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# Documenting electronic heterogenous literature

Communication effectuée avec la participation de Marcello Vitali-Rosati dans le cadre de la conférence *ELO Conference 2022 – Education and Electronic Literature*, qui s'est tenue du 30 mai au 1<sup>er</sup> juin 2022 à Côme (Italie).

Disponible également en ligne : <https://imaginarium.hypotheses.org/461>

The Répertoire des Écritures Numériques is a project of the Canada Research Chair on digital textualities, directed by Marcello Vitali-Rosati. If I am an assiduous reader of fantasy, I have been since my teenage years an electronic reader: if I grew up with fanfiction and the multitude of blogs of amateur writers, I may have always grown up WITH these fictions: my first smart phone will have been used only for that, as I learned my basic python on Ren'Py. I am intimately convinced that this reader story is an insight for what's to come—and for the political bias that will drive my communication.

The platform was initially created in 2015 by Marcello and has been re-make this summer, and it is this new version that I will focus on today, although I would like to thank Servanne Monjour and Enrico Agostini-Marchese for the work done on this first incarnation.

## First of all: what is the role of this REPERTOIRE?

The primary goal of this platform is to reference digital literary works, and in particular—at first—those non-hypermedia works that cannot be referenced by the NT2 repertoire. If this approach has opened up over time, we can now consider the Répertoire as a tool for exploring emerging forms of digital literature, in all their diversity...

WHICH IS A LOT, I grant you.

So, we document a body of work ranging from literary blogs to interactive fictions:

So mostly we address:

- Writing on platforms like Wattpad or fanfiction.com
- The networks literature
- Notifictions

- Digital native books and web publishing
- Games, whether they are interactive fiction or visual novels
- Purely narrative or poetic textual video games
- Works in augmented reality with or without book support
- Works in virtual reality...

In short, we have work to do!

Our corpus is not limited by geographical or linguistic questions: the hope of the circulation of the artworks and their possible reception outside of its initial framework being a hope too great for us to wish to limit it with geographical borders and such.

The approach here is not to legitimize works that already exist by themselves and that, let's not lie to ourselves, have an audience outside our academic spheres - which is for the best!

## Why was I talking about with a new version?

The repertoire went through a little sleep phase before being entrusted to me. And I took advantage of this incredible opportunity to go and take advantage of the LQM partnership to establish a common vocabulary for descriptions of literary objects, first with Benoit Bordeleau and Pierre Gabriel Dumoulin, then more widely with the LQM community. We worked with Opentheso, in order to be able to work together: to have systems of votes and candidate terms, to enrich the records of each term together. This painstaking work allowed us to highlight the quality of possible qualification: the use of SKOS and a hierarchical thesaurus allowing us to choose the degree of precision in the qualification of each element. The fields are then key concepts allowing a whole hierarchy.

This work allows us, for example, to work with other thesauri on specific points: for example, on the immensity of the sub-genres of science fiction and fantasy, the thesaurus of the Laboratoire junior des cultures de l'imaginaire has been a precious help.

We work on Omeka S which allows us to directly link the thesaurus and the directory when we fill in the forms! It is then possible to jump to the term's page, and find definition, notes, and translation. A whole lot of information that can improve the experience and understanding of these works.

## Which method then?

Faced with this diversity it is fundamental to find common grounds to document the works, this first time of the description is often formal!

## To document these works we need to describe them.

In the very first step, we explore the immensity of the web to find potential works. If it seems very vast—and there is cyberpunk diving in the experience I assure you with joy—many platforms, reference sites or enlightened amateurs have already constituted places of corpus allowing us to find tracks. Once the work is found, it is often possible to find a pocket of production which is close to it. Thus, IFDB or VNDB or even the work of ELO is precious to us!

Then—of course—we test the work to the best of our ability and the media available to us.

We then determine if it is literary or digital (two simple-ish criteria to establish):

- Digital works; the work must therefore initially be native to digital or not be experimentable without it. Thus a Wattpad fiction, even a homothetic one, will be native to digital, while a book in which you are the augmented hero and whose clues are only available on an application, for example, will be impossible to experience without a digital reading support.
- The question of the literature is more difficult. Let me take a moment to establish our criteria:

To define play, I will draw on Jesper Juul's (2005, 36ff) comparative study of the definitions of different theorists (Caillois, Huizinga, Suits, Avedon, Sutton-Smith, Crawford, Kelley, Salen and Zimmerman). He arrives at six essential and necessary points for recognizing a game:

1. The rules: a game is based on a system of rules;
2. A variable and quantifiable outcome;
3. A valuation of this result: values are assigned to the different possible results, some negative, others positive;
4. The player's effort: he/she makes an effort to influence the result, the games allow to take up one or several challenges;
5. The player is invested in the result: there is an emotional investment in the result produced;
6. The consequences are negotiable: the same game, based on the same rules, can be played with or without consequences in "real life".

However, in a literary work, not all of these elements are present. It would then be possible to distinguish between the two by the lack of one or other (or several) of these criteria. A

linear work with minimal manipulation is not going to rely on a strong system of rules; and the consequences are rarely negotiable: changing the text in its course is rarely possible in literature. First of all, the variable result: a literary work can have multiple ends. However, they exist in a limited number (even if this number can be large) and are predetermined by the author or the authorial figure. Jesper Juul explains when he takes fictional hypertext and storytelling as examples of elements that are close to play, but do not have all the characteristics of play and therefore fall outside the category.

