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Digital Storytelling in Spanish:

Narrative Techniques and Approaches

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in Hispanic Languages and Literature

by

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March 2015

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December 2014

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ABSTRACT

Digital Storytelling in Spanish: Narrative Techniques and Approaches

by

Julio Alejandro Pérez

This thesis looks at a sample of twelve stories of electronic literature written in Spanish and focuses on the different narrative techniques that these works implement. The techniques range from simple hyperlinks to highly complex functions as in videogames. These works draw from the traditions of print literature as well as from the digital culture that has shaped this era: hypertext, algorithms, text reordering, text fragmentation, multimedia creations, and almost anything else the computer is capable of. As each work discussed here is unique, a different theoretical approach is used for each.

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Introduction: Playing the Text

The Dawn of Electronic Literature

In *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narratives in Cyberspace*, Janet Murray describes an experience she had early in her career at IBM. In those days computers were not the fast machines they are today but large and loud card-punching contraptions that had to be kept in their own temperature-controlled rooms:

> But one day the icy, clamorous cardprinter room was turned into whimsical cabaret: a clever young hacker had created a set of punch cards that worked like a player piano roll and caused the card reader to chug a recognizable version of the Marine Corps Hymn […]. All day long, programmers sneaked away from their work to hear this thunderously awful but mesmerizing concert. The data it was processing was of course meaningless, but the song was a work of true virtuosity. (3)

With this anecdote she transforms a machine meant to crunch thousands of numbers per second and store immense amounts of information into a creative instrument capable of eliciting the same kind of emotional response we derive from literature, music, theater, and visual arts.

As computers became more advanced and accessible, other creative uses became possible, including the creation of literature. In "Card Shark and Thespis: Exotic Tools for Hypertext Narrative," Bernstein and Greco mention that the first convincing attempts at literary computing appeared in the late 1980s; the early 90s saw the first big works that would jumpstart the genre that became electronic literature. The critical step was "to

recognize that hypertext links need not be merely annotations or plot points" (167). Hyperlinks had the potential to be used in creative ways that could provide entirely new methods of organizing the text, creating new reading experiences.

One of the first works to illustrate how computers could be used as literary devices was *afternoon, a story* by Michael Joyce, published in 1990. This story is seen as a foundational work that influenced everything that came after. In *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*, Espen J. Aarseth, whom I will discuss later in more detail, describes Joyce's story as "[engaging] a modernist poetics to subvert traditional storytelling and present a literary labyrinth for the reader to explore" (13). In *afternoon,* Joyce presents a text that reveals further plot developments as the reader clicks different words on the screen. The reading experience is not passive; rather, the reader is required to pay attention to where he or she is clicking in order to reach the parts of the text not yet explored and uncover as much of the story as possible.

Another foundational story was Stuart Moulthrop's *Victory Garden*, published in 1992. It also relies on hyperlinks but does so in a more explicit manner. Each page of text contains a few hyperlinks that send the reader to new pieces of information. *Victory Garden* might seem less daunting mechanically because each link is clearly presented, but navigating through the entire story is just as complex and disorienting for the uninitiated reader. Each page's relationship with the others seems to form a complex web and it is only once the reader has experienced many scenes that the story begins to takes shape. Without devoting time to creating a map, it is impossible to know if everything has been read.

Though both works use hyperlinks, they do so in different ways. As Bernstein and Greco write, "[Moulthrop] uses links in an ironic, less purely evocative mode; Joyce speaks

of links as 'words that yield,' but Moulthrop's witty (and, often, bitterly sarcastic) links yield nothing to anyone" (167).

In *Electronic Literature: New Horizons for the Literary*, N. Katherine Hayles defines electronic literature in the way agreed upon by the Electronic Literature Organization: "work[s] with an important literary aspect that take advantage of the capabilities and contexts provided by the stand-alone or networked computer" (3). With the proliferation of more advanced smartphones, tablets, and other digital devices, the term "computer" used in her definition should be expanded. For the sake of consistency, I will use "computer" as an umbrella term for all of these devices.

Electronic literature can take many forms, adopting conventions from other media—not only from literature, but from software user interfaces, videos, music, and videogames. It is not even necessary for it to use words. Hayles notes that of the over sixty works in the Electronic Literature Collection, one third have no recognizable words. Rather, all have visual components, and some have sonic features. Hayles redefines "the literary" to encompass "creative artworks that interrogate the histories, contexts, and productions of literature, including as well the verbal art of literature proper" (4). It is because of this wide range of possibilities that the definition mentioned above is vague enough to contain them, but also provides a central, common defining element. Even if a work of electronic literature behaves like a videogame, what makes it literature is the "literary aspect" the author strove for.

Although hyperlinks are the first techniques that come to mind when discussing works of electronic literature, the variety of the genre extends well beyond this. Navigating works can be achieved through buttons, entered commands, and even controllable characters.

Hayles's study focuses on works beyond those that rely on the hypertext scheme used by Joyce and Moulthrop. She goes as far as to call that era the "classical" era of electronic literature, making the current one "contemporary" or "postmodern" (7). After this initial period, which she sees as culminating around 1995, hypertext has become a hybrid of other computational techniques. There has also been a rise of interactive fictions, network fiction, locative narratives, generative art, works with more complex navigational schemes, and even works that resemble videogames.

An example of how electronic literature has expanded from hyperlinks into other genres while still preserving its literary qualities is Neil Hennessy's *Basho's Frogger*, published in 2002 and included in the second volume of the Electronic Literature Collection published by the Electronic Literature Organization.


Basho's Frogger

Two references are needed to understand this work. The game screen is almost a replica of the videogame *Frogger* that came out in 1981. In *Frogger*, the user controls a frog that has to first cross a road, while avoiding incoming traffic, and then cross a river using logs and turtles as stepping stones. If the frog is hit by a vehicle or falls into the water, it dies and must start over. The other important intertext is seventeenth-century poet Matsuo Basho's haiku "The old pond / A frog jumps in / The sound of water." In *Basho's Frogger*, the frog cannot reach either the turtles or the logs to cross the river. It has no option but to fall into the water. Neil Hennessy modified the popular videogame from the dawn of gaming with a centuries-old haiku to create an interactive work that brings the poem to life and into the present era.

E-writing in Spanish

The first works of electronic literature written in Spanish took longer to appear; it was not until the late nineties that they started being recognized and discussed. One of them, Edith Checa's *Como el cielo los ojos*, which was published in 1998 and discussed in Chapter Two, uses hyperlinks to give the reader absolute reading freedom. Instead of having the reader navigate the story through trial and error as Joyce and Moulthrop do, Checa's work gives the reader the option to visit all chapters in whatever order is desired.

Heartbeat by Dora García, also published that year, is similar to *Victory Garden* in that the reader is given a few hyperlinks to choose from in order to explore the story. Instead of having the links change the current window, they create new pop-up windows, each with its own background color and plotline. Depending on what the reader clicks, these windows can go deeper into the story or suddenly close, forcing the reader to start over.

Just as in the English tradition, electronic literature in Spanish moved beyond relying on hyperlinks to experiment with other techniques. *Más respeto que soy tu madre* by Hernán Casciari is a blognovel. A blognovel is simply a novel published online as if it were a blog. It is word-based, like other novels, while at the same time drawing heavily from the culture and style of blogs and Internet habits and customs. *Don Juan en la frontera del espíritu*, by Juan José Díez, is a historical novel set during the days that led to the Spanish-American War. Although it can be read as a printed text, throughout its pages there are links that provide the reader with more historical and background information on the events that transpired. These hyperlinks are not simply extra information; the author expects them to be part of the reading experience. In a show of solidarity with the contemporary addiction to jumping from web page to web page, the author even encourages the reader to use the links to get lost in the Internet and ignore his novel if something more interesting is found. *Poesía aleatoria*, designed by Brian Mackern, randomly recombines lines of poetry written by C. Cafasso into a new poem generated by an algorithm. It is up to the reader to find meaning in them, raising the question: is aesthetic, poetic, and artistic expression possible without authorial intent?
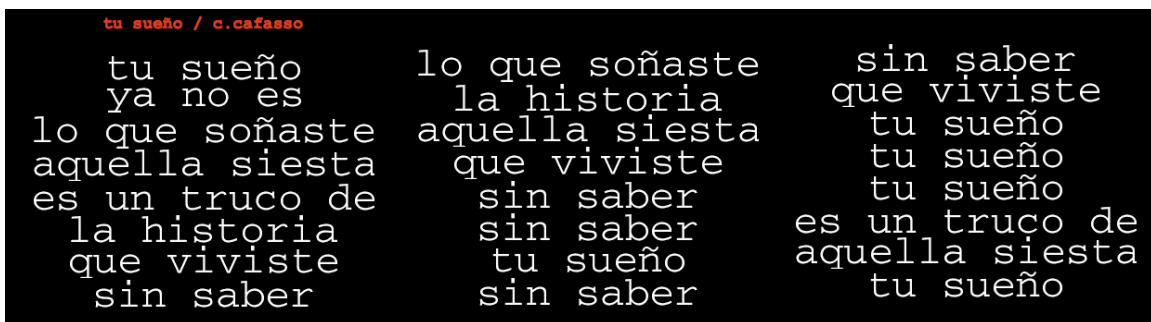
Poesía aleatoria, featuring the original "tu sueño" poem on the left

Electronic literature in Spanish also moves beyond relying heavily on text. *Golpe de Gracia* by Jaime Alejandro Rodríguez Ruiz plays like a videogame and demands that the user solve a series of challenges in order to reveal the plot, which unfolds through text, visuals, and voice acting. *Word Toys,* by Belén Gache, is an eclectic collection of minigames revolving around literature and words. One of these, *Escribe tu propio Quijote*, presents the reader with an empty page and an invitation to start typing. No matter what keys are pressed, the page is filled, letter by letter, with the words of the original novel by Miguel de Cervantes.

Though it took longer to get started, Spanish-language electronic literature has boomed with just as much energy and creativity. As with its Anglophone counterparts, there is a wide variety of examples available that are as different from each other as they are from traditional codex-form literature.

The initial attempts at electronic literature were very similar in both languages. Early works show a predilection for playing with hyperlinks to send the story in many possible directions and points of view. After this period, however, the general direction of electronic literature in Spanish began to diverge. One noticeable difference in works written in Spanish is an apparent restraint in innovation and a strong dependence on former practices. More of a tendency than a solid rule of thumb, works of electronic literature in Spanish to the present tend to be less experimental and avant-garde than their English-language counterparts.

On the surface, this might seem counter to expectation. Critics, even those outside Hispanic tradition, cite Borges' "El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan" and Cortázar's *Rayuela* as precursors of electronic literature. Both of these Spanish-speaking authors attempted something in their literary works that was ahead of what was possible in print but that can now be done seamlessly with computers. Yet these ambitions of a more complex

form of reading have been embraced more by English-speaking authors than Spanish-speaking ones.

But restraint might not necessarily be what is happening. In "The Plot Thickens," Brent Hurtig says that "[T]oday's most successful interactive artists ultimately see interactivity as an evolutionary (rather than revolutionary) step for storytelling" (quoted in Wardrip-Fruin, *First Person* 196). Borges and Cortázar were suggesting a more complex form of narration, but they were doing so in print. Depending on one's perspective, what electronic literature can provide to literature can be seen as either evolutionary or revolutionary, to use Hurtig's words, and these perspectives can shape how authors create. Spanish-speaking authors have followed a more evolutionary path, stretching the familiar into unfamiliar territory, whereas English works have opted to explore the strange new lands with much less historical baggage.

The Purpose of This Study: Storytelling in Digital

In this study I look at a sample of electronic literature written in Spanish and focus on the different narrative techniques that these works implement. Not all digital works use the capacities of the computer in the same manner, and each digital tool has a distinct narrative effect. This variety makes the field of electronic literature diverse and difficult to contain in efforts to describe and study it. The techniques authors use to bring their stories to life are as varied as the stories themselves. They could be as simple as hyperlinks or as complex as a videogame with a controllable avatar. They draw from the digital culture that has shaped this era: hypertext, algorithms, text reordering, text fragmentation, multimedia creation, and almost anything else the computer is capable of.

Focusing on techniques not possible or unintuitive in print, I look at how digital authors use the strengths of the medium to tell a story, and how these processes and products are different from those of other media. My sampling is diverse enough to show the variety of possibilities that writers in Spanish have explored. Many of the works discussed are not necessarily considered great works of art. Some have received a good deal of critical attention while others are obscure. In this study I treat them all as examples of innovations in the field of electronic media.

In *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, Murray states that although Gutenberg invented the printing press in 1455, he did not invent the book. It took decades of experimenting with paragraphing, typefaces, binding techniques, and page numbering before a working system was established. Likewise, the art of storytelling existed before print, from oral traditions to poetry to prose. And only then, after the people who were involved with the printing press spent decades experimenting, "could Cervantes write a contemporary tale like *Don Quixote*, which marks the beginning of the European novel" (29). My sampling is meant to show the variety of narrative techniques taking place in this genre that are accessible for discussion and, more importantly, that show the potential of works to come.

To provide an idea of what I aim to do I offer a brief discussion of *Condiciones Extremas*, by Juan B. Gutiérrez. This story is a hypermedia science fiction text with more than one reading. I do not mean this in the traditional sense that every reader brings his or her own experiences and uses them to read a text, hence making it unique. There are literally hundreds of different arrangements of chapters that *Condiciones Extremas* can give to a reader. Each reading is unique because each reading is done with a different text.

The story's opening is straightforward enough. There is a promise of revelation and a notice that the characters will fit together in a puzzle in a manner they are not fully aware of. We are told we are in the tenth decade. Whether it is the tenth decade of a century or of some cataclysm, the narration does not specify. A woman, Miranda, is traveling towards her job. She decides to take the scenic route, which the narrative uses to depict the world she lives in. Pollution is its defining aspect: the sun and the ground are hidden from her view and the smog sticks to the buildings and taints them. Accompanying this text is an image of a dark man, walking outside, seemingly defiant toward the dangerous world depicted by the text. It is not a long opening, just three paragraphs, read in a minute or two, barely an introduction. After reading this, the following options are given:

90% **Décima Década**
Miranda detuvo su automóvil cerca a una estación de servicio. Tenía aún combustible para cientos de kilómetros, pero le interesaba ganar tiempo antes de llegar al Centro de Inves

85% **Finales de la Novena Década**
Laboratorio Central. Miranda a sus 22 años entra por primera vez al templo más admirado del Centro de Investigaciones. Afuera dicen que allí Índigo inventa algo para revertir el proceso de mierdificación del planeta, pero en aquel sitio...

85% **Octava Década**
Los niños avatares salieron en tropel de la escuela. La vida era simple para ellos. Libre. Todas las tardes prometían una aventura en los domos que estaban construyendo los avatares adultos...

85% **Octava Década**
Miranda sólo una vez antes en su vida había mirado a un avatar de frente, cuando era niña, en uno de los parques cercanos a su casa. Los domos peatonales estaban recién construidos...

90% Tenth Decade

Miranda stopped her car near a service station. She still had fuel for hundreds of kilometers, but she wanted to kill some time before arriving at the Center of Investigations

85% End of Ninth Decade

Central Laboratory. A twenty-two-year-old Miranda enters for the first time the most admired temple of the Center of Investigations. Outside these walls it is said that Índigo is inventing something to reverse the process of turning the planet into shit, but inside…

85% Eighth Decade

The avatar children came en masse from the school. Life was simpler for them. Free. The

evenings promised a new adventure within the domes built by the adult avatars…

85% Eighth Decade

Miranda had only once before seen an avatar this close, when she was a child, in one of the

parks near her house. The pedestrian domes had been recently built…

(*My translation*)

All of these options logically follow the first current chapter, but take it in different

directions. They all make narrative sense. They all promise to reveal more information that

will clarify what is happening and what will happen. But more importantly, they all threaten

to withhold information. A decision taken carries the weight of the three avoided. And it is

not possible to explore them all; by the end of the next chapter a new set of possibilities is

given. It is up to the reader to choose a path.

The chapters in *Condiciones Extremas* are organized and presented with the

"Literatrónica" system developed by Juan B. Gutiérrez. This system sorts the chapters based

on their relationship to each other and gives readers the options it determines are best to

continue the story, while at the same time keeping track of what has been read. The end

result is that regardless of what the reader decides to click, the narrative is always fluid and

there is no repetition of chapters already read or any needless backtracking.

From the reader's perspective, this story is a linear experience. Each event depicted

logically follows the previous and leads to subsequent ones. Once finished, the reader will

have read everything, because the paths not taken find ways to suggest themselves further on

in the story. Despite the narrative linearity and coherence of the text, the reader's decisions

shape the experience by reordering the chapters. With the "Literatrónica" system, Gutiérrez

can easily create a multitude of texts, each with different great narrative effects. One possible track can uncover a key story development and then backtrack to show how everything led to it. Another can show how each event led to that unexpected outcome. It is highly unlikely that two readers will see the same arrangement of chapters.

In Chapter Two I discuss in more detail the elements that make *Condiciones Extremas* deliver its story and the techniques on which the author relies.

Critical Studies in Electronic Literature

Katherine N. Hayles's *Electronic Literature: New Horizons for the Literary* serves as the foundational book of the field. It describes what electronic literature is and how it differs from other media, while also detailing exciting prospects and issues that pertain both to the artistic works and to the study of them. This book comes with a CD of the first volume of the Electronic Literature Collection so that the reader can experience what electronic literature is instead of just reading about it. The collection of essays *Textualidades electrónicas: nuevos escenarios para la literatura*, edited by Laura Borrás Castanyer, does a similar job of explaining the field and its nuances to a Spanish-speaking audience.

Espen J Aarseth's *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* sets a strong theoretical framework to study these works and generates new theoretical directions for further exploration. Ergodic literature, he explains, unfolds through interactions that require non-trivial effort—something that goes beyond turning a page and reading—through which every reading will be unique, created as the individual reader interacts with the work. The ergodic is not limited to digital works; there are ways to make the reading of texts on paper more complicated, such as not binding the book and shuffling the pages in a box. In this book

and in his other writings, Aarseth argues that the difference between digital works and their predecessors is such that traditional approaches to literature are not suited for cybertexts and thus a new theoretical model needs to be created. To prove his points he discusses well-established disciplines such as narratology and rhetoric (17) and uses them to analyze some digital works, demonstrating where they fall short.

The series of books *First Person*, *Second Person*, and *Third Person*, edited by Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan, expand on these topics as well as provide ample case studies from a variety of works of electronic literature and games. An important aspect of this series is that the authors of these essays are not just scholars but also authors and developers. In the collection, alongside each main essay another person has the opportunity to comment, expand, or refute the claims made. This allows for a back-and-forth discussion between authors that shows the field as complex, alive, and evolving.

Besides specific scholars and texts, there are also groups devoted to studying, gathering, and sharing current works of electronic literature. The Electronic Literature Organization, currently directed by Nick Montfort and located in Cambridge, Massachusetts, states the following as its goals:

1. To bring born-digital literature to the attention of authors, scholars, developers, and the current generation of readers for whom the printed book is no longer an exclusive medium of education or aesthetic practice.
2. To build a network of affiliated organizations in academia, the arts, and business.
3. To coordinate the collection, preservation, description, and discussion of works in accessible forums, according to peer-to-peer review standards and technological best practices. (http://eliterature.org)

As of this writing, two collections of electronic literature works compiled by this group, in several languages, are available freely on their site.

Hermeneia, currently directed by Laura Borrás Castanyer, is another group of scholars from at least twenty-three American and European nations. Just like the Electronic Literature Organization, it aims to be a central hub for the discussion and sharing of new works and ideas about the field. The site contains over seven hundred works of electronic literature in a wide variety of languages. One important element of the Electronic Literature Organization and Hermeneia is that they are not limited by language when it comes to studying texts. This "globalization" makes electronic literature studies into a global movement.

One of the major topics discussed by theorists is the difficulty involved in studying electronic literature. Despite the name "electronic literature," the genre is not literature with electronic implants to it, nor is it electronics that want to be literary. It is its own "hopeful monster" (Hayles 4) that draws from everything around it. To see these works solely as descendants of the codex in Spanish would be a fatal mistake. Compromising and treating them as the progression of print, enhanced by outside influences, would be just as erroneous. The genre is so different from everything available that applying theoretical frameworks from other genres is extremely problematic.

It is possible to chart a progression of narratives from print literature to electronic literature to computer games. Of these, print literature has the advantage of having been around long enough to have a vast amount of theoretical frameworks available. Electronic literature and games are comparatively new fields and still being explored. A concern shared by scholars of these two cultural forms is what has been commonly referred as a

"colonization" threat from other academic disciplines: scholars bring what has worked for them and apply it to the new fields as if they are new land to conquer. "As with any land rush, the respect for local culture and history is minimal, while the beliefs in one's own traditions, tools and competence is unfailing" (Aarseth, *Genre Trouble* 45). Scholars of electronic literature have been faced with the double responsibility of creating a field of study that makes sense for the genre while at the same time keeping preexisting fields from taking over.

Another debate within the field can be summarized by a quote in Aarseth's *Cybertext*: "The problem was that, while they [other scholars] focused on what being read, I focused on what was being read *from*" (3). Though Aarseth here was referring to his attempts to explain cybertexts to those outside the field, the line can also be used to reflect what is happening between scholars of electronic literature. Some scholars focus on the unique functions of electronic literature while others are more interested in how the new medium can be used for greater artistic effect. The large number of scholars of electronic literature who also create their own digital works makes this debate more difficult to avoid. Whereas other fields that study art maintain some distance between critic and creator, the scholar-artist is often involved in both sides of the field in electronic literature. Of the works I analyze in my study, roughly half of the authors have also theorized about electronic literature and have often written about their own work.

Since I am interested in the narrative aspects of digital stories, works such as Aarseth's *Cybertext* are key to understanding them but do not give the entire picture. Some insight into the creative process and the goals of creation is required. In order to do this, I also refer to scholar-artists, such as Chris Crawford and his book *Chris Crawford on*

Interactive Storytelling. Crawford's background is not so much theoretical as practical and experimental. After working in the videogame industry he decided to focus on using computers to tell stories. His book serves as a guide of sorts for those interested in using the medium to tell stories.

Theoretical Approaches to Spanish Electronic Narrative

I focus my discussion on two broad and not always separated factors that shape how a work is made and how it delivers its story, in ways that are specific to electronic literature. First is the technical aspect that makes these works impossible to recreate in other media and therefore sets them apart. As part of my study I describe how these different techniques work, how they do what they do, the potential effects they have on the readers, as well as the difficulties that arise in their use. To continue using *Condiciones Extremas* as an example, my discussion of this work explains how the "Literatrónica" system devised by Juan B. Gutiérrez calculates the reading options it presents to the reader. I look at both the explicit intention of the author with this system and the product the reader sees, examining how the two match and when they break down.

With each reading providing the same overall story element albeit in different order, aporia and epiphany occur in ways different not only from linear narratives, but also from other readings of the same work. In *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*, Espen J. Aarseth discuses how these two literary devices, so critical to narrative regardless of genre, interact in a different manner in electronic works:

> In contrast to the aporias experienced in codex literature, where we are not able to make sense
> of a particular part even though we have access to the whole text, the hypertext aporia

prevents us from making sense of the whole because we may not have access to a particular part. Aporia here becomes a trope, an absent pièce de résistance rather than the usual transcendental resistance of the (absent) meaning of a difficult passage. (91)

In works such as *Condiciones Extremas* aporias and epiphanies are defined in a joint effort between the author, who designs the system, and the reader, who chooses how to navigate it. The same scene can be either an aporia or an epiphany depending on the path the reader takes to get there. A dramatic revelation can make all the previous clues come together, yet at the same time, without previous information, the same revelation can leave the reader with unanswered questions.

Chris Crawford notes that creators of interactive storytelling require a creative approach that is different from other forms of art, which he calls "second-person insight." He describes this as "the ability to think primarily in terms of how an expression will be perceived by the audience" (Kindle location 743). While creating stories that can and will be approached in many possible ways, the author must be especially aware not only of these possibilities, but of the audience's actions and reactions:

> designers of interactive storytelling need to go even further and anticipate their players' imaginings and whims. Therefore, second-person insight requires a fundamental and profound shift in attitude. You must go beyond the normal consideration of your audience's perceptions and make those perceptions the entire thrust of your efforts. (Kindle location 755)

In art, there is the idea of self-expression. In a great work of literature we are reading the author's words and we have to unravel them and make sense out of them. An author may take the reader into account and make the message accessible to a certain degree, but the

reader still has to pull meaning out of the author's words. There is a completed object (the great work of literature in our example) the reader has to comprehend. Interactive fictions, on the other hand, are a more direct collaboration between audience and creator. The object is not built yet. Depending on the work, the audience can control the protagonist of the story, in a sense becoming the character itself, or manually put together all the pieces of the puzzle. In order for this two-person task of creating the text to work, the author has to be aware of and predict what the reader will try to do and how the reader will react to the content. This is where Crawford's concept of second-person insight comes into play. If the author cannot predict the reader well enough or provide the right tools, then the reader will have no object from which extract meaning.

Except for scenarios where the author intentionally tries to break immersion for effect, immersion is a key element of a good work of literary art. Good storytelling pulls readers into the world and keeps them there. In interactive storytelling there can potentially be an infinite number of ways a reader can come in contact with the text and it is impossible for the creator to take all of these into account in the creation process. By focusing on the reader at every step of the creation, immersion and impact can be preserved regardless of iteration. This interaction between the work and the reader can also make or break a work of electronic literature. During my discussions and explanations of what happens 'under the hood,' I also pay attention to the interaction between work and reader, and talk about the strengths, weaknesses, and shortcomings of the approaches used by different authors.

Knowledge of the gears that make the machine go is just one part of understanding how digital narratives convey their stories. The other element at play is the medium and how it shapes the content of the story. Whereas one aspect of my study involves how the story is

structured and delivered, I also pay attention to what is being delivered and how it is being received. The computer, the Internet, the limits and potential of the technology, and the mass-media upbringing of creators and readers have an impact on both the form and the content of the products, as well as the way readers approach them.

The "Literatrónica" system used in *Condiciones Extremas* not only structures and organizes the discourse of the story, but also makes its way into the story itself through plotlines that go in chronologically opposite directions. In Chapter Two I argue that *Condiciones Extremas* is effective at giving the plot lines out of order because the time-traveling genre has already been doing this in other media and readers are familiar with this storytelling technique, which thus eases their way into reading this cybertext. When confronted with a time-travel plot, the audience knows to be constantly aware of all plot points given in order to know quickly where to place new developments, which then shape the entire picture. In linear storylines or stories with occasional flashbacks, the reader does not usually need such a high awareness of all events since the chronology is much clearer. A simple straightforward story reorganized with "Literatrónica" may not be as accessible as it relies on the original linearity, requiring from the reader a higher degree of adjustment before being able to read it in a comfortable manner.

To use a simpler example to clarify my point, *Más respeto que soy tu madre*, a blognovel studied in detail in Chapter One, is an entirely linear narrative. Each entry in the protagonist's diary links the previous one to the next, and most of the content is delivered through text. However, the narrative style and the structure of the webpage adhere closely to what bloggers are used to. Each chapter is short, personal, in first person, with the presumption that the narrating voice is a middle-aged woman venting her life at a computer

and the readers are blog visitors; thus the work for the most part maintains the illusion that it is a real diary by a real person. Although the story is linear and could be placed on paper, *Más respeto que soy tu madre* could never have come to be without the contributions of the digital medium and the culture that was formed around it. Such forces and influences will be discussed alongside technical elements in order to shed light on other characteristics of narrative that originated in the digital medium.

As mentioned previously, the field of study of electronic literature has been very cautious and often resistant to incorporating literary theories developed for other media, and for very good reasons. However, the diversity of these works makes forming a unified analytic approach daunting and probably impossible. The spectrum goes from linear texts all the way to game-like ones. Traditional literary theory must be adequately adapted for digital texts. Since each work demands its own approach, I employ major concepts and theoretical tools as they are required instead of trying to use the same for all of them.

Since I wish to see how the story is constructed and delivered, narratology is an appropriate starting tool. The approaches formulated by Genette and Prince are useful in providing insight, but their usefulness is not consistent. Gérard Genette separates a narrative into a triad of elements: *story*, which refers to the totality of narrated events; *narrative*, the discourse that narrates them; and *narrating*, the act that produces the discourse, in other words, the very fact of recounting (*Narrative Discourse Revisited* 13). *Narrative* and *narrating* often happen simultaneously and "the distinction between them is less one of time than of aspect: *narrative* designates the spoken discourse (syntactic and semantic aspect, according to Morris's terms) and *narrating* the situation *within* which it is uttered (pragmatic aspect)" (14). The *narrative* of a work, through its discourse, provides the reader with the

information needed to determine both the *story* and the *narrating*. You need a *narrative* sentence such as "For a long time I used to go to bed early" in order to determine that the *narrating* is a first-person voice talking about events in the past.

Here arises one potential problem that must be kept in mind. Since the *narrating* is what produces the discourse, it can be argued that the technical aspects of a work of electronic literature are part of this element. This could suggest that contrary to what Genette argued, it is possible for *narrating* to not be bound by the *narrative*. The reader must first deal directly with the *narrating* in order to access the *narrative* and eventually the *story*. When *Condiciones Extremas* offers three hyperlinks to choose from, it is not providing plot development; nor are the links discourse. The links are how the story is being delivered and without an action from the reader, the story stops. However, not all of the *narrating* is contained in the technical elements; it is still there in the narrative. Likewise, the *narrative* can be both in the content and the delivery mechanism.

Another aspect of a work examined by narratology is the concept of time and order. There is the time of the story, which is chronological, and the time of the narrative, which is how the events are narrated. A work meant to be read in a linear manner, even if narrated unchronologically, nevertheless has an order:

> when a narrative segment begins with an indication like "Three months earlier…" we must take into account both that this scene comes *after* in the narrative, and that it is supposed to have come *before* in the story: each of these, or rather the relationship between them (of contrast or of dissonance), is basic to the narrative text […]. (Genette, *Narrative Discourse* 35)

When it comes to some digital literature, the concept of narrative time can be malleable and even nonexistent. In *Como el cielo los ojos*, discussed in Chapter 2, narrative time is obliterated. After the introductory page, the reader can access every chapter in the story by all three narrators. There is no before and after in the *narrative*. Even if the time of the story is still there, without a structured and perceived narrative time there is a sense of disorientation when reading this work. The anticipation of "what will happen next?" and "how did this come to be?" has a different impact on the reader. During my reading there was no sense of narrative time; instead it was all narrative past I had to dig up. I was more a detective in a crime scene than a narratee.

It is therefore problematic and dangerous to try applying concepts such as these directly to works of electronic literature. Markku Eskelinen notes that "the dominant user function in literature, theater and film is interpretative, but in games it is the configurative one" (38). The diversity of works of electronic literature spans from one point, with words reliant on interpretation, to the other, that demands configuration. But this does not mean that a field such as narratology is useless to address them. The difficulty lies in using what is viable for the medium instead of forcing works into theoretical models because these models have worked for everything else. And if something is not appropriate, we must determine why and how an equivalent can be established, or accept that there may not be an equivalent.

Since Crawford expects the author of digital literature to pay a lot of attention to their readers, reception theory provides groundwork from which to look at the works studied here and the ideas he provided. Reception theory focuses on the work–reader dynamic and how each side negotiates with the other for meaning. The work has to provide guidance so that the reader knows how the work has to be read, and the reader has to pay attention to these clues

and modify how he or she is reading. When discussing reception theory, Eagleton notes that "The most effective literary work for Iser is one which forces the reader into a new critical awareness of his or her customary codes and expectations" (79). Electronic literature, with a format that is foreign and challenging yet at the same time familiar, poses to the reader the challenge of adapting to the work in order to be understood.

