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The “Author on the Run” – An Autoethnography of Digital
Fiction on Online Collaborative Writing Communities –
変遷する作者－コラボラティブ・ライティング・コミュニティに
おけるデジタル・フィクションのオートエスノグラフィー

社会情報学研究科

社会情報学専攻

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Introduction:

Meet the “Author on the Run”

In the Internet era, forms of expressions have exponentially multiplied, and so have the meanings connected to them. Relations have changed significantly; in particular, the relations between author and reader, whose positions were previously conceived as crystallized between modes of production and dynamics of consumption. The advent of digital fiction and new technologies have reshaped this relationship, opening new scenarios/perspectives such as:

- 1) The central role of the medium and of the sociotechnological environment in the writing process;
- 2) New modalities of creation and fruition of the stories developed within this framework;
- 3) The formation of new identities, and the redistribution of narrative roles during the creative process; and
- 4) New ways in which people interact and build relationships.

The challenge for Information System (IS) researchers has been to study the interaction between technological systems and social systems in real-life settings. Despite the fact that it is not a commonly adopted method in IS research, this paper shows the results of an autoethnography on digital fiction that took place in Japan from May 2014 to October 2015. During this period, I, as an author, had written five stories on Japanese and Italian collaborative writing platforms. The goal of writing these novels, and thus of experiencing the field as an author, was to propose a qualitative method granting in-depth understanding of the social and organizational dynamics essential to the existence of such platforms, and, therefore, to suggest that autoethnography could be a very useful qualitative tool.

This research originates from the observation of the complex Japanese media panorama, which offers interesting material to reflect on the mutual influence of new technologies and society. My personal activity as both a writer and a researcher allowed me to adopt an autoethnographic perspective in a field where the ethnographer is required also to be a writer. Considering that I am working within the

frame of an autoethnographic analysis of a writing platform, my professional experience and my academic background allow the “Literary I” and the “Researcher I” to stand side by side.

The application of the Internet to electronic portable devices was already a reality in Japan by the end of the 1990s (Ito et al. 2005). The combination of these technologies along with the development of the subculture of young high school girls through different decades and via different media gave birth to the phenomenon of the mobile novels (*keitai shosetsu*; see Hjorth 2014). These are a sort of *feuilleton* written on mobile phones on specific sites organized as a feedback wall, on which the members of the community can freely comment on the different stories while, at the same time, they enjoy contact with other community members.

The Japanese term for the mobile novel is “keitai shosetsu,” meaning literally “portable” (keitai) “novel” (shosetsu).

The mobile novel phenomenon originated in Japan over ten years ago, first started by a young writer by the pen name of Yoshi who launched the first ever mobile phone novel in 2000. The novel, entitled *Deep Love*, was then published, made into a movie and a television drama, and ultimately transformed into a whole franchise. In the beginning, there were no websites on which his cell phone novel could be read; instead, Yoshi sent out his piecemeal chapters to readers via email and MMS (multimedia messaging service). Yoshi later created the first mobile novel website through a small investment, providing unprecedented access to his content on mobile phones all across Japan. Using various campaigns such as promotion leaflets handed out on the streets, Yoshi targeted high school students and eventually created a huge reader base.

Since its beginnings, the keitai shosetsu was a new literary form mostly addressed to Japanese high school girls. Even to this day it keeps this characteristic. Stories are published in the form of episodes, which are uploaded on special websites that readers can access for free through their mobile phones. Anyone registered on the site

has the opportunity, not only to read the published stories, but also to leave comments and circulate the stories among her friends by means of her mobile phone. The reader/user may even become an author herself.

Just as the distance (and the distinction) between author and reader is blurred, the author's and the reader's roles in the Japanese mobile novel now merge together, marking a neat difference with the encrypted relation that characterized the printed book era. Mobile novels become an example of collaborative, choral work narration, wherein the author takes suggestions from the readers' posted opinions to further develop her story.

Surprisingly, mobile phone novels have made the recovery of book publishing, which has been on the decline in recent years, possible: the most successful mobile stories are, in fact, published in printed book form. In 2007, in Japan's many bookstores' Top Ten Charts, five were originally mobile novels.

Keitai shosetsu is just one of the several ways in which digital fiction takes shape nowadays. Therefore, to better frame this genre, qualified as a particular form of collaborative digital fiction, I will identify the various types of digital fictions and underline some important insights about the practice of writing fiction on the Internet as framed by digital fiction studies; at the same time, I will point out the limits of this field of study.

0.1. Digital Fiction: A Definition

In this section, I will attempt to define digital fiction, in particular the expression of collaborative digital fiction, which is the focus of this research.

Bell defines digital fiction as “a kind of fiction [that is] written for and read on a computer screen [and] that pursues its verbal, discursive, and/or conceptual complexity through the digital medium, and *would lose something of its aesthetic and semiotic function if it were removed from that medium*” (2010, quoted in Bell et al.

2014, 76; emphasis mine). To this definition a couple of further remarks need to be added.

First and foremost, we need to consider the medium adopted for the production and the fruition of digital fiction: Bell's use of the term "computer interface" is, in fact, a limiting expression as it does not include the mobility factor of mobile phones as another relevant characteristic of the digital fiction. The mobility of current mobile phones allows the producers/users of digital fiction to experience new forms of "embodiment" which can reshape the canonical bounds between author and reader in terms of affection (Rebagliati 2014).

Second, while we may surely agree that the media have a central role in defining the characteristics of the digital fiction on and for which it has been produced, and in affecting narrative experience (Ryan 2004), I nonetheless chose to opt for an "actor-network" approach to the media.

According to this methodological approach, media producers and consumers and the tensions that emerge from their power relationship impact on the development of media as much as on the media themselves with their technological influence over their users (Amagasa 2012).

The very same medium of the “book” became a successful medium for the sharing of narratives and information thanks to a series of contingent technological, social, and political reasons. The book thus represents just one of the expressions into which the human thought found its form. The advent and spread of the Internet are currently undermining the exclusive domain of the traditional book, representing a valid alternative to ink, glue, and paper.

0.1.1. *Digital Fiction: The Four Generations*

Attempts to challenge the sequential narrative of the book as medium have been made in the past via a series of literary experiments (Bolter 2001). However, the very origins of digital fiction can be found in the 1980s with the advent of “interactive

fictions.” The internal narrative organization of interactive fictions functioned in such a way that a change in the story line corresponded to an input sent by the reader. The reader also had the chance to explore the fictional world of the novel via a series of preset commands.

Yet, it is only with the advent of the hypertext and of the World Wide Web that it is possible to talk about the “digital fiction, first generation” (Bell et al. 2014). The “hypertext” of digital fiction allows the author to organize the story into small units, called nodes, which interconnect one to another but lack a fixed linear order. The reader herself/ himself will have to organize the reading experience (personalization) according to her/his own choices and re-create continuously an original fruition path. Each time the experience of reading is different because of the reader’s choices.

The first pioneers of the digital narrative put the figure of the reader at the center of their debates. While the reader was originally conceived as a passive user of mass media, a mere consumer, for these writers and theorists the reader is instead a proper

actor who actively engages with the construction of the story and its meaning via his own personal contribution. Catharses (1997) defines the digital fiction as a kind of “ergodic literature” and conceives of the reading experience as an active, involving, and interactive process.

Second generation digital fictions are characterized by the presence of both visual and musical (audio) elements which are combined with written text in order to create a multimedia artwork. Scholars have pointed to the multiple modalities of the digital fiction while stressing the necessity of integrating different methods of comparative analysis for the study of these works.

Third generation digital fiction, also called “cybertext generation” (Ensslin 2007), from the word “cybertext” coined by Aarseth (1997), is characterized by a highly efficient technological environment which traces the reader conditions at the moment of reading and unfolds the story consequently to them, reducing his conscious efforts of changing the story and providing him with a “corporality” in the fiction environment.

One example of this works of fiction is “The Breathing Wall” which “uses the reader’s respiratory system as the driving force for revealing essential referential meaning, or ‘clues’” (Ensslin 2007, 160) to unfold the story.

In her analysis of narrative expressions on social media, Page (2012) provides examples of collaborative digital fiction, which represents the fourth step in the development of the digital fiction, the so-called social media literature (Rusted quoted in Bell et al. 2014, 10), and is the subject of this research.

According to Klaiber (2014), the collaborative digital fiction is an online community for creative writing whose scope would be to write different forms of interactive fiction.

Following this definition, one author writes a story, a poem, and so on, and the members of the community participate in the creative process adding parts or chapters. The medium, the online writing platform, represents the shared space where members and users can interact with each other.

0.1.2. Collaborative Digital Fiction History

In an attempt to trace the history of collaborative fiction, Rettberg (2011) observes that the concept of the author as a singular entity is a product of legal and market concerns, and the making and distributing a book is a process involving several persons collaborating with each other. This is true even in ancient works like the *Odyssey* by the poet Homer, produced in a culture based on orality, a time where the production, the transmission, and the storage of an art poem implied the cooperation of and among different people. Homer, then, “is best understood not as an author of the solitary genius model *but as a function* in a social system of collective authorship” (Rettberg 2011, 188; emphasis mine).

As for the digital counterpart of collaborative fiction, Rettberg sees the first attempts of collaborative digital fiction in MUD (Multi-User Dungeon). These are virtual texts shared and written by different users usually describing environments for an adventure. These environments are actualized by the interaction of the readers with

the texts describing them, while the story of the adventure is created by the interaction of the characters interpreted by the reader inhabiting the environments: “dungeons.” Also, constructive hypertexts are inscribed by Rettberg as expressions of collaborative digital fiction: this label indicates the process of making an hypertext which implies a community of reader/writers interacting each other to establish connections and express reactions to other members’ work.

A constructive hypertext can then be as productively understood as a participatory writing performance, an “event” as well as a “work” (Rettberg 2011, 190).

Moreover, Rettberg also includes “chain stories” as an expression of a collective narrative on the web. In chain stories “readers would build on the contributions of previous authors in order to further develop a sequential narrative” (Rettberg 2011, 190).

However, he points out the limitation of this form of digital fiction if placed in a

technological environment where communication between contributors is not allowed confirming that collaborative writing indeed “relies on an intimate and successful relationship between any given chapter and those that precede it” (Rettberg 2011, 191).

From this last observation it can be argued that social media environment as background can help these forms of writing to acquire coherence in the fact that this kind of environment can help to enforce continuity of participation between the members involved in the writing process and increase the interaction between the members to provide the exchange of information for the story in progress.

0.1.3. Collaborative Digital Fiction in the Social Media Era

Klaiber (2014), in her study of collaborative digital fiction on social media platforms, affirms that, in order to explain the dynamics and the complexities of the stories produced in this kind of platforms, their literary and the social components have to be considered as strictly intertwined. In doing so, she opposed the concept of the

communicative model of classic narrative of Chatman (1978),¹ and proposed a new one called the “double plot.” According to her, there are two layers in collaborative digital writing platforms in which the text is developed: one is the story itself (the literary component or “primary plot”) and the other is represented by “the story behind the story” (the social component or “secondary plot”), the space provided by the social platform administrators where users can exchange messages and comments about the development of the stories.

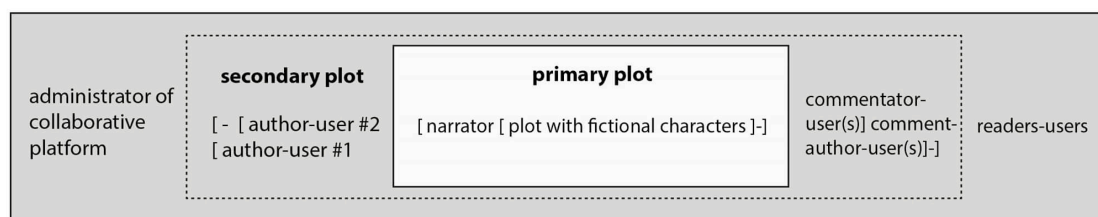


Figure 0.1. Double plot model (Klaiber 2014).

If we look at figure 0.1 representing the model then, we can see that the dotted lines indicate the permeability of the model: Klaiber imagines indeed a flexible model where

¹ This model imagines a single author narrating a story through the fictional voice of a narrator to a recipient with whom the reader usually identifies himself. There are thus two fixed roles, the author and the reader, who mirror the act production and the act of reading/ fruition, respectively.

users can switch between their roles from authors, commentators, and readers, and where the connection between the users “is multidirectional and dynamic” (Ben-Arie 2009, 153).

Klaiber further elaborates on the fact that “the secondary plot” layer could provide with important information about the process of writing the story and the relationships between the participants to the writing story process. Bronwen (2011) identifies the actions of reviewing and updating as the core of the activities of collaborative writing platforms tied to fan fictions. The first consists of answering the comments left for one’s story or participating in the revision of someone else’s work. The second consists of adding material to one’s story: both actions can both be tracked chronologically and in their textual component, thanks to the technological apparatus which records this information and makes it available for consultation. Such an operationalization is wholly unique to collaborative fiction on social media platforms. According to Bronwen (2011), such a transparency deconstructs the romantic notion of the author as an infallible deity, a creator of reality, and the belief in her/his

inexhaustible creativity. It is replaced by the figure of an author who constantly alters and transforms her/his stories with a multitude of readers who aren't just reading the contents, but actively interacting with them.

Specifically, Rettberg (2011) pinpointed three participation styles in the context of collaborative digital writing platforms, which suggest the degree of responsibility of the various contributors to the development of the story. These are:

1. conscious participants: the contributors have full responsibility of the project and its completion;
2. contributory participants: the contributors who occasionally follow the project, without having a central role in its completion; and
3. unwitting participants: those who influence the narrative without realizing it.

As a consequence of the contribution of the reader to the development of the story, the pleasure of reading evolves since it is no longer derived by the enjoyment of a single text, but is divided among several texts and is fuelled by the desire to create

new ones.

0.1.4. *The Limits of Digital Fiction*

This review of digital fiction studies allowed me to identify the different kinds of digital fiction; furthermore it provided me with important insights about the environment in which collaborative digital fiction writing practices are embedded (Klaiber's "double plot") and about the activities involved in such a practice such as reviewing and uploading.

The researchers of digital fiction choose as their targets works of digital fiction which, according to their criteria, are likely to have an "artistic value"; these works, therefore, are analyzed with models deriving from stylistic that are used in the field of traditional literature (Page 2012).

Nevertheless, there remains the attempt to consider the text not as a static entity but as being subject to changes according to the property of the medium and to the

interaction with the reader. However, as Page points out, “readers [in digital fiction] are treated as abstract figures mostly projected from the critic’s own interpretation of the text ...” (Page 2012, 4). Some effort, indeed, is needed to understand the “larger” real context of production and consumption of digital fiction using a method able to detach these empirical practices.

This is why I assume the necessity of finding a new way to explore the dynamic of the creative process of digital fiction from the point of view of an insider: only with the insights collected by a real participant in the writing process of digital fiction can it be possible to really understand how the writing practice and the relation between author and reader is challenged with the advent of the Internet.

The purpose beyond the study of digital fiction on Internet through an autoethnography lies within the will to start a reflection on the writing practice which changes online according to the medium in which it is hosted.

Therefore, this paper aims to reflect on the evolution from traditional writing up to its digital expression. At the same time, it elaborates on the potential of the ethnographic method applied to the Internet. The position of the ethnographer as user and content producer leads to the reflection on the autoethnographic method as an effective tool for the understanding of digital fiction.

0.2. Thesis Structure

In this section, I will briefly explain how I have organized my work. The first chapter aims to present the sociotechnological frame of my research; the second has the objective of investigating the Internet with the new ways it offers people to gather and interact, reshaping human practices; the third chapter aims to present the methodology used in this research: an autoethnography of the digital fiction; the fourth chapter will present the autoethnography of the collaborative writing digital fiction communities *Maho no Irando* and *The Incipit*; in the fifth chapter, the autoethnographic data will be analyzed according the frame of the dimensions of the narrative (Ochs and Capps 2011); the sixth chapter will present the conclusions of the

research. In the next sections I will take a closer look at each part.

0.2.1. *The Sociotechnological Framework of This Research*

The first chapter of the thesis aims to pinpoint the sociotechnological framework of this research and the influence of its key factors on the practice of digital fiction writing.

To do so, it is necessary to look back to the model that the positivist sociology of literature suggested to explain the literary industry.

The reference to this model is tied to the fact that “author,” “reader,” and “text” are recurring terms in this research, and it is therefore important to put them in the context of previous studies.

The French sociologist Escarpit (1970 [1958]) identifies the result of the relationships between text, author, and reader in the “literary fact,” a model which anticipates the

one proposed by the linguist Roman Jakobson (1960), which concretizes the communicative exchange, which includes literature, in the transmission of a message from a sender to a receiver. In Jakobson's model, the roles of sender and receiver are fixed, like the roles of author and reader in the positivist sociology model, crystallized in the roles of production and consumption. Several researchers connected to literary sociology have tried to pinpoint its limits, to emancipate readers and authors from this structure and to reflect on the properties of the text in shaping production and consumption acts, elaborating considerations that anticipated the advent of new technologies (Bolter 2001) without however suggesting an alternative model.

In this chapter, I will therefore refer to media studies to pinpoint a theory which accounts, on the one hand, for the importance of the technological factors, such as digital media and the Internet, in the evolution of the practices of production and consumption; on the other, the social and individual factors that influence these practices.

Jakobson's model is also found in mass communication theories, progressively replaced by the attention toward the medium (McLuhan 1964), which is no longer considered merely a channel, but can also influence the content of the message it transmits.

With Cultural Studies (Hall 1991), the theories already developed in the "Reading Theory" (Rutherford and Crouch 2014) about the role of the reader (Gadamer 1960; Jauss 1966) are refined; they see the receiver as an active figure, which can give meaning to the message.

The study of media, therefore, fluctuates between two diametrically opposed positions: one connected to the technological determinism according to which cultural changes and changes in people's way of thinking are due to the progress of media: this thesis validates, for example, the fact that the introduction of writing techniques (media) was responsible for radical changes in people's communication and reasoning

skills (Ong 2002).

The other position, opposite to determinism, is social constructivism (Okada 2005), which claims that technology is a human product and is created according to people's habits and customs.

In this research, I have adopted an intermediate perspective: the actor-network theory (Law 1992), according to which society is made of patterned networks of heterogeneous materials. Furthermore, the creation of a network presupposes the interaction of several factors, both human and not.

According to this perspective then, the *keitai shosetsu*, the collaborative fiction expression target of this research, has to be seen as the result of interwoven technological and human factors linked to the mobile phone. A detailed analysis of these factors (personalization, multifunctionality, portability) and of their relationships

allows the definition of the sociotechnological framework in which this research took place.

The aim of the following chapter is to investigate the Internet and the new ways it offers people to gather and interact as they reshape human practices; furthermore it is the place where to set the research questions of this research.

0.2.2. *The Internet and the “Intimate Stranger”*

In the second chapter, my aim is to define the Internet, the space which hosts the collaborative digital writing platforms, the new forms of social gatherings that take place there, and to ultimately define the research questions of this research.

The first studies about the Internet took place in the context of the comparison between CMC (Computer Mediated Communication) and face-to-face communication exchanges. Even though some of these studies (Short et al. 1976; Daft and Lengel 1984) pointed out their narrowness compared to face-to-face interactions, due to the

lack of information and the limitations of the channel surrounding the participations to the communication exchange, other researchers (Danet 2001; Baym 2010) started to take the stance in which mediated communications were not considered inferior to their direct counterpart, but instead are different and would rather allow people to aggregate in different ways breaking time and space distances.

In the theoretical frame of postmodernism (Azuma 2001; Hamano 2008), Internet was conceived as “cyberspace” a place where people abandoned the logic and the anxieties of the real world to challenge an alternative virtual experience completely separated from the real and recover their “ontological security” (Giddens 1991), in a safe environment.

Within this frame, Tomita (2009) proposes a new model to explain the relationships that are created through mediated communication, expressed under the “Intimate Stranger” theory: “Intimate” because this kind of relationships are born for the sole purpose of forging a bond with the other person and enjoying the satisfaction of being

connected to her/him; “Stranger” because, the contextual information (social, position cues) in mediated communication are limited.

