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The Heroes of Chris Van Allsburg in *Jumanji* and *Zathura*

Chris Van Allsburg'ın *Jumanji* ve *Zathura* Başlıklı Eserlerindeki Kahramanları

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Abstract

In the world of imagination, everything is real and possible for the reader. The awe and wonder of imagination serve as tools to broaden the minds and horizons of children. Imaginary worlds make it possible for child readers to travel to places familiar and unfamiliar, to time periods different from the one they know, and to fantastical worlds never before experienced. Having written and illustrated over twenty books, Chris Van Allsburg, one of the authors of contemporary American Children's Literature, is well-known for his love of the fantasy genre. Most of Van Allsburg's books lie within the uncertain boundaries between reality and fantasy. Written two decades apart, both *Jumanji: A Jungle Adventure Game* and *Zathura: A Space Adventure* take the child reader to the world of imagination by blurring the boundaries between reality and fantasy through a board game. The books both demonstrate how this fantasy world invades the real world, arousing curiosity, fascination, and excitement in the reader. In Van Allsburg's stories, the protagonists set out on an adventure that changes them for the better and teaches them something important over the course of the story. The author's message is often found by reading between the lines; thus, his stories invite the reader to enter a surreal world in order to track down clues and uncover hidden lessons such as the power of teamwork and collaboration and/or the importance of perseverance and persistence. Through a close reading of *Jumanji: A Jungle Adventure Game* and *Zathura: A Space Adventure*, this study aims to explore the hidden lessons of Chris Van Allsburg and how they influence the heroes of both stories, and thereby the child readers, to change for the better.
Keywords: *Jumanji*, *Zathura*, children's literature, fantasy, adventure games.

Öz

Hayal dünyasında okuyucu için her şey gerçek ve mümkündür. Hayal gücünün huşu ve mucizesi, çocukların zihinlerini ve ufkunu genişletmek için bir araç görevi görür. Hayali dünyalar, çocuk okurların aşina oldukları ve olmadıkları yerlere, bildiklerinden farklı zaman dilimlerine ve daha önce hiç tecrübe etmedikleri fantastik dünyalara seyahat etmelerini mümkün kılar. Yirminin üzerinde kitap yazan ve resimleyen çağdaş Amerikan Çocuk Edebiyatı yazarlarından Chris Van Allsburg, fantezi türüne olan düşkünlüğü ile tanınır. Van Allsburg'ın kitaplarının çoğu, gerçeklik ve fantezi arasındaki belirsiz sınırlar içinde yer alır. Yirmi yıl arayla yazılan hem *Jumanji: Bir Orman Macerası Oyunu* hem de *Zathura: Bir Uzay Macerası* isimli eserler bir oyun tahtası aracılığı ile fantezi arasındaki sınırları bulanıklaştırarak çocuk okuyucuyu hayal dünyasına götürür. Her iki eser de merak, hayranlık ve heyecan uyandırarak bu hayali dünyanın gerçek dünyayı nasıl işgal ettiğini gösterir. Van Allsburg'un öykülerinde, kahramanlar onları iyi yönde değiştiren ve onlara öykü boyunca önemli bir şey öğreten bir maceraya çıkarlar. Yazarın mesajı genellikle satır aralarının okunmasıyla bulunur; bu nedenle, hikayeleri okuyucuyu ipuçlarını bulmak ve ekip çalışması ile işbirliğinin gücü ve/veya azim ile sebatın önemi gibi gizli dersleri ortaya çıkarmak için gerçeküstü bir dünyaya davet eder. Bu çalışma, yakın okuma tekniği uygulanarak, *Jumanji: Bir Orman Macerası Oyunu* ve *Zathura: Bir Uzay*

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Macerası isimli eserlerde Chris Van Allsburg'un gizli mesajlarını ve bu mesajların her iki hikayenin kahramanlarını, ve dolayısıyla çocuk okuyucuları, iyi yönde nasıl değişim göstermeye yönelttiğini keşfetmeyi amaçlamaktadır.
Anahtar Kelimeler: *Jumanji*, *Zathura,* çocuk edebiyatı, fantazi, macera oyunları.

Introduction

The role of books whether for children or grown-ups [is] to expand our horizons, to tell us more than we had henceforth ever imagined, to give us a sense of life's exhilarating possibilities, to influence our moral outlook and to help determine what kind of people we strive to be.

