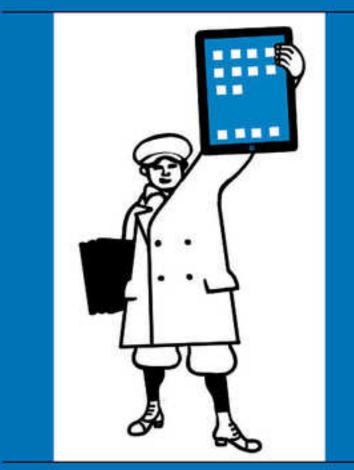# Digital Literature for Children

Texts, Readers and Educational Practices

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Introduction

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Literacy is currently facing new demands that have arisen from the expansion of the languages and codes in cultural products. This means that integration into 21st century society requires the ability to interpret a reality that is no longer represented and expressed merely through the written word. In the virtual context, literature and reading socialisation circuits are spaces where the digitality and different codes that configure the messages clearly demand an increase in the reader's interpretive skills within the framework of the digital literacy of the population. Although the new forms of electronic fiction present a notable specificity with regard to other digital products, they are completely located in this new cultural and communication paradigm which allows access to knowledge, interaction with others, the communication of one's own ideas, access to information in a virtual and virtualised world and the interpretation of different semiotic systems in coexistence with the products on the analogue circuit.

Teachers are therefore required to investigate the most suitable strategies in order to provide support to the receiver with this type of reading and with a focus on educating citizens in the interpretation of the different codes that contribute to forming the construction of meaning in the texts. It is therefore necessary for schools to take into account the expansion of these fictional and artistic designs and to introduce effective ways of facilitating the access keys to the multimedia, interactive and hypertextual messages and products that exist in today's different fictional products.

In light of these changes, we in the GRETEL research group at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (UAB, Autonomous University of Barcelona, Spain), which specialises in children's literature and literary education, proposed to mark out a line of continuity based on our previous research to distinguish and analyse this new fictional product from the perspective of literary reader training. As this is the focal point of our

research and training activities, our main objective was to explore the effects that digital literature can have on literary learning. More specifically we aimed to study the changes that digital literature has introduced in the production of fiction addressed to children and adolescents, in the reading reception of this population group and in the reading habits that usually take place in family and school situations. *Digital Literature for Children: Texts, Readers and Educational Practices*, as its title suggests, aims to provide a contribution to these three specific fields of knowledge using as a backdrop the potentials and limitations of digital literary reading and the associated practices thereof in relation to the reading of printed works.

In this research we focus specifically on app- or web-based literature that builds its meaning in a digital way by using the resources inherent to the electronic medium such as multimodality, interactivity and hypertextuality. This literature is referred to differently depending on the academic discipline, tradition and context. The most common terms are *electronic literature* (e-lit), *digital literature*, *digital fiction* and *digital picturebooks*. In order to be as unrestrictive and distinctive as possible regarding our object of study, in this work we use indistinctively the terms *e-lit* and *digital literature*. *E-lit* was formalised by the Electronic Literature Organization (ELO, the institution of reference for this new literature, albeit for an adult public) and is of constantly wider usage in children's literature research. *Digital literature*, in turn, has been and still is of much generalised use in children's literature studies. Hence its choice in the title of the book. *Digital fiction* would have been excessively general because it includes all types of digital fictional products (videogames among others) and does not necessarily have the specifically literary character required for our focus of study. On the contrary, *digital picturebooks* refers to the electronic transfer of a single type of analogue works (print picturebooks), and therefore it would have only included some of the products under analysis.

Emergent fields of study

In current societies the transformations in the uses and requirements of literacy brought about by reading in digital media have led to new lines of research in children's digital literature and in its sociocultural scope in different fields (transformation of texts, reading and writing uses and practices, editorial market, etcetera). All of these contribute to the creation of a map to (re)situate the modifications and educational practices aimed at the digital training of the population and more specifically at the literary education of children and adolescents today.

