

Loss of Grasp

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“A high quality interactive work that makes us reflect on the connection between control and lack of control... Playful and disturbing.”

ICIDS 2020 Jury

Loss of grasp and state of bliss

Abstract

In the interactive narrative *Loss of Grasp*, the reader's gestures fully contribute to the construction of meaning. The reader can experience the character's feeling of loss of grasp in an interactive way. The reader can then feel a form of "bliss" – to quote Barthes' expression – in this interactive experience, which helps him/her fully identify or be empathetic with the character. However, this bliss based on a state of loss can also be experienced by the author, whose piece is bound to disappear (because of the disappearance of Flash for instance) and who has to recreate and give birth to it again and again. And this bliss can also be experienced by the translator (*Loss of Grasp* is available in 11 different languages). Although having to translate unexpected aspects – such as different semiotic forms and gestures – may be unsettling at first, it can turn out to be an opportunity for the translator to find a way to counter global digital cultural homogeneity and give life to cultural diversity again. This link between loss of grasp and state of bliss that can be experienced by the reader, but also by the author and by the translator, is rooted in the Digital.

Keywords

Loss of grasp, bliss, digital literature, gestures, obsolescence, translation

Introduction

In *Le Plaisir du texte* (Barthes, 1973: p.25), Roland Barthes makes a distinction between the text of pleasure (“texte de plaisir”) and the text of bliss (“texte de jouissance”). This text of bliss is “the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts... unsettles the reader’s historical, cultural, psychological assumptions” (Barthes, 1973, p.25). It is also the text – and the world – which we lose grasp of. This is the theme of the literary interactive narrative *Loss of Grasp* (<http://lossofgrasp.com>)¹, an online digital creation (and also an application for smartphones since 2019) available in 11 different languages.

This screen-based work contains visual elements (mainly words) and sounds (voices and music). The piece requires headphones (or loudspeakers) and a webcam (for the fifth scene). The visual design is quite minimalist: words

written in white on a black background. This narrative is not a hypertext playing with non-linearity (it contains six scenes that follow one another), but it is nevertheless fully interactive. The reader’s gestures play an important role in the construction of the meaning of the narrative, as we will see later. The interaction with the piece lasts about 10 minutes.

This creation won the *New Media Writing Prize*² in 2011 and received the Runner up for the *Coover award*³ in 2020. It is part of the *ELMCIP Anthology of European Electronic Literature*⁴ (2012) and is included in the *Electronic Literature Collection volume 4*⁵ (2021). It is taught in several universities (curricula in electronic literature and creative writing), but also in secondary schools (Bouchardon & Brunel, 2019; Brunel & Bouchardon, 2020).

In the literary narrative *Loss of Grasp*, six scenes feature a character who is losing grasp on his wife, his son, his own image..., and who

¹ Bouchardon Serge and Volckaert Vincent, Déprise, 2010, <http://deprise.fr> (Loss of Grasp for the English version, 2010, <http://lossofgrasp.com>). Video captures of the interactions: https://youtu.be/nd6_b158qOs. Official selections, articles and pedagogical material: <http://www.utc.fr/~bouchard/works/deprise.html>;

² https://newmediawritingprize.co.uk/archive/?tx_category=winner&prize-year=2011;

³ <https://eliterature.org/2020/09/3707/>;

⁴ Engberg M., Memmott T. and Prater D.: <https://anthology.elmcip.net/works.html> (2012);

⁵ Rui Torres, Kathi Inman Berens, John Murray, Lyle Skains & Mia Zamora, <https://collection.eliterature.org/> (to be published, 2021).