Among the various expressions through which mediated communications allow to convey the “Intimate Stranger” relationship, particularly interesting is how it shapes and reframe the roles of author and reader in the collaborative writing platforms of *keitai shosetsu*: there, author and reader are not just producing and consuming texts, but are interacting with each other, all the while maintaining both anonymity and developing intimate relationships.

Maho no Irandō is an example of online communities (Hiltz 1984) where people gather and interact in new ways, reshaping human practices and giving form to new interactions styles since the advent of the Internet and digital devices connected to the Web. Digital fiction communities, then, offer spaces in which physicality is recovered in the practices of the members (Wenger 1999) and draw concreteness from the sense of embodiment acquired through the medium members use to access and act on the

community.

Belonging to an online community, therefore, doesn't mean merely entering a dimension independent from daily life, as the theorists of cyberspace argued. Rather, it means witnessing a noticeable change in human practices according to the chosen medium and the opportunities offered by the web in the creations or evolution of social connections. The concept of the Internet as cyberspace must therefore be transformed in favor of a conception of the web shaped by the way people use it and strictly connected to their everyday life (Hine 2015).

Based on what we observed on the characteristics of online communities and the approach to the web adopted in this research, the new technologies have reshaped the relationship between author and reader, opening up new scenarios such as

1. The central role of the medium and of the sociotechnological environment in the writing process;
2. New modalities of creation and fruition of the stories developed within this

framework;

3. The formation of new identities, and the redistribution of narrative roles during the creative process; and
4. New ways in which people interact and build relationships.

In order to better investigate these changes, I have adopted a method that allowing me to study digital fiction starting “from the inside” of writing practice: an autoethnography of digital fiction.

0.2.3. *The Methodology*

In the third chapter I will examine the methodology I have used in my research: an autoethnography of digital fiction. I define the “autoethnography of digital fiction” as the attempt to analyze the process of production of a novel on a digital platform of creative fiction.

In order to answer questions about a world that's becoming increasingly more complex, in which the researcher's position is put into question, the ethnographic method, from which autoethnography derives, has challenged and reshaped from its grounds. It did so shedding its ambitions about scientific research and becoming a method more suited to and capable of embracing the multiplicity of the real world and the breakdown of research's binary categories of object/subject, real/virtual, Western knowledge/indigenous cultures in the rest of the world, which had characterized all previous ethnographic studies. The result led to:

1. The development of autoethnographic studies, characterized by a high degree of reflexivity in which the researcher, with her/his actions and decisions, puts herself/himself in the middle of the investigation;

In fact, I pointed out how, in a previous research (Rebagliati 2016), through autoethnography, a researcher can:

- observe and register her/his own behavior, thoughts, and feelings

while living them during participant observation

- reach a wider audience and allow a wider comprehension of the phenomenon object of the research outside the academic field
- get a deep understanding of people and the context where they are embedded, since it entails a daily base commitment to the field

2. the expansion of ethnographic studies in non-traditional fields and the application of ethnography as a practice capable of explaining the relationships between social and technological worlds.

The usefulness of the ethnographic method is, in fact, acknowledged even by fields of study such as information systems, which studies the interaction between technological systems and social systems in real-life settings, of which the online creative writing communities are a result.

3. a consequent relativization of the concept of fieldwork in favor of more attention toward the realization of the ethnographic method and of the connected relationships.

In this perspective, my autoethnography's lack of success in the fieldwork became a source of reflection on the importance of interacting with the community members during the writing practice.

These premises are helpful to justify the use of a autoethnography as the method able to explain the practice of writing digital fiction in a complex reality characterized by the admixture between technological and social elements such as the Internet.

This autoethnography doesn't claim to unpack the multiple meanings of the Internet as some of its predecessors do (Markham 1998), but it focuses on a specific practice, digital fiction, which takes place between the real world and the digital one, linked to the idea of the web as embodied and embedded in everyday life (Hine 2015). Despite

the fact that I underline in this investigation the importance of how constraints and possibilities of the physical environments influence the practice of writing digital fiction, my study can however be contextualized in the classification of online ethnographies by Tuncalp and Lê (2014) and has to take in consideration some differences with traditional ethnographies which influenced my investigation and how the data collected during the research have been treated (Kozinets 2010). Furthermore, it is necessary to highlight how the use of certain tools, specifically media and languages, as well as qualitative methodologies to integrate the autoethnography such as various kinds of interviews, substantially influenced the development of my research.

0.2.4. *An Autoethnography of Digital Fiction on Maho no Irandó and The Incipit*

The fourth chapter discusses autoethnography from a chronological point of view in relation to the four main phases of my experience as an author of digital fiction.

The first phase involves the initial attempts, the acquisition of technical skills and the

definition of the investigative fieldwork.

The autoethnography demonstrates how digital writing is meant to be a trial and error process. Specifically, the shift of the fieldwork from the Japanese platform *Maho no Irando* to the Italian platform *The Incipit* raises questions about the acclimatization process needed in order to master the practice of digital fiction writing. To engage in writing digital fiction on a collaborative writing platform, it is quite necessary to master a technique depending on one's own manual skills and on one's ability to adapt to the writing environment, and overcome whatever cultural and linguistic barriers could arise to compromise interactions between the members of the writing community. Adapting to the tangible characteristics of the medium used and to the place or places where one's body is physically present while writing happens through a process which is far from automatic, but is rather based on trial and error.

In the second phase, the writing experience is concretized in the completion of a story;

The autoethnographic method allows to experience first hand the act of generating

and consuming a story as embedded in the dimension of “here and now.” Completing a story on a collaborative writing platform requires both the interiorization of the rules of the online platform and the efficient use of the resources provided by the website, both digital and social. It also requires the elaboration of writing and reading strategies to maximize results, with the goal of maintaining credibility as a member of that specific platform community. In this autoethnography, the participation in the summer contest, which required the completion of a story, allowed me to investigate the significant aspects and some of the limitations of the platform: the harsher publication schedule damaged both my relationships with the readers and my story’s quality. The intense pace of the uploads made me think about the nature of the creative process and its relationship with the rapid mobility of the writing medium. In addition, the questionable management, on the administrators' part, of the mechanism of the contest regarding transparency and efficiency allowed me to see for the first time the extremely fickle nature of the platform on which I wrote my stories.

Moreover, this reflection on the act of generating a story led me to think that every

story drew its value as it unfolded in the production stage and in the interaction with readers. Finally, the commitment in the process of digital writing allowed me to get precious insights related to the differences between digital and printed works.

The third phase is about my position within the community, in relation to the management of the writing process, of my identities and narrative roles on the platform. Autoethnography allows one to *reflect on the fragmentation of identity, narrative roles, and the writing experience*.

Autoethnography is a methodology in which the narrative orders of first and second level blend (Alleyne 2015): the need to be researcher and object of the research at the same time raises the issue of the position of the ethnographer within the fieldwork, further exacerbated, in the case of the autoethnography of digital fiction, by the partial or complete anonymity granted by the writing platform and by the variety of roles when taking part in the production and consumption process of the stories. The management of these fluid, fake, and (at times) temporary identities directly

influences the writing experience. Additionally, the surrounding sociotechnological environment and the characteristics of the devices used for the writing process emphasized the “fragmented” experience of the digital fiction writing process.

Finally, the fourth phase is about the network of relationships with the other members of the platform. Autoethnography shows that *the digital writing platform is not just a place where to take on a writing process; it is a space where to develop human connections, born through the collaborative production of stories with others* according to the “Intimate Stranger” model to be discussed in chapter two, but even this can evolve despite the limits imposed by the platform itself. Investigating the nature of such relationships allows us to reflect on the nature of human connections born on the Internet.

My relationships formed on *The Incipit* are born in the context of the production of a story. They are developed in relation to the frequency of the comments and according

to the various members' importance within the community. Thanks to the autoethnography it also became clear how, apart from the comments, the story itself is part of the development of the relationship between author and reader. Thus, the story's characters talk about topics that have already been shared by the contributors, presented as options or that fuel the debates on the story's wall: this creates a chain of references and allusions which tightens, loosens, and mends the relationships between the participants to the production of collaborative digital fiction. This relationship is "hypertextual" since it becomes understandable in the light of the complex network of interactions and actions in the context of the production of digital fiction by the community members. The opening up of the community to social networks such as Facebook, where anonymity is no longer an essential prerequisite of the interaction, allows these relationships to develop in a climate of seemingly increased trust. Actually, as proven by the autoethnography, these relationships are born on the basis of the completion of a common project and, even though they can develop, their main focus is the collaboration to a writing project. Anonymity is no longer essential for the development of close relationships in online collaborative

writing digital fiction communities, but it is essential within the collaborative fiction community to give shape to the authors' strategies and to safeguard the community members' self-esteem.

The autoethnography is inseparable from the chronological dimension which accounts for the maturation process of the researcher within the fieldwork. Each of the phases described in the autoethnography is a key point of the ethnographer's progress during the investigation. The fourth chapter discusses the autoethnography from the chronological perspective in relation to the four key phases of my experience as an author of digital fiction.

The first phase, during which a reflection on digital writing as a trial and error process takes place, corresponds to the initial attempts, to the acquisition of technical competences, and the definition of the fieldwork of investigation; the second phase, during which a reflection on the act of generating and consuming a story takes place, corresponds to the writing experience while completing a story on the platform; the

third phase, during which a reflection on the fragmentation of identity, narrative roles and the writing experience takes place, is devoted to the position of the author/researcher within the community; finally, the fourth phase, during which a reflection on the relationship with other members of the community takes place, pinpoints the location, the typology, and the nature of the relationships on the platform.

Each of the phases corresponds to one of the narrative dimensions by Ochs and Capps (2011) already employed by Page (2012) to analyze social media:

The first phase corresponds to the embeddedness that allows the analysis of the context in which the writing process takes place; the second phase corresponds to the linearity which pinpoints the narrative structural properties of the stories and of the process of production and consumption of the stories; the third phase corresponds to the tellership which pinpoints who creates and contributes to the story; the fourth phase corresponds to the tellability that concerns the value that the narrative acquires

in relation to the participation of its audience.

The application of these four narrative dimensions frame allows us to abstract from the chronological dimension of the autoethnography and to then propose a comparative perspective to frame the problem in question in the debate on digital fiction.

The presentation order of the categories of analysis follows Page's exposition and does not correspond to the chronological structure of the autoethnography; for each category of analysis I will however explain the contribution of the autoethnographic methodology and its contribution to the debate on digital fiction.

0.2.5. Analysis

The analysis of the online platform *The Incipit* according to the four dimensions of narrative allows us to shed light on some writing possibilities that have been temporarily suppressed by the advent of the traditional book and now are concretized

by exploiting the characteristics of mobility, accessibility, and immediacy of the medium on which they are produced.

Concerning tellership, the story is no longer under the unique responsibility of a single author; it develops via a network of actors whose roles are well discernible.

Communication among these various actors happens during the very writing of the story. In this way the narrative roles of the different participants to the creative process strengthen and tighten. Despite this, each author has the possibility to take on all these roles at once in her/his writing experience on the platform. In addition, these roles can be diluted *among* several identities reserved for one or more of these tasks.

This makes the writing experience extremely fragmented, but functional for the author's strategy on the platform when building relationships and managing her/his projects.

Concerning linearity on the platform *The Incipit*, we can pinpoint three coexisting structural levels.

1. The story level which, even following a closed structure, lends itself to the dynamics of the game and to being reworked by the readers;
2. The writing level, split in updating and reviewing, aimed at the here and now to maintain a feeling of copresence among the story's contributors;
3. And the reading level, which develops through hyperlinks without limitations of order and sequence, and is constantly alternated to the act of writing.

These three structural levels coexist and contribute to maintaining the continuous exchange of information in real time among the members of the community recreates the "common shared space" that private reading has progressively eliminated. This "space" provides the various participants to the creative process a certain social connection comparable to the experience of copresence in a physical space typical of declamation and recitation in oral societies as the story production and consumption is embedded in the dimension of "here and now."

The tellability of a story does not only depend on the value of the story, but it gets created through the strategic interaction between the author and the other members of the community which contributes to create actual relationships. I call this kind of relationships “hypertextual” since they become understandable in the light of the complex network of interactions and actions in the context of the production and consumption of digital fiction by the community members.

Concerning embeddedness, the production and consumption of the story in real time requires an analysis that takes into account the context in which it is created; thus, the textual context reflects the formation of the identities and the product of the interactions that take place on the platform; the generic context allows for a reflection on the transient nature of the Internet and the importance of the administration as a filter and to control the information; moreover, the autoethnographic analysis in which I, as an author, study the process of digital writing through my own experience allows the recovery of behavioral and extrasituational contexts identifying the crucial roles played by different media and by the sociotechnological frame in which the

writing process is framed, while reflecting on the emotional and affective dimension of an author who decides to venture in the brave new world of digital fiction.

0.2.6. Conclusions

The aim of the final chapter is to define the characteristics of the author challenging the practice of digital fiction on a collaborative writing community. I label her/him as “an author on the run.”

The novel achievement of this research through the autoethnographic method concurred to define the experience of writing digital fiction as:

A trial and error process, wherein one’s ability to adapt to the writing environment and overcome whatever cultural and linguistic barriers could arise to compromise *interactions* between the members of the writing community is the key to accomplish successfully the writing practice and where the story’s sense is given in its unfolding thanks to the interactions of the author with her/his contributors;

A practice framed in the dimension of “here and now,” where the *dynamic* response of the author through a device always connected is vital to maintain the unavoidable dialogue with the contributors to the story;

A *fragmented* experience of one’s identity, narrative roles, and the writing practice reflects the author’s strategy toward his/her project on the platform accomplished with the use of multiple devices and favored by the high degree of anonymity granted by the platform;

The hypertextual nature of the relationships built on the community and the possibility to use mobile devices to write according to one’s movements returns the dimensionality of the writing experience and the *itinerant* figure of the author who dynamically shuttles between the physical and digital worlds, between multiple identities created for a specific writing platform, and between roles whose boundaries have been broken down, or at least made permanently permeable, by the very

embeddedness of the Internet as media.

For these reasons, because of the interactive, dynamic, fragmented, and itinerant character of the writing experience, I identify the author taking part in a collaborative writing project on a digital platform as an “author on the run.”

Chapter One

The Sociotechnological Framework

The first chapter of the thesis aims to pinpoint the sociotechnological framework of this research and the influence of its key factors on the practice of digital fiction writing.

In order to do so, it is necessary to look back to the model that the positivist sociology of literature suggested to explain the literary industry.

The reference to this model is tied to the fact that “author,” “reader,” and “text” are recurring terms in this research, and it is therefore important to put them in the context of previous studies.

1.2. The Sociology of Literature: The “Literary Fact” Model

According to the definition of sociology of literature by Rutherford and Crouch (2014), the discipline investigates the relationship between literature, its object of study, and the society which generated it. Literary sociologists “have tended to answer the question “What is literature?” with an empirical descriptions of the organizational structures that govern production and circulation of literature in the modern world” (Rutherford and Crouch 2014, 278).

The two researchers acknowledge the great influence that Escarpit, a French sociologist belonging to the positivist current of the sociology of literature with his work “Sociology of Literature” (1970 [1958]), had on the development of this discipline: he contributed to the analysis of literature as a social institution and, helped push the study of literature beyond the analysis of the simple text typical of Literary Criticism.

Jakobson was the first researcher to talk about literature as a linguistic function.

According to his model of communication (sender-message-receiver), indeed, the

literature is not likely to be identified just as a text; rather it must be understood as a linguistic function (poetic function) to be accounted in the social practices of a community.

Escarpit refers to the communication model of Jakobson (sender, message, and recipient) and identifies the actors who realize the literature as a social institution in the author (sender), the text (message), and the reader (recipient). This discipline investigates "literary facts" (Escarpit 1970 [1958]). The notion of literary fact includes not only the text in itself (the message); it also includes its sender (the author), its recipient (the reader), and the web of relations that tie the actors of this process together.

The sociology of literature defines its subject of study as a constantly evolving system, where change is a constant condition depending on social context. However, since the roles of the author and the reader are crystallized respectively in production and consumption acts, this model cannot be applied to literary expressions in the Internet

era where, thanks to the digital texts of the Internet and the digital devices used for reading and writing, the author and the reader gain a new space to interact, where the boundaries between the two roles become blurred.

1.1.1 *Criticism of the Positivist Sociology of Literature*

Even though they operate within the model suggested by Escarpit, the researchers or contributors to the debate on sociology of literature or on disciplines concerning similar themes, such as the “reading theory” studies (Rutherford and Crouch 2014), are aware that the publishing industry is just one of the possible manifestations of human culture.

Therefore, even while maintaining a book-centric perspective, they tried to pinpoint its limits and to emancipate readers and authors from this structure, elaborating considerations that anticipated the advent of new technologies (Bolter 2001) .

Already within the positivist sociology of literature itself, the author is no longer

conceived as a creative genius detached from the world and capable, thanks to an innate talent, of capturing in her/his work the zeitgeist; rather, the author's work is considered "a professional practice occurring within an economic system" (Rutherford and Crouch 2014, 282). An additional implication of the resizing of the author figure according to this current is believing that cultural products "arise out of, and in response to, collective conditions" (2014, 282). From these beliefs stem new reflections on the author's actual control over the text, on the relationships between author and reader, and on the reader's importance in her/his role as a creator of meaning; these contribute to the elaboration of reflections which are concretized with the advent of digital media and the Internet.

On the one hand, the structuralists, reducing the value of the literary text to the detriment of the signification system that conceives it, opened the way for the semiologist Roland Barthes to announce "the death of the author" (1977 [1967]). According to Barthes, a French semiologist, once the text is created, the author has no control over it and the text is inevitably sucked into a network of other texts. These

intertextual connections inevitably invalidate its original meaning, as in its connection with the author who created it. The spread of the writing practice caused a progressive separation of the text from its author that went hand in hand with a disruption of the shared physical space wherein author and audience could directly interact during the formation and elaboration of a text. The reader no longer had the chance to address the author with his own comments directly and contribute to the actual redaction of the text.

Nevertheless, Umberto Eco, an Italian semiologist very active in the debate on the sociology of literature, spares the author granting her/him the ability to create “open” (1981 [1962]) works where “every act of reading involves both an interpretation and a performance” (Rutherford and Crouch 2014, 289). Through the expedients she/he comes up with while producing the work, the author can establish a “deferred” dialogue with the reader: a reader who loses his passive role as a consumer, and falls in line with the characteristics of the “reading theory” studies (Rutherford and Crouch 2014).

What these studies “have in common is an insistence on the importance of the reader, a denial of the objective literary text, and an emphasis on the active individual interaction with writing” (Rutherford and Crouch 2014, 359).

The precursor of reader theory is the philosophy of H. G. Gadamer (1972 [1960]), who writes that the comprehension of a text is directly connected to the interpretation of the reader. In the act of reading, the reader actualizes the text in an individual way under the lens of the historical context he personally experienced. The reader’s re-interpretation of the text allows the text to survive in time because it confers on it new values. The same ideas are expressed by Jauss (1969 [1967]) with the concept of “Horizons of Expectations,” which suggests that the future of a literary work is determined by the degree of satisfaction it can offer to a group of readers. The horizons of expectations of a literary work are established by the continuity of the work with its genre, style, and form (canon).

1.1.2 *The Limits of Sociology of Literature*

The advent of digital technologies and of the Internet saw the concretization of the theories of critical thinkers connected to the positivist sociology of literature, and highlighted how the model of the “literary fact” (Escarpit 1970 [1958]) at the base of the said discipline is unable to explain literary expressions at the time of Internet. However, these criticisms, even by virtue of their pioneering character, are not concretized in the elaboration of a new model, nor emancipate themselves from the traditional writing circuit.

Even though the book still remains the preferential vehicle through which literary expressions take shape, with the advent of the Internet and of digital media, due to their characteristics of velocity and immediacy, the traditional practices of production and reception of a text, and the agents themselves in the production and consumption of a text, ultimately transcend the functions they were previously attributed with, generating new practices that have never been taken into consideration. It is therefore

necessary to re-contextualize the contribution of the sociology of literature and the related theories, in the context of media studies.

