

The postmodern analysis: fragmentation, metafiction, nonlinearity, intertextuality and simulacra in *Inanimate Alice*

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Abstract:

Inanimate Alice is a digital novel created by Kate Pullinger and Chris Joseph. The novel protagonist, a young girl named Alice, grows up in a digital world, navigating the complexities of the digital, technological and virtual environment. This research article critically analyses *Inanimate Alice* from the perspective of postmodern theory, examining how the novel challenges traditional notions of storytelling. The researcher employs Alan Mackee's concept of textual analysis to explore how *Inanimate Alice* challenges the conventional narrative structure, disrupts the notion of a unified self, and blurs the boundaries between fiction and reality. The researcher focuses on Baudrillard's concepts of hyperreality and simulacra, as well as Lyotard's exploration of postmodernism and the fragmentation of narratives. This offers valuable insights into the themes and ideas explored in the digital narrative and theoretical discourse under investigation. This paper is significant because it analyses digital literature from a postmodern perspective as the literary writing style transforms from textual to digital form. The paper argues that *Inanimate Alice's* non-linear, fragmented narrative reflects the postmodern condition of the contemporary world, where reality is constructed through digital media.

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1. Introduction

In 2005, Kate Pullinger and Chris Joseph co-created *Inanimate Alice*, a groundbreaking piece of online interactive fiction. Through the seamless integration of multimedia components into its narrative structure, this creative narrative project rejects the limitations of traditional storytelling. The show follows the life of Alice Field, a young protagonist growing up in a society dramatically impacted by the quick advancement of technology. The combination of text, visuals, music, and interactive elements throughout *Inanimate Alice's* numerous parts gives readers a dynamic and engaging digital narrative experience beyond conventional literary genres. The interactive narrative format of *Inanimate Alice* invites readers to take an active role in the development of the plot. Readers actively contribute to shaping Alice's experiences by choosing what to do at crucial junctures in the story. This unique component makes reading the series a personalized experience by removing the conventional barriers between author and reader. As Alice travels around the globe, from China to various international locations, the series provides a lens through which to explore relevant themes in our current digital age. The theme of technology's effect on identity is pervasive, prompting readers to contemplate the myriad ways in which digital devices shape personal experiences and self-awareness.

In addition, *Inanimate Alice* delves into the relationship between the physical and the virtual, posing questions about the delineation between the real and the digital. This blurred boundary resonates with our contemporary experience of living in a world characterized by ubiquitous digital interactions. In literary innovation, *Inanimate Alice* has garnered acclaim for its groundbreaking approach. It exemplifies the possibilities inherent in leveraging digital platforms to challenge and expand the boundaries of traditional storytelling. As the series invites readers to embark on a journey of self-discovery alongside Alice, it simultaneously prompts them to consider their relationship with technology and how it shapes their perceptions, interactions, and identities. In an era where digital experiences are becoming increasingly intertwined with our narratives, *Inanimate Alice* is a trailblazing work that redefines how stories can be told and experienced in the digital age.

1.1. A brief overview of post-modernism

Postmodernism is a philosophical and cultural phenomenon that emerged in the latter half of the twentieth century as a reaction to the prevailing ideas of modernity. It rejected the modernist concept of objective truth, grandiose narratives, and monolithic identities, instead emphasizing subjectivity, variety, and the ambiguity of reality and representation. Baudrillard is one of the most prominent postmodernist theorists. Another central postmodernist figure is Jean-Francois Lyotard, who coined "hyperreality." Lyotard argues that "reality" and "simulation" are becoming increasingly indistinguishable. He argues that today's society, we live in a world of "signs and symbols" rather than "reality." Lyotard argues this results in a loss of "authentic" experiences. This leads Lyotard's followers to question the authenticity of one's perception and how media and technology influence one's understanding of reality.

Lyotard's approach to metanarratives is characterized by "incredulity towards metanarratives" (Lyotard, 1984). In the postmodern era, Lyotard argues that grand narratives that purport to explain everything (such as religious belief or science) are not credible. Instead, he emphasizes the importance of smaller, more varied narratives that recognize the complexity of human experience. Lyotard advocates the acceptance of differences and local narratives rather than the pursuit of universal truths. To sum up postmodernism, it challenges the rigidity of modernism, emphasizes subjectivity, deconstructs the grand narrative, and examines the relationship between the real and the representational. Baudrillard's theories about hyperreality and the media's influence, while Lyotard's emphasis on heterogeneous narratives, have all shaped our perception of the post-modern condition.