In summary: as I discuss each of the works of electronic literature included in this study I will be bringing the concepts and frameworks that best suit them individually. However, there are some theoretical tools I will utilize throughout to link them together in a consistent framework: narratology and reception theory as a cautious first lens, and the theories available for electronic literature and game studies. As I analyze each work, I will also be incorporating concepts from media studies, media culture, science fiction, hypertextuality, historical fiction, and others as appropriate.

Overview of Chapters: Progressive Complexity

This thesis is divided into three chapters, each discussing a loosely defined category of digital literature. There is a structural overlap between them. The works examined in Chapters One and Two rely heavily on text, sentences, paragraphs, and narrations as the delivery mechanism of the story, whereas those of Chapter Three require a higher degree of interaction, visuals, and sounds. Reading is no longer enough; the reader has to manipulate, restructure, and interpret what is given in order to extract the story.

The texts in Chapter One differ from those Chapters Two and Three in that the reading experience is designed as linear. The stories in Chapter One always begin at the same location and progress until the end, so that each reader encounters the same text in a manner

similar to the way most printed books are meant to be read. The works analyzed in Chapters Two and Three, on the other hand, are nonlinear. Espen Aarseth defines a nonlinear text as "an object of verbal communication that is not simply one fixed sequence of letters, words, and sentences but one in which the words or sequence of words may differ from reading to reading because of the shape, conventions, or mechanisms of the text" ("Nonlinearity and Literary Theory" 51).

This categorization and separation of my study is merely one of convenience and does not represent any hard division within the field. The intention is to begin with works that are the most akin to traditional print literature—text-reliant and relatively static—and progress to more complex structures. It is my intent in this dissertation to show how electronic literature is using, adapting, and co-opting literary devices and techniques, so this progression will make clear how this is taking place.

Though some of the works here are currently seen as canonical or genre-defining, my examples were not necessarily chosen because they were the best the field has to offer or represent any sort of technical or artistic pinnacle. Instead, I am looking at these works because of the different narrative techniques they employ that I perceive as novel and potentially useful for further exploration by other authors and scholars. I also discuss how these narrative techniques fail or succeed and what potential effect they can have on the reader.

The first chapter discusses the simplest kind of digital literature: works that are linear and for the most part entirely reliant on text. As far as the degree of interaction between reader and text goes, there is not much difference between these works and codex texts. Instead of turning a page, the reader clicks a link for the next section or scrolls down the

window, and therefore these works are not necessarily ergodic under Aarseth's definition. However, they do fit in the category of electronic literature as N. Katherine Hayles defines it. In this day and age, creating works on a computer is, for the most part, standard procedure. However, the works discussed in this chapter were conceived to be read on computers and this shaped both their content and structure. Some of the works here use visuals and sounds to enhance the linear reading experience while others draw from the world that computers and the Internet have created.

The blognovel is a genre that combines the structure of blogs and the narration of literature. Its simplest definition is a novel that is presented in the blog format: small episodic chapters that are delivered through time to the readership. The first example I study is *Diario del niño burbuja*, by Belén Gache, which narrates the adventures of a boy who is a bubble. Just like in diary blogs, each episode has the protagonist talking about his day-to-day activities. Bubble boy's narration is unable to follow a straight line and goes in a wildly erratic train-of-thought style. Gache designed *Diario del niño burbuja* less as a story than as an exploration of the paradigms created by the multiple dimensions of hyperspace, dealing with concepts of space, linearity or its lack, order, and cause and effect. The bubble boy's worldview, randomness, and lack of identity therefore reflect the behaviors of hyperspace and the people in it.

One of the most successful blognovels is *Más respeto que soy tu madre*, by Hernán Casciari. This novel embraces this social media format and makes it key to the story. Each entry is short and personal. Throughout the entire novel, the narration maintains the façade of a woman writing a diary about her family problems. Contrary to *Diario de un niño burbuja*, this work is less interested in intellectual and academic concepts and more in entertaining the

audience through a new medium in a humorous manner. It does so by placing the characters in a rich digital environment, with plenty of discussions about cell phones, instant messages, and even pornography—topics that are close to the audience's lives. It balances all this modernity and novelty with tried-and-true humorous and vulgar plotlines and characters that are common in television.

La autopista de Shambala is a short story that uses imagery and sounds to convey meaning not contained in the text. Like the other works in this chapter, it is a linear text with a beginning, middle, and end. The reader has to use the mouse's pointer to hover over the text, reading it in much the same way people read using their fingers. At specific points in the text, images, sounds, and animations that are related to the plot appear onscreen. For example, when hovering over the text that mentions driving long distances, highway signs appear on screen and increase in size, simulating the visual experience of driving through a highway. The author chose to not use realistic drawings for his work, instead opting for a more minimalist art style. In my discussion of this story I look at what the narrative gains from these images and sounds and how the art style serves to allow the reader's imagination to fill in the gaps much in the same way reading words does.

The last work covered in this chapter, *Don Juan, en la frontera del espíritu* by Juan José Díez, is at its most fundamental level a historical novel that takes place during the 1880s. The characters did exist and the events did happen, although the author fictionalizes them in certain ways. The web version of the novel is presented as a book, stylized to look like an old tome. If only the text is taken into account, it is not much different from a print novel. What makes this novel different and not fully functional outside a computer device is the large number of hyperlinks that are spread throughout the story. It is a historical novel

that tries to branch out to the history in which it takes place and does so by providing links to outside web pages where the reader can go on a tangent and learn about other events, people, and places. It can also be read as a straightforward story from page one to the end. This would be a legitimate way of reading the work, but it would be missing some of the author's intentions and the novel's potentiality. By clicking on the links and at least glancing at the pages, the reader begins to understand how the digital novel functions and how the novel is interconnected to its historical context.

For works in Chapter One, the act of reading remains relatively static. There is an established beginning, a progression, and an end. Each reader will encounter more or less the same text and read it in the same order. Chapter Two discusses works in which the reader's actions have an impact on the work that is being read. Depending on the decisions the reader makes and possible computer algorithms under the hood, the same story can be presented in different ways. Some of these paths have different outcomes, providing some information at the expense of hiding other facts, while others present the same story in different order.

The multiple ways the stories in Chapter Two can be read provide a different set of challenges and possibilities for writers. Stories can no longer be experienced in a linear fashion and because of this, the author must take these permutations into account for effective storytelling. Likewise, there is a shift expected of the reader, and a different sense of expectation and anticipation is formed. The reader must work harder—or even fight the text—in order to obtain the whole story.

One of the effects of unordered storytelling discussed in this chapter is its impact on narrative time. A print text is generally a finished piece of work. Whether the story is told in chronological order or through a series of time displacements, it is written in a specific order

for the desired narrative effect on the reader. From the reader's perspective there is a beginning, a middle, and then an end. The reading experience is driven by an interest in what will happen next in the story. Though a printed novel is finished and everything is written down, the subsequent pages are the 'future' of the story the reader has not been to yet. In electronic stories that can be read in different orders there is a shift in this concept of time. The sense of time is no longer present. In a way, everything has already happened. This in turn has an effect on how the reader interprets the world.

The first work, *Como el cielo los ojos* by Edith Checa, has three first-person narrators whose stories take place concurrently. It is structured to invite the reader to explore the story by choosing any narrator and diving into any instance in the story, without requiring exposure to any specific sections. I discuss how the author uses the plot to lure the reader into conflicting decisions by making all courses of action tempting.
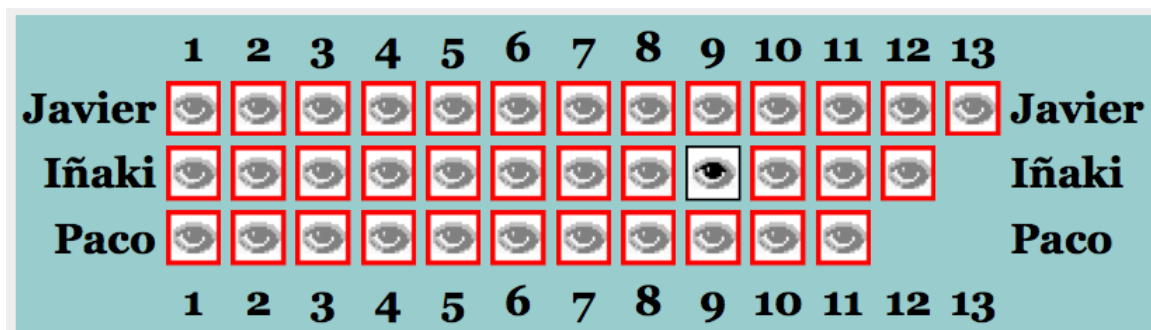
Como el cielo los ojos chapter selection box; each eye is a chapter

The number of options forces the reader to choose a path, usually deciding between fully exploring one event or one narrator, at the expense of temporarily missing out on the others. This provides some information, but withholds other facts that affect how the reader sees the

character and understands the progression. Even if by the end one has read the entire story, the reading experience is defined by the process of getting there.

Sinferidad, by Benjamín Escalonilla Godayol, is a short story about two young men. Throughout the story there are highlighted text links that move the story forward. The links make the same plot progress but alternate the points of view. One section is from the perspective of the protagonist and the next can be from the same character, his friend, or another secondary character. Since the story is always progressing, *Sinferidad* invites multiple readings in order to see all points of view. The writer's challenge for this kind of structure is to create something that will keep the reader interested in returning back to see all the variants. Even if the story remains the same, each reading should provide different insights and themes to make the rereading experience worthwhile.

Heartbeat, by Dora García, is a hypertext story as they are more traditionally understood. Each page has some part of the text as possible hyperlinks, which create small pop-up windows with further plot developments. There is a beginning but no definitive ending, as every window connects to another with frequent returns to previously read segments. Given the small fragmentary content of each window and the circular nature of the reading process, *Heartbeat* reads more as an investigation and exploration of a series of events rather than simply reading a story. The reader takes the active role of a detective that has to tie together as many pieces together as possible.

Condiciones Extremas, by Juan B. Gutiérrez, is the most complicated of the set. Just like the previous two, the reader has to make decisions about what to read next. However, as opposed to *Como el cielo los ojos* where all options are available from the beginning, and *Sinferidad* where the links are author-defined, *Condiciones Extremas* generates the available

links through an algorithm, called "Literatrónica," designed by Gutiérrez as we have seen. Before the algorithm can calculate the chapter organization, the author defines a distance between each chapter and the rest. The algorithm shows the reader the three unread chapters closest to the current chapter. As chapters are read they are removed from the pool of options that the algorithm will provide and the reader will eventually have read the whole text. By maintaining some order and control over what is given to the reader, the "Literatrónica" system provides the reader a coherent reading experience that is tailored to his or her choices and interests.

In the third chapter I look into works that branch even further from print literature with more multimedia elements and a higher degree of interaction between the user and the work. These texts are a more violent rupture from what is traditionally seen as literature and those discussed in previous chapters, involving more visual and aural stimuli, interaction, and in many cases heavy borrowing from the practices and conventions of video games and other media. The works in this chapter are more difficult to defend against a question such as "is this literature?" The story can only be taken in through complex mechanisms that require understanding and mastery of how the computer program works. The sense of accomplishment of finishing the story is accompanied by the satisfaction of having 'solved' the work and navigated it successfully to its end.

Chris Crawford's concept of second sight, where the author must effectively preempt the actions of the reader, comes into play in the works discussed in this chapter. With much less hand-holding for the reader, the author has to keep in mind what he or she is allowing the users to do while keeping in mind what the users will want to do. The discussion of these

works will focus heavily on how these dynamics work together, or against each other, in order to tell a story.

Tierra de extracción, by Doménico Chiappe and Andreas Meier, tells the story of a petroleum town called Menegrande in Venezuela; the industry has destroyed the town and made it into an almost magical dark hole. Though it uses a different user interface, *Tierra de extracción* can be navigated in multiple orders much like *Como el cielo los ojos*. The delivery of the story is very fragmented: each screen is just a tiny snippet of a scene. The reader has to combine all the pieces mentally to compile the entire image.

How the text is presented and organized is only a small part of what sets this work apart. Readers cannot simply read the text and move to the next screen to get the story; they have to carefully explore each screen with the computer's pointer to uncover hidden scenes and visual and aural cues. *Tierra de extracción* uses music, dialogue, and images to aid the reader in making mental and emotional associations between characters and events. For example, the image of a tree—a known place where people are hanged and their souls are trapped—recurs through various characters, creating a lethal tension as readers become more familiar with the history of the town and the tree. The text on its own, even creatively unordered, is not enough to present the whole story and deliver the impact of the story. It is the effective combination of all the elements at play that brings the town to life.

21 días, by Isaías Herrero Florensa, is somewhat similar to *Tierra de Extracción*. The user is given a screen with images and words and must interact with it before moving on to the next. What makes this work different is that it has very little narration and few thematic connectors between segments. The story is presented through images, sentences, words, and puzzles, most of which give the impression of not being related to anything else nor forming

a coherent story. It is up to the user to figure out what all of this means and decipher what the story is.

Modus Vivendi (2010), by Spanish author Sebastián Armas, is an interactive story where the reader is more of a player in an entirely text-based adventure. The following image is the opening scene of the story.
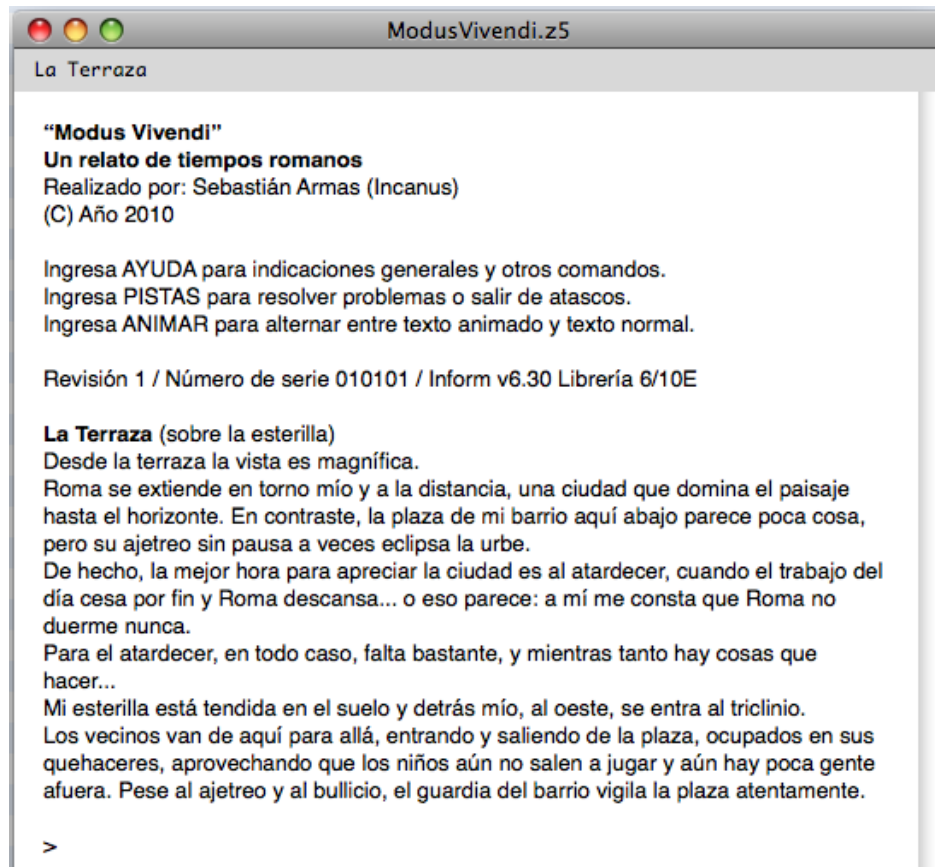
"Modus Vicendi"

A tale in Roman times

Created by: Sebastián Armas (Incanus)

(C) Year 2010

Enter HELP for general instructions and other commands.

Enter CLUES to solve difficult problems or if you are stuck

Enter ANIMATE to alternate between animated and normal text.

Revision 1 / Serial number 010101 / Inform v6.30 Library 6/10E

The Terrace (on a mat)

The view is magnificent from the terrace.

Rome spreads itself around me and into the distance, a city that dominates the landscape all

the way to the horizon. In contrast, the plaza in my neighborhood down here doesn't seem

like much, but its unceasing busyness sometimes eclipses the major areas of the metropolis.

In fact, the best time to appreciate the city is at dusk, when the day's work finally stops and

Rome rests… or so it seems: I know for a fact that Rome never sleeps.

But dusk is still too far away, at any rate, and there is so much to do…

My mat is spread on the floor and behind me, westward, I can go to the dining room.

The neighbors come and go, entering and exiting the plaza, busy with their chores, taking

advantage of the fact that the children are not playing outside yet and there are not a lot of

people around. Due to the commotion and the noise, the guard watches the place attentively.

>

(*My translation*)

Interactive fictions such as *Modus Vivendi* are not navigated through clicks as in previous

works. Instead, the reader interacts with the world by typing instructions. The introductory

paragraph sets the scene and provides clues as starting points. For example, typing "ver

Roma" (see Rome) brings a further description of the city as well as other events within the

protagonist's sight. Since the introductory text informs the reader that the narrator is on a

mat, before being able to move anywhere, the command "bajar de esterilla" (leave the mat) is

required.

The control the reader has over the story and the world in interactive fiction is greater than in linear fiction and the works seen previously. Common commands in interacting fiction are *move*, *see*, *talk*, *ask*, *take*, *drop*, and *use*, but often the creator allows for much richer interactions with the world. Although the game does not understand all verbs and actions, part of the fun resides in discovering what is understood and finding creative solutions to the problems presented by the text. Interactive fictions have been around for decades and have been traditionally seen more as games than as proper literature or as having any artistic merit. However, given that they are text-based and rely on words as the primary elements to breathe life into the fictional world, the potential for literary value is there. In this case, *Modus Vivendi's* depictions and narrative style are worded in a more literary fashion than other games of the genre, and the world exploration is more akin to a description of a city full of life than to puzzle-solving and monster-smashing.

Golpe de Gracia, by Jaime Alejandro Rodríguez and included in the second volume of the Electronic Literature Collection, plays like several different videogame genres. Divided in three chapters, the first employs person-to-person dialogue where the user talks with various characters to learn that someone tried to murder the priest Amaury; the second section is a top–down adventure game where the user takes the role of the priest and has to walk and survive through a series of puzzles and battles in a spiritual journey; and the third section is a point-and-click puzzle game where the user, now investigating the crime, has to solve the mystery of who tried to kill Amaury.

This work is an experimental hybrid between games and literature. It plays like old-school games, but at the same time, the themes presented are those explored frequently in literary works. Games normally have objectives such as "go here," "get that," "kill that." In

Golpe de Gracia these goals are still present, but they are used as a means for the user to explore the world and take in the story, not as ends in themselves. Narratives dominate over play.

After analyzing a broad sampling of what is being done in digital literature in Spanish, in the conclusion of this study I summarize the major techniques being used and their potential for growth and further development. I then discuss difficulties in the creation of the works and recurring narrative problems that arise from adding ever more complicated reader interaction.

Electronic literature at the moment is an endeavor with very little potential for monetary gain; it is driven by curiosity, creativity, and theoretical possibilities. Another segment of the conclusion, therefore, is devoted to an author-centered discussion about these movements and what motivates the creation of such works. Finally, I look at how the movements and techniques developed in electronic literature are changing narrative techniques and the impact this can have on other forms of narration, even the traditional codex.

Chapter I: Linear Narratives

With hyperlink detours, bells, and whistles along the way

In this chapter I discuss works of electronic literature that are primarily text-based and form a linear reading experience. Contrary to examples shown in further chapters, these works could be transferred to paper and remain, for the most part, readable. Though they contain an unchangeable body of words, this does not mean they are not electronic literature. A translocation from device to paper either would take away elements that are key to fully appreciating the works or would deprive the reader of a layer of the reading experience the author intended. It would be the difference between reading a play that assumed previous knowledge you do not have and seeing it fully performed by a cast that has closed these informational gaps through their performance.

What is often discussed about electronic literature is how the text can be altered, changed, and reactive to what the reader does, as well as how other media can be used to enhance or modify the work. Many of the works in this chapter do not do any of this. Even if the works here do not highlight the common strengths of electronic literature, they reflect how the computer is influencing narrative techniques and themes. This is the first step in the progression from print to digital that I shall be covering throughout this study.

Some works are digital due to how they came to be and the ideas, philosophies, and movements that fueled their formation. The humor in *Más respeto que soy tu madre*, the experimentation in *Diario de un niño burbuja*, and the large amount of hyperlinks in the historical novel *Don Juan en la frontera del espíritu* cannot be properly understood without

familiarity with what the Internet is and how it has shaped social relationships and information.

The philosophies behind the construction of these works are not the only element that makes these works digital. Some of these incorporate into their structure aspects that could not be done on paper. *Don Juan en la frontera del espíritu* is full of hyperlinks that send readers all over the Internet and *La autopista de Shambala* has vivid animations and sound effects that enhance and give new meanings to the words that accompany them. Though these digital elements do not directly affect the story being told, they have an impact on how the reader receives it.

The paratext plays a central role in electronic literature. In print literature an author may not have much control over the final form of the work, since this task is usually assigned to other people, but authors of electronic literature depend on how their works are shaped, since the form is as much an intentional part of the reading as the text itself. For this chapter, focusing on works that follow a linear narration reliant on words makes it easier to identify what is new about these works and the impact of form on the narrative.

I look primarily at four works. The first two of them, *Más respeto que soy tu madre* and *Diario de un niño burbuja*, are blognovels, which use the format of blogs to tell their story. I discuss two of these because each author has chosen a very different approach to combining literature and digital society. The first one takes a more popular path, aiming to please and entertain a reading audience that is not invested in the theoretical aspect or relevance of new media, while the second is fully experimental, representing with its characters what globalization and the Internet are doing. The third work, *La autopista de Shambala*, uses the computer medium to enhance the reading experience while making the

reader work for this pleasure. The last work, *Don Juan en la frontera del espíritu*, reads as a historical novel but uses hyperlinks to connect the reader to other pages of the Internet, forming a parallel between the intertextuality of historical novels with history and the relationship between websites connected through hyperlinks.

Web logs, or blogs, a derivation of online diaries, are an Internet medium whose flexibility is being used for creative purposes. In *Bloggers: A Portrait of the Internet's New Storytellers*, Amanda Lenhart and Susannah Fox bring statistical information about blogs and how people are using them. Not surprisingly, a large number of bloggers are people who post personal things, either about their lives or topics that interest them. About three quarters of those surveyed stated that "expressing themselves creatively was a reason that they blog" (7). However, very few saw their blogging as a profession or something to do systematically, treating it more as a hobby done when inspiration strikes. The blogging topics are as varied as the people who write them, but there are noticeable basic trends:

> The largest percentage of bloggers in our sample (37%) say that "my life and personal experiences" was the main topic. […] Entertainment-related topics were the next most popular blog-type, with 7% of bloggers, followed by sports (6%)—a topic favored by more men than women—general news and current events (5%), business (5%), technology (4%), religion, spirituality or faith (2%), a specific hobby or a health problem or illness (each comprising 1% of bloggers). Other topics mentioned include opinions, volunteering, education, photography, causes and passions, and organizations. (Lenhart and Fox 9)

Blog sites, many of which are free and come with a series of pre-made templates ready to be used, allow people to jump into an Internet life without having to know anything about web designing, hosting, costs and so on. The openness of the format and its capacity to host

videos, images, and links as well as texts allow a wide range of ways to use them, both structurally and thematically. Although blogs offer ease of publication, they also have constraints that limit what can be done with them, constraints that in turn shape the final product. Blogs, like most websites, are not ideal for massive amounts of text. Effective blog entries need to be short enough to hold interest, but long and dense enough to contain everything that needs to be said.

Their ease of use, pre-made designs, community-building attributes, and popularity are very attractive qualities for anyone who wants a place to store and share their work. Blogs have a variety of incarnations—opinion pages, public journals, political commentary, and creative works being just some of them. Short stories, musings, and poetry fit perfectly into the limited space and time commitment associated with blogs and their readers. However, bigger works are also present in blogs. Some writers, primarily amateurs but also professionals, create blognovels. Each blog entry can be seen as a chapter, but tends to be shorter than it would be in printed texts or when designed for more lengthy readable formats. Sometimes entire novels are placed on the website directly, either in multiple pages or as one long page. Other authors deliver each chapter periodically, in a manner that is reminiscent of when writers used to publish their works in newspapers or magazines in a serial format.

The term "blognovel" is an umbrella term for the different kinds of storytelling within this format. As I noted, some writers use the blog format to contain their chapters, with the text therein behaving like a traditional novel. In these cases there is nothing that directly relates the blog structure to the text. Other writers, however, embrace the blog structure and craft their stories around it.

Blognovels as a genre are not without complications. Anyone with Internet access, a keyboard, and enough writing endurance can create one. This causes the problem of finding the needle in the haystack, which has traditionally been the responsibility of editors, publishers, agents, and literary competitions. Although blogs allow writers to make their work accessible to the public, they are still far from achieving a wide readership and recognition. Lacking the traditional means of quality control, blognovels are currently seen in a similar category to fanfiction and other amateur writings. This, however, is not generally a problem as amateur writing tends to stick to niche communities that read one another and encourages the act of creation above all else.

One example of such a community was the site "Directorio de Blog Novelas" at http://directorioblognovelas.blogspot.com, now mostly inactive. This page limits itself to short blurbs and links to blognovels, which are hosted elsewhere. There are no reviews and no critical assessment of works, and within reason, every work submitted to the webmaster is posted. Although the page allows for visitors to comment on the links, this is rarely done. Just as in fanfiction communities, the authors and the writing are predominantly young, with themes and writing styles reflecting the kinds of stories that engage them.

Given their length, blognovels are more ambitious projects than one-shot stories. Even with the relaxed requirements of being created online, they demand a large time investment in order to get all the words down. Since it is so easy to start writing and so quick to have it available online, many writers begin their projects and publish them immediately to get them out there. However, many of these attempts lose steam before seeing completion. As of January 2013, Directorio de Blog Novelas has about sixty works available, out of

which only seventeen are tagged as "finished," with forty-six "in progress." The page's last update was in March 2012.

Despite the predominantly amateur "for fun" aspect of blognovels, they reflect the changes that users of the word are going through in this increasingly complex and connected world. Although they use words to convey their message, the background experiences and interests that inspire them stem from a multitude of sources, of which literature simply happens to be one. Often they owe more to popular and Internet culture than literary traditions. Every medium is as valid and important as the next for the blognovelists. Computers can be seen as the ultimate multimedia device, capable of containing almost every form of artistic expression in one way or another. Blognovels are premised on this all-encompassing dimension, and then shaped into words.

I. *Más respeto que soy tu madre*: Familiar Slapstick and Humor Repackaged

Blognovels are not solely the hobby of young people experimenting and expressing themselves. Their capacity as a medium is being explored in more serious and elaborate attempts. A notable blognovel is *Más respeto que soy tu madre*, by Hernán Casciari. It was published in episodes between September 2003 and July 2004, following the life of the fictional Mirta, a married mother of three young adults living in Argentina. Mimicking diary blogs, each "chapter" was published almost daily, sometimes even multiple times per day, portraying in "real time" what was happening to the protagonist and her family.

The first chapter opens the story with Mirta writing that her eldest son had set up a blog account and explained the basics to her. She does not fully understand the concept, but soon relies on the blog as a diary to talk about what happens to her. The narrator's ignorance

of the medium and the reach of the Internet is key to the humor and the story. She is publicly venting her private life, unaware of the repercussions and under the assumption that most likely no one will be reading it, while at the same time having the relief that someone could be listening to her.

With all the content that is available online, most blognovels are doomed to obscurity. However, since Casciari's work was a professional project by an already established author, it had an initial audience and means of promotion, on top of quality content, legitimizing it as a "real" novel in the eyes of many. Several aspects make *Más respeto que soy tu madre* stand out from the hundreds of blognovels or webnovels. From a reception standpoint, and as far as such a new medium can realistically expect, this blognovel has been a critical success. It has transcended its original incarnation as an online novel, with print publications in various languages, a theater adaptation, and a film version currently in production. Although the blognovel has transcended the device for which it was created, the print versions are dependent on a familiarity with what blogs are and how they are used.

One of Casciari's biggest accomplishments is the use of the blog-as-a-diary format as its narrative device. Whereas some blognovels use blogs to publish chapters in a more traditional sense of the word, Casciari's work is written as personal entries, with the narrator blogging daily occurrences as a way to talk about what is happening. This is not the only blognovel to use a diary structure for its delivery. However, the fiction and style of the writing are constantly aware of the medium in which the story exists—they rely on it, allowing the medium to give more life to the message. The reader is aware that what is being read is fiction, but everything available says otherwise, allowing for a smooth process of suspension of disbelief and making the characters in the story stand out as real characters. In

some parts of the website Hernán Casciari is even credited as being the compiler of Mirta's diary, who with her approval monetized what she had written.

Chronologically, the readers received the story as it was happening in the fictional world. The date stamp on each blog entry matched the day the readers had access to it, the day the fictional narrator posted it. This further enhanced the illusion that the characters were actual living creatures and created a new kind of temporal tension for the reader that is not possible through print. If something dramatic is bound to happen tomorrow, readers are left in suspense; they have no choice but to wait till those events take place and Mirta sits down to write about them before they will find out.

This way of storytelling is reminiscent of epistolary and diary fiction. In fact, the original title of *Más respeto que soy tu madre* was *Diario de una mujer gorda*. As with epistolary or diary stories, the narration is limited to the incomplete point of view of the narrator, and it is by piecing together the available elements and reading between the lines that the reader can shape the characters and complete the entire story. True to its format, however, it does not follow the introspective long-winded prose of letters or personal diaries, instead going after the fragmented quick-fix writing of diary blogs.

Here's the novel's first chapter in its entirety:

Capítulo 1 – **Un día de locos**
26 de septiembre de 2003

Como si nos costara poco traer el pan, el Caio pasó un rojo y nos cayó una multa.
Ciento diez pesos por lo del semáforo, y doscientos cinco porque es menor de 16. Total: trecientos quince mangos que hay que pagar o nos secuestran la tatadiós, que tras cartón es la única movilidad que tiene el Nacho para ir al puesto.

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Mi marido estaba que echaba humo, y lo corrió al Caio por el fondo hasta que lo agarró en un voleo y se desquitó un poco. Yo le gritaba: "¡Zacarías, dejá ese chico!", pero se conoce que no había caso. Si hubiéramos estado en la buena, Zacarías no hace tanto esfuerzo por alcanzarlo al Caio. Como mucho le sacude un zapato desde el sillón; pero no andamos en la buena.

Antiyer al pobre lo cesantearon, después de veinte años en Plastivida SA, y no consigue ni para changas. Está alterado y se pone como loco por nada.

Chapter 1 – a crazy day

September 26th, 2003

As if bread was cheap, Caio ran a light and we got a ticket.

A hundred and ten for the stoplight, and two hundred more because he is not yet sixteen. Total: three hundred and fifteen mangos we have to pay or they keep the car. It's a piece of junk that barely works but it's the only mobility Nacho has for work.

 My husband was fuming. He ran after Caio and dived at him to grab him and beat him up a bit. I screamed, "Zacarías, let go of the kid," but I knew it wouldn't do anything. If times were better, Zacarías wouldn't have made such an effort. At most he'd shake his shoe from his chair; but times aren't good.

