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Bury me, my love: (non)choosing reading paths

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Introduction

This contribution falls within the domain of children's and young adults' digital literature and, in particular, in that segment of the field aimed at exploring both the potential and the limits of reading digital literary works at school. In the last decade, all over the world, a rising interest in digital reading and in electronic literature in formal learning contexts (from both the academic community and educational actors, from teachers to stakeholders), has led to a large body of scientific literature on this subject, from very different theoretical perspectives and through various empirical approaches. Researchers conducting comparative studies, eye-tracking experiments, ethnological observations, case studies, as well as some large-scale analyses, have tried to describe young readers' cognitive performance, their literary learning, their attitudes, and their motivations, in different digital reading situations and through different devices.

Despite this growing and theoretically varied interest, a lot still has to be done, especially as regards the analysis of teachers' practices and reception experiences. In France, specifically, where I used to work and where I conducted most of the observations discussed in my PhD dissertation, only a few studies have considered actual school practices or observed students' affective responses to digital literature creations, both in terms of cognitive performance and emotional reactions.

This is why I chose to study a group of young readers rarely considered in scientific literature, especially in the context of French schools, thus focusing my first research into primary school pupils. In this context, I assumed that digital literature could have been integrated into the regular French literature curriculum, as the current instructions defined by the Ministry of Public Education include digital content among those texts that teachers may use as reading materials, to approach different genres, to build a common literary culture, or to even stimulate their students' curiosity and appreciation for reading activities.

With such a premise, I tried to work with digital literature from two perspectives. The first involved introducing teachers to the specificity of digital texts and to the cruciality of their interactive and multimodal environment for the reading process. The second perspective involved attempting to include the school usage of digital texts in the theoretical framework of the literature teaching programs, looking at the skills and competencies that are targeted at each school level, as well as at the personal, emotional, and psychosocial environment that may affect each reader's reaction, understanding, and interpretative process.

In order to describe the actual reception phenomena (and eventually to guide the formal introduction of e-literature creations in the French literature programs), I have thus considered a selection of different literary apps in different school levels¹, and focused on the information revealed by readers' verbal expressions and actual gestures on the screen to describe some elements of the readers' understanding and interpretation of digital stories. Those experiences allowed me to understand how readers may handle the narrative interface and manage to combine the multimodal materials composing the message to build their comprehension. I could grasp how they may understand a digital story, whether or not they perceive its digital and technological environment as part of the narrative, and, finally, if they recognize their own intervention on the screen as a determinant of its progression. In these experiences, a strong correlation between students' gestures and movements on the screen and the comprehension of the story emerged, proving that "narrative manipulations" [Acerra, 2019] of the screen are, indeed, "actualized interpretations" [Jeanneret, 2000].

Nevertheless, these experiences couldn't clarify how non-linear reading paths and discontinuous narrative flows may be perceived and analyzed by young readers in a school

¹ Two adaptations of contemporary picturebooks were read in four primary school classes (*I can't wait* [France Télévision, 2013] and *With a few bricks* [Dieudonne, 2014]), while an interactive literary narrative experience (*Loss of grasp* [Bouchardon, 2016]) and a scrolling graphic novel (*Phallaina* [France Télévision, 2016]) were respectively analyzed in two middle and high-schools groups [Acerra, 2019; Acerra, Raux, Kergoulay, Louichon, 2018]

reading situation. All the chosen digital works previously analyzed were in fact linear narratives, leaving little room for readers' free wandering into the fictional world and accepting only a limited number of movements and actions.

Furthermore, as three out of four literary apps used in our previous studies are characterized by a strong print-shaped format and design (and are even in some cases remediations of previous texts), we supposed that they may not introduce readers to a "different" way of experiencing literature. We thus hypothesized that other forms of digital creations may engage the so-called "fictional empathy", which is defined as the capacity to "produce a mental representation of a fictional universe, imagining the actions and the thoughts of the characters belonging in this universe" [Larrivé, 2015]. Based on cognitive processes that happen to be very similar to those normally provoked by social interactions, this form of empathy is crucial for young readers, as it may change their involvement in the reading activities and, consequently, their understanding of the material itself.

