Alice Inanimada (episode 1) and *Avó e neto contra vento e areia*, by Teolinda Gersão: how to legitimately read digital literature in the current Portuguese syllabus for secondary education

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ABSTRACT

Inanimate Alice is a unique example of the effectiveness of electronic literature on young readers. In Portugal, the impact of this story and the way in which it proposes contact with the ecology of digital media justify the acknowledgement of its aesthetic merits in school education, where electronic works are still absent. However, the syllabus is not a closed system that prevents any approach to artistic works not listed in the official reading list, and is open to the inclusion of other texts. *Avó e neto contra vento e areia* (*Grandmother and Grandson against Wind and Sand*), a short story by Teolinda Gersão, is an excellent literary vehicle for facilitating that inclusion, through the thematic and symbolic dialogue that can be established with *Inanimate Alice*. This dialogue involved a pedagogic experiment in which *Inanimate Alice* was extensively read in close relation with Teolinda Gersão's story. The report of the experiment shows several possibilities for joint exploration and use of these works.

KEYWORDS

digital literature; literary education; curriculum.

RESUMO

Alice Inanimada é um caso singular de eficácia da literatura eletrónica junto do público juvenil. Em Portugal, o impacto da obra e a exemplaridade com que propõe um contacto com a ecologia do digital justificam que o reconhecimento dos seus méritos estéticos seja ensaiado na escola, onde as obras eletrónicas não figuram. O currículo não é, contudo, um sistema fechado e impeditivo de contactos com produção artística não contemplada no *syllabus* oficial, o que abre vias para a entrada da literatura digital no seu âmbito. O conto *Avó e neto contra vento e areia*, de Teolinda Gersão, constitui um excelente veículo literário para essa entrada, através do diálogo temático e simbólico que estabelece com *Alice Inanimada*. Esse diálogo sustentou uma experiência de didatização de *Alice Inanimada* em regime de leitura extensiva, em articulação com o conto de Teolinda Gersão. O relato da experiência apresenta-nos possibilidades de exploração conjunta das duas obras.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

literatura digital; educação literária; currículo.

I. INTRODUCTION

School is an old institution and old institutions seldom assimilate innovation easily, particularly when innovation implies or requires drastic changes to long-term habits and *modi operandi*. In spite of this, society and educational authorities tend (and even fight) to push every progress in their fields into the school domain, considering the strength and the wide-ranging nature of what is taught and learned in a classroom. School normalizes and makes knowledge steady, legitimate, and socially valuable. That is why, as far as reading is concerned, school has for so long been closely attached to the idea of a canon, and that is also why, in recent times, there has been a somewhat nervous struggle among new authors and texts to enter the syllabus. Indeed, this has been the reason for a certain level of passionate and inflamed discussion on the topic, from both not so specialized opinion makers in the press as well as academic researchers.

What difficulties towards school canonization can we anticipate for a literary work which, besides being new (meaning "recent"), is issued in an exotic shape or set in a format which challenges the traditional features of a text? Certainly, many more obstacles can be expected in this case, and that is exactly what happens when the text in question is digital. If we bear in mind what Guillory (1993: 30) reminds us about the impact of "institutional agendas" in the debate about what is canonical or noncanonical, it is no surprise that products belonging to this new way of making literature challenge the concept of *writing* itself, which goes far beyond Guillory's concerns as to whether a piece of *writing* may be included in a given syllabus or not. Digital literature somehow forces the common idea of literature as *written work* (in the definition of "literature" available at www.britannica.com, for instance) and challenges a series of other traditional features of what is usually conveyed in a literary text, so it is not surprising that works created and available on a digital platform, for the experience of readers through technological means, face extra restraints when trying to gather some sort of institutional recognition, let alone formal canonization or reading recommendation in the curricular context.

Inanimate Alice, a *digital story*, as Kate Pullinger (2015: 213), one of its creators, describes it, can be viewed as an exception to this common scenario.

Its canonical fortune in several contexts, of which its inclusion in reading programmes and school syllabuses in more than one country[1] represents a major step in its affirmation both as a literary work and a multi-purpose teaching device, has given it an unmatched status, as far as digital literature aiming at young readers is concerned.

