

# BVBEL RĚVOLU † ION: Streams of Biocultural Diversity in a Participatory Narrative

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## **Abstract.**

BVBEL RĚVOLU † ION (<https://babel.utc.fr/>) is a creative project developed by a multidisciplinary team and inspired by a research question about the link between biodiversity and linguistic and cultural diversity. In a movement between scholarly imaginaries and writing practices, this creative practice-based research project has led to the development of a rhizomatic online participatory narrative. The first part of this paper presents the theoretical framework that informed the project, at the crossroads of sociolinguistics, didactic plurilingualism, and environmental issues. The second part presents the design and development process of BVBEL RĚVOLU † ION. The work seeks to create a space conducive to the emergence of a participatory narrative by bringing into contact languages and cultures, social and biological aspects, with an aim that is at once literary, scientific, and pedagogical.

**Keywords.** biodiversity, linguistic diversity, sociolinguistics, plurilingual pedagogy, practice-based research, participatory narrative.

## **1 Introduction**

“According to the latest United Nations report on biodiversity, the world will lose one million species in the upcoming years. In parallel, it has been demonstrated that the degradation of biological diversity has a negative effect on cultural and linguistic diversity, as declared by UNESCO” [1]. Indeed biodiversity and cultural diversity are closely connected and languages themselves could be understood as constantly moving

and evolving systems in a living environment [2]. This paper argues that participatory and interactive narratives are not only a privileged place of action in resisting the degradation of linguistic and cultural diversity, but can also act as a powerful tool in highlighting the latter's link with biodiversity. After presenting the theoretical context, we will elaborate on the creative process of BVBEL RĚVOLU ŤION [3], a participatory narrative developed through practice-led interdisciplinary research and which was selected in the ICIDS Kobe 2023 Exhibition.

## 2 The diversity paradigm in life sciences and linguistics

The *Manifesto on Biocultural Diversity* [1] emphasizes that biodiversity and cultural diversity are intimately related and interconnected:

*As indicated by recent research, there is an important decline in biocultural diversity across the globe. [...] Cultural practices and knowledge systems transmitted through language and linguistic cultures impact us either positively or negatively, as well as our approaches to preservation of the earth's resources and biodiversity. This is why we urgently have to transform cultural practices and develop a language of sustainability and coexistence that can have a chance of positive outcomes.*

For example, in Mexico, the loss of knowledge about medicinal plants is a direct consequence of the disappearance of vernacular languages:

*One example: nuances in the knowledge about medicinal plants and their use disappear when indigenous youth in Mexico become bilingual without teaching in and through the medium of their own languages – the knowledge is not transferred to Spanish which does not have the vocabulary for these nuances [4].*

The emphasis on biocultural diversity is based on the scientific observation of the benefits of diversity in life sciences as a warrant of the proper functioning of biological systems [5]. Based on the study of plants and living processes, Hamant suggests that this diversity could also guarantee the proper functioning of technical and socio-cultural systems, such as communication. Similarly, Picot and Guillaume [6] highlight the fact that standardisation, the introduction of a single norm seen as optimisation, goes against diversity. Picot and Guillaume focus on technological diversity, but the same applies to languages, where the imposition of a single language or linguistic norm is in tension with the promotion of linguistic and cultural diversity. The latter seems indeed in as rapid a decline as biodiversity:

*There are 6-7,000 spoken languages [...], and maybe equally many Sign languages:*  
– *The median number of speakers of a language is estimated around 5-6,000;*  
– *Over 95% of the world's spoken languages have fewer than 1 million native users;*  
– *Some 5,000 spoken languages have fewer than 100,000 speakers [4].*

The figures given in the UN report on food and agriculture reveal an equally vertiginous decline in biodiversity:

- Of 6 000 plant species that have been cultivated for food 9 account for 66% of total crop production;
- Of 7 745 extant local breeds of livestock reported globally, 26% are classified as at risk of extinction;
- Bee-colony losses are on the rise; 17% of vertebrate pollinator species are threatened with global extinction;
- Global forest area continues to decline, although the rate of loss decreased by 50% in recent decades [7].

As a response to these facts, our project BABEL RÉVOLU TION (<https://babel.utc.fr/>) is a reflection on potential ways in which interactive digital narratives (IDNs) can support biocultural diversity.