is feeling manipulated. The Barthesian “state of loss” in *Loss of Grasp* will be analyzed at three levels (reader, author and translator). The tension on grasp and loss of grasp experienced by the fictional character also mirrors the reader’s experience of an interactive digital narrative (first level, the reader’s level). This tension between interaction and narrative felt by the reader has its equivalent in the tension between interaction and narration experienced by the author. Besides, for the author, the rapid obsolescence of digital hardware and software may in some cases also lead to another state of loss; the author has to consider the piece as a continuously reinvented one if he/she wants the piece to remain available (*Loss of Grasp* was first developed in Flash in 2010, then recreated in JavaScript in 2010). This is the second level, the author’s level. Finally, in order to touch a large audience, with its cultural and linguistic diversity, it is important for a digital creation to

be accessible in different languages. However, translating an interactive and multimodal piece into another language is something so unusual that it also brings a state of loss for the translator (third level, the translator’s level).

Can these three states of loss, rooted in the Digital, lead to a “state of bliss” insofar as they “discomfort... unsettle the reader’s [and author’s and translator’s] historical, cultural, psychological [and technical] assumptions” (Barthes, 1973, p. 25)?

The reader's discomfort

Numerous interactive works of digital literature, notably interactive narratives, largely call upon what I call *figures of manipulation*, meaning gestural manipulation (Bouchardon, 2013). Since antiquity, figures have been a significant part of rhetoric, even though rhetoric should not be reduced to rhetorical figures. Figures are generally divided into four main categories: figures of diction (e.g. anagram and alliteration), figures of construction (e.g. chiasmus and anacoluthon), figures of meaning (tropes, e.g. metaphor and metonymy) and figures of thought (e.g. hyperbole and irony). The rhetorical figure is traditionally defined by Quintilian as a reasoned change of meaning or of language vis-a-vis the ordinary and simple manner of expressing oneself⁶. Jean-Marie Klinkenberg (2000) defines a rhetorical figure more precisely as a *dispositif* consisting in the production

of implicit meanings, so that the utterance is polyphonic⁷. In interactive and multimedia writing, the polyphonic dimension of the figure also relies on the pluricodal nature of the content. I have identified rhetorical figures specific to interactive writing: *figures of manipulation*, meaning gestural manipulation (Bouchardon, 2018). It is a category on its own, along with figures of diction, construction, meaning and thought.

Throughout the whole narrative of *Loss of grasp*, the reader is confronted with *figures of manipulation*: the reader is facing a manipulation based on a difference between his/her expectations and the display on the screen. For example, in the first scene, the reader advances in the story by rolling with the mouse over the sentence which is displayed on the screen, thus allowing the next sentence to appear. The speaking subject – the narrator – talks about the control he has had over his life so far. But after a while, with the sentence “*Everything escapes*

⁶ “un changement raisonné du sens ou du langage par rapport à la manière ordinaire et simple de s’exprimer” (Quintilian, *De institutione oratoria*, IX, 1, 11-13);

