POIESIS AND TECHNOLOGIES
e-Learning Material Development in Literature

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Abstract: We wanted our students to act as literary critics of works of digital literature so we designed a work of digital literature with different surfing possibilities so that students could undertake an authentic and complete exercise of literary criticism. This piece of Digital Literature (the *Diary of an Absence*) is an e-learning tool to show them what a piece of digital narrative could be and to provide them the real and complex experience of reading the new literature in its own medium and with its own rules. With different technologies such as Director, Flash, Quick-time, HTML, etc. the *Diary* is an eminently textual product, situated in a determinate visual and musical dimension, which also offers the reader a journey to be undertaken. It presents six possible approaches to the text and therefore six different possible readings: 1- An exploratory immersion in the house-scenario that offers words acting as passwords and points of access to the text. 2- A nominal reading that comes from the universe of words that have been selected from the text. 3- A numerical reading by looking at the 'treasure map' of the numbers allowing a chronological reading of the diary pages. 4- A topological reading allows consulting the plan of the house and its surroundings to see which objects or locations give us an access to the text and where it is situated. 5- A reading through objects permits to reach the text from the different objects in which the words have been assigned and 6- A musical reading since the map situates the different lyrics that constitute this particular melody in space. In a word: an immersive experience to approach e-literature from e-learning.

1 MANAGING EDUCATION IN THE DIGITAL AGE

The introduction of digital technologies in the learning process has revealed to some extent that the Internet revolution, that is to say the change of mentality produced by the use of digital technologies in the global contemporary world, also affects and is going to affect even more in the future the way in which education can be managed.

In fact, it is becoming increasingly clear to everybody that educational technologies are being implemented rather indiscriminately almost everywhere. That's why we firmly believe they should fulfill the users' needs, their educational purposes, the curricula with which they work and, specifically, the training for the people who use them. Despite this, research has yet to show that ICTs have a significant impact on learning and a special effort has to be made to find out how technology is being used in an educational context.

One thing is clear: technologies are tools capable of building learning frames. We already know that, but the question now should be are we making the most of it or is it being used to reproduce the "same old" in virtual format? To have a learning frame technologically built or assisted is not necessarily to have good learning results. On the contrary, it is necessary to enhance imagination to be able to open our minds and be able to think on new horizons for the teaching and learning of literature in the Digital Age.

2 e-LEARNING OF e-LITERATURE

Talking about 'digital literature' can cause seeming uneasiness, even hostility in many people. People that feel that something is being taken away from them because letters moves from the quietness of printed paper to this uncertain and heterogeneous

medium that is the computer, the screen, the Internet. We wanted to tell our students: "If you happen to belong to that category: stay calm and we'll show how literature can exist in other platforms".

Besides this, we wanted to open the scope of literary studies by integrating into the mainstream other types of literary and aesthetic expressions so far excluded from it: especially e-literature or digital literature (natively digital texts). The gaze that guided traditional teaching of literature has been de-centered by the use of e-learning methodologies and academia will have to explicitly assume their new locus of enunciation. Its old fashion exclusivity has to be increasingly replaced by an inclusive view that will come to consider alternative forms of expression and to recognize differences and this could be a paradigmatic change promoted by the use of technology. We intended to develop a forum of debate for these questions from inside an academic subject, an optional subject though. Its main goal is to rethink the role of literary studies at the beginning of the twenty-first century and with the use of e-learning. We expected to investigate the conflicts the discipline is facing and the paths it has been following in its diverse forms.

3 LITERARY STUDIES & DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES

With this intention we created a piece of Digital Literature in Catalan (the *Diary of an Absence*), to show our students what a piece of digital narrative could be and to provide them the real and complex experience of reading the new literature in its own medium and with its own rules. Since we wanted our students to act as literary critics of works of digital literature but the existing works worldwide would have been a challenge to the linguistic competence of most of the students, we have designed a work of digital literature with different surfing possibilities so that students can undertake an authentic and complete exercise of literary criticism.

