



ANNALENA

An increased narrative

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Narrative has occupied our thoughts throughout the ages; using speech, gesture, then text and later moving pictures, we have been trying to grab people's attention and immerse them in our imaginary universes. But the question a writer often asks is: how can I do better? Of course, the story comes first, followed by the way to relate it. From the very beginning, writers wanting to share their virtual worlds with an audience have thought about interactivity: gestures, silences, calls and other kinds of entreaties have been central to their art. One of the best ways to capture someone's imagination is through text by using a large palette of tones and styles, leaving enough room for individual imagination to do some work, building up scenes and giving body to characters and sound to dialogues. Conversely, cinema and TV have created another medium for a writer's universe to live by delegation in front of the spectators, with the help of scriptwriters, actors and other technicians.

Even though a computer is really no more than a simple viewing screen and was not conceived for reading texts (good old paper is still largely better for this purpose!), it can also open up new possibilities for narration. Interactivity is the biggest "bonus" with using a computer as it allows the user to choose what to do and where to go. So now, the key question is: what can all this bring to the art of narrative writing?

Since my previous works had focused independently on text, still and moving images or music, I have been trying to find a way to merge these elements into one project. Finally, thanks to multimedia techniques, the first result is "Annalena".

"Annalena" is an interactive narrative piece of fiction that has been written from the creative point of view using text, animated pictures and multimedia [¹] and from the research point of view, referring to studies carried out with the G-Sica Research Group about how people perceive multimedia worlds[²].

The aim of "Annalena" is to explore connections between classic narrative literature (based upon Aristotle's model), multimedia and interactivity. The text keeps its central role and is completed by visuals and sound that use different perceptive channels.

The first level of conception has been partly based on work by authors interested in the relationship between the printed text and interaction (e.g. Members of OuLiPo [³] or South-American writer Julio Cortazar [⁴]). Other more recent work from French university writers has also been taken into consideration (e.g. Jean-Louis Boissier [⁵] and Monique Maza [⁶]).

“Annalena” started out as a short story written for a book project entitled “Feux de pierres” [7] containing a lot of narrative fiction taking place in cities around the world and inspired by photos taken “in situ”. The Annalena story is situated in Antibes (on the French Riviera) and is dedicated to the great painter Nicolas de Staël. The textual characteristics of the narrative are classic using temporal linearity, narration written from the main character's point of view, and different moods concerning the arts, human feelings, mythology and non-fiction.

The adaptation of this short story for interactive narration focuses on 3 main questions:

- How much liberty can be given to the reader without losing the essence of narration?
- How can multimedia and interactivity be used to reinforce textual narration?
- What kind of balance can be found between the forms of “telling” and “showing”?

Story: “Annalena” is the story of a photographer, Pierre, whose destiny is disrupted by a double meeting: with Anna, a young hitch-hiker he picks up on his way to the French Riviera and with the works of painter Nicolas de Staël exhibited in the Castle-Museum in Antibes.

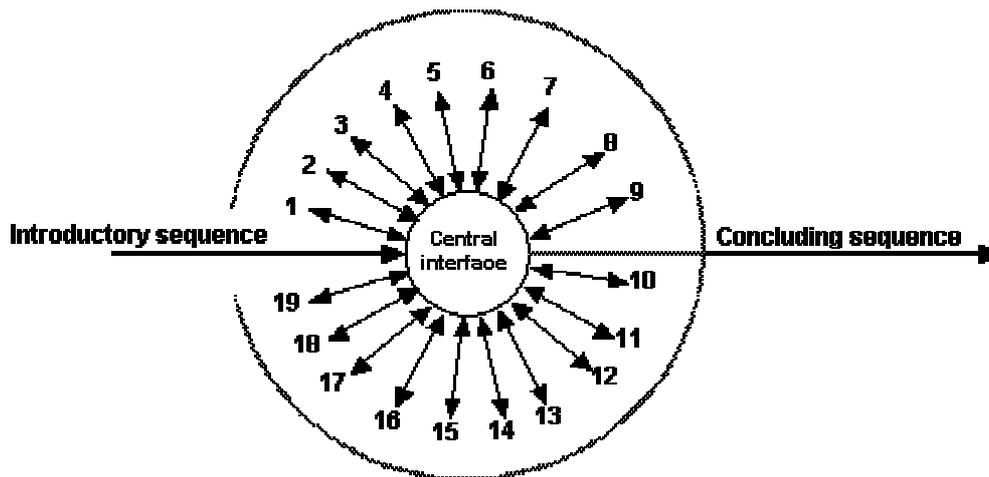
Immersed in Mediterranean light, Pierre hesitates between his own professional approach to photographic expression and exploring painting. Anna becomes the fleeting, elusive, unforeseeable and amused observer, who shows him her secret places, including the garden of love, but keeps details of her life a mystery.

