Digital Adaptations: Types, Meanings, and Implications for Literary Education

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ABSTRACT

Digital adaptations of literary works possess an ambiguous status in education. Even though they have been in use several decades, their impact on learning is not sufficiently studied. Apart from lacking technological confidence, educators are skeptical about viewing digital texts as relevant to literary discourse. In their turn, developers are not always interested in fitting the school needs and tend to market their products as innovations. The study aims to provide a semiotic framework for regarding digital adaptations in a wider context of cultural autocommunication and placing them in the system of literary education. Existing examples of digital adaptations are collected, classified and analyzed.

Keywords

Digital adaptation, digital books, literary education, translation, cultural autocommunication

1. INTRODUCTION

Due to its blurred borders, the research field is characterized by a terminological incoherence. Dozens of notions are employed both in academic conceptualization and marketing of the literature-related objects. Digital, or electronic literature is the most commonly used umbrella term for different types of objects: digital books, interactive fiction, transmedia storytelling, etc. Ergodic literature, a notion developed by Espen Aarseth [1], extends this range by including video games or even ancient wall inscriptions that present religious texts non-linearly.

The acknowledgement of literary discourse as an integral part of the overall media landscape challenges the conventional understanding of the literariness [2]. For instance, it is not clear whether a novel-based video game could be considered as literature. Semiotics allows disregarding any differences between formats in order to concentrate on the processes. Translation, in a wider semiotic sense, includes not only interlinguistic translation but also intralinguistic and intersemiotic translations [3]. Digital adaptation exemplifies the latter type, while being associated with the movement from "the literary to its representation" [4].

Digital adaptation can be seen as part of the universal cultural process. In the tradition of the Tartu-Moscow semiotic school, self-description is considered a fundamental principle of culture also known as cultural autocommunication – "a process of interpretation, mediation, deformation, elimination" of primary and secondary texts [5].

The mnemonic and creative functions of cultural autocommunication are not always recognized by the system of literary education. Since the "translation from one system of text to another always includes a certain element of untranslatability" [6], the result may seem distant from the original text. By acquiring a semiotic perspective, it is possible to extend the literary pedagogy beyond its current limits and develop a framework for the analysis and implementation of digital adaptations. This involves not merely a transition from printed to digital texts, but a transformation of the entire learning experience, i.e. a reconsideration of the nature of text, the nature of reading and the nature of new media.

2. METHODOLOGY

The lack of the established terminology complicates the identification of digital adaptations. To create the current selection (Table 1), two methods were used. Some of the digital adaptations were found in *iTunes'* catalog under the sections Books, Education, Entertainment. The others were revealed through the direct search on Google using keywords such as "interactive books", "digital books", "digital literature", "digital adaptations".

The study focuses on the products that include the full-length text or, at least, the full story. In order to be placed on the list, an adaptation needs to fit the following requirements: to be based on previously existent literary work; to present the whole story in a full or abridged version; to be released in last ten years; to challenge the traditional practices of reading and learning; to be suitable for literary education in middle or high school; to have an English-language version.

At the next stage, the adaptations were divided into three large groups based on Bolter and Grusin's remediation theory. According to the scholars, the rivalry between media may be described as duplication, enhancement, refashioning, or absorption [7]. At the one extreme, the older medium is duplicated without apparent irony or critique (those examples were excluded from the selection). Adaptations of the second type tend to emphasize a difference rather than erase it: a digital version is marketed as an innovation even though it uses the same logics. The third option is to refashion the older medium, while still marking its presence in the newer one. Finally, the newer medium can absorb the older medium entirely, so that the discontinuities between these two are minimized.

Name	Developer	Type	Subtype	Targeting
Alice for the iPad	Atomic Antelope			Entertainment
iDickens: Ghost Stories	Museum of London			Entertainment
iLovecraft Collection	iClassics Productions, S.L.			Entertainment
iPoe	iClassics Productions, S.L.		Illustrated storybooks	Entertainment
Sherlock Holmes for the iPad	Gutenbergz, Inc			Entertainment
S. Holmes	Byook			Entertainment
The Raven (HD)	vNovel Interactive			Entertainment
The Great Gatsby interactive book	Underpage			Entertainment
A Clockwork Orange iPad App	Random House			Entertainment
Jack Kerouac's On the Road	Penguin Group USA			Education
James Joyce – The Dead	University College Dublin			Education
Joyce's Ulysses: A Guide	Naxos Digital Services Ltd.			Education
Poems by Heart	Penguin Group USA	Enhancement	Multimedia collections	Education
Shakespeare	Shakespeare.com			Education
Starting Shakespeare	Deeper Richer			Education
The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy	Missing Inc Studios			Entertainment
The Poetry Hour	Josephine Hart Poetry Foundation			Education
Tolstoy. Live Pages	Articul Media			Education
Ulysses	Genius		Interactive comments	Education
Infinite Ulysses	Amanda Visconti			Education
Actively Learn	Actively Learn			Education
Babeleo	Babeleo Books			Education
BookBites	BookBites			Education
Curriculet	Curriculet		Reading platforms	Education
LitCharts	LitCharts LLC			Education
MyON	MyON			Education
Subtext	Renaissance Learning			Education
Canterbury Tales	Weekly Reader			Education
Folger Luminary Shakespeare	Luminary Digital Media LLC			Education
Gamebooks: Read and Learn English	Oxford University Press			Education
Mark Twain	Weekly Reader			Education
MIT Global Shakespeare Project	MIT	Refashioning	Transmedia	Education
O Brave New World	RETZ			Education
Of Mice and Men Study App	Mammoth Graphics Ltd			Education
Poe Web Site	Weekly Reader			Education
Shakespeare at Play	Tim Chisholm			Education

