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Inanimate Alice: The Story of the Series and its Impact in Portugal

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ABSTRACT

A team from the University of Coimbra is partnering with the producers of *Inanimate Alice* to present a distinctive vision of interactive storytelling in education. In this article, we discuss the origins of the series, the vision of the creators and how technological developments have added to the user experience. Uniquely, this transmedia narrative demonstrates the progressive complexity of life in the digital age with *Perpetual Nomads*, the latest adventure, providing a narrative experience in Virtual Reality. The goal of the Portuguese translation is to introduce the reading of *Inanimate Alice* in elementary and secondary schools. It will be the first born-digital text to be read in Portuguese schools so, concurrently, we have been translating the pedagogical guidelines. We present both the results of our work and the main challenges faced during preparation of the translations, especially focusing on intercultural analysis.

KEYWORDS

Inanimate Alice; transmedia narrative; teaching; translation problems; Virtual Reality.

RESUMO

Uma equipa da Universidade de Coimbra e os produtores de *Inanimate Alice* juntaram-se para apresentar uma perspetiva diferente quanto à narrativa interativa em contexto educativo. Neste artigo, discutimos as origens desta série, a visão dos seus criadores e também como os desenvolvimentos tecnológicos melhoraram a experiência do utilizador. Esta narrativa transmédia demonstra a progressiva complexidade da vida na era digital, sendo que *Perpetual Nomads*, a mais recente aventura, proporciona já uma experiência narrativa em Realidade Virtual. A tradução portuguesa tem como objetivo introduzir a leitura de *Alice Inanimada* nas escolas básicas e secundárias, tornando-se o primeiro texto nascido em meio digital a ser lido nas escolas portuguesas, pelo que estamos também a traduzir as orientações pedagógicas. Deste modo, apresentaremos tanto os resultados do nosso trabalho, bem como os principais desafios suscitados pela tradução, com especial enfoque na análise intercultural.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Alice Inaminada; narrativa transmídia; ensino; problemas de tradução; Realidade Virtual.

Inanimate Alice tells the story of a girl growing up dreaming of one day becoming a game designer. The narrative, written by award-winning novelist Kate Pullinger, uses game-like mechanics and backdrops that encourage students to read, re-read and fully comprehend the story, all the while thinking they are just having fun.

I. THE STORY OF *INANIMATE ALICE* (SO FAR)

The story of Alice has a progressive complexity that reflects Alice's age. Targeting ten to fourteen-year-olds, the later episodes "play older," especially for students with engagement issues or those whose first language is not English. It is used for teacher-training in several countries, including Australia where the title is embedded in the curriculum and where Education Services Australia, a Government Ministers' Company, has made repeated investments in the title.

Alice is a high visibility text that works across the curriculum: a work of digital fiction that discusses topical issues of digital mobility and disrupted lives. So far it is available in seven languages, and is readily translatable into any language.

In this article we present the two recent developments *Inanimate Alice* has experienced: the first one regarding the production of new episodes and the second one about the introduction of the narrative in Portugal.

Things have come a long way for Alice — and for digital technology — since her first outing in Episode 1 (*Alice in China*) in 2005. It seems as if technology and Alice have grown up side by side. Almost six years went by between the development of Episode 4 and 5, during which students and teachers 'filled in the gap' by creating their own 'next episodes' using all manner of web platforms and software packages, YouTube and PowerPoint being common examples. A selection of these are featured in a vibrant online gallery.¹

Eventually an 'official' Episode 5 did emerge — *Hometown 2*, introducing a newly energized sixteen-year-old Alice who wasn't afraid to dabble in 3D graphics and whose game-making skills had significantly progressed.

Shortly afterwards, Episode 6, *The Last Gas Station*, saw Alice render her entire latest adventure within 'game engine' technology, putting readers/players in her shoes through first person perspective 'free roam' exploration, whilst still

¹ Accessible at <https://inanimatealice.com/create-with-me/>.

managing to retain a strong on-screen literary element throughout the whole experience.

For Alice, writing and technology have always been very much aligned, with her latest adventure, the recently released *Perpetual Nomads*, a Virtual Reality narrative extending that experience.

Perpetual Nomads reflects the essence of the entire franchise: how our main protagonist Alice strives to remain upbeat in the face of a challenging world filled with global upheavals and geographic displacement.