Haunted by De Staël's pictorial research and tragic destiny in Antibes, Pierre tries to make Anna reveal who she is, but he makes the fatal mistake of trying to take a surprise photo of her and she disappears from his life. Disappointed by his painting, obsessed by his wish to find Anna again and distressed by De Staël's destiny, Pierre remains in Antibes, unable to do anything but wait, but for what?...

Themes: “Annalena” refers to the following themes:

- the impossible quest for the absolute (in art and love),
- a variation around the “go-between” myth,
- the tragic destiny of Nicolas de Staël and an indirect tribute to his work,
- multi-pictorial approaches: photography, painting, drawing, digital design,
- the town of Antibes, the old city, the “Fort Carré”

Scenario: the short story has been rewritten and segmented into 21 sections. The textual narration has been enriched by special atmosphere sequences. The access to beginning and concluding sequences are imposed to the reader, but the other 19 sequences can be accessed in any order, in spite of the time dependence of the narration. The concluding sequence can only be reached if all other sequences have been accessed. This kind of structure can be illustrated by the following diagram:



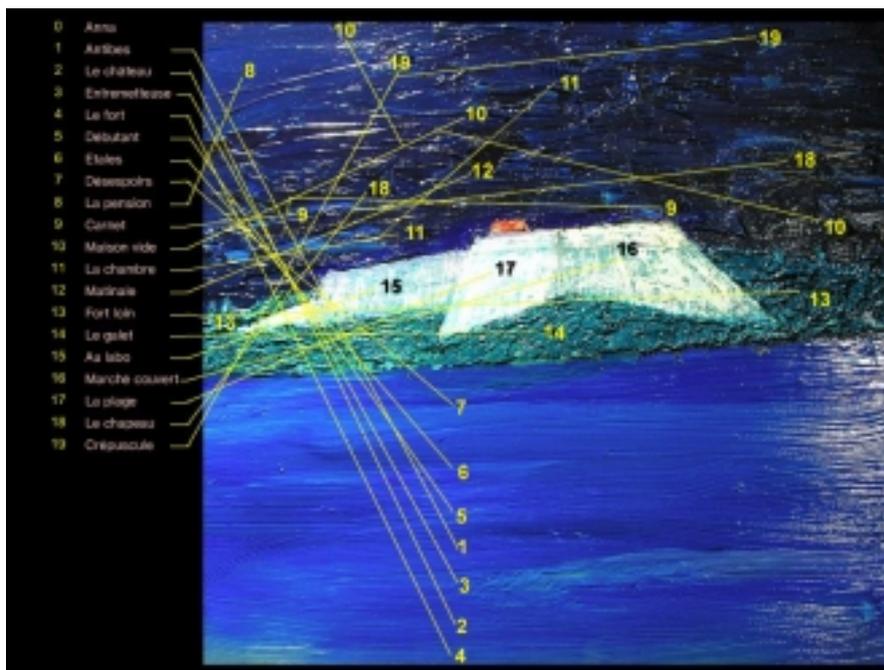
The sequences are ranked from 1 to 19, respecting the timeline, but each is structured as if the narrator was telling it on its own. Narrator and reader can be considered like two friends meeting from time to time. On each occasion, the narrator tells some kind of anecdote that should begin by “By the way, did I tell you about Annalena?” without trying to remember what had already been related. There are also certain special sequences that are not narrative, but are used to create atmosphere. (see further: “special styles”).

Presentation of sequences: the question was whether to give the reader an ordered, random or intuitive access to the sequences. Each is possible, but considering the variety of readers and respecting the purpose of the narrative, an intermediate selection was made using spatial repartition and natural inclination. This allows one reader to access the story through sequences corresponding to the beginning parts (without any previous knowledge), while another can begin by choosing sequences in any order. Both can then try to change their strategy if they want, but they will have to read 3 or 4 sequences before understanding the global spatial organisation. This can be understood thanks to the visual reminder of “already read” sequences, at the top left of the screen (see illustration below). And, it is worth repeating that this is not important to understand the whole story! First reading tests with inexperienced readers showed that they were not really perturbed by this kind of organisation.



