Playing Around in Lewis Carroll's *Alice* Books

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Mathematician Charles Dodgson's love of play and his need for rules came together in his use of popular games as part of the structure of the two famous children's books, *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass*, he wrote under the pseudonym Lewis Carroll. The author of this article looks at the interplay between the playing of such games as croquet and cards and the characters and events of the novels and argues that, when reading Carroll (who took a playful approach even in his academic texts), it is helpful to understand games and game play.

Charles Dodgson, more widely known by his pseudonym Lewis Carroll, is perhaps one of the more playful authors of children's literature. In his career, as a children's author and as an academic logician and mathematician, and in his personal life, Carroll was obsessed with games and with various forms of play. While some readers are surprised by the seemingly split personality of Charles Dodgson, the serious mathematician, and Lewis Carroll, the imaginative author of children's books, it was his love of play and games and his need to establish rules and guidelines that effectively govern play that unite these two seemingly disparate facets of Carroll's personality. Carroll's two best-known children's books—*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There* (1871)—use popular games as part of their structure. In *Victoria through the Looking-Glass,* Florence Becker Lennon has gone so far as to suggest about Carroll that "his life was a game, even his logic, his mathematics, and his singular ordering of his household and other affairs. His logic was a game, and his games were logical."[1] Croquet and playing cards are prominent features in the first *Alice* book; chess structures the landscape and the movement of characters in *Through the Looking-Glass.* Even in his academic texts, such as *Euclid and his Modern Rivals* (1879), *Curiosa Mathematica: A New Theory of Parallels* (1888), and *Curiosa Mathematica: Pillow-Problems* (1893), Carroll took a playful approach to his subject.

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As a mathematician, Carroll focused primarily on geometry, especially Euclidian geometry. He is best remembered, perhaps, for his recreational mathematics—puzzles, paradoxes, logic, story problems, and games. Carroll had planned to publish a collection of riddles, puzzles, charades, and acrostics that he had developed as *The Alice's Puzzlebook*, even persuading *Alice* illustrator John Tenniel to do the frontispiece, but it was one of many book projects that Carroll did not complete during his lifetime.[2] With books such as *A Tangled Tale* (1885), *The Game of Logic* (1887) (which included a board and color counters), and *Pillow-Problems* (1893), Carroll attempted to immerse child readers in the pleasure and amusement that he found in the orderly structure of mathematics. The ten "knots," or story problems, found in *A Tangled Tale* first appeared as columns that Carroll contributed to Charlotte Yonge's magazine for children, *The Monthly Packet,* beginning in 1880. Even in his scholarly mathematical texts for adults—such as his most significant *Euclid and his Modern Rivals*—Carroll's playful nature becomes apparent when he presents the book as a four-act play featuring three judges in Hades who test Herr Niemand, a fictious professor defending Euclidian geometry against all attacks. Professor Niemand even meets the ghost of Euclid himself.

Carroll also created and published a series of word games including *Word-Links: A Game for Two Players* (1878), *Doublets: A Word Puzzle* (1879), *Mischmasch: A Word Game for Two Players* (1882), and *Syzygies and Lanrick*: *A Word Puzzle and a Game* (1893). The latter involves changing one letter at a time so that players could transform one word into another. He produced a series of short pamphlets that outlined the rules and processes of play in various games. He invented the games *Court Circular* (1860), *Croquet Castles: For Five Players* (1863), *Lanrick: A Game for Two Players* (1879), and *Circular Billiards* (1890). Given the importance of games in his personal and professional life, it is not surprising that games and play became such a significant feature in his *Alice* books.[3]

Carroll approached his mathematics in a playful manner and composed his playful children's books in a very orderly fashion. Critics have recognized the similarity between the protagonist of the *Alice* books and Carroll. Carroll describes Alice as a "curious child" who "was very fond of pretending to be two people."[4] *Looking-Glass* readers discover, likewise, that Alice's favorite phrase is "Let's pretend."[5] Carroll did make some effort to keep his more famous pen name as a successful author separate from his daily life as lecturer at Christ

Church in Oxford University, but it was a fairly open secret. He often used his literary fame as a children's writer as his calling card.

