

# The winding roads that lead to Coimbra

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In his spiritual tale published in 2016, Canadian award-winning novelist Yann Martel takes readers on a mysterious road trip to *The High Mountains of Portugal*. That rambling, somewhat magical mystery tour, in an ancient automobile prone to breaking down, provides an apt metaphor for the journey that steered the *Inanimate Alice* production towards Coimbra. In fact, there were two journeys, separate yet inseparable, the digital and the human. I too am a Canadian resident who has fallen deeply into Portugal's welcoming embrace. Having visited Coimbra on vacation and subsequently supported the efforts of the team at the Faculty of Letters at the University (FLUC)<sup>1</sup> to deliver our digital production to schools in Portugal, this narrative tells how Portuguese educators became aware of Alice and welcomed her into their midst.

*Inanimate Alice* relates the tale of a girl growing up dreaming of becoming a game designer one day. Told through a series of episodes of increasing complexity, it is a coming-of-age story that tells of her life growing up in the age of modern communications, all the while travelling the world with her itinerant mixed-race parents. It was not meant to become an educational resource but rather a new form of entertainment, a reading-from-the-screen experience taking advantage of the non-restrictive 'canvas' that born-digital delivery affords. While most people cannot imagine digital reading to be anything other than an electronic copy of a book in print, the creators of the series have demonstrated the progressive complexity of Alice's life as she grows up through immersive experiences of increasing depth. As Alice heads towards maturity, her digital creativity improves. This is her journey, told from her perspective; she is sharing with the viewer her life and experiences. While she narrates her adventures and portrays the

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<sup>1</sup> Team of the project "[Inanimate Alice: translating digital literature in an educational context](#)", coordinated by Ana Maria Machado.

ups-and-downs of everyday life, she is demonstrating her relentless acquisition of digital skills and consequently, inspiring students to follow in her footsteps.

The production is the backstory to the screenplay for an imagined movie that I compiled in 2004. The inspiration to write followed a succession of encounters with people so transfixed by their cellphones they became oblivious to their surroundings. Their loss of spatial awareness continued up to the moment of their colliding with me!

When the first episode was released in late 2005 the production team aimed to take advantage of the possibilities that digital delivery afforded to gain attention for Alice's story. Those early episodes certainly attracted a good deal of interest; however, it was only after studying the website's statistics did we notice that almost every returning visitor to the site was a teacher. It was at that point we decided to change direction to support the efforts of those educators who were using the title.

That first episode kicks off Alice's adventures in a remote part of Northern China when she is just eight years of age. Her peregrinations come to an end in the Big City at the edge of the world, where the events leading up to the crisis described in the movie take place. This is the concept, the outline structure that has guided the production team from the beginning. Throughout the tale, as her itinerant family pursues her father's uncertain career in the oil industry, Alice eagerly embraces the multi-lingual, multi-cultural world we occupy today.

Concurrently, the series captures the evolution of technology over the timeline of its production. In 2005, we were in the days of the dial-up modem and download speeds that would be laughable today. Alice has grown with the technology. Her skills have improved in keeping with technological developments. It is a welcome co-incidence that Alice has grown up through this era of extraordinary technological evolution; the developments taking place now; some 15 years after commencement describe the life and activities of the young lady who is 15 years older than when we first meet her.

When Alice first arrived on the scene, communications were not as onerous as they are today and the release of an Education Pack, a free resource, brought thousands of teachers into the conversation. Survey results from those insights and accompanying data provided rich detail describing how teachers were using the series in their instruction. That guidance informed future developments.

Selection by the European Commission for Intercultural Dialogue and eSkills initiatives stimulated translation of episodes into French, German, Italian and Spanish. At the time, I was living in Brussels and had a translation agency on my doorstep. It was fascinating to be close to the heart of the

EC while making this contribution. I suspect that this was the first moment when I understood that the further development of the materials became supportive of the protagonist's journey.

Similarly, a research paper "The Paratexts of *Inanimate Alice*"<sup>2</sup> details the importance of the narratives, created by others, that congregate around the title. This comprises not only the media coverage and academic investigation, but also the educational materials and student-created content inspired by the series. I don't think I fully understood the value of that at the time of the paper's publication. I most certainly do now.