1.2. Research objectives and questions

The study aims to analyse hyperreality and simulacra's portrayal in *Inanimate Alice* and the digital novel *Inanimate Alice* from a postmodern perspective. The paper answers the research questions, how are hyperreality and simulacra portrayed in the digital novel *Inanimate Alice*? And how does *Inanimate Alice* embody postmodern elements?

1.3. Significance, purpose of statement and delimitation

The study is significant because it explores a new genre of digital literature. The study highlights how *Inanimate Alice* uses different postmodern elements throughout the narrative. The purpose of this study is to analyse the novel through a postmodern lens. The study will look at postmodern aspects in this novel. The study is also critical because it examines how the story engages the reader through postmodern elements. The study delimits itself to only five episodes of the digital novel *Inanimate Alice*. The study will only look at intertextuality, metafiction, fragmentation, hyperreality and Simulacra within these five episodes.

2. Literature review

Several scholars have written about *Inanimate Alice*. One notable study is by Hernández (2013). This paper explores the concept of digital literature and its implications for education, centering on analyzing the hypermedia novel *Inanimate Alice*. The novel-game is a digital work combining hypertextual narratives and various modes of representation for digital platforms. Hernández's study examines the complex relationship between multi-modal design and engaging elements in this digital novel-game. The central goal of the study is to assess the novel game's effectiveness in engaging learners with a particular focus on its pedagogical potential. In the framework of her analysis, she examines several aspects of the novel game in digital form. These include the relationship between narrative and visuals, the strategic use of visual composition methods, and the importance of characters in capturing the reader's attention. In her analysis, she highlights some examples of discrepancies in engagement,

notably the lack of dynamic characters in visual mode. She suggests a deeper dive into visual and language aspects could increase readers' engagement.

The postmodern age is the era of digitalization. Fleming (2023) has studied digitalization in the postmodern age. The study is a pioneering exploration of an ever-changing digital education landscape. *Inanimate Alice* is a case study of the power of transmedia practices to improve learning outcomes. Fleming's work occupies a central place in media literacy education discourse, exploring the relationship between technology, narrative and pedagogy and how transmedia narratives engage learners across multiple channels. Fleming emphasizes the importance of dynamic storytelling for education by focusing on *Inanimate Alice* and its transmedia methodology. Fleming's research promotes learner engagement through engaging narratives and feeds into the larger conversation about technology and media literacy's place in modern pedagogy. In short, the study argues that transmedia storytelling, especially exemplified by *Inanimate Alice*, is a powerful strategy for broadening learning opportunities and improving the educational landscape through novel, narrative-driven approaches.

The novel *Inanimate Alice* is transmedia storytelling, combining elements such as visuals, sound and text. The Machado et. al., (2018) study delves into the transmedia narrative of *Inanimate Alice* and its influence in the educational context, specifically in Portugal. The authors discuss the series' origin, the creators' vision, and how technological progress has improved the user experience. They explore the narrative intricacies of the digital age in "Perpetual Nomads," the newest adventure in the series that features a virtual reality narrative. Additionally, they discuss the Portuguese translation of the novel *Inanimate Alice*, which is intended to be incorporated into elementary and secondary schools, making it the world's first digital-born novel to be taught in Portuguese schools. They address the translation difficulties they faced, such as pragmatism, convention, language, and text-related issues, while emphasizing the advantages of incorporating electronic literature into students' curricula. The article highlights the importance of *Inanimate Alice* as an educational tool that encourages engagement and promotes transmedia storytelling. The authors discuss the difficulties of translating the text while preserving its cohesion and educational value. They also discuss the importance of including electronic literature in curricula and the national reading plan in Portugal. Analysing the translation's pragmatic, linguistic and cultural aspects, the authors show their commitment to providing Portuguese students with a pedagogically relevant and culturally relevant digital narrative. In conclusion, the article explores the innovative intersection between technology, education and storytelling through the prism of *Inanimate Alice* in narrative complexity and its influence on the educational landscape in Portugal.