Several research studies and teacher testimonies account for the exemplary interest in *Inanimate Alice* as a "transmedia narrative" (Fleming 2013: 370) involving "cross-media" technology to create a reading and learning experience that requires educators to have a new perspective on pedagogy and literary literacy, which can no longer work around the existence and the appeal of digital artistic works especially designed for the fruition of young people and containing aesthetic, social and motivational attributes that make it essential in a renewed understanding of the place literature occupies in reading skills in general and, more specifically, in school reading guidelines. *Inanimate Alice* has proved an inexhaustible resource for the exploration of several language and literature subjects and there are many papers exemplifying procedures and topics which can be easily applied to the reading of this digital narrative. Zandstra (2013: 5-6), for instance, provides a planned scheme of work with a sequence of five English lessons in which several topics are considered, from grammar to narrative structure.

However, as described by Machado *et al.* (2018: 97-99), in the Portuguese curriculum (and differently from countries such as Canada and Australia), the activities of reading, comprehension and interpretation of digital literature in the context of first language learning are not yet specifically assigned; even though the official programme guidelines for the pedagogic area of literary education do not exclude, and even support, exercises which link the study of printed literature with other artistic expressions, including those branching within literature itself, like digital literary works, for instance.[2] However, this narrow breach in the structure of the programme allows teachers to bring digital texts to the classroom and to establish linguistic, literary and cultural bridges between them and the printed texts in the

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1 In the case of Portugal, the Portuguese translation of *Inanimate Alice*, which is currently being produced as part of a project named "Inanimate Alice: Translation of Digital Literature in an Educational Context", coordinated by Ana Maria Machado, from the Centre for Portuguese Literature at Coimbra University, has been included in the lists of the National Reading Programme (Plano Nacional de Leitura 2027). *Inanimate Alice* (*Alice Inanimada*, in Portuguese) is the first digital literary work to be included in this institutional programme, which was officially announced in April 2018.

2 This can be checked in the official syllabus for the subject of Portuguese, which is available online at https://www.dge.mec.pt/sites/default/files/ficheiros/programa_metas_curriculares_portugues_secundario.pdf: objective 11, skill 2, p. 85. This item describes one of the skills students of secondary level are supposed to train: "To acknowledge the role of different supports (printed, digital and visual) and circulation contexts (press, internet, ...) in the composition and reception of texts".

syllabus, thus offering their students access to new forms and models of literary creation and display. This means that there is a new field for the exploration of electronic works such as *Inanimate Alice* in the classroom that goes beyond those listed by Hovious (2013) and tracked by Albuquerque e Aguilar (2018: 89). This new field deals with the dialogue between literary texts composed of different media (printed, linear, conventional vs. electronic, multimodal, serial) and invites readers to confront texts thematically comparable in order to identify similarities, distinctive traits and possible parallels in narrative structures, even when apparently unlike objects are involved.

In the Portuguese syllabus for 7th grade students, the list of literary printed works to be read and studied in class includes a short story by Teolinda Gersão, *Avó e neto contra vento e areia*, which was published for the first time in 2007 in a collection of short stories named *A mulher que prendeu a chuva* (*The Woman who Stole the Rain*).[3] For several reasons – a partial account of which is provided by Mello *et al.* (2019: 359-362) – this short story has proved to be an excellent instrument to bring *Inanimate Alice* to the literature classroom, not for motivational reasons or for the mere (yet justifiable) satisfaction of young people using technology at school (thus extending their daily habits), but according to a pedagogic rationale. In fact, these two pieces of literature, however different in their cultural context, origin, human experience involved, intrinsic features, narrative properties and character framing, are likely to reciprocally illuminate their literary meaning if studied side by side. This approach does not underscore the pedagogic value of *Inanimate Alice* for its technological modernity or for the appeal of its narrative medium – it expresses this original and successful fictional device as a literary achievement and tries to focus on the idea that, no matter the medium used, what really matters when there is a piece of literature to be appreciated by a class is the personal gathering of meaning, the joy of the interpretative experience and the aesthetic emotion one may collect from the whole process:

> The teacher of literature, then, seeks to help specific human beings discover the satisfactions of literature. Teaching becomes a matter of improving the individual's capacity to evoke meaning from the text by leading him to reflect self-critically on this process. The starting point for growth must be each individual's efforts to marshal his resources and organize a response relevant to the stimulus of the printed page. The teacher's task is to foster fruitful interactions – or, more precisely, transactions – between individual readers and individual literary works (Rosenblatt 1976: 26-27).

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3 An English translation of this short story was published in *The Threepenny Review* in 2006. The title chosen by the translator Margaret Jull Costa was "Grandmother and Grandson against Wind and Sand".

This constructive view of literary experience as an interaction and a transaction is fundamental and useful when it comes to conveying the pedagogical environment that literature requires to obtain personal meaning, whether it is enjoyed in a "printed page", as stated above by Louise Rosenblatt, or through the screen of a digital apparatus. This was the learning context that inspired the reading experience described in this paper.

