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INANIMATE ALICE IN PORTUGUESE SCHOOLS

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Abstract

In this paper, I aim to describe the project “Inanimate Alice: translating digital literature in an educational context”, of the Centre for Portuguese Literature at the University of Coimbra and how the Portuguese translation of Inanimate Alice was introduced in Portugal. I will refer to the translation, to the creation of pedagogical materials to teach digital literature in Elementary and Secondary Schools, to the pedagogical experiments of the project’s team, to the teacher training courses in partnership with the Portuguese National Reading Plan and within the master's programs for teacher training. Finally, I will present the plans for the future of the project: a pilot experiment with 20 schools in the center of Portugal and two important projects with Novosibirsk State Technical University and with Lesley University (Massachusetts). With further steps the team keeps developing digital literary teaching and thus trying to fill the gap in this area, in Portugal.

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1. Introduction

In this article, I will be describing some aspects of the development of the project “*Inanimate Alice*: translating digital literature in an educational context” I coordinate in the Centre for Portuguese Literature at the University of Coimbra and I will address its different stages and the plans for the future.

The need to equip students with digital skills is an important aim of Portuguese and international educational policies (Machado, 2017; Machado, 2018a; Machado, 2018b; UNESCO, 2018). However, their development in the classroom is mostly reduced to resources which take advantage of the procedures to which students are exposed without a critical, ethical or creative look at the digital environment. So one needs to “rethink our notion of literacy and advocate elit [electronic literature] as not only viable but also a compelling art form for teaching all aspects of reading, writing, and communicating” (Grigar, 2008, para. 30).

Regarding Portuguese educational policies, Portuguese documents from the Ministry of Education show openness towards the digital and recommend the familiarity with the digital environment in different contexts of communication and knowledge. In this context, *Inanimate Alice* is an excellent work to introduce students to digital literature. She tells, in the first person, the story of a girl who grows up dreaming of being a game designer, with her creations becoming progressively more sophisticated from the first episode to the seventh, in virtual reality. Besides this, the transmedia and interactive serial novel, created and developed by Pullinger et al. (2005-2017), develops mechanisms and game-like environments that encourage students to read, reread, and understand the whole story, while having fun.

2. Problem Statement

- Considering the novelty of the project, the team knew from the beginning that its development would take long and a lot of networking needed to be done, along with promoting the idea that teaching digital literature with *Alice* would benefit students and would be a great pedagogical experiment for teachers also.

3. Research Questions

How to teach digital literature in Portuguese schools in the second decade of the 20th century?

4. Purpose of the Study

I intend to show the different stages of the project, those that were already overcome and what the team must still do to reach the final goal of its mission, that is, to teach *Inanimate Alice* as a regular base in Portuguese public schools. The whole story of the project is an example of what other countries need to do to achieve the same objectives.

5. Research Methods

Our most important achievement occurred in the classroom. In the process of didacticization of the work in the 6th and 8th grade classes, two questionnaires were prepared which simultaneously signalled the specificities of digital literature and evaluated the way in which students recognized them (namely, their aesthetic perception, attention and immersion, the degree of understanding required by the work, the layers of meaning and their interaction, multimodality, etc.). These questionnaires also aimed to understand how students identify the typology and genre of the work, their empathy with the story and their awareness of multimedia features.

With the two Portuguese episodes already produced, the team prepared one digital version and one printed version. Each class was divided in half: one group read the story on paper and the other on screen; And in the second episode, the groups changed versions. As it was their first contact with digital literature, the printed episode was necessary for a first contrastive experience and, although this remediation results in an artificial construction, it aims at integrating the narrative content. In printed version, the transmedial change vanished and the illustrations almost disappeared except when the information was not provided by the verbal text *per se*.

5.1. Different stages of the project

Going back to my first contact with Inanimate Alice, it happened at the Summer School of the Doctoral Programme in Materialities of Literature, held in 2014. Then I presented the work's potential in The Child and the Book Conference 2015 and put forward the hypothesis of setting up a team around the work. In October, I conceived the project "Inanimate Alice: Translation of Digital Literature in an Educational Context", within the Research Group "Digital Mediation and Materialities of Literature" of the Centre for Portuguese Literature (CLP).

