

Enveloping Literature and Other Challenges to the Multimedia Author

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Ten years after writing the hypermedia novel *Tierra de extracción* (Land of Extraction) (which experimented with circularity, brevity, and fragmentation), the multimedia author is challenged by a more radical evolution of narrative language, toward the reality of an enveloping literature. It leads to exploring forms of post-literary writing (permutation, repetition and programming languages), increasing the ludic qualities, searching for hyperphonia in the creation and the construction of the book as a virtual object. With its consolidation, enveloping literature will be translated from the screen to public spaces and will inaugurate a new era of reading.

Introduction

Literary experimentation, the terrain of the vanguard in the digital age, formally explores poetic strategies and narratives. As with the great scientific leaps of other ages, current technology incentivizes the transformation of literary language. In the hunt for a rhetoric and language of multimedia, the author inquires about the form of the new text—a form independent of content. Did the first author who ever mentioned television create a literary trend? Or, was this done by the first person who bet on the importance of that action? Did the first narrator who ever put a mobile phone in his detective's satchel generate a literary genre? Or, is this done by the person who achieves a poetics of emoticons? Should a creator of hypermedia

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works limit himself to plots about cyborgs and cybersex? Or, are we free to tell the stories we want, even if they don't take place in the digital age?

The technology that exists in the diegetic universe affects the future of the characters that interact in it. However, such technology does not necessarily have repercussions on the author's language, although the author is necessarily influenced by the technology of his own time. For these stories can be told with whatever language, whether conventional or transgressive, the author chooses and understands. However, only transgressive language contributes to literary evolution, an evolution imagined partly by way of the technological innovations that alter an author's life and partly as the continuation of preexisting vanguards—something which occurs with the recuperation and the promotion of prior experiments marginalized by earlier authors and by the public, often due to a doubtful efficacy: they lacked a compatible technology. For example, Cubism intensely investigated the fragmentation required by hyperlinks. However, while the codex promotes a linear reading and cements the authority of the author and editor, the screen creates combinatory randomness, a fragmentation reducing such authority.

Five plots coexist in the multimedia novel *Tierra de extracción*, all dripping with a technology that has drastically affected humanity: petroleum and its derivatives. It is a technology that has revolutionized standards of living without altering modes of narration. Diverse discourses underlie each one of these plots. Each level of discourse is supported by an artistic element. Each artistic element constructs a layer and each layer constitutes an independent narrative plane. When layers are superimposed, as happens on the screen, these artistic elements combine and the work acquires the qualities of a multimedia project. The narrative is not composed with a single language (whether textual, plastic, musical, or audiovisual)—it is the result of a combination of languages that interact among themselves.

In *Tierra de extracción*, the textual level is the space from which an omniscient narrator narrates the action; the musical level transmits the emotions of any individual character and identifies the chapters that make up the same plot; the lyrical and the oral aspects, present in the song lyrics, use the first person to reflect the interior thoughts of the protagonist; the figurative art shows variations on a theme; photography narrates real stories about that environment which surrounds the fictional characters; animation and programming thread together the keys of each story and attempt the representation of plots as dream. The complete work is composed of sixty-three chapters or links, whose first level of relationship with the user is the text. Thus, the work may be defined as a “multimedia novel,” and not a “multimedia song-book” or a “multimedia gallery.”

The epicenter of the five plots is one and the same: Menegrando, the first great petroleum deposit discovered in Venezuela and site of the “Zumaque I” well. Each plot occurs across different time periods (the story covers three generations, from 1910 to 1990) and traces lines that cross one

another when the protagonist's action is the cause of the circumstances of another.

One plot takes place in the middle of the nineties, when Matías Gracia comes to Menegrande and meets Miriam Fuentellana, who returns home after several years of voluntary exile. Miriam has just ended the search that Matías has recently initiated with the complicity of another man, Pelicano, whom he meets in town.

The second plot begins in 1914 during work to bore Zumaque I and Jonás Valleterno is a laborer for one of the transnational petroleum companies. A woman named Mercedes Casas is searching for him desperately, always arriving late to the location he has already abandoned in his migratory route following the track of petroleum. Now elderly, she settles down in Menegrande. The son of Jonás Valleterno, Israel, fulfills the last wish of his dying father: to find Mercedes. He wanders through the Zulia until arriving at Menegrande, where he will be assassinated.

The third is the story of the ranch owner Rafael Bastidor, who is obsessed with Lucelena, the daughter of a laborer. Later she betrays him with a man resembling an actor from a soap opera—“es igualito al galán” (he's just like the hero). Bastidor kills the wrong man in his hunt for revenge, killing Jonás, who has just arrived in town.

Another plot focuses on the quest for social justice by Manifiesto López, an inhabitant of a stilt house close to Menegrande, and his later incursion into local politics. This plot is mixed up with the subplot about Israel Valleterno and that of other inhabitants of Menegrande.

