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Reading Practices in Affinity Spaces: Participatory Forms of Digital Culture

Prácticas lectoras en espacios de afinidad: formas participativas en la cultura digital

Anastasio García-Roca
Universidad de Almería

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Contact:

tasiogr92@hotmail.com

Abstract

In this paper we have analysed the social and creative activities carried out by followers of *A Song of Ice and Fire* series in the web *Los Siete Reinos*. The study has revealed how readers expand and manipulate textual content in order to modify and expand the ludic and aesthetics experience related to literary works: the receiver becomes co-creator of the work. This highlights the importance of affinity spaces in the process of receiving, because it promotes interaction that goes far beyond the understanding and interpretation of the original text. From this perspective, a review of creative practices in this communicative scenario to conclude that these have extraordinary learning potential through which we can come up with innovative proposals in the field of literary education.

Resumen

En este trabajo se ha realizado un análisis de las actividades sociales y creativas llevadas a cabo por seguidores de la saga literaria *Canción de Hielo y Fuego* en la página web *Los Siete Reinos*. El estudio ha permitido comprobar cómo los lectores amplían y manipulan los contenidos textuales para modificar y expandir la experiencia lúdica y estética relacionada con las obras literarias: el receptor se convierte en co-creador de la obra. Este hecho evidencia la importancia de los espacios de afinidad en el proceso de recepción, ya que favorecen una interacción que va mucho más allá de la comprensión e interpretación del texto original. Desde esta perspectiva, se hace una revisión de las prácticas creativas en este escenario de comunicación para concluir que poseen un potencial formativo extraordinario con el que plantear propuestas innovadoras en el ámbito de la educación literaria.

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Introduction

The digital age is promoting new scenarios and ways of interaction between the texts and its recipients. In this sense, new cultural practices that contribute to create affinity spaces are being created (Gee & Hayes, 2012), where users participate not only to share readings, to expand their interpretative horizons or comment on literary contents, but also to take ownership, re-write and/or handle the narrative universe of their favourite texts.

For example, in the website *Los Siete Reinos* (lossietereinos.com), the community of followers of the works of *A Song of Ice and Fire*¹ collaborates in processes of textual production and reception, such as the collaborative creation of wikies that serve as encyclopaedias, the creation of forums to discuss and play, the generation of grounded theories to bridge any possible gaps in terms of textual information, previews of new contents, the negotiation of interpretations, the suggestion of alternative readings or the agreed restructuring of storytelling. An interesting informal learning emerges in all these scenarios (Cobo & Moravec, 2011), which has a training potential in the development of reading habit and the literary competence.

On the other hand, we find a new multimodal and electronic textuality. The existence of different media and the interrelation established among them gives rise to a kind of text that does not start and end on only medium of communication, but is diversified and dispersed through leverage of the different characteristics of each medium, and it results in intermedial storytelling (Gil, 2012). Likewise, the digitalisation of media has resulted in different ways to interact among users and has promoted the unusual development of a participative culture. This way, the idea of media convergence emerges and is characterised by the transfer of information on different “media platforms, cooperation between different media industries and the migratory behaviour of media audiences” (Jenkins, 2008, p. 14). This

convergence is not only evidenced by the use of electronic devices, but it is a process of cultural change instead. This process is implemented in individual consumers and through interactions with other users. Internet plays an essential role in this entire process, whether directly or indirectly, as far as production and -especially- consumption are concerned. Readers must browse different media (TV, Internet, cinema, videogames...) to experience fun or a specific pleasure.

The phenomenon of Harry Potter is an example of media convergence. Some books by J. K. Rowling can be found in the form of hypotexts, film adaptations, a transmedia product as a videogame (*Wonderbooks: book of spells*) with exclusive content and full sense, as well as crossmedia material in *Pottermore* (<https://www.pottermore.com>)². But it is an example of participative culture above all else, because it has a huge active community of fans, willing to play and to extend the Harry Potter experience. This way, the textual offer is not limited to *top-down* content (process of traditional development of contents that are in a strict hierarchical system, from developers to users), but it also has User Generated Content (UGC).

If we proceed to deconstruct the process of textual creation and reception itself, the changes made from the point of view of the reception process are significant, as well as the changes made in the texts from a formal point of view.

Readers are no longer just individual consumers but *prosumers* (Scolari, 2008). Readers do not only interact with texts and give meaning to them, but they also participate in the creation of new hypertextual contents³. Amateur writing and fanfictions are included in the creative possibilities. The latter are cultural manifestations where fans take ownership of hypertexts and play with them, expand and modify them or fill any possible gaps in the story line. It is difficult to determine the precise limits of the concept of fanfictions and everything that surrounds it because it combines different media, genres,

forms and degrees (Cassany, 2010). There are fanfictions in the form of stories, songs, poems, drawings, animations, etc. (Knobel & Lankshear, 2011).