II. THE EXPERIENCE: SETTING AND DEVELOPMENT OF AN APPROACH

The lessons were held in the school library with a class of 21 7th grade students, who were 12 years old, on average. The school is attended by primary and secondary classes and is situated in the inner region of Central Portugal, in a semi-rural community based around a small town of about 5000 inhabitants. The initial part of the teaching unit included the unabridged reading of the short story by Teolinda Gersão, in terms quite similar to those described in the didactic experience carried out by Mello *et al.* (2019). After some post-reading activities aiming at understanding the plot and the characters, the students were asked to orally express their thoughts about some features of this short story that might, after watching the Portuguese edition of Episode 1 of *Inanimate Alice* ("China"), lead to the recognition of certain similarities, involving narrative structure, character behaviour and fictional details. *Avó e neto contra vento e areia* (*Grandmother and Grandson against Wind and Sand*) is based on a simple and linear set of events involving two characters – a grandmother and her grandson, who is a child she is looking after while his parents are at work. They are spending a warm, sunny morning on the beach when two things come and disturb their initial harmony: the grandmother loses her glasses, which would not be so troubling if there had not been a sudden gust of wind kicking up sand around them. When trying to find their way from the beach to go back home, the boy's foot is pricked with a thorn. Without her glasses and unable to carry her grandson because of the condition of her heart, the grandmother is assaulted by feelings of panic and painful memories of when she lost a child (son? daughter?) somewhere in the past. When she falls weak on the ground and unable to proceed, a familiar dog appears next to them and the way to safety is swiftly recovered in the end. These events design a narrative pattern similar to Episode 1 of *Inanimate Alice* and, even before watching it, the students had the chance to orally discuss some important aspects using a series of questions which would supposedly function as hints for the following assumptions:

i.   the existence of powerful forces that disturb the narrative starting point of the characters, but which are fortunately (and somehow unexpectedly) solved at the end of the story;

ii.   the presence of a narrative voice that imparts the intimate feelings and wishes of the characters towards the distressing succession of events, namely the wish to be back home, safe and sound;

iii.   the narrative of the experience of being lost and/or losing someone close (or the probability of facing such loss) and the expression of the outcoming feelings of grief or relief;

iv.   the presence of narrative elements and references that acquire a symbolic meaning resulting from their function in the story or from their relation to the characters (the weather, the dark sky, the wind, the photographs, the glasses, the dog, open or closed spaces, among others).

This narrative pattern can be found and is directly linkable to the first two episodes of *Inanimate Alice*[4], and those who are acquainted with this work can easily point out features of the story that fit within these four items. That is what the students in the experiment discussed immediately after watching the first episode of the series. Using a similar set of questions about Episode 1, the students were able to draw out important conclusions that support the proposed interpretative simile between the printed story and the digital story:

i.   Alice and her mother are unable to contact or locate Alice´s father, go through a series of practical difficulties until, in the end, they find his whereabouts and recover their initial normality after re-establishing the family nucleus;

ii.   Alice is a first person narrator who shares her most intimate feelings with the users, directly imparted by her or somehow transferred to her digital avatar, Brad – with those feelings being very similar to those conveyed by the grandmother in Teolinda Gersão's short story;

iii.   Alice and her mother go through a journey during the night, without any means of communicating but find relief in the end, when they relocate Alice's father and thus experience a feeling very similar to that described in Teolinda Gersão's story;

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4 When this pedagogic experiment took place, the episodes of Inanimate Alice available in a Portuguese translation were the first and the second. Although the students had the chance to watch both episodes, only the first episode, "China" was subject to reading exercises.

iv.   Throughout Alice's story some elements convey symbolic signifi-
       cance to the characters in close connection to the events and the
       stages of the plot (the darkness, the photographs of flowers sent by
       Alice to her missing father, the wish for a meal at a restaurant or
       the conversation about a pet dog, for instance).

The discussion of these items allowed students to go beyond the discur-
sive differences and helped them, in a following step, to take notes about
literary features common to both works, not only in terms of plot, but also
regarding narrative technique, tone of voice[5], composition of character, ev-
ocation of human experience and feelings, language and style.