With regard to literacy, *The New Literacy Studies* and literacy practices in context have defined the factors involved in the citizens' processes

of access to written culture within the framework of virtuality, as well as the skills of reading and text production that are activated through participation in a context configured by new technologies (Lankshear, and Nobel 2006; New London Group 1996; Pahl, and Rowsell 2005; Street 2003). As described by Alvermann (2004) or Cassany and Hernández (2012), the new *native digital* (Prensky 2001) generations are developing abilities that correspond to these forms of reading. The current immersion of children and adolescents in a technological environment leads to constant interaction on the net (through social networks, videogaming, personal blogging, etc.) and to fragmented reading with hyperlinks or to other emergent phenomena such as the collaborative writing of fiction stories. It may be considered, therefore, that these activities bring the reader closer to the narrative forms of children's digital fiction that have begun to emerge and that there is an urgent requirement for educational reflection on the literary reading that is promoted within the school context.

Also, from the sociology of reading, mainly from the qualitative research paradigm point of view, results have been provided on the socialisation exchanges of literary reading on the Internet (Leveratto, and Leontsini 2008; Lluch 2012, 2014) and on the transformations introduced by virtuality in social reading practices. In this way, the profile of the new digital reader in society has been described as having more of a tendency to share the reading experience which is focused towards interactions that transfer the reader from having an amateur role to an expert role with regard to literary reading (Manresa, and Margallo 2013). In short, this framework describes the habitual reading routines and practices of current readers and shows the emergence of new ways of relating to the literary.

Literary theory and the studies on the characterisation of contemporary children's literature also provide an essential basis for approaching literary education in the classroom. The evolution and typology of children's fiction in the last decades, configured through the integration of text and image and described by international research (Arizpe, and Styles 2003; Colomer 1995, 2002, 2005, 2010; Kress 2005; Nikolajeva 2001; Silva-Díaz 2005), prefigured the composition of fiction through multimodal and digital resources. The variations introduced by e-lit in the current production panorama place us before the studies of literary theory, comparative literature and the advances of digital resources in literary fiction which are mostly focused on adult production (Borràs 2005; Hayles 2008; Koskimaa 2000); the most relevant of these are the approaches on the effects of hypertextuality (Ensslin 2007; Landow 2006), on interaction (Juul 2001; Moreno 2002; Ryan 2001, 2004) and on multimodality (Bolter, and Grusin 2000; Ryan 2004).

Despite all these contributions, only recently has there begun to appear some reflections and research on children's digital literature that describe its current typology and characteristics and analyse in depth the variety of the existing corpus on the market in a clear effort to delimit the field of study and specify concepts (Al-Yaqout 2011; Al-Yaqout, and Nikolajeva 2015; Borràs 2012; Stichnothe 2014; Turrión 2013, 2014; Turrión, and Ramada 2014; Unsworth 2006; Yokota 2013). In summary, it has been stated that this is a type of literature that is still defining its creative limits – especially in the areas more foreign to the literary field such as the sequential and interactive potentiality of the digital environment –, and whose greatest achievements, especially regarding multimodality (with priority given to sound and movement), are still very dependent on the adjacent artistic disciplines. In parallel, this is a type of literature that situates the reader in a different place which requires a new type of interpretation and new keys of access to the literary product. To begin with the consideration of the transformations in interactive, hypertextual and multimodal products in relation to printed literature would seem to offer an efficient action framework for the precision of literary planning in the classroom.

These studies are complemented with explorations on reader strategies of comprehension, interpretation, reception and perception of digital and digitised texts. This field, explored from different research paradigms, is still very incipient with regard to literature. Most studies have investigated informative texts and have shown the differences between the reading of digital texts and the reading of printed texts, not merely in terms of comprehension skills and strategies but also in terms of reading habits and routines in general (Clark *et al*. 2008; Coiro 2007; Liu 2005). Specific research on the reception of digital literature has been mainly limited to works of textual fiction, that is to say e-books; it has been based on comparative studies on comprehension of printed and digital works, on case studies on the reading of stories using e-readers such as Amazon's Kindle, or on the focalisation of distinctive specific aspects of digital works such as, for example, hypertextuality.

