



Understand (through) drifting: characterisation of the average empirical reader in *The Empty Kingdom*

Interpretar (a) la deriva: caracterización del lector empírico medio en *The Empty Kingdom*

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Abstract

This article describes the implicit and empirical reader of the digital work of fiction *The Empty Kingdom* (Merlin Goodbrey, 2015), based on the mixed analysis of a sample of 50 questionnaires completed by 11-12 year old students from two primary schools in the province of Barcelona, within the framework of the project "Teaching to read digital literature" ("*Enseñar a leer literatura digital*") (GRETEL-UAB). The data allow us to recognise, firstly, the modes of participation and interpretative challenges that this digital work poses for its readers and, secondly, the main difficulties that students manifest in the concrete reading experience. This analysis leads to the establishment and characterisation of three reader profiles, as well as the tracing of a number of implications relevant to the mediation of digital works of fiction, something in which the school needs to be actively involved so as not to leave readers adrift in the construction of meaning.

Resumen

En este artículo describimos el lector implícito y empírico de la ficción digital *The Empty Kingdom* (Merlin Goodbrey, 2015) a partir del análisis mixto de una muestra de 50 cuestionarios llevados a cabo por alumnado de ciclo superior de dos escuelas primarias de la provincia de Barcelona, en el marco del proyecto "Enseñar a leer literatura digital" (GRETEL-UAB). Los datos permiten reconocer, por un lado, los modos de participación y los retos interpretativos que la obra digital propone a sus lectores y, por el otro, las principales dificultades que manifiestan los estudiantes en la experiencia concreta de lectura. Este análisis conduce a establecer y caracterizar tres perfiles lectores y a trazar diversas implicaciones relevantes para la mediación de las ficciones digitales, tarea en la que la escuela ha de comprometerse para no dejar a los lectores a la deriva en la construcción de sentido.

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Introduction

A significant part of youth leisure activity has evolved towards the digital domain and, accordingly, the practices around the consumption of fiction in this sector are increasingly linked to audio-visual and interactive content. The available studies are clear: the penetration of the internet amongst minors in the Spanish state now exceeds 90%, and they spend an average of 4 to 5 hours a day in front of screens. 89% of boys and girls between 7 and 13 years old consume audio-visual content on the internet and approximately 70% of those in compulsory education (i.e. 6 to 16 year olds) regularly play video games¹. In line with these data and taking into account young people's need to socialise in relation to their recreational activities, it is likely that online conversations around this content will take place between peers. We can similarly infer, in line with what happens in the case of printed literature, that their criteria when choosing digital entertainment products are limited to what consumer guidelines tend to offer these age groups. This confers readers/spectators/players with certain skills, shaped by the characteristics of what we might call the digital best-sellers.

Although the literary reader is formed in the convergence of various fields of socialisation (academic, family, as well as recommendations between peers in their interactions), the digital fiction they turn to tends to be limited to the vernacular culture, meaning that young people are offered no formal scaffolding from which to explore other ways of looking at, selecting and consuming such content. Various lines of study have focused on the connection between formal and informal literacy spaces to better understand reading and writing practices, understood in a broad sense, such as the sociology of reading or ethnographic studies on literacy practices.

Therefore, as researchers in literary education, in the light of the digital nature of our times and aware of the need to consider young people as subjects within a social dimension

(Manresa, 2013), we embarked upon a study on digital fiction that would contribute to an understanding of how such subjects interact with this material. The term digital fiction refers, herein, to products that exploit the potential of technology to offer works of fiction employing resources such as interactivity, multimodality and perhaps the breakdown of discursive linearity, both in their creation and reception processes (Ramada Prieto, 2017).

