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Making Sense of the Digital as Embodied Experience

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Volume 13 Issue 3 (September 2011) Article 7
Serge Bouchardon and Asunción López-Varela Azcárate,
"Making Sense of the Digital as Embodied Experience"
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Contents of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 13.3 (2011)
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Ed. Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek, Asunción López-Varela Azcárate,
Haun Saussy, and Jan Mieszkowski
<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol13/iss3/>

Abstract: In their article "Making Sense of the Digital as Embodied Experience" Serge Bouchardon and Asunción López-Varela Azcárate discuss a digital creation — *Loss of Grasp* <http://lossofgrasp.com/> — created by Serge Bouchardon and Vincent Volckaert. The work is about the notions of grasp and control. Through an analysis of *Loss of Grasp*, Bouchardon and López-Varela Azcárate show how the Cartesian understanding of private isolated experience, independent of reality external to it, has given way to a communal understanding of experience in which the subject constitutes itself by mirroring himself/herself on its objects, producing a mutual engagement or co-creativity among interdependent intersubjects: the experience of the creators, the experience of the user/participant, and the experience of the semiotician. The first seeks to make the reader live through the experience while telling him/her a story. The second attempts to understand what lies behind the artistic creation. And the third proposes a revision of the ontology of perception and of the emergence of human communicative potential by relating neuroscientific research and socio-contructivist understandings of human physical development, and integrating these findings with the evolving nature of the technical media that social beings use to communicate.

Serge BOUCHARDON and Asunción LÓPEZ-VARELA AZCÁRATE

Making Sense of the Digital as Embodied Experience

The interactive digital creation *Loss of Grasp* <http://lossofgrasp.com/> was conceived and developed in 2010 (with *Flash* Software in ActionScript 3) by Serge Bouchardon (both a practitioner and a theoretician of digital literature) and Vincent Volckaert (a computer engineer interested in literary writing who works with randomness and content generation). The idea was to make the reader live through the experience of "loss of grasp" while telling a story. What becomes of the narrative? The authors' purpose was not to play on non-linearity as it is the case with hypertextual narratives which allow the reader to follow many possible tracks. More than a hypertextual narrative, *Loss of Grasp* is an interactive narrative in which the reader is expected to act. Such an interactive narrative is hard to conceive as it is based on what may appear a contradiction. Narrativity implies taking the reader by hand to tell him/her a story from beginning to end while interactivity implies letting the reader have a hand to intervene in the narrative. How can narrativity and interactivity be reconciled?

In this interactive narrative, the intent was to get the reader to experience through gestures events which the narrator had already experienced. Gesture materializes the narrator's attempt to unveil the woman who was to become his wife (Scene 2), it reveals what the narrator reads between the lines of his son's essay (Scene 4), and it underlines the instability of the narrator's own image (Scene 5). Bouchardon and Volckaert wanted this interactive experience to highlight the notion of gesture and its relation with different media (text, image, sound). Which relation does a gesture have with these media, notably with text? The text is not only a readable text, but also a text to manipulate. The re-writable text only exists in relation to gesture. In an interactive work, gesture acquires a particular role, contributing to the construction of meaning. Yves Jeanneret reminds us that turning a page "doesn't suppose any particular interpretation of the text" (112). On the contrary, in an interactive work "clicking on a hyperword or an icon is itself an interpretative act" (Jeanneret 113; unless indicated otherwise, all translations by the authors). The interactive gesture consists above all in "an interpretation actualized in a gesture" (Jeanneret 121) that in the experience of *Loss of Grasp* becomes embodied experience. While working on the role of gestural manipulation, Bouchardon and Volckaert wanted interactivity to be experienced by the reader as an "in-between" act: neither a direct encounter with the subjectivity of an author nor univocal programming, neither absolute freedom nor the following of a pre-written flux. This in-between is an exciting position which the creators consider as the current "spectatorial condition." Thus, interactivity is not an opportunity to share power with the author; rather, it is an invitation from the author to the reader who is willing to take up the challenge, although reluctantly sometimes, in order to gain some freedom. *Loss of Grasp* is not only the story of a man who loses grasp on his life, it also mirrors the man/machine relationship, as well as the author/reader relationship. The interactive narrative experience allows one to think over the conditions of the intersubjective relationships between an author and his/her reader.