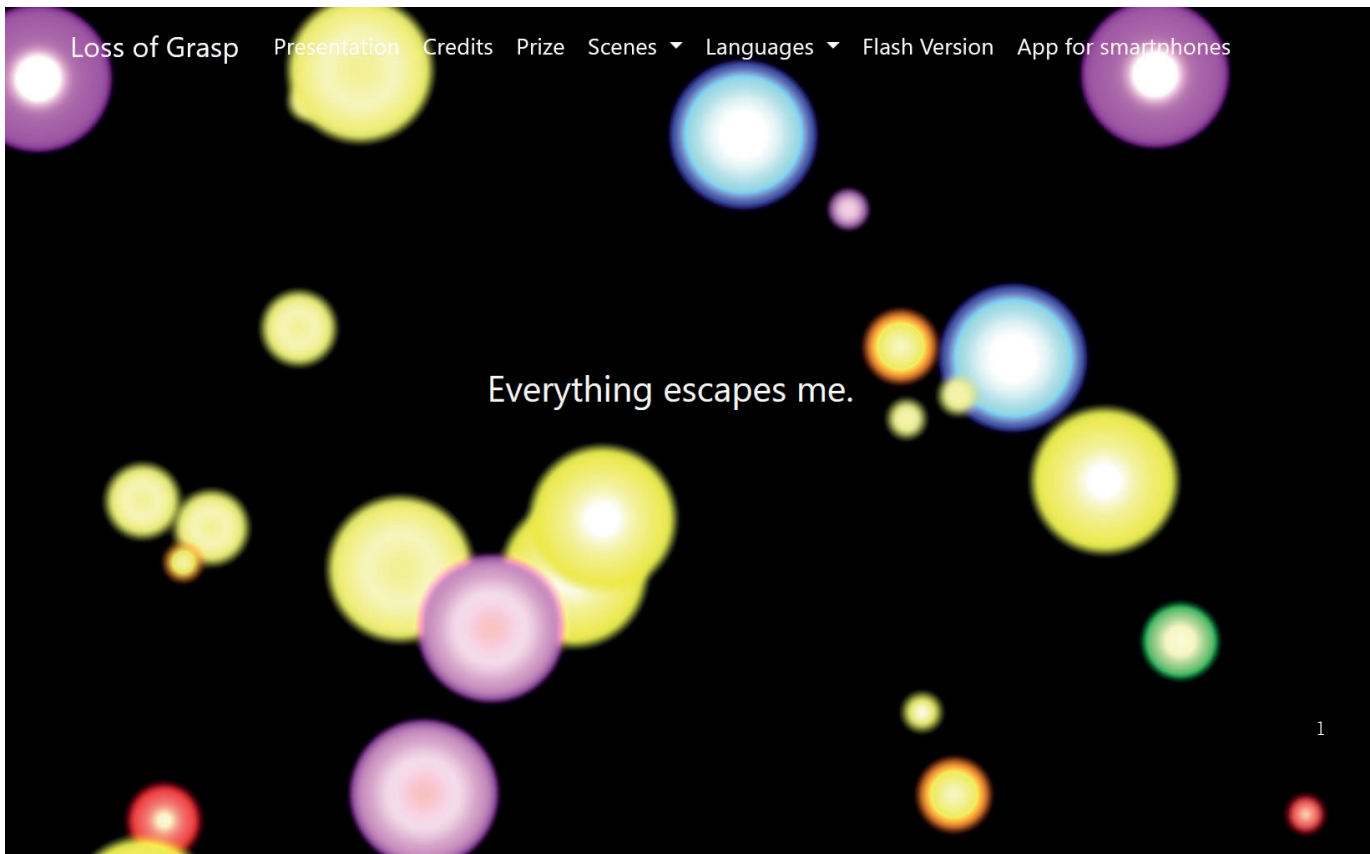
⁷ “un dispositif consistant à produire des sens implicites, de telle manière que l’énoncé où on le trouve soit polyphonique” (Klinkenberg, 2000: 343).

me", the mouse pointer disappears (Fig. 1). The reader can continue to roll over each sentence to display the following one, but without the help of the mouse pointer on the screen. The reader can start experiencing the loss of grasp through his or her gestures. The text becomes a "text of discomfort".

The second scene stages the encounter between the character and his future wife, twen-

ty years earlier. While the character "ask[s] questions to reveal her", the reader can discover the face of the woman by moving the mouse pointer. These movements leave trails of questions which progressively unveil her face. The questions themselves draw the portrait of the woman.

In the third scene, the character cannot seem to understand a note left by his wife: "love poem or breakup note?" The reader can expe-



rience this double meaning with gestures. If the reader moves the mouse pointer to the top, the text will unfold as a love poem; but if the pointer is moved to the bottom, the order of the lines is reversed and the text turns into a breakup note. As in other scenes, the Barthesian “state of loss” can be based on the staging of an appearance/disappearance (“la mise en scène d’une apparition-disparition”, Barthes, 1973, p.23).