Title	Publisher	Group	Subtype	Function
Shakespeare in Bits	Mindconnex Learning Ltd.			Education
Shakespeare's Sonnets	Touchpress Inc			Education
The Shakespearience	Sourcebooks			Education
The Waste Land	Touchpress Limited			Education
Explore Shakespeare	Cambridge University Press			Education
WorldPlay Shakespeare	The New Book Press			Education
SwipeSpeare	Golgotha Press, Inc		Multitext editions	Education
The Homer Multitext	Harvard University			Education
Walden: A Fluid Text Edition	Digital Thoreau			Education
Moby Dick, Great Expectations	Penguin, Zappar		AR	Entertainment
Much Ado About Nothing	Ophelia Project, Weekly Reader		Social media and bots	Entertainment
Twitterature	Penguin			Entertainment
Author Bot (Alice in Wonderland)	Fastbot			Entertainment
Versu	Linden Lab			Entertainment
80 Days	Inkle	Absorption	Interactive fiction	Entertainment
Frankenstein	Inkle			Entertainment
Sherlock: Interactive Adventure	HAAB			Entertainment
To Be or Not to Be	Tin Man Games			Entertainment
39 Steps	The Story Mechanics		Video games	Entertainment
Frankenstein HD	Anuman			Entertainment
The Great Gatsby: Classic Adventures Full	Hullabu, Inc			Entertainment
Sherlock Holmes: Crimes and Punishments	Frogwares			Entertainment

Table 1. Typology of digital adaptations.

3. FINDINGS

The idea of consistency between printed media and digital adaptations is reluctantly acknowledged by some developers and educators. At the same time, it allows not only revealing certain heredity, but also discovering global trends, instead of thinking in terms of specific media formats.

Developers tend to overemphasize the novelty of their products and adhere to rhetoric rather than to the objective description. In order to reveal the real nature of the object, a researcher has to filter out loud claims about „interactiveness" or „innovation" and focus on the structure of the product, its relation to more traditional media and its contribution to current practices or reading.

The final selection includes 58 digital adaptations which are divided into three groups. Enhanced books (27 items) include illustrated storybooks, multimedia collections, and reading platforms. Refashioning (19 items) is exemplified by transmedia environments, multitext editions and AR-products. Absorption (12 items) is presented in social media retellings, interactive fiction and video games. While the first type is the closest to the medium of the book, the third type is the most distant from it.

Simpler digital adaptations make the majority of the selection. Of all products, 27 may be described as slightly enhanced e-books, in contrast to only 4 literary video games. Almost all adaptations may be referred to as edutainment products, with each adaptation standing closer either to the education or entertainment pole. However, the borderline is not clear. Even though products in *iTunes* are targeted as either educational or entertaining, this is not necessarily related to their content. In most cases, their dominant function could also be derived from the description of the product or the profile of its developer (for instance, universities are more likely to deal with educational projects).

3.1 Entertainment

The entertaining function is dominant in 23 products in the selection. Interestingly, those are both the simplest adaptations (illustrated storybooks) and the most complex ones (social media retellings and bots, interactive fiction, video games). In both cases, the original texts are chosen for their potential visual appeal or the capability to win the attention of the audience.

The successful digitalization of literature is often predetermined by the immanent characteristics of the original text. To a large extent, the same features attract the authors of cinematic adaptations.