In Scene 1 the experience of the reader/user/participant is constructed by a line asking if your PC is running and a female voice invites you to enter the work by pressing the hash key. The opening sequence of sentences becomes blurry once the participant clicks on them. Lines such as "My entire life, I believed I had infinite prospects before me," "The whole universe belongs to me, I thought," "I have the choice; I control my destiny" sound shaky and insecure. Against these moments of self-assertion, the statement "I am the king of the world" appears narcissistic. The speaking subject becomes equated with the sun, even if not situated right in the centre of the screen. Musical sounds are heard as we click and click on the cosmic black hole. Such "moments of being" occur, as Virginia Woolf explained how the past and the future can be captured in the present moment. But once we move outside the center of the sun, dozens of other self-multiplying and colorful dots appear and the melody breaks into a multitude of discordant notes coming from nowhere and everywhere at the same time.

Next, the user/participant proceeds to try and make his/her way with the cursor. Like a child, he/she explores how the screen responds to the cursor's touch. Almost subconsciously, he/she moves along the source-path-goal of the narrative structure, pursuing the sequence of dots of color, as in conceptual metaphor theory (see Lakoff and Johnson). As they turn into actual pathways, the initial

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doubts of control return together with the question "How can I grasp on what happens to me?" The floating, blurring outspoken thoughts suddenly become stable on the screen: "Everything escapes me; Slips through my fingers … I feel as if I have lost control." This realization seems to be there almost as fixed as a fact. The process event of tracks of dots ceases and shapes seem to elongate and move from a horizontal axis to an oblique and vertical position. No longer following the horizontal narrative pattern of Western writing, the dots begin to lift slowly, like musical notes up the pipes of church organ or like the bubbles in a glass of champagne, disappearing at the top of the screen. The user/participant moves the cursor and the colourful images freeze first, then blur and disappear. A digital clock indicates de current time, minutes and seconds, as if asking you to move on.

In Scene 2, once more the female voice asks to press a key. Vision and colors turn to sounds in the section. Dots become people's voices in a party; a beautiful woman, a brief flirty conversation, a drink, a walk? The insecurity of the male voice (on this occasion we have Bouchardon's voice) turns all questions into incoherent statements which take visually the form of misspellings. Both the creators of the project and their participant seem to work together in this section, asking questions to attempt to unveil the Other: Who? What? Where? Why? The cursor is the pathway to dozens of questions that, in turn, like the strokes in an impressionist painting, reveal the hidden code, the woman behind the screen. She shows a cryptic Mona Lisa's smile, staring at us and refusing to give her real self. The speaking subject claims that "Without being aware this stranger became my wife," and although "we shared everything, I never got to know her truly. Today I still wonder who is following who."

In Scene 3 twenty years have passed. The speaking subject is reading a note she left. He speaks plainly about his loss of control. The lines of her goodbye note float like clouds over the screen and once again become fixed with the weight of words and facts. Moving the cursor distorts them into disproportionate proportions stretching the lines into large haunting fonts or making them converge into a blurring line that suddenly disappears along with the ghostly moans in the background. If the cursor is left inactive for a while, one can distinguish a melody in what previously seemed cries and groans, a telling ultra-tomb version of Bizet's "Toreador Song," appropriate for the unheroic account that follows.