1.2. Media Studies

As discussed in the previous section, the sociology of literature follows an approach to the media related to mass communication; the literary text (message) is created by an author (sender) and consumed by readers (recipient) who, despite their active participation in the decodification process of the text and their contribution to the preservation of the literary work in time, have no actual role in the production phase.

This model does not, therefore, have the tools to include in its analysis the literary forms developed after the advent of the Internet and mobile devices, new media whose combined use radically alters the production and consumption processes of a text, and the role of the involved parties. Thanks to the contribution of media studies we will be able, however, to shed light on the role of said media and overcome the mass communication model which is now obsolete and tied, in this specific instance, to

an editorial system which is itself in a transitional phase, at present evolving in parallel to the advent of the Internet and mobile devices.

1.2.1. *From Mass Communication to Encoding/Decoding Theory*

Media in the sociology of literature have to be considered as they are represented in media studies mass communication theory.

According to this theory, the medium represents the channel through which the message codified by the sender is delivered to the recipient. A simple configuration which reflects the orientation of media studies popular until the second half of the twentieth century, concerning research aimed at theorizing and measuring the use of the media as a propaganda tool and the generalized and wide-ranging effects of the media's influence on the public (Lasswell 1971 [1927]; Cantril 1940 [1985]).

According to this approach, the message with top-down communication is reinforced by the channel which can reach and influence multiple recipients. Even though

alternative models were suggested in the postwar period which claim that the message delivery is influenced by other factors, such as the psychological conditions of the recipient (Merton 1970 [1946]) and the human component emphasized as a potential source of conditioning when elaborating the content transmitted by the media (Lazarsfeld 1987 [1948]), the mass communication model has lasted to this day.

It is only with McLuhan (1964) that media studies focused on the inherent properties of the medium: according to the Canadian researcher, the message acquires the properties of the medium used to send it. Therefore, the medium is not a simple means of communication, but influences the properties of the message to the point of becoming one with it. The medium *is* the message. The medium becomes an extension of the body which can amplify human senses; the human being, however, is subjugated by the technological superiority of the machine. McLuhan's theory, therefore, leads to a kind of technological determinism according to which the media possess characteristics that can determine and condition the human perception of the world.

As proven by studies conducted on specific media (Matsuda 2012) and with the advent of the Internet and digital media, through which the time necessary to produce and receive a message has shrunk to the point of reducing the reaction time and the distance between sender and recipient (Rebagliati 2014), the media necessarily undergo a transformation according to the habits and the expectations of the recipients, sometimes unforeseen by the producers. This discourse follows the process of extremely high levels of personalization of the media, allowed by the widely available low-cost technology and the emancipation of recipients from the previously main sources of one-way mass information: the newspaper, the radio, and the television.

Hall (1991, 80), in the field of cultural studies, describes these tendencies with encoding/decoding theory. According to Hall, the message is not a message because it is transmitted through a medium, but is rather the result of a complex process of encoding and decoding depending on multiple participants, among which is the

recipient. The encoding/decoding theory sanctions the awareness of a new kind of recipient, which plays an active, decisive, and critical role toward the messages he receives and the media she/he consumes.

To educate this kind of recipient, it is necessary to establish a new awareness toward media. “Media literacy” is the ability to consciously interpret the information obtained from the media, to distinguish true from false, and to select only what is strictly relevant. As observed by Mizukoshi (2007), it is necessary to acquire three skills in order to achieve such an awareness and freely use media. The first is to learn to use the media through practice. The second is about acquiring information from the media critically. The third is the ability to express oneself through the media.

1.2.2. *Social Constructivism and Actor-Network Theory*

The pager (colloquially called “Pocketbell” in Japan) can be considered as a medium in the middle of the shift from telephone to mobile phone. The earliest model of Pocketbell was not used for interactive communications like the telephone because it

was mainly used at work. This model showed the list of the received calls on its display. Okada describes this pager as a “tone-only model” medium which only had a ringer function while the caller could exclusively be someone from one’s work (Okada 2005, 43). However, seeing the development of Pocketbell, its role did not accomplish the function it was supposed to at the development stage. Eventually, Pocketbell took on a new role which was “invented” by consumers. The model of Pocketbell in 1987 which had a display on it could show numbers and users started communicating each other with the numbers—a kind of numerical code. The numbers meant specific characters which formed special words called *poke-kotoba*. These words were created by the young users of the Pocketbell. According to a survey among junior high school and high school students between 12 years old and 18 years old, conducted by the Bureau of Citizens and Cultural Affairs in 1996, 48 percent of female high school students used Pocketbell (Okada 2005, 48). On the other hand, Nakamura (1996) points out that the peak hours of Pocketbell usage shifted from work hours to evening and nighttime for private use. In addition, as Matsuda (2012, 30) pointed out, the customization of Pocketbell became popular among users. This also happened mainly among young

generations who stuck it out with their own “dated” devices despite the advent of the Internet in the 1990s.

The result of this constructivist research underlines the key issue of intelligent, if unintended or even accidental, use of media by users, who are responsible for their characteristics, despite the initial intentions of the producers and the technological apparatus which doesn’t stifle, but rather elicits, their creativity.

My research follows instead an intermediate approach: the so-called actor-network theory. As clarified by Amagasa (2012), in the study of the relationship between technology and society, neither element is predominant; it is useful to instead examine the relationship between technology and society to clarify the complexities that are the base of social changes.

Law (1992) claims that society is built of patterned networks of heterogeneous materials. Furthermore, the creation of a network presupposes the interaction of

several factors, both human and not. Society as we know it is nothing but the result of this interaction: therefore, in order to study any social phenomenon, we have to investigate the network of factors at its base and the connections between them.

This review of media studies theories allowed me to challenge the model offered by the sociology of the literature and to provide a new theory, the actor-network theory, which will prove more useful in explaining the unique developments of keitai shosetsu, helping me to clarify the sociotechnological frame of my research.

1.3. The Birth of the Keitai Shosetsu

In this section, I will analyze the phenomenon of keitai shosetsu on the basis of the insights provided by the actor-network theory. Media studies with actor-network theory give me the theoretical framework to approach keitai shosetsu as a result of interwoven technological (mobile phones, the Internet) and human (phone companies, consumers) factors. Therefore, to explain the phenomenon of the keitai shosetsu, it is

necessary to retrace the evolution of mobile phones and the relationships created between producers and users of this medium in Japanese society.

It is possible to do so starting from three characteristics of mobile phones in Japan: personalization, multifunctionality, and portability.

1.3.1. *Personalization*

First, the Japanese mobile phone has been developed mainly as a personal medium, a phenomenon that Matsuda (1999) calls “personalization.” Matsuda (2012) describes the process of personalization of the telephone as follows. At the first stage, the telephone was a medium which had a transmitting function like radio, and provided a broadcasting service. But at a certain point producers started developing the telephone as a “personal communication medium,” avoiding its broadcasting service (Mizukoshi 1993; Yoshimi 1995).

By 1960, telephone became already a technology which enabled communication between two persons, but it was shared by the neighborhood because it was not

available for each house. At that time, telephone machines were located at the entrance of the house, the closest place to the “outside.” In the 1970s, owning a telephone at home became popular. Then in the 1980s, the cordless telephone, which enabled people to move around in the house while talking, became popular.

At this stage the pager (or the Pocketbell, in Okada’s 2005; see section 1.2.2), can be considered as a medium in the middle of the shift from the telephone to the mobile phone. It is not difficult to recognize that the same personalization process that the pager enabled, also carried over in the development of the mobile novel (keitai shosetsu).

Nakamura (2001) affirms that the development of keitai (mobile telephone) can be categorized into three stages. The first stage is the “work stage,” the second stage is the “personal stage,” and the final stage is the “sophistication stage.” The first model of the mobile phone in Japan appeared in 1979, and it was a tool for work. The usage fee was very expensive, and the reception was very limited. This situation did not

change until 1995 in the so-called personal stage; according to Nakamura, at this stage, cellphones were mainly used for personal purposes, and devices became smaller and were personalized and accessorized with ringer melody, straps, cases, etc. (Nakamura 2001, 52).

The third stage, that of sophistication, is from 1999 to the present. This stage is characterized by the spread of keitai usage among all genders and generations, and largely due to increased keitai multifunctionality. This last feature in the development of keitai largely contributed to the birth of keitai shosetsu.

1.3.2. Multifunctionality

By the late 1990s, keitai became a multimedia tool with several functions. However, the daily use of this network device was mainly based on the email function called *keitai mail* and the Internet function called *keitai Internet*. These two functions are particularly interesting because they are connected with the keitai shosetsu since they are written with keitai mail-style on keitai Internet.

1.3.2.1. Keitai Mail

The email service for keitai promoted the diffusion of mobile phones in Japan. This email service, which fostered personal communication especially among young people, was considered as an extension of poke-kotoba. Keitai mail became available in 1997.

Matsuda (2012, 31) writes that there were three reasons why this email service became popular among younger users. The first reason is that the cost of email service was cheaper than voice calls. The second reason is that keitai allowed users to enjoy many kinds of characters including emoji (emoticons) while exchanging messages with friends. The third reason is that emails did not depend on the type of device used and could be exchanged with any device. The diffusion of the habit of keitai mail among young generations quickly established a “mail culture.”

Matsushita (2012) notes that this mail culture has two important features: the “mail writing style” and the “mail exchange policy.” The “mail writing style” consists of all

the characters that can be used in a mail exchange. These include Japanese alphabets, Chinese characters, numbers, emoticons, and *gyaru moji*. Gyarū moji are a unique combination of characters and symbols which represent a kind of slang and an important tool used by young people exchanging messages.

According to the “Survey regarding the Japanese Language” conducted by the Agency for Cultural Affairs, the “communication of people on *keitai mail* were more casual than on personal computers or word processors” (Matsushita 2012, 69). Not only was the communication more “casual” in keitai mail, but there was also a higher number of line breaks, shorter sentences, and conversational expressions. All of these language features are also commonly used in keitai shosetsu (Matsushita 2012).

In “mail exchange policy,” it is important to reply to an email as soon as it has been received. This modality of use creates “perpetual contact” (Katz and Aakhus 2002) between the sender and the receiver. Because of this, when one sends an email, he/she will expect a quick response from the receiver. The later the receiver replies,

the more anxious the sender becomes. Degrees of expectations and anxiousness vary according to the content of the mail exchanged and the nature of the relationship with the receiver.

According to the survey conducted by the Japan Society of Mobile Communication Research in 2002, there are two purposes for using keitai mail services (Okada 2005, 50). The first purpose is that users predominantly use cellphones to communicate with “friends.” The second purpose is to accomplish consummatory communication purposes. Consummatory communication (Yoshimi, Wakabayashi, and Mizukoshi 1992) is a very useful tool to strengthen and consolidate relationships because it is designed for communicating and transmits to the receiver warmth and affection. Consummatory communication does not necessarily convey an important message, but focuses instead on showing empathy and a sense of communality with the receiver.

Suzuki especially focuses on this kind of communication. According to Suzuki,

consummatory communication occurs in the shape of emoticons rather than actual Japanese characters (2007, 67). Suzuki concludes that keitai mails have become essential for young generations to solidify their self-confidence and strengthen their relationships with each other.

1.3.2.2. Keitai Internet

Needless to say, keitai Internet is related to the spread of Internet usage in Japan. During its early rollout from 1995 to 1999, the Internet struggled to become popular in Japan (Gottlieb and McLelland 2003). The reason, according to Matsuda (2012, 32), was to be found in the technological infrastructure which at the time could not provide users with fast connection speed connections. In 1999, however, NTT Docomo introduced its Internet service called “i-Mode”: thanks to the i-Mode, cellphones became able to connect to the Internet at more affordable rates. Before this, the service fees were prohibitively expensive so users mainly accessed the Internet to download ringer melody or wallpapers to customize their personal cellphone (Matsuda 2012, 33). In 2003, every cellphone company adopted the “flat fee” package, the

number of users connecting to Internet with cellphone increased dramatically and the services specifically designed for keitai started developing. One of the services was *Maho no Irando*, which at the time provided a service to create personal homepages and later became the most popular website hosting keitai shosetsu.

1.3.3. Portability

In Japan, cellphone use is strictly limited in public spaces despite the possibility of carrying a phone practically anywhere. In his research, Tomita (2012) discusses social issues regarding portability of cellphones in Japan. He affirms that personal space (the cellphone) has penetrated into public space (Japanese trains) after the cellphone became common. Due to this, the “rule of non-engagement” on a tacit agreement was disturbed. The rule of non-engagement was first introduced by Milgram (1977) and refers to people’s acting like non-engaging each other in public spaces such as a small train cabin filled with other strangers.

Ito and Okabe’s (2005) research considers the history of cellphone etiquette in

Japanese trains. According to their study, cellphones only had its telephony function until the early 1990s, and their use was very limited only among business people. But even at that time, “people started monitoring use of *keitai* in the public space” (2005, 212).

From 1995 to 1996, around 15 percent of the Japanese population owned cellphones, and more and more people started to acquire them in the following years. Because the cellphone became increasingly popular among the younger Japanese, both as status symbol and as a means of communication, people associated these youths with unmannered acts and started complaining about their use of mobiles on trains. To address this problem, NTT Docomo put a vibration function on the mobile devices to lessen the number of complaints from those who did not like being disturbed by cellphone ringers during their train rides.

From 1997, train companies introduced counterplans for these bad manners, which limited cellphone calls in all of the train cabins. Meanwhile, mobile phones became

even more multifunctional with the keitai mail service introduced in 1997, followed by the i-Mode Internet connection service in 1999. This “alternative” use of the mobile phones became widely accepted and is common at the present time.

According to Matsushita (2012, 63), the usage of cellphone on trains is considered as a kind of reading habit because commuting hours via public transportation are very long in Japan. Kobayashi (2010, 3) argues that reading with cellphone on the train should be regarded as an extension of silent reading established after 1930s of the Meiji era. Iain Gately (2015), in his account on commuting time, argues that the fragmented consumption of keitai shosetsu on trains can actually be compared to that of serialized novels such as Charles Dickens’s and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s works, which were sold in train stations in Victorian England.

Kobayashi also affirms that keitai Internet was preferred over reading books because the device was not only easy to take out but able to update information thanks to an Internet connection. Additionally, the cellphone has sending and receiving functions so

users can edit the text directly even while they are reading.

1.3.4. *Mobile Novels and Mobile Phones*

Constance Penley and Andrew Ross offer a technocultural view of the changes occurring in our society and involving human and technological aspects:

Technologies are not repressively foisted upon passive population, any more than the power to realize their repressive potential is in the hands of a conspiring few. They are developed at any one time and place in accord with a complex set of existing rules or rational procedures, institutional histories, technical possibilities, and, last, but not least, popular desires. (1991, xiv)

According to the actor-network theory, we can say that keitai shosetsu is a product of the interaction of technological and social issues related to the mobile phone.

First, the personalization process of the mobile phone allows the establishment of a generation who express themselves and communicate daily through the mobile phone, which has become an (almost physical) extension of their body, a tool to find their position in space and time, and an object that orientates them in building and consolidating relationships. Furthermore, its mobility and the possibility to connect

quickly to the Internet guarantee efficient and effective communication among young Japanese.

Second, the feature of multifunctionality that characterizes Japanese mobile phones has yielded two important results: the first is the development of an easy way to access the Internet. Japan has seen a rapid spread of sites created exclusively for mobile phones (Gottlieb and McLelland 2003). This phenomenon is linked to the campaigns by Japanese telephone companies allowing their customers to surf the Internet using mobile phones at competitive prices compared to connecting through a personal computer. In 1999, the introduction of the i-Mode system allowed the first mobile Internet connection in Japan. Connection fees were significantly reduced with the normalization of prices in 2003, when it became possible to connect to the Internet at a fixed price. This created an accessible environment in which write at any given time and place. The second result is the spread of email culture that has become the predominant way of communication among young people. Proceeding from the mobile pager technology of the early 1990s, email technology consolidated this type of

mediated communication and its standardization in times and modalities of use (Matsushita 2012). In this sense, and according to Kyoung-hwa (2012), *keitai shosetsu* needs to be understood as “refashioning emails rather than literature.”

Third, portability is a key factor in Japan, where the use of mobiles in public places is limited by strong social restrictions: talking on the phone in front of other people is considered impolite and thus avoided in order not to disturb them (Ito et al. 2005). Therefore, during long train commuting times to and from work or school, mobile phone use is limited to “quieter” uses like accessing the Internet and related to the consolidation of strong reading and writing habits via mobile phones.

Thanks to this analysis it is possible to understand how social and technological factors linked to mobile phones characteristics of personalization, multifunctionality, and portability contributed to the birth of *keitai shosetsu*; the same social and technological factors that shaped my experience as an author of digital fiction and that

represent the sociotechnological frame in which I conducted my research.

1.5. Conclusions

In this chapter I argued how the communication model connected to literary publishing establishment and to mass communication theory fails to clarify literary expressions at the time of Internet and to provide with tools to reframe the key concepts of author, text, and reader according to this new environment.

Therefore, it is necessary to identify a media theory capable of releasing the literary production from the literary publishing establishment and from the concepts of author and reader understood as fixed entities in the production and consumption acts of fiction; the aim is to approximate a vision that allows a reframing of the book in its corresponding digital version and replacing a deterministic view of technology and production and consumption processes with a new one, determined by the Web characteristics of immediacy and easy accessibility, the mobility of cellphones, and a generation of people willing to gather on the Internet and express themselves

accordingly in its “space.”

Actor-network theory provides greater understanding of the complex relationships between technological and human components in facing changes in society, exemplified in the analysis carried out in this chapter concerning the birth of keitai shosetsu in Japan. Thanks to this analysis I developed deep insights about the sociotechnological frame in which I conducted my research.

The aim of the following chapter will be to investigate the Internet and the new ways it offers people to gather and interact, reshaping human practices; furthermore it will be the place where to set the research questions of this research.

Chapter Two

The Internet and the Intimate Stranger in Online Communities

In this second chapter, my aim is to define the Internet, the space which hosts the collaborative digital writing platforms, the new forms of social gatherings that take place there, and moreover to define the research questions of this research.

As previously mentioned in the Introduction, the first studies about the Internet took place in the context of the comparison between CMC (Computer Mediated Communication) and face-to-face communication exchanges. Even though some of these studies (Short et al. 1976; Daft and Lengel 1984) pointed out their narrowness compared to face-to-face interactions, due to lack of information and the limitations of the channel surrounding the participations to the communication exchange, other researchers (Danet 2001; Baym 2010) started to take the stance in which mediated communications were not considered inferior to their direct counterpart, but different

and would rather allow people to aggregate in different ways breaking time and space distances.

In the theoretical frame of postmodernism (Azuma 2001; Hamano 2008), the Internet was conceived as “cyberspace,” a place where people abandoned the logic and the anxieties of the real world to challenge an alternative virtual experience completely separated from the real and recover their “ontological security” (Giddens 1991), in a safe environment.

In this frame, Tomita (2009) proposes a new model to explain the relationships that are created through mediated communication, expressed under the “Intimate Stranger” theory: “Intimate” because this kind of relationships are born for the sole purpose of forging a bond with the other person and enjoying the satisfaction of being connected to her/him; “Stranger” because, the contextual information (social, position cues) in mediated communication are limited.

Among the various expressions through which mediated communications allow to convey the “Intimate Stranger” relationship, particularly interesting is how it shapes and reframes the roles of author and reader in the collaborative writing platforms of *keitai shosetsu*: there, author and reader are not just producing and consuming texts, but are also interacting with each other, all the while maintaining both anonymity and developing intimate relationships.

Maho no Irandō is one such example of online communities (Hiltz 1984) where people gather and interact in new ways, reshaping human practices and giving form to new interactions styles since the advent of the Internet and digital devices connected to the Web, spaces in which physicality is recovered in the practices of the communities members (Wenger 1999) and draws concreteness from the sense of embodiment acquired through the medium members of the community use to access and act within such a community.

Belonging to an online community, therefore, doesn’t necessarily mean entering a

dimension independent from daily life, as theorists of cyberspace argued. Rather, it meant witnessing a noticeable change in human practices according to the chosen medium and the opportunities offered by the web in the creations or evolution of social connections. The concept of the Internet as cyberspace must therefore be transformed in favor of a conception of the web shaped by the way people use it and strictly connected to their everyday life (Hine 2015).