Selma G. Lanes
(Quoted in Saccardi, 2014)

In the world of imagination, everything is real and possible for the reader. The awe and wonder of imagination serve as tools to broaden young minds and their horizons. As George Bernard Shaw beautifully puts it, "[i]magination is the beginning of creation. You imagine what you desire, you will what you imagine and at last you create what you will" (1946, p.9). Imaginary worlds make it possible for children and young adults to travel to places familiar and unfamiliar, to time periods different from the one they know, and to fantasy worlds they never experienced before. In other words, imagination liberates the child reader from the reins of what is known as real hence, opening up avenues that never existed before. As scholar Matthew Grenby also highlights, fantasy worlds include stories of "magic, ghosts, talking animals and superhuman heroes, of time travel, hallucinations, and dreams" (2008, p.144). Furthermore, all kinds of monsters, werewolves, witches, wizards, and wild things predominate children's fantasy books (Wolf, 2004; Gates, et.al, 2003). Having a remarkable history, and a remarkable range, fantasy "is never innocent, very often highly complex, and contrary to a long tradition of religious disapproval, very often based on ethical premises" (Hunt & Lenz, 2001, p. 36). Thus, as fantasy often overlaps with other major genres, notably the fairy tale and the adventure story, it is clearly central to any understanding of children's literature.

Having written and illustrated over twenty books, Chris Van Allsburg (1949 -), a contemporary American children's literature author, is well-known for his love of the fantasy genre. As he himself says in an interview: "The idea of the extraordinary happening in the context of the ordinary is what's fascinating to me" (Van Allsburg, 2000). This idea is captured in most of Van Allsburg's books, which lie within the uncertain boundaries between reality and fantasy. Written two decades apart, both *Jumanji: A Jungle Adventure Game* (1981) and *Zathura: A Space Adventure* (2002) take the child reader to the world of imagination by blurring the boundaries between reality and fantasy through a board game. Both of his stories illustrate how this fantasy world invades the real world, arousing curiosity, excitement, and pleasure at the same time. Scholars Gates, Steffel, & Molson call this kind of fantasy world "mixed fantasy," while it is also known as "low fantasy," which is a subgenre of fantasy fiction where magical events intrude on an otherwise normal world (2003, p. 49). Hence, it differs strikingly from "high fantasy" stories, in which their own set of rules and physical laws apply. The word "low" in this case indicates the level of prominence of traditional fantasy elements in the story and does not imply any remark on the quality of the story (Boyer and Zahorski, 1984).

In Van Allsburg's fantasy world, the protagonists set out on a perilous adventure that changes them notably for the better as they learn to abide by this world's laws and arrive at important lessons over the course of the story. This learning process is assisted by Van Allsburg's beautifully drawn illustrations, which "enhance the mystery and magic of his narratives" (2003) as Joanne Canow puts it, as well as providing lessons for the readers. Perry Nodelman comments on the controversial status of the picturebook genre by exposing the various ways in which the pictures in picture-books convey information about the stories they accompany (2005, pp. 69-80). In this regard, Van Allsburg's lessons in his picture books are often found by reading between the lines since without being didactic his stories incite wonder and invite children to track down clues in the fantasy world to reach the hidden lessons. The author comments on his own technique of tempting the reader to participate in the story with these words: "I am attracted to the idea of seeding the imagination by leaving a little something untold" (Van Allsburg, 2011). Thus, through a close reading of *Jumanji: A Jungle Adventure Game* and *Zathura: A Space Adventure*, this study attempts to explore the

hidden lessons of Chris Van Allsburg and interpret the implied impact of these lessons not only on the child protagonists of both stories but also on the child reader.

Jumanji: A Jungle Adventure Game

In Van Allsburg's stories, when the magic intrudes into normal life, it is important to read between the lines of the text, to see beyond the words on the page. The process of reading and understanding a text is rather complex and multi-dimensional as it is a thinking process that involves an imaginative and creative response. In his speech at the American Library Association, on being awarded the Caldecott medal, Van Allsburg emphasized the importance of reading and understanding a book as follows: "A book comes alive when they [children] read it. They give it life themselves by understanding it" (1982, p. 3). In a similar manner, the story, *Jumanji: A Jungle Adventure Game* (1981), revolves around a magical board game through which real animals and other jungle elements startlingly come to life and pose a threat to the players. As Derek Van Rheenen notes, "certainly children gain knowledge about themselves and others, and they learn how to conduct themselves in the world when they play games" (2012, p. 412) as "the child is socialized into the adult community" (2012, p. 413). Thus, it is no coincidence that Van Allsburg chooses a board game while constructing his magical story in which the players must overcome the dangers that the game brings to real life. When they find themselves to be plunged into the most exciting and bizarre adventure of their lives, the characters learn their lessons while fighting for their lives.