The briefest plot in textual length tells the future of Carmencito Villegas, a victim of existential apathy: “I would like to be a statue,” he says.

The elaboration of the content follows three stylistic guidelines imposed by the medium. First, *brevity*: precision of language is crucial in order to use the least amount of words on a screen; conciseness stimulates the use of suggestion and exactness tunes the poetics. Such conciseness is related to the language of the other arts, which follow this precept: we have songs a few seconds long, images that attempt instantaneous visual impact, minimalist computational design and resources. Second, *circularity*: each chapter begins and ends a story, which simultaneously forms part of a larger structure; although, these can be read individually without dependence on a previous or later text. As they are read, the links make up a puzzle, while the fiction augments the rhythm with which the pieces fall into place. The same happens with the song lyrics, which narrate the emotional state a character feels in a concrete lapse of time, or with the images—each one encapsulates a greater story. Third, *Fragmentation*: the plot is split into autonomous parts and, thanks to the circularity of each link, the pieces are arranged in a rhizomal structure of nodes connected by space (locality), drama (characters) and time (a linear temporal sequence), which makes a very complex circuit. The body of texts makes up the novel. The songs create a

symphony that is distinct according to the order in which they are played; from the visual sequencing there emerges a narrative in which each image belongs to a part of its structure, be it the initial proposition, the development or the denouement. Fragmentation fosters a randomized reading and combination of links. The choice of the path within the rhizome and of the art that will narrate the story remains in the user's hands, enlivening the interactivity of the work and the ludic sense with which one approaches the new medium.

In this way, the arts coexist on the screen and assume their narrative role in *Tierra de extracción*. This work uses resources available between 1996 and 2006. In the work, the artistic elements overlap in various spaces at the same time (multipresence), conjoined (interconnection) and open to variation demanded of them in that space (mutability). But technology has continued its development and new tools have arisen that affect the ecosystem where this artistic coexistence is developing: the new habitat of multimedia literature. New paths arise and the author has the challenge, and the duty, of investigating the options, and the demands, that the new ecosystem offers to language.

Challenges to the Multimedia Author

1. Carving out language: Technology generates new discourses, new potential fields for literature.

1.1 SMS (Short Message Service): Written language mutates, given the technological limitations of mass communication media (like cell phones and instant messages) in the case of SMS. Evolution goes from the speakable written, which reproduces the oral sound of the word, to the unpronounceable written, that can only be read in silence and disdains vocalization. SMS arises in two ways: 1) upon modifying the structure of traditional written words and choosing only those letters that construct an icon of the textual word and 2) upon representing the object or the gesture that one desires to transmit, using letters and signs that come from conventional writing. The brevity of the SMS bases a great deal of its information upon the guesswork and deduction of the receiver, who provides syntax and nuance to the content. Up until now, messages transmitted by SMS have been practical, with useful and ephemeral information. Although verse and microstories have been published on occasion on the cellphone screen, traditional writing has always predominated, thus restricting the quantity of words used and not abbreviating these words in order to find more space for writing and, therefore, for the development of ideas, plots and verses. That would imply (along with the conventions imposed by

literary use) the work to domesticate and enrich a language that now, at this first stage, is functional, limited and crude. These literary attempts, written in SMS, have no reason to restrict themselves to the screen of a cell phone and can establish themselves in other formats and be combined with other languages, thus consolidating their reading.

1.2 Informatic Language: Informatics offers another functional language, outside literary authority, that has gained complexity since the original binary system. Its potential is considerable in the long term, with the markings and messaging of cell phones translated to *text files* for the sake of its legibility on the computer screen. For instance, the untitled text, 911.wikileaks.org/release/messages.zip gathers together the SMS sent during the hours after the September 11th 2001 tragedy, together with the information that the telephone companies automatically exchanged. If the reader makes the effort to read linearly, as though it were a text, and if s/he takes the time necessary to dig out the words while avoiding running over the lines too quickly, s/he will find literature. The data, minute by minute, is a great chronicle of events and narratively it confers upon them a rhythm only achieved by the great action novels. There are no paragraphs, but the first part, the first hours, recreates the awakening of a society that later will be shaken up. Later messages after the attack recreate the tense and claustrophobic climate of those hours: lack of communication, failed calls. Over and over again. There is poetry in this reiteration. Tension increases line by line, thanks to the loops traced by the automatic testimony of these textual registries. The diegetic universe is constructed and sustained itself as well by noise. White noise or static runs parallel to the plot like a rumor. Sound that one can read. And that combines with the gesture of the finger pressing the buttons on the telephone: action that is “seen” upon reading the dialed numbers. The very first close-up shots of individuals’ hands which appear, just like that, in the middle of this environment, which is becoming ever more tense. As a result the sign, which is now iconic of September 11th 2001, feels oppressive, claustrophobic: presaging desperation and horror. It’s the poetics of the sign, like the image that transmits the exact word, now reconstituted in eight numbers.