Based on what we observed on the characteristics of online communities and the approach to the web adopted in this research, the new technologies have reshaped the relationship between author and reader, opening up new scenarios such as:

1. The central role of the medium and of the sociotechnological environment in the writing process;
2. New modalities of creation and fruition of the stories developed within this framework;
3. The formation of new identities, and the redistribution of narrative roles during the creative process; and

4. New ways in which people interact and build relationships

In order to better investigate these changes, I have adopted a method that allowing me to study digital fiction starting “from the inside” of writing practice: an autoethnography of digital fiction.

2.1. Media Communication vs. Face to Face

In order to understand how writing practices and the roles of author and reader change in online collaborative digital writing platforms, it is necessary to define the space hosting them: the Internet.

The first studies about the Internet were part of a research aiming to pinpoint the differences between mediated communication (CMC) and face-to-face interaction.

These studies suggest that, with the development of new media, interpersonal relations have evolved.

Within the framework of these studies, a group of researchers have interpreted this said evolution negatively.

Baym (2010) in her research about personal connections in the digital age conducts a brief review of the studies which point out how mediation consists in an impoverishment compared to copresent communication.

The first researches in this field were held in the 1970s and 1980s, when all online interaction was text-only and had the purpose “to match media capabilities, defined as their ability to transmit social cues, with task demands” (Baym 2010).

The two main theories were Social Presence Theory and Media Richness Theory. The Social Presence Theory (Short et al. 1976) pursued the task of understanding at which degree each media considered could exploit social presence described as the “level of interpersonal contact and feelings of intimacy experienced in communication” (Thurlow, Lengel, and Tomic 2004, 48).

In contrast, Media Richness Theory (Daft and Lengel 1984) tried to categorize each medium on the base of its possibility of carrying information according to four categories: the speed of feedback, the ability to communicate multiple cues, the use of natural language instead of numbers, and the ability to convey feelings and emotions.

Both of these theories can be ascribed to “cues filtered out” approaches (Culnan and Marcus 1987) which “took the defining features of CMC to be the absence of regulating feedback and reduced status and position cues” (Baym 2006, 36).

According to Fukushima (2006, 119), these theories arguing that CMC consists in an impoverishment compared to copresent communication agree on the following points: the first point is based on the fact that communication exchanges on Internet sites, bulletin boards, or chats lack of information compared to direct communication; the second point expresses the fact that it is easy for the communication channel to be interrupted because the exchange takes place according to the participants availability

at the moment of the communication and it relies on the fact that the participants are not physically sharing the same space; the third point refers to the fact that the relationships built through this kind of exchanges are based on a high degree of anonymity.

However, in response to these theories, researchers began to take the stance that mediated communications should not be considered inferior to their direct counterpart, but are merely different.

For instance Danet (2001) revealed that this lack in status and position cues was supplied by the development of special written forms such as “emoticons” and other shared symbols by the participants in the communicative exchange; these signs have the role of conveying feelings and meaning that otherwise would have been lost in mediated communications.

At the same time, Baym points out that this same perspective of considering media

communication as figuratively “lean” compared to face-to-face interactions fails to take into consideration the commitment to the communication exchange that orients participants to more cooperative and self-disclose behavior regardless if they are engaging in a CMC or face-to-face communication exchange. This commitment, during speaking about CMC exchanges, could depend upon several factors such as: “people’s familiarity with the technology, whether they know one another already and what sort of relationship they have, whether they anticipate meeting or seeing one another again, their expectations and motivations for interacting, and the social contexts in which interactions are embedded” (Baym 2010).

Once the theories stating that CMC exchanges can be considered as “lean” in comparison to face-to-face communication were called into question, the next issue faced by the sociologists of communication was to pinpoint the reason why people choose CMC, and what exactly are the consequences of this choice on the evolution of people’s relationships and forms of social gatherings.

2.2. Internet as “Cyberspace”

The first person to define the Internet as “cyberspace” was Walter Gibson in his science fiction novel entitled *Neuromancer* (1984). According to Gibson, “cyberspace” is a “nonspace” where the interaction between the “cyberspace cowboys,” the new explorers of the net, is bodiless, unreal, and appealing in the way it offers a new concept of freedom and new realms separated from the reality. This definition of the Internet has its theoretical frame in the concept of postmodernism.

In his attempt to present the features of postmodern society, Giddens (1991) affirms that relevant institutional changes are indeed undermining the traditions and the religions that once were at the base of the society. Therefore, postmodern individuals started feeling isolated from the society and developed a sense of insecurity for the many choices they have to deal with when trying to manage their own life. In this situation, in order to prove the meaning of their existence, individuals have to find in everyday practices the sense of themselves to restore their “ontological security.”

The sociologist Hazuma Hiroki (2001), in the debate of postmodernism in Japan, adopts Giddens's theories to explain some features of the popular culture. In particular he affirms that:

- 1) With the collapse of big narratives, young generations especially find refuge in what Miyadai (2006) calls "Shimauchu," groups where they can produce and consume the culture they share with the other members of the group.
- 2) The sense of reality that was supported by traditions and religion is no more understandable and the various groups are developing relationships with the world according to their own realism.
- 3) According to this vision, the mobile phone and the Internet, in the shape of the cyberspace, could offer a new frontier where people escape from the anxieties of the world to gather and recover their ontological security.

Hamano (2008) further expands this discussion to the keitai shosetsu: according to the Japanese sociologist, in the keitai shosetsu would come into play what he calls

“operative log realism.” This new sense of reality shared by authors and readers of keitai shosetsu would stem from the influence of the characteristics of the medium through which the keitai shosetsu are written and the kind of communication that takes place between authors and readers through the Internet.

2.2.1. *Japanese Youth and Mobile Phones*

In his research, Doi (2007), another Japanese sociologist, analyzes the attitudes of Japanese young people, arguing that nowadays they express themselves nowadays more smoothly through mobile phones. Doi focuses on communication between youth with a key expression: “gentle relationships.” Generally, adults regard young people as lacking in communication competency. Doi, however, insists that they tend to build “gentle relationships” and in order to sustain this kind of relationships, they need high communication skills and deep consideration. In a “gentle relationship,” one conceals her/his personality in order to avoid any conflict with the other and acts by reading the surrounding situation. Doi states that young people failing to maintain a “gentle relationship” are afraid of becoming the target of bullying (2007, 20-22) since the

former structure of bullying which consisted of a conflict between a “weak” victim and a “strong” attacker does not exist anymore; instead now, anyone could be the target depending on the situation or one’s behavior.

In order to avoid the unpredictability of bullying, modern youth avoid occasions of open conflicts while at the same time asking for approval by others in a very unstable condition. Therefore, any youth who attempts to express her/his real self to others prefers media communication to a direct one. For all these reasons, Doi argues that the most suitable medium for young generations is the mobile phone (2007, 142-45). As Doi explains, mobile phones are used as a self-navigation tool which is, in a broad sense, a tool to inform one’s position with respect to the others. In other words, through mobile cellphones allow young people to understand their expectations toward mates’ response and how other people consider them. Consequently for young people, mobile cellphones are tools to prove the sense of their existence rather than to communicate. Through mobile phones and the Internet, they can distance themselves from school and family and create a new group of friends sharing the same interests and a

communication space suited to themselves.

In the next section, I will employ the Intimate Stranger theoretical frame, introduced by the Japanese media sociologist Tomita, to explain the relationships that are created through mediated communication of which mobile phones communication is an example.

2.3. The Intimate Stranger in Mediated Communication

Tomita (2009) proposes a new model to explain the relationships that are created through mediated communication, expressed under the Intimate Stranger Theory. The main characteristic of this kind of relationships is that they occur in high degree anonymous situations. He argues that they are different from the human relations that have been established traditionally, basing his assumptions on demonstrative research on the characteristics of the relations which have been established through various media. Concerning “anonymity,” Tomita defines it as “the condition in which is not possible to identify the other” (2009, 64). This definition of anonymity is related to

“anonymity” in the sense of a stranger in urban space as compared to the “recognizability” between members of rural communities which have smaller populations. However, the difference between these two kinds of “anonymity” is that the first type refers to a situation in which the information regarding the other person cannot be confirmed because the communication exchange is conducted through media (Tomita 2009, 63).

This kind of “Intimate Relationship” corresponds to what Giddens (1992) defines as “genuine relationships” which indicate relationships that are born for the sole purpose of forging a bond with another person and enjoying the satisfaction of being connected to him; “Stranger” because, as I have discussed before, the contextual information (social, position cues, etc.) in mediated communication are not readily available. With the advent of social networks, this trend is gradually changing, but for the type of analysis presented in this thesis, this is still relevant because in text-based communities, the anonymity of the user is still an issue.

Tomita shows the concept of “Intimate Stranger” by a chart with two crossed axes, namely representing the “Anonymity” and the “Intimacy.”

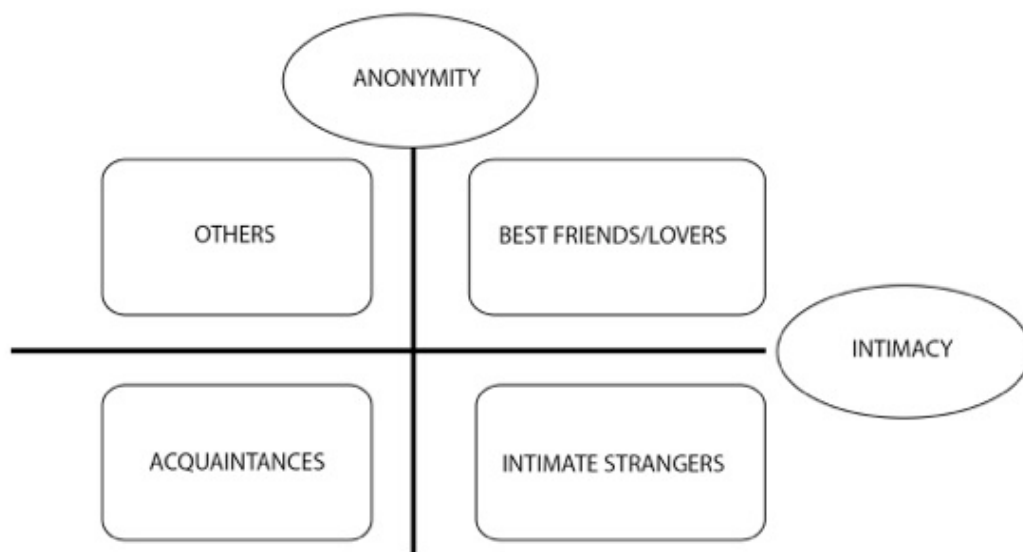


Figure 2.1. Intimate Stranger (Tomita 2009, 158).

The “Others” (1) represent people who are both anonymous and not intimate. The “Acquaintances” (2) are the ones who are neither anonymous nor intimate. They represent, for example, people who take the same train every day whose faces are familiar and sit next to one another. The “Best friends/lovers” in (3) are intimate and

not anonymous. Finally, “Intimate Strangers” in (4) are the people who are intimate and anonymous who happen to meet through media communication exchanges.

In addition to these observations, Tomita asserts that the occurrence of this type of relationship through media takes place progressively in a transformation: from a kind of instrumental communication to a consummatory one. The first is a type of communication aimed at the transmission of the message; in the second type the communicative act—the attempt to establish a contact—is considered as a priority (Yoshimi , Mizukoshi, and Wakabayashi 1992).

To understand the difference between these two types of communication and how the rise of consummatory communication in media communication exchanges has seen more and more of intimate and yet anonymous relationships, I introduce Kato’s (2011) research about the case of “communication note” used in game centers from the 1970s. At first, these communication notes were used by game center’s staff to reply to customers’ complaints and needs (instrumental communication). Gradually, however,

they started to be used by the game center's customers to introduce themselves to one another or to asking for advice about their personal matters. This last use of the note would have spread nationally and corresponded to the birth of intimate relationships cultivated by "anonymity."

Tomita has done research on a variety of media to test the validity of his hypothesis. For instance, communication through the telephone, specifically, can be identified in four different patterns (Tomita 2009, 163).

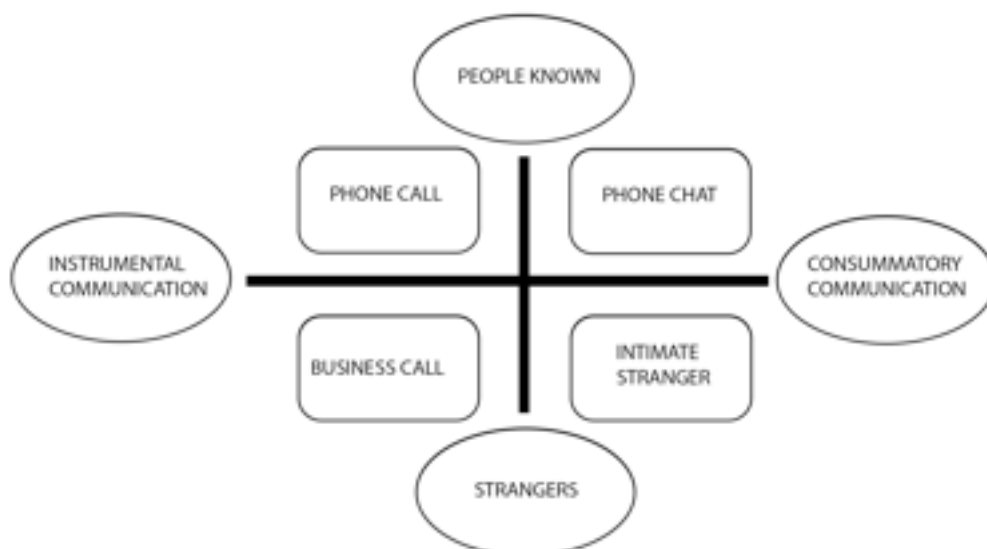


Figure 2.2. Conversation with the Intimate Stranger (Tomita 2009, 163).

First, attention should be paid to the two bases of this chart, which are namely “Instrumental communication” and “Consummatory communication.” Considering a telephone conversation between strangers as in (4), constructed by “Anonymity” and “Intimacy,” since the “Consummatory communication” is functioning, this relation is focused on “keeping on the contact with the other” rather than exchanging a particular content.” In addition, since this relation is constructed by the “Anonymity” of media, Tomita asserts that “it is possible to disappear in an instant and disconnect the relationship” (2009, 163). This kind of conversation by “intimate strangers” by “Intimate Strangers” was realized by services called “party line” and “two shot” by “Dial Q2.” “Dial Q2” was a charged telephone charged service by NTT from 1989 to 1992 and contained two channels, namely party line and two shot in which users could participate. Party line was a service in which a couple of men and women could take part freely and had a conversation through telephone. The users spoke there for the first time, and they participated in one-time telephone conversations.

Two Shot was a service in which a man and a woman who did not know each other could have a private conversation. Tomita indicates that in Two Shot, while the couple tried to find out one about the another through the conversation with “the unknown other,” the “consummatory communication” functioned by enjoying the conversation itself, and the sense of reality formed was limited to the voices of the participants through the telephone (2009, 117-29).

Moreover, Tomita (2009, 150-51) states that the same communication shift can be seen in Pocketbell, already discussed in the first chapter. This is the case of “Bell tomo” (literally, a bell friend), a virtual relation constructed by receiving and responding to a message from a stranger through Pocketbell. This relationship, on the one hand, is “anonymous” because one places oneself in a safe zone since the relationship can be reset any time, but “intimate” on the other hand by allowing him/her to tell things that normally he/she cannot reveal to others. Lastly, Tomita argues that the “Intimate Stranger” phenomenon occurs in mobile phones since in mobile phones the voice (Dial Q2) and the text (pokebell) are combined (2009, 172).

The frame in which mobile novels are created possesses both the characteristics of mobile phone communication and online community interactivity. Moreover, with the consolidation of email culture, the relationship with the Intimate Stranger is not limited to a single isolated episode but now exists within a dimension of continuous interaction.

Among the various expressions through which the mobile phone allows to convey the Intimate Stranger relationship, particularly interesting is how it both shapes and reframes the roles of author and reader in the collaborative writing platform of keitai shosetsu.

In the next section, I will illustrate the architecture of a mobile novel site wherein author and reader are not just producing and consuming texts, but are interacting with each other, all the while maintaining both anonymity and developing intimate relationships.

2.4. *Maho no Irando*

There are many sites on which mobile novels are uploaded every day. I specifically chose the pioneering website *Maho no Irando*. It is, in fact, the first site in Japan that made it possible for users to upload their own mobile novels. Moreover, during the massive market expansion of mobile novels in 2007, many sites took inspiration from its architecture. Finally, the site hosted the stories of C., the female writer whom I interviewed in 2012.

Maho no Irando hosts a whopping 2,300,000 titles. The BOOK function, allowing the upload of mobile novels, has been active since 2000. Users register themselves with nicknames, and their relationships are mostly anonymous. The continuity and intimacy of this relationship are granted by the fact that their novel is regularly uploaded and that contact between readers and authors take place daily.

The site has, in fact, a number of functions allowing interactivity between the author and the reader. Both have access to the same space; the text produced in this space is digital and, therefore, can be modified by the reader. In the email exchange process,

the so-called “perpetual contact” (Katz and Aakhus 2002) is in force. This means that a received message requires an immediate reply, since the transmission of the digital text is so instantaneous.

This particular feature of email exchange on mobile phones is also reflected in the exchange of messages between author and reader, making their relation crammed and frequent.

The site includes the page of the author (author’s home page), the mobile novel page where the novel is progressively uploaded, and a search engine through which all the mobile novels stored in the database can be searched.

On the author page, the author can activate a series of tools giving them original names.

Among the tools available, the most used are:

- The diary - through the diary the author describes her daily life and notifies the upload of her own novel.

- Tomodachi - meaning “friend”; through this tool the reader can make friends with the author. The author may then be able to check the number of accesses of her “friend” to the site: on the basis of accesses and comments, he may be able to establish deeper communication and relationships with his readers.
- BOOK - through this tool the list of the books written by the author can be displayed.
- Questionnaire - through this tool, visitors of the home page can express their opinion on the story development according to the question about the story provided by the author.
- BBS - it can be used to organize events for readers. In each string, up to 100 interventions can be inserted. The author moves from one string to the other in order to create the effect of synchronic communication.
- Mail box - this is used to exchange private messages with the author.
- Counters - these are used to keep track of the guests visiting the web page and of the progressive uploading of the page itself.

From the mobile novel page on which a specific novel is uploaded, the reader can connect directly to the author's page or use the tools available on it to interact with him/her. She/he can write a comment about the novel she/he's reading and share it, appropriately labeling spoilers if she/he has written information that could compromise the pleasure of readers who are just at the beginning of the story.

The reader may express her/his appreciation for the novel by clicking the button "like." This appreciation will directly influence the ranking of the stories on the site.

On *Maho no Irandō*, authors and readers can share a virtual space on a daily basis using the tools available. The reader can intervene in and influence both the development of the story and the reading of other people thanks to the tools at his disposal.

In order to show concretely what kind of relationship may arise between reader and writer thanks to the tools available on the site, in the following paragraph of the paper I

will present in the following section the case study of C., a female writer of mobile novels, a pioneer of the genre, particularly active in her production in order to see in a concrete case study the elements described above.

2.5. Interview of a Keitai Shosetsu Writer

When C. started to use websites, the first function which C. created in her home page was the bulletin board (BBS) where she wrote messages and responded to friends whom she met online.

One time, she arranged her home page to an “*onsen-ryokan* (hot spring hotel)” style and created a message board called “ping-pong table” where she sought participants and played games which were popular at the time. C. was called the *okami* (hostess) of the hotel and made opportunities to become closer with the guests of the hotel by supervising their communication exchanges while playing games. There was also a diary function on the home page, and C. tracked what happened to her daily life on it.

Wanting to be original, C. remodeled her home page and that was the time when she found the “BOOK” function. Assuming that no one would read it, C. started to serialize a novel “in a quiet place where nobody would have expected to find her” (in her words) and tried to revive her own past. Since writing about the past was painful, C. left the web site for a while and stopped writing the novel halfway through. After a couple of years, since mobile Internet became less expensive because of the flat monthly fee, C. accessed *Maho no Irando* again.