The day before yesterday they fired him, after twenty years in Plastavida SA, and he's had no luck finding anything else. He is out of his wits and the slightest thing makes him lose it.

(*My translation*)

Episodes are short, consisting of just a few paragraphs describing the day's events with some cathartic closing, or some random musing about a random topic. They do not end in cliffhangers to inspire the reader's curiosity, unless the narrator herself is ignorant of what will happen, as the fiction of the blognovel is that each entry is being written when the protagonist can finally sit in front of the computer. Character introductions are slim or

nonexistent, as Mirta already knows them and hence has no need to describe them. The prose follows a train-of-thought style, from someone more concerned with self-expression than coherent narrative delivery, and written more for the benefit of the fictional writer.

The reader's perception of story time works differently here. The original readers had to wait for each chapter to be published, thus following the story in "real time." The time of the story world and the time of the real world were one and the same. Subsequent readers are also impacted by the blognovel's date stamps and prose style. The writing and the reading of blogs are not ideal for lengthy reading sessions, but bite-sized snippets, and this blognovel reproduces this in its structure. Each chapter generally is its own contained topic with an overarching arc or mystery unfolding as the narrator puts her thoughts into the computer. As such, *Más respeto que soy tu madre* is best read in short sessions and longer reading can be tiring. A notable effect of the blognovel replicating the passage of real time and the intensity that encourages a periodic reading is that the story seems longer than it actually is. The reader more vividly feels the time elapsed in the story world.

Casciari's blognovel is strongly based on simple situation humor that relies on off-the-wall stock characters and the sometimes naïve, sometimes morally dubious narrator to keep the story going. Over the course of the chapters, Mirta discovers that her daughter has an online web page where she strips for money, and Mirta permits her to continue after learning how much money the daughter makes from the U.S. customers; Mirta continues finding clues about the homosexuality of her eldest son and sharing them with the world, without being able to understand what they mean; her husband erratically loves, ignores, or hates her; her middle son gets into multiple criminal problems and brings a woman to live with him, who eventually becomes the grandfather's lover; and so on.

The blognovel does not have a straight plot progression, but rather follows a format of "and now more things happen," which is closer to how real life, blog diary entries, and sitcoms behave than introduction-development-conclusion fiction. The novel closes on a happy note as Mirta is finally given a grandchild. This seems to make her happy enough that she does not need to blog her miseries anymore, ending the story.

The novelty of using blog diaries as the narrating device and the Internet as its delivery device is balanced with other techniques familiar to most readers and television viewers, making it easier for the readers to enter the story. The structure of this blognovel shows that the author is tech-savvy and familiar with blogs, their uses, and the culture around them, and other popular software such as messengers. However, Hernán Casciari chooses an older mother figure who is not familiar with any of this as the voice of the character. Such a decision has an impact not only on the story being told, but also on how the blognovel functions and becomes accessible as a new form of storytelling. Both the narrator and the audience are dealing with something novel.

Going back to the initial chapter mentioned above: without any introduction whatsoever, the narrator introduces Caio, who is a troublemaker; Nacho, who is apparently the only employed person in the family; Zacarías, who was recently fired; and the violent family dynamic. The fact that little or no description is available creates a vivid situation of a living family that existed before the narrator began writing and the readers began reading. As tragic as all of this might seem, the narrator's language and the over-the-top antics of the family reveal a much lighter, almost cartoonish reality. The only thing mentioned explicitly is that Zacarías is married to the narrator. We know little else of these characters and how they are related to the narrator. Everything else is left to be deciphered in later chapters.

Diary entries, even when made public, serve the writer more than the reader. Hence, the writer has no real need to be clear about who is who, arrange things sensibly, or go into detailed explanation. *Más respeto que soy tu madre* follows this approach of providing incomplete information. The protagonist/writer already knows the information. Writing in this manner is a very personal form of expression; a way to untangle what is not known, or to clear the mind. This leaves the readers with a lot of information they must piece together as more becomes available.

This however, is not as complex as it might initially seem. As noted previously, the characters from in this story are not developed and complex, but rather the comedic archetypes common in Spanish comedy, who are in turn oversimplified parodies of the kind of people everyone is familiar with. Everyone can claim to have a friend or a family member like this one or that one. By making the narrator an uneducated yet emotionally strong matriarchal figure, the author lures the reader with an endearing familiar element. The emotive bond between reader and story is swiftly created in the short burst of prose available. This is important for a format like the blognovel in which the reader is expected to make the effort to return to the page frequently over a long period of time. The time and mental commitment required are lower than for more complex texts, but in a medium so saturated with consumable information, the physical action is greater than simply opening a book.

While characters like these draw from familiar types in other media, they are placed in an unfamiliar format. Having the main characters be modern-computer-literate might make them closer to the initial readership. At the same time, it might make the critics and reviewers rave about the novelty of using contemporary characters that exist in a contemporary world, in order to achieve a wider appeal, and make it easier for the newcomer or the hesitant. Yet

having strong connections to what came before is important. Films had to go through the same process. The first big films were based on important works of literature or theater, and it was not until the audience and the creators were accustomed to the medium that the true potential of the medium could be developed.

On a related note, the original theatrical production drew on this notion by having Antonio Gasalla in the role of Mirta with a bad wig and a housedress, emphasizing to the audience the caricaturesque aspect of the character of the blognovel. Likewise, every character is dressed so that his or her personality and role in the story is clear visually.

Cast of *Más respeto que soy tu madre* (2009)

Although Mirta writes about what is happening to her, she is in fact journaling the lives of those around her, with her being the connecting point of all these stories. Following the traditional perceptions of the self-sacrificial mother, life happens not to her, but to those she takes care of. She is either the victim or the co-victor of actions not always her own. She reacts to the fights between family members, tolerates the whims of her husband, encourages or scolds her children. In a sense, she is as much a spectator as the reader. And since we are given only her words, we initially know as much as she does.

Although the blognovel as its own medium of storytelling is currently something that is still relatively unfamiliar, the story eases the reader into the world of the blognovel and the fiction by combining the novelty with the familiar. As the story progresses, it becomes slightly more "technical," with photos and drawings typical of blog posts and even copy/pastes of instant-messenger conversations, but only rarely breaking away from the fiction of one woman with limited knowledge.

In an essay titled "El blog en la literatura. Un acercamiento estructural a la blognovela," Hernán Casciari mentions six key elements of a blognovel: (1) the blognovel is written in first person, (2) the plot always takes place in real time, (3) the protagonist states that he/she is the creator of the blog, (4) outside reality must affect the plot, (5) the protagonist "exists" outside the plot, and (6) the author's name is not mentioned. This approach, which he also uses in other blognovels, details his philosophy to keep these works mimicking as closely as possible real life and real blogs. Although this might seem as a limiting set of rules, it breathes a different kind of life into fictional storytelling, a life not possible in traditional print. The biggest effect for this simulation of reality is for those who read the novel as it is taking place, taking in each chapter as it comes and commenting on the events as they happen, causing the characters to feel more real and alive than they could have been elsewhere.

The published version of the blognovel may provide a different kind of reading depending on the reader. Even though it is a physical object, its style and structure is such that trying to read it as a traditional book would only cause difficulties. The fiction that the narration is an online blog is such a key element of the story and the narrator's voice that the reader has to visualize the printed page as representations of an online blog, rather than a

book. Readers have had enough experience reading traditional novels in the form of diaries or correspondence that this is not such a drastic step.

Generational gaps, reading habits, affectivity, and attitudes are potentially the biggest elements that will shape the differences in reading experiences between the online version and the printed one. Someone accustomed to juggling media devices without holding any of them in a hierarchical regard will have an easier time making the mindset changes required. If the reader sees the print book as one thing and the screen as another, with different emotional attachments to one or the other, the transition might not be as easy and there will always be a "translating" step in his or her mind. In order for the print version to be effective, the reader has to imagine the paper page as a stand-in for a computer screen that contains the ramblings of a fictional character.

The perception that physical publishing legitimizes the blognovel is also bound to shape the reader experience. In the eyes of the reader, by becoming published it rose above all the clutter on the Internet and graduated to something worth noticing, a charming anomaly. This predisposes the reader to appreciate the work even before being exposed to it: it has already been validated by someone else.

With its simple characters, plot, and cartoonish drawings, *Más respeto que soy tu madre* does not break a lot of narrative ground, nor does it create something shatteringly unique. It pieces together a lot of well-known elements and reads more as a light sitcom than anything else. While experimental and playful, the blognovel relies on many well-known tropes and techniques to remain accessible. It is much more familiar than unfamiliar. Had it been written as a traditional novel, it would not be anything beyond an entertaining guilty pleasure.

But greatness was never its intention. Literature is meant to draw readers in and keep them there until the story is done, and Hernán Casciari's work succeeds at this. It does so by abiding by the conventions established in a format that has not been fully explored as a storytelling medium. In the online article "Hernán Casciari, el creador de la blognovela" written for http://portal.educ.ar, Carolina Gruffat discusses some of Casciari's works and attitudes towards blognovels. Although she names him as the creator of the blog novel, his true contribution resides in showing that it can be a viable storytelling device in an accessible way. By keeping it simple, the novel serves as a transition between traditional print and web-based storytelling, familiarizing the readership with new ways to read and showcasing the viability of a different but not entirely foreign medium.

II. *El diario del niño burbuja*: Art Imitating Medium

Another blognovel written by an established artist is *El diario del niño burbuja* by Belén Gache. It relies on a diary blog structure, as does *Más respeto que soy tu madre*, but takes its inspiration and form from a broader source. Belén Gache is an Argentinean-Spanish writer, currently residing in Madrid. Per her website, she "ha realizado trabajos de literatura experimental y expandida tales como video poemas, instalaciones sonoras, poesía electrónica y proyectos mixtos" (has created works of experimental and expanded literature such as video poems, sound installations, electronic poetry, and mixed projects) (http://belengache.net/). Her body of work is broad and diverse, serving as a panoramic view of what can be done with literature and electronics.

Mechanically speaking, this blognovel is among the least complex of what she has done. Another of her works, *Word Toys*, which will be discussed in the conclusion, is a more

mechanically elaborate example of electronic literature, and defies even the broadest definition of what literature is. The complexities of the *El diario del niño burbuja* experiment, however, lie beneath what is shown. As the author explains on the home page:

> El proyecto Bubbleboy fue concebido para ser realizado en internet, mediante 100 posts, realizados durante cien días consecutivos. Cada uno de ellos constaría de una imagen encontrada en un buscador de imágenes y de un texto breve. El Diario del Niño Burbuja se constituyó como un texto a la deriva y en proceso, sin una trama o dirección preestablecida.
>
> Burbuja, frágil e inconstante, está en continua amenaza de desaparición. Al igual que las burbujas flotan en un hiperespacio constituido por múltiples dimensiones, Bubbleboy habita el ciberespacio, lugar igualmente multidimensional que propone una nueva espacialidad y una nueva temporalidad sin órdenes lineales o causales precisos.

> The Bubbleboy project was conceived for the Internet, through one hundred posts made in one hundred consecutive days. Each would consist of an image found in a search engine and a brief text. *El diario del niño burbuja* was made as a text that was adrift and in process, without a plot or pre-established direction.
>
> Bubble, fragile and inconstant, lives under a constant threat of disappearing. Like bubbles that float in a hyperspace made by multiple dimensions, Bubbleboy lives in cyberspace, a place also multidimensional that proposes a new form of space and a new impermanence without linear orders or precise causes.
>
> (*My translation*)

Since Belén Gache has worked extensively creating and discussing multimedia projects and experimental digital literature and art, a more heterodox and academic blognovel is to be expected. Published almost daily for four months in 2004, the story follows the life of Niño

Burbuja, who, as his name suggests, is a bubble boy—not someone who has a medical condition that requires him to live inside a sterile container, but literally a boy who happens to be a bubble. Despite this being an anomaly even within the universe of the story, not much is explained about this condition. This is his reality, and the story moves on. In his diary he narrates and reflects on his interactions with the people around him (who are normal human beings), his thoughts, and his discoveries. Each entry is a pseudo-ramble that departs from a recent event or thought.

Bubble Boy is a representation of a new reality. His life, perspectives, and narrations are linked more to the multidimensional and seemingly erratic nature of cyberspace than the tribulations of a real character. Each diary entry is inspired by an image found through web searches. Within each chapter, and even throughout the blognovel, there is no real plot thread to follow. Each sentence inspires the next with little regard to the ones before, jumping whimsically from topic to topic the same way people go from website to website clicking whatever draws their attention. The novel is an exercise in the interconnectedness of thoughts and ideas in the brain in a manner similar to how websites are interconnected in the Internet. Any attempt to find concrete information that can lead anywhere is thwarted by the inevitable change of topic.

Here is the entirety of the thirteenth diary entry, dated May 27:

Mi hermana anoche volvió del Uruguay en el ferry y con tormenta. Dice que el río estaba tan movido que todos adentro se desplazaban como si estuvieran en el Apolo 11. Además, a todos los automóviles en la bodega se les activaron las alarmas y parecía una verdadera zona de desastre. Mi hermana me contó que ella se mantenía incólume, leyendo un viejo ejemplar del Tabaré, de Zorrilla, que había adquirido en la feria de Tristán Narvaja. Este largo poema épico

describe el amor trágico entre una joven española y un joven mestizo charrúa, Tabaré. El mestizo, que tiene ojos azules, se ha enamorado nada menos que de la hermana del conquistador Don Gonzalo. La joven es atacada por un indio y Tabaré la salva. Pero Don Gonzalo, al ver a su hermana en brazos del mestizo, cree que es él quien la ha atacado y, sin más, lo mata. ¡Las cosas del destino! Mientras mi hermana y yo comíamos una manzana en la cocina antes de irnos a dormir, le pregunté si se acordaba de todos los sapos que había en casa, cuando éramos pequeños. Pero ella me dijo que no se acordaba para nada. De lo que sí se acordaba era de una vez en que un plato volador bajó del cielo y se estacionó en nuestro jardín, con todas sus luces de colores girando. La verdad es que mi hermana está completamente loca.

My sister returned last night from Uruguay by ferry. There was a huge storm. She said the river was so violent that everyone inside moved around as if they were in Apollo 11. Also, every car alarm went off and it was a veritable disaster zone. My sister told me that it didn't faze her; she kept reading her old copy of *Tabaré* that she bought at the fair of Tristán Narvaja. That long epic poem describes the tragic love between a young Spanish woman and a young mestizo *charrúa*, Tabaré. The mestizo with blue eyes had fallen in love with none other than the conquistador Don Gonzalo's sister. The young woman is attacked by an Indian and Tabaré saves her. But Don Gonzalo, seeing the woman in the arms of the mestizo, thinks he is the one that attacked her, and without hesitation, kills him. The whims of Fate! As we were eating an apple I asked my sister if she remembered all the frogs that we had at home when we were little. But she said she didn't remember anything. What she did remember was that one time a flying saucer came from above the sky and landed in our yard, with lots of spinning colored lights. It is clear my sister is insane.

(*My translation*)

In this one entry of two hundred and thirty-six words, there are at least four different things happening: the sister's return during a storm and what happened, a synopsis of the book she

was reading while this was happening, him asking about the frogs they used to have, her recollection of the day a flying saucer arrived in their garden, and the narrator's statement of how he sees his sister. Most of the diary entries are this prone to switching topics randomly.

There are few consistent threads across chapters, the only ones being his opinions of those around him, which are repeated throughout; and the ongoing search for finding more about himself, whether he is adopted or not, and what exactly bubble boys are. Their development, however, progresses very slowly, and the rest of the events that take place do not seem to serve these arcs; they are static that happens to be important elsewhere.

The narrator does not limit himself to discussing his day-by-day actions. Some sections are devoted to imaginative adventures like those every child has. Other sections revolve around "facts" he has come across that he finds interesting enough to share. These tend to be the more consistent entries in his diary. He sticks to the topic almost from beginning to end. However, these are also less directly relevant to the story as they have little to do with what is happening to him, and read like the kind of content that could be found on informational websites like *Wikipedia*.

The very nature of the premise stated by the author dictates a need for inconsistency and lack of order in the text. Unfortunately, the "intellectuality" of the work gets in the way of the story. The blognovel reads as the experimental work it is meant to be, to the point where it is more an exercise in seeing how the experiment unfolds than a place of emotional attachment to the story. The thought process of the narrator suggests that the author herself relied on this technique to write and did not bother to look back at what was written.

Experimental works are difficult beasts. They rely on challenging conventions, expectations, and the familiar, but at the same time they have to find a way to draw the

audience at least long enough to get the message across, if there happens to be one. *Diario del niño burbuja* is sadly too long and not compelling enough for its own sake. The attempts at a narrative line are too far apart to connect to each other, and the playful sections are too far out of character (though in line with the experimental premise), to be effective.

Gache's attempts to portray a "new spatiality and a new temporality without linear ordering or precise causes" become muddled in a text with no real narrative hooks. It feels more as a personal project to see "what comes out," than a story that takes into account an intended audience and tries to bridge the gap between storyteller and reader. Knowing the intent of the author as described in the introduction is almost a necessity to understand or appreciate what is taking place, and it could be argued that there is no need to read beyond the introduction and the first few entries to get the gist of it.

Hernán Casciari's *Más respeto que soy tu madre* and Belén Gache's *Diario del niño burbuja* encapsulate two approaches to diary-based blognovels; although they share a similar execution, they depart from different cores and wind up with different outcomes. Both of them could be seen as plotless novels told through narrators who have no need to explain everything. *Más respeto que soy tu madre* uses a train-of-thought structure for a storytelling that wanders all over the place, with every item mentioned connected to the bigger world the characters exist in. From the collection of fragmented segments, the reader is capable of creating a coherent reality for these characters. Although *Diario del niño burbuja* also shows fragments of the whole, the bigger picture is too vast and chaotic to be definable, and probably more importantly, one that anyone familiar with cyberspace is already all too aware of.

Hernán Casciari's novel has less of a desire to be groundbreaking. It focuses more on delivery and the product itself. He wishes to tell a story through an unconventional medium and style, and tries to keep the reader interested and comfortable by relying on lighter humor and familiar plotlines and characters. Belén Gache is less approachable. However, in each of her pieces she tries to do something different within the broad medium of electronic literature. Seen this way, *Diario del niño burbuja* serves more as one piece in her collage-like library of what is possible and the implications of the diversity of the Web, than as a stand-alone piece of work to be enjoyed.

Just like the amateur authors mentioned previously, Hernán Casciari and Belén Gache are playing with the medium. The freedom of writing in a novel way, outside what tradition has established as the legitimate means of creation, makes of personal publication and blognovels a sandbox where anything can be tried without risk. They are not taken seriously enough for that. Though *Más respeto que soy tu madre* has been successful, and Gache has made a career out of studying and creating electronic art, they are still anomalies that at this point are not so much examples of what can be done with the medium, but rather exceptions to the rule.

III. *La Autopista de Shambala*: Reading with Your Pointer

La Autopista de Shambala, written by the Spanish author Jesús Ferrero, combines science fiction and Buddhist elements into a dark short story about the impossibilities of truth. As with the works examined so far, the reading experience is a linear one and not any different from print literature. The works discussed so far incorporate digital and Internet culture and theories into their storytelling or format. The plot of Ferrero's novel is not as

influenced by these elements, and is the first work discussed to incorporate digital technology into the narrating processes itself. Here the text is enhanced by images and sounds that appear at author-defined moments, creating something that is similar to a pop-up picture book.

The story follows Marcos, who after leaving work and driving through the rush-hour traffic reaches the highway's tollbooth. Everything so far has been the same as every other day except for a new road sign that says "Shambala." The routine of driving home by the highway is shattered when Marcos crosses the tollbooth and ends up on Shambala's highway, an entirely new place. Confused, he talks to the tollbooth employee who tells him he is, in fact, in another dimension: the highway leads to Shambala and wonders beyond good and evil, life and death. Unable to return home, and after much insistence from the strange man, Marcos decides to continue driving towards Shambala to see what is there to see in this new world.

Short in details, *La Autopista de Shambala* focuses more on the immediate situation the character is in. We are told very little of the new dimension, the man at the tollbooth, how things came to be, and what the final fate of the protagonist is. The character of Marcos remains mostly undefined until the final scenes where it is revealed he is about to get married and has a history of drug and alcohol abuse (which he has sworn to abandon, claiming he has been clean for a while now). These final revelations suggest the possibility that something is very wrong in Marcos's head and that it is possible there was no dimension-hopping at all, but the information given by the story is not enough to support or deny this theory.

The term "Shambala" comes from Buddhism and refers to a holy or pure kingdom. The proper definition of what it is varies from interpretation to interpretation and has become

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popularized and distorted in the Western imagination. Broadly speaking, it is seen as an advanced civilization that has achieved to perfection the tenets of Buddhism. In some interpretations, this kingdom is said to exist in the planet Earth, whereas in others it is more ambiguous, existing in both states, here on this planet and at the same time far away.

La Autopista de Shambala takes this place and brings it forward to modernity while refusing to describe it. Since throughout the story Marcos remains mostly near his vehicle and the tollbooth, we are not given much information outside what he can see from the highway and what the man says. Apart from the highway, there is not much technology. Most descriptions involve the mountains and the trees, which makes Marcos believes he is in Lebanon. There is the highway and highway signs that point towards other areas of Shambala. One of these points towards "Zaraputra Silo." This word looks like a variation of Sariputra, one of Buddha's disciples, furthering the link between the realm Marcos is in and the Buddhist tradition.

There are some elements in the story that can be associated with Buddhism, at the very least on a superficial side. Buddhism states that focusing on what is wrong, what we want, and how things should be causes our suffering and paralyzes us. The path to enlightenment lies in being mindful of the problems we have in order to see them how they really are, so we can move forward from there. As Marcos rages about his predicament and becomes violent against the tollbooth man, the man tells him to calm down and ignore how he got here. He continues by saying that if Marcos had a lucid and awakened mind he would accept the predicament; he would be able to see that he is indeed in a new dimension, that there is nothing more to it, and that the only viable course is to explore Shambala. Though the man admits his ignorance on the topic, he adds that the more illuminated have said that

the highway leads to eternity, a place beyond life and death. Marcos initially gets excited about the idea and moves through the highway, only to become frustrated by the straight road that suddenly becomes a complex net, reflecting that despite the simple tenets of Buddhism, the hard part of it is that it goes against our human nature.

To further complicate things, besides *La Autopista de Shambala* not going into too much detail about what Shambala is, it draws heavily from science fiction elements and terminologies. The narration describes Marcos as having the sensation of moving unto another dimension and the man at the tollbooth describes his transition as "le digo que se ha metido usted en un fractal del espacio y del tiempo, en un pliegue que sin duda no esperaba, y que está usted a media hora de la Castellana y a la vez a millones años luz de ella" (I am telling you that you have crossed a fractal of time and space, through a crack you most surely didn't foresee, and that you are half an hour away from la Castellana and at the same time millions of light years away from it). It is not uncommon for the genre of science fiction, as well as fantasy, to draw inspiration from philosophies to fuel imaginary worlds. Philosophies and mythologies from foreign cultures are prime targets that can be altered and adapted into fantastical settings based on the needs of the author. Since this story draws from Buddhist philosophies without being too clear about where it wants to go with them, trying to determine how much is relevant to the story is difficult and potentially dangerous as it can lead to misreadings.

Jesús Ferrero's digital novel, read in a web browser, is presented through standard text on the screen, divided in ten chapters. In order to read *La Autopista de Shambala* the reader has to control the mouse cursor and move it over the words as he or she reads, much in

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the same way one might follow words in a book with one's finger. The following is the opening paragraph of the story:
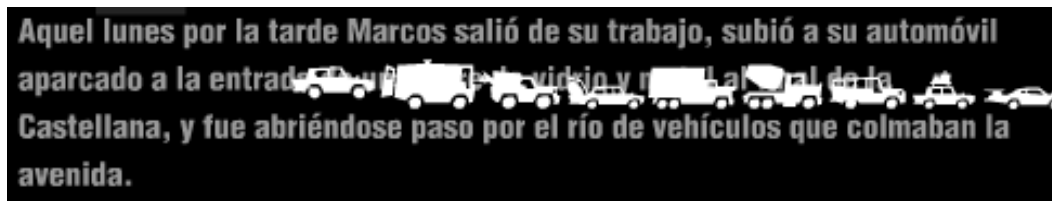

That Monday afternoon Marcos left work, got on his automobile parked at the entrance of the

of a tower of glass and metal by the end of The Castellana, and made his way through the

river of cars that packed the avenue.

(*My translation*)

When the cursor hovers by the word "automóvil" (automobile) a sound of an engine and car departing is played. Over "aparcado" (parked) a parking logo appears and a pixelated car comes out of it. When the reader gets to the phrase "río de vehículos" (river of cars) a chain of little cars comes from the left side of the screen and stops on the right, stuck in traffic as the sentence suggests. Afterward they disappear, leaving only the text. Almost every line of text in the story has some sort of animation or sound effect attached to it. The intensity of the addition varies from subtle small pictures or sounds to loud noises and images and animations that take over the entire screen.

The additions are not random and are always clearly related to what is being read. Some of these, like the examples above, give more life to the words being read; others provide a visual image for what the character is seeing; others can reflect thought patterns or ideas; and some give deeper meaning to the words that activate them. When Marcos initially realizes that he is lost, he returns to the tollbooth man, who was giving him a sideways

glance. These images that appear over the words show the image of a stick figure tollbooth character, which transforms into a grin.
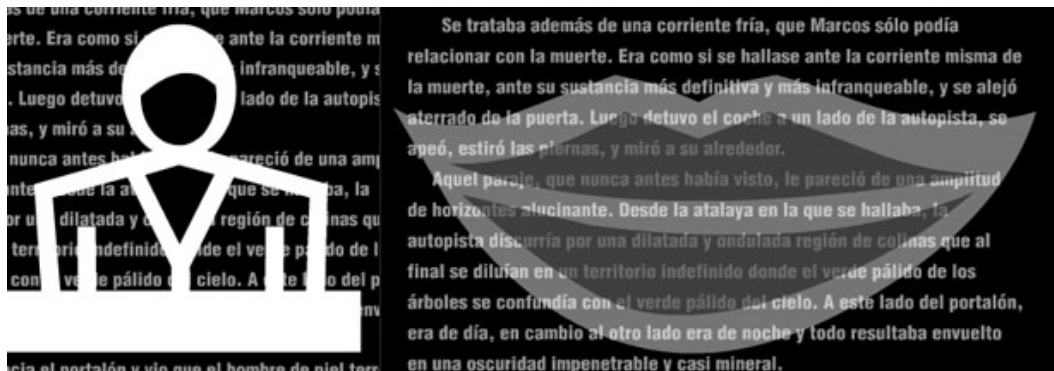
This takes place before we know much of this character, foreshadowing something sinister. The basic geometric drawing of man and the smile that follows suggest a degree of impersonality, detachment, inaccessibility, and strangeness, swiftly describing the character without the need of words. This same animation repeats itself at different scenes of the story wherever Marcos is talking with the man in order to remind the reader of this initial impression.

It is not an absolute requirement to hover over the text of *La Autopista de Shambala*. The reading experience is fully functional and the words are more than enough to convey most of the imagery and emotions the story requires. Reading is by nature a cooperative effort between writer and reader. The reader's imagination uses the words received to create a mental image of the scenery and the actions taking place. What these animations and sounds accomplish is to breathe more life into the world of *La Autopista de Shamala* by providing information that was not in the text.

Had the author chosen to use more realistic drawings or actual pictures of the characters and scenery, the flexibility of the reader's imagination would have been severely limited. The vague nature of the images, just like words that are open to interpretation, forces

the reader to complete the picture with what will affect her or him individually What defines a creepy man for one person may not be same for another. Likewise, the generic drawing of Marcos's girlfriend allows the use of whatever the reader defines as a caring, worried, and distrustful woman.

The universe of the story and the characters that inhabit it attain a stronger complexity with the visuals and the sound effects that accompany them. The crudely drawn street sign that moves from one side of the screen to the other has the cognitive effect of visualizing the long highway and a journey that is both physical and spiritual in a way that the text cannot achieve by itself. Each new sign comes from a different angle at its own erratic speed and animation, reflecting Marcos's descent into the insanity and confusion that awaits him. The text also describes this in an effective manner, but it is the combination of words and visuals that creates the stronger emotional depth.

The animated parts and sounds of the story are in many ways more alive than the words. The written text on its own depicts a dark dreadful void of a world, which Marcos is unable to escape. Though this remains true with or without the additional media, the liveliness and energy provided by the pop-ups serves to make the darkness of the highway and his situation much more dramatic by serving both as contrast and amplifier to the words being read.

The narrative impact of these additions is, however, inconsistent. Some, especially the sound effects, sometimes detract from the reading experience. The aural interruption has more to do with the silence that permeates the rest of the reading. When every other part of the text is silent, a noise is an invasion the reader must adjust to before being able to take it in. The visuals do not suffer from this intrusion. They are frequent enough to keep the reader

aware of their existence and just like the text, which is white on a black background, the images for the most part remain in black and white, maintaining visual consistency. Overall, they have a strong enough effect to keep the reader interested in knowing what will be added to the text and follow the lines with the mouse cursor.

One of the biggest impacts of the reading requirement is how it changes the perception of time and space. Using the mouse to follow the words takes longer than reading with just the eyes. This makes the reading experience not only take longer, but also feel longer, giving each word more weight per letter. In my first read-through I had a stronger sense of how the chain of events worked and how the imagery and philosophy of the story worked together. This partially broke down in consecutive readings where for the most part I ignored the digital aspects of the story by keeping the pointer away from the text. In these reading I saw the events as happening too fast, with not enough introductions and coherence. Slowing down the reading allows the brain the time it needs to process and incorporate the new information properly, allowing the story to work.

Another key visual element is the author's choice of background. The screen is black with white letters and almost every visual element is also white. The white on black contrast is basic and familiar. Darkness is the night, the unknown, the mysterious, the inescapable. This sets the scene in the reader's mind and works with the words and the visuals to create the atmosphere of the highway and Marcos's situation. The easiest way to understand how important this is to the overall effect would be to imagine how the story would read on a white background with black letters, or in any other combination of colors. As with the animations and the sounds, the background and lettering are not strictly necessary for understanding, but add to the whole in such a way that removing them would be a loss.

In the previous works discussed, the reader for the most part remains unchanged. Though reading a piece of digital literature, she or he interacts with the work in ways still similar to ways of reading printed works. What is different is the prior knowledge required. In *La Autopista de Shambala* the reader has to modify the traditional act of reading and this in turn changes how the work is received and understood. Following the story with the cursor harkens back to younger days when we are learning to read. The sudden and unexpected popping images and sounds are also reminiscent of those years. Each word is new and important and you can never know what will come of it. The inclusion of animations, crude drawings, and sounds does not detract from the written content. It eventually merges and is unobtrusive. In fact, by forcing the reader to slow down and go through each word with the promise of a reward, Jesús Ferrero's story re-empowers the written word by giving it a depth that is all too often lost by adult readers.

IV. *Don Juan, en la frontera del espíritu*: Historical Intertextuality as Hyperlinks

Don Juan, en la frontera del espíritu, a webnovel by the Spanish writer Juan José Díez, is at its most fundamental level a historical novel whose events did happen and characters did exist. The story follows the political history of Juan Valera during his stay in the United States as the Spanish ambassador during the first half of the 1880s. The events portrayed in the novel are supposedly historically accurate, with the author stating that even the lines of dialogue were directly taken from the correspondence between Juan Valera and others.