Methodology

For these reasons, we tried to work with a digital creation that we supposed likely to both expose students to a non-linear fictional environment and to stimulate their fictional empathy.

We worked with the app *Bury me, my love* [Plug In Digital, 2017], a non-linear fictional creation, loosely inspired by a true story that appeared in 2015 in the French newspaper *Le Monde*² and which was named after an Arabic expression meaning 'I love you, don't die before me'. Defined as a 'game of reality' by its creators, the story is partially determined by the literary device, which is programmed to offer different situations according to the readers' choices. The story follows the vicissitudes of Nour, a young Syrian woman who tries to flee her country to find refuge in Europe. It appears as a conversation through a text messaging app between the protagonist and her companion, who is embodied by the reader him/herself. By following the flow of the exchanges, the story progresses, and the journey of the protagonist is at the same time established and set on a path towards one of its 19 possible endings. The time of the narration also depends on the reader, who can either respect the rhythm of the conversation, intended to reproduce the actual chronology of the journey, or else accelerate the narration in order to read the sequence of the SMS in a continuous flow. In both cases, each choice is irreversible and has unexpected consequences for the narrative. A double discontinuity

² https://www.lemonde.fr/international/visuel/2015/12/18/dans-le-telephone-d-une-migrante-syrienne_4834834_3210.html#/

in the reading is thus installed: one concerns the narrative, the deployment of which may abruptly deviate from its most likely issue; the other concerns the reading act itself, quickly but systematically interrupted by the necessity of selecting a crucial preference among a limited set of options.

This digital work, both for its theme, strongly anchored to the current socio-political situation, and for its simulation of a real conversation, through the SMS language, with its own particular codes and flow, seemed well suited to the investigation of our hypothesis, as it may stimulate the identifying and affective processes necessary for effectively reading fictional texts.

Moreover, its reading environment, which implies a proactive construction of the story and a compulsory binary choice with an unchangeable effect on the narrative, may engage readers in a new reading experience and, at the same time, redefine the narrative structures, that are – of course – a part of the language programs.

32 high-school students were involved in the experience. The protocol, defined together with the teacher, Gwendoline Kergoulay, who is also a PhD student working on digital poetry, entailed several steps: a pre-test, intended to verify the technological equipment of the students and their actual abilities to download and run an app; a two-week reading phase, during which students were asked to fill out a reading journal; a final test, consisting of 50 questions concerning the reading settings and conditions; the relations towards the characters and the device; the SMS simulation and its effects on the reading; the perception of the readers' roles; and the multimodal comprehension. Unlike our previous experiences, students were not experiencing digital literature for the first time: their teacher had introduced a selection of digital creations, presented some genres, and explained how to treat the information in a multimodal environment. Moreover, she provided an introductory course aimed at recontextualizing the app within the Syrian conflict.

Results

Results are presented in order to underline the main elements observed: first, we will examine how the device seems to have determined – or at least shaped – the readers' relation to the characters and their perception of the role they played in the story. We will then consider the influence of the SMS language on the reading. Finally, we will discuss how the binary-option reading experience was perceived overall.

a. Device and relation to the characters

The device seems to have fostered a close relation to the characters, and even to have determined part of the students' capacity to understand the characters' emotions and needs.

Several statements in the written test indicate that the device or, in some cases, the format of the story, influenced their capacity to feel as though they were in the "*characters' shoes*", and to perceive that particular kind of emotional connection that is silently installed between readers and fictional characters:

"Her journey was very hard, and with the telephone sometimes you could really feel in her shoes. So she is very brave".

"The format of the story brings you way closer to the characters, you can help make decisions and you act as if the character was close to you, he becomes a friend of yours and you have to help him".

Push notifications seem to have been influential in this respect. Students declared that they were surprised about the first pushes and they felt more and more stressed (16/32) and worried (17/32) for Nour with each new notification. Sixteen students indicated that were even stressed about her silences ("*I was scared and thought that something bad happened to her*"); indeed, they sometimes recalled precisely the timing of the exchanges, to underline the anxiety of her delays in answering:

"I was surprised, I thought that she may have had problems since the last time we spoke (I spoke to her at 10:00 am and she answered me only the day after, at 3:00 p.m.). I was afraid she was in trouble".