For this study, we chose a work that both chimes in with other products popular amongst children and that can be studied from the perspective of an aesthetic experience linked to the notion of literary competence (Fittipaldi, 2013). *The Empty Kingdom* (Merlin Goodbrey, 2015) fulfils both these requirements: it elicits the interactive participation of the reader and has a clear narrative aspect whilst embodying the strong symbolic and functional components of the aesthetic conventions of storytelling. These characteristics make it an ideal work to investigate how youngsters play and read, and how they integrate the two skills when interpreting a work of quality that integrates the "contemporary" parameters of digital communication through fiction mentioned above: multimodality, reader participation and non-linear storytelling (Ramada Prieto, 2017). Given these characteristics of the work, we refer to its user as a reader-player, in recognition of the two aspects of her/his role.

We know little about how boys and girls relate to this content, what perception they have or what experiences are triggered by interpretative play. Our objective is, therefore, to describe the interpretative processes of particular subjects based on the participatory fabric of a particular work. We ask ourselves: what do readers prioritise when invited to take a participatory role in *The Empty Kingdom*? How do they react to its interactive design? What skills do they display, and what difficulties or needs do they experience?

The focus of the study is on the interactive elements and the interpretation of a digital

fiction, and as such the approach to the work is based on literary theory, electronic literary theory and that of “game studies” (Rettberg, 2019; Planells, 2015), in view of what these might contribute regarding the participatory structure of the work in question. We also consider the field of literary education to examine the readers’ perspective and the development of their literary skills.

We adopt two theoretical approaches to reading, the first of which focuses on the reader’s own process of production and the second on his or her reception of the work. Regarding the former, we use the concept of the “implicit reader” (Iser, 1978) or “model reader” (Eco, 1987), in which the reader is considered to be an integral element within the text. It is an image constructed by the writer, who, during the writing process, configures a representation of the characteristics and functions that “her” or “his” reader will fulfil. The usefulness of this concept for this study lies in its ability to separate out the characteristics of the fiction chosen according to what it demands from the reader. In terms of reception theories (Jauss, 1987; Chartier, 2003), these focus on how particular readers reconfigure the text through their multiple modes of approaching the works. This places the emphasis on the real or empirical reader as recipient of the aesthetic offering.

Although these approaches have represented either an internal examination from within the text or an external approach to that text from the reader’s perspective, the concept of the implicit reader moves the focus of attention from the work to the reader him/herself. It is thus that, in the second half of the 20th century, the turn in reading theory, which shifted the axis from the text to the reader, was produced. In this study, implicit reader and empirical reader work in a complementary way to establish a contrast between the work and its reader in a practical and particular application to a text and certain specific readers thereof.

Following this theoretical framework, which also informs the methodology, our results

describe, firstly, how the subjects (empirical readers) relate to what the work proposes (the implicit reader) and, secondly, they explore the capacities and problems that these subjects reveal in their aesthetic appreciation of the text, taking into account the concept of literary competence, which we apply here to the relevant characteristics of an interactive work. Thus, our study allows us to cross the experience of playing with the aesthetic experience.

What we propose stems from a desire to learn about reading experiences in order to characterise the different approaches that such works stimulate and to establish the parameters within which mediation can take place in order to enrich young people’s cultural practices around the reading of good quality material, which will help readers to progress from an intuitive appreciation to one based on a solid competence as interpreting subjects. It is about learning from the particular reader through an analysis that facilitates the appropriate intervention to help them develop digital interpretative skills that they can later employ in their daily reading.

Methodology

This study forms part of the project mentioned above¹. The participants are 50 students (11-12 years old) in the 6th Grade of the Spanish Primary School system (equivalent to Grade 6 Middle School students in the US or Year 7 Secondary School students in the British system) from two state schools in Barcelona. We aimed to interact with these students in order to observe their modes of perception, the strategies they brought into play and the difficulties they encountered in reading a particular work of digital fiction, *The Empty Kingdom* (Merlin Goodbrey, 2015). To do this, we previously analysed the work in question, taking into account how the implicit reader is constructed therein, and based on this, we designed two different questionnaires for the participants, who responded after interacting with the piece of digital fiction. In the first, three general questions are formulated: about the plot of the story (preparing a summary of the story);

about the elements most valued by the student; and concerning the difficulties experienced in the reading process. The second questionnaire asks specific questions about the challenges that this fiction poses to its readers and their ways of participating in, and interpreting the work².

