Revista Digital Universitaria: A Workshop of Digital Editing at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México

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Abstract

The *Revista Digital Universitaria* (http://www.revista.unam.mx) at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) is an experimental digital magazine that serves as a "workshop of digital editing at the university". In this article its editor explores how its authors and producers have experimented with the form and content of the publication.

At the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) an experiment in digital editing, promoting culture and developing forms of academic communication, called the *Revista Digital Universitaria* (http://www.revista.unam.mx), has set itself three goals, seeking not only their integration in a single publishing effort, but attempting also to surpass its own standards. While spreading what we now call "culture" to a general reading public, we are simultaneously learning to expand the possibilities of digital editing and demonstrating the potential of this new medium in the publication itself. [1]

The Tradition of Promoting Culture and a Digital Magazine

The law which established the university in 1945 gives it three main goals: to educate, to investigate and to promote culture. The third goal, "promoting culture," is ambiguous, since "culture" has been a changeable concept for the university over the past sixty years; in the beginning it was understood as "knowledge about arts," but nowadays, it comprises sciences, social studies and humanities. It can thus be understood as part of the social responsibility of the public university in Mexico, which has to provide cultural spaces and media for a nation that has no other means to develop them. But the concept can also be understood as all the activities performed inside those spaces and media, activities that tend to promote culture among the population. [2]

Magazines have been, since the first days, one of the tools created by the university to promote culture. The first magazine created to support this goal was the *Revista de la Universidad de México*. During the 1940s, promoting culture was understood as promoting certain arts, basically graphical and lyrical. Later on, during the 1970s, some groups of scientists from the university began to promote natural science as an important branch of knowledge that had been forgotten by cultural promoters. During the next twenty years, then, many magazines attempted to promote scientific knowledge in the university, until the arrival in 1998 of *Cómo vez*, a print magazine that reports on science from the UNAM. The university, having separated the arts from science, now faces the challenge of promoting the more recent conceptualization of "culture," that is, the humanities and social sciences, which don't have this kind of channel. [3]

The *Revista Digital Universitaria*, first published in the year 2000 (http://www.revista.unam.mx/vol.0/index.html), is sponsored by the Direccion General de Cómputo Académico, an administrative department which has played, and continues to play, a central role in the introduction of Web technologies and Internet services, not just to the University but to the entire country. Serving a community of 279,000 students and 41,000 teachers, the magazine acquires special duties and some advantages over its paper peers. Among these duties are the responsibility to be an inclusive and representative magazine for the entire university, to further the students' education and teachers' improvement, and to target general audiences. To achieve these goals, the magazine enjoys certain advantages. With no commitment to a single meaning of culture, it can publish articles about arts, humanities, social studies and science. It can, and actually [4]

must, develop investigative and editing techniques. It is committed to promoting culture with an appropriate diction, with interesting topics and with creative expositions.

Although only six years old, the magazine has lived two ages. During the first one, the main purpose was to use the digital technology, but not to explore or to understand it. During the first three years, the editing guidelines of a paper magazine were applied to this digital publication. Doing so created some problems with the magazine's personality, because it was compared with paper magazines, and also because it attempted to be a magazine of specialized investigations, but specializing in "everything".

In 2003, a new editorial team, the one which I lead, took charge of the magazine. While planning the next season of the magazine, we had to answer three main questions: What are the goals and duties for a digital magazine that should be representative of the whole university? How should we define the magazine's personality, since we hadn't defined the kind of content that would be included? What kind of editing guidelines must a digital magazine have?

We answered those questions as follows. The magazine's goals and duties are to create a space for innovation, development, practices and education in the world of digital publishing and to promote analysis, reflection and creation among the university's population by means of digital resources. The supporting idea was and still is to make digital editing the main topic of the magazine, and to discover new tools, ways and guidelines for a rapidly developing area of publication that has not yet established its own rules.

Our goal and our duty therefore coincide: the magazine should be the workshop of digital editing at the university. The magazine's personality should emerge from the same idea: it is defined by its articles, which are digitally edited. That means a non-lineal publication that takes advantage of Internet resources such as hypertext, graphics, image and audio, regardless of their source or the topic of the article — science, arts or social studies — so that we can test the web's possibilities for publication.

All of this resulted in two basic challenges. Who would be the authors, designers, editors and programmers? Because there were no digital editors in Mexico in 2003, we didn't have a proper culture of digital publishing. In finding authors, we had two problems. First, we needed a great number of authors to get enough articles for a monthly publication. Second, we needed authors who could think in digital terms. And it was the same for editors, designers and programmers; we needed them to think in digital terms.

We solved the amount problem by turning the magazine into a monographic publication. Every month we propose a main topic and give it to a manager — commonly a professional investigator in the corresponding area — who contacts the authors on his own. The number of articles in each issue depends mainly on the manager's leadership. But finding authors, editors, designers and programmers who can think in digital terms remains our principal job, because the magazine has a pedagogical role. Since it promotes the use of new technologies, we need to develop an intentional strategy to educate the new professionals for the new media.