The *Inanimate Alice* in Portuguese Schools by Machado (2018) is an in-depth analysis of the introduction and incorporation of digital literature, particularly the work *The Inanimate Alice*, into the educational system in Portugal. The article focuses on equipping students with digital competencies in the current academic environment and redefining literacy into electronic literature. According to Machado, the work *Inanimate Alice* is unique in that it is a

transmedia/interactive serial novel, well developed by Pullinger et al., that tells the story of the protagonist's development and places the reader in an immersive and game-like environment. The article emphasizes that the project aligns with Portuguese educational policies on digital literacy and skills development. Translating *Inanimate Alice* into Portuguese and developing the pedagogical materials according to the curriculum is a crucial step in this direction. Machado carefully analyzes the pedagogical experiments in Portuguese schools, demonstrating students' interest and engagement in this new literary form. The research methods used, such as questionnaires and comparisons of the digital and printed versions of the book, reveal students' aesthetic perception, understanding, and interactions with digital literature. The article also highlights the strategic efforts to integrate electronic literature in teacher training and higher education contexts, further strengthening the project's impact.

Overall, previous research on *The Inanimate Alice* has highlighted its innovative use of digital technologies to create a new literary experience. Scholars have also noted its potential for exploring issues of identity and community in the digital age and its value as a tool for teaching digital literacy skills. The previous section of the literature review dealt with enlisting the types of research being done on *Inanimate Alice*. Keeping this context in mind, this section of the literature review deals with the kind of research being done on the works of literature using postmodern theory. The theory has been applied to many literature texts, including both written and visual. For example, many films have also been analysed through a postmodern lens. This theory is best used to explore contemporary texts that follow nonlinear and complex plot structures and create chaos in the readers' minds. In this regard, this paper reviews a few articles that emphasise using postmodern theory as a critical lens to analyse texts. This article describes the application of postmodern theory on American Literature.

The film industry has also started to make films based on postmodern texts. The movie *Flight Club* is based in the postmodern era. The study conducted by Ortoleva discusses the postmodern elements in the film *Fight Club*. It continues to explain how *Fight Club* is a postmodern text. Firstly, it reflects fragmented identities. For instance, Jack changes his identity depending on the situation. Thus, his identity is a social construct which keeps on changing. Similarly, the Characters of this movie are victims of consumer culture. For instance, Marla relies on stealing from meals to survive. All of the characters performing in the film are living alienated lives. Furthermore, *Fight Club* uses intertextuality as a subversive technique (Ortoleva, 2003). In this way, *Fight Club* showcases all the postmodern aspects.

Fragmentation is the style of writing in the postmodern era. Shahid & Khurram (2021) have analysed the short stories of Don DeLillo through the lens of fragmentation in postmodernism. They use a textual method for this study. The author looks at the characters of the short story *The Itch*. They describe his condition as depthless. The story's narrative structure is not linear either, making this short story a postmodern text. The second short story is *Coming. Sun. Mon. Tues.* On the surface, there are no fragments in the short story, but DeLillo uses sudden shifts and breaks in the story and breaks away from the traditional way of telling a story.

A study was conducted by Khokhar et al., (2024) on the short story *The Other Death* by Jorge Luis Borges. The authors use content analysis to analyse the selected short story. The study looks at Magical realism and intertextuality in the short story. In the short story, a dead man returns to his land. Thus, this incident violates the physical laws and creates a magical situation. The study also looks at meta fictional elements in the story. In the short story, at various points, the narrator tells the reader that his version of the story is different from others. The study also looks at how, in the short story, various references are made to other literary works like "The Past" by Ralph Waldo Emerson and "The Sound and the Fury" by William Faulkner. In this way, the study looks at different elements of postmodernism in this short story.

2.1. Research gap

Previous research analysed the importance of including electronic literature in the curriculum taught at various institutions to improve students' digital competence and make them aware of the complexities associated with narratives of digitally produced texts. Furthermore, researchers have analysed the importance of teaching *Inanimate Alice* at various educational institutions to investigate how transmedia narratives engage learners across multiple channels. These studies also show that storytelling can be reimaged in games to make it more interesting for students, as *Inanimate Alice* was changed into a game.

So, all the research mentioned earlier dealt with the importance of teaching electronic literature at the educational level. The target audience of the previously conducted study was students only. No previous researcher has analysed the novel *Inanimate Alice* to relate it to the lives of familiar people. This research gap needs to be filled, and this study will play its role in explaining the importance of studying digital literature and its relevance to people's lives. For instance, this research will explore the themes of fragmentation, identity, metafiction and intertextuality. So, not just students but everyone needs to understand the importance of fragmented identities of themselves, because people's identities in the postmodern age keep changing depending on the situation. In this way, digital texts are entirely relevant to our lives. Furthermore, students and everyone need to know the importance of digital texts' self-reflexivity and have digital competence to survive in this technologically advanced world.

