Where Creativity meets the Web: a pataphysical partnership

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This is the text of a presentation given as part of the plenary panel on Creativity and the Web chaired by Andrew Hugill, during the WWW2016 conference, Montréal, April 2016. This contribution addressed the question "what is pataphysics?"

Alfred Jarry, in his thirty-four year lifetime that ended in 1907, laid the foundation for the avant-garde of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries' Western culture. An innovator and rule-breaker, Jarry envisioned and formulated conscious 'Pataphysics, that is, the Science of imaginary solutions, the Science of the supplementary and virtual universe that investigates the particular and the dimension where art and science are on the same side of the coin. As a science and an esthetic, Pataphysics integrates fragmentation, juxtaposition, shifting semiotic borders, creative destruction, playfulness, decentralization, mirroring and data linking.

In order to connect Jarry's iconoclasm and semioclasm, at the time when typewriters were becoming more widely used, to our era of information traveling from similar keyboards in a digital age, Jarry's definition of 'Pataphysics is ground zero.

Defined by Jarry most rigorously and painstakingly in *Exploits & Opinions of Doctor Faustroll, Pataphysician, neo scientific novel*, he begins his definition of 'Pataphysics by specifying that "An epiphenomenon is that which is superinduced upon a phenomenon…" and he continues with the ground-breaking assertion that it "is the science of that which is superinduced upon metaphysics, whether within or beyond the latter's limitations, extending as far beyond metaphysics as the latter extends beyond physics. Ex: an epiphenomenon being often accidental, pataphysics will be, above all, the science of the particular, despite the common opinion that the only science is that of the general. Pataphysics will examine the laws governing exceptions, and will explain the universe supplementary to this one; or, less ambitiously, will describe a universe which can be—and perhaps should be—envisaged in the place of the traditional one, since the laws that are supposed to have been discovered in the traditional universe are also correlations of exceptions, albeit more frequent ones, but in any case accidental data which, reduced to the status of unexceptional exceptions, possess no longer even the virtue of originality." Then we read an explicit and succinct "DEFINITION. *Pataphysics is the science of imaginary solutions which symbolically attributes the properties of objects, described by their virtuality, to their lineaments.*" He goes further: "Contemporary science is founded upon the principle of induction: most people have seen a certain phenomenon precede or follow some other phenomenon most often, and conclude therefrom that it will ever be thus. This is true only in the majority of cases, depends upon the point of view, and is codified only for convenience. (...) Universal assent is already a quite miraculous and incomprehensible prejudice. Why should anyone claim that the shape of a watch is round—a manifestly false proposition—since it appears in profile as a narrow rectangular construction, elliptic on three sides; and why should one only have noticed its shape at the moment of looking at the time? —Perhaps under the pretext of utility. But a child who draws a watch as a circle will also draw a house as a square, as a façade, without any justification, of course; because, except perhaps in the country, he will rarely see an isolated building, and even in a street the façades have the appearance of very oblique trapezoids. We must, in fact, inevitably admit that the common herd (…) is too dimwitted to comprehend elliptic equations, and that its members are at one in a so-called universal assent because they are capable of perceiving only those curves having a single focal point, since it is easier to coincide with one point rather than with two. (...) But even the common herd has learned that the real universe is composed of ellipses, and tradesmen keep their wine in barrels rather than cylinders."

'Pataphysics does not replace but goes spiraling beyond metaphysics just as the Semantic Web is an extension springing from the current Web and is not its replacement.
For example, because string theory is speculation based on theories that are or have been themselves speculative, such as general relativity and quantum mechanics, string theory cannot in fact be considered physics, but rather, should be understood as pataphysics. Likewise, string theory and quantum calculations do not portray an actual reality, but are mathematical pataphors. Extended metaphors that create their own context, pataphors inform the patadata of the Semantic Web.

At this epiphenomenal introduction of IMAGINATION and CREATIVITY and PATAPHYSICS into the framework of the WORLD WIDE WEB conference, it is our vision and our program to encourage "creative collisions" of scientists and artists, to quote Monica Bello, the arts director of CERN (the European Center for Nuclear Research, the cradle and the crucible that brought us the inventor of the World Wide Web, Sir Tim Berners-Lee). In her recent statement, Bello explains

that, “Our desire is to connect the worlds of leading scientists with international artists (…) encouraging both fields to challenge each other, and pushing the boundaries of their traditional roles and methodologies.” To lead in the enterprise of changing STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) to STEAM by inserting Art into educational formula, CERN is partnering with FACT, the Foundation for Art and Creative Technology, the UK's leading media arts center, “where people, art and technology meet.”

These panel lectures and conversations are cogent and provocative. Every participant has made a persuasive case for the importance and influence of ’Pataphysics and of the place of imagination and imaginary solutions in the development of the Semantic Web.

’Pataphysics has grown into a potent and significant force with active academies, colleges, institutes, chapters, and societies mapping a worldwide network spanning every continent except Antarctica, although a performance of “A Young Lovers' Guide to Speculative Pataphysics” did make it to Patagonia. Alfred Jarry’s works have been translated into many languages, including Japanese, Spanish, Hungarian, Dutch, Italian, English, Serbian, Polish, Czech, German, Swedish, Finnish, Portuguese, and Breton (Merdre= Kraoc’h). Digital humanities continue to develop solutions for the interoperation of Pataphysics and IT. In addition to other applications such as COLLEX, IVANHOE, and JUXTA, there is also a data model and device for tracking, visualizing, and formalizing “exceptional” and highly subjective activities like interpretation of imaginative works. The name of this tool explicitly derives from Alfred Jarry’s Pataphysics and credits its definition as a “science of exceptions”. This application, that outputs XML coded data, is called the “Patacritical Demon."

Our discussions of Pataphysics and the Semantic Web found connectivity, creativity, and interoperability in essays examining, for example, communicating by means of machines to give meaning to information, the transhuman, fractality, and meaningful serendipity.

Producing semantic web ontologies requires coordinated input from a variety of technologies and computational fields, computer science, engineering, and specialists in the humanities.