In Scene 4 the speaking subject laments the loss of his role of husband and male figure in control (central dot, sun, etc. are among the symbols previously used). He goes on to analyze the fall of his heroic status as father and author. A kind of Shakespearean monologue is heard as flying ungraspable letters/signs float over the screen eventually taking shape and body. The last sentence of the paragraph summarizes the claims in this section: "The author's offspring will meet their own audience, occasionally finding on their way a few harsh and envious reviewers." The Barthesian reflection on authorship and creativity, where "the deed has to free itself from its creator to live a life of its own" is but one more consequence of the "loss of grasp." The paragraph ends without a full stop, a single dot floating a few blank lines beneath. It is the user/participant who deconstructs à la Derrida the narrative sequence by clicking on the paragraph wall and breaking down into floating incoherent signs. They stand still for a while, trying to reveal the trace behind the textual chain: "I don't want anything from you," "We have nothing in common," "I want to make my own way," "soon I will leave," "I don't love you," "you are not a model for me" and amidst the ruins, the echo, the repetition, the "We don't need no…" of Pink Floyd's song "Another Brick in the Wall," the son resonates against the father, the postmodern against the modern.

In Scenes 5 and 6 the disseminated self, the speaking subject (co-author?), the father, is now an alien to himself and to others (his wife, his son). The world escapes him, and his sense perceptions are deformed: "My own image has escaped me." The — postmodern — user/participant haunts the work of the creator. The deformed face on the screen, with a prominent mutant ear that turns into a mouth and a nose at the same time, reveals the image captured by the webcam. It is the self-reflection of the user/participant. The speaking subject dissolves into the audience. The object usurps the role of creator and turns into the experiencing subject. A mirror image of the original creators, she dreams of control too, she wants to grasp the situation. She moves the cursor seeking her self realization. Suddenly, buzzing words invade the screen like night moths. Impatient to gain control, to ask the questions, she struggles with the cursor under her fingertips. Unexpectedly, the creators intervene. The original speaking subject stops her impossible quest and claims that "It's time to take control

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again." She does not yield and moves on attempting to regain the lost ground, the lost grasp. He speaks again: "it is time to stop moving in circles." He opens up a square for her, a blank writing pad: "This is it", she tells herself, "a *tabula rasa*." She presses the keys with confidence. The click-clicks sound like clear facts: "I will be able to inscribe myself into his text, like a posthuman self." But it is only a mirage. Her sense of touch and sound deceive her. The words are only open events in process. The text does not allow her incorporation, she cannot write her body into the text, she has no grasp over the words that appear on the screen. The trace of the author, of the creators, reveals itself as being already there all along.

Representation can be contemplated as a continuum of increasing depths of immersion, ranging from a temporary suspension of disbelief in traditional fiction and television, through a deeper immersion in a role-playing computer game to a full simulation of an unreal world experienced as if directly through sense perception, but in fact through the wiring of a headset. In all cases the experience, whether factual or fictional, is felt in the same way because several modalities — the material, the sensorial, the spatiotemporal and the semiotic — are combined in a process that produces the effect of authenticity. One of the first questions that comes to mind when reading and interacting with *Loss of Grasp* is whether the story told is real or fictional. Also, one wonders whether the virtual environment has any effect on our perception of authenticity. Life experiences are events. Events take the symbolic form of values that can be applicable to other times and other contexts, carrying more than one level of meaning. Beliefs, values and morals are not simply thoughts and ways of reasoning; they are experiences. Events do not become "facts" until they are negotiated into common experience (see White; Clifford). These negotiations are coloured by emotional and affective content and they take place in our modes of everyday social-life, being represented in different symbolic cultural manifestations (Clifford 100).

One of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's major concerns was to find the relationship between artistic production and personal biological circumstances at the level of sensation and not just in terms of mental concepts and psychological implications. Thus, Merleau-Ponty set out to find the interconnection between Paul Cézanne's vision of disabilities and his artistic creations and to explore the conditions and limiting factors that made possible what he termed a "mutuality" of world experiences, that is, the sense of living and dwelling with other persons who experience and understand the world in a similar fashion. Mutuality here is defined in relation to material artifacts, and offers a framework for understanding the intersubjective basis of perception and action. For Merleau-Ponty, mutuality is not pre-given by virtue of mind and body but is formed through an active process of negotiation between self and others insofar as "there is constituted between the other person and myself a common ground [where] my thought and his are interwoven into a single fabric" (354). This suggests that diversity, difference, and otherness are not the opposite of mutuality but the conditions that bring it into being as people attempt to understand one another through ongoing dialogue and interaction. Mutuality is thus predicated on a foundational difference among persons and is continually being generated, tested out, and reworked through social interaction, thereby turning it from a philosophical into an anthropological question to be understood through people's actions and practices.