The coincidence of struggles formulated by The *Manifesto on Biocultural Diversity* is part of what Jucquois [8] calls the “episteme of diversity”, a cross-paradigm that links life sciences and language sciences, among others. Since the 1970s, a commitment to ecology and a commitment to plurilingualism and interculturalism have evolved in parallel. Language family, living language, revitalisation of languages: biological metaphors are multiplying in sociolinguistics, highlighting the so-called biological and ecological approaches. Known as “language ecology, linguistic ecology or ecolinguistics” [9], these approaches borrow epistemological terms from the life sciences to explain how linguistic systems function and how languages evolve. The American sociolinguist Haugen laid the foundations of ecological linguistics with his conceptualisation of the “ecology of language” [10]. French sociolinguists have theorised the ecology of languages of the world (see *Pour une écologie des langues du monde*, [11]) through their contextualised study in their environment, uses and practices, far from the normative and prescriptive linguistics of school grammars and the ideology of state monolingualism in France, which values a single standard [12].

This epistemological approach of ecological sociolinguistics is in line with the paradigm of diversity in language pedagogy, which emerged in the 1990s with theorists such as Dabène [13]. It proposed a more open approach to the teaching and learning of languages, valuing the multiplicity of languages in the learners' “linguistic repertoire” [14], as well as the languages present in the classroom. While at the beginning of the 20th century, direct methodology prohibited the use of the first language [15], the so-called pluralistic approaches to languages aim to enhance plurilingualism through teaching methods such as integrated didactics, language awareness, intercomprehension, and interculturality [16]. However, this enhancement takes place without exoticising or stigmatising diversity or essentializing culture, and speak instead of “diversity of diversity” [17]. These approaches form part of an educational policy of “linguistic revitalisation” based on “work on the language and its conditions of use, such as adding new linguistic forms or social functions to a beleaguered minority language with a view to multiplying its uses and the number of its speakers” ([18], quoted by [19] our translation).

On the other hand, digital media might be seen as a homogenizing space [20]: global platforms and widely available tools enable authors of digital narratives and other content creators to gain access to international audiences and facilitate cultural homogenization. Artificial intelligence and the large language models (LLMs) it has enabled now generate fresh anxiety about the future of languages and writing as they dispense authors of any linguistic effort, thereby also doing away with any form of linguistic originality, creativity, and hybridity, mostly producing linguistically as consensual texts as possible. Already powerful large languages and the standard variety of each language also enjoy a clear advantage at the expense of others [21, 22], which can accelerate their colonization of the digital space thanks to the easy and intensive automatized text production and threaten multilingualism [23].

If this danger of automatized mass production combined with global reach is real, creative projects can counter them precisely by continuing to highlight the creative potential of digital technology. They can, on the one hand, build on local and less known traditions and modes of expression, maintaining them in a dynamic cycle of transmission [24], and on the other hand, take advantage of the flexibility of the technology to remix, combine, rethink, and revive them, including through encounters with other traditions and modes of expression. Linguistic variation, code switching, and plurilingualism are much better accommodated for by digital spaces than by print [25], as are interactivity and collaborative writing across borders, linguistic and geographic, and the web can also represent a relative safe space for such practices, less controlled by institutional controllers of correctness [26].

Our online participatory work, BVBEL RĚVOLU ĽION (henceforth: BR), offers a space of expression to a multiplicity of voices in a variety of languages. As Martinican poet Edouard Glissant, one of the great thinkers of *créolité* and theorist of the “Tout-Monde” said, it is no longer possible to write without acknowledging the presence of all the languages of the world [27]: the heterolingual literature – which is defined as the co-presence of different languages in the same text, following a linguistic reality in which languages exist as a continuum, rather than as separate systems [28] – bears witness to this. Even the institutional French-speaking world (OIF, AUF) is opening up to this plurality of voices and languages [29] after a French colonial policy of imposing the French language in France and in the colonial empire.

BR emphasizes this linguistic continuum as a space of diversity and invites to draw on its richness as a way of resisting reductive standardization on both language and its referents. We position this work as an environmental writing, defined above all by ethical and thematic criteria, in the tradition of nature writing and American ecocriticism [30]. Building on the threefold theoretical framework of the ecology of languages, pluralistic approaches to languages and culture, and heterolingual literature, BR proposes an ecological metaphor to experiment with the link between ecology and ecological linguistics through a participatory narrative (the role of participatory IDNs in understanding complex situations has been highlighted by Hartmut Koenitz [31]).