We began by translating the first five episodes of the series and the first two are already produced. Then it translated also the pedagogical guidelines prepared by Jess Laccetti and Bill Boyd. And finally it created its own pedagogical materials adapted to the Portuguese curriculum. With the translation of the first five episodes of Inanimate Alice into Portuguese, we expected for the work to be endorsed by the Portuguese National Reading Plan. This plan aims at promoting and developing skills in reading and writing, as well as broadening and deepening of reading habits, especially among school populations.

Finally, in 2018, *Alice Inanimada*, the Portuguese translation of *Inanimate Alice*, was endorsed by the Portuguese National Reading Plan 2027, as "the first digital narrative fiction to be read/used in Portuguese schools from pedagogical scripts focused on the aesthetic perception of students, the understanding of multimedia and the immersive literary experience."

As we approached the end of the translations, we began a survey in order to find a publishing house or a technology company with a didactic interest. In July 2017, we contacted the two largest textbook publishers in Portugal, but we understood that publishers fear what would be a major innovation. In 2018, we also tried a partnership between Microsoft Portugal and The BradField Company, the *Inanimate Alice* enterprise producer, but, as they said, it was not opportune. To achieve this, it was clear the necessity of an entity responsible for marketing and distribution in the Portuguese market of

what would be a replica of the Teachers Edition Suite model (the first five episodes accompanied by pedagogical guidelines). And this money.

Looking now at Portuguese educational context, I'm proud to say Portuguese schools are, since 2008, relatively well equipped from the point of view of computer technology – except for the frequent lack of updating of software by the Ministry of Education. Yet, within the context of Covid19, in 2020, the Ministry of Education promise to equip children who need digital devices to follow online teaching.

Coming to this point, one must say that, although we intend to provide the first contact with electronic literature to Portuguese students, it has never been our intention to eliminate the central place occupied by literary literacy, but rather to teach strategies focused on the specificity of electronic literature and to develop the metaconsciousness of the reading skills of a new literary form that explores features such as multimodality, ergodicity, interactivity, immersion, non-linearity, and to stimulate the reflective, ethical and creative potential of the students (Hayles, 2008; Ramada Prieto, 2017; Rettberg, 2019).

In this long itinerary, the core question is how to teach digital literature in Portuguese schools in the second decade of the 20th century. And one could answer that *Inanimate Alice*'s translation is a perfect work to introduce digital literature into elementary and secondary schools in Portugal, because each episode has a progressive complexity, the story is about an itinerant mixed-race family travelling the world and it follows the growing up of the protagonist – she is an 8-year-old girl in the first episode, and a 19-year-old in “Perpetual Nomads”. Besides this, the series is recommended for young people (from 10 to 14), and the last episodes aim to reach older readers.

So, as digital literature for children and young adults is absent from the national curriculum, with *Inanimate Alice*, teachers can discuss on topics such as digital mobility, disruptive lives, interculturality, home and regular education, and even corruption and they can also develop critical digital literacy or produce creative writing.

6. Findings

The research was applied with episodes 1 and 2 of *Alice Inanimada* and in two Portuguese schools: two team members, Ana Aguilar e Alice Matsuda, conducted the pedagogical experiments with 59 students from sixth- and eighth-graders interacted with the series, in April and May 2018 (Machado, Aguilar et al., 2020). Children and teenagers were very interested in this type of educational innovation and their teachers were willing to learn new skills. Our goal was also to understand the type of activities and strategies teachers need to apply in order to develop not only digital literacy, but a digital literary literacy. The research methods having been demonstrated, I will now summarize the main conclusions, saying that, along the process, students showed that they have some, although not critical, digital literacy.

Confirming the motivation factor, and even considering their ontological difference, reading the digital episode proved to be more stimulating than reading on paper. Concerning the medium, as expected, students who read the original version first and then the print adaptation preferred the digital medium. In this confrontation between two media, students realized that the original narrative was digitally born.

In the evaluation of the estrangement towards the digital environment, they had no difficulties in navigating through the work. Regarding the motivation to create a new episode about Alice's adventures, the students who read the digital version were more willing to do so (68% vs. 50%). In the field of creation, monomodality dominates. As to the type of action in the reception of digital literature, 55% of students chose vision, having stated they "watched" the episode, followed by "reading" (42%) and using (3%). In identifying genre, the responses were mostly adequate, as 58% of students identified the episode as a "digital narrative".

To assess the awareness of immersion (Murray, 1997), students had to indicate the moment they had "entered" the story. Interestingly, those who read it on paper referred to situations of mental immersion (74%), while 32% of those who read it on the computer referred to situations of physical interaction with the story, such as the moment when Alice photographs the flowers and sends them to her father. Transversely, the answers to the second questionnaire reveal that the students had already naturalized the ergodic gesture (Aarseth, 1997).