By the time the story begins, Valera had already acquired recognition both as a diplomat and an author, but had become disenchanted with life due to a bitter marriage he

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could not get out of and the financial necessity that forced him to return to his political career.

During this stay he has to juggle political issues involving Spain, the United States, and the ever more rebellious Cuba. The United States seems to favor the independence of the island, but Spain states that the help from the North American nation is in violation of international law and an affront against Spain during peacetime. One of his responsibilities includes quelling the boiling situation before things get out of hand and the two nations end up at war. At the same time he begins a relationship with Catherine Bayard, the daughter of the U.S. Secretary of State. The events portrayed in the novel account for roughly three years of his life.

As a historical novel, *Don Juan, en la frontera del espíritu* makes an enormous effort to portray the different conflicting dialogues and ideologies at the time and the subtle and not so subtle international conflicts that were brewing. Dialogue between characters breaks the veil of verisimilitude in order to pass on to the reader the information about the setting. Through these interactions the reader becomes aware of how the island is perceived by individual characters and, on an international level, the different attitudes of the era towards colonialism, slavery, revolution, and war, providing a diverse spectrum of philosophies to be judged from our position a hundred years after the fact.

However, the narrative text and the dialogue are not the only means the story relies on to reveal the history of the period. Although the novel also exists in printed format, *Don Juan, en la frontera del espíritu* is primarily a piece of electronic literature and is in this format where it fully branches and connects the reader with that world. The text is read as a

traditional prose novel and throughout the story hyperlinks are available, which upon being clicked take the reader outside the main text.

As a webnovel it takes advantage of these hyperlinks in an artistic manner. Throughout the novel, the clickable words present the reader with an image or additional background information of the world or setting. For example, the novel begins with the protagonist arriving with the sentence "A bordo del 'Cefalonia', don Juan podía atisbar en la distancia, un poco velados por la niebla, los grises barracones del puerto de Nueva York" ("On board the 'Cefalonia,' don Juan could see in the distance, slightly hidden by the fog, the grey cabins of the New York port"), with the word "niebla" being in a different color or underlined, depending on the platform. By clicking on this word a window opens with a panoramic view of the Manhattan harbor, circa 1909. This is not the exact time period, but close enough to create an impression of what the character would be seeing.

This pop-up window also provides the source of the image, which is a website of panoramic photographs from early twentieth century. It provides another link that leads to a live webcam over present-day New York. These hyperlinks elaborate and expand the world and era of the novel, allowing the core text to focus on the plot. As the hyperlinks take over the entire screen, removing the reader from the core text, they become anything from a temporary distraction to a gateway to forgetting the novel as one becomes engrossed by the historical images and facts that surround the story.

In the prologue of his webnovel, Díez suggest three ways of reading. The first is to read the narration on its own, leaving the hyperlinks for later. The second involves clicking each hyperlink, glancing at the initial display, and returning to the main narration. The third

manner, which the writer calls the proper way of reading a webnovel, is clicking each link and following it as far as his or her interest allows:

> Esta forma más caótica, sin embargo, es, creo yo, la experiencia webnovela. Vuelves al viaje original después de haberte perdido en todos los meandros. O no vuelves. Ahí está el riesgo. En todo caso, si el lector no termina la obra, al menos habrá visto mundo.
>
> This more chaotic form, however, is, I believe, the true webnovel experience. You return from your trip after being lost in every alley. Or you don't return. There's the risk. At any rate, if the reader does not finish the story, at least he or she will have seen the world.
> (*My translation*)

The average web surfer jumps from one page to another, pursuing whims and interests in a neverending journey of exploration. Authors such as Juan José Díez embrace this experience and attempt to incorporate it into the writing. With many of the hyperlinks in his story connected to outside websites, his work becomes simply a node in the World Wide Web. Authorial control is relinquished in the name of the ideal of exploring information at whim that defines the Internet.

The novel exists in various different formats with varying degrees of intended efficacy. The Flash version of it, viewable through a web browser, is the recommended way of reading the webnovel. It opens with an image of a leather-bound book, invoking the old book collection. Upon clicking the arrow, animated pages turn, revealing the text in yellowed pages. Again, the color of the pages makes reference to an older period, mirroring the time of the events themselves.

There is also a blog version of the novel. It is less visually arresting and follows the more traditional structure of blognovels where each entry is a chapter and most entries are headed by an image. The hyperlinks still persist, taking the reader to the webnovel's main site.

The other formats available accommodate most text viewing devices, including HTML, Epub, PDF, RTF, Palm Doc, Kindle, and so on. These formats lack most of the visual formatting that characterizes the Flash version, reducing the effect of the initial exposure meant to prepare the reader for the actual novel. The core text, however, remains along with the hyperlinks that feed the story. Given the limitations of these reading formats, the novel's relationship with its hyperlinks is different. The Kindle version, for example, opens each hyperlink on a separate web browser. This means running two programs and switching back and forth, destroying the more elegant pop-up window of the Flash version.

Although the author labels his creation a webnovel, it can be argued that structurally speaking, there is very little difference between it and what is being done today with enhanced ebooks. The question of where one ends and the other begins is a fair one. For this specific work, the question is even more complicated as it exists as a webnovel, a blognovel, an ebook, a webpage, a book, and so on. From the authorial intention angle, however, a webnovel and an enhanced ebook can be different beasts.

Juan José Díez's intention was to make a novel that was connected to the Internet and to the bigger world around it. The links, with their images, letters, songs, and articles, are not there solely to complement the reading experience and provide background information, they are meant to be integral elements of the entire reading experience. It in this sense that it is truly a "webnovel" and not an enhanced ebook.

This is not to say that enhanced ebooks are not capable of this. Some enhancements can be additional features similar to what we are accustomed to find on DVDs: fluff-material that, although interesting, enlightening, and fun, does not directly have an effect on the story itself. Other ebooks, however, can use these enhanced capabilities to change how the story is read. The problem with the term "enhanced ebook" is that it is an umbrella term: it includes all electronic books that come with features that do not normally come with ebooks, regardless of how the ebooks use these enhancements. A term such as webnovel is much more explicit in terms of how the digital aspects of the story affect the experience.

In *Semiotics: The Basics*, Daniel Chandler discusses the concept of intertextuality, stating that "one of the weaknesses of structuralist textual analysis is the tendency to treat individual texts as discrete, closed-off entities and to focus only on internal structures" (197). He also discusses Julia Kristeva's view of "texts in terms of two axes: a *horizontal axis* connecting the author and reader of a text, and a *vertical axis*, which connects the text to other texts" (197). Kristeva advocates for an approach that does not treat the work as an entity in the void but rather tries to understand how it was structured from everything that came before it. We are not limited to seeing a "text" only among other pieces of writing, but also within the context of the novel, the genre, the culture that shapes the novel, and the technology that is available.

As a historical webnovel that portrays the life of a historical figure, *Don Juan, en la frontera del espíritu* exists within multiple horizontal and vertical axes, each of them coming together and shaping the novel and the expectations of the reader. The genre and style of the historical novel determines how the novel is written and read. The very hyperlinks that make the novel into a webnovel serve as the paths between various dimensions. As they connect

the work to the Internet, these hyperlinks also build intertextuality between websites and their content. At the same time they form, or bring to the forefront, the intertextual bonds between the events, people, music, and locations that the novel mentions.

The simplest dimension is the one of genre. As a historical novel that narrates the life of a person, the webnovel is bound by a series of expectations. The vertical axis that connects the novel with others of the genre sets a series of ground rules, such as an acceptable degree of realism (no one can fly or breathe fire) and appropriate language and mannerisms. It is also expected that a historical novel will be well researched and able to show this. The history must be evident.

The horizontal axis, however, is more complicated. The reader should have the impression that the author knows his history and is providing an adequate amount of information in order to keep its relationship with its genre while same time be approachable to readers. If the novel cannot hold the appearance of proper historical fiction the reader will reject it as such. Yet the same thing can happen if it does too good of a job at simulating the time period. The review on Regina Irae (http://reginairae.blogcindario.com) mentions that:

He leido muchas novelas ambientadas en el siglo XIX, pero escritas por un autor contemporáneo, donde se notaba claramente el estilo actual. Esta, en cambio, parece escrita en la misma época, por el estilo moroso, elegante, sin vulgaridades de tono y contenido (incluso cuando describe sexo), romántico, en el sentido más extenso de la palabra, la no necesidad de incluir un "misterio" o intriga que "enganche" al lector...

I have read plenty of novels that take place in the nineteenth century but are written by a contemporary author, where the modern style is clear. This one, on the other hand, seems to have been written in the actual time [of the setting], with its morose, elegant style, without

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vulgarities in either tone or content (even in sex scenes)—romantic, in the broadest sense of

the word—and its lack of need to have a "mystery" or intrigue that "hooks" the reader…

(*My translation*)

The reviewer later adds that this choice of prose style, so similar to the period of the story, is one of the novel's main problems. The outdated writing style risks alienating contemporary readers who are not only unfamiliar with it, but might flat-out reject it. Historical novels are expected to be antiquated, but at the same time, they are written by contemporary authors for a contemporary readership. Some sort of happy medium is expected, and this is where the novel has some problems.

Another element in the horizontal historical axis connecting the author to the reader is the plot the author chooses. There lies the question of who is the target audience. Although Spain lost the Spanish-American-Cuban war in 1898, losing its last colonies in the American continent and terminating its New World adventures, this period is often overlooked and ignored in Spain. There are reasons for this. The nation was going through internal problems and changes that had a bigger impact on its future, and this is what most remember. There is also the factor that loss, defeat, and humiliation are generally not fond memories. However, the war is part of Spain's history. And just as there is a growth in people interested in looking at the Moorish contributions to Spain's identity and culture, there is a group who is interested in looking at Spain's colonial past and wars to learn how they shaped the country. This novel helps provide that information by setting the story during that time and using a character of literary importance in Spain.

The vertical axis in this context connects the historical elements of the novel to the history it is supposed to exist in. A passing knowledge of the history of the time would

indicate that everything seems to be in place. The amount of details and name-dropping in the novel suggests a vaster historical background than the one being followed by the narration without providing too much information, unless relevant to the plot. Further proof of the novel's historical accuracy resides in the hyperlinks that not only provide a glimpse of historical information, but also a link to an outside source with even more details for those who wish to pursue things further. This last element is especially convenient as it allows readers to verify the history without having to conduct their own research.

Just as the novel is shaped by the genre of historical novel and by history itself, the means through which the novel reaches out to the outside sources of information is defined by the conventions already set in place by the design and usage of websites. Even if the way Juan José Díez uses hyperlinks to enhance his novel is innovative, every technical element in the way the novel works—from the links to the pop-ups to the automatically opening new tabs—are already familiar ground to the user. The innovation resides in how he uses all the predefined tools and sources such as old photographs, old songs, and various external websites that have little to do with the story, outside a historical relationship.

On this digital dimension, the horizontal axis that connects the author with the reader serves to connect to the reader from the common playing field of Internet culture. The author established all these links and potential paths for exploration and invites the readers to go for them, aware that if he wishes to take advantage of the Internet and use it to enhance his work, he must pay his dues and let other sites feed off his creation. This is, after all, how the World Wide Web operates, a multitude of nodes connected to one another, bringing people in and sending them out. By embracing this exploratory philosophy, and dismissing the authorial hold over the reader, the reader becomes willing to explore the novel and its functionalities.

Although it is possible to try to judge the novel as a single contained item—and I say try because it is impossible to put aside the readers' previous experiences, which will automatically form an intertextuality—this webnovel relies on the multiple dimensions of horizontal and vertical axes to such a degree that attempting to ignore them would be dismissing the entire authorial intention. As a historical novel it needs the past for its foundation, and as a webnovel it needs the outside websites and the exploratory clicking attitude that the web encourages.

As a work of literature, *Don Juan, en la frontera del espíritu* exists simultaneously in the past and the present. Many pains were taken to make the novel as historically accurate as possible, both in prose and in content. At the same time, the novel is available in formats that are very current and still in experimentation and expansion. And even in using these digital techniques it visually tries to capture the past. But this juxtaposition does not go beyond being that. All the elements that shape the novel, although belonging to their own fields, are familiar enough that putting them together is not a problem. The digital medium has no problem with looking into the past and mimicking it, as long as it does not call too much attention to doing this. And Juan José Díez's novel accomplishes this. It is effective and ambitious enough to be a good starting point and an example of how effective the combination of media can be, even media that would not be normally associated with each other.

The Contraptions That Contain the Words

As limiting as linear narrations may sound when compared to what other works are doing, there are other narrative possibilities. One notable example is *Una contemporánea*

historia de Caldesa, by Félix Remírez. In his modernization of the tragedy of Caldesa, written in the fifteenth century by Joan Roís de Corella, the reader can follow one of the four main characters at a time, each one being a click away. During the reading process there is ticking clock representing the passage of the story's time. Once the clock hits a certain time, all four plotlines are replaced with what is happening at that new moment. The reader has a limited amount of time to read the current fragment; he or she can neither go back nor move forward. Reading all four characters is possible, but this risks superficial reading. The clock in this story goes faster than real time (otherwise the story would take over six hours to read), but a passage of time that does not wait for the reader creates an urgency and pace not possible in conventional reading mechanisms and more common in film, television, and games.

In this chapter I have focused on narratives that remain linear and unchanging, paying attention to the elements that surround the story to shed some light on how the narrative process works. By keeping the text as a constant variable it was easier to highlight and understand the effects of the digital. Despite their linear nature, which provides a reading experience similar to traditional print, the works discussed here and in the following chapters are meant to be read on digital devices. This transition from paper to screen presents its own issues with how the readers interact with the work.

The easiest and most immediate aspect that strikes a reader is the use of visual imagery. All of the works discussed so far incorporate images, and sometimes animations, to different degrees. Their abundance, ease of integration, and vital importance in digital stories can be interpreted as a warning sign that literature is moving towards something that might

no longer be literature. Although where that line is—or whether there is one—is reason for debate, the concern is there. In *Iconology*, W. J .T Mitchell says:

> Why do we have this compulsion to conceive of the relation between words and images in political terms, as a struggle for territory, a contest of rival ideologies? […] We imagine the gulf between words and images to be as wide as the one between words and things, between (in the largest sense) culture and nature. (43)

Mitchell further argues that painting and poetry always seem to be on opposing sides of an argument, each claiming a mastery that the other cannot attain: "Poetry is an art of time, motion, and action; painting an art of space, stasis, and arrested action" (48). At the same time, they both feud over the same territory of reference, representation, denotation, and meaning (47). This line of argument can be cautiously expanded to include prose-based works versus images and simple animations. By finding the common goals between these two media, literature can reach out to visual images for assistance. The problem is that each medium has its own requirements and conventions to be 'read' and the reader has to make this shift on an individual basis, which can cause a breakdown in the storytelling.

Both *La Autopista de Shambala* and *Don Juan en la frontera del espíritu* are heavily reliant on visual elements. In the first, the reader has to alternate between words and images in order to read the work. Though the switch in code interpreting is required, words operate under different rules than images do; the reader never leaves the story world. The distractions that force the reader to stop reading the words do not disrupt the reading of the story. Once the reader adjusts to the format, the transitions are seamless and the experience is a cohesive whole, with the possible exception of the sound effects. *Don Juan en la frontera del espíritu*

is not as fluid, but it never intends to be. The reader is supposed to detach from the story world to explore other possibilities. In both of these cases there is no real struggle between the word and the image. Their collaboration and mutual disruption are intentional.

Each digital work comes within its own container, or paratext, that the reader must deal with in order to read, and the differences among them are stark when compared to those among books. If the system is too complex or daunting, it can be seen as a barrier that stops the reader. Having to constantly monitor what is happening on the computer screen and what needs to be clicked is more work than the simplicity of turning a page. Furthermore, this work has nothing to do with the story and can in fact momentarily pull readers away from it.

And yet this all eventually becomes invisible. The brain, being the amazing adapting machine that it is, eventually learns to work with these elements, discordant as they may be, and just sees the letters and the content. As Janet Murray says in *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberdrama*: "Eventually all successful storytelling techniques become 'transparent': we lose consciousness of the medium and see neither print nor film but only the power of the story itself" (26). With enough exposure and familiarity, the delivery mechanism vanishes and all that is left is the story being told.

However, this does not mean that the medium of the story or the paratexts that surround it are meaningless. The psychological effect called "priming" refers to how one stimulus shapes the emotional reaction the person has to another stimulus. In the article "Who's Minding the Mind?" in *The New York Times*, Benedict Carey discusses some experiments around this effect. In one experiment done in 2005, subjects performed a dummy activity and were given a biscuit to eat at the end. One group was primed with the scent of a citrus detergent in the air, while the control group was not. After completing the

activity, the first group was more likely to clean up the crumbs than the control group. The scent had primed them for cleanliness and they behaved accordingly. This effect takes place everywhere around us, consciously and unconsciously.

Brains are associative machines. For better and for worse, the expectations, initial perceptions, value judgment, and the attitude of the reader towards the text are shaped by the design of the work before the reader processes the very first line of the story. In a work such as *La Autopista de Shambala*, the slower reading caused by maneuvering the pointer has an impact on the reading, even if the reader is not aware of the slowdown. Even if the reader will ideally forget how the story is being told, authors must be constantly aware of how their chosen medium works and how it affects their audience. This has always been the case with forms of art, but digital authors not only have to pay attention to how their words are working, but also the platform built for them; the platform is as much a part of the story as the words themselves.

The following chapter incorporates what we have seen so far and moves narrating to a place where the order of the reading is no longer fixed and it is up to the reader to decode and understand meaning from a text that changes from reading to reading. As will be seen, this breaks many of the conventions and expectations of writers and readers. It forces both sides to reconsider the process of telling a story and how a coherent story can be told when the author relinquishes control over what the reader will be reading.

Chapter II: Hypertexts

Down Every Path in the Garden

In the previous chapter I discussed how computers and electronic devices have changed the relationships people have with literature—how it is created, disseminated, and received. In the works presented there, although the mentality and the paratext had changed to venture into digital culture, the core text remained the same. Such stories are still reliant on words to reach the audience. This chapter will discuss how the delivery mechanism is no longer limited to containing the words of the story, but also has an effect on them, allowing many different physical readings. It is said that every text has an infinite number of readings based on who is reading it and what experiences and expectations they bring to the work. With the works discussed in this chapter, an extra dimension of infinite texts is added as the text changes and varies as the reader interacts with it. Within the text there are different texts to be encountered, depending on the actions chosen.

In some of these works, such as *Como el cielo los ojos* by Edith Checa, the core story remains the same, and it is the order of events that the reader encounters that varies. This requires the reader to put together everything that happens in a coherent manner in order to get the whole picture. In others, like *Condiciones Extremas* by Juan B. Gutiérrez, the story itself can branch and alter, providing various outcomes or interpretations. The stories in this category differentiate themselves from the ones previously seen by requiring a different mindset from the writers and the readers. The delivery of the story is no longer railroaded, and both the reader and the writer must be aware of this as they encounter the work. In some of the works, both the reader and the writer exist within a rhizome, a space where they can go

in any direction without ever leaving it. In others, the reader experiences one track, fully aware that it is only one of many.

Two literary works that can be seen as prototypes, or aspirations, of these kinds of writings are *Rayuela*, by Julio Cortázar, and *El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan*, by Jorge Luis Borges. Both of these are frequently referenced in explaining electronic literature and what it can provide to the field of literature.

In the novel *Rayuela*, Julio Cortázar envisioned a text that could be approached in multiple ways. In the introduction he suggests that the reader tackle it in the order the chapters appear and in an alternate ordering, each reading being unique. He also encourages the reader to go at it however she or he sees fit. For a book, which is by structure a linear construct, jumping back and forth from page to page can be counterintuitive, against every other experience a book reader might have had. Trying to read it this way is more of a novelty attempt that our reading customs cannot take seriously. However, when each chapter is connected through hyperlinks, in digital literature the strangeness is reduced and the approach easier to digest.

The plot of *El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan* follows a more traditional linear path. The protagonist is going through a series of difficult decisions toward his end goal and through his journey he thinks about ideas and theories that he has heard regarding outcomes and possibilities. Every action that can be taken is taken and the course of history branches out indefinitely into an unlimited number of realities. The protagonist could follow through on his plan to kill a man, but at the same time could stop, or he could get killed in the process, or his actions could be for naught. All of these will happen and the protagonist wonders about all the other "hims" with different lives, some of whom might even wind up

dead. Although the story does not go into all those potential branches, it plants in the reader the seed of possibilities, and the notion that each cause can have an effect in the story. Just like the protagonist, the reader is also left wondering about the potential outcomes of the story, and given enough inclination and imagination, can potentially develop them himself.

Cortázar's and Borges' work introduce into the familiar linearity of written works the idea of physical disorganization and texts unique to the reader. The physical constraints of the book—page numbers, ordering, size limitations, and the habit of going from first page to the last—put some limits on what can be achieved with it. When transported to a computer, however, these problems and unintuitiveness solve themselves. Websites and software users are already used to jumping all over the place toward what they need and having the content they see change according to their needs and input.

The stories within this chapter can be seen as variations of hypertext narratives. Hypertext narratives were among the first to be popularized when people began writing stories using the technology available. By relying on hyperlinks, people began to dream of stories that do not necessarily go in a linear fashion. Since a page can contain potentially an infinite amount of hyperlinks, and none of these can be treated as more relevant than others, the hierarchy of page ordering can be put to the side, allowing a new form of connections to rise, which would create new ways to tell stories. Stories with no beginning and no end, a delicious uncertainty about having read everything there is to read, different texts for different readers, the self-altering story, and a sense of open exploration replacing the paved journey were all ideals that narratives connected in a weblike fashion promised.

These ambitious dreams of liberation did not come to pass with the expected force, and it is easier to find more theoretical discussions about the potentiality and limitations of

the genre than actual stories. Writing stories like these requires a very different mindset from the beginning, one that most people are unfamiliar with. Almost every form of storytelling out there, whether it is printed books, cinema, theater, and so on, is linear. A certain time of experimentation and familiarization with the possibilities will be needed before people are comfortable to write and read hypertext stories. It also does not help that the requirements of what constitutes an ideal hypertext story are so many and specific that they end up oppressing the creative process instead of liberating it.

The four stories covered in this chapter do not follow all the proclaimed standards and requirements of hypertextual narratives. Instead they pull from the traditional modes of storytelling in various ways, either in how they are shaped or in ease of reading. They provide some examples of how computers can be used to change the form of story itself. What block of text the reader sees depends on his or her decisions or a computer algorithm designed by the author. Creating works of electronic literature like these requires a shift in how the author thinks of the story.

"Chekhov's Gun" is the popular name of a storytelling technique related to foreshadowing. It highlights two characteristics that an element must have in order to deserve being in the story. If an element is mentioned in the beginning, say a gun hanging over the fireplace, later in the story it must be used, it must be fired. If the gun serves no purpose to the story, it should not be there in the first place. Of course, an apparent "Chekhov's Gun" could be a red herring and mislead the audience, but a properly used herring is still a gun, even if it never goes off.

Since B may not always follow A, in stories where ordering and outcomes of decisions can affect what the reader encounters, the techniques for handling elements like

these varies. A high sense of awareness of all the potential iterations that the story can have is key to keeping it legible. Readers might come across the gun being shot before they even knew it was there, or they might see the gun and never see anything done with it.

The works examined here take a different approach to how the text is organized and how the exploratory options are presented to the reader. The following discussion analyzes how these stories were constructed and how the elements interact with each other in order to shed some light on how the storytelling experience can change through different readings. As with everything, each has its own strengths and weaknesses and different degrees of success. These examples should not be seen as canonical models of the genre, but more as solid attempts from which to learn how the genre works and what can be done with it.

I. *Como el cielo los ojos*: Fragmented Texts, Memories, Illusions, and Self

Como el cielo los ojos, published in 1998 by Spanish writer, journalist, and poet Edith Checa, incorporates some of the early possibilities of hyperlinked stories used as narrative device. The story follows the three characters Javier, Iñaki, and Paco through the events following the death of a fourth, Isabel. Each character is in a different stage of a love relationship with Isabel. Javier is still in the infatuation before an actual relationship happens; Iñaki feels bitterness over the recent separation; and Paco has been divorced long enough that apparently time has healed all wounds and he can focus on the good things that happened, like their daughter.

Each of these characters is portrayed through a first-person narration, which gives insight into their relationship with Isabel and how they view the other characters. Javier's narration opens the story and introduces the reader to Isabel and her death. Of all the

characters, he is the one that knew her least, having met her only three times. His initial impressions of her were not favorable; she was too strong and too overweight for his taste. At his age he needed someone more tranquil to calm him down, not this strong opinionated woman. He did, however, find her attractive and by the time she died he was in love with her. Her energy, passion, love of life, and poetic way of seeing the world won him over. Through his eyes we get to see how men reacted initially to Isabel and how they were drawn to her. Later in the story he gets access to her letters, poems, and stories, which serve to endear her to him even more.

Iñaki is Isabel's most recent lover. Apart from the immediate family, he is thought to be the person most affected by the death. The secondary characters worry about him and ask how he is coping. However, the relationship ended on a sour note and he holds nothing but contempt towards Isabel; he attends the funeral because it is expected of him and is dragged there by friends who mean well. The friction between Isabel and Iñaki revolved around the different expectations they had. In the eyes of everyone, including Isabel, their relationship was a serious one that was headed towards formal commitment, but Iñaki always denied this. For him it was more friendship with privileges than anything else. Though he had told her this, Isabel alternated between accepting it and expecting more from him. Her constant harassment, devotion, love declarations, and demands made him turn sour and impatient. Throughout the story he worried to the point of petrified paranoia about how much more damage she could do to him even in death.

Paco is Isabel's ex-husband. His emotional reaction to the death of the character reflects that of a man who loved her intensely a long time ago. The daughter they had is the only thing that kept them connected after the breakup. The other two narrators perceive him

as a hideous man who is only pretending to care about the death and is only there to fulfill his responsibilities as the ex-husband and father, and wonder what Isabel saw in such a person. His story shows that his fondness is caused by a selective memory that ignored all the bad times in favor of the good ones. The few bad moments he does remember are seen as having been his fault. While Iñaki both gives and receives in the field of emotional abuse, Paco recalls himself as the main aggressor.

Through her letters, poetry, and short stories, Isabel becomes the fourth voice in the story. Her writings are revealed during the other characters' chapters as they read them. Her short stories, even with names changed to protect the innocent, are blatant retellings of her own past, and her poetry and letters reflect how she feels about life and people. She provides the other perspective to the stories the male narrators tell themselves.

Where Paco is still fond of his ex-wife and sees the marriage as not working due to different personalities, Isabel's short stories portray a marriage full of strife where the impossibilities of connecting to an ever-distant and never-available husband caused never ending arguments. Iñaki remembers being the victim of Isabel's constant attacks and public humiliations; Isabel's words bring up a scenario where after an intense relationship she loved him but he only wanted to be friends. Nonetheless, he never gave her the emotional space she needed to become that. This left her struggling with trying to be friends with someone she loved who was pushing and pulling her affections.

Javier's case is unique in that there is no relationship with Isabel, only infatuation and what-if fantasies. His access to her writings makes him even more devoted because in one of her letters she professes absolute love for him, even though they had only met. Of all the male characters, Javier is probably the luckiest. All three were drawn by Isabel's intense

energy; however, it was this very element that eventually embittered Iñaki and Paco. Javier will forever stay at the happy infatuation stage of the relationship.

Despite all the first-person narrations, it becomes impossible to obtain enough information to form a complete picture of what has transpired and who Isabel is. Instead of helping shed some light on the subject, all of the different points of view obfuscate the character of Isabel with conflicting interpretations. It is never clear how the relationship problems started, nor who is responsible. Was it Isabel's personality that brought out the worst in these men? Were the men lacking? It was most likely a combination of these factors, but in whose favor are the scales tilted? In this case the "common wisdom" of hearing multiple perspectives of a story is detrimental to clarification.

Como el cielo los ojos is structured to allow readers to follow any character in any instance by providing links to all chapters in a grid arrangement. It is up to the reader to decide whom to focus on and in what order to explore the plot. Every chapter has the following diagram linking to every chapter in the story.

Each number is an event in the story and each eye is a link to that event through the point of view of the character, for a total of thirty-six chapters. The numbers provide an idea of where chronologically each scene is in the story's timeline. The three 1s are the narrator's reaction

to Isabel's death, the 2s describe how they feel during the funeral, the 3s how they reacted to her final letter, and so on.

The story opens in Javier-1, which serves to introduce one of the narrators and the character of Isabel, who connects all the others. After this, the reader has the liberty of clicking any eye; tackling each character at the same time, scene-by-scene, side-by-side; reading the story from back to front; proceeding in any other order that seems interesting; and rereading previously read scenes. Each mode of reading provides a unique experience as different parts of the story are revealed in a different order, with more random approaches running the risk of becoming more difficult to follow. The name and number system provides an anchoring structure for the reader to know who is talking and where the scene is on the timeline.

It should be noted that prior to the usage of computers and links there was nothing stopping the reader from reading any book in a random order. Early novels had a detailed summary for each chapter that could lead the less committed reader to skip to the chapter that intrigued him or her the most, and it is not unheard of for people to skip to the ending to see who the killer is or if the ending is satisfactory enough to merit reading the entire thing. And as noted, Julio Cortázar encouraged this in *Rayuela*. However, books have a physical linear tradition and design that both the reader and the author are expected to conform to. It is currently unintuitive to try to read a story in a printed book any other way. Without the physical linearity of the book, hyperlinks and visual aids are ideal for these kinds of stories. In digital literature authorial intention and proper planning, along with a format that encourages readers to choose one of multiple paths, are useful to create such a story.

Narratives that do not follow chronological order or employ multiple perspectives are not new. These literary devices have been used to great effect. But writers deliberately order the events and control the flow of information and points of view to cause the biggest impact on the reader. In *Como el cielo los ojos*, however, the reader is the one who chooses in what order to view the events, suggesting that any possible combination of links is just as viable as the next.

One of the challenges of writing a story where the reader decides in what order to read things is providing the reader multiple alluring choices, all of which are capable of delivering a compelling and coherent narrative. There are two intuitive ways to approach *Como el cielo los ojos*, both of them following traditional linear storytelling. The first is following each character's story through, then returning to the beginning to read the others. The second is to follow the events in chronological order, through everyone's perspectives. Jumping randomly through the events is possible, but as the story is presented, there are no hooks to encourage this. The story always opens with the first section and pushes the story forward in a linear manner. This leaves the two linear readings as the most likely paths. However, the two intuitive approaches are often at odds with each other as they struggle for the reader's attention.

For example, early on it is announced that Isabel has written a letter to be read during her funeral. That she had written a letter for her death takes a few characters aback, since she was too young to be planning for such things. Others are less shaken, as she has always been fond of writing letters and had a dramatic flair that would make her likely to ponder what she wanted to say during such an event. All characters had an emotional reaction to the potential

content of the letter. Some were curious about what her last words would be, while others were nervous that she would mention them and publicly humiliate them.

The reader here has two options: follow one character's storyline in order to find out what the letter said and how it affected this character, or move on to the next character's response towards the revelation of the letter. By this time, the personalities of all three characters have been established well enough to make both going forward or sideways in the story equally interesting options.

Another hook used in the text to divide the reader's interest is the conflict between appearances and reality. The three narrators are not acquainted with each other but have strong opinions about each other. All narrators are very personal and unique in their voices, making a point that what they are saying is their version of things. The contrast between how people see others versus how they see themselves serves to pull the reader away from one narrator and into another character's voice in search of a clearer idea of what is true and what is personal interpretation.