In the picture books of Van Allsburg, the child reader is also invited to enter the surreal worlds in order to track down clues and reach hidden lessons. This is mainly because Van Allsburg prefers to leave gaps between the text and the image since "[g]aps are said to encourage creativity in the young reader, leading the child to "fill them in" with their own interpretation" (Beauvais, 2015, p. 72). Hence, the author intentionally unravels the story slowly and carefully on the page through both his words and his drawings in many of his stories. While doing so, he does not describe his characters but provides clues as to what they say and how they act. In line with this technique, the story, *Jumanji: A Jungle Adventure Game,* starts with direct speech, which takes the child reader straight into action. From the first lines, the reader construes that the mother and father are orderly, tidy parents who wish to "keep the house neat" (Van Allsburg, 1981). While the father was "tucking his scarf inside his coat," the mother "carefully pinned her hat in place" (Van Allsburg, 1981) as they were getting ready to go out to the opera leaving the two siblings home alone. The story starts like any other ordinary home-alone story in which the unattended children find themselves in unexpected situations and have to overcome several obstacles.

Being alone at home can be interpreted as both a childhood fantasy and a childhood fear since it means that in their parents' absence, children are not only free from their parents' rules but also deprived of their protection. This idea might sound both exciting and scary at the same time. Even though most kids may think that being home alone is fun, they would soon realize that in the absence of their parents, they must take care of themselves and make sound decisions on their own. This thought is best captured when, the siblings, Judy and Peter, in *Jumanji*: *A Jungle Adventure Game* react first by celebrating their solitude and freedom as they "giggled with delight" and "took all the toys out of their toy chest and made a terrible mess" (Van Allsburg, 1981). Soon, however, they are bored and decide to go outside to explore the park nearby. Thus, the first scenes seem to foreshadow what is to happen in the story as the reader anticipates chaos that will turn the previous order of the household upside down. Therefore, the first lesson to be drawn from the opening scene of the story is that leaving the house without parental permission is not a good idea as it may expose the children to some unforeseen hazard.

Another lesson that one can deduce from the beginning of *Jumanji* is that an unattended object, even just a board game, must not be touched or even worse taken home. This idea is best exemplified when Judy, the elder sister, takes the board game home when they come across it in the park. When they find the game under a tree, they see a warning message on a note taped to the bottom of the box, which reads as: "Free game, fun for some but not for all. PS: Read the instructions carefully" (Van Allsburg, 1981). The warning

regarding the instructions of the game clearly indicates the didactic aspect of the story. However, with little debate concerning either the content or the owner of the game, the siblings take the board home to give it a try. When they are back home alone, the reader is in the sitting room with the two children who are about to play the game. When the board is unfolded, colored squares are revealed and there are messages written on them addressed to the players. The path on the board starts in the deepest jungle and ends up in a city of golden buildings and towers called Jumanji. It looks like an ordinary board game, which might possibly be a little boring as Peter "casually drop[s] the dice from his hand" to start the game and sarcastically says "Gosh, how exciting," in a very unexcited voice (Van Allsburg, 1981).

Clearly, the message given to the reader is that one must understand the importance of reading and understanding the instructions before setting out to do anything. Although "the board game looked very much like the games they already had," Judy takes the board game rules and instructions seriously and reads them carefully (Van Allsburg, 1981). In the box, she finds another "very important" message, which says in capital letters that "ONCE A GAME OF JUMANJI STARTED IT WILL NOT BE OVER UNTIL ONE PLAYER REACHES THE GOLDEN CITY" (Van Allsburg, 1981). The intended message seems to be clear once again to the reader in that one needs to finish what he/she has started. As Grenby notes, "[f]antasy so readily invites symbolic readings" (2008, p. 154). Thus, if the readers were to interpret this lesson figuratively, it can be said that children must learn that there are serious rules, in other words, norms, and codes of behavior to exist within the society. As Jonathan Todres and Sarah Higinbotham assert: "The power of stories over children has long been recognized, thus the predominantly didactic tradition of children's literature as moral instruction, useful for edifying and molding children into rule-following citizens" (2016, p. 10). In the world of adults, just like in the games, children have to play the game by the rule and take serious warnings in order to survive. In the end, as the ending of the story reveals, the children both learn their lessons and seem to alter significantly for the better.