We analyse the responses to the questionnaires in a mixed way, looking for recurring patterns in order to establish and describe the main trends in the ways of interacting with the work, as well as the most frequent difficulties encountered when interpreting it.

The Empty Kingdom presents a story without words crossed by image, music and sound effects, where what appears to be a simple game invites its reader-players to collect objects for use at specific moments in the story to overcome obstacles and escape from the empty kingdom, which is actually a desert island. If we delve into its interpretation, however, the work can be conceived as a metaphor about power and the loneliness that often accompanies it. In its construction, the story invites the active participation of its reader-players, who must wander around the island seeking an escape. This wandering, as we shall see in the analysis, has a clear influence on the ways in which users understand and relate to the work.

To understand how interactivity is integrated into interpretation, how it forms part of the material from which we construct meaning, we look into the kind of participation the work demands: what role do we assume in the “play environment” (Perez Latorre, 2012, p. 115)³; what are the components, i.e. “those subjects that can cause significant changes in the environment”, and what are the events or “processes and results that the interventions of said subjects can generate” (Ramada Prieto, 2017, p. 258). The latter can be classified, following Chatman (1978), into *kernels*, which are “narrative moments that give rise to cruxes in the direction taken by events... [that] cannot be deleted without destroying the narrative logic”, and *satellite* events, that “can be deleted without

disturbing the logic of the plot, though [their] omission will, of course, impoverish the narrative aesthetically” (Chatman, 1978, pp. 53-54) Among the kernels, we place the presentation of the protagonist, the situations in which he has to collect or use the objects and the departure from the island. Among the satellites, we would include the interactions with secondary animals, the automatic use of objects already possessed or a number of events that occur outside the logical chain of key events (such as reaching the beach at the end without having come to look for the protagonist, or going to the cliff without finding anything to do).

The recognition and categorisation of these kernels and satellites make it possible to detect two levels of performativity, according to Ramada Prieto (2017, pp. 309-310), linked to two kinds of interpretative challenges present in the work:

- a necessary performativity, related to kernels, which we categorise as “configurative gameplay modules” (ibid.), such as the obligation to pick up objects and use them at the right moment in order to move on, something that poses the challenge of knowing how to decode the participatory chains presented in fiction;
- performativity that arises from the semiotic element of the work, but that is not linked to the progression of the action, such as, for example, certain satellite events, categorised as “explorative gameplay modules” (ibid.), which incite the reader to explore the empty spaces presented in the story with no specific end result. This type presents the challenge of understanding the interpretative relevance of something located outside the main logical chain, since it contributes to the construction of a poetic gaze that gives symbolic value to the idea of emptiness, initially mooted in the title.

The analysis thus shows how the work constructs an implicit multimodal reader, who must know how to recognise and enter into both levels of interactivity to overcome the interpretative

challenges arising, and serves as an instrument to know and understand the empirical reader, a task that we will carry out in what follows.

Results

The average empirical reader

Once the expressive framework of *The Empty Kingdom* had been taken on board, we made a panoramic assessment of how the students had interpretatively framed themselves within the work. For this, we analysed the summaries that the children constructed in their questionnaires, accounting for the kernel or satellite events they referred to. This method allowed data to be obtained and analysed in order to glimpse certain tendencies, across the entire sample, regarding their processes of reading and interpretation. This emergent construction of the common interpretative features detected in the students is what we here call the “average empirical reader”.

One of the primary points observed is the relevance of the protagonist, mentioned in 90% of the summaries: “It’s about a king who has to look for objects”; “He is a king who is lost”, among other examples. This is predictable due to the special importance that any protagonist enjoys within his or her narrative, but perhaps in this case it is reinforced by the character’s status within the gameplay as an avatar: the protagonist king not only assumes the main role, but also functions as the embodiment of the reader-players in the narration. The students recognise this by pointing out that “you are the king”, or by using the second person when explaining the protagonist’s adventures: “*The Empty Kingdom* is a very entertaining story because you have to escape from an island”; “You are the only human (or whoever you are) in the kingdom”.

