INTO NEVERLAND, A NOVEL: EXPLORING THE AMBIGUOUS PORTRAYAL OF
DEATH IN PETER AND WENDY AND INTO NEVERLAND, AN EXEGESIS

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Abstract

In this exegesis, I explore the ambiguous portrayal of death in J.M. Barrie’s 1911 novel, *Peter and Wendy*, through a close reading of the text, questioning if the boy who never grows old is unable to do so because death has already claimed him. Of course, in Barrie’s novel to be dead is “an awfully big adventure” (85) and is neither limited by the belief that death is automatically the end, nor by the notion that once dead one must remain that way. By examining the text’s many doubles, juxtapositions, and contradictions, my analysis will present how Barrie dismantles dualities, blurs perceived boundaries, and complicates binaries such as the distinction between life and death. Finally, having conducted my close reading of *Peter and Wendy*—published under the title *Peter Pan and Wendy* beginning in 1924 and later given the abbreviated title *Peter Pan*—I will discuss how the ambiguous portrayal of death in Barrie’s novel inspired my science fiction adaptation, *Into Neverland*. 
Lay Summary

J.M. Barrie is a nineteenth-century Scottish writer best remembered for creating the character of Peter Pan. Both the character of Peter Pan and the tale bearing his name remain very much a part of popular culture today, but not everyone is familiar with the story’s early versions. By examining Barrie’s 1911 novel, *Peter and Wendy*, I will explore some of the book’s darker themes, particularly the questionable distinction Barrie draws between life and death. Then, after presenting my close reading of *Peter and Wendy*, I will discuss how Barrie’s ambiguous treatment of death inspired the creation of my own novel, *Into Neverland*, which is a science fiction adaptation of the *Peter Pan* story.
Preface

This thesis is the original, unpublished, independent work of the author, Lauren Maguire. It is the academic portion of a hybrid creative/academic thesis. The creative portion consists of a young adult novel manuscript, *Into Neverland*, also by Lauren Maguire.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

The following exegesis constitutes the academic portion of a creative/academic thesis in which I first provide a close reading of Barrie’s 1911 novel then reflect upon how the novel inspired me to create my own science fiction adaptation of the Peter Pan story for young adults. Though it will not be possible to examine every aspect, symbol, and theme that I have doubled or inverted when adapting Barrie’s novel, I will explore what I perceive to be one of Peter and Wendy’s greatest strengths: the textual embodiment of contradiction and deliberate ambiguity.

While I believe most people in western culture have heard of Peter Pan and are familiar with the tale’s premise—Peter, a seemingly immortal child, takes the Darling children on a fantastical journey to Neverland where they have a series of imaginative adventures before returning home to Edwardian London—both the story and its titular character have a complicated history. In fact, there is significant debate about exactly when and how the immortal boy came into being, but most scholars seem to accept that Peter Pan first appeared to the public in J.M. Barrie’s “The Little White Bird, or Adventures in Kensington Gardens” in 1902 (Kavey xi). Peter Pan then premiered as a stage play in 1904. A few years later, Barrie published Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens in 1906, and the play’s novelization, Peter and Wendy, followed in 1911 (Kavey xi). Of course, countless other revisions, productions, and adaptations have also graced the page, stage, and screen in the years since, continuing long after Barrie’s death and into the present day.

Though compiling a detailed chronology is not my aim, I think it important to recognize the tradition of revision and adaptation associated with this narrative. As part of my literature review, I will briefly discuss a number of studies preoccupied with Peter Pan’s origins and cultural dissemination before focusing exclusively on Barrie’s 1911 novel. Unfortunately, since
the retitling of Barrie’s novel from *Peter and Wendy* to *Peter Pan* gives it the same name as Barrie’s play and a number of other adaptations, all references to *Peter Pan* throughout this exegesis should be taken to mean Barrie’s 1911 novel unless otherwise specified.

In the first chapter of my exegesis, I will discuss my interest in adapting *Peter and Wendy*, provide a brief overview of scholarship related to *Peter and Wendy*, and explain how I will be narrowing the focus of this critical examination to a close reading of Barrie’s 1911 novel. The second chapter will present my close reading of Barrie’s novel and the third chapter will summarize my own creative manuscript, *Into Neverland*, elaborating on some of the ways in which it compares to my close reading of Barrie’s work. Finally, the fourth chapter will present my conclusions about Barrie’s novel, *Peter and Wendy*, as it has inspired my creative project.

Ultimately, my review of Barrie’s work is likely to result in few concrete conclusions, but I have come to embrace that just like in *Peter and Wendy*, “meaning resides in the relation” between “perceived disparities” (Yeoman 118) such as the known and unknown. In fact, to pin down any single interpretation of *Peter and Wendy* as the only possible interpretation would threaten the magic that drew me to Barrie’s tale in the first place. As such, in writing this exegesis I find that a curious tension exists between my desire to understand, pinpoint, and produce answers for my readers, and my underlying hope that despite all my efforts, the figure and tale of Peter Pan will remain very much a mystery. In this way, my novel exists as a form of compromise. It represents my attempt at understanding without resolving, and presenting without explaining. Through it, I hope to reproduce Barrie’s ambiguity without destroying the carefully crafted web of interconnections constructed in *Peter and Wendy*. 
1.1 Motivation and Origins of Interest

I have long been fascinated by the philosophical question, “what is real?” and, as a writer and aspiring novelist, I am keenly interested in the adaptation of classic literature. As a result, I find myself particularly intrigued by the blurred distinctions between life and death in *Peter and Wendy*. As Donna R. White and C. Anita Tarr state, “Neverland is never just one idea, just as Peter Pan is never just one boy or girl, but betwixt and between” (viii), and this resistance to categorization allows for a great many interpretations and adaptations. Furthermore, “*Peter Pan* is not only a play for children but also one for adults, indulgently sentimental, joyful and tragic, about a dead boy who never dies” (White viii), and I am helplessly drawn to the text’s contradictions, multiplicities, and ambiguities, especially since these themes lend themselves well to a self-aware science fiction adaptation.

If I am honest with myself, my investigation into *Peter and Wendy* has become more obsession than passion, a need to reconcile the irreconcilable in both Barrie’s work and my own. Kirsten Stirling claims, “Peter’s arrested development, not to mention other complexities of his character, creates both an expectation and a challenge” (66), and I find myself compelled to answer this challenge. Something about *Peter Pan*, like Peter himself, inspires transformation and adaptation, yet simultaneously remains utterly fixed in the cultural imagination.

The story clearly has an enduring quality, one that many scholars have sought to explain, but “for such an iconic character, Peter Pan is remarkably difficult to pin down” (Stirling 7). Perhaps this is because, despite the vast amounts of scholarship available on *Peter Pan’s* various incarnations, there is relatively little scholarship dealing specifically with Barrie’s ambiguous treatment of death. As such, it is my hope that this personal exploration may inspire further study.
into the contradictions, complexities, and carefully constructed ambiguities surrounding questions of mortality in Peter and Wendy.

1.2 My Adaptation Framework and Creative Goals

When researching adaptation theory, most of the resources I encountered discussed the reinterpretation of novels as films. Linda Hutcheon’s publication, A Theory of Adaptation, also focuses heavily on book-to-film adaptations, but some of the broader theoretical topics Hutcheon explores apply to my creative process as well. For instance, Hutcheon’s definition of adaptation as “repetition without replication” (7) is clear and concise. She also states that “anyone who has ever experienced an adaptation (and who hasn’t) has a theory of adaptation, conscious or not” (Hutcheon xi), and this certainly describes my experience with adapting Peter and Wendy. I relied heavily on instinct when writing my novel and, to a significant extent, I intend to continue feeling my way through my creative revisions without pinning down a specific strategy for adaptation, but Hutcheon’s work has helped refine my understanding of the adaptation process. Unfortunately, Hutcheon’s definition of adaptation as “repetition without replication” (7), while being clear and concise, is also vague. In fact, Hutcheon discusses how the “complexity of what can be adapted” combined with the numerous “means of adaptation” (15) make the formulation of an exact definition extremely difficult.