In the fourth scene, the teenage son asks his father (the narrator) to read his written assignment on the theme of the hero. However, instead of concentrating on his son’s essay, the father reads between the lines. The reader clicks on the text and sentences appear (Fig. 2), made up with the letters from the text, such as:

I don't love you.
You don't know me.
We have nothing in common.
I don't want anything from you.
You're not a model for me.
I want to make my own way.
Soon I will leave.

Don't have a her
 have never had a
 value one quality
 them, but I don't l
 consi ers that wh
 his herbic acti ns
 over? Nothing but
 shines through hi
 to live a life of its
 finding o their wa

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hero. As far back as I can remember, and even after this, I can't remember a hero. The hero figure has no authority or moral value more than we love them nor would we care what makes a hero. It's not his uniqueness or his heroic deeds that put the title on him. It can be anything. I tend to believe in the hero of his own accord. The authors of the comic books and a few harsh and envious reviewers

you don't know me.

working hard, I don't doubt because I don't know you. I can recognize a fanatic. If one reads for his feats, heroic deeds are not the action of the creator but the audience, occasionally I have

That's the first time I've ever seen a hero in a comic book. I've seen a lot of heroes in movies, but I've never seen a hero in a comic book. I've seen a lot of heroes in movies, but I've never seen a hero in a comic book. I've seen a lot of heroes in movies, but I've never seen a hero in a comic book.

But I can't focus on the words.

In the fifth scene, even the own image of the character seems to be slipping away as the image of the reader appears on the screen via the webcam. The reader can then distort, manipulate his/her own image. The character confesses: "I feel manipulated."

In the sixth and last scene, the character decides to take control again. A text input window is proposed to the reader, in which he/she can write. But whichever keys the reader presses, the following text appears progressively: *I'm doing all I can to get a grip on my life again. I make choices. I control my emotions. The meaning of things. At last, I have a grasp...* Here again, the reader is confronted with a figure which relies on a gap between his/her expectations and the result of his/her manipulations on screen. Thus through his/her gestures and through various figures of manipulation – which could as a matter of fact appear as variations on a *figure of loss of grasp* – the reader experiences the cha-

acter's *loss of grasp* in an interactive way.

In this interactive narrative, the gesture fully contributes to the construction of meaning: the reader experiences in an interactive way the character's feeling of loss of grasp. This interactive narrative is a "text of discomfort" that makes us reflect on the feeling of loss of grasp that we can sometimes experience in our life.

The author's discomfort

The author's discomfort can be analysed at two levels: the tension between narration and interaction, and the disappearance of some works due to hardware and software obsolescence.

Firstly, we can draw a parallel between the interaction/narrative tension experienced by the reader, and the interaction/narration tension experienced by the author. Insofar as the piece is interactive, the author expects certain gestures from the reader. But nothing guarantees that the reader will know what gestures to make. While the author of a printed narrative may wonder whether the reader will be able to interpret the content of his/her narrative, the author of an interactive narrative may wonder whether the reader will be able to manipulate the content (this manipulation being closely related to the question of interpretation as seen previously). With the Digital, it is indeed not

only the medium, but the content itself which becomes manipulable. Thus in the first scene of *Loss of Grasp*, I was not sure whether having the mouse cursor disappear would still get most of the readers to continue, or whether manipulating content without a cursor would turn out to be too difficult and even lead some readers to think there was a bug and just leave the narrative.

Secondly, the author's state of loss of grasp can also be linked to the disappearance of some of his or her online pieces, especially pieces developed with the *Adobe Flash* software which are no longer available since January 2021. Given the obsolescence of devices and software, should an author strive to preserve his/her works at all costs, or promote the "aesthetics of ephemerality" (Saemmer, 2009)? There are three options for managing the perennity or non-perennity of a digital creation, depending on the type of creation and the author's aesthe-

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tics: archive the work along with all the records of its life cycle (including the design process, the sources, and all the different versions); let it go (the aesthetics of ephemerality); continuously recreate and reinvent it. The three options are legitimate (and sometimes combinable), depending on the artistic project.