It is precisely because these specific characteristics of digital literature still have an incipient presence in the first two episodes of the series that they show an important aesthetic and didactic experience, providing for the metacognition of concepts and practices inherent to electronic literature. Through the implicit knowledge of students, it is up to the teachers to explore these contents in order to develop the pupils' digital literary literacy.

6.1. In-service teacher training

Regarding, in-service teacher training, without official commitments, we continued the effort to bring electronic literature to schools by means of training courses, namely those organised by the National Reading Plan, according to what was asked in Strategic Plan for the Area of Science, Technology and Higher Education: "(...) in 2018, the team will carry out two short-term training actions dedicated to the reading/use of digital literature with the objective of initiating teachers in the educational uses of interactive narrative." (2018: 13). Due to various reasons, only in 2019 four courses were held in Coimbra and Lisbon, the Portuguese capital: With "Electronic Literature in an Educational Context: Creative Practices", we trained more than 50 teachers, educators and teacher librarians, from all over the country. During the sessions, the trainees had to undertake interdisciplinary creative projects and some of them provided continuity to these in their own schools and libraries. Among the trainees there were also members of the National Reading Plan (PNL 2027, 2018) staff who immediately accepted the examples provided of digital literature and incorporated them into the Plan's official website (<https://www.pnl2027.gov.pt/np4/recursos>).

Thus, gradually, we are achieving a domino effect despite the lack of financial resources. In fact, we added other training courses certified by the Scientific and Pedagogical Council for In-service Teacher Training. And from 2019/2020 on, I designed a training course that took place at the School of Arts and Humanities of the University of Coimbra having as target audience cooperating teachers, that is, supervisors of the students' teaching practice.

6.2. Higher education

And, in higher education, an introductory module on digital literature was included in the syllabus of the Masters in the Teaching of Portuguese. In 2018/2019, the University of Coimbra investment in digital literature at the post-graduate level included a Short Course of Combinatory Poetry and Textual Generation, taught by the poet Rui Torres and a former PHD student, Bruno Ministro. The team also organized the Teaching Digital Literature International Conference, where a roundtable discussion on the teaching of *Inanimate Alice* around the world took place, with participants from Canada, Portugal, Spain, Russia, and the United States of America.

6.3. Last steps

In 2021, images, videos and testimonies of the first Portuguese pedagogical experiment were introduced on the *Inanimate Alice* webpage, in “Featured Classrooms”.

In 2019, the University of Coimbra also signed a Cooperation Agreement with Novosibirsk State Technical University with the purpose, between others, of studying *Alice Inanimada* in Portuguese as Foreign Language classes. And as part of the Master's Degree in Portuguese as a Foreign/Second Language, the project coordinator is now developing the didacticization of the two episodes produced for Portuguese as an heritage language classes, implementing the “Atlantic Bridge”, that is, a cooperation protocol with Lesley University (Massachusetts, USA), and also as a consultant of the project “ST&RT with Alice: Examining an Innovation for STEM Teaching and Learning” (2021).

The Portuguese team, in collaboration with the production team, is committed to creating a pilot-experiment in 20 schools in Central Portugal. We expect that the pedagogic materials will be stored in a cloud, probably at the University of Coimbra, where they will be disseminated through licenses granted to this group of schools. We believe that, as in the experiments reported, the first episode will create curiosity in students and a wish to experience new adventures of Alice and we also hope that the publicity for the experiment on social media will raise interest in working with *Alice Inanimada* in other schools. In that regard, a profile of the protagonist (Alice Field) has already been created on Facebook.

From the point of view of funding, we can place some hope in Intermunicipal entities, which deals with the area of intelligent education. And, last news, *Alice Inanimada* is now being adapted in the Brazilian Linguistic variant and thus introduced in the world’s largest Lusophone-speaking country

7. Conclusion

Looking back, a lot has been done: four papers published, a roundtable about teaching *Inanimate Alice*, the pedagogical experiments, the teacher training sessions and the academic debates are an example of the project’s success. The project “Inanimate Alice: translating digital literature in an educational context” tried to respond to the challenges of teaching a digital literary work and thereby filling a gap in this area, in Portugal. And if funding has not yet been forthcoming, at least we cannot hide the rewarding work developed since 2015, nor the national and international recognition of the project.

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