Another message for the reader to infer from the story can be the ability to respond to unfamiliar or stressful situations. Fearful children might imagine scary scenarios that could happen in the absence of their parents. To their horror, the children soon discover that the dangers encountered in the game spring to life somewhere in the house. The game transports the child reader deep inside an exotic jungle in which the two siblings have to employ problem-solving skills in order to save their lives. For example, when Peter rolls a lion, a real lion appears "lying on the piano," "staring at Peter and licking his lips" (Van Allsburg, 1981). It is also clear from the illustration that the lion's focus is solely on Peter, and the only thought in its mind is to eat him. As scholar Marianne Saccardi also notes, "[p]ictures are the crowning glory of picture books, and they are instrumental in telling the story" (2014, p. 66). Similarly, Van Allsburg's drawing also accelerates the horror of the atmosphere by zooming in on Peter and the lion. Peter's dialogue in between gasps of air contributes to the feeling of fear and speed while the lion is "a whisker's length behind," which feels like he is almost breathing on Peter (Van Allsburg, 1981). Eventually, the two siblings trap the lion in their parents' bedroom, while its head is stuck under the bed.

Terrified by the magical appearance of the lion, Peter refuses to play anymore but the elder sister Judy takes control once again: "We started this game and now we have to finish it" (Van Allsburg, 1981). At this point, the significance of perseverance and persistence in the face of insurmountable obstacles and adversities can be inferred from the story. Hence, Peter reluctantly accepts that they must continue to play until one of them wins the game. When it is Judy's turn, she rolls the dice and the message on the color square warns them against "monkeys stealing food" (Van Allsburg, 1981). Then suddenly "the sounds of banging pots and falling jars" are heard in the kitchen (Van Allsburg, 1981). By depicting only, a part of the scene while the monkeys are in the kitchen, the author aims to trigger the imagination of the reader. The illustration on the accompanying page exemplifies Van Allsburg's drawing as shown from a child's perspective, which reflects monkeys more intimidating than they are in real life. When Peter states that his mother would be even more upset about the monkeys in the kitchen than the lion in the bedroom, the image of the orderly parents comes to mind.

The idea that one must finish what s/he has started is highlighted as one of the crucial lessons of the story. To achieve this, the children try to behave as normally as possible in the face of unexpected

appearance of magic and try to continue to play, hoping that if they finish the game, everything will go back to normal. When Peter rolls on monsoon, the rain begins to fall in buckets and thunderclaps scare the monkey out of the kitchen. The accompanying illustration on the page reveals six monkeys sitting and watching the game, while the expressions on their faces intrigue the reader further. They seem to be waiting for the siblings to continue to roll the dice and finish the game before they can return to safety. Next Judy rolls a guide who appears to be lost and is deeply confused. The guide's confusion is obvious as the readers see him first questioning himself then, contradicting himself. The use of ellipses here signals his unfinished sentences, while the repetitive use of the verb *muttered* contributes to his confused state of mind. Van Allsburg's illustration on the accompanying page conveys the lost guide's body language powerfully, which helps the reader to visualize the scene better.

The mysterious and at the same time awe-inspiring jungle adventure game gets more dangerous as Peter gets bitten on his nose by a tsetse fly when it is his turn**.** The reader may not know the meaning of the word *tsetse* fly, but soon it becomes clear that this insect's bite puts you to sleep. Feelings of panic and suspense arise when Judy first realizes that she cannot wake Peter up and rolls the dice again in amazement. She is further terror-struck further as she hears rhinos stampeding in the distance, which wakes up Peter from his enchanted sleep. Having heard a rumble in the hallway, "Judy and Peter covered their ears as the sounds of splintering wood and breaking china filled the house" (Van Allsburg, 1981). The accompanying illustration of the rhinos makes the child-reader feel as if the rhinos were actually stampeding towards them, springing out of the page. It is rather intimidating to see their eyes fixed on the reader, looking straight out of the page. The next time the dice is rolled, the message says: "Python sneaks into camp" (Van Allsburg, 1981). Van Allsburg's illustration focuses on the snake this time, with only some aspects of it partially visible over the fireplace, while the pattern of the snake is mirrored in the pattern of the furniture, creating a type of camouflage. It is possible to claim that the snake appears to be all the more threatening when the illustration reflects a child's eye view. In addition, the reader seems to be challenged as s/he is forced to remember whether the furniture had the same pattern before the snake's appearance.