3. Theoretical framework

Postmodernism is a new domain in research that emerged in the late 20th century. It is characterized by skepticism towards metanarratives, ideologies and explanations prevalent in the modern age. Postmodernism delves deeper into investigating the intricacy and complexity of ideas. It has influenced literature, philosophy and sociology (Jitender). One of the essential and emerging genres of postmodernism is metafiction, a piece of literature in which the author self-consciously includes some aspects of writing that deviate from the traditional writing style. These elements prove the work's artificiality (e literature). Metafiction contains a few crucial tropes, which are stated below.

3.1. Fragmentation

Metafiction contains many plots proceeding within a single story. In postmodern terms, this situation is known as fragmentation. Metafiction involves nonlinear narratives, which refer to storylines that move back and forth in time and place, thus creating a disjointed and disoriented idea in the reader's mind. This phenomenon is known as fragmentation in postmodern terms. This technique is used in postmodern texts to create an impression of mystery and suspense. It also depicts that unrelated events meet at a point in the end. Fragments in postmodern texts are usually connected thematically or with the help of some literary devices, such as symbolism (Barr & Barr, 2023).

3.2. Intertextuality

Postmodernism affected literary writing, questioning the notion of single authorship, objective truth and linear narrative of the scholarly text. Postmodern texts include references, quotations, allusions or plotlines of various texts in a single text. Incorporation of these techniques challenges the single authorship and emphasizes the role of readers in interpreting the texts. In postmodern terms, including these techniques in a text is known as intertextuality. Intertextuality gives rise to a multiplicity of views in which all voices are equally celebrated and heard (Allen, 2000).

3.3. Hyperreality and simulacrum

Baudrillard was a French sociologist, philosopher and cultural theorist. In his book *Simulacra and Simulation*, he has proposed that our current society has replaced all reality and meaning with symbols and signs. Human experience is a simulation of reality. Baudrillard's notion of hyper reality is closely linked with his idea of simulacrum, which refers to the fact that the postmodern age has replaced reality with false images to such an extent that people cannot distinguish between reality and fiction. Inhabitants of the postmodern age just follow images and consider those images as reality. For instance, "The Gulf War did not take place", but its images of destruction were portrayed on social media, and people considered those images authentic. Thus, a simulacrum related to the "Gulf War" was created on social media (Mambrol, 2019).

4. Research method

Textual analysis as a research method involves a close encounter with the work. It examines the details without bringing more presupposition than we can help (Belsey, 2013). Catherine Belsey distinguishes between research and other forms of study. "Research is expected to contribute to knowledge; it uncovers something new" (Belsey, 2013). In this way, the research brings something new to the existing literature. The method used for this study is textual as it allows the researcher to look closely at any given text. According to Alan McKee, "when we

perform textual analysis on a text, we make an educated guess at some of the most likely interpretations that might be made of that text” (McKee, 2003). Now, the question is, what is text? A text can be anything from a book to a film or TV program. McKee defines text as “something we make meaning from” (McKee, 2003).

5. Analysis

5.1. Fragmentation

Inanimate Alice is a postmodern novel portraying the story in frame sets. The first episodes of the book take place in China, as Alice tells the readers that “we are in China” (Pullinger & Joseph, 2020). She also informs them that her father works here and that he has not returned home. Episode 4 of the novel takes place in Russia as well as England. Halfway through the episode, Alice tells the readers that “everything changed for my family when we had to leave Moscow” (Pullinger & Joseph, 2020) as the narrative moves with a different picture indicating Alice leaving Moscow. She informs the reader that “we ended up here, in a town in the middle of the town” (Pullinger & Joseph, 2020). In this way, with different settings, the story presents itself in fragments, a key element of postmodern literature.

5.2. Metafiction

Another characteristic that makes *Inanimate Alice* a postmodern text is metafiction. Metafiction is when a work of art comments on itself as fiction and tells readers that they should not get too serious it is just a piece of literature. The *Inanimate Alice* uses this technique by commenting on the nature of it as a work of art in the first episode, the opening line of the story tells the reader that “the story uses images, text and sound; turn on sound on your computer” (Pullinger & Joseph, 2020). In this way, *Inanimate Alice* draws attention to its artificiality by telling the viewers that it is a digital piece of literature and requires a computer or tablet to read. It also makes this novel a postmodern piece of fiction.