Written by a non-human element, this could be the great novel of the beginning of the twenty first century if only it could overcome one obstacle: an enormous amount of patience is required to adjust one’s sight to reading these codes, to decipher its content at first sight, to appreciate the information transmitted in the reiteration of language. In order to approach this work, the public needs to learn to read anew. The literary author can take advantage of this language of programming, adapt it to human understanding and utilize it in order to recreate complex universes, like those that this registry depicts.

1.3 Narrating without Text: In the two last proposals, literature is sustained by text. It is a modified, insurgent content, but one that is based on the written word. Nevertheless, literature can explore another possibility, that of doing without the text in the same way that it has already renounced orality and gesture to a great degree. Upon renouncing text as the basis for its transmission, it buttresses much of its message and content upon other arts, with which it obtains an enveloping effect, producing stimuli that do not necessarily pass through the brain, but rather penetrate the reader by way of his other senses, like taste and smell. In multimedia works, the textual is reserved for that which is abstract and intangible—it is the territory of the subjectivity of the author, of the representation of that which cannot be attested without textual mediation.

One of the keys to an enveloping literature is overcoming the text as sole mediator. It's also the overcoming of all that would attempt to mediate, for example, between a fragrance and fragrance itself. With multimedia, the written word gains and loses spaces. The digital entity of the book contains and transmits scents and sounds, as well as the visual and the audible. And these senses will, in this way, become further territories for literature.

2. Transforming the Medium (Text) into the Object of the Work of Art: This is one of the spaces in which the text wins, that of electing words not only for their significance but for their visual form, in the same way as rhyme privileges them for their sound. It is a great pleasure to see the silhouette of the word and of its letters, sheathed with beauty according to its illustrative and pictorial characteristics.

When coupled with cyberspace, text also transforms into something else, something that permits its exploitation as an art object. That is to say, independent of its significance, the written word is isolated, depriving it of its abstract significance and converting it into a three-dimensional material. Within its context it maintains its sense. The author, after all, holds the authority to isolate or contextualize the word, but so too the reader, who can approach or distance him/herself with a click. Within a composition, when the distance with which a reader observes the text is adequate for the reading, the text maintains its traditional role and its significance. If it is too close or too far it is transformed into that transformed object.

3. Inquiring into Post-Literary Writing: The utilization of resources proper to the videogame, like repetition, applied to description and permutation (which is applied to plot) leads to a multiplication of alternatives to the plot, taking off from minimal variations upon a central idea, which then branches out and changes according to the routes that stem from the choice and combination of resulting plots. Repetition consists of effecting minimal variations upon the elements of the universe (characters, objects), which produces as many characters and objects as there are

differences that can be made. For example, in the prototypical characteristics of a protagonist: his hair color is changed ten times; the color of his skin, three times; his height, eight times. Combining these changes produces hundreds of different individuals. The reader can choose among them, or they can interact among themselves when these variations are also applied to the interior qualities of the characters. On the other hand, permutation consists in making small changes to the plot, to the future of those characters that, in turn, have been “repeated.”

Post-literary writing multiplies interactivity (the reader chooses who acts and the diverse itineraries they can follow, even when the reader does not know what will happen) as well as the ludic sense (choice and its chancy result are understood as a game). In spite of the quantity of options facing the reader, the use of these resources allows the author to maintain dominion over his work—indeed the possibility of following roads that the author has not contemplated or provoked does not exist.

4. Authorial Polyphony and Hyperphony: Polyphony is a term applied to literary works that depict a universe from multiple points of view; as many as there are characters that act as protagonists. Polyphony is linked to the complexity of the work and the artistic ambition of the author. In analogue literature, even though a work possesses different perspectives, creation comes from a single vision, that of the author. In multimedia works, where the necessity of using different arts to tell obligates the creative collaboration of various authors, polyphony occurs from the original concept on a plane of meta-work. If a polyphonic work is built through polyphony, the result is hyperphony (polyphony within polyphony).

The hyperphonic work not only offers the reader or user a multiple vision of the universe according to the characters that live in that universe, but it also grants him or her the vision of the creators about the created universe. It's a quality of the multimedia work, which demands previous agreements among authors in order to start from the same artistic intention, which is independent in itself, but converges on a territory, that of the work, enriched by the (certainly divergent) visions of the creators.

5. Ludism: The possibility of intervening in the work increases the playful quality of the reading. Through their action, the public (as Mallarmé demanded) makes the work. The interaction can have different levels, from that of the closed work that allows the reader to make small decisions such as the route of the reading, to an open work that mutates with their intervention. The reader's degree of power is decided by the author, who either does or does not renounce total control over the work according to his/her artistic intention.