She found out she had been criticized by readers for erasing everything that had been written and stored on the site; that was the occasion when she decided to start writing novels seriously. When C. first wrote, approximately fifty readers commented. C. always responded, and the comments motivated C. as well. The number of readers grew and asked to link the novel to an administrator of a larger web site. At that time, the number of people who visited her page had ballooned to 8,000 to 9,000 a day. Whenever readers among them commented, C. always replied. Using all her free time to write the novel, the diary lost its own function and became a tool to notify the

readers of the updates of the novel. While finishing her first novel, which tells the story of C.'s junior high school years, her work caught the attention of a publishing company which decided to publish her.

2.5.1. *The Process of Becoming a Writer*

At first, C. only used the mobile phone to write. She was neither a professional writer nor a heavy reader, so she was fascinated by the practicality of the mobile phone. The mobile phone allowed her to overcome some problems she had had when she was writing: for example, the mobile phone's function which displays the different Chinese characters' combinations (*suisokukino*) helped her to find the right character without consulting a dictionary; moreover, if she wanted to check if an expression she wanted to use was correct for that particular sentence, she could connect to the Internet and check for proof the correctness of the expression.

At first, C. only used mobile phones and concentrated on creating texts. "I woke up and wrote, or for example ate and if I had the time I wrote. And went to work and wrote

during breaks and write while on the train to go home. Took a bath and wrote before I went to bed. I wrote whenever I had the time. It was like that," C. explained.

She also used also a computer but there was a time when C. could not write with it, therefore she only used her mobile cellphone. When she got used to writing with computers and became more able to type naturally, she realized for the first time how fast writing would have had been to write had she used computers from the start.

Now, she uses both the cellphone and the computer when she writes. However, she normally uses mobile phones when communicating with readers on the mobile novel bulletin site or creating novels while commuting. She is used to mobile phones and she is not especially adept at computers, but when she gets stuck, she shifts from mobile to computer or computer to mobile for a change. However, it is true that she does not feel the pressure in writing with mobiles because of the small screen which does not show a blank space as a computer does. The blank space on computer screens scares her. The site allows her to write her novel and save it on her page without using other

writing software like Word, so she can easily interrupt her writing and get back to it wherever she is and whenever conditions allow her to.

She felt a lot of pressure on her a lot of pressure when she decided to live as a mobile novelist. When she became the most popular writer on the mobile novel bulletin site, she realized what the competition between writers meant for the first time. Active writers in the mobile novel business put pressure on her by telling her, “You should be leaving *Maho no Irando*” or “You should be satisfied with what you have reached until now.”

Another source of pressure was caused by the fact that when mobile novels became a competitive business, she had to improve her writing skills in order to survive as a novelist. From the time of her debut, her work had been criticized by mobile novel fans on the popular site “2 channel” and by the literary world because her work would not have been strictly classified as “a novel,” there was “no description,” and “the sentences [were] clumsy.” Her novels at that time only included acts and dialogues,

and these were considered more a kind of a script rather than a novel. In order to expand her vocabulary, she bought a dictionary and a thesaurus, and wrote with these by her side. Following the instruction of her then editor, C. who tried to illustrate emotions and descriptions in her sentences learned this skill by reading comics for girls. She dealt with description by regarding it as the scenery inserted between the actions of the characters in manga. At first, she included too many descriptions so that her sentences became unnatural but with the advice of her next editor who told her that the rhythm of the sentences were better without description, she has started to write naturally again without feeling the pressure to describe.

2.5.2. The Role of the Reader

C. says she was supported by her readers from the very beginning. After quitting work to write full time, she says it was to meet the request of online chatting friends that she decided to continue writing and become a professional mobile novelist. She received supportive messages from them as “I read it too!” or “Please write!” This was why she started to write again. C. once thought of quitting to write her novel halfway because

of the pain that recall her past brought her. She kept distance from the mobile novel bulletin site for a while and did not return. However, in 2003, when mobile providers began to offer flat monthly fee services and it became cheaper to access the Internet via mobile phones, she revisited the site. Discovering that her friends whom she had as contacts in the past continued writing their thoughts on her unfinished novel and reading that the readers were empathizing with the novel, C. bravely started to rewrite the novel from the beginning until the very end. At this point, the readers were no longer readers for her; they were simply friends, a group of friends.

Since the number of the her page visitors increased, she intended to erase the novel after finishing it; but also in that moment her readers gave her a new motivation to continue writing. At the time, C. had not yet visited the grave of the main character of her novel. She expressed her feelings to the readers, writing that she would have visited his grave and after doing that she would have deleted her novel. However, readers addressed their feeling that they wanted to know about her visit to the grave. C. did not reply to each message but instead, wrote her last chapter based on her

experience of the visit. Gradually, her decision to completely remove her novel faded.

Readers also played an important role for the production of a novel. As C. indicates, the novel's production is based on the interaction with the reader according to the following flow: "I write, readers read and comment on it, and I feel motivated by hearing that , so I can go on writing."

One of the readers directly called an editor to advertise C.'s work and tried to promote her. The editor, who showed interest in the reader's enthusiasm, accessed the site of mobile novels and scouted C. This later led to the publication of her novel.

On the one hand, readers motivate authors, and writers write according to readers' desires. The readers also advertise writers by utilizing the functions of social network. This is how important readers are.

On the other hand, there was also another side where conflicts arose between C. and

her readers. For instance, when C. intended to respond to a message on the online bulletin, readers wrote her asking her to update the novel instead of replying to messages. When she updated her work, however, another reader will write her to respond to the message on the bulletin. At first, she tried to respond to all the messages but for some reason when things did not work out as the readers hoped for, she received complaints. She felt anger toward readers and wrote on her diary, “I cannot write today.” At the same time, she also embraced the reality that she could not write without the readers’ support.

There was also a time when she became stuck by relying too much on the reaction of readers’ reaction. C. is not the only author who has experienced this kind of “addiction” toward readers (and the “high” that they give), which is a common problem among mobile novelists like her. She lived by herself when she first started creating mobile novels and sometimes felt lonely. The readers who visited her site supported her, and they made her feel relieved and also motivated her to continue writing.

When the mobile novels market became big business, however, fewer readers visited her site and she thought it meant that they were isolating her, a fact that made her anxious. She was so concerned that she started thinking it was meaningless to write without the reaction from the readers. C. expresses her anxiety by the following words: she started to say, "Please support me because I want to be connected." Until 2010, she kept on saying that while starting a new novel that would have been her last and fell into a vicious cycle. In 2010, however, she reconsidered her thoughts and recalled her own words in a past interview for a newspaper in the past: "What would you do if there was no longer a place for C. to write?" she was asked. She had answered, "I would create the place by myself and write." It was the will of the writer which was the strongest feeling. In other words, she would continue to write whatever happens.

She used to call her regular visitors to the site "family" and treated them like they were a part of her family. Nowadays, she calls them "relatives" and explains her relationship with her readers as the following: "We meet and talk occasionally and go on like 'C., are you still writing?' 'Oh yeah, I do. Let me know if you're interested.'" It's like a casual

conversation like 'How have you been?' 'I'm good'. It's not like 'Please read my story, please read' or 'Why are they not reading' any more but instead I say like 'please read if you are interested.'"

As we have seen above, *Maho no Irando* is a space that connects C. and her readers through mobile communication, creating an "intimate relationship" between writers and readers which had not existed in the past. Additionally, writers and readers are experiencing "perpetual contact" (Katz and Aakhus 2002), in which readers entering the domain where writers create stories and motivate the writing process by commenting and expressing their opinions. On the other hand, while creating a direct relationship with readers, writers collect hints on what reflect the readers' preferences and provoke their "empathy." In the next section, the "intimate relationship" which has been established in this way will be examined.

2.5.3. The “Intimate Relationship” between Mobile Authors and Readers

Thanks to C.’s case study, it is possible to better understand better how the “Intimate Stranger” relationship between author and reader takes place in *Maho no Irando* or similar collaborative writing platforms on the Internet.

C. says she basically does not meet with readers. One of the reasons derives from the numbers of readers which makes it difficult for her to meet them directly, but even if she doesn’t meet them, there are some cases in which she can have an intimate relationship with readers. Three examples can be raised about intimate relationship with readers:

1. Faithful Readers - One reader bought C.’s book at a bookstore and visited her online site where she/he reader accidentally ran into an event for readers created by C. The reader was very happy to be able to actually meet (via the Internet) the writer of the book. That incident made him a regular visitor to her site and even become a faithful reader of C.’s works. Until this day, C. receives birthday presents every year from this reader.

2. Writer as an Advisor/Counselor - According to C., she and the readers have something in common which can be said as “empathy toward the story.” Her stories are based on episodes that really happened in her life, a fact which gains the empathy of readers and since the stories can be about anyone, the level of identification is high. There are numerous comments expressing this feeling of “empathy”: “C., I understand so much,” “I would think so, too,” or “That story is about me.” One reader was so impressed with one of C.’s story which dealt with C.’s past that the reader asked her to write a story based on the his/her own experience. C. thought the reader should write by herself in order to be liberated from the past event but while the reader argued she/he could not write as well as C., she decided to accept the request. It was essentially a story of lost love that dealing about the death of the love: the book was published. While creating the novel, C. communicated with the reader through telephone and e-mail since it was not possible to meet in person. The writer became an advisor to the reader and through communication, a new

story was born.

However, personal communication between a writer and a reader does not always result in an intimate relationship.

With her own will, C. herself once met with a reader when she was looking for new materials to write a novel. C., who wanted to understand a specific location, recruited readers in her web site who could provide her with this information and selected the most appropriate person who met face to face, developing a story afterwards based on the scenery and experience of the reader. For example, since C. has never gone to college, she met with a college student and used his/her person's life as a material of her novel.

There are also readers who regard C. as an advisor without having interest in her work. Basically, communication from readers to the writer is a mélange of commenting on the novel and seeking advice for a personal crisis but there are

some cases where the former is absent and readers aggressively ask for advice on the latter. This behavior of the reader is not only limited in seeking for advice on personal matters but also in asking C. to read the readers' pieces, a request that is regarded by her as very selfish.

3. Close Readers - Originally, C. set up her mobile phone so as to be able to receive messages that came to her web site but since the messages were abundant, the editor started to serve as an intermediary and organize the messages. When C. began to use Twitter, messages from her followers relentlessly increased. C. explains her communication with the readers as follows: "I feel that the distance is close. That's why I think the distance is very different from literary novelists who only published books."

Occasionally, she is told from the readers "Let's meet already!" A few days before the interview, one of the readers tweeted her by saying "C.-san! I'm

coming to Osaka! Do you know any good places to eat?" so C. listed some of the restaurants and indicated the directions. The following day, the reader uploaded a photo of the restaurant by commenting "this is the place where C. comes frequently." After a couple of days, when the reader went to eat at a *Takoyaki*-place where C. recommended, the reader tweeted "I'm eating now. C., won't you come?" C. replies to these messages in the following manner: "Sorry, but I try not meet with readers." Then the reader responded "Ok, then come next time when I come here to eat again." There are also tweets to ask to speak with her through the phone. To put it another way, readers do not understand even though C. wants some distance from the readers. Most of the readers tend to have an image in their heads that C. is easy to meet with.

An intimate relationship between author and readers develops through communicating on the web site as well. C. expresses her empathy toward readers through various actions. There is a mutual feeling expressed among readers in their will to continue reading her stories faithfully and in C.'s gratefulness for the support from her readers.

1. Chat Events - C. holds events where she arranges a couple of virtual “rooms,” invites readers at a certain time, and chats with readers in turn. She adjusts her schedule to fit the needs of the readers, usually ending up having to hold events on Sundays for ten hours. Since C. cannot be in more than two “rooms” at once, she divides them up into separate rooms, visits each room every ten minutes, and chats with the readers in the room. When C. is not in the room, the readers talk among themselves, communicate in smaller groups, or exchange e-mails. There is also a closing ceremony where all the readers gather in one “room” and make a “no (ノ)” sign meaning everyone is present. Once C. delivers her farewell speech, thank you messages from the readers fill the screen.

2. Souvenir Events / New Year’s Greeting Card Events - Whenever C. cannot write novels, she travels. She always buys readers souvenirs but cannot share them with each reader. So she releases some questions concerning her novel on her home page and whoever answered correctly will be a part of a lottery where a person will be selected to receive C.’s souvenir by mail. In order to

preserve her anonymity, C. asks the publishing company to send out the souvenir. When New Year's Day approaches, C. releases some questions on her web site. This time they are not concerning her novels but about readers, asking them of their hopes for the New Year or special events that happened that year. She holds a lottery among the applicants and sends out a New Year's greeting card to the winner. Interestingly, this card not only contains greetings from her but also her original comments on what the reader has written.

3. Family-Novels Events - Among the readers who visit C.'s web site every day, there are some people who want to be novelists like her. She has held "Family-Novels Events" in the past for her "family" who are special readers. At this event, applicants write novels based on a certain topic (it was Valentine's time during the event) and C. released the novels on her home page. When such events are held readers can communicate among themselves and this fact represents a good opportunity to have other people reading their stories. C. reads them as well and comments briefly on each of them. One of the novels is

selected and the link will be available online on C. home page throughout the year, which is a good advertisement for the author.

2.5.4. Conclusions

Within the interview with C., three keywords need close attention, namely “Pocketbell,” “i-Mode,” and “flat monthly fee service.” Pocketbell is a communication medium which preceded mobile mail. As Tomita (2009) notes, the relationship of “Intimate Stranger” expressed by “anonymity” based on “intimacy” could be found through communication with Pocketbell. *Poke tomo* (Poke friend) is a stranger you neither know the name neither see the face but you feel intimate with. Additionally, since i-Mode and flat monthly fee services dramatically changed the usage of mobile phones, those three elements are of significant importance to C.’s activity and success as a mobile novelist.

Along with other young people, C. underwent the usage of pokebell and then mobile Internet that developed thereafter. Since she had fewer friends after losing her loved

one and dropping out from school, she created her own web site on mobile Internet in search of “intimacy” between the visitors. The characteristics of the functions on her web site were its interactivity and that users can carry out various editing activity. In other words, users who visit C.’s web site utilizes the editing functions and could actively participate in the owner’s web site and communicate.

C. commenced to use the Internet in order to make friends. Her sentences on the bulletin board and diary in *Maho no Irando* were intended to be read by her friends and she herself had never thought of becoming a writer. At that time, the BOOK function where one can write novels was not popular and C., who submitted her novel there, was writing with the sense that no one is was actually reading her. For C., the digital space was distant from reality and therefore a healing place where she could write about her trouble in her student years. However, realizing that her novel, based on a true story, was able to provoke “empathy” of the users who visited the web site and witnessing that the readers were increasing, she made up her mind to become a

writer. The “empathy” which is raised through communication between C. and her readers are expressed, from the readers’ point of view, by supporting her and evaluating her novel. C. as a writer, on the other hand as a writer, responds to readers’ comments immediately and develops her story keeping in account their wishes.

While so doing so, C. communicates with the readers who visit her site and read her novel as if communicating through mobile mail, in a characteristic manner which has been discussed in the first chapter, namely “mail writing style” and the “mail exchange policy” (Matsushita 2012). Since “perpetual contact” between C. and her readers is established through “mail manners,” she tries to respond to messages as fast as possible. Through this “intimate relationship” which is formed by “anonymity,” C. was supported by her “family” in a safe surrounding environment and finished her first mobile novel.

While the readers who visited her web site increased, the publishing industry started to pay attention to her activity. Until then, the relationship between C. and her readers in

Maho no Irando was “constant communication” through mailing style and provoked “empathy” on either side. However, with the arrival of a publishing company, the relationship experienced a transformation. A publishing company was attempting to create a new business by cooperating with the manager of *Maho no Irando* which was the publishing of mobile novels. In addition, that publishing company intended to continuously retain readers and secure a market for book by remodeling *Maho no Irando* and establishing a “mobile novel award.”

Meanwhile, C., as popular writer, became busy and could not respond to requests from the readers. She was unable to reply to messages received in her mail PO box and the publishing company acted as an intermediary instead. Being severely criticized by the literary world, what she needed was the support from her readers to continue writing but there appeared a tendency among the readers to keep their distance from C. The promise between C. and her readers was slowly broken and the “sympathy” between the two gradually faded. C., however, decided to keep on writing in order to continue as a mobile novelist even without comments from readers. This decision was reflected

in the fact that her novel transformed from true stories to fiction. Additionally, she no longer communicates with readers through mail PO box but through a website prepared by the publishing company. In order to express her commitment toward readers, she holds events and responds to comments which are open to the public on her web site. After registering in Twitter, she communicates one on one with readers again. This time, however, she limits her relation with the readers as a mobile novelist.

As we have seen, *Maho no Irando* is a space where C. and her readers are connected through mobile communication. Because of the characteristics of the space, an “intimate relationship” is established and “perpetual contact” is carried out between the author and its readers, the likes of which had not existed until now. There, readers enter the area where authors create novels and motivate authors in their creating process by commenting and giving their opinions. Moreover, readers cooperate in advertising and distributing the novel that they are reading by using functions on the web site. Authors, on the other hand, while forming a direct relationship with readers, seek materials where they can provoke interests and “sympathy” of the readers. In

order to maintain these relationships with readers, authors respond to readers' troubles and advise readers who are aim to be writers themselves. Authors even hold events for readers to express their compassion and provoke communication among readers. Authors and readers communicate almost daily by regularity which is linked by the episodic upload of mobile novels and functions of the web site. The distance between writers and readers is diminishing with the communication by mobile phones, which is an extension of their heart and hands. On the contrary, if this kind of communication were to disappear, the writers' activity would be extremely difficult. Therefore, we could say that in the case of mobile novels, the presence of readers is very significant and they greatly affect the activity of authors.

As we have seen, with the advent of Internet and mobile communication, people gather and interact in new ways, reshaping human practices and giving form to new interaction styles in a space that acquire the physicality of a real place: the online community.

2.6. Features of Online Communities

Routinized behavior among the members of an online group is just one of the characteristics attributed to online communities: one of the pioneer researchers of this new form of social aggregations is Rheingold (1993) who refers to it as “virtual community.”

Rheingold defines “virtual communities” as “social aggregations that emerge from the net when enough people carry on ... public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feelings, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace” (1993, 5). In this paper, however, I will refer to them as “online communities.”²

In the sociological field, the word “community,” as specified by Wendy Griswold (2013), has two interpretations: one connected to the territoriality of the community, as in the ability to identify it within a physical space; and another connected to the relationality,

² As we will point out, “virtual” is not the correct term to refer to a community based on the Internet, because all the actions of the members influence and are strictly interwoven to daily life. We rather prefer to use the term “online communities” (Hiltz 1984) assuming that their domain is the Internet defined as Embodied, Embedded, and Everyday (Hine 2015).

referring to the network of connections between the community members.

It could be assumed that, in regards to online communities, the spatial component is lacking since their members interact in a virtual dimension, which lacks physicality; however, as it has become clear from the interview of C., this component is recovered in the practices of the communities members and draws concreteness from the sense of embodiment acquired through the medium members use to access and act on the community. This physicality can, therefore, be expressed in the physical act of consumption which governs the behavior of community members.

As for the relational side, Kozinets (2010), in the attempt to present “netnography,” a form of ethnography based on the study of online communities, states that,

- 1) the operation of consumption,
- 2) the creation of social connections within the community, and
- 3) represent the forms of relationality shaping online communities.

Regarding the first point, Kozinets urges caution when using the term “consumption” to clarify that the main activity which is the goal of community members is not passive, but can involve active participation. Therefore, it is preferable to talk about “prosumption” (Tapscott and William 2007). In the very case of this research, dealing with online collaborative digital fiction writing communities, the “prosumption” activity refers to the simultaneous actions of writing and reading stories by the community’s members.

Activities like writing, reading, commenting, and sharing information require respecting ritualized behaviors, sanctioned by norms followed by its members and reinforced by the technological affordances of the platform that hosts it.

Online communities can then be seen as working as communities of practice (Wenger 1999), communities whose operative scope is the creation of organized knowledge of good quality accessible to the members of the community. Having a common goal

allows giving each user a well recognizable role during the processes of production and fruition of the contents.