The *Nomads* story picks up directly after Episode 6 when Alice takes a journey across the desert on-board a rather cranky old bus back to the city after her shift working at *The Last Gas Station*. Before long, the bus collides with something and grinds to a halt, leaving Alice stranded in the middle of the wilderness, the city on the distant horizon, the sun going down, and her gadget — struggling to download a shiny new communications app — almost totally out of power.

Perpetual Nomads introduces a new level of meaning to the term ‘being in Alice’s shoes.’ As well as available to experience in familiar ‘first person perspective mode’ common to narrative games, readers/players can experience it immersively through VR hardware such as the Vive or the Oculus Rift. Several glimpsing, 360-degree *Perpetual Nomads* reading experiences compatible with VR-friendly phones such as the Samsung Galaxy and Daydream devices are also in production.

Developing *Inanimate Alice* for VR has challenged the producers to think about approaching the narrative flow and various narrative techniques used throughout the series in a very different way. Alice’s gadget for example: as well as super-imposing the device into the game world, they have also created a self-contained VR ‘room’ for the narrative sections where her gadget takes precedence; not just to ensure intuitive clutter-free navigation, but to encourage strong narrative focus.

One of the most interesting and most ‘openly explorable’ scenes in *Perpetual Nomads* occurs when Alice disembarks from the broken-down bus, curious to know what it has collided with. Rendered in richly immersive VR, the desert is littered with remnants of abandoned buildings, scraps of old vehicles and alive with plants and elusive animals. Its weather system works in ‘real time’; as the sun goes down, the environment darkens; Alice’s device becomes not just a narrative driver but also a physically essential torch.

To give Alice’s technology an authentic feel in *Perpetual Nomads*, the producers have experimented with bringing real-world web content onto the various device screens contained within the work. This has not only allowed them to mix a graphically rich 3D environment with more approachable web-based technologies such as HTML, CSS and Javascript, but also to create a simple content management system where they can swiftly experiment with the on-screen text without having to recompile the entire work.

Text in *Perpetual Nomads* works on several levels: Alice's thoughts linger in huge clear thought bubbles; a flow of communication spreads across her rendered 'private' device/screen space as a series of chat-room-like exchanges; and key voice over narratives help to give the story additional layers of clarity, structure and momentum.

Beyond *Perpetual Nomads*, in Episode 7, Alice will finally reach the city — an enormous navigable space and the most interactive episode so far — where she'll focus on a job interview for a position at a games studio that she has been striving for throughout her life.

The results of this — and the games she works on — will form the remainder of the series beyond 7. Where Alice will be at that stage with technology — how the conclusion to her adventures will unfold — will be interesting to see.

II. INANIMATE ALICE'S IMPACT IN PORTUGAL

As previously stated, *Inanimate Alice* has already been translated into six languages (Spanish, French, German, Italian, Japanese and Indonesian). With Portuguese being the fourth most widely spoken language in the world (with 260 million speakers on four continents), it was time for a Portuguese version. To that end, the team came up with the "*Inanimate Alice: Translating Electronic Literature for an Educational Context*" project, which is based at the Centre for Portuguese Literature (University of Coimbra). The team is coordinated by Ana Maria Machado and involves two postgraduate students, Ana Albuquerque e Aguilar² and António Oliveira,³ the *Inanimate Alice* executive producer, Ian Harper, and, more recently, a Brazilian post-doc student, Alice Matsuda. At this point, we should explain that the team from the University of Coimbra is only concerned with natural language translation problems. Though a translation of a work of electronic literature, characterized by its many layers, has repercussions on different levels, the implications for the code are being resolved by members of the *Inanimate Alice* production team. So, the translation issues we will address only concern the transposition from English to Portuguese.

Resulting from a research collaboration involving the FCT PhD Programme in Materialities of Literature and the Master's degree in Translation, the team translated the five episodes available, as, for the moment, the sixth is "only available for purchase from the website targeting those with computers that have 2Gb dedicated graphics cards." So it will be necessary "to reduce the specification and make it more accessible" (Harper, e-mail 21.2-2017).

The project's goal was to introduce *Alice* in elementary and secondary schools, as well as to introduce it for adoption within the Portuguese National Reading Plan (PNL). This idea was presented in interministerial meetings when

² From the PhD Program in Materialities of Literature.

³ With a Master in Translation.

the PNL team was reviewing the plan's principles and scope, one of which is digital literature. Moreover, in 2017, the Portuguese Ministry for Education published the *Perfil dos Alunos à Saída da Escolaridade Obrigatória* (*Student Profile On Leaving Compulsory Education*), which is a document that will affect the Portuguese school curriculum across all levels. Finally, in 2018, *Alice Inanimada*, the Portuguese translation for *Inanimate Alice*, was included in PNL 2027, as the first digital literary work ever endorsed by this institution in our teaching system. Consequently, the team was recommended to present the work in teachers' training sessions, as part of the strategic plan prepared by the Ministry of Science, Technology and Higher Education.