Carroll is always careful to point out that while Alice might enjoy pretending to be two different people, her world of pretend has an established set of rules; she once boxed her own ears "for having cheated herself in a game of croquet she was playing against her self."[6] The issue of ignoring the rules or cheating at croquet reappears when Alice is invited to play croquet with the Red Queen. Games are only fun if they follow established rules that allow all the players equal access. As Kathleen Blake discusses in *Play, Games, Sport: The Literary Works of Lewis Carroll*, Carroll's imaginative universe is overwhelmingly composed of rule games.[7] Using Jean Piaget's *Play, Dreams and Imitation*, Blake suggests that Carroll's *Alice* books emphasize games, rather than the larger category of play, observing that Piaget described the third period of child development—from around ages seven to eleven—to be the time when a child is most interested in games with rules.[8] Alice conforms to Piaget's model; she is seven years old in *Wonderland* and seven-and-a-half in *Looking-Glass.*

According to Blake, the majority of games that Carroll and Alice enjoy feature competition.[9] Part of Alice's frustration with the Caucus Race, in which she and the other damp creatures engage after falling into the Pool of Tears, is that this game seems pointless to her. She and her wet companions may be hoping to dry off, but as Alice sees it, all they do is run around in circles for half an hour. When the Dodo announces, "The race is over!" the group inquires, "But who has won?" To Alice's confusion, the Dodo declares, "*Everybody* has won, and *all* must have prizes."[10] Alice is much happier with more competitive games that create winners and losers and happiest when she is a winner. Games—such as chess in *Looking-Glass,* where Alice begins as a lowly pawn but eventually becomes a powerful Queen—truly appeal to her.

Games in the *Alice* books provide Alice with a way to display her skill and mastery over other characters. As an upwardly ambitious and very socially aware Victorian child, Alice longs to mingle with royalty, whether or not they are pleasant. Alice is consistently competitive when she is judging if she is cleverer than her friend Mabel, matching wits with the Mad Hatter and the March Hare, and comparing schools with the Mock Turtle. Games allow Alice to feel superior to others. She is just the sort of girl who practices curtseying while slowly falling down a rabbit hole and reviews her geography lesson, in case she has an opportunity for "showing off her knowledge."[11]

In *Wonderland,* Alice is invited to play croquet with the Red Queen and members of her court. Croquet was a recent and popular game from France introduced to Victorian England around 1856. Lorina Hanna Liddell, the mother of Alice Liddell, the young girl for whom Carroll wrote *Wonderland,* believed that croquet was a good form of exercise for her three daughters. Carroll was occasionally invited to play croquet with Alice and her sisters. According to Morton Cohen in *Lewis Carroll: A Biography,* Carroll was a fan of croquet because it was as an outdoor game that allowed adults and children and men and women to play together.[12] Carroll often played croquet with members of his immediate family, and he took photographs of them, including himself, holding croquet mallets on the lawn of his family home. A croquet mallet sometimes appears as a prop in Carroll's photographs of children, including one he took of Alice and her sister Lorina Liddell in 1860.[13] Because it was a relatively new game, competing versions of croquet existed, each with its own set of rules. Carroll himself developed an overly complicated version of croquet which he published as *Croquet Castles: For Five Players* (1863). The game involved ten different colored balls, ten arches, and five flags. Around the same time, he composed the handwritten and self-illustrated manuscript of *Alice's Adventures Underground* that he gave as a Christmas gift to Alice Liddell and later revised and expanded into *Wonderland*. The complicated nature of Carroll's version of croquet prevented it from ever becoming very popular. The utter chaos of the croquet game played in *Wonderland* may be Carroll's response to the Liddell children's demand for a game with fewer rules. Carroll revised and republished the rules for *Croquet Castles* in 1866, a year after the publication of *Wonderland*.

The game of croquet that Alice plays in *Wonderland* shows the value of establishing and adhering to a set of rules in order to have a satisfying and enjoyable game. While Alice quickly accepts the Red Queen's invitation to play croquet, she soon realizes that she had "never seen such a curious croquet-ground in her life: it was all ridges and furrows: the croquet balls were live hedgehogs, and the mallets live flamingoes, and the soldiers had to double themselves up and stand on their hands and feet to makes the arches."[14] Alice discovers her chief difficulty with this "live version" of croquet is in handling her flamingo effectively. The game is actually an improvement over the version of croquet that Carroll has Alice play in *Underground* where ostriches, which weigh hundreds of pounds, were used as the mallets instead of the flamingoes. John Tenniel's illustration showing Alice struggling with her flamingo-mallet

which twists its head around to stare at her and makes her laugh is one of the more memorable images in *Wonderland*. At Alice's feet, the reader can see the hedgehog unrolling itself and quickly scurrying away in hopes of not becoming a croquet ball (figure 1).

