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BOOK REVIEW

Digital literature for children: texts, readers and educational practices, edited by Mireia Manresa and Neus Real, Brussels, Peter Lang, 2015, 236 pp, EUR €38.00/GBP £30.00/USD $49.95 (Paperback), ISBN: 9783035298383

Digital literature for children has gained a new dimension with the proliferation of portable computers like tablets and smartphones in the past years. Scholarship, however, is still trying to catch up in capturing this rapidly changing phenomenon, and while in the fields of education and psychology a considerable body of work has been published recently on apps and other digital cultural products for children, from an aesthetic perspective the gap is still considerable. *Digital literature for children: texts, readers and educational practices* is a collection of essays edited by Mireia Manresa and Neus Real that combines aesthetic and educational approaches to examine this area, with a special focus on electronic literature (or e-lit) in app format, but also considering other forms and genres, such as web-based fiction, fan-fiction and cellphone novels.

It is the first book published on this topic since Len Unsworth's *E-literature for children: enhancing digital literacy learning*, from 2006,[1] and in the past 11 years the panorama of e-lit for children has shifted significantly. The milestone that triggered this change was perhaps the 2010 release of the iPad and the proliferation of the so-called "picturebook (or story) apps", which revived the interest of children's literature scholars for digital texts.

Digital literature for children is therefore a much-needed publication and it brings together different pieces of research from the GRETEL research group in children's literature from the Autonomous University of Barcelona (UAB), in Spain. The overarching project, "Children's digital literature: production, reading uses, reception and teaching practices", took place from 2012 and 2015 and was funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation. The publication also has chapters by prestigious invited authors, such as picturebook scholars Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer and Junko Yokota, electronic literature specialist Laura Borràs, and creators Kate Pullinger and Arnal Ballester.

The book is wide in scope. Theoretical perspectives on children's e-lit and the digitalization of reading open the volume (Part I). Then, the whole process of communication is considered, from creation (Part V), passing through the analysis of the corpus of digital literature (Part II), and finally reaching the reader (Parts III and IV), covering various age groups and reading contexts (home, school, library).

Part I, "Contextualization and Theoretical Framework", offers an important theorization of the phenomenon of e-lit and of young people's digital reading, reviewing important literature in the field and highlighting key concepts and characteristics that are unique to this field. Laura Borràs (chapter 1) discusses the digital reading experience of young people, growing up in a digitized context, and how digital reading shapes new generations' concepts of reading and textuality. She proposes three essential characteristics of digital reading: reading is *shared*, in the digital sphere, in ways not possible before, such as through social media; reading is *fragmented*, discontinuous, fugacious; and reading is *transmedia*, or moves across different devices and platforms.

Defining broad concepts like digital children's literature is extremely daunting but at the same time necessary, even if in many cases definitions are limited to the scope of a specific work. Chapter 2, by Lucas Ramada Prieto, navigates through a wide range of literature in the field of e-lit and how they apply to the specificities of digital literature for children. It concludes with three key aspects that he believes define electronic literature: (1) the fact that it is *coded*, that is, it involves a code processed in a computer, so what is displayed to the user is different from what is present in the code; (2) e-lit is *interactive*, presenting feedback loops and a bilateral performance from both text and reader; (3) finally, digital literature tends to *rupture discursive linearity*. This chapter is a must-read for anyone entering the field of children's e-lit because it covers most seminal works in the area and reminds us that many of the issues that have now become prevalent in children's literature have been discussed earlier in relation to works of mainstream digital literature.

Part II, "Digital Literature for Children and Young Adults", presents three chapters that overview the corpus of children's e-lit in relationship to the broader field of children's literature. New genres are rapidly emerging in the electronic medium, and influencing in return print literature in form and content. Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer discusses some of these possibilities, with a special focus on three areas: *cellphone novels*, a phenomenon that started in Japan but has spread across many countries; *transmedia storytelling*, where stories can be accessed across platforms, for instance, as books, movies, games, webpages and apps; and finally examining *fan fiction*, which she claims to be an important area of children's literature still lacking investigation in children's literature scholarship, since fan fiction impacts considerably the very notions of children's literature and authorship.