We already have successful examples, namely in Australia where, because of the pedagogical effect *Inanimate Alice* had in schools, it was embedded in the national curriculum. Similarly, as Amanda Hovious (2013) states, "*Inanimate Alice* can be seamlessly integrated into the [North American] curriculum," as it is aligned with the Common Core State English Language Arts Standards for Reading: Literature. We can therefore be positive this will be the first digital-born text to be read in Portuguese schools. This is also the reason why we started translating the pedagogical guidelines prepared by Jess Laccetti (episodes 1 to 3), and Bill Boyd. Some of this material is a kind of index and we can either change it into activity suggestions or, in time, create some new ones ourselves. These didactic guidelines to the protagonist's various adventures will be of great benefit to the educational community, for they provide teachers with suitable tools with which to read *Alice*. We believe all this is an important introduction to electronic literature and that, with the help of these pedagogical tools, pupils will live a transmedia experience that will provide them another level of awareness and knowledge. In fact, the pedagogical experiment the team developed in two schools in the centre of Portugal proved how both students and teachers were interested in studying electronic literature and its new forms of reading/using, as the team will demonstrate in another paper.

Furthermore, one must not forget that, as Anne Mangen and Adriaan van der Weel state,

During the past decades, not only have new multimodal forms of reading made their appearance, but reading in the narrow sense, that is, of linear, written texts — has also undergone substantial changes, and is now increasingly performed with digital screen technologies such as laptops, smartphones, tablets (e.g. iPad) and e-readers (e.g. Kindle). As screens are replacing paper as the main reading substrate, digitisation is influencing reading and literacy activities in preschools and kindergartens as well as in elementary schools and in higher education. (Mangen and Weel, 2016: 2)

For this purpose, students must be guided from the first years on with digital stories like *Inanimate Alice*.

In an environment where there is no established route to market, we are facing the commonly experienced problem of funding. We have made some contacts with an important academic publisher because we need someone to be “responsible for marketing and distribution of the Teachers Edition Suite” (TES) (the first 5 episodes plus teacher guidelines) in the Portuguese market. This means the publisher would develop the product with the *Inanimate Alice* production team. Again, we are optimistic, because we believe there are private and public schools that like to be challenged and are expected to buy TES and allow their students to access *Alice Inanimada*.

Having said that, we will now present both the results of the five episodes translation and the main issues that we faced during its preparation. In order to explain our decisions, we follow the typology of objective translation problems discussed by Christiane Nord, in the book *Text Analysis in Translation* (2005: 174-179). Although her purpose is mostly didactic, the four types of problems she considers – pragmatic, convention-related, linguistic, and text-specific translation problems – are very useful to our discussion (Nord, 2005: 174). By pragmatic translation problems she means those that arise from the contrast between Source Text vs. Target Text receivers and medium, and from the contrast between each motif (for production and translation) and function. As the expression suggests, the convention-related translation problems are the result of cultural differences, such as genre or style convention. With respect to linguistic translation problems, they refer particularly to lexis and sentence structure, and finally text-specific translation problems “arise in a particular text specimen” and “its occurrence (...) is a special case” (Nord, 2005: 176).

1. Considering our goals, the pedagogical concern was crucial in the outcome. We are conscious that, from the point of view of reception theory, *Inanimate Alice* faced a meaningful detour when it was captured by schools, which is certainly a pragmatic translation problem. Kate Pullinger never thought *Inanimate Alice* would have such a didactic potential, and she recognizes that the success it had in educational area was an astonishing surprise (Pullinger, 2015). With this background, the Portuguese translation experience was, from the beginning, conditioned by the pedagogical context. As we will see, this decision controlled clearly some translation options, as we were more concerned with language models than with oral and colloquial discourses, such as the free syntax of Alice. Needless to say that we also used the Portuguese standard thinking about any child accessing the series outside of school.