Web 2.0 and participative culture

As stated above, users have the possibility, the need and, in some cases, the obligation to perform new creative and social activities. The great availability of new communication tools and instruments (blogs, wikies, social media...) has boosted the creation of knowledge communities based on shared interests and common emotional implications, where participation and collaboration among users is prioritised, as well as the distribution and reprocessing of contents. Many writers create spaces to gather a group of readers and/or fans together around their works, but most of these websites are generally created by the readers themselves. It is in this spirit that Lluch (2014) has analysed different virtual spaces on reading and focused on the de Laura Gallego forum (Lluch & Acosta, 2012) and those created by readers during a marketing campaign called *Reto Delirium (Delirium Challenge)*, launched by Editorial SM to promote the novel by Lauren Oliver (Sánchez, Lluch & Del Río, 2013).

Web 2.0 is characterised by its potential in terms of collaborative creation. This precisely allows the creation of knowledge communities as voluntary, temporary and tactical memberships defined through common intellectual endeavours and emotional investments (Lévy, 2007; Jenkins, 2008). In other words, the shared interests are the cornerstone of these communities. Their creation and existence will thus depend on the production and exchange of knowledge generated among their members.

It is true that these group are not recently established. Nevertheless, we find significant differences between the traditional Communities and those of the digital age. Among these differences, we can highlight the fact that before the revolution brought by the Internet, the interactions among the members

of a community were not so fluent and immediate (they were established by postal mail, for example), there were physical barriers, the number of participants was smaller and, generally, the knowledge and productions generated did not transcend the boundaries established by the group itself. For example, *trekkies* (*Star Trek* fans) created a great community without the current communication tools (Internet). Nonetheless, they devised their own mechanisms to share cultural productions such as fanzines, posters, comics, pictures or fanfictions based on barter and the creation of exchange groups.

Affinity spaces

The interesting thing is not analysing the community but exploring the spaces where their members gather. For this reason, Gee & Hayes (2012) prefer to focus on those scenarios, instead of on associations based on a specific passion, affinity or interest. Therefore, many questions arise: Any person who visits an affinity space is a member of the community? Where is the line between a visitor and a full member? This line is probably found in emotional, social and intellectual involvement, but it is still blurred. In this sense, a correlation between oral participation of users -where they make direct contributions- and their commitment to the brand, product or text (Guerrero, 2014) should not be established because a significant portion of followers participate indirectly or silently.

For this reason, the focus should be on the spaces created by and/or for the community and the opportunities, characteristics, working and educational potentials should be analysed, as well as the traces left by users. From this point of view, Gee & Hayes (2012) propose the term "affinity space" to refer to this new communication scenario since in nowadays' society groups are often defined by the space around which they associate. Likewise, they have certain ideal characteristics that define them, although identifying common features to all of affinity spaces is difficult given their great

heterogeneity. Nevertheless, there are a series of specificities that they all share to a greater or lesser extent:

- The reason for setting up the space is the existence of a shared interest or effort. Given that these interactions are generally determined by a device connected to the net, aspects like gender, age, ethnicity, disability, the credentials or the socio-economic status of the members are not important.
- The space is made up of as many non-experienced members in the web space as experienced members. In this sense, experienced users facilitate the incorporation of new users through tutors or mentors.
- All of them can produce contents. To that end, there are different forms of creative participation, not only consumption.
- Reputation within affinity spaces is gained in different ways:
- Knowledge is distributed and operates as collective intelligence.
- General, specialised and individual knowledge are developed.
- The content is transformed through interaction.

On one hand, it should be noted that society 2.0 establishes relationships through the production and exchange of knowledge in increasingly complex systems (Cobo & Miravec, 2011). This way, users can get involved, collaborate or associate to participative culture, that is, a culture whose members believe that their contributions are important and have a certain degree of social connection among them. To that end, fans and other readers are invited to participate actively both in the creation and dissemination of new contents (Jenkins, 2010).

This fact introduces a cultural shift, where production is not only hierarchical but multi-directional. Therefore, the writer is no longer placed in the centre of culture (Foucault, 1999; Derrida, 1997; Deleuze & Guattari, 2008). The true cultural revolution of the digital age, as pointed out by Casacuberta, is collective creation, whereby “the artist develops a tool that is to be subsequently used, developed and

disseminated by the public depending on their interests thereof, that may not be the same or even be influenced by the artists’ original will” (2003: 60). This way, writers create a medium so that readers can express themselves and play a creative role. Unlike other cultural models of traditional literacy that strengthen individuality and authorship, the community takes ownership, handles it and, in short, play with the work.