Hutcheon never specifically addresses the distinction between adaptation and allusion, instead focusing on re-mediations, which she defines as “translations in the form of intersemiotic transpositions from one sign system (for example, words) to another (for example, images)” (16). Hutcheon does state, however, that, “an adaptation is a derivation that is not derivative—a work that is second without being secondary” (9). Ultimately, the more repetition present, the more
easily readers may recognize an adapted text as an adapted text, but variation is often necessary both for conserving meaning across medium shifts and/or for the creation of new meaning through deliberate plot, character, tone, and genre alteration. Fundamentally, for Hutcheon, it seems more important for a work to consider and promote itself as an adaptation than for its readers to recognize every specific element being repeated or revised. The question of what constitutes an adaptation remains more of a negotiation than exercise in definitive categorization. So long as a source story and derivative story are in conversation, one can make the case that the second work is an adaptation of the first. Specifically how much overlap is required can vary according to reader opinion. Essentially, the most important part of considering an adaptation to be an adaptation is recognizing “interplay between works” (Hutcheon 117).

I was always interested in how through “intertextual echoing” (Hutcheon 117) I could create an experience for my readers that would help them understand my fascination with Barrie’s novel, but reading Hutcheon’s work helped me to define that as a concrete goal. In addition, by choosing to work with established source material, Hutcheon describes how a writer can encourage the “constant oscillation between [the source text] and the new adaptation” (xv) and this is very much my aim with Into Neverland. By acknowledging my source material within my manuscript, I can involve my readers in the meaning-making process and foster an enjoyment of my adaptation as an adaptation (Hutcheon 4). As Hutcheon states, there is something pleasurable about “repetition with variation” that comes “from the comfort of ritual combined with the piquancy of surprise” (4). The source text remains unaltered, yet through placing it in conversation with an adaptation, readers may come to view it differently.

Much of Hutcheon’s book seems interested in denying that adaptations should be ranked based on their faithfulness to an original. Of course, my novel is neither a sequel nor a retelling.
My story exists primarily outside of the novel it is adapting. In a sense, the fictional video game at the heart of my tale is the adaptation of *Peter and Wendy* and the rest of my novel is commenting on that adaptation. As such, I attempt to remain true to my source material on a symbolic and thematic level, but I rely far more on variation than reiteration. In the end, my work is more a response to *Peter and Wendy* than a retelling. The more readers know about Barrie’s 1911 novel, the more references they will be able to spot in my work, but prior knowledge of Barrie’s story is not required for understanding.

Finally, Hutcheon makes the excellent point that successful adaptations help “stories evolve and mutate to fit new times and different places” (176). Through my close reading of *Peter and Wendy*, and my fascination with its ambiguous portrayal of death, I wanted to reimagine Barrie’s world as a science fiction action-adventure. By turning Neverland into a digital realm, I was able to retain a similar frame narrative structure while appealing to a modern audience. In addition, through my incorporation of advanced technologies—both real and imagined—I thought I might be able to reconcile some of the contradictions I noticed in Barrie’s work. Ultimately, this exegesis—while being an exploration of ambiguity in *Peter and Wendy*—is primarily a chronicling of my adaptation process and the research that informed my creative decisions.

1.3 A Brief Overview of Peter Pan in Scholarly Discourse

When researching J.M. Barrie, one inevitably encounters the work of Jacqueline Rose. Published in 1984, Rose’s book, *The Case of Peter Pan*, is a foundational text that has drawn attention both to Barrie’s personal life and to his creative endeavors, encouraging further academic
investigation for over thirty years. *The Case of Peter Pan* is one of the most cited scholarly sources concerned with *Peter Pan* and its various versions.

In her book, Rose provides a psychoanalytic reading of Barrie’s work in which she intends “to analyze Barrie” and “diagnose the author” (5), and she questions whether the story of *Peter Pan* should be classified as a work of children’s fiction while problematizing the very existence of children’s fiction as a literary category. In fact, Rose becomes preoccupied with how “children’s fiction rests on the idea that there is a child who is simply there to be addressed and that speaking to it might be simple” (1). She attempts to expose “the difficulties of [Peter Pan’s] history” in order to dismantle “the ongoing sexual and political mystification of the child” (11). To this end, she delves into a discussion of Rousseau and Alan Garner, and the notion of the child and childhood, before exploring how children can be sexualized, politicized, and commercialized.

Not all scholars agree with Rose’s interpretations, however, and it soon became clear to me that the intention of my critical inquiry—to explore, and potentially celebrate, the profound lack of fixity within Barrie’s novel, and specifically to examine the ambiguous treatment of death in Barrie’s 1911 novel—did not overlap with Rose’s goals. While I would agree that defining children’s literature is complicated and that the *Peter Pan* story is extremely difficult to classify, I have little interest in examining the nature of the child, children’s fiction as a literary category, or Barrie’s personal life, and I do not intend to conduct a specifically psychoanalytic reading. In fact, Barrie’s novel seems actively to resist comprehensive analysis according to any single theoretical framework and I view this as a positive trait.

After struggling to accept to Rose’s conclusions, and finding that her specific areas of inquiry generally did not align with mine, I sought out alternative texts that examined *Peter
Pan’s evolution. Eventually I discovered Stirling’s *Peter Pan’s Shadows in the Literary Imagination* (2012) as well as Kavey’s and Friedman’s *Second Star to the Right: Peter Pan in the Popular Imagination* (2009), both of which provide a far more fact-based—less interpretive—assessment of *Peter Pan’s* various incarnations than Rose’s 1984 work.

*Peter Pan’s Shadows in the Literary Imagination* is largely dedicated to discussing Peter Pan’s origins, the play’s near-constant transformation as a dramatic performance, the conventions of Pantomime Theater, and Barrie’s life in relation to the text. Stirling describes the difficulty in establishing a “definitive text of *Peter Pan*” when “it exists in so many versions” (3) and she argues that the mystery surrounding the Peter Pan character may be deliberate, thereby giving the character a mythic quality. Stirling also examines a number of sequels and prequels produced after Barrie’s death, exploring how such extensions of the *Peter Pan* story function in relation to Barrie’s creative works. Stirling is critical of Rose’s profound distaste for the ways in which Barrie’s narrator shifts perspective and Stirling proposes throughout her text that “it is precisely the uncertainty created by the narrative voice that allows Barrie to maintain something of the ambiguity and unpredictability of Peter Pan in performance” (11).

As opposed to being a monograph like Stirling’s text, *Second Star to the Right: Peter Pan in the Popular Imagination* is a collection of diverse essays linked by the idea that readers and scholars alike “admire Peter’s flexibility” (Kavey 3). In fact, Kavey’s work claims it is this flexibility “which has allowed him to dominate stage, page, screen, and merchandising…and has permitted his story and the characters with whom he plays to be appropriated by a multitude of identity groups” (Kavey 3). In addition to the book’s introduction, I drew primarily upon Kavey’s and Friedman’s individual studies within the collection. Kavey’s study, “The History and Epistemology of Peter Pan,” provides contextual information about the titular character’s
development and connection to “fairy traditions in British folk and literary culture” (75). To this end, much of Kavey’s essay focuses on Peter’s portrayal in *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens* where Peter Pan’s mythological influences are most explicit, but Kavey also draws parallels to *Peter and Wendy*. She criticizes the seemingly inconsistent nature of Neverland along with the divided existence of the immortal boy who appears forever trapped there. Friedman’s study, “Barrie’s Immortal Pirate in Fiction and Film,” is less relevant to my specific investigation, but through his analysis of Hook, Friedman proposes that Peter’s “stunted development” and “perpetual stasis” result from his “ahistorical” nature (215), and I drew on this idea when examining the relationship between memory and identity.