There are several categories inside what we consider digital literature from web texts to programmed digital texts, cybertexts (Aarseth 1997), texts that are not only in digital format, but they also use the digital format in producing effects which are not possible in print. These digital texts are based on a hypertextual structure (text is divided into shorter segments, which then are connected to each other with user-controllable links), but their functionality

is not limited to hypertextuality. In a technical sense these text documents are actually computer programs, and as such they may include all the functionality a computer program can offer. Temporal manipulation and control especially gain wholly new potential with cybertexts in what has been called "cybertextual narrativity" (Eskelinen 1999), where it is possible to strictly control the reading time. For example, a text page may change every 30 seconds forcing the reader to this reading rhythm if she wants to read at all, or, make the text change of form, explode, rain, move, etc. With the current software, it is relatively easy to produce kinetic texts. Even though this, at a first glance, may seem more as case of movement and spatiality, it naturally requires the possibility to control the appearance of the text during a certain time period. Thus, the temporal dimension is certainly essential for kinetics. But if kinetics seemed to be more inviting for poets than to prose writers, we have used 'Flash" to create this kinetic effect inside the text.

Of course all the multimedia imaginable may be used, that is, the text may include sound, moving image etc. We can find a complete variation of the limited reading time when texts can only be read once: after the text disappears from the screen, it is deleted from the memory and cannot be accessed again until next reading. In the opposite strategy the reading time can also be somehow extended when it is not possible to proceed from one part of the work to another before a certain period of time –in this case of read text- has passed. If the reader completes the whole reading, follow the different paths and can finally read every piece of single text hidden on the CD, then there is a kind of "bonus track" text that ideally closes the reading exercise, closes the reading process of the work.

4 ARCHITECTURE OF THE DIARY OF AN ABSENCE

Arranged in the form of a diary, the study case we have developed follows the paths of absence by delving into the pain that is caused by desire, a desire that is reflected in the particular mixture of emotions that is faced in the separation from the loved one. To the idea of introspection arising from the exercise of spiritual reflection and the flood of torn feelings that this brings, there appears the idea of the house as a cloister, which is the scenario in which the tale in our hypertext exercise has been set. The apparently illogical ups and downs of the

narrator's thoughts are metaphorically translated into the maze in which the reader gets lost, this reader who has come in search of words that will lead towards the interior that tells a story of love, of the loss of love, of passion and of impossibility.

The *Diary of an Absence* aims to be an example of intimate personal writing through something which has been put into words but which perhaps should have remained unsaid. In an exercise of visual structuration of hypertextual narrative (Koskimaa 1997), the text has been disposed spatially in a closed space, with rooms to walk through, just as we travel different routes when we go deeper into the intimate truth of the suffering narrator. We have chosen to use technology for a goal that is aesthetic, narrative, semiotic and hermeneutic. In this regard we must point out that here you will not find a range of the most advanced media as a technological exhibition without any other purpose than the mere display of resources, but rather a group of computer-based media in the service of an aesthetic digital product. Its fundamentally hypertextual nature evokes the most secret and intimate aspect of hypertext –something that becomes still more relevant when you bear in mind the element of confession, of self-confession- that is implicit in a private journal. At the same time

Figure 1: Reading paths.

we find a combination of the creative synergical possibilities of artistic languages like image and music which tell us of its hybrid nature as a cybertext.

The *Diary of an Absence* presents six possible approaches to the text and therefore six different possible readings.

1- First, there is the exploratory immersion in the house-scenario that offers, through the rooms, words acting as passwords and points of access to the different days of the text. This is a way in which curiosity and the chance in our choices take us to words that act as a call for the hidden text to appear, the text to which they refer, to which in fact they belong, because this is where they come from.

Figure 2: The house-scenario.

2- Second, there is a nominal reading that comes from the universe of words that have been selected from the text.