When the Cheshire Cat appears on the scene to see how Alice is getting on with the Red Queen, Alice complains: "'I don't think they play at all fairly,' Alice began, in rather a complaining tone, 'and they all quarrel so dreadfully one ca'n't hear oneself speak—and they don't seem to have any rules in par-

Figure 1. Alice struggles with her flamingo as she plays croquet in John Tenniel's illustration from Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865).

ticular; at least, if there are, nobody attends to them—and you've no idea how confusing it is all the things being alive.'"[15]

Excessive rules, like the excessive morals the Duchess is so fond of—"Every thing's got a moral, if only you can find it"[16]—can make a game too complicated and no fun. A happy balance between too many rulers and too few rules needs to be established. The game of croquet in *Wonderland* shows Alice that the absence of rules can doom a game. The same lack of rules wrecks havoc with the exchange of riddles begun at the Mad Tea-Party. Much to Alice's dismay, the Mad Hatter poses riddles but later admits he hasn't the slightest idea of any answers. Alice complains, "'I think you might do something better with time,' she said, 'than wasting it in asking riddles that have no answers.'"[17] For Alice, games ought to have a set of guidelines that clearly establish the winner and the loser. As Kathleen Blake observes, "Alice is still eager enough to believe that the systems she encounters will be decipherable, rational."[18] Play needs to involve the right combination of imagination but also proscribed order. Carroll may be attempting to suggest that there needs to be a middle ground between the constant moralizing of the Duchess (a world with too many rules) and the randomness of the Queen's croquet game (a world with too few rules).

Elizabeth Sewell, in *The Field of Nonsense,* has argued that nonsense as practiced by Victorian writers such as Carroll and Edward Lear was not a product of chance, nor an endless succession of random events; rather they write about "a carefully limited world, controlled and directed by reason, a construction subject to its own laws."[19] For Sewell, the *Alice* books are literary games that follow a fixed set of rules, "with the aim of producing a given result despite the opposition of chance and/or opponents."[20] The nonsense worlds of *Wonderland* and *Looking-Glass* are elaborate games made of language where words are the objects of play that are used with great skill and precision. Sewell argues that rather than being chaotic, nonsense literature forms a surprisingly orderly world, just the sort of place where a mathematician such as Carroll would feel comfortable because it follows its own clearly prescribed set of rules. Rules are important in *Wonderland*.

While the *Alice* books may seem to be incoherent and dreamlike, they are far more carefully structured than they first appear. Alice quickly recognizes the landscape of *Looking-Glass* is "marked out like some large chess-board!"[21] Alice realizes that she has been placed in a game: "It's a great huge game of chess that's being played—all over the world—if this *is* the world, you know. Oh, what

fun it is!"[22] (figure 2). Chess is hardly a game of chance, but it is a complicated game with a dizzying set of rules and moves. In its complexity, chess resembles the elaborate rules of social conduct and behavior of Victorian England. Games like chess and Victorian-era etiquette are deadly serious and result in clear winners and losers. As a proper upper-class Victorian girl socialized to her place in society, Alice is already an accomplished player in the world of social hierarchies. The game of one-upmanship is constantly being played throughout the *Alice* books—such as in the mouse's history lesson, the Mad Hatter's riddles, the Caterpillar's questioning, and the Duchess's constant moralizing.

Although not as extreme as the Duchess, who finds a moral everywhere, Alice does manage to uncover a series of rules that allow her to navigate the curious worlds of *Wonderland* and *Looking-Glass*. To change her size in *Wonderland*, Alice learns she needs to eat or drink something, but only after looking carefully to see if it is "marked *'poison'* or not."[23] Alice discovers that to read "Jabberwocky" in *Looking-Glass*, she must hold it up to a mirror because the poem is printed in a looking-glass book.[24] To reach the garden of Live Flowers in *Looking-Glass,* Alice learns she needs to proceed in the opposite direction, rather than walk toward it.[25]

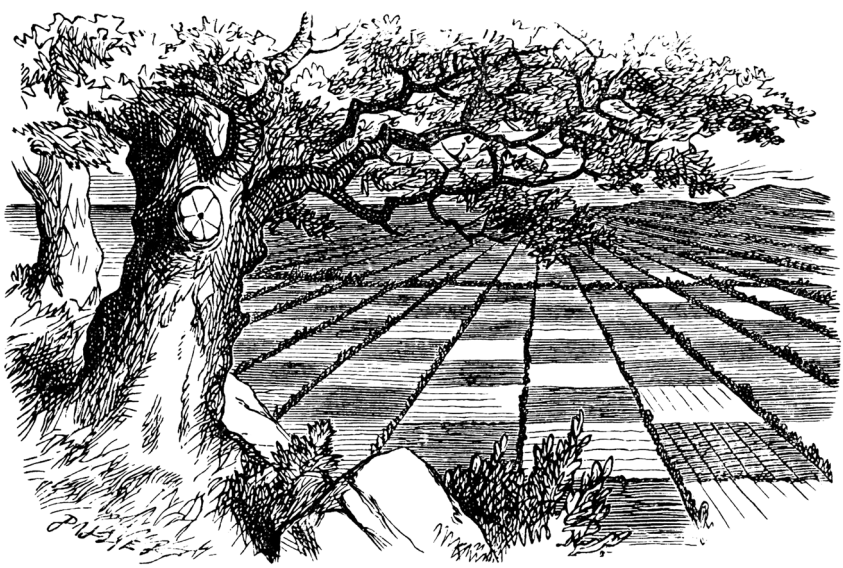

Figure 2. Alice recognizes that the landscape is marked out like a chessboard in John Tenniel's illustration from Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass* (1871).