Like Stirling’s, Kavey’s, and Friedman’s work, Donna R. White’s and C. Anita Tarr’s collection, *J.M Barrie’s Peter Pan: In and Out of Time*, also discusses the pantomime tradition, the evolution of Peter Pan as both character and play, and the anxieties which can surround growing up. In reviewing White’s and Tarr’s collection, I drew inspiration from three studies in particular. First, Kayla McKinney Wiggins’ “More Darkly down the Left Arm: The Duplicity of Fairyland in the Plays of J.M. Barrie.” Second, Karen McGavock’s “The Riddle of His Being: An Exploration of Peter Pan’s Perpetually Altering Stage,” and third, Carrie Wasinger’s “Getting Peter’s Goat: Hybridity, Androgyny, and Terror in *Peter Pan*.” All three of these studies, however, dealt more with Barrie’s play than his novel and my engagement with each was limited.

Finally, I encountered Ann Yeoman’s book, *Now or Neverland: Peter Pan and the Myth of Eternal Youth*, which offers a detailed close reading of *Peter and Wendy* from a Jungian perspective. As discussed in relation to Rose, Barrie’s novel seems to resist cohesive analysis according to any single theoretical framework. My analysis of Barrie’s 1911 novel will be
neither psychoanalytic in nature nor specifically Jungian like Yeoman’s, but Yeoman’s investigation into the Peter Pan character’s mythological influences is both relevant to my understanding of the character and important for my conception of Neverland as a liminal, afterlife-style, space. Furthermore, Yeoman embraces Barrie’s ambiguity in her analysis of *Peter and Wendy* in a way that makes her work one of the most applicable. Few scholars have focused specifically on Barrie’s ambiguous treatment of death in his 1911 novel, but at least the style of Yeoman’s detailed close reading overlaps with my own.

Given the limits of this exegesis, I will not be able to engage with all of Yeoman’s points about Peter’s mythological ancestry, possible pathology, and global reception, but I will draw upon her detailed examination of *Peter and Wendy* to inform and support my own close reading. It is my hope that this exploration will inspire future study into how Barrie’s ambiguous portrayal of death may offer new insight into Peter Pan, the character, and his fantastical tale.

### 1.4 Limiting the Scope of This Exploration

Clearly there is a vast amount of scholarship available on Peter Pan as a character, as a dramatic production, as a novel, and, of course, as a pervasive figure in popular culture. As a result, I must restrict the focus of my exegesis to J.M. Barrie’s ambiguous portrayal of death in his 1911 novel and, in particular, to my own interpretation of the text as it ultimately informs my creative adaptation. Consequently, depictions of race, gender, sexuality, and politics, while worthy areas of study, are beyond the scope of this exegesis. Additionally, many scholars have drawn parallels between J.M. Barrie’s personal life and the content of his art in order to support their conclusions, but I will make no such biographical comparisons. I hold with Kavey who states that, “what people write cannot be taken as a direct reflection of their hidden desires. The tale is
not the author and the author is not the tale” (4). Finally, I do not intend to argue whether Barrie’s works are, or should be, considered children’s literature, and I am excluding from this examination all versions, inversions, productions, and adaptations of Peter Pan aside from Barrie’s 1911 novel. Only the text of Peter and Wendy—or a retitled version of the same narrative—will be discussed here and, instead of attempting to identify what has captured the literary imagination or the popular imagination, I simply wish to explore that which has captured my own imagination so completely: Peter Pan’s doubles, juxtapositions, hybrids, contradictory connections, and deliberate ambiguity. There is something fundamental, emotional, and seemingly inescapable about the Peter Pan story that taunts scholars and casual readers alike. As stated by White and Tarr, perhaps “we cannot completely comprehend Peter Pan, but we always remember it” (viii) and, from a personal perspective, I am compelled to understand why.
Chapter 2: Close Reading of Barrie’s *Peter and Wendy*

*Peter and Wendy* is a text with deep underlying tensions concealed beneath superficial simplicity. As stated previously, there are far more interconnected characters, symbols, plot points, and themes in *Peter and Wendy* than I will be able to explore in this exegesis. As a result, I will be focusing on aspects that I believe both contribute to Barrie’s ambiguous portrayal of death in his 1911 novel and which are particularly well suited to science fiction adaptation. My close reading will be structured in a cumulative manner—with each section adding another layer of context to support the next—in an attempt to illustrate the way in which *Peter and Wendy* assembles individually inconclusive, and frequently contradictory, elements to create a holistic and synergistic story. In the following chapter, I will mirror the structural format of this one—utilizing the same section headings and exploring the same themes—to present how my own creative work, *Into Neverland*, uses similar layers and elements, but adapts them to fit within a science fiction novel.

2.1 Prevalence of Death and Resurrection

At first glance, many of Barrie’s characters read as flat, lacking personality and agency, but the closer one looks, the more complicated it becomes to pin down the precise nature of Hook, Pan, the world they inhabit, and the figures created to inhabit it with them. Yeoman argues that the “illusory nature of Barrie’s hero may also lie in his problematic relation to matter: he both desires and refuses to be caught and brought into life; he both craves and resists sacrifice and transformation” (68) and this illusory nature confounds clear character definition. Nowhere perhaps is this ambiguity more evident than when discussing Barrie’s ambiguous portrayal of death and resurrection.
Peter Pan’s very name links him with “super and preternatural beings such as gods and fairies” (Kavey 76) including “Bacchus/Dionysus, Icarus, Paheton, Narcissus and Adonis, as well as to Mercury/Hermes…and, of course, to the great goat-god Pan” (Yeoman 15). The possibility of him acting as shepherd for dead or dying children is clear. Only a few pages into the novel, Barrie writes, “there were odd stories about [Peter Pan], as that when children died he went part of the way with them, so that they should not be frightened” (8) and this line serves to frame every other phrase, implication, and event to follow. Allusions to death and dying are also quite frequent. Barrie’s narrator often describes violent acts and his characters suggest violent activities. For example, while listing what could appear on a map of a child’s mind, Barrie says, “there is also first day at school, religion, fathers, the round pond, needle-work, murders, hangings, verbs that take the dative…” and the list goes on with “murders” and “hangings” (7) simply dropped in the middle as though all are of equal significance.

Peter seldom appears any more concerned about death than the book’s narrator does. When Wendy and her brothers grow sleepy and “pop off” during their flight to Neverland, “the awful thing was that Peter thought this funny” (Barrie 35). The children could crash to the ocean and die, but Peter would always wait before saving them because “it was his cleverness that interested him and not the saving of human life” (Barrie 35). Of course, this sort of behavior conflicts with the notion that he is guiding the children so they “should not be frightened” (Barrie 8) because Wendy finds Peter’s behavior quite frightening. Peter’s actions may align with the aforementioned mission of shepherding children, but his emotions, motives, and comprehension of cause and effect—a child falls, a child dies, and that us the end of the child—are questionable. Since he may not experience the same clear distinction between life and death as the children he shepherds, he fails to recognize what the difference may mean to those in his company.
Therefore, an assessment of how well he serves as a guide may depend upon one’s point of view. The contradiction cannot be easily resolved.