The process of progressive experiencing of the community by individual members is described by Kozinets (2010) according to the model depicted in figure 2.3.

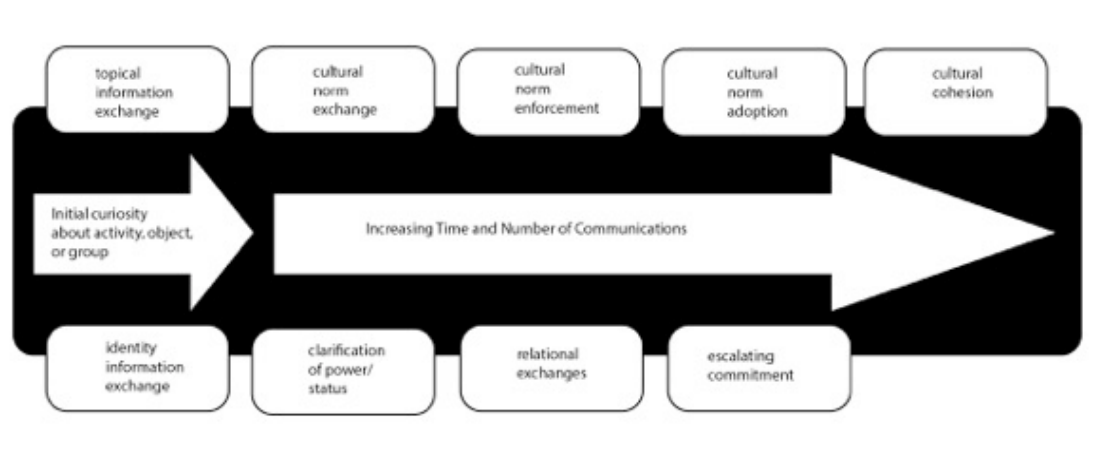


Figure 2.3. Developmental Progression of Participation in Online Communities (Kozinets 2010, 28).

Initially it presupposes a first approach intended to gather information about the community, therefore the new user relies on the information available on the platform hosting the community in order to participate in the proposed prosuption activity. Visiting the community regularly, however, she/he will progressively interact with

other participants and will develop a cultural and social competency regarding the community environment, which will influence her/his approach to the main activity of the community. She/he will also learn about the power dynamics at play within said community.

The creation of social connections is the second aspect related to relationality within the online communities.

Baym (2010) claims that in online relationships with others, people are looking for a kind of “social support” defined as “The resources people attain because of their network of relationship” (Baym 2010).

The researcher identifies four kinds of online social support:

- 1) Network support: through shared hobbies and interests, people develop the sense of belonging to a well-defined group;
- 2) Emotional support: when, upon facing a problem, people receive

moral support from the members of the group;

3) Esteem support: through the relationship with community members, the individual can open up and gain a more positive self-awareness;

4) Informational support: receiving advice on how to perform a task related to the “prosution” activity of the community, or regarding a topic one wishes to share with the other community members.

Combining the level of commitments with the online community prosution activity and their attachments toward the relationships built with the community members, Kozinets (2010) classifies community users according four main styles of community participation.

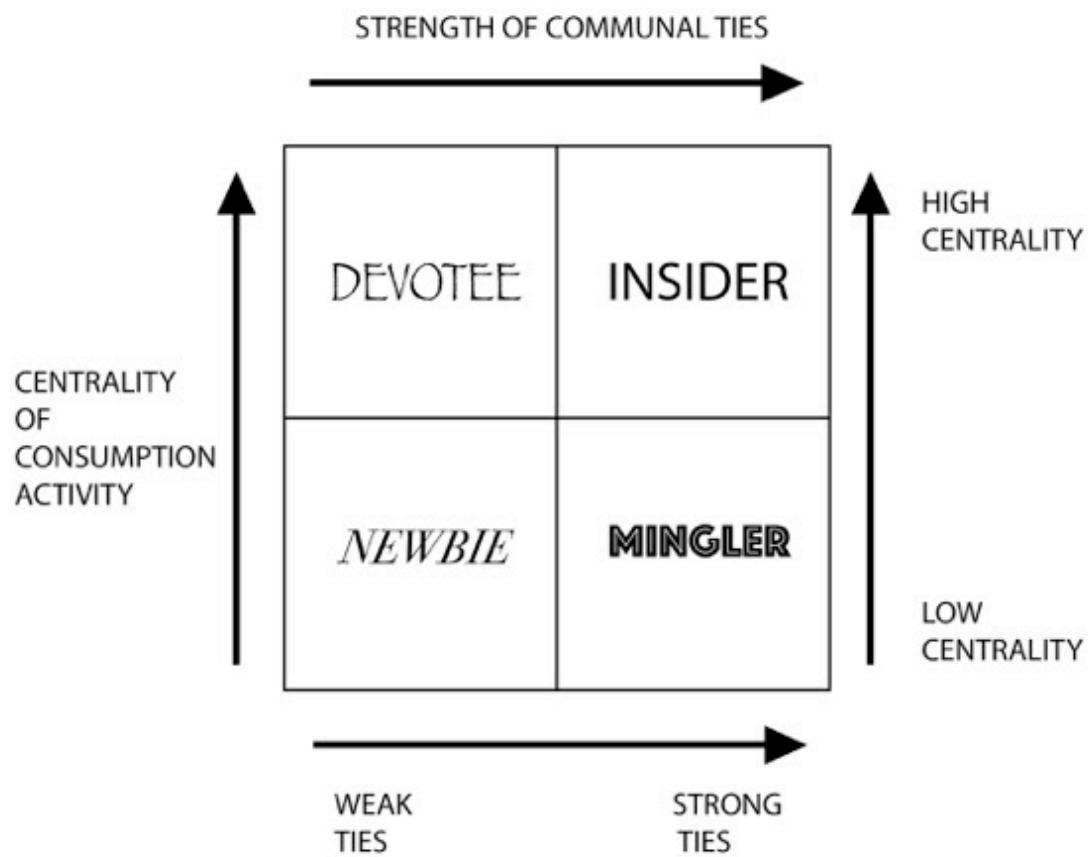


Figure 2.4. Types of Online Community Participation (adapted from Kozinets 2010, 33).

As can be argued, each style matches with one of the social support pointed out by Baym.

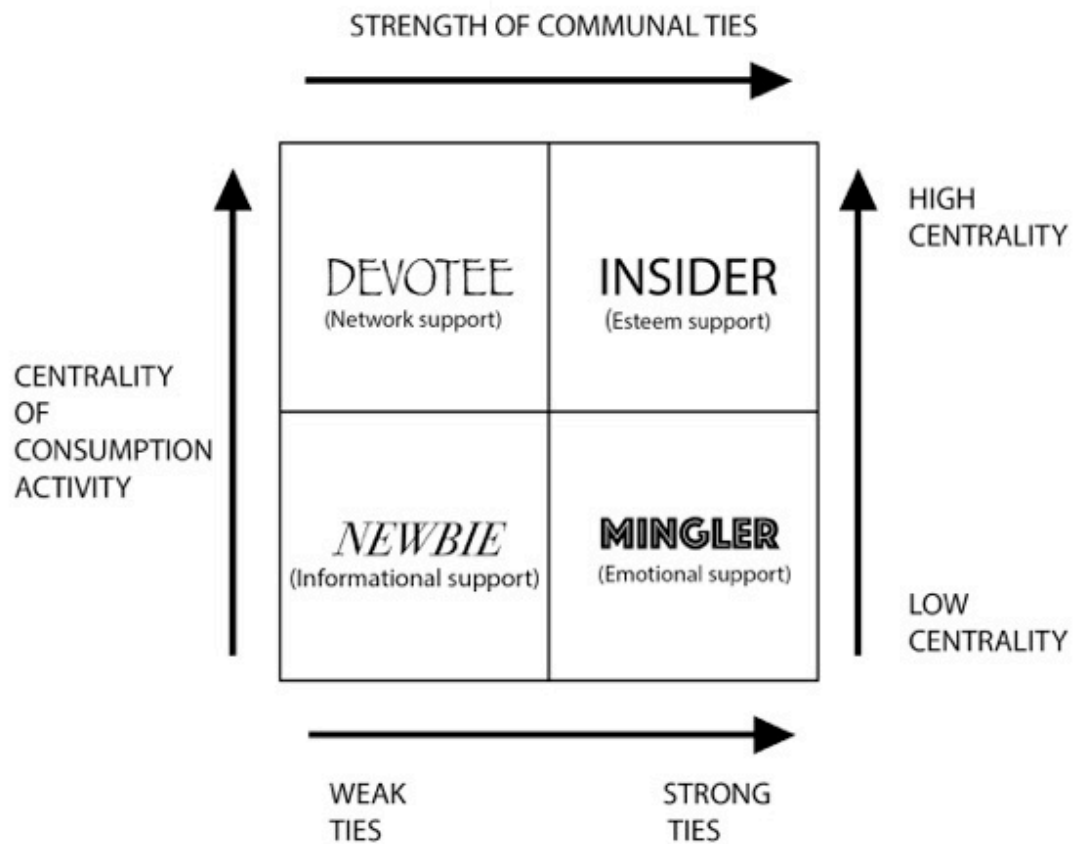


Figure 2.5. Types of Online Community Participation (adapted and developed from Kozinets 2010, 33).

In the context of C.'s interview, the relationship between the author and her/his faithful readers involves on the one hand an active participation to the prosuption activity and, on the other, denotes a strong attachments toward the relationships built

within them. This participation style corresponds to the “esteem support” as Baym calls it, which if on the one hand identifies the need from the author to have constant feedback from the readers in the context of the production of the story, on the other hand it has its expression in the need of the reader to have a determinant role in the development of the story.

2.7. Internet: Embedded, Embodied, Everyday

From C.’s words we can infer how the writing activity in *Maho no Irando’s* writing community is closely linked to everyday reality.

The author’s words reveal the clear physical component of the writing practice in its correlation with the medium, and in the mobility of the writing process which influences both the temporal and spatial aspects of her/his daily life. Belonging to an online community, therefore, doesn’t mean entering a dimension entirely independent from daily life, as theorists of cyberspace argued. Rather, it means witnessing a

noticeable change in human practices according to the chosen medium and the opportunities offered by the web in the creation or evolution of social connections.

The concept of the Internet as cyberspace must therefore be reshaped in favor of a conception of the web shaped by the way people use it, and strictly connected to their everyday life. As stated by Hine (2015), the Internet is not a new dimension completely separated from the daily life but is, rather, a sort of extension of reality through which cultures dialogue, rapidly reshaping one another. Relationships are born on completely different and heterogeneous premises. The Net characterized as embedded, embodied, and everyday transforms human practices, the writing included.

It is embedded because the Internet is directly connected to the human practices; it is not a world apart but it exists within the human habits which are reshaped through it.

It is embodied because with the diffusion of the mobile technology, some human activities can be practiced everywhere. It is through the acquisition of techniques and

competences enabling work with these devices that the elaboration of strategies of adjustment and success related to the online community emerge.

Finally, the Net is everyday because it represents an infrastructure that permeates our ways of acting and our practices of living in such a pervasive way that it becomes and renders itself invisible.

Based on what we observed about the traditional practice of writing, on the characteristics of online communities and the approach to the web adopted in this research, the new technologies have reshaped the relationship between author and reader, opening up new scenarios/perspectives such as:

- 1) The central role of the medium and of the sociotechnological environment in the writing process;
- 2) New modalities of creation and fruition of the stories developed within this framework;
- 3) The formation of new identities, and the redistribution of

narrative roles during the creative process; and,

- 4) New ways in which people interact and build relationships.

In order to better investigate these changes, we must adopt a method that allows us to study digital fiction starting from the reality of writing practice: in the following chapter, I will present an autoethnography of digital fiction, a method through which it will be possible to investigate “from the inside” the dynamics of collaborative writing in online communities.

Chapter Three

Toward an Autoethnography of Digital Fiction

The aim of this chapter is to illustrate the characteristics of the method I employed in my research, an autoethnography of digital fiction.

My research so far has led to the confirmation of the following points:

1. the importance of the constant interactivity between author and reader in the creative process of the digital fiction (Katz and Aakhus 2002); and
2. how this interactivity leads to a new relationship between author and reader based on intimacy and the preservation of their own anonymity (Tomita 2009).

However, being a writer myself, I felt that there should be a way to better closely portray the dynamics the author has to deal with once she/he is engaged in this online creative process, where the communication and the interaction with the reader is a vital sine qua non condition for writing.

The challenges I faced were as follows: How to explain that the author was an author *and* a reader at the same time? How to portray the dynamics that compelled the author to interact with readers who could become authors themselves? And, finally, how to demonstrate that the online community was vital to the creative process itself?

In order to give a deeper perspective into the phenomenon and answer these questions, I decided, as a researcher, to become an author and study my own experience through an autoethnography of the Internet in the realm of digital fiction.

Hine, referring to the highly individualized experience that one has of the Internet, stresses how an autoethnography of the Internet, with its account “from the inside” of the embodied self, provides a highly informative experience. She writes:

[this method] emphasizes the embodied and emotional experience of engagement with diverse media, attending to the influences that shape and constrain the experience, and the opportunities and restrictions that emerge. (2015, 83)

Based on this observation, I call the “autoethnography of digital fiction” the attempt to analyze the process of production of a novel on a digital platform of creative fiction.

To clarify what I mean with “autoethnography of digital fiction,” I will discuss in this chapter the characteristics of the said method starting from an *excursus* about autoethnography from its origins to the present, highlighting how the need to answer questions about a world that’s becoming increasingly more complex, in which the researcher’s position is put into question, has challenged and reshaped the ethnographic method from its grounds.

The ethnographic method is rooted in the anthropology of the late 1800s, with references to Malinowsky’s work: at the time, the Western anthropologist’s goal was to study societies in the most remote corners of the world, through prolonged participant observation of the reference fieldwork and meticulous field notes. This rigor on the researcher’s part resulted in scientifically valuable results. Ethnography developed independently from anthropology in other disciplines; in sociology, with the Chicago School, the focus turned to research about groups within the researcher’s own society. “Street Corner Society” (William Foote Whyte 1993) is an emblematic work:

while reiterating the method's scientific and positivist trait, it sheds light on the researcher's need to "reflect" on his choices and his position within the field in order to correctly evaluate his research and results. When *Writing Culture* by Clifford and Marcus was published in 1986, it became clear that ethnography needed to reshape itself, shedding its ambitions about scientific research and becoming a method capable of embracing a postmodern conception of the world, where it should account for the multiplicity of the real world and the breakdown of research's binary categories of object/subject, real/virtual, Western knowledge/indigenous cultures in the rest of the world, which had characterized all previous ethnographic studies. This critique is implemented through:

1. The development of autoethnographic studies, characterized by a high degree of reflexivity in which the researcher, with her/his actions and decisions, puts herself/himself in the middle of the investigation;

In fact, in a previous research (Rebagliati 2016) I pointed out how, through autoethnography, a researcher can:

- observe and register her/his own behavior, thoughts, and feelings while living them during participant observation
- reach a wider audience and allow a wider comprehension of the phenomenon object of the research outside the academic field
- get a deep understanding of people and the context where they are embedded, since it entails a daily base commitment to the field

2. the expansion of ethnographic studies in non-traditional fields and the application of ethnography as a practice capable of explaining the relationships between social and technological worlds.

The usefulness of the ethnographic method is, in fact, acknowledged even by fields of study such as information systems, which studies the interaction between technological systems and social systems in real-life settings, of which the online creative writing communities are a result.

3. a consequent relativization of the concept of fieldwork in favor of more attention toward the realization of the ethnographic method and of the connected relationships.

In this perspective, my autoethnography's lack of success in the fieldwork became a source of reflection on the importance of interacting with the community members during the writing practice.

These premises are helpful to justify the use of autoethnography as the method able to explain the practice of writing digital fiction in a complex reality characterized by the admixture between technological and social elements such as the Internet.

This autoethnography doesn't claim to wholly and totally unpack the multiple meanings of the Internet as some of its predecessors (Markham 1998), but it does—for the purposes of this thesis—focus on a specific practice, digital fiction, which takes place between the real world and the digital one, inextricably linked to the idea of the

web as embodied and embedded in everyday life (Hine 2015). Despite the fact that I underline in this investigation the importance of how constraints and possibilities of the physical environments influence the practice of writing digital fiction, my study can still however be contextualized in the classification of online ethnographies by Tuncalp and Lê (2014). It also takes into consideration some differences with traditional ethnographies which influenced my investigation and how the data collected during the research have been treated (Kozinets 2010). Furthermore, it is necessary to highlight how the use of certain tools, specifically media and languages, as well as qualitative methodologies to integrate the autoethnography such as various kinds of interviews, substantially influenced the development of my research.

According to Alleyne, "Autoethnography blurs the distinction between first order narratives (i.e., those produced by people about their normal circumstances) and second order narratives (i.e., those produced by social researchers based on data gathered in the field or from archive)."

Researchers like Ellis et al. (2011) exacerbate this admixture between the two narrative orders, claiming that the autoethnographic story has value in itself and does not need to be re-contextualized in the academic field. The autoethnography presented in this research has, however, an “analytical” character (Anderson 2006); it tries to use the analysis tools from the discipline in question and to contextualize itself in the debate about digital fiction. The analytical frame employed refers to the narrative dimensions (Ochs and Capps 2011) that Page (2012) used to analyze social networks. Through this narrative frame, it will be possible to maintain a comparative perspective and, at the same time, to shed light on the contributions of the autoethnographic method to the digital fiction studies debate.

After these premises, helpful in justifying the use of autoethnography as the method able to explain the practice of writing digital fiction in the infinitely complex reality characterized by the different elements of the Internet as both a technological and social phenomenon, I will illustrate in the second part of this chapter the characteristics of autoethnography in relation to my research.

Autoethnography is a method that features elements of both autobiography and ethnography; in this research, based on a personal reflection on the practice of writing digital fiction, this method has been especially useful because it allows: introspective self-observation, the possibility to connect the personal and cultural, the aim to reach a wider audience than traditional research, and rich insights about people understanding and the context in which are embedded.

The final part of this chapter is about the tools available to the ethnographer during his research and to the presentation of the analytical framework through which the data will be processed (chapter five).

3.1. Some Observations on the Methods: The Debate about the Ethnographic Method at the Time of the Internet

Due to the recent and rapid development of new technologies, the debate around the Malinowskian ethnographic method, which started between the 1970s and the 1980s, is still extremely relevant to this day.

In a previous work (Rebagliati 2016), I found useful the way Denzin and Lincoln (1994; 2000) outline key moments in the history of qualitative research in order to place autoethnography in the investigation of new technology-related phenomena.

The first “key” moment occurred in the early 1900s, when qualitative researchers reported on their fieldwork as an object to be investigated from a distance. From the postwar years to the 1970s, classified as the second key moment, this period saw researchers striving to conduct qualitative research with the same rigor as that of quantitative investigation.

The third key moment, between 1970 and 1986, saw rather a blurring of the genres, which ended in the crisis of representation and legitimization of the fourth moment, in

the mid-1980s. The crisis is followed by a fifth moment, which sees experimental writing and participatory research and rise of the autoethnography, the methodology chosen. The sixth moment, called post-experimental, and the seventh, the future, is when fictional ethnographies are taken for granted, with a total revision of the origins of ethnography.

In particular, I will examine in this section the first five moments, with the perspective and aim of justifying the reasons behind the adoption of the autoethnography method for my research.

3.1.1 Malinowsky and the Establishment of Ethnography

In the early 1800s in Great Britain, we witnessed the consolidation of two genres, the missionary accounts of exotic societies and the travellers' tales which are the forerunners of anthropological ethnography (Alleyne 2015). The founder of this method is Malinowsky (1884-1942); during his research in Melanesia about the customs and practices of the locals, the anthropologist laid the foundation for the

ethnographic method. By Malinowskian ethnography we mean “a written account of some respect of human social/cultural life, based on participation and observation, over an extended period of a year or more, usually” (Alleyne 2015, 18).

This ethnographic method required a place to be investigated which wasn't the researcher's place of origin. The researcher was, therefore, immersed in an exotic culture, where he spent a prolonged amount of time observing, in order to compile an ethnographic diary where he noted what happened around him. Malinowski claimed that these observations could lead to reflections of a scientific nature on the culture in question.