Unfortunately, as the story progresses, it becomes increasingly difficult to confront the reader with decisions like these. Each character's plotline become either so strong that the interest in the others wanes, or the interconnections between them weaken. The pull of appearances versus inner characteristics wanes as each character splits his own story and they interact less and less with each other.

The authorial struggle between a traditional format and the desire to attempt something different is evident throughout the text. It is evident that the author had a strong vision of how each character speaks and how they perceive their situation. The ambition to portray these characters fairly gets in the way of the open structure. Scenes in which the

author's approach required longer text space were divided into multiple flowing chapters, threatening to disjoint the intended free chapter-selection theme, and the inclusion of the voice of Isabel as a narrator within narrators ended up dominating some characters' sections, reducing them to shells that merely read her words.

In both the printed book and this type of story, readers are aware that they are dealing with a completed work, with everything that takes place already decided and included in the work. However, in a hyperlinked story such as this one, there is a change in the affective relationship the reader has with the story and the characters, and this change alters the reading experience.

The linear nature of traditional storytelling railroads the reader's experience forward. Every succeeding page is in the future, it has not taken place yet, and every page before is past. For the reader, this impression holds true even in stories narrated entirely in past tense. The reader's interest is driven to find what happens next, and walk with the characters forward. In a story like *Como el cielo los ojos*, with every chapter placed in front of us, it becomes unavoidable to perceive all the events as if they already happened; the reader just does not know them.

Even if approached in chronological order, with every link clicked from left to right, this impression can still persist in the reader's mind. He or she is driven by an impulse to know how all of this came to be; there is more of an investigative, or puzzle element to the reading. Time is no longer a straight line, but it is in pieces in a mystery bag the reader has to pull out. As such, any such writer looking to have the work form an effective connection with the reader should pay attention to make sure that any small combination chapters will work together strongly enough to capture the audience and motivate them to continue through the

rest of the work. It cannot rely on solid characterization at the beginning to make up for the less interesting middle sections. If the reader begins at the middle, she or he may decide not to bother with the rest of it.

Used correctly, such *ad hoc* reading could be one of the strengths of stories like this. To use a fictional example, let us say that the reader lands at a scene where the protagonist is in a room with a killer. Depending on what path the reader has taken to get there, he or she may or may not know the killer's identity, whether the protagonist is aware of the killer's identity, or whether the protagonist is ready for the encounter. There is also the chance that the reader already knows who won, but has not seen how. Each of these possibilities offers different kinds of tension for the same scene.

However, in *Como el cielo los ojos*, some sections seem disjointed, without a reference point, and difficult to understand. The chapters numbered 1 to 3 extensively shape the characters' voices, which helps to some degree, but the dissonance is still there. This is amplified by the story's presentation. We are given three characters, with three distinct points of view, and the voice of Isabel. Each fragment is numbered chronologically and with an eye icon. All of this suggests that the reader has the power to understand what has transpired. But once everything is read, the reader is still left unclear over what happened and who Isabel is.

The difficulties with the presentation and the cohesion of the fragments could be seen as a flaw in the writing, a writer trying to create a hyperlinked story that is still relying on linear narrative techniques. However, this discordance with the reading also goes with the overarching theme of the story. The question *Como el cielo los ojos* seems to be asking is "is it really possible to know one person?" Her death motivates all three narrators to think about her and learn more about her, making the story an exploration of Isabel. Javier goes on a

quest to learn as much as he can of, filling the gaps with his imagination, while Iñaki and Paco go down memory lane and assemble old mementos to reconstruct her.

The story seems to give the reader more than enough tools and points of view to do the same. Yet although these depictions of Isabel do not necessarily conflict or refute each other, they do not play well together. They are all fragments, a puzzle missing too many pieces to know what the final image is. We are left with a character that is impossible to know, who is just as inaccessible to the reader as she was to the other characters that knew her. Not even Isabel herself gives the impression of understanding herself. The only thing these characters can do is simplify Isabel into an easily digestible depiction that works for their needs. To Javier, she is a mysterious muse; Iñaki sees her as a venomous person; Paco feels compassion over her frailties; and Isabel sees herself as a tragic figure of literary proportions. Likewise, the reader has to either accept that the character cannot be known or reduce her to something that satisfies him or her.

When seen this way, the narrative structure works. The failure to properly describe a character matches the impossibility of getting to know someone else. However, I am not ready to accept that in this sense *Como el cielo los ojos* is as successful as I may be portraying it. There are simply too many incongruities and often the fragments have too many difficulties relating to each other. Although not always effective, Checa's approach of giving the reader options of what to read, and providing enough enticement to make more than one option attractive, shows how the reader can be put into a different kind of emotional stress with the text. Where it works, there are enough hooks and baits throughout to exemplify the potential of the format. There is no right or wrong option, yet every decision made implies a loss. It is up to the readers' sensitivities and curiosity to guide them through.

Checa's example also exposes the difficulty of writing stories in this manner. The writer not only has the responsibility of making all possible branches attractive enough, but also of ensuring that all possible chains of events flow in a coherent manner. The reader will be receiving the story in a linear manner, one chapter following another, regardless of the order he or she chooses to click through the story. The writer can no longer write scenes thinking about how the previous ones set them up and how they set up the ones to come, but how each scene interacts with each other. This rhizomatic approach to storytelling requires a completely different mentality for its creation.

II. *Sinferidad*: Branching toward Others' Perceptions

Compared to the previous works seen, the short story *Sinferidad,* written by Spanish author Benjamín Escalonilla Godayol in 2003, more closely resembles what seems to be the ideal hypertext story. The narration branches and reconnects, goes forward and returns, all depending on the reader's actions. In contrast to works like *Como el cielo los ojos*, there is no direct option or requirement to go through all the links to complete a reading. Reaching the end does not expose all of the text it contains; thus these works require careful rereadings, going down different paths each time. Although the core plot does not change, what the reader is exposed to varies depending on the links chosen.

The plot in *Sinferidad* is straightforward and uncomplicated. Two men drive a motorcycle through Madrid at frightening speed. They are young, rebellious, and loud. The protagonist is blasting music through his helmet while the passenger holds on for dear life swearing to never get on a machine like this one again. Not much is known about these characters, except for their vast knowledge of music, pop culture, comic books and Japanese

animation, which depicts them as intense media consumers. They are typical young people of the era.

Upon arriving, the protagonist struggles with the gate and receives a disapproving look from the guard. When they make their way to the eighth floor, the neighbor sees them coming and closes the door. The characters do not care about these people; they have better things to do. In the room they begin playing loud music. After defying authority, intimidating old people, and living the young life, everything comes to a sudden halt, there is nothing interesting left to do. The protagonist tells his friend that he is a lie. They did not arrive by bike but by Metro and everything he said about himself was untrue. The protagonist ends by admitting that his friend is just a creation, simply someone he has been writing about for five pages, who has only been alive for ten minutes or so:

> Y mirando al Retiro desde este cuarto, uno más entre los miles de cuartos, le veo cómo contesta: "es cierto, ni siquiera recuerdo mi nombre"... Eso le hago decir.
> Y entonces una luz blanca nos ciega y sabemos que vamos a morir... porque esa blancura no es otra cosa que la página siguiente que está vacía, indicando claramente, (y lo sabemos temerosos), que esto se acaba <u>aquí.</u>

> And looking at the Retiro from this room, one of a thousand rooms, I see him reply: "that is true, I don't even remember my name"… I make him say this.
> And then a white light blinds us and we know we are going to die… because that whiteness is nothing but the next page, empty, letting us know, (and we already know this), that this ends <u>here</u>.
> (*My translation*)

The word *aquí* is the sole link in the section, and it leads to a blank page, marking the end of the story and the character's existence. There is not even a "the end" to end it properly.

Sinferidad is navigated through hyperlinks, with two or three phrases within the text of each section highlighted as such. Some links reveal the following scene, while others provide another point of view of the scene just read. What each link will provide is not explicitly said in the text itself. There are two main narrators, the protagonist and the friend, whose text appears on the right or the left side of the screen respectively, and a third minor voice in the form of the neighbor.

To provide an example, the story opens as both characters are traveling in the motorcycle. A reference is made to the passenger with "Suelto puño y me atenazo al manillar de la moto para no quedarme atrás, el aire denso quiere pararme en seco, el paquete también lo nota y me aprieta para no volar…" The underlined word is the first hyperlink available. The final paragraph of the section begins with "Enfilo la Avenida Menéndez Pelayo dejando atrás la arenilla que el viento de anoche trajo del Retiro, justo a mi izquierda." The first hyperlink follows the perspective of the passenger, and the second continues with the current speaker. Regardless of the choice, however, the plot is the same.

Sinferidad is not a choose-your-own-adventure style of story but rather invites readers to 'choose your own path.' Regardless of decisions, the story generally moves forward in time, following the same plot, towards the unchangeable ending. Every link chosen comes with a link that will not be read. The result of this is that if a section is read from the perspective of the protagonist, the friend's version will be skipped over and unreachable without backtracking or rereading. This gives the story a forward momentum similar to

traditional storytelling and not the floating-in-space effect of works like *Como el cielo los ojos* and *Heartbeat*, discussed later in this chapter.

The core text of the story is not always clear from the content or the narrator of each link. This forces the reader to choose a link without knowing what will be read or from whose point of view. This creates the effect of the unknown and gives each link as much weight as the other. A story that begins with one narrator can give the impression that he is the main voice, with the other voices being of secondary importance or satellites to the primary voice.

However, it is possible to have an idea of who is going to speak since many current browsers show where each link leads to and the name of each page. And it with this that the structure of the story can be easily put together and understood. Referring back to the previous example, when hovering the cursor over "el paquete" the browser shows *http://www.erres.com/abran-esa-maldita-puerta/sinferidad/2-Amigo-A.htm*, and "Avenida Menéndez Pelayo" leads to *http://www.erres.com/abran-esa-maldita-puerta/sinferidad/1-Yo-B.htm*. The key words on these links are "Amigo," which always leads to the point of view of the friend, and "Yo," which is always the original narrator. This naming pattern is consistent throughout, so a careful reader can peek into the information the browser displays to make a selection.

Sinferidad is a rather short story. One reading can take around ten minutes. Subsequent readings to find what has been missed can take around half an hour or so. But due to how the hyperlinks work together and how the story expands and contracts, it feels longer than it actually is. Its brevity, with roughly twenty-one different scenes, makes it easy to put together how the links are connected and map the branches within the story to get a

feel of how it flows under the hood. Even in a story of this length, creating a map shows how complex the interconnections can be.
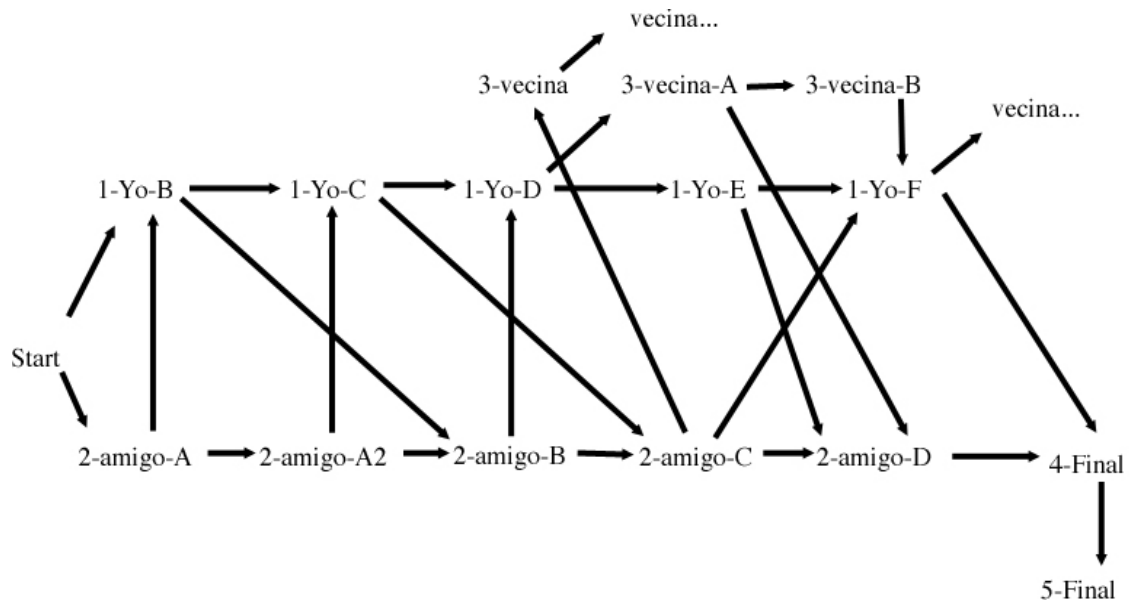
This flowchart shows how each chapter in the story is connected. The arrows represent how the direction of the hyperlinks. Some sections of the neighbor (*vecina*) are not included here for brevity's sake. The story starts at a link names *1-Yo-A.htm*. From here the reader can go to either *1-Yo-B.htm* or *2-amigo-A.htm*, and so on until *5-final.htm*, the final scene, is reached.

Benjamín Escalonilla Godayol did not branch the story outwards, but connected some sections with concurrent events, always moving the story forward. The initial sections are simple: the two main characters move forward in their story, with the option of changing perspectives towards the other one. However, the text itself does not always make it clear which link yields to which. Only by looking at the information the web browser provides can the reader make such an informed decision. And this requires a technologically savvy reader. The neighbor sections add an additional layer of complexity. She has her own storyline, but

can go to either the protagonist or the friend, breaking the back-and-forth pattern of the first half.

Despite the initially simple arrangement of links, the strength of a hyperlink story that varies based on the reader's choices work here mainly because the story is so short. The brevity of this text allows for a simple back-and-forth between characters and still preserves the strength of hypertextual storytelling. There is not enough time for the reader to catch up on what is happening until the neighbor starts appearing and the story ends. A longer, more complex story would require a more elaborate interconnection of scenes to keep the reader in the dark and in the right mindset. Otherwise, the gimmick would be caught and the intention would break. At the same time, a more complicated story could become a nightmare to piece together both by the author and the inquisitive reader.

Susana Pajares Tosca mentions that in hypertext stories it is nearly mandatory to make meta-references. She comments that "the most widely quoted hyperfictions like Eastgate's *Afternooon* or *Patchwork Girl* are fictions about writing fictions apart from being stories" (275). This trend could be a result of the initial experiments with hypertext stories that, after achieving a certain level of recognition, became an expected trend. *Sinferidad* uses this in technique as well in its ending, causing a twist that seemingly comes out of nowhere. Yet this easy exit out of the story sheds a different light over the previous sections that depict a common urban youth environment obsessed with creative media.

The friend, the created character, is a passive, cowardly follower of the protagonist. The protagonist (who in reality is afraid, suffers, and most definitely does not have a motorcycle) is depicted as a biker dude who plays all the cool music loudly, is distrusted by law officers and despised by old ladies, yet at the same time is seemingly unstoppable. The

alter ego of the writer is an example of a "Gary Stu," one of the biggest sins in writing and a common mistake among amateur authors. "Gary Stu" and the female counterpart "Mary Sue" are derogatory terms for perfect characters, predominant in fan fiction though it is not uncommon for characters like these to be present in more professional works. These characters not only represent the author as a character, but also idealize the depiction, presenting the character as everything the author wishes he or she could be. These characters tend to be without flaw; the universe seems to revolve around them and they can do no wrong. Such a character is simply not realistic, and is seen as a major warning sign of bad writing. Despite the literary and verisimilitude problems with these characters, they are important as they represent authorial desire and can shed a light on everything the author is by flipping the character over to see its opposite.

The protagonist of *Sinferidad*, in his awesome awesomeness, after scaring squares and defeating the forces of law finds himself paralyzed. Without a challenge or a human struggle, there is no recourse but to return to his humanity and normal life, where he is woefully inadequate, and admit that he is weak and flawed. And since there is no big threat to fight or people to impress, it has to end here: the universe must disappear.

Benjamín Escalonilla Godayol's career as an artist and creator has revolved around the effects of globalization, technology, and media on today's youth. The fate of the characters in *Sinferidad* is unavoidable and a reflection of the current generation steeped in popular culture and mass-media entertainment. With so much information and knowledge at their disposal, it is expected of them to feel powerful and superior to others, such as guards and older neighbors, who seem to know so little of the world and are stuck in the trivialities of life. Informational and sensorial overload may be empowering and exhilarating, but at the

same time it depowers and unarms. The rebellious know-it-all characters in *Sinferidad* are rebels without a cause. Their struggles against authority have no higher purpose since they are unaware of why they should struggle; all the information they have consumed has helped define what they like and how they act without contributing to shape who they are. So after the adventure has passed and they have to face themselves and think, they vanish.

It would be easy to see this story as an old person's rant that today's youth is uninterested in important things, but this does not seem to be the case here. If the characters do not know or care about bigger things beyond themselves, it is because they are so bombarded with interesting information and a sense of self importance that they are unable to see past them. The protagonist wants more out of life; he is just too lost to know where to start looking.

III. *Heartbeat*: Structure and Theme on Opposing Corners

The structure of the hypertext story *Heartbeat*, by Spanish multimedia artist Dora García, is more akin to how the genre of hypertext stories is commonly understood. There is no linearity or ordered events to guide the reader. Instead, each page contains a number of hyperlinks, which lead to different parts of the story with only vague hints of what each section will be about. The reading experience is quick and repetitive as the reader gets lost in the web of links in order to extract what the story has to say.

Though told mainly with text with the occasional simple image, the story does not rely exclusively on the prose and style of the written word as its delivery mechanisms. Focusing on the words alone reveals a bare-bones story that does not go anywhere or say much. To a much higher degree than in the works discussed so far, the reader's interaction

with and response to the links are key parts of the experience. It is the combination of elements, taken as a whole, that gives the story the desired impact.

Much like *Sinferidad*, *Heartbeat* explores the contemporary era and its impact on young people. The plot of *Heartbeat* revolves around a new craze young people are practicing, which involves simply paying attention to the beating of their own hearts. This drugless addiction creates a feeling that is both exhilarating and soothing and alters their perception of reality. This phenomenon has extended outside small circles of friends, becoming part of the music scene as DJs mix their songs to mimic the beating of a heart. Despite being a self-contained practice, this behavior has effects very similar to the consumption of strong drugs. By focusing intensely on hearing their hearts, heartbeaters become excessively sensitive to other aural stimuli, so much that even a whisper feels like a blow to their brains. Other side effects include schizophrenia-like behavior, a loss of interest in other aspects of life, and an obsession with their own mortality, wanting nothing more than to notice that one final heartbeat.

Y la paradoja era que una juventud que parecía hecha de ruido se hubiera convertido absolutamente a esta religión hecha de silencio.

And the paradox was that a generation that seemed to be made of noise had converted entirely to this religion built on silence.

(My translation)

At the heart of this story is the contrast between heartbeating and modern society. Modern life and urban areas are becoming increasingly polluted with sounds and erratic stimuli

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coming from all directions; these create a chaotic way of life that in its own way is also addictive. One of the pages describes how office workers in cubicles had to be given background noise to be able to function, as the isolation made the sound of gnashing teeth and of swallowing saliva maddening. People can no longer deal with silence or inaction. By focusing on the most basic of sounds—the one sound that is impossible to avoid—the heartbeaters manage to disconnect themselves from this noisy modernity. They can feel alive once again and, ironically enough, more connected to those around them.

There is no proper plot or narrative to *Heartbeat*. The narration is more descriptive, in a style akin to a medical book entry or a newspaper article that describes a situation. There are neither conventional characters nor series of events; rather, a series of vignettes discusses the symptoms and effects of heartbeating: sometimes in the general sense, other times focusing on specific people, these episodes describe the society in which this phenomenon happened and the response of the population to this practice. Given the nature of how the story is told, the reader, given the introductory paragraph, can only delve deeper into the story, learning more details about the fictional world, without ever reaching a satisfactory conclusion.

Hearbeat is read in a web browser through a series of pop-up windows interconnected with hyperlinks. Each screen or page contains a small fragment of text with between one and four words that connect to other pages of the story. Clicking on any of these links closes the current page and sends the reader to the next one, without the option of going back. These links are arranged in a spiderweb-like structure so that there is more than one way to reach a specific page. Because of this, it is not uncommon for the reader to find him or herself back at pages already read, in which case the options are to click the links not

already explored or repeat the steps already taken to branch further down the reading. This going back and forth foils readers' attempts to move forward while at the same time allowing them to go down paths not taken.

Despite the serious and methodical style of the prose, the visual presentation of this story does not aim for realism. The backgrounds of the pop-up windows are grey, blue, red, green, or yellow, without any format or heading to explain their origin. Each is nothing more than a colored screen with a few sentences in it. As seen in *Más respeto que soy tu madre*, which mimics blogs, and *Don Juan en la frontera del espíritu*, which looks like an old book, it is possible to make a story's paratext look like something recognizable in order to produce a particular narrative impact. The problem with imitation is that once the illusion is not strong enough or believable enough, the entire effect is lost; the reader is drawn outside the story world and sees the story for what it is—a made artifact. Rather than attempting to follow the logic of a different medium, the pop-up windows in *Heartbeat* are allowed to come from anywhere and everywhere, giving their words a sense of authority and omniscience.

In a sense, the reader is powerless, at the will of the story. Contrary to *Como el cielo los ojos*, this story has no map that aids the navigation and comprehension of the story. And unlike those of *Sinferidad*, the links here do not move the plot or the story time forward. There is not much continuity between hyperlinks, nor do the links prepare the reader for their content. Given this lack of guiding information, every option is as good as the next: the only wrong links are those that return the reader to territory already covered, and these are only discovered after the selection is made.

Like other hypertext stories, *Heartbeat* does not provide the reader the tools to read the entire work. The only way to be sure everything has been covered would be to go meticulously from page to page keeping track of what has been clicked and mapping how the links are interconnected. Yet this is something the average reader could not be expected to do. If a reader does reach this point, this suggests that the process has become less reading a story and more examining its mechanics, at the expense of the pleasures of immersion and storytelling.

Experiencing everything, however, is not a requirement for some hypertext stories to the same degree it is in other media. In fact, enabling the reader to feel a sense of completion without actually reading all available words is part of the genre. After a certain threshold, which varies from person to person, the reader can safely say that she or he has read enough and that what is left are just details that may enhance the experience but are not strictly necessary. Closing the browser and calling it quits is a perfectly acceptable way to finish reading.

One of the narrative difficulties in crafting hypertext stories that, like this one, trap the reader in a difficult-to-navigate labyrinth of repeating sections is the problem of where to establish the line between providing "enough" information in a seamless manner and making the reader pay attention to what he or she is doing. If the reader struggles with the links before a genuine interest is established, the reading experience becomes work rather than pleasure. However, if the reader's curiosity is sufficiently satisfied before the hyperlinks present difficulties, it can be an enjoyable experience to explore the intricacies of how the text is put together and discover what is missing.

Heartbeat establishes its premise early without presenting any big unanswered question whose solution will be revealed upon reading. The first few screens cover all the major points; what comes after are details that flesh out the universe and the situation. By presenting the major plot elements upfront, the work implicitly grants the reader permission to stop the moment she or he is satisfied, bored, or frustrated with going in circles without leaving the sensation that something important was left unread. What keeps the reader's engagement is not the catharsis of completion or the discovery of a mystery, but the desire to know more about this world and what heartbeating is about. The introductory pages are fleshed out with a richness that suggests that what it being told is just the tip of the iceberg; subsequent pages show how elaborate the story is, adding more dimensions and complexity to the whole and expanding the story world in logical places.

Early on the reader knows what this craze is, why it is so alluring, and the effects it has on people's brains. Since it began with young people who feel the need to belong to a like-minded group to define themselves, the question arises of how such a community can form around a practice that by definition eliminates all sources of external stimulus. Some sections of the story deal with this by explaining the proliferation of headphones and behavioral habits. Heartbeaters do not need to interact with each other; by seeing how they are dressed they can acknowledge each other and belong to something bigger. Something similar happens with youth music and partying. Despite the disk jockeys' use of heartbeat sounds, Heartbeaters that go to clubs dance with sound-proof headphones, oblivious to the music and paying attention instead to what matters to them. Being in the same location doing the same thing is enough to form this community without the need for words or interaction.

As the practice expands throughout the population and becomes commonplace, the reader might be expected to wonder about its impact on the workplace and on consumer culture, as well as its long-term effects and any attempts to cure it. *Heartbeat* explores all of these in ways that make sense and are interesting but remain extraneous to the core plot. Not all of these side stories are needed to understand *Heartbeat,* but they enhance the story. Reaching them all is well worth it, if the reader has the inclination to do so.

The question that needs to be addressed is how structuring *Heartbeat* as hypertext serves the story. *Heartbeat's* narrating structure reflects the impossibility of understanding another's experience. The authoritative tone of the fragments creates a narrating voice of someone who is an outsider to the heartbeating craze and is looking in, attempting to describe the situation. But this phenomenon that is taking over is not something easily understood by those who have not experienced it. Even those who have been involved cannot explain it properly. The arrangement and the decoration of the fragments in *Heartbeat* create a disorienting experience and the illusion of an impenetrable story. Understanding the story of *Heartbeat* and the Heartbeaters becomes as impossible to the reader as it is to the fictional population that is left taking care of them.

This distance between reader and subject matter, and between narrator and Heartbeaters, is felt throughout the story, both in the narrating and the narrative. The dry descriptive nature of the narration does not allow the reader to feel much empathy toward the few characters in the story. The reader is placed in a position not of seeing the events alongside the narrator, but simply of listening to the narrator's accounts of them. The lack of actual plot, in the sense of a series of events that move the story forward, is evinced both by the hypertext structure of the narration and the early revelation that *Heartbeating* is still

happening. The given elements do not fuel a drive to find out how the story ends, and indeed it does not. The only reason for a reader to continue is to obtain more information through the web of interconnected links.

A characteristic of modern digital life is the constant consumption of short bursts of information, rapidly moving on to the next; the delivery mechanism of *Heartbeat* is a reflection of this. The brevity of each page, the persistent need to click links, and the windows that pop up all over the screen serve as a simulation modern social behavior. *Heartbeat* not only mimics it, but also exaggerates it: the readings are briefer, the clicking is more accelerated, the content more fractured, and the visual stimuli more intense.

The reading experience of *Heartbeat* is precisely counter to what it describes. The reader, prodded to speed up in the pursuit of multiple paths, becomes diametrically opposed to the Heartbeaters, who remain hyper-focused on a single element to the point of ignoring everything else. Exaggerating readers' participation in the habits of contemporary digital life makes the lives on the other side more vivid and strange. There is very little need for the story to inform us what the Heartbeaters are rebelling against because the story is making us behave in such a way. And it is not solely the interaction with the story that situates the reader, but also the cognitive impact of reading. The disorientation and frustration caused by the links and the repeating sections also mirror contemporary life, establishing the reader more firmly on this side.

In order for this story to work, both sides have to be properly defined. If this plot were to function on paper or film, or in a linear fashion, time would have to be devoted to elaborate on the fast pace of modern life. Once this was established, the oppositional craze of Heartbeating could be introduced. However, the reader's placement might be different and

would be much more difficult to guarantee. As a more passive consumer in this scenario, the reader might no longer be at one extreme, instead choosing to be wherever she might see herself. Readers could position themselves toward the middle, alternate alliances as the story goes, side with the Heartbeaters, or see themselves as entirely outside this binary, believing that they are not part of it at all.

This is not to say that making the reader the opposite of a Heartbeater is impossible. However, in order to achieve the same effect, additional measures would have been necessary, measures that would be redundant in this hypertext story. By forcing the reader to take a hands-on approach, *Heartbeat* controls how the reader receives and interprets the story without having to rely on words or other traditional media to deliver this part of the story's impact.

We are living in intense times that bombard our senses every second of the day. It is only natural that a reaction to this unhealthy extreme would swing to the opposite direction with damaging intensity. Despite the Heartbeaters' sense of joy and liberation, their proposed solution to the over-stimulated era is worse than the problem. Those who practice it are more akin to the mentally disordered; a functioning society is impossible if everyone is a Heartbeater.

It is not surprising that this phenomenon began among the young and took hold of their culture. It is conventionally the role of younger generations to judge and rebel against what the old ones have accomplished in order to keep what works, redo what does not, and bring fresh energy into a society. However, in the highly stimulated era, the Heartbeaters' best direction to counter the present is to slow down to dangerous levels. With the young

being a symbol of social continuity and progress, the Heartbeaters' passivity to the point of suicide by inaction suggests a grim future.

Heartbeat is more a statement of a problem than a suggestion. By framing it as a web of connected hyperlinks that have to be tracked down and manipulated, Dora García can effectively deliver her message of a busy digital life by giving the reader the actual experience instead of simply describing it. Despite this, I question whether the paratext is effective at delivering the impact to the conscious mind. The structure of the story primes the reader without his or her awareness. If readers cannot understand that they are on the other extreme of the Heartbeater phenomenon, all they can do is react to the dangerous consequences of rejecting society and be glad that they are not like that, without realizing that they are also in a precarious position.

IV. *Condiciones Extremas*: the Self-Altering Narration

Condiciones Extremas, written by Juan B. Gutiérrez, is another story in which the chapter ordering is left open and up to the reader. Contrary to *Como el cielo los ojos*, the reader does not have free access to all chapters, but is given a limited number of options; as in *Heartbeat* and *Sinferidad*, these do not provide a way to go back. Regardless of what the reader selects, the links offer a high degree of narrative continuity, providing the reader with a more coherent story, though the narration is also somewhat unordered and varies depending on the choices made by the reader.

This story has a long history of revision and alterations. It was originally published in 1998, both as a hypertext version and a printed one. In 2000, an updated version with an improved interface and organization was published online. Gutiérrez writes that he has

always seen *Condiciones Extremas* as a digital work and has altered its shape by incorporating different techniques of linking the chapters: "es, esencialmente, una novela experimental que ha servido como conejillo de indias para ensayar técnicas de autoría e interacción de los lectores" (it is, essentially, an experimental novel that has served as a guinea pig to play with authorial and reader interaction techniques) ("Acerca de…," Literatronica.com). The version discussed here is its third and final (as of 2014) iteration, finished in 2005. Although the plot has remained the same, the technical aspect of how chapters are organized and how the user receives them is more complex than in its previous versions and in the works analyzed here so far.

The novel is classic science fiction, using many themes and tropes familiar from that genre. The world is full of pollution and humanity is forced to survive inside domes. A mutant species, called "avatars," has evolved from humans and is capable of surviving the planet's current conditions. These two factions are at odds with each other. Mutants thrive on pollution and crave more of it, while humans need to clean the planet to avert their extinction.

In a year labeled by the story as the tenth decade, Índigo Cavalera, an old wealthy man in control of Cavalera Industries, finalizes his lifelong project: with the aid of a young scientist named Miranda Macedonia, he has built a time machine. The first person to use the machine is an avatar named Rasid. Índigo instructs Rasid to travel back in time to give young Índigo all the scientific ideas he will need in order to become the rich and powerful man he is now. According to Índigo, the human race has had its chance and the world now belongs to the avatars, so he wants to make sure the avatars prosper. After Rasid is sent through time, an old Miranda appears to young Miranda to tell her what Índigo's plans are. The old woman

sends the young one into the past to stop Rasid and sway the young Índigo from the path of greed and power that shaped the present.

Both Rasid and Miranda find Índigo in the first decade, but their intentions have expanded beyond their original plans. Rasid wants to ensure that Índigo becomes powerful and that his own race is born, but he also wants to instill in the young man a sense of kindness towards the poor and victimized classes in order to ensure that the avatars in the future are living in better conditions. Miranda, on the other hand, also wants to nudge Índigo down a kinder path, but also wants to eliminate the avatars from ever coming to be.