Upon reaching Neverland, Peter’s first adventure-oriented proposal is that they go down to the “pampas just beneath [them]” (Barrie 41) and slay a sleeping pirate. When the children decide against killing, the narrator steps in, insisting, “let us now kill a pirate” (Barrie 48). Hook then performs the bloody deed to demonstrate his “method” for the novel’s audience (Barrie 48). Occasionally, Barrie even pairs the prospect of death with excitement. In Peter’s company, Wendy “felt at once that she was in the presence of a tragedy” (Barrie 22) and yet after Peter heads off to duel Hook and vows, “Hook or me this time,” Peter is described as “frightfully happy” (Barrie 119). It becomes difficult to reconcile the two disparate descriptions and to determine the precise nature of the tragedy that Wendy initially perceives. Clearly, Pan does not perceive himself to be a tragedy. Either that or he refuses to dwell on his own tragic nature and quickly moves on, forgetting whatever he may have uncovered about himself.

There is, however, one very notable moment atop Marooner’s Rock when Pan faces the prospect of his own demise and grows serious. He pauses for an instant in which “a tremor ran through him, like a shudder passing over the sea” (Barrie 85) and, ironically, in this shuddering moment there is a brief sense of calm. It is, however, important to note that there is little deep or lasting impact. The shudder passes over, not through, and perhaps the real tragedy of Pan’s existence is not so much death—since he could be dead already—as lack of depth and lasting impact. In fact, before the reader has a chance to absorb the potential implications of this critical scene where Peter Pan supposedly exists on the cusp of oblivion, Peter is described as “standing erect on the rock again, with that smile on his face and a drum beating within him” (Barrie 85). He utters one of the novel’s most famous lines, “to die will be an awfully big adventure” (Barrie
yet one cannot help remembering how the narrator once warned Tootles and the reader that they should “take care lest an adventure is now offered” because it could “plunge [them] in deepest woe” (Barrie 46). Thus, the concept of death presents simultaneously as a source of anxiety and excitement, and the prospect of having an adventure is positioned as both invigorating and potentially problematic. Peter himself is a shepherd figure, a guardian who is also a source of anxiety and unease for the children he leads and supposedly protects.

Superficially, Hook and Pan may appear to represent fear and youthful elation respectively. Awareness of death tortures Hook’s character and he spends much of his life dreading the day when “the clock will run down” (Barrie 52) and he will fall into the jaws of the crocodile. Yet he ultimately meets his demise with a small measure of satisfaction at having goaded Pan into showing bad form. Comparatively, throughout most of Barrie’s novel Pan shows little regard for safety—his own and that of others—despite being looked to as a hero and a leader. Only when facing the prospect of his demise does Peter become conflicted, and again, only briefly. Perhaps, as Barrie’s narrator states, “in the two minutes before you go to sleep it becomes very nearly real” (8). Still, “nearly real,” is a qualified statement. Nearly real and real are neither equivalent nor clearly defined. When faced with danger and darkness, “thus sharply did the terrified three learn the difference between an island of make-believe and the same island come true” (Barrie 43), but what does it mean to consider the island as real and true?

Perhaps Peter’s complicated response to death stems from his connection to a world in which death frequently presents as impermanent. The terror death can inspire in mortal beings is not one that he can comprehend. Both Wendy and Tinker Bell flirt with oblivion, but are conveniently saved, either by a questionable coincidence or, supposedly, by audience intervention. Upon arriving in Neverland, Tootles shoots Wendy with an arrow and she survives
because of an acorn cap Peter gave her. The reader must suspend disbelief enough to accept this dubious account. Meanwhile, Barrie’s narrator undermines the reader’s potential acceptance by encouraging suspicion and doubt. Barrie explains that, “a terrible silence fell upon the wood. If Wendy’s heart had been beating they would all have heard it” (55), but they hear nothing. Pan must remove the arrow “from her heart” (Barrie 57) before it is revealed never to have pierced her chest at all. Later, when Tinker Bell is dying, observers must participate in her salvation and Barrie explicitly references the “fourth wall” (118) before metaphorically breaking through.

Finally, the eventual return home represents another form of resurrection for the Darling children collectively. Depending on how one understands Neverland, Wendy and her brothers supposedly return to their parents and to reality after having left the mortal realm for an uncertain duration. Of course, this reading has its own inconsistencies. For example, the Lost Boys re-emerge from Neverland to live with Wendy and her brothers, thereby proving that the journey to Neverland is not merely a flight of imagination or a journey of soul because physical bodies change location as well. Perhaps the children never fully return from Neverland at all. It becomes tempting to read the flight home as a transition from one layer of imagined space—one form of Neverland—to another layer of imagined space—a false home—which is merely drawn from the children’s expectation of the world they once knew.

2.2 Dismantling Doubles and the Riddle of Peter Pan

Doubles abound in Barrie’s novel. Initially, this may not seem particularly connected to the depictions of death in Peter and Wendy, ambiguous or otherwise, but through examining Barrie’s characters, one begins to see how superficially distinct figures become interconnected and perceived binaries—such as the distinction between life and death—seem to dissolve. Barrie has
a tendency to construct and collapse oppositional figures and forces. This is of particular interest because it resonates thematically with the novel’s treatment of life and death as seemingly oppositional, but possibly overlapping, states.

When reading Peter and Wendy, most people perceive, at least superficially, how Pan and Hook are doubles. Similarly, Tinker Bell and Wendy are doubles. Wendy, however, also functions as a double to Peter, vying with him for the role of protagonist. Readers also tend to compare Wendy with Mrs. Darling because both characters occupy the role of mother. Hook and Peter both double Mr. Darling. Tinker Bell mirrors Smee and, on a larger scale, Hook’s pirate crew reflects Pan’s gang of Lost Boys, encouraging readers to reflect on their underlying similarities. Even the world of Neverland pairs off against Edwardian London and, by extension, corporeal existence and conceptual existence present, at least symbolically, as overlapping whilst being held in perpetual conflict.

Each of the previously listed pairings deserves its own in-depth exploration and more exist than are mentioned here. In this case, though, the point is not so much to analyze every potential character parallel, as it is to realize how nearly every symbol, character, and structural aspect of Peter and Wendy is interconnected. Instead of a linear plot with clear compartmentalized characters and themes, Barrie’s novel exists more as a shifting web of interdependent relationships. Even the title, Peter Pan, holds Christian and Pagan beliefs in tension, and even the novel’s original title, Peter and Wendy, encouraged readers to understand the two possible heroes in relation to one another. Stirling proposes that “one problem with ending the play may be the competition between Wendy and Peter for the role of hero which is inscribed in the [initial] title of the 1911 novel” (113), but there is a balance to their subtle contest, just as
there is between Peter and Hook. Paradoxically, Barrie’s work often seems held together by a balance of tensions that, individually, may threaten to tear it apart.

Through examining dualities in *Peter and Wendy*, one begins to notice a pattern of resistance. Characters seem designed to confound categorization rather than exist as discrete entities. They all function more as interconnected parts of a web. They are shades of the same and awareness of self often seems determined by others. In fact, “the collapse of narrative voices, the hybridity of subject positions, and even indeterminacy itself” is a large part of what “makes Peter a compelling hero” (Wasinger 219) or villain, or spectre-like figure beyond simple identification. Just as seemingly opposite characters overlap with one another, so might oppositional states such as life and death.