Having to decide between these three options can be very discomfoting for an author. Concerning *Loss of Grasp*, I decided to reinvent/recreate this interactive narrative – originally programmed with Flash in 2010 – as a web-based creation but also as an app for smartphones, both in JavaScript⁸. This led me to take a stand as an author and to rethink the digital age itself.

Regarding preservation, the digital age is undoubtedly and against all expectations the most fragile and complex context in the history of humanity. The added-value of digital technology is thus not where one expects it to be. The digital medium is not a natural preservation me-

dium. However digital technology makes us enter another universe, a universe of reinvented memory. From an anthropological point of view, this model of memory seems more valuable and more authentic than the model of printed media which is a memory of storage (the book that one stores on a bookshelf or the memory that one would store in a compartment of one's brain). Indeed, cognitive sciences teach us that memory does not function according to the model of storage. From this point of view, digital literature can be regarded as a good laboratory to address digital preservation: it makes it possible to raise the appropriate questions and presents the digital age as a shift from a model of stored memory to a model of reinvented memory (Bouchardon and Bachimont, 2013).

The initial state of loss (the anxiety to see the piece disappear) actually led me to a “state of bliss”, inviting me to rethink some of the design and the interactions of the piece, making me feel

as if I was giving birth to this narrative once again. This recreation also paved the way to new and unexpected translations.

The translator's discomfort

The original version of *Déprise* (in French, 2010) was first translated into English, Italian, Spanish and Portuguese (2010-2013), and then into Arabic, Chinese, German, Hungarian, Polish and Russian (2020-2021). María Mencía, Søren Pold and Manuel Portela (2018) have identified four dimensions involved in translating digital literature: translinguistic, transcoding, transmedial and transcreational. With the researcher Nohelia Meza, we interviewed the translators of *Déprise / Loss of Grasp* and wrote an article in which we underline that these dimensions are found in the translators' experiences with the piece (2021).

The translator of digital literature is so-

metimes in a state of loss of grasp when trying to translate the specific aspects of a digital literary piece. Such a piece is indeed not only linguistic, but is also multimodal as it contains images, sounds, animations and interactions. Besides, insofar as a digital piece is first and foremost a programmed piece, the translator may have to look at the code – which can be for him or her a “Text of Discomfort” – to understand the randomized, generative or timed dimensions of the piece.

The interplay of semiotic resources (words, images, sounds, gestures) plays an important role in digital literature translation practices. Can we truly achieve intersemiotic cohesion in the translation of a piece, for example when recreating similar literary effects (i.e. figures of speech and rhetorical figures)? In *Loss of Grasp*, such literary and rhetorical effects are possible thanks to “figures of manipulation” (meaning gestural manipulation, as we have

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File Edit Search View Encoding Language Settings Tools Macro Run Plugins Window ?
lexds.en.xml
33 <rendezVous>
34 <phrases>
35 <phrase>But the meeting was trumped.</phrase>
36 <phrase>I only realized it later.</phrase>
37 <phrase>The woman in front of me seemed so perfect, I was flabbergasted.</phrase>
38 <phrase>I couldn't say anything coherent.</phrase>
39 <phrase>I was distraught.</phrase>
40 <phrase>I had to ask questions to reveal her.</phrase>
41 <phrase>Without my being aware of it, this stranger became my wife.</phrase>
42 <phrase>We shared everything.</phrase>
43 <phrase>But I never got to truly know her.</phrase>
44 <phrase>Today, I still wonder.</phrase>
45 <phrase>Who is following whom?</phrase>
46 <phrase>When I love her, she loses me.</phrase>
47 </phrases>
48 <questions>
49 <question>Who are you?</question>
50 <question>Do you like...</question>
51 <question>What do you think about...</question>
52 <question>Where are you from?</question>
53 <question>Where are you going?</question>
54 <question>Do you think...</question>
55 </questions>
56 <sounds>
57 <sound value="Have you lived around here for a long time?" alteration="Have you used the wrong ear for a long time?" />
58 <sound value="What do you do for a living?" alteration="What do you do fall and evening?" />
59 <sound value="You are very pretty!" alteration="You all very picky!" />
60 <sound value="You have gorgeous eyes" alteration="You have girly size" />
61 <sound value="I feel we have a lot in common" alteration="I feel we have a lottery, come on" />
62 <sound value="Do you come here often?" alteration="Dew comes here often?" />
63 <sound value="Can I get you another drink?" alteration="Caning gets you into the drink" />
64 <sound value="I like the way you smile" alteration="I light the west aisle" />
65 <sound value="Shall we go for a walk?" alteration="Shall the gopher talk?" />
66 </sounds>
67 </rendezVous>