When Peter rolls a volcano on the dice next, the room gets warmer and starts to shake a little. The game becomes more alarming and life-threatening as molten lava pours from the fireplace meeting the water on the floor, thereby filling the room with steam. The feelings of tension, intensity, and suspense in the story start to decrease when Judy rolls a twelve and yells "Jumanji!" ending the game for good (Van Allsburg, 1981). In an instant, everything is back to normal and the siblings quickly return to the park and abandon the game with great relief where they found it before their parents return. When their parents come back, the conversation between the mother and the children is as if nothing had happened in between. Since normality has returned, it is clear that the parents will never believe what has taken place in their absence. The story ends with Judy and Peter looking outside and seeing their neighbors, Danny and Walter Budwing, excitedly returning from the park with *Jumanji* in their hands. Mrs. Budwing, who is among the guests their parents bring home after the opera claims that his sons never bother to finish the games, they play nor read the instructions, which leaves the reader with excitement and anticipation.

To conclude, Van Allsburg's drawings eloquently furnish his magical story, the mix of everyday life with the extraordinary, in which a quiet house is taken over by an exotic jungle. The readers do not question the credibility of the exotic animals once they become a part of the game. At this point, one cannot help being reminded of J. R. R. Tolkien's famous dictum that the author should strive to imagine a fully-formed "secondary world" into which the reader can enter: "Inside it, what he [the author] relates is 'true': it accords with the laws of that world. You, therefore, believe it, while you are, as it were, inside. The moment disbelief arises, the spell is broken; the magic, or rather art, has failed" (1966, p. 37). When the phenomenal success of *The Hobbit* (1937) and *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-55) is taken into consideration, there is no doubt that Tolkien's strategy has worked. Likewise, in *Jumanji*, whenever a player rolls the dice, the reader anticipates in excitement to see or hear more from the jungle and the jungle animals. Through the blend of fantasy with reality, the reader also learns jungle-related vocabulary such as monsoon, volcanoes, explorer, monkeys, lions, and stampede. Moreover, because readers are expected to develop responses towards the unraveling of events with anticipation, they develop an independent and creative response to the text as well. The predictability and pattern of "happy ending" used in the narrative, aka Tolkienian "eucatastrophe" in fantasy,

gives the child reader a sense of confidence and half-knowing what is going to happen, yet not knowing the particulars. This enables the child reader to take part in the creative process, which can be even more exciting and even wilder than what actually takes place in the story.

Zathura: A Space Adventure

Twenty years later, Chris Van Allsburg reveals what happens when Danny and Walter roll the dice in *Zathura: A Space Adventure* (2002). As this is a sequel to *Jumanji: A Jungle Adventure Game* visual as well as textual references are made to *Jumanji* throughout the story. This time the name of the game is *Zathura* and the author blends scientific information with an adventure story in which the battling Budwing boys are fighting for their lives and have to work as a team to overcome the intergalactic challenges when their house magically starts to float in outer space. The board game seems to provide a reflection of the times the story is set in that the daily lives of ordinary people are bombarded with science and scientific innovations in this new millennia. The author aims to engage, educate and employ the imagination of the child reader, who will be the next generation of explorers and scientists. Thus, the author once again places his characters in a realistic setting, the safest place in the world, their home in which the magical intervention takes them into a science fictional setting posing a serious threat to the safety of the children. At this point, one can argue that by combining elements from both science fiction and fantasy, Van Allsburg displays a mixed genre, "science fantasy," in which "devices of fantasy are employed in a 'science-fictional' context (related to but distanced from the 'real world' by time, space, or dimension)" (Wolfe, 1986).

The story *Zathura* starts like another ordinary "home-alone" story in which Mrs. Budwing is trying to stop the two brothers, Walter and Danny from fighting each other while getting ready to go out with Mr. Budwing. Similar to *Jumanji,* the readers find themselves in the middle of action as the author employs a direct speech technique in the narration. Walter complains about his younger brother who has broken the antenna of his walky-talky, but his mother tells him to be more tolerant and understanding towards his brother. At this point, the reader anticipates either a dangerous intrusion or serious mischief, since, from the very beginning, it is established that the two brothers do not get along with each other. This piece of information is a pivotal point in the narrative because at the end of the story, the conflict between the Budwing brothers is resolved and they seem to get on well, as Walter has learned his lesson the hard way. After their parents leave, Danny wants to play catch with his elder brother Walter, who instead prefers to watch television. To get his attention, Danny tosses Walter a baseball that hits him on the head. Walter then chases his brother through the house and catches him in the park across the street from their house, where they find a board game named *Jumanji*: *A Jungle Adventure.* Like in *Jumanji*, the author establishes an aura of suspense with the abandoned board game under a tree in the park, which signals that magic is imminent.