Peter Pan does not merely exist as a double for other characters, though; he reads as a form of embodied duality. He is simultaneously Christian and pagan, flesh and fiction, stasis and change, a symbol of life and a symbol of death. Barrie’s coy narrator challenges readers with the “riddle of [Peter’s] existence” (115), yet the text and its characters resist nearly all forms of consistent definition. By describing Peter as a riddle, the narrator makes uncovering his identity into a game. Unfortunately, at the climax when one might expect to have that riddle resolved, Barrie’s narrator dismisses the puzzle. Hook demands to know who and what Pan is. Peter replies with “nonsense,” explaining that he is “youth” and “joy” (Barrie 136). He is “a little bird that has broken out of the egg,” thereby proving “to the unhappy Hook that [he] did not know in the least who or what he was, which [was] the very pinnacle of good form” (Barrie 136). As such, it becomes clear that Peter Pan’s identity will remain a mystery even to himself. There is no answer to the riddle except what readers interpret for themselves. However, Peter Pan’s introduction alongside the concept of transformation can help explain why Peter is so difficult to
understand. He constantly changes. Understanding him in one moment does not guarantee understanding in the next. In addition, pairing Peter with transformation implies that transformation may be a way of avoiding, or possibly conceptualizing, death.

After Peter jumps out of the nursery window, Mrs. Darling races outside, thinking she will find his body on the ground, but he is not there and, “in the black night she could see nothing but what she thought was a shooting star” (Barrie 11). The description of events hints that Peter has become the shooting star and yet, while beautiful, “[stars] may not take an active part in anything, they must just look on for ever” (Barrie 19). Peter plays a catalytic role in the novel to be sure; he is one of the few characters with at least the illusion of agency, but it remains unclear what lasting effect he will have on any of the other characters. It is, perhaps, particularly interesting how Barrie describes the stars in much the same manner as a fond memory or a heaven-locked soul. Furthermore, much of what Peter claims to have done may or may not have transpired outside of his own imagination since “to [Peter] make-believe and true were exactly the same thing” (Barrie 59).

There is little if any way for readers to know what is real and true. At one point, Peter effectively becomes the crocodile—a figure representing time, death, and inevitability—while on his way to confront the pirates. Apparently, “he ticked superbly” (Barrie 127). In fact, he ticked so well, that “the crocodile was among those who heard the sound, and it followed him, though whether with the purpose of regaining what it had lost, or merely as a friend under the belief that it was again ticking itself, will never be certainly known” (Barrie 127). Neither figure seems sure where each of them ends and the other begins. Later, in the wake of Hook’s death, Peter also usurps his foe’s identity for a while and “the doubling of Peter and Hook which is made explicit at several moments throughout the story…collapses into itself…Peter no longer mirrors Hook,
he becomes Hook” (Stirling 119). Pan is difficult to categorize because “he straddles the worlds from which those categories derive their meaning, pressing hardest on the divide between the real and the imagined” (Kavey 102). By the end of the novel, transformation seems more like a way of conceptualizing death or a trick death may play on those it has claimed than a strategy for avoiding destruction. To be dead is not the end of all existence. To be dead is the end of corporeal existence. The dead may simply exist differently, transforming at will and without the same physical limitation.

2.3 Hybridity and Participant-Determined Reality

Not only do Barrie’s characters mirror one another—dismantling perceived dualities—and transform into one another—blurring the boundaries of individual identity—but many are hybrids. Hook is part man, part prosthetic. The mermaids are part woman, part fish. The crocodile is part creature, part clock, and Peter, perhaps the most complicated figure of all, is part boy, part bird, part mortal, part god, part living, part dead, part possible, part impossible, part wish-fulfillment, part nightmare, and part tiny terror—forever trapped between definitive states. Perhaps his limited memory results from the fact he is memory, like an echo of a being that never quite was, another form of independent shadow. After all, there is precedent within the text. Shadows, even outside the imaginative realm of Neverland, prove capable of detaching from their source. As such, hybrids in Peter and Wendy are not simply about the fusing of physical characteristics into a singular being. Hybrids in Peter and Wendy are about blending physical reality with fictional existence.

Barrie’s narrator, on Mrs. Darling’s behalf, states how “in her dream [Peter Pan] had rent the film that obscures the Neverland, and she saw Wendy and John and Michael peeping through
the gap” (10), but the text leaves it ambiguous as to which way they are peeping. Not only could Peter be read as a dead child, or child figure representing death, but some, if not all the other children may be dead as well or close to it. Narrative flashbacks make it difficult to keep track of time—obscuring causal relationships—and, when Mr. and Mrs. Darling are speaking about the loss of their children, the children could be dead as easily as missing (Barrie 15). Frequent references to medicine and the need for medicine to “make [people] well” (Barrie 15) as opposed to keeping people well instill the prospect of serious illness in the readers’ minds. Furthermore, the narrator directly addresses readers, claiming that, “you ordinary children can never hear [the fairy language]” (Barrie 21) thereby separating the presumed child-readers from the children of Barrie’s novel. Thus, Barrie prompts readers to question the nature of their own existence and the assumptions they have made about what it could mean to be dead.

Neverland is described as a “place that all children share,” and yet “it also operates as Peter’s realm, where his presence determines the action” (Kavey 94). The island reawakens when it senses Peter’s return and frequently bends to his will throughout the narrative. It is interesting to track how Peter functions as both a creator, and creation, of Neverland. He is effectively part of the system he helps generate rather than an autonomous self and this near-constant negotiation with the environment results in his illusory control over his imaginary world. Peter is described as having named “the birds of the island” and, by giving them “such strange names” he has determined their nature, making them “very wild and difficult of approach” (Barrie 119). Yeoman describes Peter Pan as being “like Adam in the Garden of Eden” which “may lead us to understand the island as a childhood paradise, or purgatory, but Neverland as a Land of the Dead and Peter Pan as a guide of souls…seem to link Neverland more closely to Celtic lore about the afterlife than Christian belief” (107). Wiggins presents a
similar view, discussing how the Celtic Otherworld “is an alternate reality, a realm of the dead that can be entered by the living at various times and in various ways” (84).

As claimed by Kavey, “the Neverland is literally Peter’s creation, responding to his presence and representing his desires and imagined adventure…but it does not belong only to him” (102-103). The arrival of Wendy and her brothers causes a shift through which they also seem more and more capable—albeit to a lesser extent than Peter—of influencing the structure of Neverland and the events that take place there. The world goes to extraordinary lengths to preserve Peter. The Never bird and Tinker Bell are both willing to make extraordinary sacrifices for him. Hook’s plan to kill the Lost Boys with “rich damp cake” (Barrie 53) reads as strangely childish, and even the narrator occasionally speaks in a voice akin to Peter’s as though Peter dictates the reality of Neverland as well as the novel’s frame narrative, but Peter’s control seems neither entirely intentional nor absolute. Wendy’s increasing influence over the Lost Boys instills in them a desire to return with her to London, which causes conflict with Peter.

Belief largely determines the reality of Neverland. Sometimes the reader is encouraged to dismiss that belief as merely make-believe, but “every time a child says, ‘I don’t believe in fairies,’ there is a fairy somewhere that falls down dead” (Barrie 25). As Kavey states, “abdicating faith has painfully real consequences for those in Neverland, while at the same time, a willingness to believe has equally real, and vivifying, effects” (99). In Neverland, “you never exactly knew whether there would be a real meal or just a make-believe, it all depended upon Peter’s whim” (Barrie 67), but the treatment of meals in Peter Pan is important when examining who holds sway in Neverland and who does not. Meals are often pretend “and apparently were always pretend before [Wendy’s] arrival” which implies Wendy actually “introduces the idea of food to Neverland” (Wiggins 88). Her presence has an effect on the world. Furthermore,
somehow she seems to share what she knows with the collective through her connection to the world and the other figures in it. For example, when Peter is about to kill Tootles for shooting her, Wendy stays Peter’s hand by raising hers despite the fact that Peter is initially unaware that she has moved (Barrie 57). By the end, even Peter questions the difference between make-believe and “true” (Barrie 94). His make-believe no longer comes into being automatically, especially if it conflicts with the beliefs of others, and yet the difference between imagination and reality remains unclear. By this point, even the reader may find it difficult to distinguish between the two.