### 3 BVBEL RÈVOLU } ION: linking diversities in a creative collaboration/design process

BR (<https://babel.utc.fr/>) is an online participatory work which aims to invite reflections on the importance of diversity from an ecological, linguistic, and cultural perspective. It was created through an interdisciplinary collaboration informed by research in sociolinguistics and plurilingual pedagogy, involving researchers in didactics, contemporary literature, communication science, design, and students in software engineering. The piece queries the connection between the loss of flora and the disappearance of languages through a multi-voiced narrative and opens up to a wider linguistic diversity than that of its creators. It is also an experiment on how digital participatory narratives translate in different areas, people, and cultures through artistic expression, and on how they can facilitate the crossing of boundaries of all sorts.

#### 3.1 A narrative framework for plurilingual contributions

The original scenario takes place in a dystopian world inspired by Orwell's *1984*, Damasio's *Hauts® Parleurs®*, and the philologist Victor Klemperer's notebooks, *LTI* [32], analysing the rise of Nazism through the evolution of the German language. A resistance movement is growing against a political regime that applies a monolingual policy impoverishing both language and the natural world and contributing to the disappearance of words as well as of the reality that they shape and refer to. Voices are invited to be raised in online posts, in any language. The posts respond to central decrees or previous posts, immediately connected with them and constituting a network that grows in the form of a dynamic graph displaying the articulations of different streams of thought. Will this polyphonic collective of rebels succeed in overthrowing the regime of monoculture and monolingualism? The outcome depends on the contributions (with several alternative endings) and is established by the session leader.

This narrative framework is based on a critique of the monolingual ideology and of the universal language, this utopia of communication which is not necessarily productive, as evidenced by the fact that international tensions are not reduced with the development of a global English. It also highlights the pertinence of Wittgenstein's observation that "the limits of my language mean the limits of my world" [33].

The narrative invites contributors to choose their position between resisting the regime, supporting it, or neither of those clearly defined camps. While the history of intercultural communication has been fraught with a tension between a (European-centric) humanism that called for a universal language in the name of a common good and as a supposed guarantee of peace and inter-comprehension, from Renaissance humanists through the revolutionaries who fought against regional languages in France to supranational organizations such as Unesco, and a form of culturalism that respects the diversity of languages and cultures, such as the Council of Europe's project [34], also criticized for its angelism (see the debate between Forlot and Maurer, [35]), this opposition runs the risk of being reductive. In their posts, the contributors are invited to engage in complex thinking that connects issues rather than forcing them into binary

oppositions [36], while also making the link between the question of biological diversity and that of cultural and linguistic diversity (see fig. 1). The piece thus both promotes contact between languages in a variety of ways, from translation to code-switching and to translanguaging [37] and offers a rhizomatic user space of interactions facilitating the emergence of a collective intelligence.



Fig. 1: Two posts in BVBEL RĚVOLU ǁ ION (ELO Coimbra 2023 session)

In this vein, BR can also be considered as creative space for collaborative speculative fiction in Donna Haraway’s sense, who observes that “[t]he worlds of S[cience] F[iction] are not containers; they are patternings, risky co-makings, speculative fabulations [...]. It matters which ideas we think other ideas with” [38].

BR is an IDN according to the definition by Koenitz [31]: “An interactive digital narrative is a narrative expression in various forms [...] experienced through a participatory process in which interactors have a non-trivial influence on progress, perspective, content, and/or outcome.” This being said, can BR be considered a narrative? During a session, there are events and a form of closure: the session leader can trigger events (decrees in the original scenario) and also an ending (when the session comes to an end) among several possible endings. But how do participation and interactivity translate into narrativization? How are these rhizomatic structures made narrative? How do they redefine “narrative” in the digital sphere? These questions will continue to be explored. In a sense, complex and emerging situations require new narrative forms, moving traditional storytelling towards more interactive and participatory forms.

### 3.2 Creative and design process

BR’s design was guided by three main objectives: to produce an interactive and evolving story, to provide an easy to understand context for the story, and to incite the

audience to write. This required addressing a number of design challenges, including collecting plurilingual messages, permitting the co-construction of the story through them, and presenting the evolving narrative using a dynamic graph that helps the interpretation.