Abilities for the Digital Medium

When we asked ourselves how to educate and inform editors, designers, programmers and writers for the environment of digital publishing, we realized that the magazine and its collaborators must develop, beyond the proper use of digital tools, some abilities that could make possible the digital representation of scientific, humanistic, technical, artistic and cultural languages. The goal was that, by means of those abilities, the magazine and its editors, designers, programmers and writers would be able to make the digital expression of those languages and styles offer something different and better than its written expression. Since the magazine itself has been an experimenting and teaching tool, it is possible, in the course of developing those abilities, to follow the road of tentative solutions, in the first place, and the way of the magazine's consolidation, in the second, in order to get a digital rebuilt of languages and expressions.

From Text to Digital Revision

In the beginning, like many other digital magazines, the *Revista Digital Universitaria* tried to simulate a paper magazine,

using the screen as if it was a sheet of paper, and using the home page as a magazine cover (http://www.revista.unam.mx/indexabr01.html). The first meaningful step toward leaving behind the "simulation" trend was to break the lineal sequence of texts and, therefore, the unity of the page. We did that by digitally revising the text, creating a net which represented its logical structure with a menu (http://www.revista.unam.mx/vol.4/num3/art5/art5.html). The change demonstrated its advantages, not only because it eased the process of reading the screen, by shortening the length of the texts, but also because it changed the reading logic from a sequential model to one with different alternatives on the same level. That means that we left behind the visual metaphor of the pages that can be turned, and created a new model of links between different segments which contain logical components. Soon, the solution became a standard model for the magazine.

Today, the representation of the logical structure of the text in a menu is a widely developed ability among editors, designers and some authors. It is true that we have faced the challenge of revising entire articles with inappropriate structures, or made the reading difficult instead of easing it. In that we clearly failed. There are some examples of that failure (http://www.//www.revista.unam.mx/vol.5/num4/art25/art25.htm). But beyond those difficulties, this step established a new order for the publishing process and therefore an opening to new alternatives for the digital representation of the text. | 13

The nature of those alternatives was revealed by a wrongly solved problem. It was an article about the image and its reading (http://www.revista.unam.mx/vol.5/num9/art60/art60.htm); although it was the analysis of graphical material, it was difficult, because of the lineal writing, to establish a dialogue between the text and the image. When we represented the text's structure with a menu, we weren't able to create a useful relation between images and texts and we didn't get the author to understand that it would be better to divide his text by linking it with the fragmented image, and to use the graphics but not the text as a guideline for his analysis. The solution that we gave him — to set the image corpus on one side, and the improperly segmented text on the other — showed us the next step to revising the different scientific languages. We had to apply segmentation and make the most of the digital tools, which allow revising underlying elements of the text, like content nets and structures, inherent to sciences and humanities. | 14

In the articles just mentioned, those elements were the links between the image and its analysis. Although we took some steps in that direction, we couldn't improve the text value and include some underlying nets until we got an article about fish. In fact, the problem with the articles about fish (a whole issue, http://www.revista.unam.mx/index_agosto05.html) was that editors understood neither the terminology nor the content relevance of those articles, which came from a very specialized branch of science. So we decided to talk with the authors, in order to clarify terms and relevance, and we took this dialogue to the final article. We highlighted some relevant and specialized concepts and linked them with a body of descriptive notes; that was a successful solution and we will apply it again in some scientific papers. | 15

The solution of including underlying nets in the texts is not completely developed and, as happened with an article about visual anthropology (http://www.revista.unam.mx/vol.7/num9/art75/int75.htm), we can link theoretical, informative and critical elements to a cinematographic document, in order to enlarge the comprehension of the film. Then, the main ability that the magazine creators have to develop is an identification of the elements which accomplish or really enlarge collaborations, because they are some of the essential values of any form of digitalization. Also, as we discovered early, those "enlargements" are part of and are used for the digital reconstruction of the style of cultural promotion. | 16

Searching for New Narratives

When we approach promotion, we don't target experts but general audiences without specialized knowledge about the topics that they read about. That implies a different writing style, one which uses certain narrative and graphic resources to obtain the expected communication and to cause the expected effects on the readers. Science has been the main creator of this language and has formed the basis of cultural promotion. We have to recognize that this particular language has not been adopted by the humanities and social studies, which find no point in modifying their narratives in order to make them easier to understand. For them, promotion is only the diffusion of content, not the use of a different language. | 17

In any case, the Internet is a medium specially qualified to go beyond the cultural promotion style, because it not only eases the integration of underlying elements — as we have said — but also incorporates alternative narratives to attract non-specialized readers. In one case, we received an article, written as a play, about Kepler's doctrine (http://www.revista.unam.mx/vol.5/num5/art29/intro.htm). We tried to represent this in a narrative-dramatic style, using an object with an animated structure in which the characters of the play "act" the play, following the reading time. The result was very interesting; we found that we could graphically rebuild some narrative structures and use this graphic representation to create forms of interaction between the content of the magazine and the "reader," in order to inspire the expectation and interest about knowing something new.