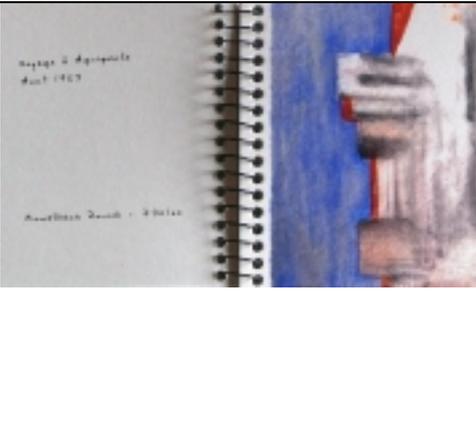
Central interface with 3 already read sequences.
The painting begins to appear on the photo.

Main interface: the central interface is an interactive photograph of the “Fort Carré” in Antibes. Each click on it reveals part of a painting of the same monument and gives access to a sequence. When a sequence has been viewed, its title is written on the left black part of the screen, respecting the predefined order given by the original story.



Spatial repartition of sequences on achieved reading : the painting is complete.
Blinking red roof is the interactive zone for access to the concluding sequence

Character approach: there are three main characters in the original text of “Annalena”, and each one has been especially customised.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The main character, Pierre, is the narrator. His presence is only textual and interactive. No audio voice has been associated with his words. Only his hand appears sometimes on the screen (this can also be considered as the reader's own hand), or his shadow. The reader is then able to keep a subjective identification process exactly as if he was reading the text. 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Anna, the female character, is physically present on the screen in a lot of sequences, but her face is never seen. All her words are spoken by an audio voice. 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The third character, Nicolas de Staël, is only suggested. The difficulty concerning this character, was to speak about him and his work without showing any pictures even though the story itself was elaborated around this idea. A way to get around this problem was to use sketches of some of Pierre's paintings from his notebook. This offers a good balance between the three characters, letting Pierre approach Nicolas through his work without degrading it, while also allowing Anna to play her role of “go-between”. 	

Visual forms: many visual forms (line drawing, watercolor, oil painting, acrylic, vectorial drawing, photography, video, vectorial animation, frame by frame animation, inlayed animation and rotoscoping) have been used to illustrate Pierre's inner turmoil regarding photography and painting, and also to give a wider field of visual expression. Multimedia was used to serve these visual forms rather than impose a digital style.

Ways of narration: the most frequent means used for developing the narration consists in using screens with text, dialogues and pictures in an interactive way. Some punctuation has been obtained by mouse clicks, necessary when a relevant amount of text has to be read and synchronised with Anna's audio spoken dialogue. Generally, sequences are completed with animated images and/or sound sequences activated or controlled by interaction.

Special styles: three other specific styles are used in some sequences:

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Poetic in two sequences. In the first (“Fort”), interactivity is used following the Oulipo way: an active mix of two poems depending on the position of the cursor. One of these poems is about photography and the other painting. The active mix between these two texts symbolises Pierre’s wanderings. In the second (“Chambre”) poetic sentences are developed in a visual way that refers to Guillaume Apollinaire’s “calligrammes”, and are dependent on mouse clicks. 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Dreamlike, in two other sequences (“Fort loin” and “Etales”). These sequences are purely non-interactive and can be considered as digressions, giving another interpretation of events in other sequences, like a dream. This is a way to give the narration some space in time and action and is also a kind of gap between reality and allegory. 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Purely visual, in two sequences too. One of these (“Antibes”) is devoted to a photographic exploration of places in Antibes seen through Pierre’s viewfinder, and the second, (“Carnet”) is a spiral notebook containing sketches drawn by Pierre. Just as in the Poetic sequence “Fort”, these two sequences are the visual extremes of Pierre’s wanderings between photography and painting. 	

The aim of these styles is to open the narrative to new dimensions, and give the reader different sensations.