Therefore we have studies based on diverse aspects that, from different methodological perspectives, offer important results on what happens when reading non-printed literature. For example, studies that show the comprehension differences between subjects who read the same narrative texts in both printed and digitised formats and show lower levels of understanding among the readers who read in digital format (Mangen, Walgermo, and Brønnick 2013). Or studies on the effects of the physical participation of the reader in digital reading such as the importance of the use of the fingers and hands for *immersion* in the fiction (Mangen 2008); on the impact of hypertextual reading in the reflexive mode which

is characteristic of traditional literary reading (Miall, and Dobson 2001); on the ways of locating oneself in the temporality of fiction when it is not read in print (Mangen, Walgermo, and Brønnick 2013) or on the involvement possibilities when reading narrative works on electronic devices (Clark *et al*. 2008; Larson 2010). Nonetheless, we still know little of the reader's experience regarding the specificity of e-lit.

Equally interesting are the studies situated within the framework of the mobilisation and integration of electronic fiction in school and family situations with adult facilitation. Noteworthy among these are the studies that have examined the impact of technologies on learning processes (Coll, Mauri, and Onrubia 2008; Krashen 1993) and more specifically those that have focused on the incorporation of digital devices in the classroom. For example, the observations of Hutchison, Beschorner and Schmidt-Crawford (2012), who explored their use in the learning of reading and writing over a period of three weeks; or the descriptive work by Roskos, Burstein and You (2012), that establishes a typology of the involvement of infant children when reading in this medium on an individual and shared basis; and also the comparison by Sheppard (2011), based on reading a work in printed format and on iPad in a classroom situation where a greater level of involvement is shown, with no parallel increase in school performance, together with a lower comprehension among weak readers, the evaluation of tablets as an element of distraction and the failure to involve the students in offline discussions.

All these works represent and point to significant advances in various lines. However, in parallel, they also call for more research in the field of the reading of digital fiction, on the response of children and adolescents to this new type of production and, more specifically, on the reading of digital literature in the school context – a key area for the training of citizens in information societies.

GRETEL's research project on children's digital literature

In order to contribute results in the field of e-lit for children and adolescents, between 2012 and 2015 the GRETEL research group carried out the R&D project "Literatura infantil y juvenil digital: producción, usos lectores, recepción y prácticas docentes" (Children's digital literature: production, reading uses, reception and teaching practices).[1] The project

pursued three major objectives: to analyse the transformations produced in works by the multimodal forms of narration and by the incorporation of new resources for reader participation; to study the reception of e-lit in terms of motivation, comprehension, interpretation and the ability of emergent readers to evaluate metafictional and metaliterary aspects when engaged in the reading of fictional works, and to observe the impact of fictional reading with electronic devices on school and family reading situations.

With regard to the first of these objectives – the children and adolescent e-lit corpus – work was carried out on the establishment of the digital production typology addressed to children and adolescents and the characterisation of its contributions to the renovation of narrative elements, to the cooperation of languages and to receiver participation. In this framework, it was deemed necessary to first analyse the complex relationships between digital literature and the literature which has so far been addressed to children and adolescents, with focus on the visual, oral and, above all, interactive resources. More specifically, it seemed a matter of urgency to generate knowledge on the typology of children's digital productions that are emerging on the market with special focus on analysing how each main element of the narration in digital format is constructed; i.e., studying how a chronological leap is transmitted or how narrative focalisation is represented through the moving image, sound and interactivity. It was also of interest to establish whether this produced changes in the fictional constructive tendencies and, therefore, if there were variations in the type of proposed fictional experience (the duration of the act of reading and the rhythm of reading, for example, seem to have particular significance in digital fiction).

The second focal point entailed case studies on reader reactions to digital literature by means of different research with students of between nine and fifteen years old and based on the analysis of the discourse content from literary discussions and conversations that were held with small groups of students. This analysis took into account the perception and evaluation of the digital characteristics of the proposed works as well as the interpretive response to each one and was based on the literary and digital aspects that construct literary fiction (Margallo 2013). If the reading of digitised texts on a screen supposes numerous changes with regard to reading skills and strategies in contrast to print reading, then the reading and interpreting of e-lit introduces new factors that transform it into a specific product, and it is therefore of interest to understand the reactions of children and adolescents to this product. Following previous research carried out by our group on the reading response to picturebooks (Colomer, and Fittipaldi eds. 2012), we asked ourselves what interpretive strategies are used by readers when reading digital works, what reading

modes are activated and what perception they have of the digital resources that appear in works of fiction.