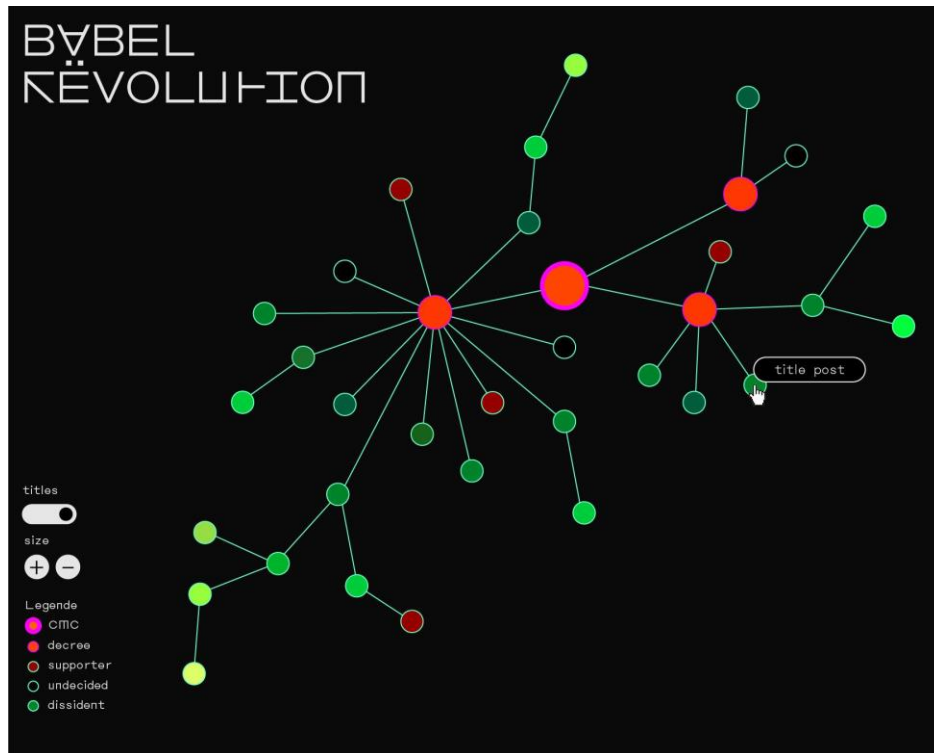


Fig. 2. Visual design of the graph

Our design choices (see fig. 2) were accordingly guided by functional considerations to optimize reading and interactions, ensuring a smooth text flow and rapid comprehension, also taking into account the most common interactive gestures, while also aiming at minimalism. Each element must be reduced with the goal of optimizing overall readability. The variations of typographic elements are minimized (see fig. 3), hierarchical levels are distinguished with a single graphic solution (indentation or font size), without any additional ornamentation. This minimalist perspective was motivated by an eco-friendly ethic, which also guided other graphic as well as technical choices aiming at an overall lightweight design to limit the energy footprint (dark background, absence of images or video media, a typography with minimal weight (see <https://altertype.fr/>)). The website was developed using open-source languages such as

HTML, CSS, and JavaScript, and graphics are generated through code rather than image files for lower energy consumption.



Fig. 3. first choice for functional elements (typeface & colors)

The graph itself combines two levels of reading: a micro level that aligns its form with the users' choices and thereby presents the evolution of the story; and a macro level that gives a global impression, more open to interpretation. Users can also "read" the narrative through the graph in a variety of ways, as the graphic image conveys information beyond formal notation, suggesting an association with plant biology. This only works, however, as far as the shapes are widely recognizable (i.e. they evoke plants) and that the addition of new contributions is also indicated. The color choices are also oriented towards iconic representation through the resemblance with the natural environment, drawing a parallel between the degradation of biodiversity and the degradation of linguistic and cultural diversity through the green color as a reference to healthy plants and red suggesting their degradation due to drying, burning, or disease (see fig. 4).