So we explore other forms to do this. In the issue about Kant (http://www.revista.unam.mx/indexdic04.html) we used the underlying nets and explored the forms of alternative narrative to produce expectation in the reader. First we used the image as a map. The picture on the cover became a map that guides the reader through the different articles. So the image is, at the same time, the structure for a possible reading, a point of view from the main character in the same image, and a reference to an underlying net, because the image is also a text to be read. It's not casual that Kant's butler is the one who introduces the text about the picture. Who are the characters over there? And when, why and about what are they talking? Also, the picture presents the Kantian ideas that merge during an after-dinner chat, among other things.

By means of the exploration of alternative narratives, like the ones that turn the image into text and the text into image, the magazine's authors and producers have tried to develop the ability of building machines, as well as mazes, maps, hieroglyphics, calligraphy and instructions in different time sequences, in which the construction of a new narrative goes beyond the differences of styles and surpasses the limitations of the language of promotion.

Towards Digital Creation

As a result of all this experimentation with the texts, we have found that digital editing could be a device for constructing new narratives and new languages beyond the traditional narratives as well as humanities, sciences, arts or even promotion. That's because the use of words and forms in the digital sphere creates different orders for writing; those orders are not unknown to literature — let's remember the *carmina figurata* or the graphic poems of José Juan Tablada — but they mean new ways to transform the narrative of a text. In our particular case they let us make it more attractive for a bigger audience, helping us to solve the difficulties implied by the use of technical narratives by some authors. In other words, digital editing can generate reading and meaning processes, parting from a digital rewriting which exploits the relation between graphic, sound, video, animation and words, and becomes a tool that promotes knowledge.

Following this route, the magazine has continued with its experimentation, but now searching for creations produced specifically in and for the digital media. We aim to go beyond the digital representation of the text, towards its digital production. We have approached to this by two roads. We have published some experimental projects that authors send to the magazine and organized a workshop of digital creation, whose final results were presented on the magazine's issue of December, 2006 (http://www.revista.unam.mx/index_dic06.html).

One example of the first initiative is "The case of the penalty that never happened" (http://www.revista.unam.mx/index_junio05.html). The idea is to provide a sequence that motivates the reader to reflection. The sequence has two dimensions; it begins with a graphic, continues with a listing and then opens a structure where the reader can choose between many options, parting from his own convictions. The final sequence is a reflection on the impossibility of breaking personal rules-–that means a reflection on the impossibility of moral failing — and can have different endings, according to the reader's ability to understand that in certain normative structures, like the ones of soccer, the rule is fulfilled even when the referee makes a mistake.

In the December issue (http://www.revista.unam.mx/index_dic06.html), the digital objects that resulted from the workshop follow two directions. The first is the one that we have called "digital intervention" in the text. The second one is the direct production of objects, conceived as digital since its origin. One main activity of the workshop directed by the magazine was to ask the assistants to choose a poem, give it a digital representation and intervene in its cadence, rhythm, meaning, sequence and reading. The idea behind this experiment was to show that, when taken to the digital

media, the text can be modified in other aspects than its structure or graphics, and can be turned into something else; maybe another poem, or maybe another thing, like a prize. Talking about the production of digital objects, the workshop searched for two goals: production, as a prime achievement, but also, as a second goal, the way in which these objects can be described.

The creative results — the production of objects — were interesting and followed two directions. First, producing objects with a basic textual component, and second, producing objects without text, to make the best join of images, sounds and interactivity. Both are, of course, the first steps given by the magazine towards the digital creation and they represent, by now, the first approach to the production of originally digital objects for a digital magazine.

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The secondary goal of the production of digital objects, that of "description," is a topic that has concerned the magazine's developers for a long time. As we are a magazine that not only receives authors who are trained in the use of digital tools, but also tries to show the advantages of digital editing, even to those writers who aren't familiar with the digital media, one of our challenges has been to explain to authors how they can expose their ideas in order to be published by the magazine's developers. The intention is that the "description" model serves also to promote some of the extensions that digitalization can incorporate to the text.

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The creation of a standard "description" for the objects — we don't even know if we must call it "script" — is still in process, but it has already generated different discussions about the profile and the technical abilities (or the lack of them) of the digital author; and also about the possibility of translating intentions and digital ideas by means of maps or guides of the object, which designers, editors and programmers can follow.

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A Conclusion as a Step

The nature of the *Revista Digital Universitaria* and its immediate challenge and goals, have led us to explore the nature of digital editing, its aims, and its possibilities to enlarge the academic communication and the promotion of knowledge. Our work is far from ended, of course. But in the latter years we have built the bases to promote the culture of digital editing and to form a group of editors, designers and programmers who can think in digital terms. It is hard to foresee who the digital authors of the future will be. We don't know if they will be experts in the technical aspects of Internet and multimedia, or authors deeply concerned with the creation of texts and their digital interventions or representations.

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Anyway, the main goal of the magazine, by now, remains the same; to create the tools and the experimental spaces for any kind of author, the highly technical or the essentially creative. Finally, the magazine is still an invitation to explore on the digital editing world.

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