The third objective refers to the exploration of the effects that the introduction of digital literature into independent reading situations has on student reading practices, preferences and evaluations – all of which are issues that affect decisions on the advisability of integrating this type of literature into the classroom and on the didactic reconsideration of current literary education. Specifically, we observed the effects of the introduction of touchscreen tablets, containing specific e-lit selections, into school and family independent reading practice. The main contexts in which children and adolescents encounter works of digital fiction, in school and in the home, provide favourable settings for the exploration of the reading uses that are activated and produced when encounters with these devices and digital literature take place. In this case these were ethnographic case studies in a natural classroom library situation or in family shared reading situations with children of between two and three years old and children of between eleven and twelve years old on the one hand, and children of up to six years old on the other.

Although the results of these studies will be widely covered in the chapters of this book, we must highlight some of the educational implications that can be deduced from this work as a whole. On the one hand there is the logic and necessity to integrate e-lit into formal literary education in order to respond to the demands of a highly technologised society where literary and digital products are two key aspects for the future of children and adolescents. On the other hand, there is the importance of teaching facilitation for the introduction of the works into quality selections and the incorporation of the analysis and specific evaluation of multimodal resources into literary education. Finally, there is the fact that the continuity of experience and teaching facilitation promote more sophisticated, elaborate analyses on the fictional aspects and artistic resources of digital works.

This book brings together the results of these studies on digital literature for children and its impact on the training of the literary reader. The corresponding previews were initially presented in the framework of the International Symposium "Electronic literature: texts, readers and teaching practices", which was organised by the GRETEL research group and held in October last year in Barcelona.[2] They are presented here in their new, extended and revised versions. Also included is the collaboration from researchers and authors of international renown who were invited to the symposium for their trajectory and influence in

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[2]   For the minutes on the Symposium see GRETEL 2014.

this field, such as Laura Borràs, Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer, Junko Yokota, Kate Pullinger and Arnal Ballester.

This volume

We have taken these three focal points that influence the transformations in the field of digital literary reading as a point of departure and have structured the book into three central parts – the corpus (Part II, Digital Literature for Children and Young Adults), the reader (Part III, Readers and Digital Literature) and the reading uses in classroom or family situations (Part IV, Educational Practices: Families and Schools) – which are preceded by two chapters as a framework (Part I, Contextualization and Theoretical Framework) and followed by two closing chapters that include the reflections of two agents involved in the production of digital works: an author and an illustrator (Part V, Creating Digital Texts: Two Reflections). The volume is therefore organised into five different sections, focused respectively on the general context of digital reading and the theory of electronic literature (two chapters), the production (three chapters), the readers (three chapters), the uses (three chapters) and the creation of children's digital literature (two chapters).

Given its incipient nature, and beyond the summary presentation provided by this introduction, it was unavoidable to include a section dedicated to digital reading on the one hand, and the current state of the research on e-lit for children and adolescents and the tools available to those who today are engaged in this area of study on the other. It was necessary to establish a state of the art in order to specify concepts and define the bases on which these have been founded and on which the approaches to this expanding literature are based; to determine the aspects that characterise digital literature and draw the lines along which the research is moving and the direction in which it should proceed. And at the same time not neglecting to contemplate unanswered questions and problematise the more complex aspects derived from disciplinary crossroads that can often be stumbling blocks. The initial chapters therefore contextualise digital literary reading and specify the new research framework of digital literature for children and adolescents by, respectively, examining the sociocultural nuclei where these new literary reading practices are located and the theoretical advances in the definition and characterisation of the digital literary product.