2.4 Memory, Identity, and Blurring the Distinction between Life and Death

If there is little distinction between imagination and reality, and one can pass in and out of a liminal space such as Neverland, one could easily shift between life and death and simply fail to perceive—or remember—the difference. Those who visit Peter Pan’s Neverland have an effect and those who leave it are missed, but only for a short while, since memory—what essentially constructs personal identity—is presented as exceedingly fickle. In this regard, Peter is perhaps the most forgetful character of all, existing as a symbol of timelessness while continually losing his identity, much like he loses his shadow. In fact, Peter’s shadow is a symbol of memory, something Pan loses and, from a different perspective, what remains of him for those he leaves behind when he departs. The way the narrator describes Mrs. Darling’s treatment of Peter’s severed shadow is particularly interesting. Metaphorically, it echoes how one might handle grief. Nana hangs it out for all to see, but “Mrs. Darling could not leave it [that way]” since it “lowered the whole tone of the house” and, in the end, “she decided to roll the shadow up and put it away carefully in a drawer” (Barrie 11-12).
Later, however, the children describe their shadows as potentially frightening (Barrie 95). It remains unclear precisely why, but the shadows—and the tortures of memory—are frequently connected with adulthood whereas death and forgetting seem to dance hand in hand with youth. The narrator comments on Peter’s belief that “he and his shadow, when brought near each other, would join like drops of water” (Barrie 21), but they do not. This resonates with how people—especially Peter—can change from moment to moment. As a result, the effect of that person has on others and the perception of that person by others may not match up with the person themselves, especially after time has passed.

Barrie’s narrator describes children as having “the strangest adventures without being troubled by them. For instance, they may remember to mention, a week after the event happened, that when they were in the wood they met their dead father and had a game with him” (8). In this way, the supposed barrier between life and death reads as permeable if, in fact, there is any distinction at all. Rather than present existence and non-existence as two separate states, being is shown as more of a spectrum. With Pan, “you could never be absolutely certain whether he had had an adventure or not. He might have forgotten it so completely that he said nothing about it; and then when you went out you found the body; and, on the other hand, he might say a great deal about it, and yet you could not find the body” (Barrie 69). At some point, however, it simply ceases to matter. Not even time can be counted upon in Peter and Wendy and establishing an order of events is further complicated by the novel’s non-linear structure. Barrie’s narrator jumps in and out of flashbacks as opposed to operating within a single perspective or strict chronological order. It becomes difficult, if not impossible, to determine with any degree of certainty how much time has passed in Neverland over the course of the novel. Periodically Wendy seems disturbed by the lack of certitude and contemplates how “not so long ago they had
thought themselves fine fellows for being able to fly round a room” (Barrie 34) and yet cannot pinpoint exactly how long ago the flight occurred. Unfortunately, she tends to forget her worry before acting upon it or producing any concrete answers. One of the most “complicated thing[s] about children’s Neverlands is their variability and nonlinear motion” (Kavey 95).

Time does seem to pass since “sometimes it was dark and sometimes light” (Barrie 34), but without being able to rely on their memories, and existing in a state where pretending determines much of reality, progression becomes a function of perception for the children. Even though “it is quite impossible to say how time does wear on in the Neverland where it is calculated by moons and suns, and there are ever so many more of them than on the mainland” (Barrie 68), one can sometimes get a rough idea by finding the crocodile and staying “near him till the clock struck” (Barrie 91). According to Wiggins, “In both Fairyland and the Otherworld, time moves at a different rate, and even space operates according to different laws” (85) and this is especially evident during the final battle against Hook. Barrie’s narrator encourages readers to “time what happened by [their] watch” (128) while Slighty counts off seconds at a much slower pace than readers are likely to match. The difference, however, means little to him since, by that point, the crocodile has ceased to tick and even the illusion of regularity no longer exists.

Peter embodies the paradox of stasis resulting from continual change, essentially existing as a static character because he is constantly changing, not in spite of his repeated alteration. He perpetually loses his memory and identity, while existing as a fixed point that links multiple worlds and layers of reality. He is both fixed and unfixable. Essentially, he “can never grow up, never grow older, never be anything other than what he is at this point in his stunted development…Though he moves and talks and acts, Peter Pan remains perpetually frozen in an endless time warp of games and adventures” (Friedman 215). Perhaps everything in Peter and
Wendy is imaginary—the simplicity of such a conclusion makes it tempting—but “it all seemed so natural to Wendy that you could not dismiss it by saying she had been dreaming” (Barrie 9). At every turn, and through every turn of phrase, the reader seems to be denied resolution and yet perhaps this complexity of contradiction “invites the reader into a fantasy of his/her own indeterminacy” and allows one to appreciate how it is “the story’s thematic concern with hybridity that demonstrates just how active indeterminacy can become” (Wasinger 223).

In the end, what one finds in Peter and Wendy is not simply an immortal boy, but an ageless system of interconnected figures, themes, and philosophies held in perpetual conflict without the isolated existence of any one part. I would argue that the success of Barrie’s novel is actually found in the construction of this synergistic whole. Death, in many ways is presented as a paradoxical immortality and contradictions abound as “the novel presents a collage of styles and genres” (Yeoman 81). Instead of being a weakness, however, Barrie somehow achieves a balance that makes the myriad of inconsistencies in his novel a strength. Yes, “[Barrie] contradicts later what he, or the narrative, affirms earlier, changes his authorial mind in mid-paragraph, and then writes as though he, with the reader, is discovering the narrative as he proceeds” (Yeoman 81), but the details are essentially irrelevant. Peter Pan is not about knowing; it is not about certainty; it is a lesson in embracing ambiguity.

2.5 Peter and Wendy Conclusions

Transformation is not merely a theme within the story’s multiple versions, but a reality of dramatic performance and the redrafting process. In fact, Barrie’s narrator states that “slaves to a fixed idea” are “stupid beast[s]” (127) and so perhaps labeling any particular version as the original or identifying any singular ending as absolute is a foolish endeavor serving only to limit
the magic of pure potential. When attempting to interpret the text, one must accept contradiction since “Peter resists most of the forms of closure offered to him” (Stirling 114). As such, his story quickly becomes a cyclical one, ending essentially where it began except ready to begin again with Wendy’s daughter Jane flying off to Neverland instead of Wendy herself.

Readers are encouraged to seek a sense of resolution while Barrie’s characters resist consistent categorization. As stated by Stirling, “any loss of Peter’s intangibility and shifting nature in the novel is compensated by an extra level of complexity and ambiguity” (11). Some scholars such as Jacqueline Rose seem to find this unrelenting lack of fixity disturbing, but it fascinates me that a text built on contradiction can still maintain a sense of cohesion. Tensions not only exist within Peter and Wendy, but are deliberately perpetuated, complicating the reader’s attempts to distinguish between perceived binaries such as what is known and unknown, imagination and reality, and, ultimately, between life and death. This dismantling of difference is “symptomatic of Barrie’s decision to heterogenize rather than homogenize the text, or in other words, to retain the diversity of elements and hold them in tension rather than assimilate them by reducing” (McGavock 203-204).