*Inanimate Alice* was the first digitally-delivered text to be selected by Education Services Australia (ESA) for alignment with the national curriculum. In addition, ESA invested in 'Alice in Australia', a package of 12 magazine-style stories and remixable elements for younger students. In a later instance, episodes were translated into Indonesian and Japanese languages that, together with contextual journals providing "on the street" encounters, take students on language acquisition adventures to Jakarta and Kalimantan in Indonesia and 3 cities in Japan.

Along the way, we have been tempted to explore several avenues that seemingly hold much promise yet do not become permanent features on Alice's horizon. A shining example of this is Everloop, the delightful, curated platform for under 13's that, sadly, ran out of financial steam. Those detours provided experiences for Alice and the created materials have been retained within her portfolio that we hope will see the light of day once again.

A different perspective is provided by Edmodo, the student engagement platform that is a powerful connector of teachers and classrooms around the world. I have enjoyed collaborating with teachers and participating in discussions with students within the platform. Insights provided through this engagement clearly demonstrate the power of digital networking and collaboration.

All that has transpired thus far has been the result of the efforts of a relatively small cohort of early-adopters, those curious and energetic folks who are prepared to take risks in their work and commit time and effort to provide vital new experiences for students. Success stories are many and we hear of educators being amply rewarded by the enthusiastic reactions of their students. However, it has become apparent that if Alice is to reach the education mainstream it will be necessary to do more, much more, than tell the tale and provide waymarkers.

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2 STEWART, Gavin (2010). "The Paratexts of *Inanimate Alice*: Thresholds, Genre Expectations and Status". *Convergence* 16 (1): 57-74. <doi: [10.1177/1354856509347709](https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856509347709)>

That situation started to change when the team at FLUC committed to the translation of the series and supporting educational materials into Portuguese. This work, coupled with a plan to introduce the series to schools and train teachers in the effective use of the resources has attracted much interest across the country. After almost 3 years of determined effort, the FLUC team secured recognition for *Inanimate Alice* as the first ever digital text to be listed in Portugal's National Reading Plan. This was a wonderful moment for all concerned. That recognition opened the door for further development and distribution activities, the next phase in journey.

Looking to the future, an interdisciplinary team, the Inanimate Alice Research Group, has been initiated at Lesley University's Graduate School of Education in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Founded in 1909 as a school of education, the university uses progressive approaches to prepare more educators for the classroom than any other institution in that state.

Research indicates that literacy educators in the US have access to technology yet tend to use traditional methods of teaching. This is a problem for the born-digital generation who rely heavily on their digital skills for future employability. The group shares a vision to establish an Immersive Literacy Laboratory with *Inanimate Alice* as the foundational title. The first laboratory will be built in New Bedford, MA, a district hosting underserved and underperforming schools with multi-lingual, multicultural challenges and opportunities.

The group's paper, *The Compelling Nature of Transmedia Storytelling: Empowering 21st-Century Readers and Writers through Multimodality*, presented at the American Education Research Association conference, held in Toronto, April 2019, has been selected for publication by Springer<sup>3</sup>. Multi-year research grant proposals have been submitted to national institutions for the development of an intervention using the title as the core text and, with the *Big City Life* concept, the creation of the digital+physical environment that will provide pathways to STEM education and employment.

By establishing research projects on the Atlantic seaboard of the US and on Europe's Atlantic Coast and connecting the two teams, together we have established something of an Atlantic bridge that digitally spans the ocean. It is a curious co-incidence that the coastal region of southern Massachusetts, home of Lesley University, is also the home of the Portuguese speaking community in North America, first established by adventurous fishermen several hundred years ago and which retains a thriving population to this day.

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3 HOVIOUS, Amanda, Shinas, Valerie Harlow, and Harper, Ian (2020). "The Compelling Nature of Transmedia Storytelling: Empowering Twenty First-Century Readers and Writers Through Multimodality." *Technology, Knowledge and Learning*.  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10758-020-09437-7>

Thanks to attendance at conferences in Cork, Ireland and in Coimbra not only have those relationships been firmly established, but additional connections have been made offering the prospect of further digital bridge-building to come in the near future. At heart, Alice's story is about connecting people and places through digital communications. The road that led to Coimbra leads elsewhere and I, for one, am looking forward to the journey.

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