3.1.2 The Ethnographic Method and the Chicago School

From the postwar years to the 1970s we witnessed the spread of the ethnographic method in fields different from anthropology, such as sociology.

For example, the Chicago School supports the Malinowskian position according to which the ethnographic method maintains the rigor and validity of scientific research.

However, unlike the ethnographers who are interested in distant, unknown cultures, sociologists favored city environments that represent marginalized realities, which can only be explained in scientific terms through a careful ethnographic analysis. In his work “Street Corner Society” (1993), William Foote Whyte employs the Malinowskian ethnographic method to analyze the Italian slum of Cornerville. His main focus wasn’t to study the social issues of the society he was researching, but to analyze the said community as an organized social system; therefore, Whyte had to explore the object of his investigation “from the inside” and spend four years in the community. Even though Whyte maintained Malinowsky’s positivist approach, his research shed light on the reflexive component, that is “[the research] is conducted in full awareness of the myriad limitations (and advantages) associated with humans studying other human lives” (O’Reilly 2012, 17).

3.1.3 Writing Culture and Critiques to Scientific Ethnography

With the publication of *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus 1986), we witness the development of a critical awareness of ethnography as it had been understood until that point.

Fujita et al. (2013) pinpoint the main points of this critique:

1. The selection of information. When collecting data, the ethnographer makes a selection which results in an inevitably manipulated understanding of the phenomenon in question. In addition, the ethnographer tends not to admit his errors, such as weaknesses and emotions he developed toward his research, trying to adhere to a scientific and unobjectionable method.
2. Ethnography as a novel. Ethnography employs the rhetorical figures typical of novels, which inevitably influence the objectivity of the report.

3. Ethnography as a Western methodology. Ethnography is a research method born in the West, with the goal of investigating the Other: an approach which reflects the need to situate the “other” in the aftermath of the conquests that had characterized colonialism during the previous century. An approach which might depict the Other as placed in a subordinate position and described negatively.

4. The white male ethnographer. The ethnographer’s characteristics: male, white, and Western, influence the researcher’s way of investigating the object of his research: the voice of the people he examines is always filtered through his words.

5. A partial truth. For these reasons, the ethnographic method is deprived of the claim of the rigor and validity of the scientific method, and is scaled back to a tool to identify “partial truths.”

3.1.4 The Origin of a Critical Ethnography

The criticism that followed “Writing Culture” (Clifford and Marcus 1986) led to the need to reconfigure the ethnographic method and adapt it to the complexity and the multiple facets of meaning which characterize the world as an object of reflection.

1) Self-reflexivity

The ethnographer abandons her/his privileged position entering the fieldwork. The result of her/his investigation is no longer an objective and detached account of the world he explored, but rather a subjective reflection stemming from her/his trial-and-error based interaction with said reality and its inhabitants (Fujita et al. 2013, 31).

2) Fieldwork mobility

Ethnography required the immersion in a fieldwork of investigation identifiable in a physical space. However, as illustrated in “Writing Culture,” fieldwork is just a tool that the researcher uses with the goal of self-reflection in relation to the object of his

investigation. Furthermore, with the stratification of reality and the interpenetration of the Internet in everyday life (Hine 2015), it is increasingly difficult to reconfigure the concept of fieldwork introducing the notion of multi-sited field.

The past habit of Malinowskian ethnography has been to take subjects as you find them in natural units of difference—cultures, communities; the habit or impulse of multi-sited research is to see subjects as differently constituted, as not products of essential unity of difference only, but to see them in development—displaced, recombined, hybrid in the once popular idiom, alternatively imagined. Such research pushes beyond the situated subject of ethnography towards the system of relations which define them. (Marcus 2012, 19)

This multi-sited fieldwork is the point of arrival of the ethnographer, who interacts with a multi-faceted reality which isn't linear and is made of trial and error; it is precisely through his actions that he shapes around himself the research field which makes autoethnography a connective, itinerant, and networked approach (Hine 2015).

3) Multi-voice approach

Trying to analyze the reality around him, the researcher must try to capture the diversity and variety that characterize the people and situations he deals with.

Furthermore, the informants are not just simply people to be observed and

interviewed, but can help the ethnographer understand the dynamics he is investigating, and have different voices that can reflect the complexity of the real world.

3.2. The Rise of Autoethnography

The criticism of the ethnographic method allowed the rehabilitation of ethnography, which was applied to new fields of investigation such as Cultural Studies, Audience Studies, and IS (Information System) researches.

The importance of self-reflexivity in the researcher's ethnographic report led to the birth in the 1980s of a new study method which places the researcher personally at the center of the ethnographic investigation: autoethnography. It emphasizes the subjective components disowned by classic ethnography, which inevitably influence the researcher's experience and analysis.

3.2.1 Autoethnography vs. Ethnography

Autoethnography includes features of autobiography and ethnography, but is different from them in the following areas:

1) Autoethnography, unlike autobiography, does not cover the subject's entire existence;

2) Autobiography is usually the narration in past tense of a life, "as remembered and written down by the subject" (Alleyne 2015, 142); on the other hand, autoethnography, like ethnography, includes parts compiled in real time, in the form of field notes;

3) Autoethnography is written in the first person, while ethnography is in the third person;

4) In autoethnography, the researcher's reflective experience is predominant (Okely and Callaway 1992);

5) Both ethnography and autoethnography are characterized by narrativity, but "the narrativity of autoethnography is very much *personal* narrativity" (Alleyne 2015, 150; emphasis mine).

After describing autoethnography starting from the characteristics which distinguish it from ethnography and autobiography, I will discuss in the following section the elements of said method that convinced me to adopt it for my research about digital fiction.

3.2.2 The Characteristics of Autoethnography

In a preceding study on methodology (Rebagliati 2016), some aspects of the autoethnographic method convinced me that it could be a useful way to study digital fiction and the creative process behind it from the inside and to get rich insights on the interaction between the technological and social systems in real-life settings.

Introspective self-observation. Drawing from both ethnographic tradition and biography, autoethnography allows researchers to observe and register their own behaviors, thoughts, and feelings while living them during participant observation. In this way both “introspective self-observation” and “interactive introspection” are possible.

I found this methodology particularly useful for the analysis of a field like the Internet, which is constantly in process, constantly reshaping relations and practices (Chang 2008).

Connecting the personal and cultural. Autoethnography must connect personal experiences to the cultural, making of them a meaningful research and at the same time reaching out to a wider audience than traditional research (Ellis et al. 20110).

Aim. Being myself a writer and a teacher, I must say that the ultimate aim of my research activity is that its results might be shared by a wider community, rather than being limited to the experts of the academic world. The analysis of digital fiction might help us understand better the way we relate to technological systems, and it is a pity that such knowledge remains closed in books and papers accessible only to university members.

Rich insight. The two points before lead me to a further point in a quite natural way: rich insight. Such an intense experience, where the individual researcher reflects on his behaviors through “introspective self-observation” and also compares them through “interactive introspection” on a daily basis, convinced me that autoethnographic methods are useful to get a deep understanding of people and the context in which they are embedded (Myers 1999).

In fact, an analysis made by an external subject and conducted by using the structural methods of social network analysis would instead return only a very partial picture of this phenomenon.

This method “focuses on the structures and patterns of relationship between social actors in a network” (Kozinet 2010, 49). However, in a digital context, such as an online writing community, such patterns are influenced by specific algorithms which determine the flow of information and the formation of such clusters of data. The digital researcher’s concern must necessarily be about “the extent to which

algorithmic data has the capacity to enhance change or replace traditional qualitative (as sociologist frame ethnography) and quantitative practice” (Pink 2016, 6).

Autoethnography is, therefore, an answer to such a concern, because it allows the researcher to monitor the data derived from the analysis since their origin, and to keep track of the writing process in its entirety, sidestepping the algorithms that regulate how social networks function, but do not reflect how users truly react to them. It also allows for an awakening of the researcher’s awareness, so that she/he may take a critical stance toward the digital tools she/he uses to produce, observe, and analyze such data.

Due to the nature of digital media and the mixture of the virtual and the real, the direct participation in the writing activity allows registering and describing passages that otherwise would have remained hidden.

3.3. An Autoethnography of Digital Fiction

This brief overview helps us in quickly recognize the fact that autoethnography is to be understood as the product of the crisis of the 1990s and thus of the will to experiment a way where qualitative research can be effective even in unconventional fields, like IS investigation.

The topic of my research is about identifying how the fiction-writing practice has changed in the time of the Internet: this problem falls under the scope of Information Systems Researches.

The challenge for information system researchers has been to study the interaction between technological systems and social systems in real-life settings. As far as IS research is concerned, the value of ethnographic methods is that they can provide deep insights into the human, social, and organizational aspects of IS phenomena and their adoption allows for the qualitative analysis of the interaction between social and technological systems (Schultze 2001).

As I pointed out in chapter two, writing digital fiction in my research takes place in communities of practice (Wenger 1999), where people and structures are connected and reality represents the manifestation of agency by the individuals embedded in the social and technological structures.

The fruitful use of the ethnographic method in the study of human practices and their transformation in a digital context is supported by several studies. Pink claims that “a digital ethnography approach, precisely because ethnographic methods enable us to focus on doing ... offer methods through which to investigate practices *as they unfold*” (2016, 45; emphasis mine).

As suggested by its name, the practice of collaborative digital fiction writing involves multiple people and is therefore a collective activity.

Through the application of trial-and-error based autoethnography, I interacted with the other members of the community and interiorized the mechanisms at the base of

the reference group and the structure in which said group is to be found; these mechanisms are concretized in the realization of the practice.

This is one of the fundamental questions that led me to conduct research on collaborative fiction from the inside. My position was not that of a researcher in the field, but rather that of a member of that fieldwork, as a writer, and member of the collaborative writing platform, with the possibility of examining the writing practice *from the inside*.

Therefore, as Pink points out, “A research design that focuses on practices offers us an analytical unit that creates a ready entry point for studying what people do and how these doings might be constitutive of wider social configurations, contexts and processes” (2016, 57).

Digital fiction relied on a perspective tied to literary-critical narrative theory. According to this perspective, the investigation is focused on a single work evaluated, as

previously discussed in the Introduction, from the point of view of the engagement of the reader toward it. Therefore, any attempt to consider the social dimension of the work, which has been realized and is being perused in an interactive and mutable context such as the Internet, is excluded from the analysis. On the other hand, there are the sociolinguistic and discourse analytic research methodologies used in computer-mediated communication studies which rely on a wider data set in order to uncover generic patterns of texts.

Page (2012) brings these two approaches together for her study about social media: on the one hand, she employs analytical categories belonging to literary-critical narrative theory (which we will illustrate), but she does so in order to analyze textual data derived from the fluid and interactive context of social media. Autoethnography allows to keep in line with these approaches relying on the same analytical categories used by Page, while surpassing them at the same time, using its descriptive potential to unfold the practice of digital fiction and the possibility to provide with a deep immersion in the media context.

In this part of this chapter I will examine a few specific issues connected with the realization of an online autoethnography. Firstly, I will refer to some precursors who created online autoethnographies; I will then insert my autoethnography in the context of the categorization proposed by Tuncalp and Lê (2014); I will then describe the problematics and techniques of this method applied to research on digital fiction; finally, I will provide the methodological frame I used to narrativize my data (chapter four) and analyze it (chapter five).

3.3.1. Literature Review

In chapter two, I highlighted how the studies about and on the Internet have progressively shifted from a position which considered the web as a cyberspace wherein the body has lost its materiality, a stand-alone entity, where the relationships therein created were subjected to the limitations of the technological medium, to a conception of the Internet as tightly connected to everyday practices, which are reshaped as they are embedded in the medium, but guarantee an intense

embodiment experience due to the physicality and the immediacy of the devices (such as the cellphone) which we use to connect to it. In autoethnographies about the web, it is also possible to notice how such researches on the web have influenced the ethnographer's approach to the Internet (Hine 2015).

In Markham (1998), one of the first autoethnographies about the web, we can detect the multiple meanings that the Internet can have according to how people used it. Markham claims that the web ("cyberspace" in her words) can act as a place, as a tool, and as a way of being.

This multiplicity of the web brings to attention the need for the ethnographer to consider reflexivity as an indispensable component of his research: through this process, the researcher can understand how her/his agency in the development of the fieldwork impacts the construction of her/his report. The reflexive attention toward the choices she/he made and could have made is fundamental to understand his own research (Hine 2015). This kind of study is exemplified by Baym's research (2000), in

which the author changes her point of view in relation to the field from participant to observer, and notes how this change was a source of important insights about the setting; or Kendall's study (2002) which sets herself apart from the members of the group she is studying, in order to identify their characteristics by contrast. Researchers like Hine (2015) believe that autoethnography is a valid method to explore the web, since:

The autoethnography emphasizes the embodied and emotional experience of engagement with diverse media, attending to the influences that shape and constrain the experience, and the opportunities and restrictions that emerge.
(Hine 2015, 83)

The whole experience can be thus explored "in a far greater degree of depths that can be achieved by asking other participants for retrospective accounts alone or from simply observing what they do" (Hine 2015, 84).

This autoethnography should, therefore, be seen not only as an occasion to broaden the writing environment, but also as a formative trial-and-error experience, during which I created my story outside the established boundaries of traditional writing. My

work undergoes fast, live feedback posted by a large audience, who not only judge the story but also participate actively in its creation.

3.3.2. In the Context of Digital Ethnographies

In the attempt to define my autoethnography of digital fiction in the context of online ethnographies (Rebagliati 2015), I found Tunçalp and Lê (2014) particularly helpful by their offering directions to systematize the different online ethnographies. Following their theoretical framework which establishes the boundaries of research space, time, the way to cross them, and the degree of engagement in the field, I will define my autoethnography of digital fiction as follows:

Space. Hine (2015) refers to the Internet as embedded, embodied, and everyday in the real. From my point of view, an online autoethnography has to take into account the real environment represented by the physical location and the physical constraints on the act of writing. Moreover, since it is a digital operation, it has to consider the physical components of the medium we use to write. On the other hand, since the

digital novel is created, uploaded, and consumed in the digital environment, the two dimensions of real and virtual are likely to be considered strictly interconnected to give a complete account of the writing process.

During an autoethnographic study on how Internet reshapes human practices, the field of investigation becomes more precise the more one proceeds in the analysis since the Internet is a fluid medium in constant change. The knowledge of the researcher is not something certain that remains immutable; rather, it changes the more he advances in his study (Hine 2015).

I decided to start with *Maho no irando*, the Japanese platform which I had investigated in a previous study, to trace the lines of debate about the future of the traditional publishing and the alternative scenarios opened up by the advent of digital publications. In that study I focused my attention on the new relationship between author and reader that the digital media contribute to and create in the concept of *Intimate Stranger* (Rebagliati 2014).

Nonetheless the fieldwork shifted from the Japanese platform to an Italian platform, as some linguistic and cultural difficulties arose during the writing process.

Such an autoethnographic experience proved to be very helpful to pinpoint some of the challenges that I, a want-to-be author, had to face when I decided to start writing digital fiction. This point is valid no matter which platform one eventually selects to investigate. At the same time, my experience helped me understand that each and every case of writing represents a very specific and unique moment defined by a series of contingent instances, the choices of the author and the responses of the readers that do not repeat themselves twice.

Time. As I mentioned above, online autoethnography allowed me to have a deep immersion in the process of writing digital fiction as an author. Indeed, the core of my research was based on the real-time production of contents which allowed me to have direct access and comprehension of the mechanisms of the writing platform and the

online community. Interactivity is an important issue when engaging with the production of digital fiction; problems slowed down the efficiency of my feedback and the degree of synchronicity of my responses, but the process gave me the possibility to develop insights about the characteristics of the writing community.

Engagement in the field. I registered with the sites and set up my personal page. I tried to actively participate both as an author and as a reader of other people's stories, keeping my anonymity intentionally and eventually, revealing my real self, aware of the importance of researcher positionability fluctuation in the field to get new insights and to think reflexively.

Once I framed my autoethnography in the context of other online ethnographies, the next step is to clarify how the digital impacts the conducting of my research. As pointed out above, to understand the practice of writing digital fiction, both my physical and digital positions are important. However, since the digital novel is created, uploaded, and consumed in the digital environment and the interactions with the

other members of the community occurs mostly through the platform technological tools, most of the data are exploited from the digital environment. Kozinets (2010) in the attempt to establish how traditional ethnographies differ from the ones conducted exclusively on the web, pinpoints four differences between face-to-face interactions and computer-mediated social interactions: these differences influence the kind of investigation that the ethnographer has to implement and how the data collected during the research are treated; these can be identified in alteration, anonymity, accessibility, and archiving.

3.4. Autoethnography on the Internet: Alteration, Anonymity, Accessibility, and Archiving

Alteration. Interactions through the media take place according to the characteristics of the said media. On online collaborative writing platforms, all communication takes place in textual mode and the feeling of copresence and immediacy is guaranteed by the speed and interactivity of the medium (the web) and the physicality of the

experience is recovered through the writing devices (cellphones, computers, and iPads). Furthermore, the asynchronous nature of mediated communication allows one “to engage in strategic control over information and self-presentation than face to face exchanges” (Kozinets 2010, 69). Finally, as Kozinets points out, “online interaction forces the learning of additional codes and norms, abbreviations, emoticons, sets of keystrokes and other technical skills in order to transfer the emotional information vital to social relation” (2010, 69).

Anonymity. Kozinets states that “anonymity confers online actors a new sense of identity flexibility” (2010, 70). I have already discussed the topic of anonymity regarding the Intimate Stranger relationships in the time of the Internet in mediated communication (chapter two). In my research, anonymity is a strategy to blend in and hide my identity as a researcher, just as identity flexibility allows to change my positionability within the field and receive new insights while changing my point of view.

Accessibility. Kozinets states that the participatory and egalitarian nature of the Internet is reflected in the “general democracy and inclusiveness of many, if not most, online social groups” (2010, 71). In spite of this, I must state that in my research that language barriers or the inability to interiorize the rules and norms at the base of each group are factors that can prevent full access to it.

The Internet’s characteristics as an infrastructure that can eliminate the barriers of space and time allowed me to reach people I would otherwise have been unable to reach without physically travelling to them. On the other hand, potential problems in the functioning of the web or other limits in the technology influenced some aspects of the research and present some obstacles in completing it.

Archiving. As observed by Kozinets, thanks to the properties of digital texts, every interaction can be observed, saved, and copied as soon as it takes place. Moreover, the opportunity to research digital data makes it easier to organize them in the context of one’s study. This allows cumbersome reconstructions to be overcome in hindsight

by the researcher and his attempts at keeping track of past interaction relying solely on his memory. However, it is necessary to specify that the Internet is a constantly evolving reality and that the information it contains can be copied and re-contextualized, taking on a completely different meaning from the original one, or can suddenly disappear and become inaccessible. To overcome these problems in proceeding with my research I had to deal with the precariousness of such data, saving it as soon as it is created and contextualizing it according to when it had been produced.

3.5. The Tools of the Online Ethnographer

3.5.1. *Media*

To write the digital fiction which is the base of my autoethnography, I mainly used three devices: an iPhone 5, an iPad, and a laptop. The Note app, shared by all three devices, allowed me to access the updated version of my research.

My production of the stories mostly took place during the hour I spent on the train

with my cellphone; sometimes, however, while I was writing the story, I would receive feedback from readers or interact with other platform users, or I wanted to note down a specific situation and I would stop writing the story to write down useful material for my field notes. The story and the field notes proceeded simultaneously, alternating on the Notes page, on which I also pasted some data collected on the platform. This rather disorderly stream of story parts, notes, and data was then organized in the evening on the computer: the story parts were uploaded or edited before finally becoming the new episode to upload, while data and field notes had to be corrected and adjusted, adapting them to the pre-existing corpus of field notes.

3.5.2. *Languages*

This research was developed using three languages: Italian, English, and Japanese.

I used Italian, my native tongue, because it allowed me to fully exploit stylistic potential when writing my stories. Italian is therefore the writer's language: even when, in the first stage of my autoethnography, I tried writing on a Japanese

collaborative writing platform, the original text was always in Italian.