The importance of the player-avatar link and the impression it leaves on the reader is intensified when we compare, for example, the number of times the king is mentioned compared to other fundamental character in the story (such as the

queen who comes to look for him at the end), who appears in only 38% of the summaries, despite their relevance to the plot.

The second notable element is the overwhelming presence of references to the actions demanded by the interactive fabric of the work, present in almost 70% of the questionnaire responses. This fact points to the importance that the performative part of *The Empty Kingdom* takes on for the students, since at no time were they asked to comment on the gameplay, but rather to summarise the plot: “Explain the story of *The Empty Kingdom* in as much detail as you can”. However, of the 50 participants, as many as 33 (66%) employ verbs related to interactive aspects of the game, such as the collection or use of objects scattered throughout the fictional world:

- It is about a king who travelled throughout his kingdom [and] picked up objects that he had to use later.
- I really liked it because you had to pick up objects.
- ... you are a ‘figure’ and you have to go and find items and then use them however you can and also all the time everywhere and after using everything they go to the beach and you go in a boat.

It is striking, however, that these references all remain at a superficial level, which does not go beyond the use of general verbs (such as “find”, “take”, “use”...), since only 17 out of the 50 participants (34%) explicitly relate these actions, the verbs used, with the elements of the fictional world that give them discursive meaning within the story (objects, settings, etc.):

- You start in the meadow you take the monster’s lantern you go back you go to the cave you take the lantern you go up you take the bone and you go to the house you take the paper and you are going to throw it you go in the cave and you go past the waterfall and then you put the glass on the lamp you go to the bridge you get to the cemetery then to the beach and you go.
- He is a king who has got lost and who can’t find his kingdom and so he goes looking for things or objects such as: a trumpet, a paper aeroplane, a lantern, etc.

Even fewer students, only 10 (20%), in addition to relating what they do with the specific components of the functional fabric of the story world, explicitly allude to the functions that their actions perform, such as the need to cross the bridge in order to reach the jetty:

- The story is about a king who must cross the bridge over the river but he can't because it's touching the water. So the king needs to have a bunch of things to be able to cross the bridge and go in the boat with his friend.

This is also the case with the direct consequential relationship between the sending of the letter by the king and his rescue by the queen:

- It's about a king who is on an island with lots of dinosaurs and he sends a note to the queen to come and get him.
- First you have to send a letter to a person so that they come to rescue you, then you have to shine a light so that they see you, finally, you have to sound something to get to the other side that the person who comes to find you is waiting for you.

We can therefore interpret these data as indicating that, for the majority of the students, the impression left by the participatory element is fundamental to their perception of the work, but that theirs is not necessarily a narrative or fictional reading of the work, but rather a focus on having to "do things" within the story. From what we can see, *The Empty Kingdom* seems to be more of a work concerned with carrying out actions than one about being a weary king on an island who needs to contact someone to come and rescue him.

The third noteworthy trend is the surprising absence of references to the end of the story: less than half of the participants (46%) refer to the protagonist's departure from the island and only 38% explicitly state that it is the queen who comes to get him. This reinforces the idea that, for different reasons -which we will explore later-, the perception of the work that students reveal in the questionnaires is more focussed on the purely procedural and actional dimension

than on the expressive and narrative layer that underlies these actions.

A last noteworthy tendency of the average empirical reader is the mention in several summaries of wandering and drifting, one of the satellite features and a key experiential outcome of a poetic reading of the work:

- It was like a game, I had to move around the same places many times because I didn't know what I was there for.
- And this story was about [...] a king who is you yourself who was lost on a desert island full of living and dead dinosaurs, and with the objects that you have found getting out of that desert island full of dinosaurs.