But the most complicated game that Carroll and Alice play in the *Alice* books is the game of language itself. The master wordsmith is Humpty Dumpty who, in *Looking-Glass,* makes clear that language is power, and it belongs to those who can use it to their own advantage. Humpty Dumpty explains the meaning of *Jabberwocky* and, much to her surprise, Alice learns the word *glory* means "a nice knock-down argument." When Alice objects to Humpty Dumpty's definition of glory, he tells her that a word "means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less." For him, the only serious rule is "which is to be master," the words or the person who uses them.[26] While it is good to follow the rules, it is better to make them. Here Humpty Dumpty resembles the Red Queen in relation to the croquet game, where she seemingly makes up the rules as she plays. Carroll is no Humpty Dumpty, but with his frequent use of puns and parodies in the *Alice* books, he uses language to revise and invert meaning to his advantage. As the Mad Hatter warns Alice, language can be very slippery, and one needs to use it very carefully. Saying what you mean is not the same as meaning what you say. Language is revealed to be a game as complicated as chess. The verbal tests that the Red Queen and White Queen give to Alice in *Looking-Glass* show that language can be a powerful weapon in defeating one's opponent.

In the *Alice* books, Carroll, like Humpty Dumpty, shows himself to be skillful at reinterpreting poetry. Rather than the busy little bee of Isaac Watts's "Against Idleness and Mischief," which carefully gathers honey and stores it away for the future, Alice presents the example of the little crocodile gleefully enjoying his meal in much the same way Alice immediately enjoys the bottle marked "Drink Me." The same sort of literary modifications are made in Alice's recitation of Robert Southey's "The Old Man's Comforts and How He Gained Them." The original verse describes a man who gingerly disengaged himself from the world in order to live a quiet, but long life, while Father William is a jolly and robust figure who vigorously enjoys life.

At the conclusion of *Wonderland*, Carroll shifts Alice from the role of listener to the teller of her story: "how she would gather about her other little children, and make *their* eyes bright and eager with many a strange tale, perhaps, even with the dream of Wonderland long ago."[27] The storyteller controls the story. In the game of language, power always favors the skillful storyteller. The person who constructs the rules of a game wins the game, just as the Red Queen dominates the game of croquet. Lewis Carroll creates the literary charac-

ter Alice, who is more memorable than Alice Liddell, the person on whom she is based. Alice learns this valuable lesson in gamesmanship and power, which is why the final chapter of *Looking-Glass* is "Which Dreamed It?" Here Alice struggles with Kitty to determine who controls the dream. Alice insists "Now, Kitty, let's consider who it was that dreamed it all. This is a serious question."[28] Either Alice is part of the Red King's dream, or the Red King is part of her dream. But in the dream, as in the game of language, it is the storyteller who makes the rules and eventually wins the game. It is neither Alice's dream nor the Red King's dream, but Lewis Carroll's dream. It is Carroll who makes the rules in *Wonderland* and *Looking-Glass*. In the *Alice* books, Carroll reveals himself to be a playful author with exceptional skill of language who is, indeed, proficient in his game.

Notes

1. Florence Becker Lennon, *Victoria through the Looking-Glass: The Life of Lewis Carroll* (1945), 169.
2. Jean Gattégno, *Lewis Carroll: Fragments of a Looking-Glass*, trans. Rosemary Sheed (1976), 110.
3. These word games and games are reprinted in Martin Gardner's *The Universe in a Handkerchief: Lewis Carroll's Mathematical Recreations, Games, Puzzles, and Word Plays* (1996).
4. Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass*, ed. Hugh Haughton (1998), 14.
5. Ibid., 124.
6. Ibid., 14.
7. Kathleen Blake, *Play, Games, and Sport: The Literary Works of Lewis Carroll* (1974), 62.
8. Ibid., 61.
9. Ibid.
10. Carroll, *Wonderland/Looking-Glass,* 26.
11. Ibid., 11.
12. Morton N. Cohen, *Lewis Carroll: A Biography* (1995), 396.
13. Roger Taylor and Edward Wakeling, *Lewis Carroll, Photographer: The Princeton University Library Albums* (2002), 186. A(II):105.
14. Carroll, *Wonderland/Looking-Glass,* 73.
15. Ibid., 75.
16. Ibid., 78.

17. Ibid., 62–63.
18. Blake, *Play, Games, and Sport*, 127.
19. Elizabeth Sewell, *The Field of Nonsense* (1952), 5.
20. Ibid., 27.
21. Carroll, *Wonderland/Looking-Glass,* 141.
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid., 13.
24. Ibid., 131.
25. Ibid., 135.
26. Ibid., 186.
27. Ibid., 110.
28. Ibid., 239–40.