Thus, a collaborative writing determined by hypertext reading and digital environments is generated. The members of these affinity spaces are required to develop new social competences and skills like playing, acting, impersonating, taking ownership of ideas and contents, multitasking, interacting with tools that promote cognitive skills, developing collective intelligence, assessing the reliability of different sources, browsing different media, establishing intertextual connections, creating multimedia contents, negotiating interpretations, etc. (Jenkins, 2009).

Los Siete Reinos

If we focus on the specific field of youth reading and literature, it is noteworthy the countless number of affinity spaces. One of the most active communities of fans created in connection with youth literature works is *A Song of Ice and Fire*, by George R. R. Martin. On one hand, there is the author’s official website (<http://www.georgerrmartin.com>)⁴ and, on the other hand, there are many spaces created by fans such as <http://www.asshai.com>, <http://hieloyfuego.wikia.com> or <http://www.lossietereinos.com>. The reading and writing practices performed in this last space are analysed below.

Los Siete Reinos is a website in Spanish created by and for readers and viewers of this saga. In the heading itself it is stated that *we do not just read*. In other words, participation in this space is just another element of the complex reception process. The website is made up of the web where different news, entries and a forum are

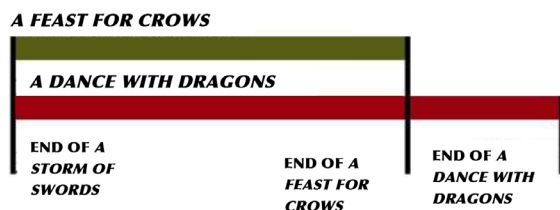
displayed, and where followers can comment on, share and discuss.

Creating alternative reading routes

The story of the last two books published of *A Song of Ice and Fire* (*A Feast for Crows* and *A Dance with Dragons*, specifically), is not ordered chronologically. The approach taken to include the chapters in one book or another is spatial separation. This way, the story of the last two books is simultaneous, but takes place in different scenarios. We can see the temporal evolution of both books in Picture 1. Most of the community of readers did not like this division because it introduced a significant shift compared to the preceding works and entailed a temporary farewell to half of the favourite characters and their relevant stories. Readers showed their disappointment and anger in forums, webs, blogs and social media. Far from resigning, the community had the ability and will to handle and model the texts according to their interests or preferences.

TIME SCALE

A FEAST FOR CROWS VS A DANCE WITH DRAGONS



Picture 1. Time scale of *A Feast for Crows* and *A Dance with Dragons*

Source: <http://lossietereinos.com/>

As a solution, this affinity space opted for an alternative way of reading whereby the chapters of both books were combined, altering their order so that the story's time scale could be kept. The result is known as *Feast-Dance*. This is a new way to go through and restructure the text, in which the chronological order is taken into account more than the spatial order. This proposal had such a great social recognition that most of the community of fans believe that the writer should have followed that order.

Users go even beyond. They suggest two reading routes depending on the kind of reader: a) one for readers who approach the work for the first time, paying special attention to avoid spoilers, and b) another one for readers who have already read or seen the story. This generates a different experience through which the communities of readers play an essential role, taking ownership, resignifying and transforming the works' contents.

Construction of the narrative puzzle

Readers look forward to the publication of *The Winds of Winter*, which will be the next book of the saga *A Song of Ice and Fire*. The author, who is aware of this situation, is sharing some unpublished chapters to keep his community of followers alive and active through new contents. Nevertheless, these chapters do not have the order they will have in the work and it is not even known whether they belong to the beginning or the end of the work. Isolated and disorganised fragments of the work are shared and translated in this space, which facilitate fans to arrange chapters as they please, bridging the gaps among them in the form of analyses, essays, grounded theories, conjectures and speculations or to extend the text in a more creative and imaginative way (*fanfics*).

Shared reading: grounded theories

The community is able to deepen in the text in a way that would not be possible individually because its members operate as collective intelligence (Lévy, 2007). Readers with a poor literary competence, unable to bridge textual gaps in the story properly, are offered the opportunity to access the interpretations from other readers. This way, alternative ways of reading are performed.

Similarly, different readings are generated in this affinity space. Their combination results in an archireading in terms of Riffaterre (1976), a deeper reading agreed by the members of such community. That is what we call interpretative community, in the words of Fish (1982). In this community, a shared system of rules

and/or conventions is established and negotiated, which in short serves to interpret a literary work, a cultural product or a text.

