

Variable Fiction, a New Literary Genre Questioning Cooperative Writing and Reality Jam

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VARIABLE FICTION is an original literary genre based on a new type of informational element, which we call a *Topos*.¹ It can be defined as modeled, crossmedia, interactive and massively cooperative fiction. Variable fiction is meant to be broadcast and edited on any and on all media, digital or not.

«THE 3FOLD SPACE» is the first variable fiction. Approximately 2000 people have already contributed to the writing and 500 of the resulting texts have been selected and merged into the fiction which contains over 1500 different pieces.

The French digital platform, www.3espaces.com, was developed over a period of 6 years and tested for 2 years before it was launched in May 2007. This platform is an innovative interactive reading-writing-glossing space which is visited by approximately 5000 readers and writers every month.

The 3FOLD SPACE cooperative writing campaign is due to last until 2014. It will progressively extend to different languages and countries. Each country will create an independent «sphere» after the initial “model”, with specific local additions. A common bilingual core (English and French) will incorporate the texts that have been deemed the most important by each sphere.

The most complete artistic experience that variable fiction can offer is best described as «pervasive» as it takes place both in real urban environment and in the media. Such an event was organized in March 2008, when one «episode» of the fiction was presented in the most important Parisian commercial center and first subway hub worldwide, *Le Forum des Halles*, creating a kind of “reality jam” experience and questioning the frontiers of fiction in our digital society. Over one million people came into contact with this pervasive fiction in the course of one week.

Topos and variable fiction

The basic idea behind the *Topos* is that crossmedia content should not be meant for adaptation but for

actualization. Adaptation derives a second object from a first one and so on. Actualization requires a determined and identified *virtual object* that *actualizes* itself according to the different media, users, uses, needs and situations.

This virtual object is not just a “matrix”: it is a modeled informational space that is defined, organized and constructed for the purpose of coherent extractions and combinations.

Being modeled, a *Topos* enacts rules, constraints and categories that determine which elements may or may not belong to the virtual space. Consequently, any element that conforms to the criteria may be introduced into the *Topos* and a relevant position found. Coherent cooperative creation and re-use (remix) is thus possible, even on a large scale.

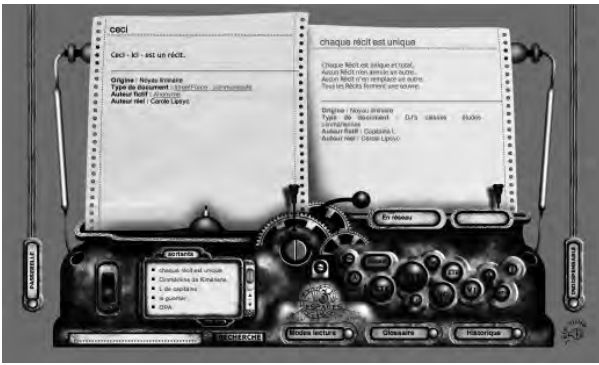
VARIABLE FICTION denotes a literary and narrative *Topos*.

Variable fiction and cooperative writing

The 3FOLD SPACE digital platform provides readers with different tools which allow them to:

- perform “active reading” which includes interactivity, annotation, the selection of favorite texts and the writing of “satellite texts”;²
- create their own character and animate it via a blog; and
- take part in the cooperative writing of the fiction.

THE 3FOLD SPACE is a literary work. This means that the aesthetic dimension of literature takes precedence over the cooperative dimension. Cooperative writing must contribute to the quality of the work but cannot be considered a goal per se. This explains why the cooperative contributions need to be evaluated by an editorial committee. By contrast, comments, «satellite texts» and blogging do not require any editorial control. They do not belong to the official narrative: they



The digital platform

contribute to the adoption of the fictional universe by the community of readers.

Cooperative writing must be distinguished from collaborative writing and from collective writing. Cooperative writing refers to a creation process where every contributor is distinct and where each element that s/he brings is acknowledged as his/hers; collaborative writing describes an activity that combines people with different skills (illustrator, engineer, writer, etc.); collective writing applies to a group working together to produce a document without any possible distinction concerning the contributions of each member. Cooperative writing, however, does not imply the traceability of publications as wikis do: it is about the individual characteristic of the contribution.

Each variable fiction can produce its own rules concerning the role of cooperative writing and the necessity of an editorial committee. In the case of THE 3FOLD SPACE, I am the author of the model, of the narrative data, of the preliminary core (the first 1000 texts) and I head the editorial committee. This fiction is first and foremost an authorial fiction, but I have invited my readers in. Legally, the fact that the contributors follow the rules that I have edicted and that I eventually choose which texts belong to the *Topos* designates me as the author of the fiction. Each contributor is the author of his or her own text but not of the fiction. These fluctuations and possibilities between exclusive and cooperative authorships are representative of the digital era creation.

Variable fiction and reality jam

On March 2008, THE 3FOLD SPACE was broadcast on a pervasive mode:

- Over 600 m² of vinyl posters were displayed along 3 aisles across the commercial center, interacting with Bluetooth messages sent on the visitors' phones, 2D codes, audio messages, street theater shows, clips screened in the movie theaters and showing on shop screens, etc.;
- Text messages and emails were sent to the readers who had subscribed;

- An exhibition was set up on Second Life; and
- A pervasive game was organized that included many different technologies in the city and online.

The episode ended with an incident happening that had been announced in the story: a spatiotemporal slowdown. The readers who received the text or email messages were given instructions concerning the happening. The last step of the pervasive game also included the same instructions. Thus the happening was part of the story and the participants became actors of the fiction. They made it exist in the real world. Two hundred people met in the main hall of the commercial center on the last day of the event and froze for four minutes. When they moved again, they handed a book, a magazine or a text to a passer-by and then scattered.

In this case, the reality jam was not created through 3D visual simulations or through images but through literature invading the urban space, through interactivity and acting. The use of everyday technology (cellular



The final happening and the 3FOLD SPACE map on the ground or the hall

phones, emails) enhanced the immersive feeling. People actually had the impression they were living in the fantastic universe of THE 3FOLD SPACE for a while.

To conclude I would like to emphasize the fact that variable fiction, which is a literary genre of our digital era and communicating society, requires important human and financial means. The pervasive episode required the involvement of 40 different partners and the team was made up of around 50 people. Furthermore, variable fiction also requires time: time for creation, time for expansion, time for the conquest of an audience, time for the teaching of its semantics. To develop such new forms of arts, artists have to accept to become researchers, entrepreneurs, negotiators and educators.

- 1 This term is inherited from the antique art of rhetoric and has lived already more than one life throughout history, particularly in philology and literary theories. Here, though, it is used with yet another new meaning.
- 2 Texts that are inspired by the fiction but that do not belong to it.