2. Regarding convention-related translation problems, our biggest challenge was due to punctuation differences between both languages, especially those that concern direct speech conventions, which in English are much more fluid. Thinking about the pedagogical purpose of our project, we had to set ground rules for each particular kind of direct speech occurrence and apply

them consistently in all the episodes. For example, if the character speaks directly to another character, we used the Portuguese convention — using dashes to separate the narrator’s from the character’s voice, *verba dicendi* that introduce direct speech, with the occasional use of a colon, even if the English text had only one sentence, with speech marked by quotation marks and commas:

English

My father says, Why are you sitting in the snow?! and grabs my hand and pulls me up and puts his arm around me, and my mother says, Did the snowcat drop you off early? Look! we’ve brought you pizza for your supper, it was hot a minute ago but it’s probably frozen now, and How was your day, did you meet up with those kids again? and Isn’t it beautiful out here in the dark with the snow falling and... (Episode 2)

Portuguese

O meu pai diz:

— Porque é que estás sentada na neve?! — E agarra a minha mão e puxa-me para cima e põe o braço à minha volta.

A minha mãe diz:

— O carro da neve deixou-te aqui cedo? Olha! Trouxemos-te *pizza* para o jantar, estava quente há um minuto, mas agora provavelmente já está congelada. Como foi o teu dia? Encontraste-te outra vez com aqueles miúdos? Não é tão bonito isto aqui fora, na escuridão com a neve a cair e... (Episódio 2)

But if the character, normally Alice, is thinking, remembering or recreating her own or someone else’s words, we used quotation marks to signal it, as we can see in the example, also taken from episode 2:

English

Then I hear him. I hear Brad’s voice. Inside my head. He’s speaking quietly. He’s saying, Be calm. Be still. He’s saying, Concentrate. Move slowly. Push yourself up into a sitting position. Don’t worry about not being able to see. Push yourself up slowly.

Portuguese

Então, ouço-o. Ouço a voz do Brad. Na minha cabeça. Está a falar baixinho. Diz-me: “Tem calma. Fica quieta.” Diz-me: “Concentra-te. Mexe-te devagar. Procura uma posição sentada. Não te preocupes por não conseguires ver. Senta-te devagar.”

Portuguese students typically struggle with these conventions, which are taught from the 3rd to the 9th grade, and we hope that *Alice Inanimada* contributes to the distinction and appropriation of the rules for different kinds of speech.

Convention-related translation problems also refer to the features that are specific to “culture groups” (Nord, 2005: 175). In this particular case, we took the character’s age into account (let us not forget she is eight in the 1st episode and sixteen in the 5th), maintaining the dominant casual register throughout the episodes, and trying to find equivalent words or expressions in Portuguese (as the word “cool,” for example, which we translated to “fixe”). We also respected the

paratactic structure in Portuguese when possible, to reflect the narrator's age as well to preserve the proximity with the reader, afforded by colloquialism. However, we had to cut and to divide some English sentences, because their size and repetitive structure would sound ungrammatical when translated directly into Portuguese, as one can see in the sentence below:

English

"I'm on my back, and I can't see anything, and I start thrashing, except I can't because I'm trapped, and the snow is still falling, and no one is going to see that I'm here, and I'll freeze to death and they won't find me until spring." (Episode 2)

Portuguese

"Estou de costas e não consigo ver nada. Quero mexer-me, mas não consigo porque estou presa e a neve continua a cair. E ninguém vai ver que eu estou aqui e vou morrer congelada e não me vão encontrar antes da primavera." (Episódio 2)

3. Concerning linguistic translation problems, we will first focus on deixis. Regarding person deixis, it is important to explain that Portuguese syntax admits null subject sentences, as the repetition of the same subject through different sentences is ungrammatical. Thus we had to omit the noun or the pronoun in many occasions so that the Portuguese text would be grammatically correct, as in the expression "I'm sitting here," from episode 5, which was translated to "estou aqui sentada."

Concerning time deixis, verbs were our main challenge, especially the past tenses and the subjunctive and conditional moods, because there isn't always a correspondence between English and Portuguese. Therefore we had to find the best equivalent to convey the original meaning.

Finally, space deixis was the biggest challenge regarding indexicality, because we had to determine the location of the object regarding the subject concerned. For example, the determiner and pronoun "that" can be translated in Portuguese as "este"/"esse"/"aquele," "esta"/"essa"/"aquela," or "isto"/"isso" / "aquilo" depending on the locative relation with the speaker. In this particular part, the translation act was based on an interpretative act of the original text.

We must also address the gender issue, because in Portuguese a gender suffix characterizes most nouns and adjectives. Episode 5 provides us a good example of this kind of translation problem as in its second sentence the word "Headteacher" appears. It also appears on the sidebar menu, being the title of the chapter. We only get to know the Headteacher's gender towards the end of the episode, when Alice says "The Head has given me a written warning; She e-mailed a copy to my parents." However, in Portuguese, we had to use the word "Diretora," revealing her gender from the very beginning of the episode, as the suffix *-a* is the feminine marker.