Despite not representing a high percentage (22%), this is the most cited satellite event in the summaries, followed only by the occasional (and predictable) references to the dinosaurs that are evident in numerous scenes. We consider this point relevant because of the way in which the participatory architecture of the game-through a design that forces the reader to wander from one place to another without really knowing why-, generates a concrete experiential aesthetic, that of a king lost in his own kingdom. This architecture is capable of colouring the perception of the reader-players, in fact in an almost involuntary way, since in practically no questionnaire is this sensation related to any comprehensive appreciation of the work.

Some interpretative barriers

Given that, as the profile of the average empirical reader described above shows, for the students, the participatory fabric of the work constitutes the most relevant ingredient in its aesthetic mix, we analyse the responses of the readers in more depth, in order to confirm (or not) the indications that point to a superficial or conflictive relationship with the work. To do this, we compare the type of conceptual approach that readers show in their questionnaire responses, beyond the summary, towards two events in the work in which the gameplay (the design of the

rules of participation) reflects different degrees of complexity in the weave of the plot: the use of the horn to cross the river, and the launch of the paper aeroplane collected in the house that sends a message to the queen. Each of these events displays a different degree of complexity in its participatory aspect, due to the way in which the implicit reader is constructed, based on its 'rules of implementation', the sequence of actions that needs to be performed, and its 'rules of realisation, the consequences of these actions (Pérez Latorre, 2012, pp. 79-94).

In the first event, we need to sound the horn to be able to cross the river: the consequence of this action is immediate and occurs in the same place in which it is carried out: when playing the instrument (by pressing the space bar on the keyboard) the dinosaurs blocking our passage move aside and allow us to walk across the wooden plank.

However, the second event, launching the paper plane, does not have an immediate outcome, since this action triggers a more complex chain of events that need to be interpreted jointly. Here, when pressing the space bar, at the edge of the cliff, to launch the letter folded into a paper aeroplane (rules of realisation), it must be understood that someone, possibly the queen, will receive the message, and that from this point on we are able to go down to the jetty to confirm the receipt of the message by means of luminous signals, allowing someone to rescue us on the beach. But at the point of launching the message, we have no direct confirmation of this result. Constructing the logic of the plot through this puzzle therefore requires thinking beyond the explicit sequence of actions carried out. We need an awareness of the narrative stimuli and likely consequences of triggering the event, something much more complex, in that it requires the elaboration of hypotheses and inferences that go beyond the simple "I blow this horn and cross the river."

This formal and semantic difference between the two events constitutes an interesting indi-

cator from which to analyse how the reader is discursively positioned, if and when speaking of it. A quantitative analysis of the summaries does not provide these data because the two events are mentioned on a similar number of occasions. But a more detailed analysis of the mentions of one event or the other does reveal relevant indicators.

A first significant piece of data is that none of the 12 students who said they had given up on the work before the end mentioned the most complex puzzle of the paper aeroplane, while a subset of these (25%) did refer to the event of blowing the horn to cross the river. If we place this fact alongside the high number of cases in which, when asked about any particular difficulties encountered, readers mentioned the horn event as problematic, we can deduce not only that this (surprisingly) was cited by some respondents as a difficulty when managing the participatory fabric of the work, but also that the event with the horn and the dinosaurs played a role as a "barrier" to action.

It was difficult for me when I had to cross a wooden plank [that] was not well placed and I couldn't get past, it was really difficult because I was trying to see if I had to find some object I was missing to be able to get past and when I got it, I couldn't get past along a beach and to be able to get through I was looking everywhere.

This conjunction of data allows us to establish a first barrier in the reader's processes of constructing meaning in *The Empty Kingdom*: the simple matter of dealing with the work as a participatory text. Despite the strong impression that this expressive feature leaves on the reader, this does not mean that it is a language of communication in which the students are naturally skilled, given that some expressed considerable difficulty in this regard, difficulty that prevented them from managing the reading comfortably or even reaching the end.