After exploring the strong similarities between the two stories in terms
of content, human significance and symbolic interpretation, the students
were invited to check and analyse the existence of surface differences, the
majority of which have to do with formal features resulting from the dis-
tinctive strategies employed in the creation of the object: the straight, linear
narration of events using the traditional protocol of printed texts, in the
case of *Avó e neto contra vento e areia*; a "multi-platform narrative" (Fleming
2013: 370) that clusters different types of languages and representational
apparatuses in an immersive storytelling device, in the case of *Inanimate
Alice*. For this purpose, the exercise suggested to the students in the experi-
ment tried to take advantage of the seduction brought about in readers un-
accustomed to electronic literature by an object such as *Inanimate Alice*. The
exposure to Episodes 1 and 2 of the series was, in fact, something new, a
situation to which students responded with a mixture of strangeness and
enthusiasm, so it seemed natural that the productive stage of these reading
activities would require some practice on the discursive and technical fea-
tures of a digital work.

The students, in pairs and sharing a computer, were asked to watch Ep-
isode 1 of *Inanimate Alice* (and Episode 2, if they liked), paying special atten-
tion to the different languages and devices for conveying meaning employed
in the making of the object, namely text, image (either steady or moving),
sound effects (noise, natural sounds, voice, music), lighting effects (contrast
between light and darkness, brightness, colour) and interactive features (in-
serted screens, side bars or games). After this introductory activity, the

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5 Ferreira (2013: 73) defines *Inanimate Alice* as a serial and digital *Bildungsroman* and
  considers that this *genre* tendency in today's fiction for young readers has a substantial
  impact in the discursive construction of each episode of the series, in which the readers
  face a monologue of a child / a girl with herself, but using their own eyes, feelings and
  senses. This sort of embodiment of Alice, as a character, in each reader, through the
  technological device used to support the fictional arrangement of the story is one of
  the justifications for her being a *professed* "inanimate" character, which means, more
  inanimate than fictional characters, intrinsically, already must be.

main aim of which was to offer students some time to analyse the distinctive nature of electronic literature, taking into account the multiplicity of discursive elements it accumulates to build a narrative and make it appealing to the reader, the pairs of students advanced to a productive phase, certainly the most demanding (but that also proved to be the most challenging and fun), which involved an exercise in transposition. In this exercise, each pair of students was invited to edit a small excerpt of the short story written by Teolinda Gersão, putting it into a script for conversion into a digital narrative.

This operation was rather complex and was guided by a succession of steps. In the first place, students had to imagine how the excerpt they were given might be structured if it were moved into an electronic environment. Digital media consist of a communicative ecology which students immediately recognize as different from their usual experience as readers of analogic texts and (in the case of twelve-year-old teenagers) as native users of technological devices, so there was no difficulty in understanding the motive and the aim of this task. Since the original analogic text was the starting point, the linguistic material of the narrative would be the first to be modified according to simple criteria: (*i*) Are all the sentences / phrases / words in the excerpt necessary to convey meaning in a digital version of this story? (*ii*) Which sentences / phrases / words would have to be added if this story were digitally narrated? (*iii*) Which devices would replace the deleted sentences / phrases / words in the digital edition of this short story?

In the experiment with the students, this was the task in the edition of an electronic version of the fragments from the short story that proved more difficult to accomplish. Few pairs of students altered the original text and none of those who did so made any additions. Students only felt the need to delete some parts of the original sentences from the short story, which is the natural option when undertaking a media substitution exercise. Moreover, students are used to recognising printed discourse as the central element in a class of Portuguese Language and Literature, and when they are invited to manipulate printed texts and insert them in a digital context, they tend to respect and revere the layer of meaning within them, because, in their minds, this material continues to be the main support for communication, narration and transference of ideas. And this is certainly one of the reasons why students do not easily discard or add text when they have the chance to do so – there is a sense of sacredness about the written / printed word that makes it (still) indispensable when meaning, narration and literature are concerned.

After adjusting the printed text to its new environment, the students proceeded to add or convert non-linguistic signs in order to obtain a "script" of a digital edition of different fragments of the short story by Teolinda

Gersão. As stated above, this was the task in which students proved to be more creative, imaginative and capable of taking risks to convey new meaning. Although the teacher provided some orientation and suggestions when requested, the majority of the groups showed autonomy in the development of this exercise and produced some interesting and original solutions to the problem of adjusting, amplifying and complexifying printed material into an object made of multiple layers. Here is one example of this conversion exercise as solved by students (the different colours indicate the different supports suggested by the groups; struck through phrases correspond to deleted segments in the original text):

Text to be edited	Notes
image of a beach under a cloudy sky	steady image
Indeed, it was impossible to understand just why the sky had grown suddenly	
noise of wind, growing stronger and stronger; image of a cloud	drawing of a cloud
overcast and why the wind was blowing even harder. The blue disappeared	
getting darker and heavier; sound of wind blowing, whistling	natural sound
behind heavy clouds, and the sand started whistling around them.	
sound of strong wind blowing; dim image of two figures walking uneasily	moving image
The wind was scooping the sand up higher and higher, the sand beat in their	
magnified image of an eye closing; sound of strong wind blowing	moving image
faces, and they had to screw up their eyes	
game including a maze in which the reader has to find the correct path to escape, choosing the right arrows using the mouse / touchpad / touchscreen	interactive game
to keep it out.	
image of an old woman moving her mouth; speech bubble filled in with the words pronounced by the grandmother	moving image
"Goodness me", ~~said the grandmother~~.	