Some of the lessons in *Jumanji* can also be observed in *Zathura*: leaving the house without parental permission and taking unattended objects may put you in unforeseen danger. Without giving it much thought, Danny brings the game home, where he takes the board out of its box but then loses interest in it as he considers it "babyish and even boring," just like Walter has said earlier in the park (Van Allsburg, 2002). As Danny is putting the game away, he discovers another game underneath the *Jumanji* board, called *Zathura: A Space Adventure* "decorated with exciting-looking flying saucers and planets" (Van Allsburg, 2002). The old board game seems to have evolved into a game that meets the scientific expectations of the millennium kids. Just like *Jumanji,* the game seems innocent and ordinary enough "with a path with colored squares leading from Earth to a purple planet called *Zathura* and back to Earth" (Van Allsburg, 2002). As both stories reveal, Van Allsburg seems to challenge the child reader to imagine a world in which things may be different than they seem and the children must be equipped with the ability to take care of themselves and work together in order to survive.

While Walter is sitting on the sofa watching the TV, Danny starts to play on his own by putting a token on Earth and rolling the dice. After he moves along the path, a startling buzzing sound comes from the board and "with a click, a small green card pop[s] out of the edge" right in front of him warning the players against a meteor shower: "Meteor showers, take evasive action" (Van Allsburg, 2002). Then suddenly, a real meteor shower begins crashing down the roof of the house. The author eloquently enables

the reader to visualize what might happen when a meteor hits the roof through his description as well as his powerful illustration: "The noise grew louder, like a thousand golf balls bouncing off the roof. The room got so dark; Walter turned on the lights. Then—KABOOM—a rock the size of a refrigerator fell through the ceiling and crushed the television" (Van Allsburg, 2002). Danny quickly realizes that the game is real and tries hard to convince his disbelieving brother of the power of the game. It soon becomes clear, as the game thrusts the reader into outer space, that the two brothers are expected to employ problem-solving skills to save their lives.

When they open the front door to see their house floating in outer space, the siblings discover that the only way to set things right is to finish the game and reach the purple planet *Zathura.* Thus, the brothers start playing the game together since they recognize that the game will not take them home unless they collaborate to finish it. Like in *Jumanji*, the power of teamwork and collaboration is highlighted as one of the crucial lessons of the story. The child protagonists soon adapt themselves to the dangerous power of the magical board game and cope with the adversaries they encounter during the course of the story. For example, when Walter loses his gravity and finds himself sticking to the ceiling, it is Danny who saves him from disappearing into space by tying his brother to the sofa with the cord of the television. At this point, Walter, perhaps for the first time in his life, acknowledges his brother's abilities and appreciates him truly. On a figurative level, one can suggest that spending too much time in front of the TV, and by extension using too much technology, can rob one of real-life interaction and like Walter, who has lost his gravity and whose feet is no longer stable on the ground, one may lose her/his touch with reality.

The Budwing siblings, who never bother to finish games as their mother claimed earlier in Jumanji, strive to go on with the game to save their lives, which recalls the message of *Jumanji*: you must finish what you have started. Accordingly, Danny rolls the dice upon which the gyroscope of the house starts to malfunction: "Suddenly, everything in the room slides to one side, and Danny gets buried under a mountain of furniture" (Van Allsburg, 2002). As in *Jumanji,* the author helps the reader infer the meaning of unknown words, such as "gravity" and "gyroscope," by describing what happens to the characters or the objects (Van Allsburg, 2002). Danny successfully digs himself out to continue the game; however, when he sees Walter floating back towards the hole in the ceiling, he ties him to the sofa once again. At this point, even though the brothers are introduced as fighting constantly with each other, the message is clear that they have only each other to depend on. So far, Danny has displayed effective decision-making and problem-solving skills in the game, and saved his brother twice, which is what changed Walter's perception of his younger brother in the first place. The lesson to be taken by the readers then is that appearances can be deceptive. In other words, some people may seem vulnerable or regarded as weak because of their young age, especially by their elders; however, this does not necessarily mean that they are not capable of protecting themselves or others including their elders, which is a common feature of children's tales that has its roots in the folk-tale tradition.

