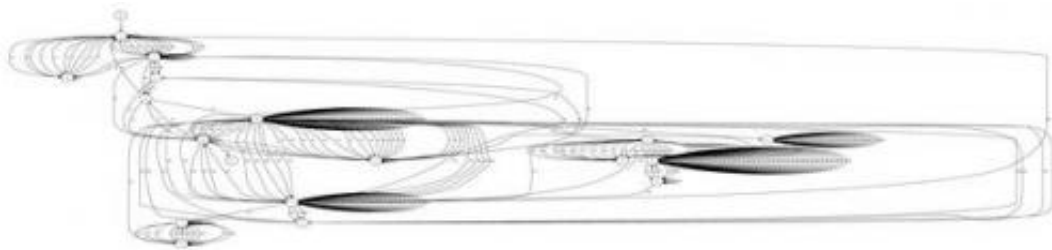


# First steps towards "Experimental Literature 2.0"

April 21 2014, by Emmanuel Barraud

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Narrative focalisations sequence in La simulation humaine. Credit: Cyril Bornet - DH Lab - EPFL

As part of a student's thesis, the Laboratory of Digital Humanities at EPFL has developed an application that aims at rearranging literary works by changing their chapter order. "The human simulation" a saga written by the Swiss writer Daniel de Roulet and whose tenth and final volume was released today, is the basis for this experiment.

We already had the Hundred Thousand Billion Poems, Raymond Queneau's book in which the reader can compose sonnets by choosing each verse out of ten possibilities. Well, as of today we have The Human Simulation in digital format. It results from a joint project between the Laboratory of Digital humanities (DH Lab) at EPFL, led by Frédéric Kaplan, and the Swiss writer Daniel de Roulet. It offers a new type of reading path through a book sequence – ten novels – that explore 75 years of nuclear history between Japan, Ukraine and the United States.

Developed as a [free application](#) (in French) for smartphones, tablets or computers, The Human Simulation offers a neat and dynamic reading experience of ten different books. At least in appearance. They are all certainly based on the same corpus: 297 chapters of the eponymous saga, written between 1990 and 2014 by Daniel de Roulet - the last book, *Le démantèlement du cœur*, is now available-. "Each chapter constitutes a narrative unit with enough elements in common with the other chapters of the saga so that it is possible to read them in a different order than that of the publication," explained the writer. Accordingly, he was able to "reconstruct" six stories and three novels of varying lengths (from one to 38 chapters) by obtaining their material from the ten books making up the saga. The last reconstruction, named Total simulation brings the entire work together.

In order to do this work, the author ensured - intuitively, he affirms - the consistency of each "new" story made available by the application. "By carrying out an algorithmic analysis of the text, we aim to formalize the process of writing, and eventually synthesizing the text, explained Cyril Bornet, doctoral student at the DH Lab and developer of the application released today. In this respect, Daniel de Roulet's saga is an excellent narrative testing ground."

The goal of the research on storytelling conducted by the DH Lab goes beyond the "reconstruction" of existing literary works. It also aims to take into account readers' changing habits, which currently favor short intrigues to long narrative structures. "This tendency is not limited to fictional literature, it happens in a variety of domains," said Cyril Bornet.

## **Iconoclastic?**

It could be argued that this approach is rather iconoclastic. Indeed, Daniel de Roulet admits that he was "shocked by the way DH Lab

researchers saw literary material as a simple mathematical variable, without feeling much consideration for the author's writing throes..." But this did not stop him from getting excited about the project and actively participating in it.

As part of his thesis, Cyril Bornet wants to "analyze, through the use of computer tools, how digital media influence the way literary works are written, he said. New media give readers an active role as they can share their impressions and understanding of the work. On the other hand, it is also possible to ascertain the most read passages, the reading order of stories, etc... "

The sheer volume of information that can be systematically collected through digital media will –perhaps- contribute to a reinvention of the very writing profession.

Provided by Ecole Polytechnique Federale de Lausanne

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