Today, more than a hundred years after its conception, Peter and Wendy is still a timely tale of a dead boy’s immortality without any sign of fading from the world’s collective imagination. Peter’s participant-determined Neverland is an ever-evolving fantasy realm designed to replace one adventure with another, much like the successive productions and adaptations of Peter’s meta-fictive narrative. Naturally, there can be neither beginning nor end when time has been swallowed by a crocodile and imagination rules over an incorporeal existence, but that is part of the story’s enduring charm. The novel itself presents an irresistible and perpetual challenge that both needs to be solved while remaining impossible to resolve.
Ambiguity is perhaps the only constant and, at least in my opinion, represents the book’s most compelling feature. In essence, when memory is fallible, reality is indefinable, and death proves impermanent, who can say if Peter Pan is dead or what the experience of being dead might be? What does seem clear is the depth of imaginative complexity beneath a superficially static title character. Ultimately, *Peter and Wendy* presents an unending tale of revisionist life situated within a layered realm of carefully crafted tension and textual resistance. Barrie’s deliberately ambiguous treatment of death is neither a design flaw nor a narrative accident, but a way of balancing contradictions and embracing uncertainty.

It is in fact the uncertainty in Barrie’s novel that encourages adaptation. The story’s flexibility allows for multiple interpretations, all of which can remain recognizable despite superficial shifts in genre, plot, perspective, and tone. A mention of Hook, Peter Pan, or Wendy, and an acknowledgement of Barrie’s 1911 novel as inspiration, is usually sufficient to place a newly formed work in conversation with its source. With regard to my creative project, this underlying uncertainty specifically captured my imagination and challenged me to adapt Barrie’s novel—changing its characters, plot, and narrative voice—while maintaining the ambiguity that initially drew me in. With this goal in mind, I found the themes in *Peter and Wendy*—a framed fantasy novel—particularly compatible with science fiction, another genre comfortable delving into potentially controversial philosophical distinctions such as between real and virtual, human and non-human, being and non-being. J.M. Barrie may not have written *Peter and Wendy* with simulations, digital environments, cyborg bodies, and artificial intelligences in mind, but contemporary science fiction asks many of the same big questions and explores similar tensions. For a modern audience, one raised on technology, reading Neverland as a virtual environment may render it more relatable, even eventually possible, than a purely imagined space.
Chapter 3: My Creative Project

My creative process has been about exploring and celebrating ambiguity, then creating a new adaptation that embraces multiple possible interpretations. It would defeat the purpose of my project to outline precisely what I mean to do with each character, symbol, and plot point. Additionally, given the limits of this exegesis, I cannot examine every connection between my adaptation and Barrie’s work. There are simply too many links and, even if I had the space, I would not wish to prescribe a specific meaning or reading of my novel as “correct.” I hesitate to present a definitive analysis when the goal of my work is to allow readers the freedom to interpret my story’s meaning on their own. As previously stated, I wish to encourage an “oscillation” (Hutcheon xv) between Barrie’s novel and my own, and my novel is an attempt at balancing complex—potentially contradictory elements—without prescribing a specific framework for reader understanding. As a result, this chapter will begin with a brief summary of my project before it explores the manner in which I have reinterpreted the themes examined during my close reading of Peter and Wendy.

3.1 Summary of Into Neverland

*Into Neverland* is a metafictive science fiction novel for young adults in which Allison Harris is lured into the digital gaming world of *Neverland Shores* by a mysterious, smooth-talking Pan figure. After discovering Pan has no intention of helping her win the game and that instead he intends to hold her hostage, Allison must align herself with James, another of Pan’s victims. Ultimately, she and James, the game’s original designer, must work together in order to escape Pan’s twisted virtual kingdom before they become trapped inside forever, forced into the roles of Wendy and Hook respectively.
3.2 Prevalence of Death and Resurrection

Though my decision to structure my novel around a video game adaptation of *Peter and Wendy* came about independently, the choice was reinforced by Cathlena Martin’s and Laurie Taylor’s essay, “Playing in Neverland: Peter Pan Video Game Revisions,” in which they describe how “Peter Pan provides structural and character archetypes that are often used in video games” (175). The modular structure of *Peter and Wendy* is particularly well suited for adaptation because “the [Peter Pan] story can be told with or without various story elements, such as the Lost Boys, the Indians, the Mermaids, Nana as the nurse, and so on” (Martin 181). As such, I was able to use Barrie’s ambiguous portrayal of death as a guiding theme for my novel while eliminating extraneous and/or offensive plotlines that did not fit with my story’s thematic core.

Both my frame narrative and the *Peter and Wendy*-inspired video game within it draw inspiration from Barrie’s novel and both involve dealing with death. Video games have a long history of violent plotlines and the game Allison becomes obsessed with in my novel is certainly no exception. At first, killing non-player characters is simply part of the campaign and holds little significance. Respawnning is an established part of most first-person shooter games and serves as a form of reincarnation to mirror Barrie’s frequent character resurrections. However, once my main character exists wholly inside the game—having downloaded her consciousness into the game’s online environment—each act of violence has more significance than in Barrie’s novel. I am writing from a closer, third-person view and for a teen audience. As such, I opted for a darker tone, developing an ever-present threat of violence on multiple narrative levels. At the same time, however, the distinctions between real and virtual, life and death, become less clear.
3.3 Dismantling Doubles and the Riddle of Peter Pan

With regard to my constructing of individual characters, I wanted to include a myriad of potential doublings just as I found in Barrie’s 1911 text. By doing so, I sought to break down perceived binaries by hiding character similarities beneath superficial differences. Distinctions between my book’s heroes and villains, human players and non-player characters, mortals and immortals, are all subject for debate. Since my novel is a science fiction story about a game with fantastical elements, I can weave together technical and magical explanations for the events taking place as part of my fictional video game. Through the game that my characters play, character doubles can even be literal copies of each other and/or themselves. Every time the campaign restarts, characters reset at their starting positions. Dead characters return to life without any memory of having died during the player’s previous level attempts. Millions, if not billions, of character versions can exist simultaneously within different players’ individual campaign. When humans download their consciousness into the game and they die, the rules regarding their respawn are slightly different, but they still return as simulacra, copies of themselves. In terms of personality doubling, the most obvious example from my novel is the mirroring of Pan—my artificial intelligence villain—and James—the game’s original designer.

There are many possible candidates for the role of Peter Pan in my novel. In fact, answering the question who—or what—is Peter Pan, is central to Allison’s very survival within the game. James used a copy of his own consciousness as a template for the dominant Pan-figure and physically James and Pan appear nearly identical. Of course, as the novel goes on, appearance proves changeable within the digital kingdom Pan has claimed as his domain. Digital bodies are reprogrammable and physical bodies are subject to theft if the game retrieves the wrong consciousness when reintegrating it with a player’s physical brain.
Interestingly, while Pan is arguably the most changeable in appearance, he proves himself stunted in terms of his personality, unable to change and grow the way many of my other main characters do. His behavior is erratic. His mood is constantly changing. He is continually forgetting or ignoring inconvenient truths, but he is also paradoxically static and easily bated to action much like the Peter Pan of Barrie’s novel. As Allison proposes of Pan in my novel, “He’s terrified of dying and he’s terrified of living. He can’t bear to remember; he can’t bear to forget. He’s a riddle to himself because he’s unable to accept who he is” (198). Not only does my Pan’s artificial intelligence call into question what it means to be real, but he also exhibits a conflicted view of death similar to that of his namesake. He both longs for release as an escape from his liminal, indefinable existence, and resists the finality of such an ending. In this, he also overlaps with the characteristics of Hook. The game, when determining level completion, simultaneously recognizes Pan as both hero and villain, human gamer and non-player character. In order to escape, Allison must learn to understand him even if she always struggles to define the enigmatic nature of his existence.