Figure 1. Excerpt 2

One unexpected aspect of this exercise was the diversity of solutions (certainly suggested from watching *Inanimate Alice*) found by the students to remake the printed short story into a digital multimodal narrative. They felt comfortable adapting the short story to the new narrative frame and found it easy to recompose the original meaning through different strategies, techniques and languages, although with unequal effectiveness. In the six excerpts handed out to the students, the resources chosen for a digital edition were, in order of frequency, (*i*) image (steady or, in most cases, moving; drawings, graphics or, in most cases, photograms; colour or black and white; contrast between darkness and light; in some cases, using recognizable pictures – from paintings, films or advertisements), (*ii*) sound (natural noises, voice, music), and (*iii*) games.

Due to lack of time, the activities carried out by the students did not include a third dimension which had been initially planned, related to the symbolic and human significance of the characters in both narratives. In fact, both works appeal to the experience of the human being as a *wayfarer*, someone involved in a journey through a territory, experiencing moments of displacement, drift and loss, but also some grateful times of joy, solidarity and togetherness. As far as this topic is concerned, Alice's journey with her mother in the night through the north of China and the grandmother's crossing of the beach, lost, almost blind and dragging her injured grandson are the literary counterpart of other artistic representations of human experience over time, whether in sculpture, painting or music. If the grandmother in Teolinda Gersão's short story makes us think about how easily our seemingly calm and peaceful life may become out of control, distressing and veer from its natural path, in Alice's episodes we witness the transformation of this accidental experience of anxiety into a permanent lifestyle, linked to present-day patterns of human existence, family bonds and social forms of interaction. The literary accounts of Alice's wandering around the world depict the anxiety associated with modern nomadism and, *mutatis mutandis*, can even be illuminated by Goethe's concept of *Weltliteratur*: what this girl goes through because of her permanent dislocation around the world is converted into a juvenile-oriented digital literary work of art that discusses and reveals a lot about the idea of mankind in this era of interculturality, with its annulation of old frontiers, the appearance of new frontiers, freedom and confinement in a planet never felt so small and so menaced.

It is important, regardless of their age, that the readers of *Inanimate Alice* in a school context take, from the reading of narratives like Teolinda Gersão's *Avó e neto contra vento e areia*, the opportunity to analyse and discuss the profound roots and meanings of what the characters in these stories undergo, feel, suffer and hope when crossing their territories with a somewhat

clear purpose in their mind. These modern representations of the classic *homo viator*, here embodied in a nomadic young girl and a lost old woman, can successfully take on new relevance and personal value when put side by side with paintings like *The Winter Traveller* by Charles Spencelayh or *Winter Landscape with Homecoming Farmers* by Julius von Klever, or pieces of music like the first *Lied* from Franz Schubert's *Winterreise* (D 911, a setting of poems by Wilhelm Müller). The aesthetic and cultural depth of these associations will vary according to the skills and the maturity of the students, but will certainly not leave them unresponsive towards the extension and the time-lessness of what these works are about. When doing this, students will no longer be discussing what distinguishes the stories technically and formally – they will instead be discussing the human significance that links those sto-ries to each other and to other pieces of art beyond those distinctions and that is the truly important point when studying literature.

III. CONCLUSION

Taking this experiment into account and, most of all, the opportunities to discuss language, literature, art in general and, beyond these, the interest of stories in our lives, teachers do not necessarily have to feel anxious about the presence of digital literature in their classrooms or, when the time comes, in the school syllabus. Printed texts will always keep their place and will always prompt enriching dialogues with these objects which, in spite of being new and challenging in their form and function, keep the general mys-terious purpose inherent to any literary work of art. As Zoë Sadokierski rec-ognizes in an essay from 2013 republished in her blog *The Book Is...*, what really matters is that literature and books (in whatever form) keep their role in civilization, adapting themselves "dynamically to the interests and experi-ence of the reader".[6] And, as one of the central locations for the existence of literature and books as such, school can never be excluded from this mission.

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