Now that Walter takes his turn to roll the dice, he immediately gets back his gravity but soon a shiny silver robot talking in an odd mechanical tone starts to chase him through the house saying: "Alien life forms must be destroyed" (Van Allsburg, 2002). Tension rises when this defective Robot appears from the hallway. The illustration of the robot with snapping claw-like hands on the facing page is yet another example of Van Allsburg's ability to draw from a child's perspective, which helps the reader to envisage the robot all the more intimidating and terrifying. Because of the tilted floor, however, the robot cannot balance properly and falls, which stops him from reaching his main target, Walter. With a growing sense of panic, Danny rolls the dice and the card he receives tells him that he gets close to a planet called Tsouris 3, which causes Danny to get shorter and wider, and soon he reaches the size of a large beach ball, feeling heavy dense and round. As expected, the Budwing brothers are learning to cope with the unexpected perils of the game, which is evident in the scene where Walter rolls Danny "like a giant bowling ball" on the floor to knock down the life-threatening robot (Van Allsburg, 2002). Like before, the story is fast-paced and full of action, while the reader is invited to take part in the action since they can easily put themselves into the shoes of the two boys, mostly due to the beautiful drawings accompanying each page.

The board game becomes more alarming and dangerous when Walter rolls the dice and picks up the card regarding the attack of an alien pirate ship called "Zorgon" (Van Allsburg, 2002). When the pirate

spaceship appears slowly in front of the window, the awe in their faces is clear both in the description and in the supplementary illustration. To their horror, the Zorgons immediately begin to attack their house shooting the chimney first and then the upstairs bathroom ultimately causing the water to drip from the ceiling. Quickly Danny rolls the dice once again and silently reads his card, which announces the invasion of their house by the Zorgons. The next moment, the spaceship bangs up against the house, as the Zorgons try to board their house; however, suddenly the defective robot appears and chases the Zorgons away. On the facing page, Van Allsburg's illustration of one of the Zorgons increases the terrifying effect of the scene. The illustration shows only some aspects of the alien pirate, his "tail and lizard like legs" swinging down from the hole in the ceiling, which leaves the rest to the reader's imagination (Van Allsburg, 2002). This scene contributes to the science fiction setting in which "the imaginary and the actual, the magical and the prosaic, the mythical and the scientific, meet and interanimate. In so doing, these worlds inspire us with new sensations and experiences" (Malmgren, 1988, p. 260).

Survival seems impossible and Danny feels not only hopeless but also exhausted as they have been playing the game for three hours. Yet Walter assures his younger brother that they will survive together promising that: "Me and you, together, we can do it" (Van Allsburg, 2002). Finally, Walter takes his turn and gets sucked into a massive black hole, and is suddenly sent back in time. The game transports Walter back in time when he was with Danny in the park where Danny found *Jumanji* and was about to take it home. This time, however, Walter throws the game out and instead offers to play catch with Danny instead repeating the words: "Me and you, together" (Van Allsburg, 2002). On one level, the brothers, especially Walter, have learned to appreciate each other's company instead of antagonizing each other. They have also learned that working together is the only way to solve problems in real life as well as in an imaginary game. Moreover, not only the Budwing brothers but through them the reader also learns the significance of cooperation, tolerance, understanding, and brotherly/sisterly affection. The fact that family members can depend on each other not only on good days but also on the bad, especially in the face of adversaries, is underlined. Thus, brotherhood is strengthened between the previously quarreling siblings as a result of a science-fictional quest that takes place in the depths of outer space, which posits a surreal world even for the contemporary reader.

In both *Jumanji: A Jungle Adventure Game* and *Zathura: A Space Adventure***,** Van Allsburg's drawings mesh well with the magical, mysterious, and even awe-inspiring adventure story, as they add to the tension, intensity, and suspense of the story. His picture drawings are also an integral part of the narration as they contribute to the experience of the magical in a world in which the border between the ordinary and the extraordinary is blurred. To this end, *Zathura*, a mixture of science fiction with fantasy, also teaches the child reader vocabulary related to space such as planets, meteor showers, gravity, black hole, spaceship, aliens, robots, and outer space. In providing the child reader with an opportunity to acquire space-related vocabulary or jungle-related vocabulary through supernatural encounters Van Allsburg feeds the imagination of children, empowering them to imagine, create and change for the better. As Todres and Higinbotham note, "the fields of childhood education, developmental psychology, and childhood development have documented that reading fosters children's language skills, improves memory, increases attention spans, and even reduces violence" (2016, p. 10). Thus, one can conclude that while Van Allsburg is showing his stories in addition to telling them, his stance is that of the best teachers who want to encourage literary engagement by appealing to visual sense as well (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2006; Nodelman, 2005).