Thanks to Rasid and Miranda's actions throughout those ten decades, Índigo goes from being an unremarkable young man to the most powerful person on the planet. As Índigo becomes older, he recruits Miranda when she is a child and educates her so she can help him create the machine. He also rescues Rasid from certain death and prepares him to travel back in time. Cause and effect are muddled and indistinguishable: old Índigo creates the time machine only because old Índigo had sent (and will send) Rasid back in time to show his younger self all the advanced science that was required.

Time paradoxes abound in this story, ending in a neatly sealed ontological quandary known as the stable time loop. Although not technically a paradox, the stable time loop is a common time-traveling plot device in which the results of time traveling eventually dictate the need for—or cause—the original time travel. The movie *Terminator* is a popular example. In the film a robot is sent back to kill Sarah Connor, the mother of the man, John Connor, who is leading the human fight against the machines. At the same time, a man named Kyle Reese is also sent back to rescue her. Kyle tells Sarah about how she is a legend, how she knew about the upcoming war, and how she trained her son for battle. They

eventually fall in love and have sex, and John Connor is born from that union. The act of the machines sending a robot to kill their nemesis causes the nemesis to be born, and Sarah becomes the legend she became because she was told how she became one. It gets even more complicated in the sequel where we find out the time traveling robot is what inspires the humans to develop more advanced computers, machines, and robots which eventually revolt and start the war. Although a stable time loop forms a coherent circular narrative, it produces a chicken-or-the-egg scenario that leaves unanswered the question of how everything originally began. And that is part of the allure of such stories.

The conventions of time-traveling stories serve the structure of *Condiciones Extremas* well. Time traveling invariably involves going back and forth, with elements throughout time interacting with each other outside chronological order. Events do not proceed through cause and effect, but are a collection of points that interact and shape each other without any linearity or hierarchy. For a story that is meant to be read in various possible orders, a plot like this is ideal.

The 2005 iteration of *Condiciones Extremas* is built on a system that the author calls an "adaptive digital narrative." One of the goals of the program is to achieve the narrative fluidity that is associated with traditional storytelling, while at the same time taking advantage of the combinatorial capacities of hypertext stories. In his description of the system, Gutiérrez mentions some of the potential problems with hypertextual literature and how he has tried to solve them:

> Uno de los principales argumentos que los oponentes del hipertexto literario han esgrimido en el pasado es la historia fragmentada que se le ofrece al lector. En este caso, el lector recibe una trama que ha sido optimizada desde el punto de vista narrativo. Es decir, el lector recibe

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un texto lineal la mayor parte del tiempo. Esto genera una pregunta: ¿son la multilinealidad y la fragmentación los objetivos de la narrativa digital, o son ellas el producto del estado del arte cuando los primeros hipertextos literarios fueron producidos? ¿Es la fragmentación un paradigma que queramos conservar? Tenemos la habilidad de producir textos que explotan la esencia del medio digital, y al mismo tiempo conservan la esencia de la narrativa en un sentido clásico: inmersión.

One of the main arguments opponents of the literary hypertext have used in the past is the fragmented story it gives the reader. In this case, the reader receives a plot that has been optimized from the narrative point of view. In other words, the reader reads a linear text most of the time. This raises the question, are multilinearity and fragmentation the objectives of digital narrative, or are they the outcome of the trends when the first literary hypertexts were made? Is fragmentation a paradigm we want to keep? We have the ability to produce texts that exploit the essence of the digital medium while at the same time preserving the essence of narrative in its classical sense: immersion. ("¿Qué es la narrativa digital adaptativa?" Literatronica.com, *my translation*)

Gutiérrez's system is built for the purpose of maintaining this "immersion" by keeping the narrative flowing coherently. It does so by controlling what the reader can do. The story opens in the same chapter for all readers, and then provides three possible links to follow. After the reader has made a choice, three more options will be provided. And so on. The difference in *Condiciones Extremas* is that these options are not author-defined. In "adaptive digital narrative," the author defines the distances and connections between each chapter. The computer algorithm uses this information to decide which three options to present, based on which provide the highest narrative continuity value. Each link is presented with a few lines

of that chapter and a percentage value. This number represents how much continuity the system estimates there is between the present chapter and the suggested one.

For example, the following are the possible options presented to the reader after reading the chapter where old Índigo tells Rasid that he will travel back in time to make the avatars the dominant species on the planet:

Vínculos Adaptativos (Mayor porcentaje indica mayor continuidad narrativa)

90% Décima Década
Índigo Cavalera paseaba en su silla por el corazón del Centro. Se detenía junto a cada operario, como si pudiera verificar que ellos hicieran bien su trabajo. Cuando Miranda entró, Índigo estaba hablando con el jefe de seguridad…

85% Primera Década
La Plaza Mayor de Santa Fe vista desde una de sus esquinas, a través de una ventana del Colegio San Bartolomé, tenía exactamente el mismo aspecto que Rasid Bagda había aprendido durante su asistencia a la cátedra…

80% Décima Década
Los del Centro llegaron uno a uno. Se acomodaron frente al ventanal blindado que protegía a los observadores contra la radiación que originaría el viaje. El jefe de ingenieros empezó la cuenta regresiva: "9, 8, 7…"

Adaptative Links (greater percentage indicates higher narrative continuity)

90% **Tenth Decade**

Índigo Cavalera walked in his chair through the heart of the Center. He stopped at each worker, as if he was verifying that they were on the job. When Miranda entered, Índigo was talking to the head of security…

85% **First Decade**

The Playa Mayor of Santa Fe, seen from one of its corners, through a window of the Colegio San Bartolomé, had the exact same appearance that Rasid Bagda had learned during his education…

80% **Tenth Decade**

The staff from the Center came one by one. They sat in front of the shielded window that protected the observers of the radiation the travel would emit. The chief of engineering began the countdown: "9, 8, 7…"

(*My translation*)

Based on the initial sentences, the reader can get a gist of what the next chapters contain. The one with the highest narrative continuity seems to be the next logical one. The second one jumps back in time to the first decade, where Rasid begins his quest to change time. The third one involves the actual time-traveling event, with radiation and a dramatic countdown. All of these can follow the events of the current chapter without much problem. For an action-oriented reader, the second and third options could be more alluring; they could go to the meat of the story. But if the reader wishes to know more about Miranda, the first option is the most viable.

After the reader has made a selection, the chapters read are removed from the pool of available options. The three closest chapters will still be provided, but which three depends on what is available. Say the reader is currently at chapter A, and the four chapters the highest narrative continuity are W, X, Y, and Z, with W being the highest, and Z the lowest. If the reader has not encountered any of these chapters previously, he or she would be given the options W, X, Y. However, if at some point before reaching A the reader had already encountered W, the options would be X, Y, and Z, with X promising the highest narrative continuity. As the reader continues, the pool of available chapters becomes smaller and smaller until there are none left and the reading is complete.

The limited number of options and the arranging system help to make sure that the reader is given a mostly coherent storyline. But the author's efforts to aid the reading process did not stop here. Since the reader will most likely end up going back and forth in time and following different characters in their various incarnations, there are cues to help place the reader spatially and temporally in the story. Each chapter is headlined by the decade it takes

place in and accompanied by an image of the characters involved or the location. For example, the scenes involving Rasid's encounters with other avatars are labeled "tenth decade" with images of Rasid, wastelands, or abandoned factories. When he is talking with young Índigo about what can be done with science and indoctrinating him into becoming a man of good, the images are generally of universities and parks. All these elements come together to make the reading organized and easy to follow.

As mentioned in the discussion about *Como el cielo los ojos*, one strength of a structure like the one provided in both of these works, allowing chapters to be read in multiple orders, is that the information received can change the reading tension. *Condiciones Extremas* makes good use of this by having multiple plotlines at the same time. Each chapter can be entered through multiple angles, each of them providing a different experience to the reader.

During my first read—and it could be argued that in a story like this there is only one—I stumbled upon the final scenes of the avatar Rasid. Stranded in the first decade, believing that he has failed and that his race will never exist, he allows himself to be taken over by primitive impulses, and from a school instructor becomes a beggar and a thief. His downward spiral worsens and he turns violent, forcing himself upon women he finds in the slums. He dies before the first of his progeny is born. Another scene I read involved young Índigo Cavalera in the first decade grieving that Miranda, the woman he loved, is trapped in the fifth decade. He decides that the only way to save her is by making sure Cavalera Industries exists, so that in fifty years the factory where he last saw her is still there.

As I continued reading I came across the scenes of Miranda and young Índigo traveling to the fifth decade. Miranda is trying to show him the conditions of a world created

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by his greed. She also has plans to stop the chemical accident that gave birth to the avatars. At the time I had no idea why they were traveling together, I had yet to stumble upon their encounter on the first decade, and it was not clear to me how they became so close to the point of falling in love with each other. However, I knew that her attempts to stop the births of the avatars and the creation of Cavalera Industries were going to fail. She was misinformed about the birth of the avatars. They were already in existence thanks to Rasid, although the people were not aware of them. Also, I knew that something had to happen to leave her stranded in that decade, while Índigo returned. What I did not know was how the events in the fifth decade unfolded and what became of Índigo's noble attempt to create the company, keep it honest, and rescue the woman he loved.

Had I taken a different path to the fifth decade scenes, I would have had more hope about the outcome of Miranda's quest. Or probably I would have been even better informed about its futility. As it was, the only possible path I still saw for a happy ending that would change the future was that Índigo stayed true to his intentions.

One problem that arose from my reading, which seems like an unavoidable result of this structure, concerns the options presented during the final stages. A helpful feature of the website is that it keeps track of the percentage of the story that has been read so far. By the time I was eighty percent done my chapter options were already spreading thin. As I was running out of unread chapters, the only selections the software could give me were the scene that naturally followed the one I was in and some loose threads from other arcs that I had missed. It was not uncommon for my first option to be in the eighty to ninety percent continuity range, with the second or third designated sixty percent or lower. More critical options went into the fifteen, five, and negative five percent values.

One chapter was about old Índigo telling Rasid that the avatar race should lead the world while old Miranda watches them talk. This section was the initial step Índigo took in his preparation to train Rasid for his mission in the past. Of the options given, the highest value was in the sixty percent range of narrative continuity, which is low compared to the values I had been obtaining previously. But I took it. In this chapter, old Índigo was talking to a young Miranda about the finalizing of the time-traveling project. The machine was almost ready to go. Whereas she saw it as the beginning of something very exciting and world-changing, he saw it as the end of an adventure that had lasted too long. Although the numerical prospects were not good, and the scene did not directly follow the one with Rasid, it was still within the same theme: the beginning of the journey that began the story. The lack of direct chapters that flowed together was not necessarily problematic. By this point I was already familiar with enough arcs to locate myself with ease.

And even in chapters that were vastly unrelated to each other, the lower percent options were not necessarily a bad thing. It was often refreshing to see I had missed a detail from an arc I thought was completed. This can be attributed to the very close and dense theme that permeates the entire story. There are very few sidetracking or filler scenes. Every chapter is important for the macro story and they are all in some way connected to the rest. Despite all the headaches that paradoxes can cause, by keeping the number of characters low and their journeys straightforward, the story was given the rigidity it needed to survive all the potential mixing and matching that the software was capable of.

The problem with having a story that is experienced as a linear narration but can be read in multiple possible orders is the lack of proper ending. *Heartbeat* ends when the reader is tired of going in circles, *Como el cielo los ojos* ends when all the sections offered have

been read, but as far as the reader can see, *Condiciones Extremas* has a final chapter. And the author's last word is not necessarily the strongest way to end the novel. Most likely it will be the last unread chapter and will not provide proper narrative closure. For a story that keeps a steady momentum and high degree of narrative coherence, such an ending feels like arriving nowhere after a pleasurable trip.

As convoluted as Gutiérrez's description of the "literatronica" system is, it seems to have worked, at least for a story like this. The narrative was for the most part fluid and there were few, if any, moments where I felt lost. The problem with a system like this one is that it requires more technological expertise than other forms of writing so far. It cannot be created with basic knowledge of web design. *Condiciones Extremas* exists as a Javascript application, which requires some knowledge of computer sciences, mathematics, and programming. To create a story like this the writer either has to become a programmer, get one, or be a programmer who wants to write, and then be able to test the system to make sure it does what it is intended to do. This is not beyond the grasp of the dedicated, but beyond what would normally be expected from a wordsmith.

Hypertext Storytelling as a Medium, Not a Message

In her paper *Condiciones Extremas: Digital Science Fiction from Colombia*, based on the second version of the story, Susana Pajares Tosca mentions several commonly accepted features of electronic literature that relies on hypertext. Beyond the apparent requirement of meta-reference, "authors such as Landow, Bolter, and Douglas list a series of features that supposedly characterize all hypertext narratives: no definitive beginning or ending, no way of

knowing if two readers have read the same text, a 'convergence' between the roles of author and reader, and other characteristics" (275).

Besides *Heartbeat*, the texts discussed in this chapter break away from many of these rules. Both *Condiciones Extremas* and *Sinferidad* aim to maintain a story's momentum and narrative coherence from one section to the next. Along with *Como el cielo los ojos*, they have a clearly demonstrated beginning and ending, even if the middle is muddled. All, however, are proper exercises in a new medium. In the prologue to *Como el cielo los ojos,* Edith Checa is quoted mentioning that after writing the novel she placed the pages containing the story on the floor to see how the elements would interact with each other and spent a year deciding how to arrange them. Juan B. Gutiérrez freely admits that he has made a digital guinea pig out of his story. And *Sinferidad*'s theme, complicated connection of links, and evidence of structural changes suggest that Benjamín Escalonilla Godayol was also playing with the concept. But instead of adhering to the rules they worked with what they had, using what worked and discarding what did not. They sacrifice theoretical integrity for the sake of narrative coherence. The point is to tell a story in a unique way, not to show off what Carlos Jáuregui describes as "technical gymnastics" ("Writing Communities" 289)—referring to the disorientation effects, the fractured narration, the cyclical readings, and the random and never-ending nature of the archetypical hypertext.

Susana Pajares Tosca mentions that "it is interesting that so many American hypertext writers talk about the liberatory effect of hypertext and then do not think it necessary to address social or political issues in their works" (283). Her argument is in defense of how *Condiciones Extremas* uses hypertext techniques and science fiction to address social issues of power and oppression. According to her, English hypertext narratives are still too

fascinated with themselves to branch out into tackling issues outside the confines of literature. Although this might be an extreme postulation, it does provide some food for thought.

It is my impression that Hispanic literature has always been more focused on social and political issues than English texts, almost to a fault. Spanish-speaking writers are seen as a combination of artist, social revolutionary, advocate, and political rebel. The idea that dictators fear poets more than armies is almost a cliché in the Hispanic world, with Spanish-speaking poets being banished and shot during harsh regimes. English authors, on the other hand, have more flexibility in pursuing a wider range of interests, whether pertaining to social and political issues, experimentation, or simply becoming a good storyteller. There is this idea that literature in Spanish is serious business, whereas writers in English can have fun with words if they choose to.

Whether or not this is an entirely accurate perception, it is not surprising that when Spanish-speaking writers attempt to work in the digital medium they bring with them the tradition of social and political awareness. Writing is about more than just the person or the art, it is about the society that the writer is in, even if it happens to be the digital culture.

The works covered in this chapter and in the previous one are in the majority stories told through technological techniques. *Más respeto que soy tu madre* is entertaining family slapstick in blog format. *Como el cielo los ojos* deals with human interactions and how passions and damaged love can ruin lives, leaving out of the picture anything technological. *Condiciones Extremas* transforms present-day Colombia into a dystopian future where the poor are mutants and the rich are humans. Although impossible to ignore entirely, the

medium is not the message to the magnitude McLuhan claimed, and some proponents of electronic literature want it to be.

Hypertext stories have yet to achieve what was initially expected of them. The first generations of computers were very limited and heavily reliant on text. Hypertext stories and the theories and ideas that propelled them began to take shape during the early days of computing. Today's computers are capable of much more and, more importantly, readers and computer users are familiarizing themselves with these kinds of interactions. Each year brings more technological improvements that make it easier to create digital narrations that are more like games than literary texts—yet ironically, this diminishes their chances of ever doing so. What is probably the biggest problem for hypertext literature is not the issue of writing and arranging the texts in a way that is accessible to readers, but being phased out by other media that prove easier to work with and better at grasping the reader's attention—namely, videogames as art or as storytelling.

This is not to say that stories like those in this chapter belong to a genre that has no future. Still, this literature has a place and can serve to move both literary and gaming techniques forward. The decentralization of a hierarchic order of events into a more free form of exploration through words has the capacity to create new storytelling experiences. And words still have the power to produce an impact that is different from that offered by images and sounds. Still, creators of hypertext stories need to reevaluate what they are meant to achieve and what they can bring to the table.

The following chapter will discuss some works of electronic literature that rely less on words by using a higher degree of interactivity, visuals, and sounds to produce an effect that is more akin to games and software than to a conventional novel. They are still far from

being games or software, but far enough from literature that their categorization as such may be questionable. However, many of the elements and traits that have been seen so far still persist.

Chapter III: Multimedia and the Interactive

Stealing the word's job

In Chapters One and Two I discussed works that consisted primarily of text. Chapter One dealt with linear narratives that were enhanced in various ways. Chapter Two analyzed stories that, although still reliant on words, depended on decisions made by the reader to create narrative order. In the works featured in both chapters, the story being delivered remains relatively static and constant; what changes is how the reader receives it. The stories in Chapter Three go one step further, distancing themselves even more from what is traditionally seen as literature. The reader, now more of a user, can no longer progress by simply clicking a link. These works expect the reader to interpret and manipulate the work and make the correct choices in order to move forward. The first text discussed, *Tierra de extracción*, requires the reader to pay attention to the screen and explore it in order to find meaning, thematic connections, and clarity. The second, *21 días*, is similar to *Tierra de extracción*, but it keeps the user at the safe distance of spectator; ignores standard conventions of narrative, coherent prose, and order; and forces the reader to piece the message together through an amalgam of disparate pieces of information. The final two, *Modus Vivendi* and *Golpe de Gracia*, place the user as a character in a fictional world that must be walked through and solved. Whereas the previous chapters dealt with the reader manipulating the text, the stories here have the user manipulating the story world itself.

These stories depart heavily from traditional storytelling, demanding that the user incorporate interpretative skills from outside literature in order to "read" the story. Espen J. Aarseth's concept of the ergodic—the non-trivial effort needed to read a work—is taken to a

higher degree here. Though still ergodic under Aarseth's definition, the effort required by the user and the way the world responds to these actions can more appropriately be described as interactive. The word "interactive," however, is a problematic one; it has been used in so many contexts that it can mean many things.

Both Aarseth and Crawford discuss the "interactive" term in an attempt to find a working definition that adequately delimits yet is flexible enough to encompass a wide range of interactivity. Crawford sees interactivity as "a cyclic process between two or more active agents in which each agent alternately listens, thinks, and speaks" (29) in a metaphoric sense. Emphasizing that the definition is humanistic in nature, he elaborates that if he were going to be specific to computing, he would have replaced the terms with "accepts input," "processes input," and "outputs results." A good combination of these three qualities is necessary for successful interactivity. And this is what separates the works in the previous chapters from the ones here. The works in Chapter One had very few listening and speaking elements for the reader. The works in Chapter Two accept input through the form of clicks and provide output by showing the next screen, but there is no processing input in between. Each click sends the reader to the next screen and that is it. An argument can be made that *Condiciones Extremas* employs some "thinking" through the Literatrónica algorithm, but the amount of thinking and speaking that the reader has available is too limited to provide a proper sense of interacting with the text. It consists only of selecting from a few limited choices provided by the program.

In the works discussed in this chapter the reader has to process the presented material and configure it in a nontrivial manner in order to properly move forward. The change in what the audience has to do is so strong that the word "reader" is no longer adequate. "User"

is a more appropriate, though ambiguous, term. Some of the stories discussed here—such as *Modus Vivendi* and *Golpe de Gracia*, which are played like video games—suggest the possibility that the audience is a "player" instead of a "user" or a "reader," but the problem with this word is that it implies that these are games to be beaten and not works that aim for literary qualities.

With the increase in user interactivity and decreased reliance on prose narration to convey the story, the works in this chapter run into a series of difficulties that the works in Chapter One and Two do not. Many of the stories here aim to make the reader a participant in the story and allow her or him to have an impact on the story world. No longer being a spectator, and instead performing actions that have consequences, means that if the user does something wrong or does not know what to do, the story may break down. Preserving the illusion of a world and the reader's immersion in it becomes much more difficult when the user can die repeatedly through mistakes or go in circles in the "reading" experience, not knowing what to do. This is a common aspect of games as well, but games are expected to provide challenges for the player to overcome. A work of electronic storytelling has a story to tell; recurring frustrations, interruptions, failures, and frequent repetition of the same stages—features accepted in games—are not as effective here. Many of the works discussed in Chapter Two deal with the difficulty of telling a story that can be read in multiple orders in order to keep it meaningful for all possible readers. The works in this chapter retain this difficulty, but also struggle with the problem of how to provide enough of a challenge to keep the user interested in participating without losing the reader before the story is told.

The works in this chapter are exemplary of electronic literature because they showcase how different the genre is from traditional print literature. They are at the same

time the most problematic to understand and analyze as they depart from what is familiar. As mentioned in the introduction, the Electronic Literature Organization defined it as "work with an important literary aspect that takes advantage of the capabilities and contexts provided by the stand-alone or networked computer" (Hayles 3). Since the works discussed in this chapter depart from being text-centric, with some of them behaving like videogames and others lacking any concrete form of prose, what makes them "literary" is less obvious when viewed through the lens of traditional literature. Because of this, my discussion will highlight how these works are literary and from what familiar aspects of literature they draw. The stories in this chapter attempt to attain these aesthetic and literary qualities through different approaches: some handle themes that are popular in literature, others draw their structure from literary genres such as short stories, and others employ images and words to deliver an emotional and cognitive impact that is more akin to art than popular games.

I. *Tierra de extracción*: Drilling for Plot and Subconscious Narrating

Tierra de extracción, by Doménico Chiappe and Andreas Meier, published in 2007 and included in the second volume of the *Electronic Literature Organization*, is a multimedia novel about a Venezuelan petroleum-drilling town. Like *Como el cielo los ojos* and *Condiciones Extremas*, *Tierra de extracción* requires the reader to piece together information that is given in an unordered manner. However, passively reading and selecting the next page is no longer enough. The reader has to interact with the dynamically changing screen in order to extract the information.

The collection of episodes depicts a town that never changes. There is no overarching end to the plot lines that would bring some closure to *Tierra de extracción*. The story follows

a number of characters throughout the history of Menegrande, a small town that has developed around its industry of petroleum extraction. Menegrande is its own universe, seemingly existing without the rest of Venezuela. It has its own power structure and a morbid aura that sucks in and traps anyone who gets near. Social standing is defined through power, wealth, violence, and lust. For example, a man lusting over how a child will look when she is older can claim her as his future bride and the parents will submissively groom her for this end. Despite their subservient status in the town, women also wield their own kind of control through their bodies. They keep the town alive by luring outsiders and entrancing them into staying.

The themes of *Tierra de extracción* are similar to those explored in other Latin American novels and follow the familiar formula of the large landowner versus impoverished peasants, and the entrapment of life in these situations. The popular hacienda theme is replaced with an oil town, and employees of the drilling company and local politicians replace the powerful landowner. The dark pessimism of some of these older literary works is not diminished with the modern reimagining. Menegrande is as suffocating, alluring, and entrapping as Comala in Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo.* The plot is not about escaping these conditions, nor does the text suggest that such a thing is possible. There is no salvation for the characters who are already there, and the only salvation for those on the outside is to never set foot in the town.

The narrative is delivered through text aided by sound effects, music tracks, sounds, newspaper clippings, and static and animated images. There are two main ways to interact with *Tierra de extracción*. The first involves going from one screen to another by clicking arrows in the corners of the screen. Clicking on the right arrow brings the next lexia in an arc

and the left arrow goes back, with the top and bottom border arrows jumping to other story arcs. If the reader constantly moves to the right, each arc functions as a linear narration. Though each arc can be read linearly, the chronological relationship between the arcs is not explicit. Nonetheless it is not difficult to organize most of them during the reading process.

What separates *Tierra de extracción* from other works discussed so far is that reading one lexia and moving on is not enough. Each one contains further information in the form of images, animations, texts, and sounds that can only be accessed by moving the pointer over the text or visuals and either hovering or clicking them. The following is one lexia in the section titled "árbol":

<div align="center">

El último murió ahorcado hace ya algunos años y
en su boca había un notica que decía que ese
actorcito no se iba a burlar más. Pero, ¡qué va!
Su sombra anda por ahí, echando vaina.

</div>

The last one was hanged some years ago and in his mouth there was a note that said that this actor was not going to mock anyone else. But what do you know? His shadow lurks in the area, stirring up problems.

(*My translation*)

Two phrases function as hyperlinks: "El último murió ahorcado" and "Su sombra." Hovering over the first highlighted text makes a drawing of a tree pop up, suggesting where the person was hanged. The second text displays another tree, which slowly and eerily transforms into the face of a man that looks like he could be the actor the text is alluding to.

Some links are richer than others, popping up entire sections of text and puzzle-like elements. Nothing is deliberately hidden; there are hints that guide the reader to elements that can be interacted with. In order to unearth everything the reader has to work by moving the

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cursor, clicking and deciding in what order to click the available options. This almost kinesthetic way of reading encourages a higher sense of awareness and attention to the reading and its process.

Doménico Chiappe's interest is not only in creating digital works but also in understanding their nuances and how to make them more effective. The version discussed here is actually *Tierra de extracción 2.0.* In *El oficio de vender un lenguaje multimedia, con muy poco uso*, he mentions that the first iteration of *Tierra de extracción* was linear prose but the more he thought about it, the more he saw the story as not being properly supported by such a structure. The story he wanted to tell needed to exist in a different format, which made him adapt it into a multimedia novel. This transformation entailed sacrificing his authorial pride and cutting words that became superfluous when other media were incorporated. In the same essay, available on his webpage, he elaborates in hindsight the philosophies he arrived at during the creative process:

1. Los capítulos deben ser como eslabones de mercurio: concisos y circulares

2. Se narra en varios planos.

3. Las imágenes sirven como enlaces con el subconsciente del lector

4. Dos premisas: Sencillez del diseño y modestas instrucciones

5. Construcción lúdica. El lector hace su camino

(1. Chapters are like drops of mercury: concise and circular.

2. Narration takes place on multiple planes.

3. Images serve as links to the reader's subconscious.

4. Two premises: simplicity of design and simple instructions.

5. Ludic construction: the reader makes his own path.)

(My translation)

All of these rules are reader-centered, aimed at ensuring that the reader understands the work and gets into it. The driving philosophy is that a work can be made as complex and elaborate as possible, as long as the reader can easily grasp the tool that will be needed for the reading experience. The reader should not have to fight the context in order to discover the content.

Tierra de extracción opens on the following screen:

Figure 1: Introductory screen of Tierra de extracción

Hovering over the city segments reveals towers and turns the smoke red. The tree at the center begins a spoken narration about Menegrande. The words on the top left are some of the chapter names and serve as a thematic introduction to the readings. Hovering over these reveals introductory text about the origins of the town. The next screen shows every lexia in the story, allowing the reader to choose where to begin:
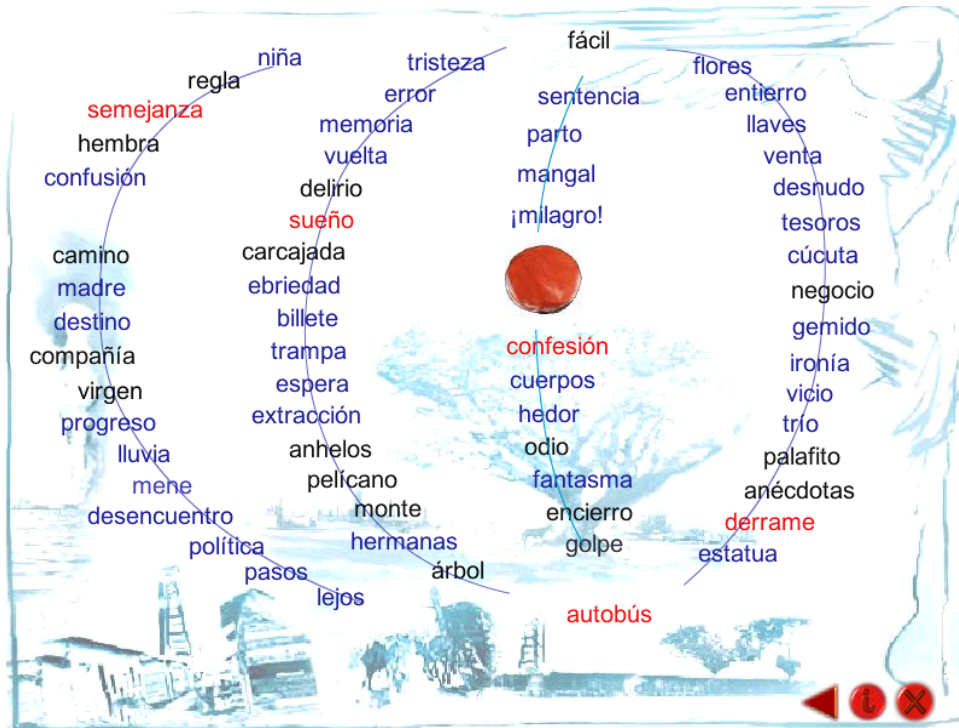
Figure 2: Navigation Screen

The lines in Figure 2 represent the order of each of the arcs in the story, starting at the bottom and working upwards. Each of these words is a link to a section in the text. If the reader is in the section titled "estatua," clicking on the right edge of the screen takes her or him to "derrame" and clicking on the right goes to "autobus." Visually, only "fácil" and "autobús" look like possible beginnings or ends, but even these are as rhizomatic as the other sections in the novel.

Like the previous works I have analyzed, *Tierra de extracción* has a fragmented story without a strict reading linearity. There is some contained linearity when a specific arc is followed, but even this is optional. If the reader chooses, there is a button that brings up a map with all of the story's fragments, so that she or he can jump to any specific fragment and have an idea of how they all interconnect.

Each lexia, although connected to the plot in its arc, is also a self-contained snapshot of the events that inform the reader not only of the story, but also of the universe in the story. Even in its brevity, each lexia has a beginning, middle, and conclusion. The relative completeness of each section makes the reading process more digestible as the reader does not feel cheated of key information needed to understand it. Although the reader might not know exactly everything that is going on, each fragment is self-sufficient enough to be understood and there is the promise that more information will be available soon. This can be compared to a nonlinear work previously discussed, *Como el cielo los ojos*, where reading some chapters could be fruitless without background knowledge that some readers might not yet have.

If the complex nature of each fragment helps the process of taking in the information, it is the recurring themes and the symbols throughout the story that glue together all these elements and shape the mythology of Menegrande. The management of these themes and symbols is heavily dependent on the digital narrative techniques of the novel. In *Tierra de extracción* the text focuses on the storytelling and the digital on creating the intratextuality.