Similarly, the **sms language** was spontaneously mentioned by 1/3 of the students as one of the elements having fostered their feeling of closeness with the characters. Three reasons are frequently given.

The first one refers to an impression of familiarity, clearly based on a consideration of the texting practice as a social act: "*The sms gives the impression of being close, and of knowing each other*".

The second refers to the impression of coherence and immediacy, as the messaging flows remove the space separating the fictional world from the real one and allow a real-time interaction with the fictional world: "[I felt close to the characters] *because I could speak*

through messages and receive an answer according to mine. That was nice, for once, to speak with the characters.”

Finally, the third reason implies a sentiment of participation in the fictional events, and a feeling that the characters temperaments and personalities were better understood: “[I felt close to the characters] *because of the messages, which really make you part of the characters’ stories. You can do something for them and better understand who they are*”.

In fact, the literary device seems to have influenced the readers’ impressions of the characters and helped their characterization overall.

Though they generally described Nour as “*courageous*”, “*prudent*” and “*wise*”, at least 5 participants have considered her “*incapable of making her own decisions*”:

“I think she is courageous and very thoughtful but from time to time she does not know how to make a decision and we must choose for her, because she won’t, and because that still is the aim of the game”. In this case, the student seems to have felt compelled to act in her place – and, eventually, seems to have linked his intervention to a more general “aim of the game”.

Of course, describing Majd, the protagonist’s boyfriend, proved to be more difficult. Despite his protective attitude, which is noted in several answers, students tend to view him as “*mysterious*” and “*hard to define*”, as they recognize he shares his personality with them:

“This character represents a bit us, so I don’t know what to say about him”.

“The character of Majd is in fact a bit controlled by the gamer; he changes every day, according to reader’s choice, so he is hard to describe”.

“Majd is just me, he is a nice character: it’s thanks to him that the story can progress. He is fun, wise and smart”.

“He is a boy like me, thanks to him I could really identify to the story”.

b. Reader’s role in the story

This brings to our second point, concerning the readers’ perceptions about their own role in the narrative.

Some readers perceived themselves as co-helpers of the characters (“*I had the role of a guide, a bit like someone really helping*”, “*I helped Nour and Madj make decisions and let Nour know*”

what was the best for her trip”, “*I was Nour’s counsellor, someone she could trust and who always supported her*”) and considered their interaction as “*determinant*” for her story.

They proved able to recall their interventions and often showed a critical evaluation of their choices:

“I chose a too dangerous option and let her leave on an inflatable boat. I knew she could have died and eventually she didn’t make it”, “I always tried what I considered the rightest and the safest thing, but my choices were often too risky and finally quite dangerous. So, as soon as I could, I tried to change the events and to push her into a safer place”.

Unchosen reading paths

Nevertheless, the app did not allow readers to change their answers or, consequently, to see what it would have happened by selecting a different option (unless the app was relaunched, and the journey restarted).

This constrained approach was generally faced with a certain reluctance. Students clearly perceived the limits of the binary options on their free choice and were often frustrated by the impossibility of providing their own directions and solutions. 15 students precisely identified moments and passages where they felt uncomfortable with the proposed set of pre-defined answers and would have preferred to write their own solutions. They didn’t always agree with the solutions suggested by the app (“[I would have wanted to write my own messages] *when Majd suggested solutions that I approved, then added a message that changed a bit the meaning*”), were upset about the automatic responses sometimes programmed by the text (“*when Majd answers Nour by himself, and I cannot intervene at all*”), and disliked the severe consequences of apparently trivial choices. Interestingly, only a few participants recognized these constraints as part of the narrative artifice and only three students related their appreciation for the story to its binary choices progression (“*it is really interesting to know which issue you can obtain thanks to the multiple choices*”, “[I liked the story] *because there are several choices and all leading to different endings*”, “*I would say this story is worth reading as you can decide the course of the story thanks to your choices*”).