5.1 The Reciprocity of the Robot Narrator: The robot narrator, provided with artificial intelligence and invested with the power to know the reader's personal information, has the ability to generate stories for the particular reader who opens up his/her private and intimate plane that, generally, is guarded behind passwords: email contacts, browser history, desktop archives, social networking profiles. With this data the basic plot is personalized. But its possibilities are immense when it is combined with post-literary writing, when the repetition and permutation altering the plot follows those patterns encountered in the reader's intimacy. The robot narrator is multiplied for each reader. There is a narrator for every reader; thus, the relationship between author (one) and reader (multitude) changes. Now the relationship is one-on-one, personal, and it modifies the reading paradigm in which the reader, previously, did not receive responses to their attempts at communication with the author. The robot narrator feeds off that reader and protects their relationship. This single receiver is consecrated exactly in so far as he or she receives their stimuli. The reciprocity of the deal awakens a more intense relationship in the reader, one in which emotions and desires may surface, and that the narrator shares.

The willingness of the robot narrator to modify the plot according to the demands of the reader can give a work dramatic complexity, which in turn assembles another work that has been born from the same point of departure. Both are children of one original work, and they return to it, granting it their variations, which enrich and enlarge the matrix that may indeed be controlled directly by the author.

5.2 Wii Reader: The combinatorial literary work can also be transformed through movement, thanks to the possibility that sensors afford the new space of the book. The wii reader—referring Nintendo's brandname for their videogame console controller—relies on the work's "reading" of corporeal responses, making possible interaction by means of movement, touch, smell, sweat and all other manifestations of a feeling (fear, joy) or thought (externalized through writing and voice). The plot can advance with the intervention of the reader, but that interference can also modify the future of the characters and of the story.

Using Barthes's definition, we can say that the text is the space of language and it goes beyond its own usual containers (the book) and the individual works signed by an author. The text contains and combines these things in a complex literary sphere. The role of the Wii reader is generated more in this macro-sphere than in the terrain of the closed and signed work. The act of altering, remixing, editing the work, returns the text from closed to open space—a terrain as intangible as that of ideas, where the clear borders of the codex world do not exist. In this way new intertextuality is produced, the passing of copyrighted text to a freer and less literary space, whose content belongs to whoever utilizes it during the timespan of that use.

6. Publication: Part of the author's challenges has to do with the new book and the medium in which it exists.

6.1 Reconstruction of the Book Object: The book is now virtual. The immateriality of the book and the fact that literature begins—returns to—a lack of packaging, so efficient for the marketing of literary genres as products, obliges the author to reaffirm his commitment to a poetics. The editors of the codex-book favored discursive imprecision—valued the text's length of the text over its exactness. Any story was better if it reached a word count that turned it into a novel. On the one hand, the importance of packaging disappears with the virtual book. And on the other hand, there is the compulsion to buy according to novelty and publicity. Nonetheless, the virtual book, housing hypermedia literature and not that which merely warehouses the codex (now digitally migrated—the e-book) is still in the time of the incunabula, a time of formation, of testing that, in time, along with exploration of the new languages, will lead to a consolidation of format.

The virtuality of the book also allows the author to publish in real time, to the extent that his work's links are finalized. The existence of literary works "in process" permits the intervention of the reader (if that public intervention forms part of the artistic intention of the author).

6.2 Combating Obsolescence and Disappearance: The digital work is vulnerable. The preservation of its existence in cyberspace requires continuous precautions, so that its programming and electronic format do not end up obsolete and illegible with the renovation of support systems, and so that it does not vanish from its servers for lack of maintenance or payment of fees. In order to combat disappearance, the author should duplicate copies, even when, in the digital medium, one copy is enough for an infinite number of users to read it. The disappearance of that single edition would signify a permanent loss. The author for now takes on the role that the librarian assumed for papyrus roles and codices; without this vigilance the digital work is as fragile as a book abandoned in the middle of the forest.

7. Occupying Public Space with Enveloping Literature: In order to achieve an enveloping literature, the second key factor (besides that of overcoming the notion of text as sole mediator) is that interaction should not just be voluntary. The reader must not be the only one who decides if he has influence. The author, robotic or not, must be the one who determines the conditions for the reader's interference as affecting the work. Even in spite of the reader. Even in spite of the non-reader, of the unprepared passer-by when the work is installed in public spaces—plazas, streets, garages, institution halls—for whoever "passes through there." This implies that

whomever lives with their backs turned to literature, even though they might not wish it, will link up to the work. They must learn to live with the literature that exists in public spaces, just as the citizens of any city learn to live with cars. Literature installations envelop a person, attract them, instigate them, and seduce them. And they include the individual in the work.

The occupation of public spaces with hypermedia literary works reopens the era of collective reading, albeit, this time, in silence.

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