There is a section related to *Theories and Essays* (<http://lossietereinos.com/teorias>) on *Los Siete Reinos*. In this section, readers are offered the opportunity to set forth their explicative theories, which are always grounded with fragments from the text, sequences of the series or other relevant elements, such as interviews with the author, leaking of documents... These conjectures, foresights or essays are discussed by “the Council”, made up of two readers-administrators of the web and a special guest who is an expert in this field. After the verdict, that issue is referred to the other members of the community, who give their opinion, value, reject or support that idea.

Some of these theories show great skills and the development of interpretative competences by users. Some of them had a huge impact on other readers. Indeed, the American writer has intervened from time to time to refute some theories and rumours. In an interview he even had to admit that some of those hypotheses elaborated by readers were right. These hypotheses had made him rethink certain events in the saga. The feedback and the constant play between the role of the traditional author and the creative capacity of his/her readers shows that both figures overlap.

Ice and Fire Role Playing Game

As far as the forum is concerned, the *Ice and Fire Role Playing Game* is noteworthy (<http://lossietereinos.com/foro>) because in this section readers can play by taking on the role of their favourite characters or making up new ones. The role playing game, based on forums, chats, blogs or by e-mail is also known as narrative role playing game, and is an example of constructive hyperfiction or collaborative authorship (Pajares, 1997). This reading and writing practice is relatively usual in affinity spaces related to literary texts, videogames, films or TV series with an active community of fans. This game is about creating a story

between all the participants and each user takes the role of one or more characters of the story. In other words, a text is created collectively and collaboratively just for fun. For this the resulting product does not necessarily have any literary value whatsoever.

This practice is another modality of the role playing game, where participants have to make up a character. To that end, the master⁵ generally provides participants with a registration form. Upon fulfilling it, users have to continue the story from the main character’s point of view, complying with the rules set. The development of actions and events is valued, as well as expressiveness and the way stories are told.

Each forum establishes its own rules of the game and each master specifies them even more in each role playing game. Nevertheless, there is a general code shared by all of them:

- Proper orthography and grammar are required.
- The type of narrative—generally in first person-set has to be respected. Nevertheless, narrative in third person can be used at the writer’s discretion.
- It is forbidden to talk or make Character-Player (henceforth CP) actions⁶ of other users. This behaviour is known in some spaces as “godmodding”.
- Players cannot kill, wound or kidnap other CP without prior agreement with other player.
- *Meta-role* or metagaming cannot be used. This is one of the most frequent mistakes made in narrative role playing games. In this practice, a CP uses some information that is reserved or available to readers-writers only.
- Comments falling outside the scope of the narrative proposal cannot be made. If made, chats or parallel channels are provided.
- Absences longer than 24 hours must be notified to the relevant section or the character will be withdrawn from the story.
- Players must specify the character of each intervention because they may have several CPs.

- Each intervention will have a minimum length.

Only roles related to *A Song of Ice and Fire* are allowed in this forum, unlike -for instance- the progressive role playing games⁷ of the Laura Gallego forum (<http://www.lauragallego.com/foro>), with higher levels of creative freedom and where topics are not so limited. All the games have the same fiction universe and historical context too. Spatial coordinates were events take place do change.

In the case of *Seven Kingdoms*, there were certain rules regarding the ways to play and plan strategies:

- Travel times: times established to make movements.
- The army of each house: each team had specific troops that should be used strategically.
- Rules of war: among them, we should mention “modifiers” and “bonuses” applied to battles, the value of units, etc.
- Moderators reserve the right to increase or decrease the number of rules of work.

The *Ice and Fire Role Playing Game* (<http://lossietereinos.com/foro/el-rol-de-hielo-y-fuego>) started as a conventional narrative role playing game, where players played games and coordinated actions and strategies for a specific objective, which was sitting on the Iron Throne. Nevertheless, shortly after, all warlike actions were paralysed and prohibited, and therefore the objective that pushed participants to compete against one another was abandoned. Users at present do not seek to win the game but to enjoy the story creation process. In this sense, it is more like a progressive role playing game as the objective is creating a story collaboratively where fun and creative writing are the ultimate goal.

Since the stories are at a relatively advanced stage, manuals and summaries have been created to facilitate the incorporation of new writers to the common project. Similarly, a wiki of the *Ice and Fire Role Playing Game* has been created (<http://es.elroldehieloyfuego.wikia>

com/wiki/Wiki_El_Rol_de_Hielo_y_Fuego), where each user can add any information on his/her CP. Once the starting point and the objective are known (they are established by the moderators), new players have to select their characters. Therefore, there are cards that include the name, house or family characters belong, their lives and backgrounds, their economic, social and political status or class along with their place of residence and a picture or a photograph of them⁸. That is to say, they have to specify all relevant aspects of their characters or, if they prefer, they can continue the role of a character that has already been created by other user who left the game.

