooms of EA, creative ambition was no longer enough.

According to McGee and numerous interviews he's given since, EA saw too many risks - financial, marketwise, brandwise. The dark, psychological nature of Alice Asylum didn't fit neatly into a quarterly earnings report. It wasn't a sports title, a blockbuster sequel, or a safe licence. It was art - and that made it uncomfortable in the world of corporate risk.

The reaction from the community was immediate. What was once hope turned into confusion, then frustration, and finally outrage.

Fans didn't just quietly complain online, they mobilised. Petitions circulated. Messages poured into EA leadership. Threads exploded on forums. People demanded answers. They asked why a company could profit for years from a cult property yet refuse to let it evolve creatively. For many, EA's rejection wasn't just a business decision, it was a dismissal of the fans themselves.

And that anger wasn't entirely abstract. Alice Asylum had already become more than some unattainable dream. The concept art was out there. The design bible was publicly downloadable. McGee had shared so much, transparently, over years, that fans felt ownership - not legally, but emotionally. This was their story too.

But in the end, EA didn't waver.

The rights stayed in their hands. Asylum was shelved. And McGee, frustrated, would soon announce that he was stepping away from making video games entirely.

Wonderland, it seemed, had been rejected not just by executives, but by the industry itself.

## Poor management by EA

If EA's rejection of Alice Asylum was frustrating enough, the way they handled the existing Alice games has only added insult to injury.

The original American McGee's Alice, released in 2000, is now largely considered abandonware. It isn't officially sold on modern storefronts, meaning the only way to play it today is by hunting down ancient physical copies (which can cost more than a small mortgage) or digging through the internet's obscure, dusty corners like a digital archaeologist. It's a cult classic, sure - but if you're new to the franchise, good luck actually finding it without sacrificing a weekend, or your sanity.

Alice Madness Returns, on the other hand, did receive a Steam release, which sounds promising on paper. But in practice, it's far from perfect. Even replaying it recently for this video, I encountered multiple game breaking bugs.

### **(Jarvis include clips here)**

For a game about exploration and interacting with a twisted, immersive world, these issues are like giving someone a beautifully wrapped gift and then filling it with rocks. And honestly, they make you want to rage quit and never touch the game ever again.

Yet here I am, still recommending it to everyone. I realise how delusional that must sound - "Hey, come play this masterpiece, but don't mind the floating enemies, broken platforms, and game breaking bugs!" Yet somehow, even in spite of all its technical sins, I still can't help but to love this franchise.

And while we're on the topic of Steam, despite existing achievements on the Xbox release, the Steam version has zero achievements. None. For someone like me - a completionist whose soul aches at 99% completion - this isn't just frustrating. It's like EA handing me a chocolate cake, and then telling me I can't eat it.

Between the original game's near inaccessibility and the broken, incomplete nature of its sequel on modern platforms, it's clear that EA has done little to preserve or honour McGee's Wonderland. A series that once pushed artistic and emotional boundaries now feels abandoned, left to survive only through fan dedication, word of mouth, and the stubborn persistence of anyone who refuses to let this bizarre, beautiful world fade into obscurity. (like me :D)

# What is McGee up to nowadays

So... what is American McGee up to nowadays?

After years of battling EA and eventually stepping away from game development altogether, McGee decided to take his creativity in a slightly unexpected direction. He co-founded a plush company called Plushie Dreadfuls, a line of dark fantasy inspired stuffed animals. They're whimsical, slightly creepy, and unmistakably in line with McGee's aesthetic - cute characters stitched together with a hint of melancholy and just enough oddness to make you tilt your head.

There's even a Victorian McGee plush line that riffs directly on the aesthetic of Alice Madness Returns. The plushes look like something that crawled out of Wonderland, got softened up with fabric and stuffing, and then decided to become marketable. And I'll admit, I absolutely adore them. I ended up buying the Cheshire Cat and Alice plushes myself, and they now live comfortably in my room like two tiny, emotionally complicated roommates. There's something oddly fitting about that. Even as plush toys, they still carry that strange mixture of comfort and melancholy that McGee's version of Wonderland always had. It's weirdly wholesome... in a mildly disturbing sort of way.

But Plushie Dreadfuls hasn't just been a side hobby. In many ways, it's become a kind of creative incubator.

In late 2025, after several years away from game development following the collapse of Alice Asylum, McGee announced that he's finally returning to game development - just not in the way people expected. Through social media, he revealed that he's working on a brand new video game inspired by the world of Plushie Dreadfuls, one heavily influenced by the tone and themes of Wonderland while carefully avoiding the original Alice intellectual property that EA still owns.

The project, currently teased under the banner Plushie Dreadfuls: The Game (with the occasional reference to Alice Floofness Returns). In his own announcement, McGee explained that while making a new Alice game isn't legally possible, he's found a creative workaround, stating:

"We have managed to bring Wonderland into Plushie Dreadfuls. Actually, it's the other way around - the story I'm working on now has the universe of Plushie Dreadfuls living inside of Wonderland."

According to McGee, fan interactions at events, including a recent pop-up in Japan, helped reignite his enthusiasm for game development. In an honestly heart warming post on Instagram, he admitted that those conversations pushed him to start building the story and world for this new project. Talks are already underway with potential developers to create an early playable demo, with McGee himself focusing on the narrative and emotional direction.

So after years of frustration, corporate roadblocks, and creative limbo, American McGee is once again doing what he's always done best - building strange, emotional worlds that exist somewhere between fantasy and psychological reflection.

Only this time... they're populated by plush bunnies.

And honestly? I wouldn't have it any other way.

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