In his work, "Imagination and Creativity in Childhood" Lev Semenovich Vygotsky eloquently demonstrated the relationship between human creativity and imagination, which leads human beings "toward the future, creating the future and thus altering their own present" (2004, p. 3). As Vygotsky further asserts, "imagination, as the basis of all creative activity, is an important component of absolutely all aspects of cultural life, enabling artistic, scientific, and technical creation alike" (2004, p. 4). In line with this idea, Van Allsburg invites the child reader to step into the shoes of the child protagonists and partake in action to a certain extent not only through magical adventures but also through their own imagination and creative minds. While scholars Michael Levy and Farah Mendlesohn (2016) highlight the role of children's fantasy literature in helping develop imagination, scholar Marianne Saccardi points out the desired impact of picture books on the child reader as follows: "By giving youngsters the opportunity to see the world through the

eyes of these bold and resourceful characters and gain insights into the imaginative ways authors have created them, we provide them with models for facing their own challenges—and, ultimately, the challenges of our world—as divergent thinkers" (2014, p. 37). This aspect of his fiction, which offers a chance to be "divergent thinkers," might explain the enduring appeal of Van Allsburg's stories.

Conclusion

All the children except for Danny, who will not remember anything as Walter goes back in time and stops Danny from taking the game home, have worked through fears and conflicts, which prepare children for the obstacles of everyday life. The board game is emblematic of the unexpected and even seemingly impossible dangers of such a world that children may encounter while the game tests the survival skills of the child protagonists in these stories. In this regard, while the invasion of the monkeys or the Zorgons can be seen as outside threats to the sacred place that is home where a child is supposed to be protected from all types of danger, the danger of a lion or a defective robot implies any threats of brute physical force. In addition, monsoon rains or meteor showers may refer to the powerlessness and helplessness of humanity in the face of natural disasters. In the end, the children become powerful as they have gained the knowledge and survival skills that are mainly reserved for adults. As is often pointed out, didacticism has consistently remained at the heart of children's fantasy writing (Grenby, 2008, p. 161). Nevertheless, Van Allsburg's didacticism in his alternative worlds offers an opportunity to the reader to fill in the gaps and thus is not patronizing. He rather seems to encourage young readers to activate their imagination and creativity instead. The children, except Danny, in *Jumanji: A Jungle Adventure Game* (1981) and *Zathura: A Space Adventure* (2002) gradually become more competent, mature, and wise as they have learned to access their inner heroes and changed for the better when magic intruded into their normal, ordinary lives.

On the whole, both stories encompass many hidden lessons that permeate much of Van Allsburg's other works. For example, from the beginning, the children are warned against the unanticipated consequences of leaving the house without parental permission and taking found objects home. They also recognize the significance of reading, understanding, and following instructions in the world of adults. Another important lesson they have learned during the course of the story is that they have to finish what they have started. This idea is best captured in the course of both magical games, during which the children face the hostile intrusion of either exotic jungle animals or lizard-like aliens. They have also learned the hard way that one should be aware of the power of teamwork and cooperation: in other words, standing united against adversaries. The importance of perseverance, persistence, bravery, and courage are also some of the hidden lessons one can infer from the stories. Effective decision-making, as well as problem-solving skills, have also proved to be crucial for survival. Finally, these child protagonists have developed an appreciation of the seemingly impossible, which can be probable, may be possible in the world of imagination.

In Chris Van Allsburg's stories, the protagonists learn their lessons through the magical adventures in surreal worlds to which they find themselves plunged into and have to fight for their lives. During the process of reading, the author's lessons are often found by reading between the lines, Van Allsburg's stories display the ability to incite wonder and inspire child readers to enter these surreal worlds in order to find clues and reach these hidden lessons. One can conclude that the enduring appeal of his stories might be due to his invitation to the child reader to explore and create. The means by which this is achieved is not only through the use of direct speech but also through his beautifully drawn illustrations, which bring the story to life slowly and carefully onto the page. Thus, Chris Van Allsburg leaves "a little something untold," thereby ensuring the creative freedom of contemporary children as the process of reading between the lines excites, enlightens, and fascinates them.

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