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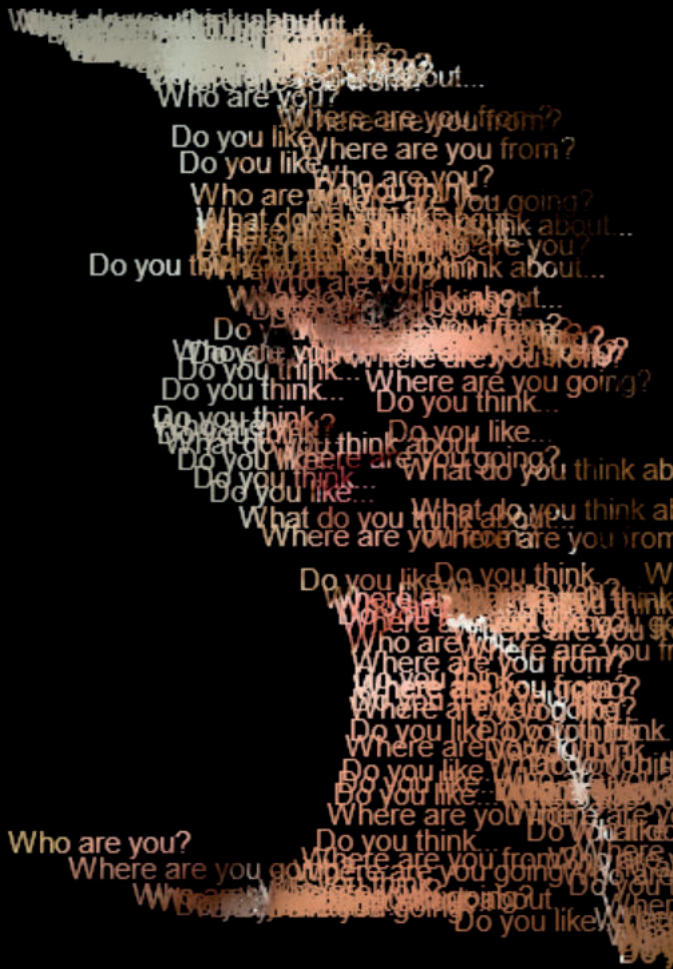
D:\Users\bouchard\Desktop\en.json - Notepad++
en.json
50 "SCENE_2": {
51   "phrases": {
52     "ph0": "2",
53     "ph1": "But the meeting was trumped.",
54     "ph2": "I only realized it later.",
55     "ph3": "The woman in front of me seemed so perfect, I was flabbergasted.",
56     "ph4": "I couldn't say anything coherent.",
57     "ph5": "I was distraught.",
58     "ph6": "I had to ask questions to reveal her.",
59     "ph7": "Without my being aware of it, this stranger became my wife.",
60     "ph8": "We shared everything.",
61     "ph9": "But I never got to know her truly.",
62     "ph10": "Today, I still wonder.",
63     "ph11": "Who is following whom?",
64     "ph12": "When I love her, she loses me."
65   },
66   "questions": {
67     "q1": "Who are you?",
68     "q2": "Do you like...",
69     "q3": "What do you think about...",
70     "q4": "Where are you from?",
71     "q5": "Where are you going?",
72     "q6": "Do you think..."
73   }
74 },
75 "SCENE_2 FLATTERIES": {
76   "Vous habitez la région depuis longtemps ?": "Have you lived around here for a long time?",
77   "Vous évitez la légion depuis longtemps ?": "Have you used the wrong ear for a long time?",
78   "Et vous travaillez dans quoi ?": "What do you do for a living?",
79   "Et vous travaillez l'envoi ?": "What do you do fall and evening?",
80   "Je vous trouve vraiment très jolie !": "You are very pretty",
81   "Chevaux, brousse, bêlement... près jolis": "You all very picky!",
82   "J'ai l'impression qu'on a beaucoup de points communs": "I feel we have a lot in common",
83   "Chemins pression en Allemagne point comme un...": "I feel we have a lottery, come on",
84   "Vous avez des yeux somptueux": "You have gorgeous eyes",
85   "Vous avouez des notions de cœurs": "You have girly size",
86   "Vous venez souvent ici ?": "Do you often come here?",
87   "Vous avez l'absent acquis": "Dew comes here often?",
88   "Puis-je vous offrir un autre verre ?": "Can I get you another drink ?",
89   "Pigeon oulr un Notre Père ?": "Caning gets you into the drink",
90   "J'aime votre façon de sourire": "I like the way you smile.",
91   "Gène, votre garçon mourir": "I light the west aisle",
92   "Vous voulez marcher un peu ?": "Shall we go for a walk ?",
93   "Nouveaux-nés barges et il pleut": "Shall the gopher talk?"
94 },