The Latin prefix "inter" present both in the term "intersubjectivity" and "intermediality" and "interactivity" stands basically for two meanings: on the one hand, "between and among," but also "mutually and reciprocally." It also appears in "internalization," a process required in perception where content is absorbed and abstracted via a certain medium (biological or technological). Paul Ricoeur has described aesthetic experiences as moments where mutual "understanding ceases to appear as a simple mode of knowing in order to become a way of being" (44) and all participants — subject, reader, critic — might experience a moment of dispossession of their narcissistic egos, instead of a moment of appropriation (Ricoeur 192). Thus, in a triangular process of internalization the "I" subject-participant is able to experience the world through the experiences of the "I" subject-creator, mediated or mirrored by the subject artwork. In other words, aesthetic experience provides a bridge where all subjects/objects involved in the process become "intersubjects" (on this, see, e.g., López-Varela Azcárate, "Exploring," "Posthuman").

In cognitive terms the production of human spatial finitude and delimitation of both space (the skin that separates us from the rest of the world) and time (the perception of a certain life span)

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places the individual at the centre of perception, with objects (things/people/signs) felt (seen, heard, etc.) as fixed around us, against particular points of reference (neuroscientific evidence for deictic pointers, see in López-Varela Azcárate, "Intermedial"). This constructed space acquires frequently a sense of territorial belonging, exemplified in the terms "identity" (immutable Self) and "nation" (the sharing of a birth place). It is through this sense of belonging that the role of history, memory, and art comes into play. Beyond the straightforward remembering of the past, the understanding of art as an "intersubjective experience" constructs interpretation absorbing outside (Other) elements plunged into the present of a translational or mirroring situation with a contextual shift.

Loss of Grasp enacts a story in which the self loses touch first with others, and then with oneself, only to return to others once more, and thus, again to himself (there are several clues that point to the speaking subject being a male). It does so by providing information (text, image, sound) about how the speaking subject feels. In the process of perception, sense data are conceived as sensation acquiring a mental form (*Gestalt* and schema are terms most frequently used). In the process of creation, the artist reverses the process and tries to communicate sensation as closely to reality as possible in order to make the receptor share his/her feelings. The creator may talk about his/her own experiences, as in autobiographical narrative, or he/she may use characters to explore different mental worlds. In both cases, whether in autobiographical or fictional accounts, some unconscious forgetting, and even some conscious distancing might take place.

External objects (a photograph, a special souvenir, a particular taste, as the *madeleine* in Marcel Proust's *A la Recherche du temps perdu*) are used to re-create ideas and feelings, connecting distinct spatio-temporal levels. These objects or memorabilia function as "chronotopes" (Bakhtin), having a metonymic deictic function that helps the process of recall. However, while potentially a source for remembrance, the material traces of the past might be structured by omissions, restrictions, repressions, and exclusions that incite, even as they thwart, total recall. As such, they expose the ever present relations of power inherent in processes of selection, assemblage and ordering whereby events are made into facts, and also into signs. The fact is that what is affirmed (statement) of the event needs to be described so as to appear as facts. Thus, we can say that an event is a fact subject to description, that is, telling. Fictionalization is involved in this process, since it can be considered the provision of a description that transforms an event in a possible object of analysis, that is, a fact. As Jorge Luis Borges writes, "All language is set of symbols whose use among its speakers assumes a shared past. How, then, can I translate into worlds the limitless Aleph, which my floundering mind can scarcely encompass?" (19).