However, the data also point to another aspect that not only confirms the importance of game design as perceived by the students, but

also profiles a group of boys and girls who are used to playing, for whom this does not seem to be a problem. Nevertheless, “playing” and “constructing meaning from the game” do not necessarily go hand in hand, as was hinted at in the description of the average empirical reader, in which we highlighted only a small sample of students capable of verbalising the elements of the gameplay in a manner that was argumentatively justified. For this reason, we wanted to delve into the type of verbalisations produced regarding an argumentatively and procedurally more complex puzzle, such as the paper aeroplane described above.

The fact that all the students who mentioned this event had finished the digital book sheds some light on their greater capacity to manipulate the situation compared to the rest. But in most cases, this skill was employed towards configuring the play and reaching the conclusion, rather than as a cognitive empowerment that might lead to a more complex textual interpretation. This is clearly seen in the way in which they constantly link the launch of the plane with what they consider to be the ultimate goal of the game (escape), without specifying any sort of plot motivation for the character or any global interpretation of the causes and circumstances making this necessary: for most students the plane is simply launched in order to finish the game:

- In this scene they are signalling to come and get him.
- The character has been lost on an island and needs materials to get away from there. First you take the bone that is on the ground, then you take the paper aeroplane that is in the house by the lake, and they also have to take the lamp and put a torch inside it to signal to someone to come and rescue you.

This interpretation of the data is reinforced by a moment experienced by the researchers during its collection: a group of eight students decided to use the reading time offered to do a *speedrun* with the work. (“A speedrun is a play-through, or a recording thereof, of a whole video game

or a selected part of it (such as a single level), performed with the intention of completing it as fast as possible”, Wikipedia). The fact that, whilst knowing that at the end they would have to answer interpretive questions, the children decided to compete in a race to reach the end of *The Empty Kingdom* clearly shows their configurative conception of the text as a game to be completed.

In summary, we conclude that, just as, for a considerable part of the readership, the basic grammar of interactivity was a barrier in their experience of the work, another significant barrier to constructing complex meaning in participatory texts is the failure to consider this language and the game design as integral elements in the overall expressive toolkit of the work. It is not only about knowing how to play, but also about understanding that when we play, we are advancing the narrative that must be interpreted within a game, which is not simply intended to be finished or won.

The reader profiles

Both the description of the average empirical reader and the detection and analysis of the two barriers that readers face with *The Empty Kingdom* outline three distinct reading profiles:

- The first profile corresponds to those who have difficulty in playing and find navigating the performative logic of the work a challenge.
- The second profile includes those who are comfortable playing and manage the participatory fabric of the work well, but they see no meaning beyond its dimension as a text/game that needs to be solved and finished;
- The third profile includes those who not only master the performative logic of the work, but are also capable of intuiting what its meaning might be.

Let’s go through a careful review of each of these profiles.

Those who have difficulty playing

In this first category are those students who encounter numerous problems in accessing the work. Difficulties might occur in manipulating or controlling the gameplay, such as when they do not know how to use the keyboard arrows to move, for example; or they might be interactive issues, such as when the reader-player does not seem to understand what to do in the world of the digital fiction, how or why they should move the character, or when they do not realise that they need to pick up objects and use them. This type of problem is especially evident in the puzzle of the plank crossing the river mentioned above, in which several students admitted to being stuck: "There is a [scene in which] I was stuck because I didn't know how to do it. It was the part where I couldn't cross the river because the plank was not in the right place to get over and I didn't know how to cross".

The obstacles indicated often make it difficult for these readers to access the storyline, something that we observe particularly in the case of those who summarised the story as being about "picking up objects". Such difficulties led to 24% of the students proving unable to reach the end of the story, whilst others, despite having finished it, living the experience with a feeling of frustration, as a result of not knowing how to manipulate the object that they had in their hands, either as an object *per se*, or in terms of its role in the fiction. Several reported the frustration of feeling as lost as the character⁴ and this led them, involuntarily, to share the disorientation and loneliness felt by the fictional king of *The Empty Kingdom* himself.