5.3. Intertextuality

Intertextuality is a concept that Julia Kristeva introduced. It is an idea that all works of Literature are connected. *Inanimate Alice* uses this concept by referencing other digital media formats. In Episode 4, Alice creates a video game similar to the classic arcade game. In doing so, the novel connects itself to the larger cultural context and uses the postmodern idea of Intertextuality. The name of the novel *Alice* also refers to two different texts; for example, the name Alice is used in the movie *Resident Evil*. In this movie, Alice is the main character. The movie is about a survivor in an environment where a deadly virus has turned people into zombies. The name Alice also refers to the movie *Alice in Wonderland*. In this movie, Alice is the main character. The movie is about survival in a strange land. In both these texts, the characters try to survive a difficult situation. Similarly, in the novel *Inanimate Alice*, the

characters try to survive by moving from one place to another as the different episodes of the book take place in various parts of the world. Alice reminds us that due to the nature of his father's work, they moved from one part of the world to another. In this way, by referring to the other work of fiction, *Inanimate Alice* uses the postmodern technique of intertextuality. If a person knows these texts, it increases his ability to understand *Inanimate Alice* better.

5.4. Nonlinear

The story of *Inanimate Alice* is in episodes. Different episodes are set in other parts of the world. In each episode, the readers meet Alice at a different stage of his life. There is no apparent connection between these episodes. The progression of time is not linear. In each episode, the readers learn about Alice's experiences in different parts of the country. It presents a snapshot of her life. By delivering the story in various episodes, *Inanimate Alice* uses the technique of postmodernism, which is nonlinear narrative.

5.5. Simulacra

The concept of simulacra in *Inanimate Alice* is explored through the novel construction of a hyperreal world and the digital media. Baudrillard defines simulacra as the blurring of the boundaries between real and imaginary. *Inanimate Alice* reflects Baudrillard's postmodern world because of the digital elements of the novel, such as fragmented narratives, a digital environment, and a virtual environment, which become part of Alice's experience and identity. In the story, reality is no longer a stable concept but rather something mediated and constructed through simulations.

The novel's narrative unfolds through multimedia episodes that blend different images and interactive elements. The environment that Alice experiences is the hyper-real world, where distinguishing between what is simulated and what is real becomes hard. The novel's first episode begins in a digital world where Alice's childhood is represented as both digitally mediated and real as well. The world that is inhabited by Alice does not just describe reality, but it creates a new version of reality alienated from the physical world. This relates to Baudrillard's notion that in the postmodern age, media constructs its version of simulacrum (reality), which becomes more real than reality. Alice's interaction with the digital world and the technology creates a hyperreal environment. The line between what is real and what is constructed becomes blurred as Alice grows in the technological world of the virtual environments and video games.

Alice's interaction with digital objects, such as her relationship with Brad, a virtual friend, highlights the postmodern idea of simulacra. Brad is constructed through the digital realm yet appears to be the real companion of Alice. The relationship between Alice and Brad highlights the postmodern world of simulation (like Brad). The boundaries between the digital one and the real become more apparent in episode four because of Alice's interaction with the digital

world. The simulated relationship feels real in the case of Brad because he does not represent the actual human being but is a substitute as the rules of the digital universe frame it.

The postmodern theory of Baudrillard, the simulacrum, erases the distinction between the future, the past and the present. This is reflected in *Inanimate Alice* through the digital novel's blurring of time and space. The virtual and digital medium allows for a shift between realities, memories and location. Alice's experiences are not limited to linear time or physical boundaries. Still, her experiences and memories are filtered through the digital world, making them seem immediate and distant. This fragmented progression reflects Baudrillard's concept about the dominance of simulacrum and the collapse of time. The novel shows how simulacra shape and redefines our perception of the world through fragmented storytelling and modern technology. The novel mirrors Baudrillard's postmodern idea that in a digital environment, a hyper world creates a new mediated experience of existence by replacing the traditional notion of reality.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, *Inanimate Alice* is an example of a digital novel that uses postmodern techniques to attract readers. It is also an example of how text moves from page to screen. By intertextuality, *The Inanimate Alice* refers to another art form by using. In this way, it creates multiple meanings in the readers' minds and reminds them of the vast scope of literature. It is also a way of telling the reader about the works of literature. On the other hand, the metafictional element reminds the reader of the fictional nature of the novel. This adds to the story's uniqueness and makes *Inanimate Alice* a digital and postmodern text. Alice's story is told nonlinearly, challenging conventional storytelling, another element of postmodernism. In this way, *The Inanimate Alice* rejects the traditional way of telling the story, which is linear and invites the readers to think outside the box. Furthermore, the novel blurs the boundaries between the virtual and the honest through hyperreality and simulacra, increasing readers' experience using the digital medium. Using these postmodern elements, *Inanimate Alice* sets the example of how readers move from the text to the screen.

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