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7

texts of discomfort

seen in the first part of this paper). These figures rely on a gap between the reader's expectations while manipulating the text and the result on the screen. The translatability of the literary effect of the figures of manipulation calls for a careful intersemiotic translation in the target language, and there is sometimes some friction with the original work. For example, in scene 2 (the rendez-vous when the protagonist meets his wife), the reader can click on a question mark (or roll over with the mouse) for a series of questions to appear randomly on the screen: "*Who are you?*", "*Do you like...*", "*What do you think about...*", "*Where are you from?*", "*Where are you going?*", "*Do you think...*" The questions progressively unveil the image of the woman's character (cf. figure 6). In this case, the translation process aims to create a harmony between manipulation, animation, and the linguistic texts in different languages that construct the same image. The aim is not only to grasp the meaning of the aesthetic elements of expression but also to search for literary patterns (Bouchardon & Meza, 2021).



I had to ask questions to reveal her.

Also in scene 2 of *Loss of Grasp*, there is a play with what I call “alterations” or misunderstandings between what is heard and what is seen on the screen. A speech recognition software program was used to generate these alterations or misunderstandings in French. For example: *Vous habitez la région depuis longtemps? (Vous évitez la légion depuis longtemps ?)*. The translators tried to reproduce this effect in the other versions. Most of them said that they had to look at the source code to translate this scene. Translating the dichotomy of meaning and sound is indeed one of the greatest challenges in the translation of scene 2. The translators’ imagination and stylistic strategies proved a true process of transcreation, considering that the original version was made with a speech recognition software program. Certainly, the linguistic and phonetic exercise triggered the following questions: how can cultural humour be rendered in a work of digital literatu-

re? How do different cultures interpret *Loss of Grasp*? On the one hand, the voices in scene 2 belong to different cultural contexts and individuals; and on the other hand, random cultural elements were used in the translations to fit each individual context. Moreover, these translations show that the inextricable connection between multilingualism and multiculturalism is a challenge when translating a digital piece.