Although, as we have already mentioned, provoking this experience is part of the aesthetic aim of the work, without the interpretative strategies or the necessary mediation, it is impossible for some students to make an objective reading of the work, and they therefore experience this feeling of disorientation, of being lost, but fail to understand this as a fundamental component of

the fictional approach and that the participation sought by the work is that of deciphering a code, or solving a puzzle.

Those who know how to play, but take it no further

The second profile groups those students who, although they understand the rules of manipulating the environment and can decode the interactive structure of the work with no great difficulty, do not manage to access a deeper level of interpretation. These are the subjects who seem to understand the work merely as a game whose primary objective is to help the protagonist escape from the island as soon as possible - such are the students who opted to do the aforementioned *speedrun*.

Students focus only on what the fiction requires of them to reach the end. Thus, they sidestep the narrative plane, the literary elements and intentions of the story. This is observed in the case of those players who, in the first question of the questionnaire, define the work as "like a PlayStation™ game", "like a mission", while in the fourth question (which asks them to make explicit the inferences behind what happens at the jetty) they seem to maintain a literal interpretation, explaining what they observe physically, without alluding to the protagonist's motivations, which are essential to a full understanding of the scene: "It's raining and the guy is like as if in the end he's seen someone"; "It lights up something else that's in the distance."

We thus observe how recognition of this second reader profile provides clear evidence for analysis: the fact that they "know how to play", that they know how to move comfortably at the level of manipulating the gameplay, seems to give them a false sense of mastery of the work, false inasmuch as the ability to function freely in the interactive framework does not *per se* imply having internalised an interpretative view of the video-play language.

Those who play and show interpretative ability

Finally, the third profile groups those children who show some understanding of the work in its narrative aspect. Less than a quarter of the sample seems to recognise the narrative function of the actions that the character carries out, or shows any level of awareness of the logic of the plotline of the work.

However, it is possible to distinguish two levels of response, linked to the ability to explain a personal interpretation, “that iceberg that constitutes each person’s reading process” (Fittipaldi 2012, p. 73) of which we can often only see the tip. Only 10% of the students refer in their responses to the protagonist’s motivations and feelings, such as the examples that indicate that the king “feels alone” on the island. But, although they are able to recognise the lonely status of the protagonist and his desire to escape from that empty space and meet his beloved towards the end of the story, almost no respondent alludes to the lyricism of the digital fiction, to the poetic nature of its construction, in linking the various levels of the text.

This global understanding of the work is practically non-existent in most of the responses, which leads us to single out the need for education in digital fiction that might help students to sharpen their gaze in order to observe and understand how compositional resources and, above all, constructed interactivity helps us to experience that loneliness ourselves, that sense of disorientation that we share with the protagonist. It is the design, positioning and dynamics that engage readers and generate such emotions. Although, as we remarked with regard to the first category, some students do experience the feeling of being lost, they lack the objectivity or reflective capacity to question whether this is part of the aesthetic character of the work.

Likewise, we place in this profile a small group of readers (2%) whose literary competence has helped them glimpse some interpretative challenges posed by the fiction, in that they allude to

clues such as the title itself, or the *mise en scène* of the work, in a search for possible meanings. However, even they do not seem to be aware that they are making interpretations beyond the superficial level, that they are accessing deeper layers of meaning. It seems that in these cases “traditional” literary knowledge is not sufficient for reading fictions of this type and there is a lack of competence in digital reading that would allow them to recognise compositional resources, understand the links between them and the aesthetic intentionality of the constructive fabric and thereby develop a comprehensive interpretative appreciation of digital works.

Conclusions

Herewith we present some final remarks emerging from the study. Firstly, the analysis of digital fiction and the type of implicit reader, from the point of view of interactivity, allows us to observe the competences that the work demands of the reader to avoid becoming lost on its journey or in the interpretative challenges that it presents. This can then be contrasted with the experiences of the participants, to arrive at a description of the average empirical reader. This underlines the importance of gaining a knowledge of the work in question and the modes of participation that it offers its readers when thinking about mediated access to this type of literary product.