The result will not be quantifiable, at least not visibly, for the reader: there is no notion of score or of greater or lesser success. The work is read or not read, which brings us to the criterion of the result. In short, there is no possibility of failure that sends the work back before the moment of error to pick up the story where it left off: everything is scripted and if the ending is "bad" or describes a failure, it is not that of the person who experiences it, but a diegetic failure of the characters.

And to stay in our beloved literary discipline and try to create an artificial border with cinema or other forms of creation, the predominance of the text or at least its presence in the foreground will be important here.

Like all criteria of classification all this is debatable - and we often discuss it! However, it is necessary to find criteria to limit the already titanic work of documentation that we have undertaken.

## What particular approaches then and why?

This is a legitimate question at this point of my presentation.

I am going to try a presentation in two times here: first of all, the formal importance of materiality: support and creation means allowing to establish and to understand the framework of production as much as the constraints of the work and on the other hand by the procedural modalities: the gestures and interactions necessary to read the work.

And in a second time the intimate docking of this classification with the literary forms and genres already known, as well as their necessary adaptation.

The materiality is fundamental in the experience of a work, what we can affirm has the continuation of Cavallo and Chartier notably. Now, the materialities of digital literature and video games can be very close (same supports, same controllers, etc.).

We live in a material world, whether it is a world of immediately tangible objects or immaterial objects stored on servers and carried through cables.

This cohabitation between material and immaterial is moreover evoked by Jay David Bolter:

Our technical relationship to the writing space is always with us as readers and writers. Literacy is, among other things, the realization that language can have a visual as well as an aural dimension, that one's words can be recorded and shown to others who are not present, perhaps not even alive, at the time of the recording (2001, 16).

For a work to exist, to be perceived and thus experienced by a reader/receiver: it must be embodied. It is therefore necessary a way to enter in contact with it. And if this process was for a long time the impression on paper, it can be done today by various methods, so much on walls, by painting or projection, on various screens, on fabrics, etc.; an incarnation underlined by Christina Haas taken again by Jay David Bolter:

As Christina Haas (1996) puts it: "Writing is situated in the material world in a number of ways. It always occurs in a material setting, employs material tools, and results in material artifacts". (Haas, 1996; Bolter 2001, 17)

This is what is described in particular with the reading medium: a work will not be constrained in the same way on a smartphone or on a game console - on an Amiga or on the latest iMac. These material considerations allow us to understand how these works were produced, to place them in a context of reception and in communities: thus, the modders (in the strong sense of Becky Chambers) who continue to use the Apple II to tell their dystopian stories say something different by this production process in 2022 than if they were using the latest Unreal Engine.

Even before apprehending the meaning of the text, our experience of the world must pass through our own senses, equipped or not. If we cannot yet apprehend telepathic sharing, it is essential to find ways of transmitting thoughts from one individual to another. For that, it is necessary to have a trace of this thought, and even more, a comprehensible, shareable, and durable trace. All this is possible through manipulation. It is because it is possible to make experience of the work—to navigate and circulate,—in it that it becomes possible to understand it and to document it for us.

These are—for us—the procedural modalities: how—by what means and gesture—is it possible to interact with the work? should we click on it? shake it? walk in it or make an avatar move in it?

This combination allows me to keep the most concrete archive possible of the physical experience of the work. This is to note grouped with image and video recordings, as well as live broadcasts on the twitch channel of the project of the work. It is then possible, or at least we hope so for the time when these works will not be available or poorly available to continue an analysis of these works. At least to be aware of them and to keep them in the body of our work.

This brings us to the anchoring that we wish to be strong in the cultural heritages. As I said in the introduction, I have been a reader of the imaginary for a long time. And I could thus experiment in the first place the importance of the naming of the genres in the choice of works by a readership. We know it by the numerous studies of the reception of which I make us grace here—the paratext is fundamental to think a work. It also passes by the possibility of seizing what is going to fall in our hands.

In our non-digital reading experience, our mood for reading a comic book will not be the same as for reading a novel, will it? That's why the literary form category exists: what is this thing you're going to be able to dive into? is it an iconotextual arrangement or a brick of text requiring an analytical reading? is it a video game novel that will probably require some agentivity from you? or more simply a children's app book?

Once you've established what your reader is interested in, it's important to have an idea of whether it's compatible with his or her tastes. For example, I HATE crime and erotic romance novels. I abhor them from the bottom of my little reader's heart. Well, I wouldn't want to stumble upon it by accident. Simply because the label was out of place. Outside of my little person, this trend is demonstrated every year by readership studies conducted by Babelio or Goodreads: genres are strong polarizers. If we want our work to be useful to real readers and not just to us who read these works with our sharpest critical eye, it is essential to allow this approach.

## And then?

If, like me, after a long day of reading in the metaverse while trying not to get seasick, you are asking yourself existential questions, here are my few hopeful tracks for the future.

We would like now that our corpus is starting to be consistent—exceeding a thousand works and growing at great speed!—to use this data to quantitatively document the trends of this corpus: when did this or that practice come to the forefront? are there declines and peaks? Are they related to the popularization of certain tools? of certain practices?

Is it linked to geographical or linguistic areas?

In short, now that data collection is beginning to find a rhythm, and even if the work to be done is still immense, we can envisage working WITH these data in a nice DH approach to try to better understand the stakes and the evolutions of this discipline that is digital literature.

All this will undoubtedly have to be accompanied by a deep work of archiving and safeguarding, of conservation and creation of traces. Many works can no longer be

referenced because they are no longer accessible. This confronts us with an exciting form of urgency!

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