This way, stories are created through creative creation so that the forum facilitates communication among users through threads or chats to start shared stories, make questions, etc.

Other sections

There is another section on *Los Siete Reinos*, with very little activity and with speculations on the author’s historical inspirations, podcasts, analyses of the works, artistic pictures shared, montages, comics, quizzes for readers... There are many opportunities for social interaction, production and reception of texts and knowledge production.

A few closing remarks

From a traditional point of view, the beginning and end of all aesthetic experiences related to a literary work have been confined to its textual comprehension and interpretation process. Hypertexts, participative culture and the digital age, with all their implications and consequences in terms of production, distribution and consumption of literary texts, have substantially modified this process. Followers are reluctant to bid farewell to their favourite texts and, to that end, they carry out new social and creative activities to keep enjoying the story or the development of their favourite characters.

Analysing the website *Los Siete Reinos* has allowed us to know some of the countless reading and writing practices carried out in affinity spaces. Readers share their theories -normally with sound foundations- on relevant untold facts. From this perspective, individual readers can access interpretations from other fans, even changing their initial reading. Consequently, the reception process does not end in the hypertext, but it is extended as much as the reader and the community wish instead. Additionally, they are not limited to deepening the content of novels, but they also take ownership, extend and/or modify the narrative universe through fanfictions. They do not only create contents individually, but collaboratively through narrative role playing games, a kind of collective fanfiction with a wide range of new potentialities.

What are the implications for literary education? Its educational potential is extraordinary. Young readers relate to literature through sound social, emotional and intellectual implications. They play with texts voluntarily and playfully, which allows them to attain a greater level of development in terms of reading and literary competence (Amo, 2015). They also use literary reading and writing in their leisure spheres and times and thanks to this process, they strengthen their reading habits and experience greater aesthetic pleasure.

Communication and cooperation structures are generated in these affinity spaces, where constant exchange of knowledge takes place, whether among peers or in the form of mentors or beta readers. From this point of view, its didactic leverage is beyond doubt. An interpretative community is created through negotiation, consensus and through sharing reading and writing rules inside a group so that shared reading is promoted, which means an alternative way of reading to most readers.

All the foregoing is part of informal learning and the development of competences linked to formal education. Therefore, these scenarios have educational value that should be taken

into account when designing and making innovative proposals related to reading and literary education.

The hierarchy between primary and secondary texts is eliminated through this kind of social practices. It is, as Derrida (1997) would say, the overflow that eliminates all limits. A collaborative writing is developed, whereby the concepts of authorship, intellectual property and creativity are clearly differentiated from those associated to the printed book's technology (Landow, 2009, p. 186).

Notes

1 The novels published by the author and the TV series are indicated in these studies. There are differences among them, such as change of fate, name or age of some characters, different narrative order, etc. We must remember that the books and the series have hitherto had parallel story lines. From the 6th season (*The Winds of Winter*) onwards, they are on divergent paths and the differences are thus more remarkable and/or significant.

2 This is the official Harry Potter website that offers different exclusive contents and experiences related to the main work by J. K. Rowling.

3 We use hypertextuality with two meanings. On one hand, the meaning related to the use and electronic layout of networking structures with linked nodes (Landow, 2009) and, on the other hand, the concept developed by Genette (1989) covering the relations that include a text A (the hypotext) within a subsequent text B (called hypertext). This second meaning is based on the idea that all texts are mosaics of quotes (Kristeva 1969; Barthes, 1973; Genette, 1989), mentions, references, appropriations, rewritings, and transformations of other text(s). A network of semantic references or a palimpsest is thus conceived and its structure is created through the existence and interconnection of texts written in the culture concerned (Barthes, 1973, p.1015).

4 This is the author's official website. It is a website directed and/or moderated by R. R. Martin. The following sections can be found: blog, information about the author, bibliography, fanzone, news and merchandising.

5 The master is a user who moderates and adapts the rules, created registration forms, develops the fiction universe on which the role playing game is based, establishes objectives, etc.

6 It is that one interpreted or played by a person. On the other hand, we have NPCs, secondary characters that are not being directly developed by any writer.

7 Progressive role playing games are not divided into games. They are divided into free interpretations performed by players, without any intervention from any master in the story's creation process.

8 In order to know if this fictional character, actor or unknown person is already being interpreted by other person, there is a database on the website where availability can be checked.

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