Conclusions

In conclusion, it seems that such a literary creation may help students identify with the fictional characters. The device recreates an environment mirroring the real world and fosters, through its codes and structures, that “*psychic disposition*” [Larrivé, 2014] necessary to understand their

situations and emotions. The SMS language, the push notifications, and the real-time response of the screen trigger the affective participation of the students and the “shared and playful simulation” [Schaeffer, 1999] capable of bringing fictional characters to life. The resistance to accepting the constrained path can be interpreted in the same vein: once implicated in the story, once involved with the characters and responsible for their destiny, a binary selection of predefined answers seems insufficient for the readers, who want their own sentiments, hopes and concerns to be reflected in the story. In this respect, *Bury me, my love* appears to be an excellent instrument in the French class context, as it demands a critical reflection on the reading contracts, on the codes of the e-literary communication, and on the mechanisms of the interactive experience.

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Literary apps

With a few bricks, Dieudonne, 2014.

Loss of grasp, Bouchardon, 2016.

I can't wait, France Télévision, 2013.

Phallaina, France Télévision, 2016.

Bury me, me love, Plug In Digital, 2017.

Abstract

Keywords: literary apps; children's e-lit; multimodal reading

This contribution falls within the domain of children's and young adults' digital literature and, in particular, in that segment of the field aimed at exploring both the potential and the limits of reading digital literary works at school. In order to describe the actual reception process (and eventually to accompany the formal introduction of e-lit creations in the French literature school programs), a selection of literary apps was presented to eight groups of young readers, across different school levels: two adaptations of contemporary picturebooks were read in four primary school classes (*I can't wait* [France Télévision, 2013] and *With a few bricks* [Dieudonne, 2014]), while an interactive literary narrative experience (*Loss of grasp* [Bouchardon, 2016]) and a scrolling graphic novel (*Phallaina* [France Télévision, 2016]) were respectively analyzed in two middle and high-schools groups. If those experiences lead to describe how young readers handle the narrative interface and manage to combine the multimodal materials composing the message to build their comprehension, they couldn't clarify how non-linear reading paths and discontinuous narrative flows may be perceived and analyzed in a school reading situation. We thus involved a sample of 32 high-school students in the reading of *Bury me, me love* [Plug In Digital, 2017], a non-linear fictional creation (inspired from a true story) partially determined by the literary device, that offers different issues according to the readers' choices. Defined as a "game of reality", the story follows the vicissitudes of Nour, a young Syrian woman who tries to flee her country, and appears as a conversation via a messaging app between the protagonist and his companion, who is embodied by the reader him/herself. By following the flow of the exchanges, the story progresses, and the journey of the protagonist is at the same established and addressed towards one of its 19 possible endings. The time of the narration also depends on the reader, who can either respect the rhythm of the conversation, intended to reproduce the actual chronology of the journey, or accelerate the narration in order to read the sequence of sms in a continuous flow. In both cases, each choice is irreversible and has unexpected consequences on the narrative. A double discontinuity in the reading is thus installed: one concerns the narrative, whose deployment may abruptly deviate from its most likely issue; the other concerns the reading itself, quickly but systematically interrupted by the necessity of selecting a crucial preference among a limited set of options. In this context, it is worth observing if the role of the device, the programmed choices and the discontinuity of the narrative plot are effectively considered as part of the

literary construction. In order to answers to those questions, we will analyze the verbal exchanges held by the students during the three-week reading sessions, the reading diaries written during the experience and the 50 answers they submitted in the final questionnaire. The interpretation of the data will lay out different positions and, globally, a certain resistance at accepting a renewed reading role.

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Bury me, me love, Plug In Digital, 2017.

Biography

Eleonora Acerra has a PhD in Literature and Education, obtained at the University of Paul Valéry - Montpellier III (France). Her main reseach interest concerns children's digital literature, e-literary education and multimodality. Her doctoral project was part of the LiNum projet, which was aimed at developing educational contents for studying digital literature at the primary school. She currently is a post-doctoral researcher at the Université du Québec à Montréal.