4. As for text-specific translation problems, we faced quite a few, especially regarding lexis. In fact, there were lots of words that had no exact correspondence in Portuguese. The most interesting one was Alice's "player," a crucial gadget present in all the episodes, and whose features increased until the last one. As we see it in the first episode, it looks like a Blackberry, but it has more functions than any mobile phone had by 2005, the year the first episode was released. With this player, in the first episode, one can draw, play Ba-Xi and other games, take photos, read, write and send e-mails or even access GPS⁴. Thus, if we had translated it by mobile phone, it would have been an anachronism. Although Japanese were working in the smartphone since 1999, its use in the West world didn't spread until the 2010s. In this sense, Kate Pullinger, together with developer Chris Joseph, anticipated the smartphone but, as the name wasn't yet known, she called the gadget a *player*. And so did we, in order to keep the same curiosity such a device should have caused in the first episodes of *Inanimate Alice*. As Portuguese children are very exposed to technology and its English language, we believe there won't be any misunderstandings. Besides, the image clears any possible doubt and, furthermore, the foreignism can be explored didactically.

The advantage of images inherent to the digital novel is that they also have implications in the translation, since images are of great help in understanding the story. In fact, in many cases it was impossible to find a Portuguese word perfectly suited for translating an English one. We will give a few examples. Usually we chose a hyperonym like in "compound" (2nd episode), which we translated to "casa." Knowing the word had a more specific sense than 'house', we are sure that the image and the label "casa" will give a closer perception of the intended expression. The same criterion was used with the words "top" and "closet" (3rd episode), translated, respectively by "camisola" and "armário." Both English words are used in Portuguese, but, whenever possible, we tried to use a Portuguese equivalent, based on the context and on the image. Something close to this happens with "sitter" (2nd episode). In Portuguese we use "baby-sitter" for a person that takes care of babies, but we don't have a specific word for sitting a ten-year-old, so we replaced it by a generic "empregada," relying on the context. As to "fried dumplings" (5th episode), as Portuguese food doesn't have this tradition, we must use again a hyperonym like "fritos," expressing the way dumplings are cooked. On the other hand, when the concept is difficult to translate, as in "rewilding" (5th episode), we must appeal to a periphrasis, like "regresso à natureza."

In other situations, the English word wasn't precise enough and we chose to keep its ambiguity. For instance, the context of the word "leak," in episode 3, didn't tell us whether it was an information, a gas or an oil leak, so we kept the ambiguity with the word "fuga," a little more polysemic in Portuguese.

4 In the following episodes, the player has even more functionalities, like enabling video calls (ep. 2), building 3D games (ep. 2 and 4), using social media and listening to music (ep. 4).

In some circumstances, English lexicon is richer than Portuguese and distinguishes words like, for instance, “shout” and “shriek,” for which we have only the verb “gritar,” so that’s what we used. Or, in other situations, the expressivity of English verbs like “slide” or “skate away” (5th episode) demands different solutions in Portuguese. In the first case, we must add the noun “skate” (“Saio (...) de skate”) and, in the second one, we appealed once again to the hyperonym “fugir.”

The last translation problem related to *Inanimate Alice* regards idiomatic expressions. If some of them are easily translated without compromising their meaning, for others we need to find an equivalent significance, even though the literal expression is different. That is what happened, for instance, with “we’re at home,” “like a lump,” “face the music” (5th episode), which we translated by “estamos na maior,” “a olhar para o teto” and “enfrentar a bronco.”

As you could see, the Portuguese version of *Inanimate Alice* shows an important reflection on the adequacy of lexicon and syntax and on the contrastive grammar between English and Portuguese. The attention paid to the reception of the target text was crucial in all our decisions, because, above all, we want students from elementary and secondary school to recognize in *Alice Inanimada* a model of writing and of verbal and visual reading.

Thus, so far, this has not only been an exercise in literal translation, but one of intercultural analysis. We aim to provide Portuguese children and teenagers with a new text that is coherent with their reasonable expectations, while respecting the original text.

We believe that the two developments we presented will be very important for the expansion of Alice’s universe and its worldwide recognition, as numerous prizes already are. We expect to engage children and teenagers with literature and to show them that reading is a very exciting activity, even if school sometimes lets them forget it.

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