Firstly, successful texts are those that provoke suspense, curiosity, or surprise. For these reasons, "thrillers, detectives, and spy novels are always high on best-seller lists", since they "are not read for the information they contain, but for the pleasure they provide" [8]. Unsurprisingly, classic detectives and mystery stories have a strong position: digital adaptations are inspired by A. C. Doyle (5 items), E. A. Poe (3), Mary Shelley (3), C. Dickens (2), H. P. Lovecraft (1). Secondly, literary texts are chosen for their potential in terms of audiovisuality. For instance, the users of *S. Holmes* app are invited to "be startled as the victim's screams resonate", "shudder as the blood spreads out on the pages", and "shiver as the rain falls into the palm of the hand". Extremely popular app *Alice for the iPad* exploits the similar technique: "Throw tarts at the Queen of Hearts – they bounce off her! Witness the Cheshire Cat disappear and help the Caterpillar smoke his hookah pipe".

As may be seen, entertaining products are mostly based on the texts of the certain genre which are not typically used in classroom settings. This makes difficult to define whether the unpopularity of such products among educators results from their digital form or simply the content.

3.2 Education

More than a half of all products (35) may be considered as mostly educational. Some adaptations are affiliated with universities and possess an explicit educational function: *Walden Project* by the State University of New York at Geneseo; *James Joyce – The Dead* by the University College Dublin; *The Homer Multitext* by Harvard University; *Of Mice and Men Study App* by Oxford University.

Within the educational domain, reasons for digitalization can also be manifold. First, digital products aim to facilitate the comprehension of old texts. Thus, 14 products based on Shakespeare's works offer translations into modern English, videos of word-for-word staging, thorough annotations, profiles of characters. The study guide for John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* contains profiles of characters and historical locations, while *Tolstoy. Live Pages* maps the complex interrelations of real and historical events via interactive infographics. The second explanation is related to the complex structure or genre of literary works. *The Homer Multitext* project reflects the heterogeneous structure of *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, while a digital edition of Thoreau's *Walden* explores the stages of development through a series of drafts. Many digital products deal with 20th-century texts that are not easily comprehended without a context. *A Clockwork Orange iPad App* supplements Anthony Burgess' novel with archive video and audio; mobile version of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* includes interactive map of the story, archive photos, texts, and videos; T. S. Elliot's *The Waste Land* is enhanced with multimodal comments and scans of the original manuscript; applications based on James Joyce's works contain elaborated annotations and multimedia. Digital environments are more flexible than paper-based editions, which makes them suitable for presenting the heterogeneity of modern and postmodern texts.

Educational features can usually be demonstrated in more or less complex products, including interactive reading platforms and transmedia. They can facilitate comprehension of the old or obscure texts and explain the complex structure of literary works. However, there are no educational products under the third type – the absorbed text seems to be standing too far from its newer version.

4. PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

For sure, there cannot be a universal technological solution to the problems of literary education. The possibilities offered by each product can be creatively adopted and integrated by teachers in various situations. However, there are some characteristics that may be regarded as inherent to different types of adaptations.

Enhanced versions provide more opportunities to literary education, but may contain distractive features. The most effective ones seem to be those that contain collections of literary-related materials or allow students to interact with peers and teachers. In the latter case, the digital book may become a core element in a "flipped classroom".

Refashioning shifts the reading patterns, causing that the story is not necessarily perceived linearly and solely from words. The borders between formats are blurred: a literary experience is no longer limited to reading, but implies an interaction with digital environments. These products reconsider the limits of literature, undermine the linearity and the authority of literary texts, and, subsequently, are not easily adopted by conservative teachers.

Finally, absorption often implies reconstruction of the whole storyworld using unconventional means (such as visual art or artificial intelligence) and may be extremely costly. In most cases, these products are positioned as games rather than books. Users acquire control over development of the plot while acting within the immersive environments. Implementation of such products calls for a new multidisciplinary pedagogy that will reconcile literary education with the needs of contemporary media communication.

5. CONCLUSION

The current research can help educators to find consistency between literary works and their digital adaptations, while appreciating advantages offered by different formats. Developers, in their turn, may use it as a hint on how to find a balance between entertainment and education. For instance, some educational projects may benefit from more educational features, while distinctly entertaining formats – such as video games – could be adapted for educational environment. Judging by the popularity of commercial digital adaptations, it is clear that the literary experience could be highly demandable. The real challenge is to make popular the works that do not fall into specific genres and are not so entertaining on their own.

Potential educational applications of digital adaptations are much wider than listed above, even though they are yet to be realized. Apart from improving already existent practices on the level of comprehension, new technological means allow performing activities that were hardly feasible with printed books. For instance, in some digital environments, it is possible to discuss literary texts with other readers, do exercises and even contribute to the construction of the storyworld by submitting new works of art. Now these products are not widely used at schools, that is why the thorough examination of different functions is still needed.

Elaboration of the current research can take different directions. Firstly, the theoretical findings could be supported by practice in real-life literary classrooms. At the same time, the ideas may be tested in collaborative work with the developers of digital books. Secondly, the research may embrace a wider range of objects, including not only full-text adaptations, but also compact retellings, comic strips, book trailers, and other media forms.

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