Laura Borràs, a renowned international researcher in the field of e-lit, opens Part I. Her chapter "The Reader (in) Digital. Forms of Reading on Screens" provides a global vision, in the context of the relevant social and cultural changes, of what it means to read on a screen. The author sketches the new and multiple media of this reading which is widespread

and corresponds to a social reader or to a socialising intention. Focusing especially on children, she identifies a proliferation of digital reading formats, establishes their relationship with book sales and revises some of the works that refer to what she calls *hermeneutics of complexity*.

Lucas Ramada Prieto, a member of the GRETEL research group, completes this initial section. "'Common Places in Children's E-Lit'. A Journey through the Defining Spaces of Electronic Literature" proposes a theoretical interdisciplinary trip through the different knowledge areas that provide the necessary terminology and instruments in order to set out the concept of e-lit applied to children's literature, define its essential characteristics, consider the different classification proposals of the products addressed to children and adolescents, characterise the digital aesthetic and establish the literary potential of this new creative and interpretive paradigm in relation to emergent readers.

After this both general and theoretical introduction to the subject the logical step was to enter into the corpus to provide a global vision of the digital works and their characteristics (Part II). Nonetheless, here it was not only of interest to analyse the new electronic products and reflect on their potential with regard to literary education. Due to the current links and interdependency among them, it also seemed necessary to connect e-lit for children and adolescents with the printed books with which they coexist and to study the nature of the relationships that they have established and continue to establish. Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer and Junko Yokota, two prominent specialists in children's digital literature and digital production, share this section with Celia Turrión Penelas, a member of the GRETEL research group.

Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer presents "The Impact of New Digital Media on Children's and Young Adult Literature". Centred on the relationship between the production aimed at the children's market and the electronic medium, this chapter offers a panoramic view of their mutual influences, illustrated with specific works and genres with fan fiction as a highlighted example. The new narrative interactive forms, the innovative genres and changes in content and structure derived from the impact of digital media on children's literature are analysed in parallel with the influence of all of this on literary comprehension and on the drastic reconsideration of the traditional relationship between author and reader.

"The Past, Present and Future of Digital Picturebooks for Children", by Junko Yokota, in contrast, is based on the importance of the facilitators (librarians, teachers and parents) in the selection and evaluation of children's digital literary readings. With the intention of providing effective instruments, the researcher offers a current state of the electronic

publication of stories for children in correlation with the world of printed picturebooks and focuses her attention on the ways in which different characteristics of one and the other can affect the comprehension of children readers and influence their responses to this new type of literature.

Celia Turrión Penelas' chapter, "Electronic Literature for Children. Characterising Narrative Apps (2010-2014)", builds a model of analysis for children's narrative apps and applies it to a group of thirty works that appeared between 2010 and 2014. The author thus studies the potential of e-lit for the literary pleasure and education of emergent readers by means of a double formal characterisation: on the one hand that of the current digital corpus conceived for touchscreen tablets and addressed to children and adolescents; on the other, that of the implicit reader which is derived from the essential characteristics of the applications that were studied.

Having established the contextual and conceptual map as well as the panoramic view of the works and their main characteristics, both specifically and with respect to the implied children readers, the book inaugurates the approach to the effective reality of the children's contact with the digital literature that has been designed and addressed to their age group (Part III and Part IV). The comprehensive nucleus of the initial results from the fieldwork carried out by the GRETEL researchers are presented here – all of which was made possible thanks to their R&D project. The first block of contributions (the second of the three central parts after the corpus) focuses directly on the readers in order to study their responses to the literary proposals in the digital products by means of guided reading experiences in different educational centres. The second (third in the nucleus of the book) centres on the family and school uses of e-lit to determine, among other things, what happens when different electronic works are made available to children readers without eliminating printed literature from their environment.

The section dedicated to the readers (Part III) opens with "Traditional Readers and Electronic Literature. An Exploration of Perceptions and Readings of Digital Works", by Mireia Manresa, which provides an analysis of the experiences taken from the literary conversations on five different digital works. This was carried out with three groups of children aged between nine and eleven years old (twelve participants in total) and two groups of adolescents (seven children in total, aged between fourteen and fifteen). There are two focal points by which the children readers' understanding of e-lit and the ways in which they respond to the digital texts (that is to say, how they interpret them) are determined: by interaction and by the interpretation of temporality expressed with digital resources.