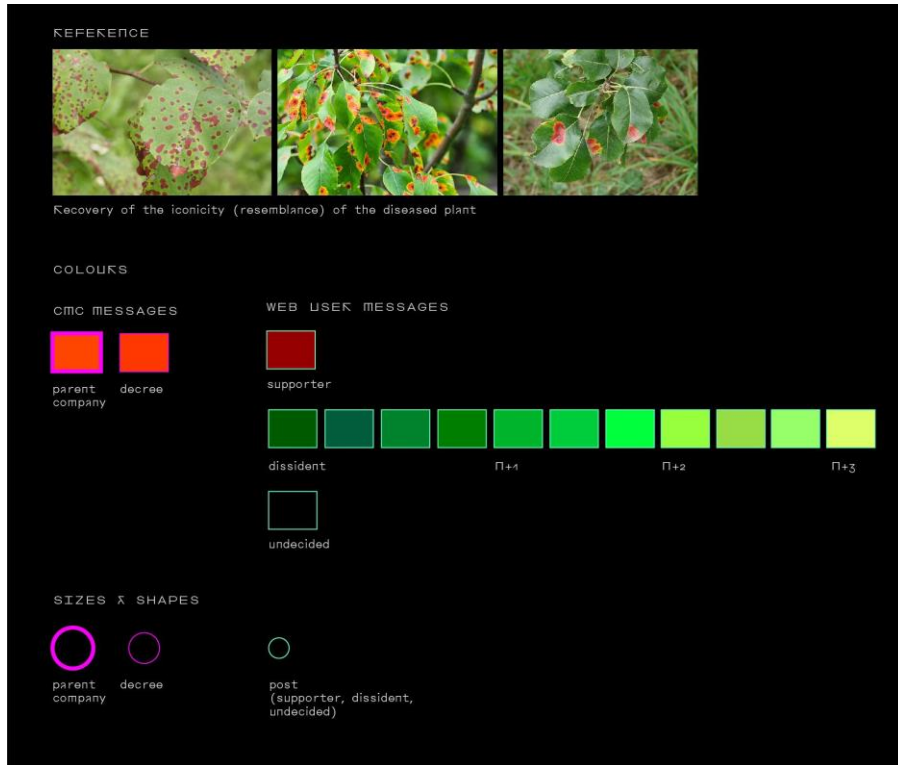


Fig. 4. Recovery of the iconicity (resemblance) of the diseased plant

The idea of multiple levels of reading was also inspired by Johanna Drucker's distinction [39] between notation (*mathesis*, or formal language) and inscription (*graphesis*, its form). The graph invites the user to consider both the abstract structure and its singular material trace, both the universal and localized cultural assertions, open to both an interaction with, and a reflection on, the object and the interactions that it represents.

### 3.3 A creative platform for writing workshops

Combining theoretical reflections on the diversity of languages and the creative practices of heterolingual writing, BR is part of a research-creation approach, where

*the two activities [of research and creative practice] intersect, touch, even hybridize, summoning each other without merging into the same indistinct entity. However, when the two activities are placed in close proximity, they become part*

*of an ambiguous organization in which we no longer know whether it is the research that enables the creative practice or the creative practice that enables the research ([40], our translation).*

The work makes it possible to think about the links between linguistic and ecological diversity through a collaborative process that goes beyond the initial co-design team. Writing workshops managed through the administrator interface can invite participants to engage in a performative reflection on multilingualism, as well as on the implications of a simplified universal language. The contributions might take the form of argumentative discourse or be more creative, literary. Each workshop or writing session is a collective “revolution” in the search for ways in which languages can coexist through mediated interactions.

The development of BR is still in progress, and we have involved users in this process. We tested the initial beta version in a workshop, in line with the principles of the agile / SCRUM methodology focused on the user experience through “agile mix”, or sprints. The first sprint took place in Aix-en-Provence in June 2023, as part of the “Lire et écrire entre les langues” (*Reading and writing between languages*) conference (LEEL conference, June 2023, <https://babel.utc.fr/completed/74>). The one-hour workshop involved 14 participants, mainly academics in languages and literature, and/or workshop leaders. Following the experiment, we collected immediate verbal feedback, as well as sending participants a written questionnaire.



Fig. 5: Workshop, Aix-en-Provence, June 2023

A second workshop has taken place in Coimbra, Portugal (ELO conference, July 2023, <https://babel.utc.fr/completed/98>). On the occasion of this conference, we also

tested the work through an open session in the framework of the “ELO Coimbra Exhibition” (cf. fig. 6), then to the ICIDS Exhibition in Kobe in December 2023. Other sessions have been organised since then, most of them private and not listed in the public sessions on the website.



Fig. 6 : BYBEL RĚVOLU ĬION at the ELO 2023 Coimbra exhibition

These workshops and exhibitions had a heuristic dimension and raised several new perspectives and questions, including whether we should move more towards role-playing (using avatars with pseudonyms that users would keep throughout a session, or even a role that everyone is assigned at the beginning – but how to avoid caricaturing positions and arguments?); whether we should slow the movement of the dynamic graph and concentrate more on the texts and their readability (some participants found that the graph moved too quickly as a result of contributions in synchronous mode); and whether we should add the possibility of contributions in media other than text (pictures, voices... this would allow us to work on the visual and auditive dimensions of language, but it would also run counter to the choice of a lightweight minimalist design).