Previously I mentioned two key elements in the story: the tree and the actor. Both of these images recur throughout different arcs. In one of the story arcs, Lucelena, who was forced to marry the much older and more powerful Bastidor, has sex with a visitor and gets pregnant as a way to get back at Bastidor for her situation. Bastidor demands that she tell him who her lover was, but since she does not know his name, all she can say is that he looked like a television star. When asked to show him which star, she intentionally shows him a different actor to save her lover. As bad luck would have it, another man comes into town who happens to look like the different actor and is captured by Bastidor's men and hanged

from the tree. Bastidor kills the man to assert his control over his wife, and Lucelena lies about appearance and unintentionally has another man killed in order to, within her limited position of power, defeat her husband. The image of the popular icon Lucelena describes is then used in other arcs and characters unrelated to Lucelena and Bastidor to allude to the violence and deceit in Menegrande.

One "live" example of how imagery is used is the following segment about three sisters. On the left of figure 3 is the original lexia and on the right the tree that appears when the phrase "comunicación visceral" is clicked. This tree is a prominent image used throughout *Tierra de extracción*. Those who are a problem for the town or its leaders are hanged under it and their corpses are left there for public display until the next person is killed.

The three sisters live in a communion akin to the one of trees. **A** <u>visceral communication</u> that feeds itself on Miriam's impudence.

(*My translation*)

Figure 3. Before and after

Clicking on the tree produces two deformations of the tree, one a hybrid tree-city and the other a combination of a tree and a noose. Clicking these produces two more images each for a total of four images, one being the oil tower and another a noose, two important symbols throughout the entire story:

Las tres hermanas viven en una comunión parecida a la de los árboles. Comunicación visceral, que se nutre gustosa del desparpajo de Miriam.
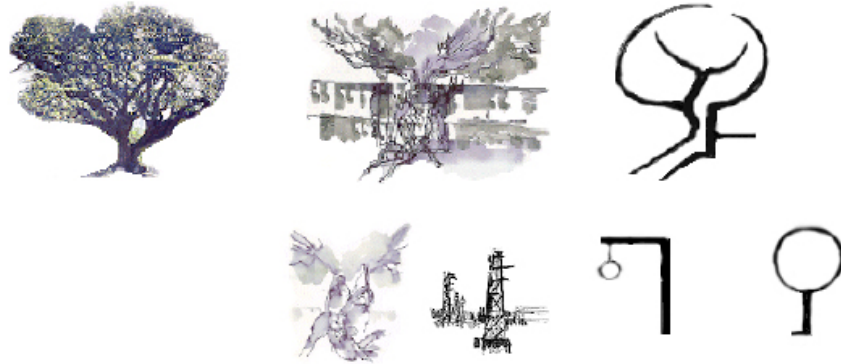

Figure 4. Final outcome of clicking the tree and its children images

On their own, these images do not mean much outside of whatever personal bias the reader has. A reader who stumbles upon this early on may not know the relationship between these items or their implications for the characters and the town. However, the relationship between these items—the sisters, the tree, the oil, and death—is established for the new reader of the text, or reinforced for the seasoned one. A reader who is familiar with these images may also quickly conclude that these sisters are trouble, without the text or the images explicitly mentioning it.

Symbols and recurring themes are common in any form of art. They build intratextuality, develop ideas, and create meaning. Yet in *Tierra de extracción*, the images and sounds rarely move the story forward. This task is generally left to the text and the reader who has to click and search the page for the elements that will reveal the next scene. However, by the time new words are available, the other media of the story will have prepared the reader for them by shaping interpretation and reception.

At the same time, by using different techniques to form such connections, different parts of the brain are involved in the reading process, causing different cognitive and emotional responses. In "Enveloping Literature and Other Challenges to the Multimedia Author," Doménico Chiappe says:

> 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. (45)

If the technical aspects of *Tierra de extracción* are effective as storytelling devices, it is because of the focus on the readership and the use of the tools available towards this goal, keeping in mind how audiences take in information. If certain aspects are better served by being transmitted with images and music, then words are superfluous. One notable effect of this multimedia novel is that despite the reliance on other media and the effort of the reader to dig through hyperlinks and screens, it is still a read artifact. Without the words, the images and sounds do not convey any message or plot. And yet the words without the other media do tell a story, though with much being lost.

One character, Israel Valleterno, is on a quest to find his "mother." His biological mother abandoned him when he was still a baby because the father made it clear that he did not love her. His father had only loved one woman and in his eyes this lost woman was

Israel's real mother. Israel has heard plenty of stories about this woman but none about his biological mother and at the father's last request he goes to find her. To prepare himself for the journey he searches the old man's house for money. In the text the phrase "revisó cada resquicio de la casa" is in red and hovering over it reveals the following picture and text:

Nada encontró de valor.

(He found nothing of value.) (*My translation*)

As has been said, poverty and desperation are at the center of Menegrande and the characters in *Tierra de extracción*. There is nothing in the text that suggests that Israel and his father are wealthy. They are as poor as the other characters. But what each reader can picture varies depending on their own experiences and interpretations of the text. Some might imagine the characters' situation as dire, others might see their poverty as an inconvenience that allows them a decent life albeit without many luxuries. By popping up a picture to represent the situation of the characters the reader's mental image of the settings is swiftly matched with

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the world the authors want to convey in an efficient manner. There is little need for the text to focus too much on describing the poverty and violence when a well placed picture can do the job, and in *Tierra de extracción* there are many pictures like these throughout the multimedia novel.

The words are still the center of attention and the reader will spend most of her or his time reading words. All the technical elements have their impact in a subtle, behind-the-scenes manner, priming the reader for the desired reading response. They shape the experience of reading without calling attention to themselves.

There is no definitive ending to *Tierra de extracción*, nor a "The End" screen. This is common in works of electronic literature, making the reader unsure if everything has been read. In the case of this work, this choice also serves the overall narration. With the large number of chapters it is difficult to know if everything has been read unless the reader makes the effort to check thoroughly. With no explicit final scene to draw the curtain down, the reading experience is without the cathartic sense of completion. The town is the protagonist of the story, described through the people the story focuses on, and Menegrande continues to exist unchanged after the reading is complete.
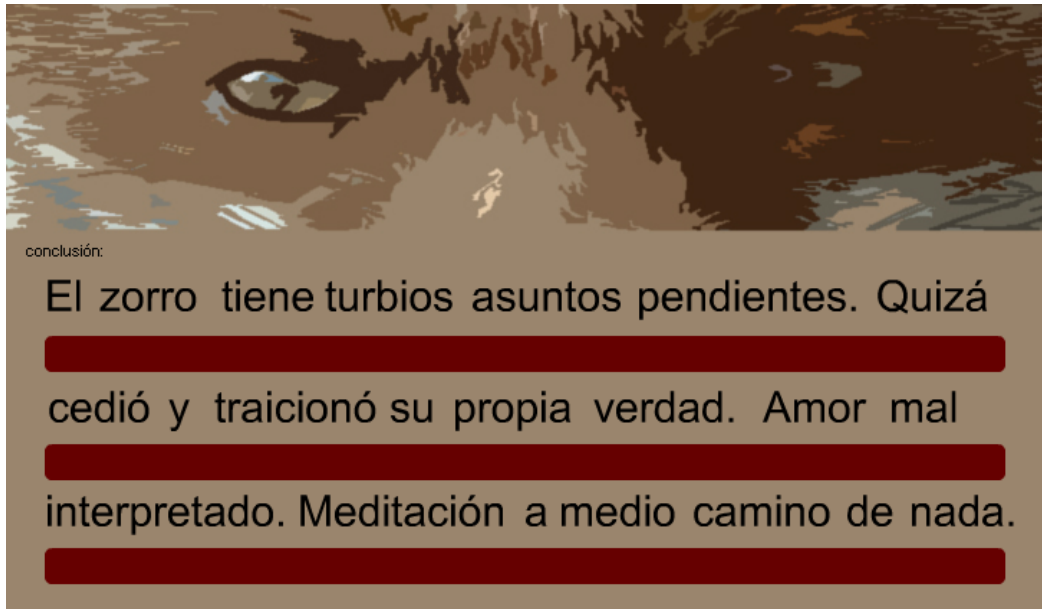
II. *21 días*, Defying the Narrating

21 días, by Spanish writer Isaías Herrero Florensa, provides a disorienting reading experience. Despite the linear delivery of most of the story, the fractured manner in which each lexia is presented forces the reader to piece together seemingly random pieces to find meaning. Published in 2006 and earning the international award for digital narrative from *Ciutat de Vinarós* in 2006, *21 días* appears much like *Tierra de extracción* in that it gives the

reader a screen with visuals and text that can be navigated by clicking different areas. The similarities end there, as the content delivered by *21 días* is unorganized and unintuitive, without much prose or guidance that can be used to form a coherent plot or determining what is the narrating and who is the narrator.

There are three introductory chapters and twenty-one "days" to navigate, with each "day" being a screen. In order to unlock the days, all three introductions must be explored in any order. The days themselves start at twenty-one and count down to zero when the story ends, presumably with the death of the narrator or the world. The only thing the reader knows is that at the end of the days something will end. Each chapter has its own visual and navigation style, as well as its own narrating style and impact. Some are in the vein of horror, others contain imagery of nature or art, and others are overloaded with color and visual stimuli. There is not a logical transition between the chapters, nor is it clear how they are related to each other. In a way, all these discordant images and interactions are like train of thought made interactive. The premise of each is still the same: click what is available to be clicked in order to move forward. But what can be clicked and how the screen responds varies, keeping the reader off-guard and forcing her or him to adapt.

The range of complexity varies from day to day. Some days force the reader to wait until a scrolling text is over, others require navigating a pseudo-maze, and others provide a set of buttons that must be pressed and read. Regardless of how each chapter is explored, the process is always straightforward and there is no chance for the reader to get stuck in a day and unable to move forward.

For example, the final screen on the sixteenth day is the following:

conclusión:

El zorro tiene turbios asuntos pendientes. Quizá

cedió y traicionó su propia verdad. Amor mal

interpretado. Meditación a medio camino de nada.

(The fox has shady unfinished business. Maybe he gave in and betrayed his own truth. Misinterpreted love. Meditation halfway to nowhere.) *(Translation mine)*

Clicking each word in this sentence produces a word in the bars in between and connects them through dotted lines. After clicking all words we get the following:
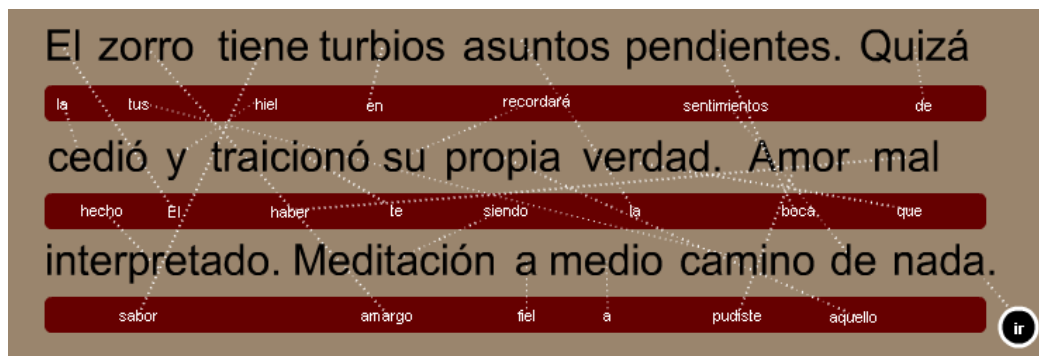
The new words are scrambled, but since words appear one at a time and connected with dotted lines, they can be sorted out by matching them with the order of the original phrase, producing the line "El amargo sabor en la boca de la hiel te recordará aquello que pudiste haber hecho siendo fiel a tus sentimientos" (The bitter taste of bile will remind you of what

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you could have done had you been true to yourself). The meaning of the original sentence and the revealed one in the scope of the entire narrative is not explicit. The fox mentioned here is not a character—the story lacks characters—and does not play any role in the other chapters of the story.

What has to be read from these sentences is the general idea they are trying to convey, which the reader must then fit into the bigger narrative of something that is ending. Here the narration is discussing a life not lived and actions not taken, a bitterness over what never happened due to inaction. This is something that someone waiting for the end might think about. So, although the reader might not know what about the narrator's past is so troublesome, the reader does know there is something, and as far as the narrating goes, that is enough.

The difficulty in *21 días* lies in comprehending what is happening with what little is given and in imagining how the story is being told. *21 días* seems to lack Genette's narrative components of traditional *narrating*, the act that produces discourse; *story*, the totality of events; and *narrative*, the discourse that narrates them. The *narrating* in this work is a combination of the first-person narrator and the user interface that the reader interacts with. Determining the role of the narrator in the traditional sense is difficult since the narrating voice alternates between concern for himself and concern for the reader's fate. It is unclear where he stands in everything.

At the same time, it is impossible to conceptualize how the narrator is narrating the story. First-person narration creates a direct personal relationship between addressee and narrator; there is a person telling the reader the story. Even in narrations where the addressee is undefined, first-person narrations still have a dialogue between the two sides.

21 días subverts this. The narrator talks in an erratic train-of-thought style, but the structure of how the story is delivered—with the links, hidden text, visuals, and deliberate slowing of the narrating time—is anything but random. It is elaborately mechanical, the very opposite of what first-person narration and train of thought tend to represent.

The series of hyperlinks and obtuse narration in *21 días* does not convey a real person trying to communicate with the reader; the narrative is too technical and inhuman to form the human connection. *Tierra de extracción* tells its story in a similar manner, but the narration is in third person and that distance allows for a more seamless interaction between the narration and the delivery mechanism. Without something tangible to aid in defining the narrating process, the reading experience becomes difficult, as the reader has nothing to hold on to in order to make sense of it all.

The *narrative*, as the act that produces discourse to tell events, is simple enough. The screen is there and the reader can interact with it in order to generate text. But the role of the *narrative* is to provide the reader with both the *narrating* and the *story* and it fails to provide a coherent means of doing this. As far as the *story* is concerned, there does not really seem to be one. The narrator states that there are twenty-one days left and that there is nothing to do but pass the time until then. There is no clear development or progression. There are no characters besides the narrator and the addressee. Thus there is not much of a story or plot. Some works of literature without much plot compensate by providing rich character emotions, introspection, or background, but *21 días* lacks all of this. After twenty-one chapters the reader is left without understanding exactly what transpired or to whom. Even when the narrator muses about life, memories, and death, it is more of a tired intellectual

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exercise than actual introspection. It is forced: not something the narrator wishes to do, but more something the narrator should be doing given the situation he is in.

The avant-garde approach of *21 días* demands a different kind of reading. The reader must adjust his or her expectations and create a set of conventions and interpretative tools unique to the work. It is only after doing this that the reader can begin to see what is happening and have a chance of pulling out some sort of plot or *story*. Each chapter can be seen as a form of free-flowing train of thought where the narrator is going through his emotions and coping with the upcoming end. As this end approaches, the narrator poses questions and challenges the addressee on metaphysical and existential topics about the self, life, divinity, immortality, and death.

The discourse is shaped by the narrator's emotions and is a process degenerating toward oblivion. Some chapters are explicit depictions of what the narrator is going through and how he is dealing with the impending end. Other chapters are less direct and at face value seem to be unconnected with the story. The introductory chapters are euphoric and the narrator feels like a *manga* superhero: flying above all else, but also apathetic. For him, it is irrelevant how the next three weeks are spent. By the nineteenth day, there is a conviction that human beings are immortal, connected to some eternal fountain and bigger source, and that all that we need to do is question ourselves and find this source. Day fifteen is a musing about an eternal laser beam and a statue that believed it could be around forever and how the laser and the statue will have their last encounter and become illusions. Much like the previous example with the fox, the two characters mentioned are not part of any other chapter. This miniature short story has to be viewed within the context of the overarching story to understand its contributions. Whereas the fox scene can be seen as a statement on

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lives not lived, the destruction of the laser and the statue can be seen as an acceptance that everything must come to an end. By day eleven the narrator accuses the addressee of being a miserable person led by ego. This alternating between allegory and directness continues during the first half of the story.

The last ten days are short, with flashing screens focusing on only one thought. The elaborate sections are over, and the narration speeds towards its end. The narrator is done and wants to be done with it, becoming much more impulsive and driven by desires, asking that the addressee live to the fullest or to not go out. All possibilities are equally irrelevant and valid. Throughout these days there is no straight progression similar to Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's famous "five stages of grief," but a back-and-forth movement that does not converge at one point. Even in the last days of life the narrator is still erratic, though more apathetic than before, unsure of what has to be done and what is the right way to end things.

After all these incongruent scenes we arrive to the day 0:

El sol no ha salido hoy. Podrían sonar las trompetas del apocalipsis. ¿No?

Dejémolso…

¿Tú cómo te sientes?

¿Dónde vas a ir?

Si no lo tienes claro,

dedícate 21 días más.

FIN

The sun has not come out today. Maybe the trumpets of the apocalypse can start playing. No?

Let's forget it…

How do you feel?

Where are you going to go?

If you are not sure,

give yourself another twenty-one days.

THE END.

(*My translation*)

In the same way that the entire narration refuses to conform to a structure or narrative that the reader can follow, the ending does not provide any closing statement that can bring all the contradictory and discordant elements together. Instead it makes it impossible for the reader to form a coherent narrative and story out of everything read. The end of everything is unavoidable, but if readers are not ready for it, they can take another twenty-one days to figure it out. This raises the question, if oblivion can wait, why was the narrator deteriorating so haphazardly? Maybe the end of everything is a personal thing. The narrator has chosen to go but has given the reader extra time if it is needed.

Two main forces make the reader's comprehension difficult. First, the narrator is unstable and undefined, and second, each chapter's user interface is different, manipulating how fast the reader goes through the story and how she or he explores it. Throughout the story the interface and the narrator work in tandem, but separately, to keep the reader off-center, constantly breaking the illusion of immersion by jumping back and forth through the "fourth wall" of the theatrical stage. The closing chapter brings these two elements together and firmly establishes that there is no stage or actors. There is just the audience, the wall, and the gears that make everything go.

It is not uncommon for readers to have to struggle with the structure of works of electronic literature. Making the reading process itself into a new experience that requires adaptation is part of the genre and its appeal. *21 días* goes one step further by eliminating the story itself. There are two often-repeated characteristics of electronic literature works. The first is that it may be impossible for readers to know if they have read everything that there is to read. When a reader is given a maze of hyperlinks or the option to explore at will there is the possibility of missing something. The second characteristic is that reading the entire work is not necessary to achieve the state of a complete reading. The reader does not need all the pieces to put the puzzle together. Contrary to traditional literature or films, it is possible for the reader to have read just enough so that anything missed would not provide any new meaningful insights and the reader can be left with a feeling of completion. These two traits are not requirements, nor are they available on all digital texts, but they suggest a trend that is possible and acceptable for these kinds of works.

21 días subverts these characteristics by making the reading process straightforward and ensuring that reader receives all the information contained within the work. But

possessing all of the pieces of the puzzle does not mean it can be put easily put together. Once the final scene is reached the reader is left with the impression that something is missing: not the content, but the comprehension of what it all is supposed to mean and a schema that can aid in the process of comprehension.

At the same time, the difficulties with the content of the story mirror the difficulties with the narrator. Understanding what is happening is troublesome because the narrating does not give us anything to hold on to and understanding the narrator is difficult because the reader is not given something tangible to use to build a whole character. It is all bits and pieces, with both narrator and story giving the impression of being equally impenetrable. *Tierra de extracción* keeps every element in order and delivers them all to aid the reader in understanding the author's intention and the story he wants to tell. The reader still has to work to reveal the story, but what is found is easily understood and incorporated to the rest of the story world. *21 días*, on the other hand, challenges the reader at every step of the way. Revealing the words is only the first hurdle. After that the reader has to determine what is being said and how it fits into the bigger narrative. And even then, it is not always clear.

Immersion is usually recognized as an important element for good storytelling. What precisely immersion is can vary by medium and narrative technique, but it entails keeping the reader in the story world so that he or she focuses on the story itself rather than the strings that keep it together. In *21 días* it is the work itself that intentionally shatters the illusion of a story, constantly reminding the readers that this is a work of experimental storytelling and accentuating the technical, visual, and verbal feast the author has created for the reader to experience. The spectator can only marvel at the masterful brushstrokes, the clever use of colors, the odd brush choices, and the frame selected instead of the finalized painting.

III. *Modus Vivendi*: Interacting with the World through Words

Taken literally, "interactive fiction" is a broad term that can be applied to any form of storytelling that the reader can interact with. For the purpose of this discussion, I will be using this term to refer to what are also known as adventure games. Interactive fiction is one of the oldest forms of programmable interactive storytelling, having its origins before computers were capable of advanced graphics and user interactivity and reaching its peak of popularity in the early eighties. The structure is straightforward and simple: there is a screen of text and a prompt area where the user can enter text commands. The screen presents a textual description of a room, the items in the room, characters, thoughts, and the situation. Once this information has been given, the program waits for the user to enter some commands in the prompt line, usually a combination of verbs and nouns. Common commands are *look*, *walk*, *go*, *ask*, *pick*, *drop*, *use*, and *hit*, though other verbs are also possible, usually limited by what the creator allows.

This form of interactive storytelling is entirely dependent on words as a delivery mechanism; images and sounds are uncommon as such additions would threaten to make the genre into a different one entirely. Because of this, they have not changed much over the past thirty years. For a medium that exists on a device that is capable of processing videos, sounds, and complex calculations, being word-based can be seen as a fatal shortcoming and this genre's lack of popularity may be attributed to this. As computers became more complex, people naturally migrated into more visually arresting and intuitive forms of interacting with media. However, this apparent limitation of interactive fiction only exists when compared to other kinds of computer applications. Interactive fiction is limited to

words as much as codex literature is, and literature has been accomplishing impressive feats for a few millennia. Compared to other game-like ways of storytelling, interactive fiction has a higher potential to use the strength of words since it lacks other stimuli or media. This is not to say that interactive fictions have accomplished literary mastery over the written word; they began as a gaming genre and have continued to focus on this aspect. But this has not stopped some creators from trying to maximize the literary and aesthetic impact of words. Limitations and restrictions breed creativity by forcing creators to think of ways of maximizing their resources.

Interactive fictions provide some advantages for those who want to create stories that are more mechanically complex and dynamic than those done with linear prose or hyperlinks. Since the medium is text-based, someone who wishes to create an interactive story is only required to know how to write and have basic programming knowledge. More complex forms of storytelling require a wider range of expertise such as animation, visual arts, how to design user interfaces, etc. This makes interactive fiction a good candidate for beginning creators since the entry requirements are not as high.

With only text to describe the world, and a prompt that can in theory accept and use anything the user types, interactive fiction holds a lot of promise. Interactive fiction can create with words anything literature can and as a program, if the creator is willing to do the work, the story can be manipulated in many ways. Unlike a book where the only option is turning the page or a hypertext when the only actions are the available links, a system such as interactive fiction can, at least hypothetically, allow any word to be typed in, suggesting the possibility that anything can be done. In practice, however, this possibility is quickly obstructed because the program can only understand and compute what the programmer has

allowed. And even if the creator spends a large amount of time creating outcomes for many different actions, it is humanly impossible for her or him to foresee everything users might want to try.

As a game genre, interactive fiction has persisted without many structural changes since any modifications would turn the genre into something else. The reliance on text and command prompts defines and shapes these works. What has changed with time is how people approach and create them. Even with the increased capacities of computers and other forms of entertainment and video games, interactive fiction has found communities where people have continued to create and share new works. Interactive fiction is not a financially viable genre, so it has fallen into the hands of enthusiasts and amateurs to stay alive. Programmers who enjoy interactive fiction develop and maintain software to create and play it, and creative people use these programs to build stories and share them. All this is done not for financial gain, but for the love of the craft and whatever praise and accolades can be received from the small communities that enjoy these games.

One example of developing software is Inform 7, which is freely available online. Its innovation is to allow the creation of interactive fiction through the use of simple English commands instead or a programming language. With the program serving as an intermediary between computer code and the person, creators can enter a sentence such as "Kitchen is a room. The description is 'The kitchen is dirty.' A lamp is in the kitchen." and Inform 7 creates an explorable room and an object the user can interact with. Since creation demands mastery of a different set of skills, programs like Inform 7 allow the authors of these communities to focus their energies on the artistic aspects of making an interactive text instead of splitting their energies between the programming and the creative.

Interactive fiction has remained mostly a game genre. Since its beginnings most games have been exploratory with puzzle elements. The user has to use the words and clues provided to piece together what has to be done in order to move forward and beat the game. World exploration, puzzle solving, and trial and error are the trademarks of the genre. However, as text-based adventures, they retain the potential for more complex literary forms of expression and interaction and there are many who have used this genre for a more artistic impact.

Modus Vivendi, published in 2010 by Chilean author Sebastián Armas, is one work of interactive fiction that possesses literary qualities, attempts to move beyond simply being a puzzle-solving game, and aspires to have an emotional impact on the player. I am focusing on *Modus Vivendi* because it won awards in 2010 for interactivity, playability, best puzzler, and, more importantly for this study, for literary qualities from the community of adventure games CAAD (www.caad.es). This group is an online community of people who enjoy the genre and not a prestigious academic circle. Despite the possible "lack of pedigree" for this award, it was given by people who know and enjoy the genre instead of outside scholars who might not fully understand it. The group's background carries its own weight.

The story follows a young man as he navigates the slums of Rome in what is presented as a normal day. As the story progresses the protagonist interacts with other characters and takes in the life that happens in the most powerful city of his time. One commonly mentioned difference between games and art is that "the dominant user function in literature, theater and film is interpretative, but in games it is the configurative one" (Eskelinen 38). In a game, every piece of information and item on screen is to be understood as a piece of a puzzle or a tool that the player needs to interpret and utilize in order to move

forward and finish the game. In literature, items have the role of expanding and adding depth to the world being depicted and every word is there to shape the entire reading experience.

A matchbox on a table can have two roles that are not mutually exclusive. In a game it can be an item that at one point will serve to light something, and as such it must be picked up and carried around. In a work of art it could reflect the situation a character is in, stand in for some emotion or ambition, or be a symbol of something else, depending on everything else that is in the room and has happened.

Modus Vivendi explores this second use of words: items and symbols. Obtaining items, solving puzzles, and completing tasks is secondary. As a prisoner of my gaming upbringing, I initially attempted to explore Rome by checking everything around me, skimming the long texts for what I perceived as key information that would help me progress, and trying to pick up everything that was not nailed to the walls. This quickly became a trying experience. The game world was using too many complex words to describe the scenery, the characters talked too casually without helping me on my quest, items to pick up were not that common, and I could move from scene to scene with too much freedom. I had to overcome my gaming reflexes and focus on the words not as a means to an end, but as the end itself. Once I stopped playing it as a game and began reading it as literature, the walls of text became palatable and meaningful. The characters stopped being tools and began having more than one dimension, and the city of Rome began to breathe.

Regardless of medium, bringing a fictional world to life is one of the more difficult tasks for many artists. The medium has to be a window between realities but by definition it is an imperfect one. Books only have words to do the task. Without the capacity to directly stimulate all five senses that shape reality, prose has to be complex and effective at

simulating these sensorial and affective responses. Interactive fiction can draw from the capacities of prose but is hindered by the static nature of the prompts and the frequency of repeated or ineffective commands. But the genre has the means to shore up on these deficiencies. One of the techniques *Modus Vivendi* uses to bring the world to life is multiple dialogue responses. Talking to the same character multiple times elicits different replies, many of which have to do with what is happening in the story so far. Also, when the user is finished with a character and it serves no further purpose, the story has these characters move on to something else instead of being interactive objects that do nothing. For example, a guard who at one point was receptive to interaction and discussion might be too busy dealing with citizens, merchants, or customers to pay attention to you. The doctor who spends some time talking to you at one point moves offstage, presumably to experiment on a corpse, and is nowhere to be found. This gives these characters a perceived existence and agency beyond being game objects.

Another technique that livens up the town is the use of random events. When the user is exploring an area, the game interjects some special actions the protagonists can witness but not interact with, such as a guard walking by, some neighbors drinking from the fountain, or a marital discussion taking place nearby. The order in which these events appear on screen is not fixed and they do not always appear on screen when commands are repeated. The user has no control over what she will see or in what order. Though seemingly random, these events are scripted by the creator through a set of predefined rules, so that the user does not know what activates these minor scenes. That the user cannot have an effect on everything that is happening creates the illusion that the story is taking place in a living town and the user is simply one person out of many.

Pulling from literature's handbook, subtlety, suggestion, and description are used throughout *Modus Vivendi* to create a world that exists beyond what is being presented. Though the characters in the story are not three-dimensional and are limited in what they say and do, the prose presents them as having more going on in their lives. The first few rooms in the game serve no other purpose than to set the scene and describe Rome, the neighborhood, and the life of the main character. The protagonist sleeps on a cot in a room that the local washerwoman has allowed him to stay in, the dining room is impoverished with damaged cushions on the chairs, and the washing room reeks of urine, which turns out to be a good thing as further exploration reveals that this is used for cleaning purposes. Throughout these initial scenes the washerwoman is presented as a hard-working and kind soul who helps the protagonist who has nowhere to stay. However, after these scenes there is very little interaction between the protagonist and the woman, and the building and the woman serve no further roles in the story. As far as the story goes, the washerwoman is too busy working to pay attention to the main character. But in the technical sense of storytelling she serves a descriptive purpose. Similar to how prose may spend the first couple of pages on exposition, *Modus Vivendi*'s first few rooms are used to build the world and the character.

The way the user interacts with the story world is simple by interactive-fiction standards. As opposed to other games where the user has to ask X about Y in order to get information and trial and error is needed to complete a task, a simple command such as "talk" is enough to move the story forward as long as it is done at the right time. This allows the user to progress through the story in a more fluid manner and experience the story itself. As interactive fiction, *Modus Vivendi* contains puzzles that need to be solved to move the story forward. However, many of these are straightforward and simply revolve around

talking to the right people in the right order. If the user is stuck, there is a window that can be summoned for hints. The simple puzzles are not the real heart of the game and this becomes extremely apparent during the more complex puzzles that require combining items and actions. With so much of the game involving prose, city description, characters, and their interactions, the more technical puzzles stand out as disruptive to the overall flow.

As I have mentioned, interactive fictions can walk the line between games and the possibility of possessing textual literary qualities. In his essay "Algunos aspectos del cuentos" (Some Facets of Short Stories), Julio Cortázar states that the novel wins through accumulated points, while the short story claims victory through knockout. In short stories every element serves to set up the reader for the conclusion that connects all the details that came before. *Modus Vivendi* works in the same way.

The main character is a young man without many resources; although aware of his inferior position in the bigger world, he seems to be content with his lot. He has run away from his hometown to avoid responsibilities, lacks ambition, and chooses not to grow up to be a productive member of society. He survives on the pennies or goodwill he acquires by doing random chores he finds out about. Throughout the story, as a matter of collecting a few coins, the protagonist helps a guard catch a pedophile, a research doctor obtain a corpse for study (the pedophile's), a salesman fix his wagon, and an exiled politician to communicate with his wife through conveyed messages. All of these actions are purely ways to survive and avoid a decision of what to do with his life. Attaining enough to get through the day is more than sufficient.

There is very little plot development in the story, just a series of tasks that the protagonist accomplishes. While all these actions are being done, the narration takes its time

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to flesh out a living city around him. Life is not easy for anyone in the town. Many characters call the protagonist "citizen," hammering in how the Romans see each other and making more pronounced the protagonist's ambiguous place in the society.