However, the field of e-lit is not only marked by novelty. Established genres are now available in print and digital formats, and Junko Yokota's chapter examines the affordances of both media to present different types of content. Reference books and non-fiction, for instance, can be continuously updated in digital versions and benefit from the non-linearity of the digital medium. In the case of fiction, such a relationship is not as direct. As exemplified by various examples, Yokota

suggests that different types of stories might benefit from or lose out with the affordances of digital media. Therefore she claims good digital literature does exactly that: makes use of these affordances, using form in favor of content to enhance the aesthetic value of a text.

With such a variety of narrative forms and possibilities, an interdisciplinary framework is necessary for the analysis of children's e-lit. Celia Turrión Penelas has adopted a very systematic approach and examined a corpus of 30 apps published from 2010 to 2014. Combining film and interactive narratologies, hypertext, game theory, children's literature and picturebook theories, she presents an analytic tool that considers four key aspects of narrative apps: the mechanics of entertainment and educational industries (the type of adaptation and genre choices); interactivity (type and degree of participation, integration with the narrative and balance of interactive features); the tensions between complex and simplistic narrative features (narrative structure, composition, point of view and types of interpretive complexity); and finally the variations of the proposed fictional experience (organization of the information on the interface, dominant mode, and type of fictional pact).

With such a richness of possibilities available, how do children and adolescents then engage with e-lit? This question is addressed in parts III, "Readers and Digital Literature", and VI, "Educational Practices: Families and Schools". Starting with the chapters that look at the responses from older children and teens, Mireia Manresa explores groups of 9–11- and 14–15-year-olds reading different genres of e-lit from picturebook apps like Oliver Jeffers' *The Heart and the Bottle* to web-based *Inanimate Alice* and Berta Rubio Faus' digital poetry in *Les Aventures de la Lala*. Lucas Ramana Prieto and Lara Reyes López conducted an exploratory study with four 11–12-year-olds, selected according to their reading profiles (competence and attitude towards reading and technology), reading different fictional story apps on a tablet, including William Joyce's *The Numberlys* and Daniel Nesquen's *Mi Vecino de Abajo*. In chapter 8, Martina Fittipaldi, Anna Juan and Mireia Manresa compare 15-year-olds' readings of Edgar Allan Poe's *The Tell-Tale Heart* in print (verbal language only) and digital (multimodal) versions. Finally, in Teresa Colomer's and Karla Fernández de Gamboa Vázquez's project, 11–12-year-olds have had access, as part of their daily independent reading, to a digital library containing apps and digitized texts in PDF, in addition to a print collection. All four projects took place in a school setting and the children had little to no experience of children's e-lit. These young readers were not yet born in a completely digitized context but are transitioning towards it, in many cases thanks to available resources at school. Studies such as these are important since they document the first encounters of a transitional generation with digital literature. They suggest that young readers with little experience of e-lit tend to transfer reading and comprehension skills, as well as their expectations of print literature, onto the reading of e-lit. This can result, as shown for instance in chapters 6 and 11, in initial surprise and disorientation since some texts do not conform to the readers' expectations. While children with stronger literacy skills seem to make richer and more informed interpretations when reading digital literature (chapter 7), some features typical of e-lit, such as participation, playfulness and complex multimodal configurations, might require further support from mediators and guidance in supporting the development of new multimodal and digital literacies (chapter 8). These chapters fill an important gap in scholarship in two ways: first of all, most literature in the field so far focuses on apps for younger readers (preschool and first years of primary) whereas here the responses of older children and adolescents are considered. Secondly, these chapters consider texts with longer written narratives such as short stories (in comparison, for instance, to picturebooks and other story apps).