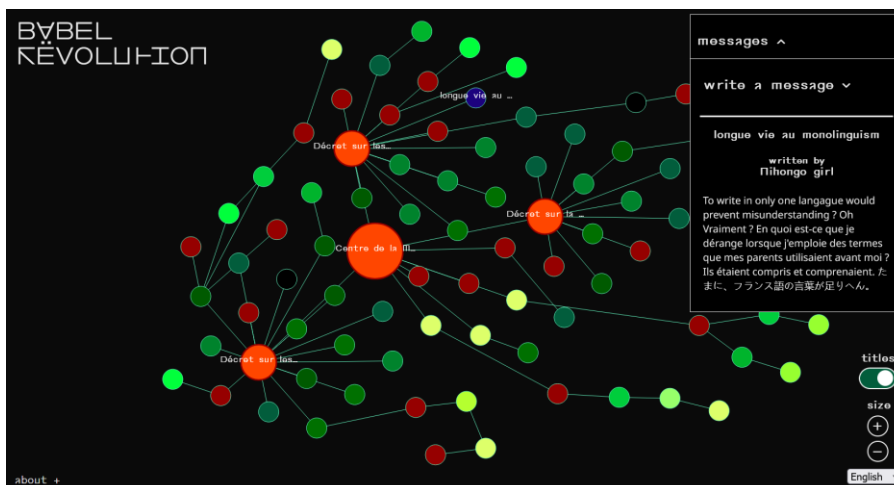


Fig. 7: The Aix-en-Provence workshop's final graph

The BR project continues to evolve. It has been selected to be part of a corpus for secondary school teachers in France (<https://projet-lifranum.univ-lyon3.fr/seances-pedagogiques>). It can easily be used through specific sessions in workshops or in language and literature courses: an administrator interface allows users to create not only new sessions, but also new scenarios. The project itself is open source, available on Git.

## 4 Conclusion

This collaborative project started with a research question and a creative challenge, aiming to highlight the link between biodiversity and cultural and linguistic diversity, and exploring the ways in which the cross-cutting issues of sociolinguistics and ecology can be transposed into a participatory narrative. In the spirit of practice-based research, the epistemological questions about plurilingualism in both its political and literary dimensions have led to the collective development of an interactive participatory work combining a narrative framework and graphic interface designed to encourage heterolingual creative contributions that make users reflect on the question of biodiversity in relation to that of language(s) as well. BYBEL RÉVOLUTION was also conceived for educational purposes, in particular to develop digital literacy in the classroom in a more creative form, through digital writing workshops. Its refinement is still in progress as we continue to seek user feedback from writing workshop leaders and participants, including teachers, researchers, and language learners.

Indeed, along the way, the focus has shifted to the creative process, rather than the product. Beyond the website and workshop tool, the interest of this work lies for us in the way in which digital interactions were organized within an interdisciplinary team

involving both confirmed researchers and students in a shared effort to meet the challenges of the project and think and work together creatively, “producing an idea that can be expressed in an observable form or making a production that is both innovative and unexpected, adapted to the situation and (in some cases) considered to have value”, to quote Bonnardel’s definition of creativity [41].

The links between the ecological and cultural-linguistic diversity deserve to be explored further, and we propose to continue this work through workshops and analyses of the products and the apparatus. We will continue to reflect on ways in which a digital interface can help to encourage plurilingual writing through translation across user contributions, transgressions of the dominant norm, orality, code switching, translanguaging, creation of a new language/new alphabet, multimodal writing, searching for a style of multilingualism to the point of opacity. Among the questions we are continuing to explore (such as the “narrative” and its redefinition in interactive and participatory works, as mentioned above), is the issue of incorporating different languages. Until now, the project has mainly focused on major languages (English, French). How can we adapt this project to include other languages, especially ones that are at risk of extinction? This will raise further questions at later stages of the project, including such as community engagement, marginalized identities, and indigenous participation.

One of the challenges of the project was also to imagine a multilingual digital work that would take into account the environmental issues associated with digital technology, the ecological impacts of which are well known [42]. This was reflected in the search for low impact solutions. We have also incorporated this issue into the narrative, proposing that one possible outcome with the victory of the dissidents could be a form of disconnection from the Machine. To reinforce this coincidence between narrative and technology, we are working on an epilogue in an even more low impact, minimalist version. Rather than offering a fully fleshed answer, this project therefore represents an ongoing and constantly renewed collaborative process also propelled by discussions with effective and potential users, in line with the work’s participatory spirit.

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