It is the final task that brings all the elements of the story together for the knockout. Upon the request of a priestess, the protagonist heads to the outskirts of town to deliver a package from the wife of the politician to a messenger who will deliver it to her husband. Though he does this for the reward, he likes the wife because she looks like the old washerwoman who gives him a place to sleep. Since the messenger is in a dangerous area of town, the protagonist befriends a guard who agrees to accompany him after his shift. After noticing the dialogue between the well-to-do messenger and the raggedy protagonist, the guard realizes that some sort of political events have been transpiring and asks in jest, "¿Acabo de prestar servicios para la República en mis horas libres?" (Did I just serve the Republic during my free time?). The protagonist replies "Al igual que yo, soldado…" (So did I, soldier…).

This brief dialogue sheds light over all the previous actions, not only for the reader but for the protagonist himself. He begins to muse about how he has been helping people in the city but only for his own personal gain and how he has been avoiding contributing to the well-being of the city like everyone else he has encountered in the day. All the quests done are illuminated as both being useful and irresponsible. Though he had been helping the town, he was doing it for selfish reasons and without any real drive to help. He could have just as easily spent the day doing tasks that would have hurt the city. The brief internal monologue is left incomplete. The ending is intentionally left in a bittersweet sense of realization without resolution as the protagonist returns to his shelter in the laundry for dinner.

It is the way Sebastián Armas closes his story that gives *Modus Vivendi* a higher degree of literary quality than that of other works in the genre and most games. By the end the user may have beat the game by solving the tasks and reaching the ending, but the character in the story has not managed to gain much. Contrary to what might be expected from a game, the main character is not a hero who saves the kingdom, just a regular person who cannot influence much outside his immediate sphere, but can be a useful citizen if he chooses to be. The bigger storyline—the political intrigue that will shape the fate of Rome— is left unfinished without the protagonist in any position to have a role in it.

The time period provides a convenient middle ground between games and literature. Ancient Rome with its monsters and myths is both the inspiration of countless games and the origin of many classic tragedies and epics. The story even opens with a dream about a Medusa attacking the populace. But although the time period is explored more by games and popular media than by literature, the theme and concerns of the plot are contemporary. Rather than dealing with the usual classical themes from both genres, *Modus Vivendi*'s focus on city life and personal responsibility rings very true to today's era of people being absorbed in their own lives and ignoring the world around them. The characters in *Modus Viendi* are living during the height of the empire, but contemporary readers know that Rome fell. This sends a warning that even our era can come to an end if we do not act to stop this from happening.

IV. *Golpe de Gracia:* a Proto-literary Videogame

Golpe de Gracia, created and directed by Jaime Alejandro Rodríguez Ruiz, is an interactive hypermedia story that plays as a text-heavy videogame. It combines elements

from eagle-eye-view games, point-and-click games, and multi-path story interactions. The story is about a priest, Amaury, who is in the hospital after a murder attempt against his life. The mystery deals with this character's past, who tried to kill him, and why.

Jaime Alejandro Rodríguez Ruiz is an engineer turned literary scholar and writer who resides in Bogotá, Colombia. His profile at the Pontificia Universidad Javeriana website notes: "Soy un ingeniero fascinado por la literatura que ha terminado encontrando en la cibercultura un espacio donde convergen sus intereses creativos, académicos y pedagógicos" (I am an engineer fascinated by literature who has found in cyberculture a space where his creative, academic and pedagogical interests converge.) (http://www.javeriana.edu.co/ Facultades/C_Sociales/jaime_a/). He has published a number of books, both creative and scholarly, and *Golpe de Gracia* was included in the second volume of the *Electronic Literature Collection*, which contained four works in Spanish.

The story is divided into three distinct sections, titled "Cadaver exquisito," "Línea mortal," and "Muerte digital." Each section is unique in scope, interactivity, and point of view. The user must successfully navigate all three to piece together the plot as a whole.
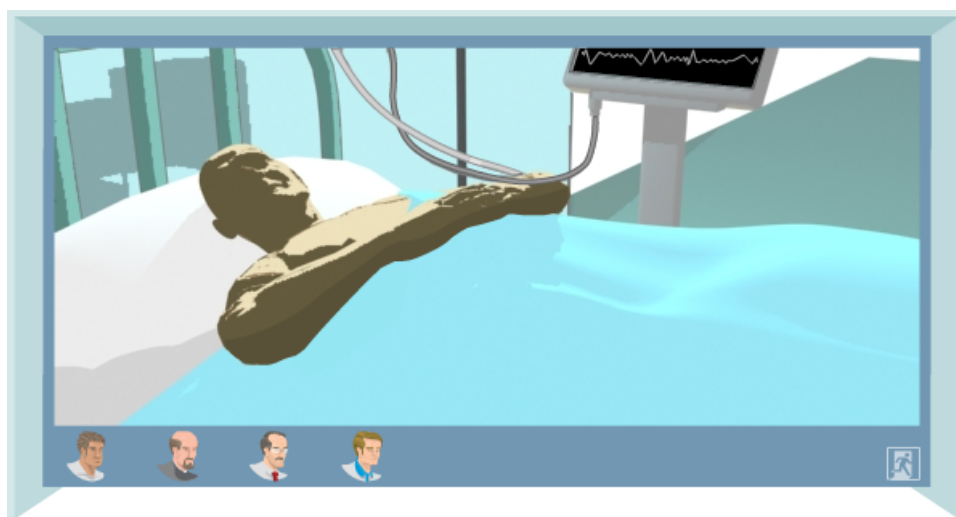
*Opening scene of "Cadaver exquisito"*

The opening chapter, "Cadaver exquisito," which is also called "Mundo 1," takes place in a hospital with a man in critical condition. The figure is generic, still undefined. The narration, which is text at this point, informs the user that this man can be anyone—your boss, your priest, your teacher, or your father—and that he will be receiving visitors who will not be kind to him. These four characters are selectable. Clicking each name will put that character in the bed, accompanied by three available visitors.

The visitors come as shadows whose dialogue includes both screen text and voice acting. Based on their depictions, all four men have stirred up much hatred and caused plenty of damage in their lives. The visitors show no sympathy, instead taking the opportunity to attack the man and show their glee at his fate. At this point in the story it is not clear who these four men-options are; we are only given their jobs: boss, priest, teacher, and father. All they have in common is that they are about to die and have caused a lot of damage. We are not always told what each did. Each has three visitors who reproach him, although he cannot fight back, expressing how glad they are that he is going to die. As far as the visitors are concerned, there is not much need to go over the details of what each man did. They are taking the opportunity to say things they have never been able to say.

The most striking element of the first scene is how little sympathy the story creates for the four men who are about to die. The voice acting and the text deliver the visitors' emotional anguish and hatred. Not even with the men at their most vulnerable can the visitors find room for compassion or forgiveness. And without any voice to advocate for the bedridden men, the reader sides with the visitors, a troubling sensation as one of these dying

men is the protagonist and the character who will be controlled by the reader in the next section.

Once all four men with their visitors have their say, the work shifts away from the static bed scene and into a multiple-choice window where the user has more options to explore the chapter further:
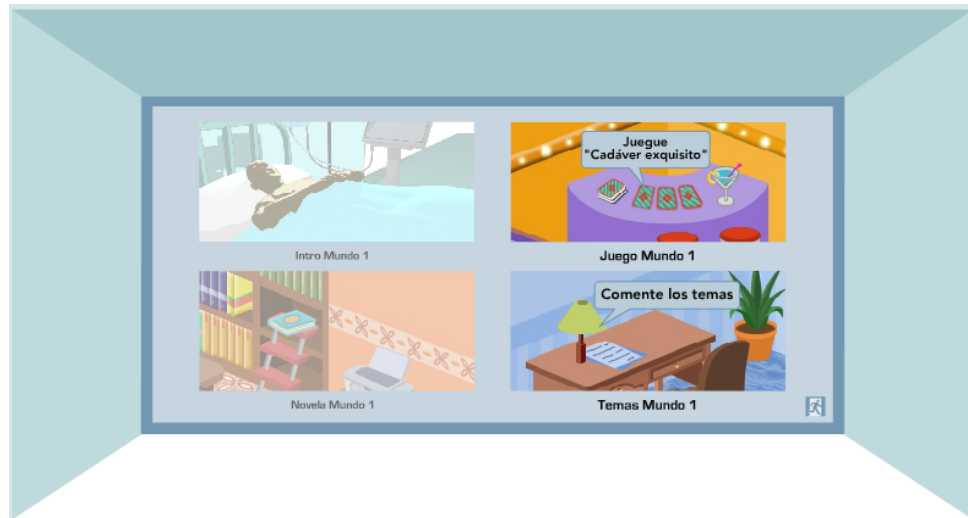
Golpe de Gracia, World 1 after the bed scene

The chapter is effectively finished and what is left is to explore is the gears behind it and how the work of electronic literature was made. The first option allows replaying the chapter. "Juegue 'Cadáver exquisito'" (Play "Exquisite Corpse") opens a new window to play a game where a collaborative story between users takes place. Each person can write up to three hundred words to move the story forward based on what the previous person wrote on the theme provided. This game was not functional at the time I tested *Golpe de Gracia* in 2013. Given *Golpe de Gracia*'s dynamic nature and the fact that it was designed to have a proper ending, the activity is most likely finished without further additions being made.

Unfortunately, no links are provided to see the finished outcome or what previous participants did.

The third option, "Lea 'Comiendo del muerto'" (Read "Eating from the dead man"), also opens another window with selectable blocks of text that provide further information about the characters. These discuss all four men, allowing the user to see things from their perspectives and those of other characters, though it is not always clear who is who. These text-reliant sections allow for a deeper exploration of the themes and characters than is possible in the interactive sections; however, they are such a disruption from the core storytelling device that their purpose is questionable. On one hand, they provide more information to get to know the story world, but on the other they seem like footnotes at best, filler at worse.

The last section, "Comente los temas" (Comment on the themes), jumps to the author's blog where he discusses the themes of the work from a broader literary tradition and invites readers to discuss them. An interesting aspect of this last selection is that the author of *Golpe de Gracia* takes the role not only of the author explaining his work, but also of an academic going over its details, themes, and influences. Much like "Comiendo del muerto," they serve to expose the gears inside the machine. I will discuss the effect of this exposure on the reading experience later.

The second world, "Línea mortal" (Deadly path), has Father Amaury, one of the four men in the previous chapters, flat-lining and facing a near-death experience. He travels through three different purgatory-like stages until he returns to the world of the living. This section plays more like a videogame than the previous one. Whereas in the first chapter the user was limited to clicking text options, here she or he controls the protagonist as he moves

in a two-dimensional world. The reader has to navigate Father Amaury to collect puzzle pieces, avoid monsters, and solve puzzles and riddles. Just as in videogames, the risk of being defeated is very real, requiring starting all over again. Once all pieces have been collected, Amaury has to face the reality that he was not the good person he thought he was and he attempts to find some sort of spiritual growth.

Much like at the end of the first world, there are four options to explore. Two of them are similar to the previous sections: replay and the blog. "Lea 'Coordenadas imprecisas de la muerte" (Read "Imprecise Coordinates of Death") is another dead link. The final options send the user to a wiki site and the suggestion that the user contribute an entry on the concept of cyberculture.

Of the three worlds, the second one is the richest in mythos and literary references. Galician folk stories and Aztec mythology inspire many characters and settings, all of which the author goes over in detail in the linked blog. Unfortunately, the second world is also the most difficult to navigate. Each stage is timed and each mistake deducts from this timer or makes you start over. This section is disproportionately more difficult than the previous worlds and the following one. This distracts the reader from reading the story and appreciating the world and makes him or her focus on surviving just to get through.

"Muerte digital" (Digital Death), the third world, takes place from the point of view of a reporter who wants to find out who tried to kill the priest. Where the second section took the form of an adventure game, this one uses the point-and-click genre where users need to explore the scene and collect clues in order to discover the culprit. The investigator visits a series of locations and interviews potential suspects. After hearing all the testimonies, the reader selects which person from that location is a possible suspect. In order to determine

who is innocent and who might be responsible, the reporter interviews each of them to find holes in their alibis or reasons they might have to hurt the priest. In the final section all four suspects are investigated further to discover the motives. Once everything is revealed in *Golpe de Gracia*, the user is again presented with four out-of-story choices similar to the previous worlds.

Each world has its own interface and style of interactivity. Despite the discordant interfaces and often frustratingly repetitive game play, each world does a good job immersing the user in the world of *Golpe de Gracia*. Complications arise when the various worlds are compared to each other. Story-wise, the differences are also problematic. Amaury's spiritual journey makes him face his true self, demons, and gods; eventually he comes to terms with what he was accused of in the first world, setting the scene for redemption. The first two words are about his spiritual journey. After this, a crime scene would be too tangential. The question of who wanted to kill him is not a driving plot point in the previous worlds.

Although the game-play elements get the job done, they suffer from a high degree of difficulty for an average player and may be potentially hard and frustrating for neophytes. It is too easy to fail, and this requires starting over. For example, the "La Costa da Morte" section in the second world requires the user to collect eleven pieces of a puzzle while avoiding monsters and monitoring the remaining time and life levels. During all of this, the reader is also expected to read the sailors' stories, which are inspired by Galician folk tales. But the time is ticking during these conversations with the sailors, and death means having to talk to every single sailor all over again. With dying being so easy, the reader's attention may sway away from the narrative and focus on survival. The small margin of error and the punishing nature of failure detract from immersion. Fortunately, the work does not force

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much linear progression. All three worlds can be explored in any order, and even within worlds there is some degree of flexibility for which stage the user wants to play. However, completing each world takes numerous attempts.

Another immersion problem stems from the post-world sections that invite the user to be part of the cyberculture world, discuss themes, and collaboratively create digital works. This pulls the reader out of the story world and places her or him side by side with the author looking at the work as a digital artifact. That this is done between each chapter—chapters that are already composed in a frustrating way that requires constant retracing of steps due to untimely defeats—keeps the user detached from the work, with the reality of a computer program always in the foreground.

Although the user interfaces in *Golpe de Gracia* and the post-chapter sections frame the work as a digital multimedia narrative and insist that it must be perceived as such, the story itself is less convincing in this respect. In his blog the author discusses the themes incorporated into his work and explains how these relate to traditional literature and the cyber world. Each world has its own themes, many of which have little direct relation to cyberculture. Per his blog, the first world is about old age, sickness, and authoritarianism; the second, about Galician legends and near-death experiences; and the final one, about the soul vs. technology, anarchy, the hacker / the hikkomori (http://recursostic.javeriana.edu.co/ multiblogs/golpe.php). This contrast between trying to read the story and the constant efforts of *Golpe de Gracia* to remind the user that it is a work of electronic storytelling is its biggest fault as a storytelling medium. It is like watching a film, while at the same time watching the making-of documentary, with director commentaries turned on, and with the stunt people waving at the audience whenever they come on screen, and with a faulty DVD player that

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needs constant resetting. And with each section being followed by links to discuss and read further about the themes of the story, the user is expected to take it seriously and meditate on it, when he or she was never allowed to get emotionally invested in the story in the first place since the fourth wall was constantly getting shattered by the author himself. Focusing more on the story and less on the technical and thematic elements and easing the difficulty would have allowed the story elements to come forward.

Ignoring the difficulty and immersion problems, which are more design issues rather than inherent flaws, *Golpe de Gracia* serves its purpose of showcasing how literature and its themes can be transplanted into a game world. It could be argued that the difficulty of the levels is a part of the experience and must be taken into account in the work's understanding. However, this causes the user to explore the world less as a world and more as a piece of software that must be outsmarted, a series of ones and zeroes instead of a developed fictional universe. It is, in the end, a work that will be of interest to those who are already interested in the field of electronic literature, but will probably push away those who are new or distrusting. There is simply too much exposure to what lies inside the machine, which detracts from the experience.

A valid question is why this work is a piece of electronic literature and not a videogame. Its inclusion in *Electronic Literature Collection, volume 2* is not enough. I would argue that this is a piece of electronic literature because it says it is and treats itself as such. As mentioned in the previous chapter, it seems to be mandatory that hyperfictions make meta-references. *Golpe de Gracia* does this, not within the story elements themselves but in the interludes between them, and it does so in a heavy-handed manner. The author's blog about the work initiates the discussions about the themes in it, something usually left to

scholars and enthusiasts. Videogames generally do not take themselves as seriously and do not pick themselves apart while still alive and kicking.

Is a work like this really literature? As the blog states, literary devices and themes heavily influence the foundation of the work and its characters. From the standpoint of intention, the author has taken pains to pull from both literary and digital traditions. How successful he is in his attempts is an entirely different question.

A Limited Sampling

The stories covered in this third chapter do not fit into a defined category as easily as those in Chapters One and Two did. Chapter One was about linear narrations and Chapter Two was focused on hyperlinked prose. The spectrum here is too wide and diverse. For the sake of showing a progression from print prose to electronic literature I have limited myself to text-heavy works, but the complexity of these works can go even further to the point where not even words are a requirement. If something can be done in a computer and that something can attain some degree of literary quality, it can then be considered a work of electronic literature.

Saying that works as those included in this chapter possess some literary quality might seem odd to people more accustomed to traditional print literature. The word literary is strongly associated with literature, which has for thousands of years been associated with text. I hope that the progression of works I discussed starting at Chapter One and ending here shows how such a term does apply to works like these. As authors explore more variations and become more familiar with what can be accomplished with computers, our definition of what is literary will have to expand and adapt even further.

Conclusion

Approaches and Impact of Electronic Storytelling

The stories in this study explore what computers can do for literary storytelling that would be impossible in traditional print literature. These works are only a sampling of what is available and do not reflect everything that has been done and what the genre is capable of. These works are experimental in their execution and have both faults and successes. I have showcased the possibilities and the different approaches that creators have taken according to their overall goals and visions.

When compared to what is being done in videogames and other kinds of computer software, these works may seem primitive and simplistic, but for literature they are complex and groundbreaking. As in most forms of art, small groups create these works, with the burden often falling on one person; they lack the budgets and monetary goals of bigger productions. This limitation of resources and capacities has to be factored into the creation process. A part of artistic creation is working with the available tools and skill set and pushing them as much as the creator is capable of. One of the problems with electronic literature is that not only are the tools not properly understood, but also there are always more tools available if the creator just takes the time to learn how to use them. Sometimes, then, a creator tries to use too many tools. *Golpe de Gracia*, for example, tries to do too much at once and has difficulties maintaining the quality of each stage of the story. *Modus Vivendi*, on the other hand, sticks within the limited scope of the genre, using its strengths while not attempting to do something it cannot. This is one of the problems that creators of electronic

literature have to deal with and at some point a line must be drawn to determine what will be used.

Though the focus of this study is storytelling, it would be unfair not to mention other types of electronic literature that fall outside my scope, as this would create a lopsided picture of the field. Other genres are being practiced with just as much creativity and experimentation, and these are being taken in directions not possible for narratives. Electronic poetry has seen some experimentation about the meaning and power of words with techniques such as randomly generated poems, word replacement, animated poetry, and line reordering. Some of the questions that electronic poetry asks include: where does meaning come from? And can a poem say something if there is not an author with something to say?

The density of verses in electronic literature and the technical capacities of computers can and have given birth to some interesting experimental works. Electronic narratives make us question how a story is told and allow us to see new ways of doing this. Electronic poetry has the capacity to challenge the very notions of meaning and aesthetics by creating poems without authorial control. If a digitally generated poem can be beautiful and profound, what does that say to us?

There is also another category of works that do not have a simple equivalent in traditional literature. One of the strongest representatives of this is Belén Gache's *Word Toys*, published in 2006. Shaped as a book with animated turning pages, *Word Toys* is a collection of fourteen mini-games involving a variety of themes, ranging from history to literature to children's stories to poetry. Though the title is in English, the collection of digital mini-games is in Spanish and draws from Spanish-language literary traditions. I have mentioned

one of the sections, *Escribe tu propio Quijote*, in the introduction to this study. Here the game presents a Microsoft Word screen and asks the reader to start typing. No matter what the reader enters, the words that appear on screen are Miguel de Cervantes' novel. Another of Gache's mini-games is *La Biblioteca*, a collection of old book covers with reviews written based solely on the book's title and cover. Readers are invited to write their own reviews of these books and submit them. Another section, *Poemas de agua*, is a static image of a sink. Clicking on the knobs makes letters spill out from the faucet and form a line of text from a known writer in the sink. Repeated clicking yields new lines. Though not a proper literary genre, *Word Toys* develops amusingly simple ways to play with the written word, even with the classics of literature, by allowing the reader to create and contribute.

The main purpose of this study is to explore how digital narratives in Spanish deliver their stories. I have focused primarily on the narrative techniques used by the authors and how readers can potentially receive them. My main intention is to improve our understanding of how digital narratives function for both readers and potential creators. One aspect I have not discussed is the difficulty of creating such works. Some of the writers mentioned do in fact have a background in computers. Juan B. Gutiérrez, the author of *Condiciones Extremas*, works as a math professor and has a background in civil engineering. Doménico Chiappe and Andreas Meier, authors of *Tierra de extracción*, know their way around machines as well. How much a person knows computers will define what can be done, which in turn has an impact on the delivery mechanism. However, a background in computing is becoming less of a requirement as time passes and new software becomes available.

In my discussion of *Modus Vivendi* in Chapter Three I mentioned the program "Inform 7," which allows people with little to no programming knowledge to make

interactive fictions. Likewise, WYSIWYG webpage-creating software allows writers to easily create hypertext stories. For more advanced forms of digital storytelling, the series "RPG Maker" can be used to make role playing games. And "Ren'py" is an easy-to-use software that creates visual novels, which are a combination of traditional storybooks and interactive fiction. These programs are simple enough to allow anyone to create something while at the same time robust enough to allow technically advanced creators to design more complex stories. Not only do these programs allow creators to write digital narratives without much coding knowledge, but also many are multiplatform development kits. One code can generate software that can run on multiple systems—PC, Macs, and tablets. This allows creators to focus on creating with the assurance that their work will be accessible to most potential readers.

Creating software may be becoming easier for the uninitiated and the entry barrier may be getting smaller, but this does not mean that a writer used to working only with words can simply switch media. These more visual media demand that writers have some familiarity with images and sounds if they choose to take advantage of such features. To use a personal example, I have been writing an adaptation of Juan Rulfo's novel *Pedro Páramo* in Ren'py. As I work on this, one of the more prohibitive difficulties is access to images for characters, backgrounds, and menus. The genre of visual novels can create strong narrative impact with static images and text, but without suitable imagery, the visual elements can become hindrances. A bad image can ruin immersion. Searching online can only go so far and risks copyright infringement. In order to have visual imagery capable of sustaining the story I would require a committed second or third person to work with me, or learn to do it

myself, which would require me to develop a certain level of expertise over the visual medium. The audio elements present similar problems.

There is, therefore, a give-and-take dynamic in creating works of electronic literature and digital narratives when compared to writing literature. All of the exciting possibilities demand more from the creator. Even if technical advances are making it easier for creators to do digital works, authors now need to be jacks-of-all-trades and capable of thinking in more dimensions than before if they are to reduce the time needed for mastery in each of the components. Another possibility is a collaborative work, which may or may not be feasible depending on the scope of the project and the resources available.

Other Potential Approaches

I have aimed to give an overview of different kinds of electronic literature written in Spanish and to provide a sample of the range of what is being done and the genre's possibilities. I have focused on the narrative techniques, how they work, and how effective they are. Though I have done some literary analysis, this study does not focus on many other valid angles. A deeper study on the recurring themes or stylistic choices in electronic literature could potentially yield some insight on the different priorities and motivations of print and digital authors. Digital culture and modernity run deep in the formation of all of these authors and have affected their work even when they do not address the digital element explicitly. Likewise, a look into the background of the authors could illuminate how different this generation of authors is. Many come from fields and areas of expertise that are not commonly seen as origins for literary creators. Much like electronic literature in English, many works discussed here are from author-scholars who work with literature and art, but

others come from computer and engineering backgrounds. Juan B. Gutiérrez is a computer engineer, for example, while others are in more expected fields such as higher education, journalism, literature, experimental art, and entertainment. With computers being the primary work device for many different jobs, it is not surprising that electronic literature works can be created by such a variety of people, who meet digitally in the same place.

Advances in computing and the Internet have not only given us different ways of creating art. They have also allowed communities to flourish. Internet communities centered on narratives also suggest a field that is ripe for exploration and study. Literature is often seen as a work by a single artist, leading scholars to study the text's implications, impact, aesthetic, etc. More attention is placed on literature as a created product than on the process of creation. Writing, in both fiction and other genres, is a mechanism for people to process information, experiences, thoughts, and troubles. It can be entertainment, self-exploration, and healing, as well as art and a career. Virtual communities provide an enormous number of case studies about the personal benefits of creation. We would have to be extremely flexible to be able to label these works electronic literature. Indeed, it would be easy to argue that they are not literature, since in many cases they are pure prose with no explicit digital aspect outside of the means that allow the writers to share their work. But looking at these stories and communities as a digital product can yield some insight on how the digital is shaping our lives and how writing can impact them in turn.

The Lasting Impact of Electronic Literature

There are many factors that make a genre like electronic literature hard to sell. Despite the wide range of forms it can take—in fact, probably because of this diversity—the

audience simply is not there. There are not enough readers to bring the medium to the forefront of popular attention. Also, the creators of these works are fragmented in interconnected bubbles, aware of each other's existence but still isolated. At least for the uninitiated, this weakens electronic literature's capacity to come forward as one genre, instead appearing as a compilation of discordant pieces. The questions then becomes, what is the point of electronic literature? What is its contribution to the larger cultural realm? One possibility is that electronic literature, with all its experimentation, can provide inspiration for new directions for other media. It can encourage new patterns of perception, new knowledge, and new approaches to entertainment as educational models for pedagogy.

Limited to words, printed literature is, in a manner of speaking, jealous of what other media can accomplish with their unique tools. As such, it has always striven to break the limitations of the page and expand beyond it. Emilio Díaz Valcarcel's print novel *Figuraciones en el mes de marzo* (1972) is written as a collection of letters, receipts, doctor's notes, news clippings, diary entries, and more. Some contemporary novels, influenced by cinema, read more like movies than books. One important way to develop new techniques is to see what other media are doing and try to adapt these things back into print literature. In its infancy, cinema borrowed from the literary tradition, only for literature to then borrow from cinema once it was mature enough to come up with tricks of its own that literature had not yet thought of or polished. This recursive effect serves to help all media grow. The innovations of electronic literature can not only affect print literature, but can also impact cinema and videogames.

These possible directions are not only for creators. Electronic literature can also serve to prepare the reader for a new kind of reading. To use cinema again as an example, thanks to

the influence of film (and the Internet), readers today have seen more than the readers of a hundred years ago. Because of this, pages of scenery and character description are becoming less common in literature. The reader now has an easier time picturing things mentally and does not need this assistance. Readers have seen so much that authors' imagination can go even further in other directions. In the same way, computer culture, electronic literature, and the practices that arise from these can prepare the reader for text content that would have previously been impossible or highly difficult to navigate.

Art is never only about itself; it also serves to help us understand the world around us. Likewise, electronic literature can help readers understand the directions of the digital era. Rosenwald's article "Serious Reading Takes a Hit from Online Scanning and Skimming, Researchers Say" discusses how online habits, heavily reliant on fast skimming for important information, are changing how the brain functions and how it can impact all kinds of reading. Maryanne Wolf, a neuroscientist who studies reading, admits that "It was torture getting through the first page [of Hermann Hesse's *The Glass Bead Game*]. I couldn't force myself to slow down so that I wasn't skimming, picking out key words, organizing my eye movements to generate the most information at the highest speed. I was so disgusted with myself" (quoted in Rosenwald). Researchers are finding that people are becoming incapable of slowing down for deep reading when required, often without even realizing that they cannot do so.

The new reading habits may require new writing techniques that can capitalize on this phenomenon. Presumably, the author of a work of electronic literature is heavily influenced by the digital medium and can write in a way that is more effective in this new paradigm. This would mean shaping the work in order to deliver the biggest impact, either by finding

means to slow the reader down or by delivering complex information and emotional impact in a condensed manner through a combination of techniques. By understanding how these new works function, we can get a better understanding of how reading and information absorption are evolving.

The arrangement of the works discussed in this study may give the impression of an evolution of the genre of electronic literature: my study starts with blognovels and prose written to be read online, moves forward through hypertexts, and ends with videogames. However, this is not the case; these sub-genes did not develop sequentially. All of the different forms of electronic literature described are still viable today. These different kinds may be as different from each other as theater is to cinema, while still falling under the umbrella of electronic literature. One common thread that has guided this study is how each medium is best suited for specific techniques and functions (an image may be better than a paragraph to describe a specific scene, or a crude animation can have a stronger impact than a live-action video), and that one of the strengths of electronic literature is that it can use the best tool for the job. Likewise, different forms of electronic literature can be suited for different effects depending on the intention of the author. Simply because a computer *can* do something does not mean the writer *has to* use that function. A videogame may be capable of more technical effects than a work of electronic fiction is, but if the author determines that advanced imagery is not the best way to tell the story, he or she has effective alternatives at hand.

Each medium has agreed-upon or set conventions that consumers can expect, which creators draw upon to facilitate understanding. We expect theater to have actors, and that the actors will most likely talk and move on a stage. Literature will be words written on a page

for us to read in sentences. Cinema will employ a series of moving images and sounds. And so on. Electronic literature, on the other hand, does not have such clear conventions. It is fair to expect that each work will have its own internal rules that the reader will have to decipher and navigate in order to read the work. And these rules may or may not apply to the next work read. There is no "idea of the object" in the Greek sense. Literature has one, so does film, music, even dogs. The difficulty of describing electronic literature exemplifies the difficulty of grasping what it is.

At present, electronic literature is defined by an 'everything is valid' approach. This can be very freeing but also creates a fragmentation where small pockets of people experiment with different possibilities, almost isolated from each other and incompatible in goals and techniques. We have many examples of the promise and potential of electronic literature as a storytelling device, but the lack of focus as writers move into the future can delay the creation of the masterwork. The pressing question for electronic literature is where are the inarguable masterpieces? Electronic literature in Spanish has no *Don Quixote* or *Hamlet* that has transcended boundaries and received mass acceptance and admiration. Nonetheless, the innovations that creators of electronic literature are producing can be funneled into the more mainstream versions of electronic literature in the future.

If such a work will be created, it will most likely be in a medium similar to one that already has more appeal and acceptance—for example, enhanced ebooks and videogames. Certain enhanced ebooks and videogames might be considered electronic literature; the definition is broad enough to include them if they fulfill the requirements of aesthetic value. These two media already have a large number of people working on developing them. They have a much larger established and expanding market, which means easier access to an

audience. And finally, notwithstanding the technical requirements of the devices, they are flexible enough to allow most of the things done in other manifestations of electronic literature.

Videogames are very popular and gamers are always looking for new things. As the market becomes more and more saturated, creators are being forced to be creative in order to stand out, and some of these innovations are narrative-oriented. Story-driven videogames with less than usual focus on the gaming elements are becoming more common. These games sacrifice gaming elements in the hopes of achieving a larger literary scope. More importantly, among the gaming community, these games are becoming more accepted as a legitimate gaming experience. Gamers are less resistant to the concept of "more of a story than a videogame" in their videogame consumption than before. And these games can draw from the contributions of electronic literature.

Electronic literature in Spanish has a trickier situation. Most internationally known games are created in English or Japanese and either translated or consumed in their original form. Add to this the impression that most of the Internet is in English with the fragmentation caused by virtual communities and the outcome is that creating a digital work in Spanish with mass appeal becomes quite difficult. Electronic literature in Spanish will continue to thrive and go in new directions, but its long-lasting impact will most likely be on print, or traditional literature, in Spanish. Fortunately, Hispanic literature is very welcoming of odd and novel forms of narration and experimentation and many authors are appreciated because of their talent at creating something entirely different. All these narrative innovations will be put to good use.

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