In virtual environments, spatial delocation promotes the dominance of certain senses at the expense of others. *Loss of Grasp* uses three fundamental sensorial modalities: vision, sound, and touch. In a printed text the gaze moves the narrative forward, at least until the reader turns the page. In digital formats the tactile or somatosensory experience (clicking on the mouse or touching the screen) creates the experience of narrative motion, together with eye-tracking movements. The surface of the technical medium, the computer, are all important because they allow information to be introduced from the outside, in this case the track of mouse/key moving the cursor, and the image of the user/participant, captured by the Webcam and reflected back onto the screen.

George P. Landow has noted the fact that in order to distinguish between analogue and digital media, attention should be paid not just to the fact that the networked quality of hypertext configurations is open to the interpretative world of recipients. The notion of "interactivity" means that in process oriented works, such as some of those created in digital formats, performativity means actual actions operated by participants, not just critical readings. These actions are mostly enabled by the connection between three basic sense modalities: vision, touch, and sound, that is, through the technical medium of the computer and its parts, such as screen/webcam, keyboard/mouse, and speakers/microphone. The sensorial experience conveyed in *Loss of Grasp* parallels the struggle of the narrating subject, seeking to find a sense of self and identity. Identity is often described as a stable, fixed entity, a subjective sense, as well as an observable quality of personal sameness and continuity which is pared with a belief in the continuity of the shared world image. Neuroscientists speak of "body schema" and "body image" forged in a dialogue with our life perceptions, social world, and actions. Without others a subject cannot signify. *Loss of Grasp* offers no facts about the subject's identity, it

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only presents a multimodal performance of how such as a subject would feel like. It allows the user/participant to feel like the speaking subject/creator; to share his feelings (perception) of what is like to be a non-self or a self in process. This creation of electronic literature speaks about intersubjective relations. But how? We propose that the idea is to look for semiotic cues, that is, perceptual signs that drive the process of association and work as reminders of something else, bringing to mind echoes from acquired world experience and knowledge, things that suddenly become "common sense." In hypermodal sequences (not necessarily linear, but networked), there are cues of transition that organize the information and indicate if a previous proposition will be expanded, supported, or qualified in some way following rules of causality (consequential/reversed), likeness/contrast, amplification or metonymy/example (from general to particular), concession, insistence, sequence, restatement, recapitulation, time, movement in space, etc. Hyperlinks are just some of such cues indicating casual sequence.

As with many life processes, the complexity of human intersubjective communication can only be captured partially, through cartographic enunciation (see López-Varela Azcárate, "Spatiotemporal"). In *Loss of Grasp* we encounter two modalities of enunciation which correspond to narration (text) and description (text, image, sound). In description the object offers itself to the gaze/ear in the simple coexisting present of its parts. In narrative we can image the gaze of a traveler covering a time span and occupying areas which might offer new vantage points (or points of view). Location, embodiment, and distance enter an intricate set of relations and associations. Images, photographs (e.g., in Scene 2 of *Loss of Grasp* when the user/participant moves the cursor to help unveil the identity of the woman behind the screen), maps, and recorded events (the sounds at the party, the music of El Toreador) they all point back to the body of the speaking subject and the people surrounding him in a certain spatio-temporal location.

While many voices from the world of electronic literature claim non-narratological patterns behind electronic figurations (sometimes self-reflexive, sometimes just open to the world wide web), *Loss of Grasp* brings to the fore this theme of the fragmented identity in formal terms. It does so through the representation of perceptual confusion affecting the visual, auditory, and tactile senses. Thus, floating dots become random bubbles in a glass of champagne, echoes, and ghostly sounds turn into a bizarre version of El Toreador, letters happen to re-arrange themselves by chance, paragraphs collapse under the touch of the cursor, careless strokes disclose the portrait of a woman, and the cursor does not always obey the commands of the keyboard/mouse. They are all used to enhance the perceptual disorganization characteristic of a confused Self. The telling in *Loss of Grasp* is retrospective, almost as if at certain points the story refuses to remember and memory denies full access to and the mapping of the story. Narrative generally takes us on a journey of progress and discovery. In Bouchardon's and Volckaert's creation the knowledge allowed is "so partial that it borders on denial, a revelation so incomplete that it obscures" (Herman 1). The semi-real, semi-fictional world of *Loss of Grasp* is no place for a serious semiotician; someone who would want to grasp "signs" for what they really "are," even if only held at the fingertips. However, perhaps there is a way around the obvious pointer. The location signaled might be the shortest, most probable one, but it does not rule out other possible paths. Instead of a graspable answer, let us put a question: What is the disruptive experience that lurks inside this electronic text and that "disarticulates the self" (LaCapra 41)?