Interactivity: In “Annalena” a mouse click is not just a common way to control the sequences and screens. Other ways of using interactivity have been explored aiming to increase the power of narration without transforming “Annalena” into a video game or just another “interactive geek”.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Touch transposition - e.g. in the sequence “La chambre”, the reader moves Pierre's hand along Anna's body. 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Contribution to narration – e.g. in the sequence “Au labo”, the interactive developing of a photograph reveals key information about Anna. 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Other forms of interactivity have also been used to serve the narration like drag-and-drop, point of view control, mouse over, attraction, repulsion, unmasking, simulation..., (control of lateral camera movement - see opposite). 	

Some extreme cases have also been used:

- no interaction at all (in dreamlike sequences),
- asynchronous association between text and picture,
- textual and pictorial interactive transformation.

Again, the aim is not to lose the reader, but to make him work differently.

Future: A lot of questions are still waiting for answers, concerning how an audience would perceive such a creation:

- Is the use of multimedia and interactivity significant in such a piece of narrative fiction?
- Is the new relationship created between reader and story a natural one, or is it at least intuitive?
- How does the order of reading sequences change the reader's perception of the work?
- Is this kind of work restricted to a specific public only?

These questions are in accordance with a more fundamental one expressed by Marie-Laure Ryan [8], specialist in narratology: “What has the computer done for the word?”, and widely for “Verbal art”, i.e. Litterature.

Another question concerns distribution, and the corresponding commercial product: Designed to be used “offline”, what sort of market would be interested in “Annalena”?

A new “increased narrative” is now in production mixing text, sound, images and interactivity, but which also has new issues:

- managing several periods from 1913 to the present,
- a new central interface concept,
- Conciliating texts to be read and autonomous animated sequences on the same screen
- Deeper overlaps between the written text and spoken sentences,
- And more that have not revealed themselves yet!

I would like to thank the people who contributed to making “Annalena”: Anik Coggins (Anna’s voice, music, songs), Brigitte Bardou (Anna’s silhouettes), and Alain Carré (male voice at the end).

Daniel BOUILLOT – February 2008

[¹] short stories collection “Un et autres mécomptes” (Ed. du Choucas – 1997) – Animated movies “Temps vertical” (2001), “Jour de soleil à Pékin” (2002), “Boréale” (2003), “P.H.T.” and “Pas d’Icare” (2004), “Octobre” and “Agenda 7” (2005), “Fort loin” (2006) – Multimedia creations “Poésie en boîte” (1998), “Ménologe parnassien” (2000), “Chaos 2.2” (2005) based on works by Solweig von Kleist. Some of these works can be seen on the web site www.lisiere.com

[²] “An exhibition within an exhibition: how do the public go from reality to virtual?” - Ghislaine Chabert, Daniel Bouillot - IAEA 2006

[³] Consider French Poet Raymond Queneau and his “Cent mille milliards de poèmes” who is the most spectacular example with his ten pages cut into 14 horizontal strips. See also a novel: “La vie mode d’emploi” by Georges Pérec (Hachette 1978 – Prix Médicis). The 99 chapters of this book are organised and can be read in various orders, just as the knight polygraphy in a chess game.

[⁴] Julio Cortazar proposed ways of reading “Marelle” in 155 chapters (Gallimard – 1966).

[⁵] Jean-Louis Boissier (Ciren – Univ. Paris VIII) created “Moments” based on texts from French philosopher and writer Jean-Jacques Rousseau (Ed. Gallimard – 2000)

[⁶] Monique Maza (Univ. Jean Monnet – Saint-Etienne) made a series of “Usimages” associating texts, pictures and interactivity about the French town of Lyon and its history.

[⁷] Some extracts of “Feux de pierres” can be seen on the web site www.lisiere.com/feux

[⁸] Marie-Laure Ryan is an independent scholar, author of “Narrative as Virtual Reality” (John Hopkins University Press - 2001) and editor of “Narrative across Media” (University of Nebraska Press – 2004)

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### Digital material supplied for CAC.2 edition : “Slacknesses”

This is one of the non-interactive dreamlike sequences of “Annalena” adapted to screening. It is 1’ 34” long and have been realized with Flash.

Voice and music: Anik Coggins. Graphics, sounds, animations and direction: Daniel Bouillot. Official selection in Annecy International Animated Film Festival (2006).

\*\*\* A full interactive version of “Annalena” will be shown during CAC.2 Congress. \*\*\*