Portable touch-screen devices brought digital literature to the hands of the very young, including babies, toddlers and pre-schoolers, who had generally been excluded from this phenomenon in the era of desktop computers. For children at this stage, home, rather than school, may be where the child experiences e-lit (chapters 9 and 10). As widely documented, parent–child shared reading is an important aspect of out-of-school literacy practices and has significant impact on young children's literacy development. In that light, Cristina Aliagas and Ana M. Margallo have conducted an ethnographic study observing the digital shared reading experience of four girls aged 1–5, while Neus Real and Cristina Correro have compared 2–5-year-olds' reading experiences at home and at nursery school for a period of two years. Both studies show that at home the reading of e-lit is part of the larger transmedia experience since children navigate from literary apps to YouTube and other apps. Children also show a preference for texts with prominent playful features and some children favour game apps to e-lit (chapter 10). In the nursery, the guided readings were much more controlled and linear, similar to traditional picturebook sharing, whereas the unmoderated free readings were fragmented and messy, dominated by some children in detriment of others. Both chapters reflect on the role of adults as mediators of children's e-lit, and suggest that features such as voiceover narration allow an autonomous reading experience even for the very young, leaving adults as facilitators rather than co-readers. Young children's experiences with tablets have been more widely documented, and the findings reported in these chapters are in agreement with other studies such as Merchant.[2]

Parts III and IV of this volume are important contributions to the field of reader-response research in children's literature, since this is the first book to consider at length children's responses to e-lit from an aesthetic perspective, even if many studies do take place in a school context. Traces of didacticism, however, are noticeable in some of the chapters, where the responses from children are judged within a strict and traditional framework for literary analysis and teaching, shadowing the fact that literature is open to multiple interpretations that might go beyond the curriculum, especially if the curriculum is based on "traditional" print literature.

Finally, the perspective of the creators can provide important insights into the history and aesthetics of e-lit but is often neglected in children's literature scholarship. Part V, "Creating Digital Texts: Two Reflections" is therefore an asset of this volume. It starts with Kate Pullinger, creator of the award-winning web-based fiction *Inanimate Alice*. She narrates the development of this multi-instalment text from its origins, and reflects on how the text has become widely used in schools all over the world. Initially planned to be part of a marketing campaign for a feature film that was never created, *Inanimate Alice* combines writing, images, video, sound effects, music, animation and games to tell the story of Alice from the age of 8 until 19. In agreement with Yokota's suggestion of what makes good e-lit (chapter 4), Pullinger highlights how intentionally interactivity was integrated into the story level: Alice wants to be a game designer herself, so the games inside the narrative develop in complexity as Alice develops as a game creator herself. *Digital literature for children* ends with Arnal Ballester, illustrator and animator. He discusses, among various aspects of e-lit, its interdisciplinarity. From an analytical perspective, he claims the need to approximate children's literature with game studies, as video games have been, for decades, experimenting with different forms of reader participation. From the creator's perspective, he concludes that this interdisciplinarity requires the development of new skills from authors and illustrators, such as programming, and collaboration with artists from other disciplines.

The phenomenon of digital literature for children is wide and diverse, and certainly this volume manages to give a (even if at times brief) consideration of many of its angles. That being said, some of the chapters are overly descriptive and lack in integrating findings with critical literature and wider theoretical perspectives, which might have given more depth to the discussions. Also, although many of the chapters, as highlighted earlier, derive from the same large research project, they are completely independent and the connection between them or how they together move our understanding of digital children's literature and its aesthetics is not clearly stated in the volume. For instance, it would have been interesting to see aspects from the theoretical discussions of Ramada Prieto and the classifications proposed by Turrión Penelas applied in consideration to the texts the children responded to in parts III and IV.

Ultimately, *Digital literature for children* is of great relevance to children's literature scholarship and each chapter will probably open to the reader a new range of questions about the various facets of children's e-lit that require further study. One of these aspects is perhaps the multimodal features of such texts and how they impact children's reading experience, which was mentioned in several chapters but not analysed in any length in the volume. Slightly over a year after the book was published, this is perhaps one aspect where scholarship has developed further, with some projects incorporating multimodal social semiotics to the interdisciplinary framework of children's e-lit analysis,[3] continuing a trend that has also been seen in the analysis of the print picturebook, with important contributions of, for example, Painter et al.[4] and Serafini.[5]

Notes

1. Unsworth, *E-literature for children*.
2. Merchant, "Keep Taking the Tablets."
3. Aguilera et. al., "Expanding Analytical Perspectives"; and Frederico, "The Future of the Reader or the Reader of the Future."
4. Painter et al., *Reading Visual Narratives*.
5. Serafini, "Reading Multimodal Texts."

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