A source of discomfort for the translator can actually be found in the necessity to take into account the cultural dimension of a digital piece. *Loss of Grasp* contains passages strictly related to Western culture. For instance, in scene 3, the reading from left to right of the love/break up letter in comparison to reading from right to left in the Arabic version; also in scene 3, the inclusion of Georges Bizet’s *Carmen* as background music; in scene 4, the concept of “hero” expressed by the protagonist’s son; to name but a few examples. The adaptation to the different

versions of such aesthetic and poetic effects raise the following questions: how do we substitute or compensate for such cultural aspects in the targeted culture? How do we deal with cultural transferences when translating works of digital literature? In the example of the love/breakup letter in the Arabic version, we find that the double meaning and visual effect of the linguistic text is relevant to the meaning of the work, but not culturally consistent with the target language. A similar thing happens with Bizet's *Carmen* opera. This aria plays an important role in the construction of the literary atmosphere of the scene – as the protagonist reads the letter, but it might not be suitable for the different contexts of the translations.

Some scholars put forward the idea of a global digital cultural homogeneity based on digital technology. It is a question raised by Erika Fülöp:

Leonardo Flores highlights that elit depends more on (global) technological developments and international influences than on national or regional traditions. Digital technologies represent such a radical change of paradigm, he argues, that we should consider electronic literature as an international or even postnational phenomenon (Fülöp, 2018, p.271).

In response to this vision of digital literature as an international and postnational phenomenon, Erika Fülöp expresses a desire to “counter the stereotype of a homogenous global culture in the Digital Age” (Fülöp, 2018, p.276), insisting on the fact that digital literature preserves the traces of pre-digital cultures. This potential shift also raises the question of the translation of the creations of digital literature. Should the role of the translator (into English, for example) be to dilute cultural references so that an English-speaking audience may *identify*

with the work, or on the contrary to reproduce any traces of cultural specificity, thus emphasizing the cultural diversity of the productions of digital literature more than their international dimension?

Moreover, how is such cultural diversity expressed? Is it unique through the linguistic dimension of digital literature? We might put forward the hypothesis that the fact that the creations of digital literature are not merely based on words, but also on gestures and animations, reinforces the impact of cultural specificities and the importance of taking these into consideration (Di Rosario & Barras, 2012). The state of loss (loss of cultural diversity in the global digital cultural homogeneity) can then be experienced as a “state of bliss” (rendering of cultural specificities).

Conclusion

In the interactive narrative *Loss of Grasp*, the reader’s gestures fully contribute to the construction of meaning. The reader can experience the character’s feeling of loss of grasp in an interactive way. The reader can then feel a form of “bliss” – to quote Barthes’ expression – in this interactive experience, which helps him/her fully identify or be empathetic with the character. However, this bliss based on a state of loss can also be experienced by the author, whose piece is bound to disappear (because of the disappearance of *Flash* for instance) and who has to recreate and give birth to it again and again. And this bliss can also be experienced by the translator. Although having to translate unexpected aspects – such as different semiotic forms and gestures – may be unsettling at first, it can turn out to be an opportunity for the translator to find

a way to counter global digital cultural homogeneity and give life to cultural diversity again.

This link between loss of grasp and state of bliss that can be experienced by the reader, but also by the author and by the translator, is rooted in the Digital. The Digital always stages a tension between grasp and loss of grasp, proximity and distance, transparency and opacity. The Digital is fundamentally ambivalent, and is consequently a milieu of discomfort which “unsettles [our] historical, cultural, psychological [and technical] assumptions.”

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Images

1. Loss of Grasp, first scene;
2. Loss of Grasp, fourth scene;
3. Three different versions of scene 2: the Web version in Flash (2010), in HTML / JavaScript (2018) and the smartphone app (2019);
4. Example of XML code for scene 2 (for the Flash version in 2010);
5. Example of JSON file for scene 2 (for the smartphone App version in 2019);
6. Loss of Grasp, scene 2.

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