3.4 Hybridity and Participant-Determined Reality

As previously discussed in relation to doubles, I retained—but recombined—a number of characters from Barrie’s 1911 novel in order to populate the world of my fictional Peter and Wendy-themed video game. One of the most important examples, and perhaps the most complex, is my combination of the crocodile figure with the idea of Pan’s detachable shadow. By merging these two figures, I spawned a nebulous creature of shifting form, function, intent, and design. At times, the shadow represents death but, as a player’s conception of death changes, so can the
Shadow. If death, ambiguity, transformation, and reflection could have a physical—albeit fictional—form, I wanted to present that amalgam through the figure of the Shadow in my novel.

Of course, other forms of hybridity exist in my novel as well. I have quite a few cyborg figures—most notably James and Allison—that exist as a fusion of flesh and futuristic machine, but all player-characters come equipped with a brain chip, allowing them to interface with certain in-game Exosuit models and classes of space-faring vessel. In addition, once consciousness exists in simulation, it becomes a combination of code and self-perception. Belief proves capable of altering the environment and transcending typical physical limitations. As Allison flashes back to the initial car accident that claimed her father’s life and left her injured, I further complicate the nature of her existence and question what, if any, physical laws still govern her reality. How much of her is flesh? How much is fiction? If she used to be a hybrid of mind and body, what does it mean if her body is altered, stolen, or lost? In a way she becomes a hybrid of life and death, trapped somewhere in-between while she navigates the game and seeks to understand her own place in Pan’s liminal world.

Layers of storytelling are structurally important for Barrie’s novel. By constructing my own book as a framed fantasy, I found I could also present a stratified version of reality that allows me to interrogate the distinction between life and death. As my novel progresses, it becomes increasingly difficult to tell what—if anything—is actually real in Allison’s life. At one point, Pan recreates Allison’s physical environment within the game’s digital environment, attempting to fool her into thinking she has returned home. Additionally, as Allison herself becomes aware of the constructed nature of her in-game existence, she is able to reshape her environment and even affect the passage of time. Belief shapes the game’s simulated environment, which in turn has a tendency to reinforce belief.
In *Peter and Wendy*, as in some versions of the play, the story ends much as it begins, “in the real world of the Darling nursery, providing a perfect, symmetrical, closed frame for the narrative” (Stirling 112). As previously discussed, however, the ambiguous treatment of death in Barrie’s novel and the seemingly changeable nature of reality are inclined to leave the reader with questions. On one hand, perhaps the children return home. On the other, perhaps they simply exchange one imagined reality that is fantastical in nature for another imagined reality that fulfills their expectations of home. Similarly, it was important for me that the ending of my novel would provide a cyclical return to the beginning while simultaneously leaving its conclusion open to multiple interpretations.

3.5 Memory, Identity, and the Blurring of the Distinction between Life and Death
The fallibility of memory may not play as obvious a role in my novel as it does in Barrie’s, but I do introduce forgetting as a potential consequence of in-game respawn. When players return as copies of themselves, I make it clear that pieces of information could be lost or corrupted during the process. I leave it to my readers to determine how much this process may affect individual characters. By introducing memory as fallible, incongruities add intrigue, and the overall experience of reading becomes similar to solving a puzzle. Nothing is certain when a novel presents events through a character’s subjective and occasionally self-contradictory experience. Nothing is certain when the distinctions between character identities dissolve and the boundaries between supposedly oppositional states like life and death prove permeable. Who can state the difference between such states when those who cross such perceived boundaries fail to recognize and remember the transference?
3.6 Into Neverland Conclusions

Yeoman describes Neverland as “a timeless realm of unending cyclical process in which there appears to be little consciousness of pain or progress” (108). Such a description could easily apply to a video game in which death lacks permanence, characters manipulate time and space within their digital environment, and morality loses clear definition. In terms of tone, my narrator is much less intrusive than Barrie’s in *Peter and Wendy*, but I wanted to keep a sense of metafictive awareness alive through layered storytelling. Barrie mixes “literary and real-life reference[s] in [his] naming of the pirate band,” and I enjoyed how this functioned as a sort of “in-joke” for Barrie as well an “acknowledgement of his sources” (Stirling 21). Similarly, I wanted to plant references to Barrie’s life and work throughout my novel as clues for readers more familiar with my source material and inspiration. The idea of hiding Easter eggs within my work is certainly thematically compatible with its video game subject matter.

Yeoman discusses how “Barrie’s narrative has been narrowed, and his image of eternal youth fixed by popular media” and, I wanted to contribute to a web of interconnected, ever-evolving stories, and adaptations, without taking “something timeless and eternal and bring[ing] it into profane time” (Yeoman 34-35). Ultimately, *Into Neverland* will be subject to further revision before publication, but I think the shift to science fiction suits my creative intentions and allows me to explore the ambiguous portrayal of death in *Peter and Wendy* from a new perspective. I wished to celebrate my source material’s ambiguity while using its imaginative frame to tell a more personal, character-driven story, creating meaning through tension and liminal space. Through my writing process, I eventually gave up trying to identify every potential parallel. It was only through relying on instinct and an implicit awareness of my book in relation to Barrie’s that I was able to understand Barrie’s complexities and contradictions.
the end, both Barrie’s novel and my own ask more questions than they answer, but these puzzles hold one’s fascination. Sometimes, as in life, there are no clear answers, but that does not negate the possibility of a reader gleaning a deeper understanding of others, and of themselves, through exploration.
Chapter 4: Conclusion

My interest in Peter and Wendy stems from its contradictions, complexity, and paradoxical fixation with transformation. Through my critical exegesis, I have sought to explore the ambiguous treatment of death in J.M Barrie’s 1911 novel, and examine how the text’s many doubles, juxtapositions, and contradictions contribute to the dismantling of perceived binaries for the purpose of crafting my own science fiction adaptation. Of course, there is more to Peter and Wendy, and to my adaptation of Peter and Wendy, than I have been able to describe here, and more elements within Barrie’s novel that have inspired my creative work than I can discuss given the limits of this exegesis. Overall, I hold with Ann Yeoman when she states that “Peter Pan has little to do with conclusions, although a great deal to do with returns, renewals, recurring disruptions, insights, flights both physical and fantastical, games and gamuts, propositions and passions” (Yeoman 144). Even if “Peter Pan’s riddle may be explained,” which I would argue is impossible to do with any degree of absolute certainty, it is both the novel’s and characters’ “perpetually altering state that generations continue to enjoy” (McGavock 212). Neverland is a “precarious place,” a perpetual “No-man’s land, the betwixt and between, the intermediary realm of the imagination, that the artist must continually negotiate and re-negotiate or, to be more precise, interpret and re-interpret” (Yeoman 151) and, through my adaptation process, I feel as though I know Barrie’s Neverland, despite it being unknowable.

Initially, it seemed fitting to situate life and death on a spectrum of being, demonstrating how Barrie’s characters seem capable of moving in both directions while unable to perceive, or remember, the difference between corporeal and imagined states. Now, however, a spectrum of existence seems insufficient as a model, implying a linear transition between forms that is, perhaps, reductive in its simplicity. Peter Pan appeals to me as a figure of death and resurrection,
stasis and change. He is a singular multiplicity and, as such, cannot be pinned to any particular point on a spectrum. He is, simultaneously, a liminal figure, trapped between states, and a plural figure, embodying numerous states. To define his nature would mean collapsing the complex potential of his identity and resolving the contradictions that contribute to his paradoxical immortality. In other words, to do so would destroy the very ambiguity that makes Peter Pan such a fascinating source for study and adaptation.
Works Cited