Repressed traumas (whether physical or psychological) emerge at times when the imaginary consistency of body and unified identity is threatened. Thus, trauma is generally brought about by absence and loss. Sigmund Freud's work on loss and trauma, *Mourning & Melancholia* (1917), was developed in the context of his personal experience in mourning the death of his father in 1896. Freud situates the states of mourning and melancholia in relation to chronic depression and long-term outcome of trauma where the sufferer cuts himself/herself off from social reality and experiences a regression into narcissistic identification in reaction to real loss or disappointment. Freud distinguishes between mourning, when the external world becomes empty, and melancholia, where it is the ego itself: "even if the patient is aware of the loss that has given rise to his melancholia … [it is] only in the sense that he knows whom he has lost but not what he has lost in him" (254). With these insights Freud reaches right to the unconscious meaning of the experience and what it is that the external loss represents internally.

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In "Trauma, Absence, Loss" Dominick LaCapra introduces a distinction in the notions of lack/absence and "loss." For LaCapra, "absence" involves the perception of something that was never present to begin with, while "loss" refers to a particular thing/person/event. When "loss is converted into (or encrypted in) an indiscriminately generalized rhetoric of absence, one faces the impasse of endless melancholy, impossible mourning" (LaCapra 698). In Jacques Lacan's theory of language acquisition, closely related with motor development, the relationship between "the Imaginary Order" (the dimension of images, conscious or unconscious, perceived or imagined) and "the real" is enabled through the psychological separation of mother and child facilitated by a third signifier ("the name of the father"), "the Symbolic Order." It takes place after the "mirror stage" between 6-18 months, when the person becomes conscious of his/her own self. In cases of psychosis the paternal function is foreclosed from the symbolic order. This places the person in a non-distinction between the symbolic and the real, and psychotic delusions or hallucinations are the consequent result of the individual's striving to account for what he/she experiences. These experiences are also felt as lacking something, as a void impossible to fill. The symbolic order reflects these gaps in language, and the imaginary order ceases to fill the concrete holes in signifying chains with illusions of wholeness. The real appears as unknowable and surrounded by anxiety: not known not "fact," but, rather, as a narrated "event." Indeed, such an encounter with the void causes a kind of relief precisely because unconscious meaning ceases to produce a signifying chain of unknowable — but ever functioning fantasy interpretations of reality. Once language's capacity as the primary means for mediating between subjective first-person and objective third-person experience becomes compromised, intractable borders are placed between the person and his/her social communities. Thus *Loss of Grasp* dwells near the limits of linguistic expression, the death of language, and the emergence of images as the a prominent example of intermediality.

As summary, we can say that in *Loss of Grasp* the repetition of patterns and suffering coexist with withdrawal protective reactions in an effort to forget and to distance oneself from the traumatic event. Detachment, estrangement, and social withdrawal accompany the silenced secret whose meaning is displaced until such time as the truth of the unbearable can be spoken by the person and, subsequently, heard by others. If the void opens up to an empathic audience, if trauma becomes apparent to a sympathetic user/participant, it does so through the imaginary dimensions of the story, through ambiguous forms which cross between fact and fiction. It is only when we become aware of such peculiar logic that we are able to grasp that "fictitious" does not mean illusory, deceptive, or untrue as such. It is, rather, addressed in order to reveal a paradox and it is in this sense that we lose "grasp." It is in this sense that we gaze and listen to place ourselves in someone else's position. It is in this sense that art speaks across intersubjective positions, and that the critic becomes the host.

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