"Digital Migrations: Exploratory Research on Children's E-Lit Reading Profiles", by Lucas Ramada Prieto and Lara Reyes López, adopts the perspective of the reader profiles to show the results from the digital reading work carried out in a classroom of students aged between eleven and twelve years old with remarkable literary training but unfamiliar with touchscreen tablets and e-lit. The exploration of their tendencies as digital readers shows the suitability of these works with regard to ludic and exploratory reading attitudes, exposes the ways in which the skills acquired from reading in print are transferred to reading on digital devices and underlines the importance of the selection of a corpus where the expressive digital modes are significant in the construction of the literary text.

Martina Fittipaldi, Anna Juan and Mireia Manresa conclude this part dedicated to the readers with a chapter where they contrast the reading experiences of the same text in print and electronic formats. "Paper or Digital: A Comparative Reading with Teenagers of a Poe Short Story" focuses on the interpretation of "The Tell-Tale Heart" by Edgar Allan Poe by two groups of adolescents in two sessions of literary discussion in order to observe the distinctive characteristics of digital reading (the aspects that form the students' construction of meaning in the work) and to discover to what degree the specific components of e-lit contribute – or not – to this construction.

"iPads, Emergent Readers and Families", by Cristina Aliagas and Ana M. Margallo, opens the part focused on reading uses (Part IV) with the results of longitudinal ethnographic research in a family context with young children. Using the funds of knowledge approach, the changes introduced by touchscreen tablets are explored in the shared reading practices of stories in four homes with regard to four aspects: reading times and spaces, infant digital libraries, techno-literary learning of young participants in relation to adult facilitation and the incidence of multimodality and interactivity in reading experiences.

Next, "Digital Literature in Early Childhood. Reading Experiences in Family and School Contexts", by Neus Real and Cristina Correro, examines the debate on the use of electronic content and devices by young children and provides the results from different observations carried out with children of between two and six years old in four homes and a pre-school. The chapter describes and contrasts the majority uses of the iPad and the digital (literary) preferences of very young readers in both of these spaces and underlines the importance of facilitation in a new type of reading experience which complements analogue literary training in children under seven years of age.

Teresa Colomer and Karla Fernández de Gamboa Vázquez, in "Reading Literature on Screen in a Classroom Library", close the section on reader uses with the results of a piece of exploratory research consisting of the effects of the introduction of digital works in a classroom library in a class of students of between eleven and twelve years old. The chapter explains in detail the resulting reading practices of the group and their preferences with regard to the combination of analogue and digital corpus and exclusively to e-lit; finally it describes the discourse that was collectively constructed by the students on digital reading in order to show its potential, limitations and implications.

After considering the corpus, the readers, and the uses of current e-lit for children in situations of independent reading, it seemed essential to finish by including the reflections of the creators of digital children's works; those responsible for the effective possibility and the development of this new production. The volume therefore closes with a section (Part V) where the floor is given to the authors through the reflections of two renowned names in the English-speaking and Latin American fields: Kate Pullinger and Arnal Ballester.

In "*Inanimate Alice* – How We Accidentally Created a Digital Story for Schools", the London-based Canadian writer tells the story of one of the most popular digital works in the world. Beyond the protagonist and her life journey – which grow in parallel in the same way as the episodes in the work –, and also beyond her own definition of the kind of literature *Inanimate Alice* belongs to, Kate Pullinger focuses this chapter on the general history of a project which, begun a decade ago, has developed intermittently, has been modified according to circumstances and different factors, and so far, does not have an expiry date.

Last but not least, in "Change of Direction", Arnal Ballester tackles the idiosyncrasy of the electronic medium and its influence on the changes of conception in the literary work and the reader. The well-known Catalan illustrator examines the profound social and cultural transformation created by this new paradigm, taking into consideration the relationships between children's print and digital literature and the figure of the receiver, but also videogames and illustration. In short, this chapter proposes a different look at a phenomenon which is already radically modifying our relationships with knowledge and literary creation. In our opinion this provides a very intriguing close to the book in order to continue investigating and reflecting on digital literature for children – on digital texts, readers and educational practices.

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