Secondly, inquiring into what happens when children enter into a work of this type allows us to better understand specific readers, to know what stance they might adopt when confronted with the text, in what aspects they might falter when approaching the digital product, and to explore what they know and where they seem to get stuck. Which are the barriers that they cannot autonomously overcome during the reading/playing experience?

Our analysis allows us to better understand both the text and its readers. Both these types of knowledge point to the existence of an initial barrier preventing many readers from coping

comfortably in the framework of a digital fiction, and that is the problem of how to manipulate the environment. Added to this stumbling block is another related to the difficulty in linking the modes of participation in the digital fiction with its aesthetic dimension, i.e. not appreciating the type of interactivity postulated in the work as a discursive element susceptible to interpretation. This finding shows that the technological and manipulative skills of children who “know how to play” are not enough: the school needs to address the world of digital fiction and help build interpretative processes that facilitate an understanding of the global meaning of such works.

The cross between the image of the implicit reader and that of the average empirical reader leads to the categorisation of three reader profiles who need to be catered for differently in the mediation of digital fictions as follows:

- A first group of readers who experience difficulty in playing, in managing the interactive framework of the fiction with ease, for whom the school should facilitate access to a variety of works, offering a range of challenges in order to broaden their horizons and mitigate their discomfort when faced with this type of fictional product.
- A second group of readers who know how to play, have the manipulative skills to manage the gameplay, but end up racing to get to the end, transferring the logic of other games they are familiar with to works of digital fiction, such as *The Empty Kingdom*, that demand a more exploratory, contemplative approach (and a willingness to digress). In this dash to the end, these readers fail to construct the meaning upon which the fiction relies for its full effect. Here, mediation is also important to show that digital fictions involve more than just finishing the game and that not all such works function in the same way: each work requires a specific approach, according to the design characteristics aimed at its implicit reader.
- A third group includes reader-players who are capable of appreciating other levels of meaning beyond the plot, but are unable to

develop them fully because they lack the objective viewpoint that would help them understand that the fiction works on different planes that need to be linked together in order to arrive at a global interpretation. In this task, mediation might offer reading opportunities and discussion that encourage a wider perspective and the degree of reflection necessary to encourage a deeper and more integrated understanding of such pieces of fiction.

If we think of the interpretation of digital fictions as a journey, we discover that there are travellers (readers) who do not know where to go or how to get there, who are lost on the road and who need to know that every text constructs its own map for its navigation. Other travellers seem to be clear about the destination from the beginning and just want to get there as fast as possible, without realising that the road itself (with its landscapes, views and stop-offs) is also part of the journey. Then there are those who do grasp that the journey consists in more than just the medium (how the work functions at a performative level), or the storyline, and manage to glimpse a broader panorama of meaning. Nevertheless, all these categories of reader need a guide, a companion on the road to help them reach their destination, who does not leave them adrift. In short, such mediation would help them understand that travelling through a digital fiction involves a variety of skills: deciphering the different languages and knowing how to manipulate the resources presented, but also understanding the story and going further, to interpret the semiotic content that the work offers overall, understanding it holistically, appreciating that, as Borges said, the form is the content. We see this as a role that the school could usefully play.

Notes

1. Data extracted from “The video game industry in Spain: 2019 yearbook”, published by the Spanish Video Game Association 2020 [online], and from the 2018 report of the Association for Media Research AIMC Niñ@s [online].

2. A posteriori we also conducted a couple interviews, but they were not used for this research.

3. The gaming environment is defined as “the set of components that make up the fictional space in which the interactor has the possibility to act and that define the virtual world of the cybertext” (Ramada Prieto 2017, p. 258).

4. As we mentioned in the analysis of the empirical readers, 22% refer to this wandering in the spatial dimension, but they do not mention it as a resource used to evoke the sensation of being lost or adrift.

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