Figure 3: The words' constellation.
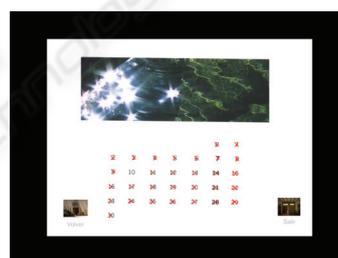
Figure 4: The numerical reading.

3- One can follow a numerical reading by looking at the 'treasure map' of the numbers allowing a chronological reading of the diary pages. Bearing in mind that each diary page corresponds to one day in a month, a third reading is also possible based on the texts that have been discovered/revealed in the linear order of the calendar. We must remember, however, that the correspondence between the word selected and the day of the month to which it refers will not be visible until the content of the word has been revealed.

4- Another possible way of reading is the one which allows us to consult the map or plan of the house and its surroundings to see which objects or locations give us an access to the text and where it is situated.

5- There is also a way to reach the text from the objects in which the words have been assigned. So, following this route, we could choose an object and

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find out what page of the diary and in which room, environment or location has been set and associated.

6- Finally, the map situates the different lyrics that constitute this painful melody in space, and one can allow oneself to be taken where the music suggests, to go to the text that corresponds to the music that is evoked. Words, numbers, objects, lyrics and chance are the means for this particular journey into the darkness of the soul.
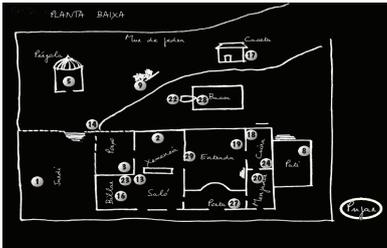

Figure 5: The treasure-map reading.

Figure 6: Reading through the objects.

Figure 7: A musical reading.

In this context, we ask ourselves and our students: Is reading something that can be shared? Will everybody have read the same *Diary* if everybody's reading is necessarily different? Even one single person can read it differently on different occasions. To what extent will a linear reading of the *Diary of an Absence*, the reading that is most literary and least playful-exploratory, diverge from the reading that one can carry out on paper with the fragmented and random texts of the individual pages of a diary? Will the choice of music, of the landscape

surroundings in which the words, objects and texts are to be found, that is, will a digital reading represent something more? Is this an aesthetic experience different from the analogical, conventional reading of the *Diary* as a diary? What type of reading emerges in this changing context, with so many senses involved, with so many options for the reader? These and many other questions can only be answered by our students after they have engaged with the *Diary*.

Our first impression is very positive. We have offered this subject only 2 semesters, but the acceptance of the materials and the immersive process of discovering e-literature from inside a piece of it has been very encouraging. Despite the fact that in a subject titled *Universal Literary Themes* (Borràs 2005), we have had so many problems when the materials were simply hypertext, now that the task of exploration we are requiring is much more complex, we have assumed more mature –digitally alphabetized- students. The risk was there and it is still there. We will have to wait and see.

5 CONCLUSIONS

We would have liked to explain other experiments that we have carried out in e-learning of literature. For example, we took a cabaret to the university and studied it during a whole semester of the course on Comparative Literature and then digitalized it in order to create a bank of contents that can be reused from then on. In fact, we combine electronic didactic materials, on-line resources, digital libraries, web-sites of reference, virtual exhibitions and a virtual workshop with the different corrections of student's exercises that is very well much appreciated by the students. This workshop is a web that allows them to compare their exercises with those of their peers and to benefit from their corrections too. Anyway, our experience as lecturers developing e-learning materials confirms us that it is necessary to seriously consider that on-line teaching using these digital resources implies becoming detached from acquired habits and transforming the discourse of communicative techniques. The opening up of the temporal field for literary signification is a change, which true magnitude we can only guess. In this direction we have done our best and we should expect new innovations to appear. A new approach is now possible by the use of technology in e-learning. Perhaps the question we would really need to ask is what the nature of literature teaching has been in order to salvage from old practices those

new ways of learning that will allow us to move forward and so, to convert this critical juncture in which we are (let's think in the transformation that Higher Education is undergoing throughout Europe and the "Bolognese reform") into an opportunity.

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