I used English as the ethnographer's language: the field notes were written directly in English, because this would allow me to save time when analyzing them and writing the doctoral thesis, which I planned from the start to write in English.

Finally, I used Japanese for the presentations I held at the university to share my research's progress within the Informatic Sociology department of the Aoyama Gakuin Daigaku University. Japanese was, therefore, the researcher's language, also because of the continuity of my studies during my Master's Degree at the Chuo University. It was also the translator's language, when I translated from Italian into Japanese, assisted by an editor in the first phase of my research. It is also the language of the social context which was the background of my study.

From the very first files in the Note app, the three languages appear simultaneously: on the one hand, they represent the three souls of the author and act as a filter to

stem the challenge of separating what might otherwise seem a single “stream of consciousness”; on the other hand, they highlight the complexity of the research at hand, requiring the author to split himself into several “parts” for the different—but also contiguous—stages of his study.

3.5.3. Interviews

Beside autoethnography, I also used interviews to collect data.

Alleyne (2015) remarks the difference between structured and semi-structured interviews.

Structured interviews require a series of fixed questions to be asked to several people.

I used this kind of interview when I introduced myself as a researcher to the administrators of the collaborative writing platform *The Incipit*: I asked for their support in contacting a few veteran users of the platform and asking my questions. In doing so, I acquired some general information about the functioning of the platform

and, at the same time, I created a preferential communication channel with the website staff.

There are also semi-structured interviews, which can be further categorized in narrative interviews and ethnographic interviews.

In the narrative interview, the interviewee gives a detailed account about an event or a practice in which she/he has been involved. The interview is planned in advance and the researcher “would normally have a set of background topics ready to prompt the interviewee if necessary as they proceed through the narration of their story” (Alleyne 2015, 136).

In my research, they correspond with the interviews I had with the keitai shosetsu author C. (chapter two) and with Lucia Sparagna (chapter four). In the second instance, the success of the interview relied on a kind of collaboration that was born between the two parties. This interview was prolonged in time, and its evolution was parallel to

the consolidation of the relationship between the researcher and the interviewee. In addition, Lucia didn't simply tell her story, but she involved me in her experience on the platform and collaborated with me in gathering relevant information on the platform.

By contrast, the ethnographic interview “has an element of spontaneity attached it, in that it arises in the course of a wider participant observation study” (Alleyne 2015, 136). This kind of interview corresponds to the interactions with the platform users and are hidden in the daily exchange of information connected to the platform or in answer to some specific event on said platform. Their spontaneous nature is precisely what allows to shed light on issues that hadn't been taken into account but provide new insights for the research.

3.6. Analytical Framework

Before moving on to the actual autoethnography, we need to specify the analytical framework through which the data gathered during the investigation process should

be analyzed. In *Writing Culture*, Clifford and Marcus (1986) state that writing ethnography is similar to writing novels; according to this statement, the anthropologist should be able to employ literary devices (rhetorical figures, plot, characterization, etc.) to narrativize his ethnographic text as well (Alleyne 2015).

The object of this research is *the practice of writing digital fiction*. For a researcher investigating the practices of narrative writing on the Internet, I can identify three key moments.

The first one is connected to my activity as a writer and as a researcher: as the author of the digital fiction I had to complete a narrative text in ten episodes according to the affordances of the writing platform and following the directions given by my readers.

At the same time, the I researcher kept track of my progress on the platform through a field note, typical of ethnographic reports. The need to perform two actions at the same time (also because, as previously discussed, the tool for writing and for keeping the field note is the same) inevitably means that the use of narrative tools for handling

the novel influenced the writing style of the field note.

The second moment is the narrativization of the field notes, in which I selected the parts pertaining to the final report and presented them according to a narrative architecture to facilitate the fruition of the text.

It is worth noting that:

Autoethnography blurs the distinction between first order narratives (i.e. those produced by people about their normal circumstances) and second order narratives (i.e. those produced by social researchers based on data gathered in the field or from archive). (Alleyne 2015, 150)

Therefore, the digital fiction author and the researcher, author of the ethnographic text, are close, which results in the overlapping of the two narrative orders.

The third moment is the analysis of the autoethnography starting from an analytical frame: in this research, I decided to use the four dimensions of narrativity (Ochs and Capps 2011). Firstly, because this frame allows a comparative perspective in relation to

other narrative forms such as the traditional novel contained in the medium book and the writing practices in social media as describe by Page (2012).

Furthermore, since the narrative orders of first and second level blend in the autoethnography, using a theoretical frame connected to the narrativity structures will allow one to make observations not only on the practice of digital fiction writing, but also on the autoethnography itself, revealing the crucial importance of the author/researcher relationship.

In general, it is possible to recognize two kinds of approaches within autoethnographical investigations: evocative and analytical (Alleyne 2015).

The first kind refers to the work of researchers such as Ellis (2011), which centers on the fact that, in autoethnography, it is no longer possible to distinguish between the first and the second order narrative: the first order is commonly associated with the voices belonging to the field, the second to the researcher's representation of the field.

This means that the distinction between narrator and ethnographer is undermined, like the one between social sciences and humanities.

The second kind refers to Anderson's "analytical" autoethnography (2006) according to which the method needs to be tied to considerations of a general character using, in the analysis, categories coherent with the debate of the discipline subject of the research.

In this autoethnography, it is not possible to completely separate the two fields; on the one hand, we often report cases where the distinction between first and second order narrative disappears, but on the other hand, there is an attempt to organize data according to analytical categories recognized in its field of study.

3.6.1. The Narrative Dimension

In their work, Ochs and Capps (2001) investigate the different dimensions through which human beings experience the process of narrative. Each of these dimensions

indicates a precise narrative form; it places it within a continuum organized between two sets of extreme poles and differentiates it from other narrative forms. The narrative dimensions that Ochs and Capps identify consist in linearity, tellership, tellability, embeddedness, and moral stance.

In her study about social media, among which are included collaborative digital fiction writing platforms too, Page (2012) claims that four of the five proposed dimensions (linearity, tellership, tellability, and embeddedness) can be used to analyze the writing and communication practices that take place on digital devices and, more generally, mediated communication.

Let's take a closer look at what Ochs and Capps mean when discussing the above-mentioned narrative dimensions:

1. Linearity points at the narrative structural properties. One pole presents a kind of close narrative that develops along precise temporal lines, the other pole offers instead a narrative organized in open, multilinear circuits of

narration.

2. Tellership indicates who creates the story. Again we swing between two poles: at one extremity we have single author organizing and supervising the whole narrative, at the other extremity a plurality of authors who actively engage with the creative process and the development of the story.

3. Tellability is concerned with the value that the narrative acquires in relation to the participation of its users/readers. Of great interest are the strategies developed by the author to keep the level of attention of his audience high and to widen his fellowship. At the other pole stands a story which has no reason to be told.

4. Finally, the dimension of embeddedness refers to the dependence of the narrative to the context(s) in which it happens to be produced.

Through these four dimensions, it will be possible to analyze the data collected during the digital fiction autoethnography, and it will be possible to do so in a comparative perspective once the same analytical framework is applied to books and to social media in general (chapter five).

Chapter Four

An Autoethnography of Digital Fiction:

Maho no Irando and The Incipit

Author's Ethnographic Notes: My usual day as a digital writer

15/04/2014

Today I woke up earlier to prepare the lessons. I left home at 9:30, and I took the train to Shibuya. It was not crowded as usual even if I could not sit so I could put my left hand through the hook and write with the right.

I was writing the fifth episode of the Italian story. I had almost finished the first half of the story, but I have to prepare completely new material because of the comments of the readers; they changed the course of the story. As I get off at Shibuya I could sit comfortably on the following train and I could write on the way to the National Theatre. I sat outside the theatre until 11:35, then I had to stop writing because of my work. Usually I write with my headphones on. I tried to do it directly connecting to the site but the problem is that if I have some corrections to do on the text, I encounter troubles and I cannot do it properly. So I have decided to use the Note App instead and paste the work in progress on the site frame in order to have an idea of how many words I wrote. For each episode the maximum is 5,000 words which means 50,000 words for the whole story. I had my lunch break and at four I left for Yokohama. On the train I could sit and write again but I could not reach the 5,000 words. On the train back I spoke with a colleague for the half of the commute and I did not have enough inspiration to write anymore.

My activity as a reader is still not enough busy. I should start tomorrow on the train back to Tokyo at night. For sure before sleeping I will try to reach my 5,000 words. Some reader has complained about my grammar mistakes due to my

using the mobile. That is the reason why I have decided to upload the new episodes from my laptop in order to correct the eventual mistakes.

As for the Japanese story there are not restrictions of length of the text, so I am free to model my episode freely.

The model of the Intimate Stranger perfectly explains the dynamics that come into play between authors and readers on collaborative writing platforms like *Maho no Irando*. The transformation of that relationship accompanies the fact that writing fiction is no longer exclusively confined to paper; now it is being reshaped through the Internet and online collaborative writing communities.

The next step is to define in further detail the act of digital writing in all its aspects, considering it within the context of the previously presented model.

In the previous chapter I justified the need for an autoethnography of digital fiction, because this method allows me to embrace the phenomenon in its entirety and all its hidden aspects. In addition, thanks to this method the practical dimension of the act of writing is brought back, because autoethnography helps underscore the fact that

digital writing is implemented through a body and through an equally tangible instrument, the mobile phone. Acknowledging these aspects, combined with the experience of mobility (which is also physical), allows us to provide a clearer view of the analyzed phenomenon and, in this perspective, to encourage the revision of the research about traditional and past writing processes. In an autoethnography of writing, therefore, the body, to quote Wacquant (2000), is considered as an “instrument of investigation and carrier of knowledge.”

The autoethnography follows the writing process, is strictly connected to it, and is fuelled by it; at the same time, it is also able to create its own independent space, which is the source of reflection. In this research, there are three souls (or roles): the author, the ethnographer, and the researcher. The divide between the three is the use of language as I previously stated in chapter three: Italian for the creative aspect, English for the field notes, and Japanese for presentation about how the research progressed. Furthermore, Japanese was the translator’s language, which I translated from Italian into Japanese, assisted by an editor in the first phase of my research.

Finally, it is also the language of the social context which was the background of my study.

Even though there are areas in this investigation where these three “personas” merge, the different use of languages and the professional experience I gained in both areas, as well as the fluidity granted by the digital medium, allow me to take on any role as needed.

Autoethnography tries to recreate the writing process narrativizing the stream of consciousness of field notes and the digital information available on the platform, collected and catalogued according to discourse analytic techniques. The result is an account articulated in the following points, which represents the main elements of the writing experience:

1. *A reflection on digital writing as a trial and error process.* To engage in writing digital fiction on a collaborative writing platform, it is quite necessary to master a technique depending on one’s own manual skills and on one’s ability

to adapt to the writing environment and overcome whatever cultural and linguistic barriers could arise to compromise interactions between the members of the writing community. Adapting to the tangible characteristics of the medium used and to the place or places where one's body is physically present while writing happens through a process which is far from automatic, but is rather based on trial and error.

2. A reflection on the act of generating and consuming a story as embedded in the dimension of "here and now." Completing a story on a collaborative writing platform requires both the interiorization of the rules of the online platform and the efficient use of the resources provided by the website. It also requires the elaboration of writing and reading strategies to maximize results, with the goal of maintaining credibility as a member of that specific platform community.

3. A reflection on the fragmentation of identity, narrative roles, and the writing experience. The partial or complete anonymity granted by the writing platform when interacting with other participants; the variety of roles when taking part

in the production and consumption process of the stories; and the need to be a researcher, author, and reader all at the same time emphasize the need to manage fragmented, fake, and temporary identities, whose management directly influences the writing experience.

4. *A reflection on the relationship with other members of the community.* The writing platform is not just a place where to take on a writing process; it is a space where to develop human connections, born through the collaborative production of stories with others, but that can evolve despite the limits imposed by the platform itself. Investigating the nature of such relationships allows us to reflect on the nature of human connections born on the Internet.

4.1. A Reflection on Digital Writing as a Trial and Error Process: *Maho no Irando*

To engage in writing digital fiction on a collaborative writing platform, it is quite necessary to master a technique depending on one's own manual skills and on one's ability to adapt to the writing environment, and then overcome whatever cultural and linguistic barriers could arise to compromise interactions between the members of the

writing community. Adapting to the tangible characteristics of the medium used and to the place or places where one's body is physically present while writing happens through a process which is far from automatic, but is rather based on trial and error.

4.1.1. *First Steps*

I decided to start my autoethnography choosing the Japanese platform *Maho no Irando* as my fieldwork. There are many sites on which mobile novels are uploaded every day. I specifically chose the pioneering website *Maho no Irando*: indeed, it was the first site in Japan that made it possible for users to upload their own mobile novels. Moreover, during the massive market expansion of mobile novels in 2007, many sites took inspiration from its architecture. Finally, it is the collaborative digital fiction writing community where C., the keitai shosetsuka I referred in chapter two, engaged in mostly as an author of digital fiction.

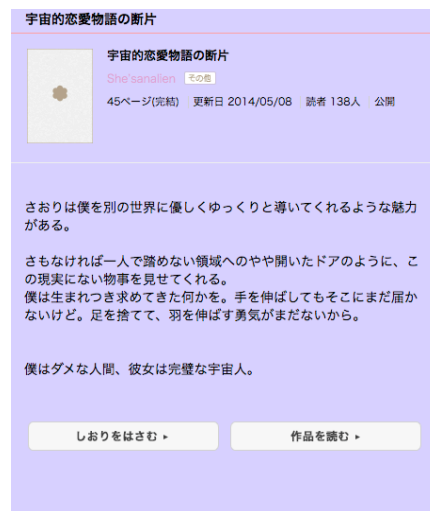


Figure 4.1. *Maho no Irando*'s mobile novel front page, 05/04/2014. Translation: Saori slowly takes me to another world. That's what makes her special. It's like a door opening on a dimension that I could never explore by myself. Through Saori I can see something that doesn't exist in this reality. Something I've always been looking for. I reach out, but I can't grasp it.

First of all I registered with the site and set up my personal page. I had tried to actively participate both as an author and as a reader of other people's story, intentionally keeping my anonymity.

Author's Ethnographic Notes: My first day on *Maho no Irando* 05/04/2014

This afternoon I opened my account on Maho no Irando. I was using my iPhone, but unluckily there was not a specific application designed for writing with it. This means that I have to scroll up down left right the page when I am working on the settings. First of all I chose a domain for my home page hosted in the site. While editing my page I have the chance to improve it with several tools. Today

*I concentrated on writing my profile (this is still not complete; I will improve it in the following days) with some basic information as nickname, the origin of my nickname, nationality (I add in this section fictitious data: “I come from a place far, far away”), Zodiac sign, and hobbies. **Then I clicked on the tool BOOK and I’ve started improving my first mobile novel.** I’ve found a title for it which sounds like “Fragments of an alien love story” and I have added some explanations on the contents of the novel which are shown on the front page. Anybody accessing to the novel’s page will be able to read this piece of information before starting reading.*

This is the reason why I think I will edit it again, once I have developed the story better in my mind. This operation took about twenty minutes. I was doing so just outside of my house in a small park sitting on a wooden chair while looking at the cherry blossom trees. While writing I was answering to some messages from my friends on Facebook.

4.1.2. The Writing Environment: The Sociotechnological Frame

Digital writing is not an automatic process; it is indeed a technique one must learn just like the traditional way of writing. The Internet gives us quite an infinite number of tools which enrich and expand this writing practice but which need to be mastered in order to be used effectively.

Author’s Ethnographic Notes: Writing on the train 1

07/04/2014

I am on the train to work: it takes one hour to get there, the right time to

finalize my account on Maho no Irando ...

I am holding my mobile with the right hand and typing the text with the thumb of the same hand. I have also tried to hold the mobile with the right hand using the left hand to type in order to improve the speed of my writing.

Speaking specifically about mobile phone technology, the iPhone 5 certainly was not the right device to use to write on *Maho no Irando*. This website was, in fact, originally conceived to be accessed via Japanese mobile phones. The causes that contributed to the early diffusion of such electronic devices connected to the Internet in Japan and to the rise of a now well established practice of writing digital novels on such devices (keitai shosetsu) can be summed up in the three main points already mentioned in chapter one:

1. *Personalization*. Mobile phones represent the way young generations can express themselves and easily communicate with a great degree of embodiment.
2. *Multifunctionality*. Mobile phones allow people to carry out several human practices including writing and reading activities which are reshaped according to the medium's affordances and people's needs.

3. *Portability*. Mobile devices are easy to carry and always connected to the Internet, allowing people to use their features while being in public places where certain actions are restricted and some behaviors may not be welcome.

Keeping in mind that mobile novels are the products of technological and social issues merging together, we can say that all the three characteristics of the Japanese mobile phone mentioned above have contributed significantly to the emergence of the mobile novel culture.

4.1.3. *Writing and Reading on the Run*

The one described above is the sociotechnological frame into which my autoethnography has been inserted along its whole duration. Although the focus of the analysis shifted from a Japanese website to an Italian platform, my physical person was located in Japan and the writing process occurred almost entirely on trains and through mobile phones.

The use of a smart phone and then of an iPad to write and read short stories and novels was a choice determined by several reasons:

1. The time spent to commute on trains (around two hours per day) and the wish to use this time productively;
2. The use of mobile technology easy to carry around and to be employed on trains where the space is usually limited and not suitable to the use of a computer;
3. The devices were constantly connected: this allowed me to constantly keep an eye on the activities on the platform, read the users' comments, and grant me a very immersive experience in the platform.
4. The time spent in Japan made me used to the general environment of Japanese trains, where people use individual contents such as books and mobile phones and interpersonal contact or conversations among the passengers are avoided.

However, writing on a train has its own disadvantages: during rush hours the coaches

are sometimes so packed that it is impossible to find a seat, let alone find enough space to use a mobile phone to write or read.

Author's Ethnographic Notes: Writing on the Train 2

07/04/2014

*I left home at 11:15 and took the train to work. **During the commute, I connected to Maho no Irando but it was impossible to write as I was standing up with one hand grabbing the handhold and the other holding the mobile phone. I had to be content with some amount of reading.***

On my way back home (two stops from Shibuya) I wish I had some time to read Maria's novel. Sadly the train was full of people (20:15), and I could just jump onboard to find myself in a crowd with no chance of moving a single muscle. It's April, and all companies welcome the new employees with afterwork parties. By the middle of the month, the situation will hopefully change with the new employees forced to work overtime until late evening.

Sometimes the battery of my mobile phone simply went dead during my commutes.

Author's Ethnographic Notes: Writing on the train 3

15/07/2014

***My mobile was dying, and I connected it to my computer which I brought today as I had to use it in the classroom.** Normally I do not take my computer with me. As my mobile was recharging I wrote a Word document on my computer and then I pasted it on a note to transfer on the mobile.*

In the case described above, I had encountered a complete technological bound: while the mobile was reaching the battery through my computer, the computer was connected to the Internet via the mobile.

Even though at some point, as clarified in the following pages, I had shifted my activity from the Japanese platform to the Italian platform *The Incipit*, the sociotechnological environment I experienced while writing was the same all through the process of autoethnography: the train, with all the characteristics and issues which made my writing special. Answering a comment where an Italian reader, already mistrustful of digital writing, disapproved of my use of the mobile phone as a tool to write my stories, I wrote:



Figure 4.2. Answer to a reader's comment, *The Incipit*, 19/11/2014. (Translation: If we want to talk about mobile phones, let me explain. I suppose you're used to living in a metropolis: you get back home at night, tired after working all day. Tokyo is no different: in addition, I work as a teacher and need to travel from one side to the other of the Kanto prefecture. The time spent traveling is a blessing: I take out my mobile phone and read or write. It's my consolation when travelling alone. Besides, people don't talk on Japanese trains and, except during rush hour, it's like being in a quiet living room.

Have a look: <http://www.gabrielerebagliati.com/2014/11/il-mio-spazio-di-scrittura-e-lettura.html> (the link leads to a picture of a Japanese train). The mobile phone is therefore a necessity and, without it, to be completely honest, I don't know what I would do. Besides, in order to write, you too have submitted to the dynamics of a technological platform like *The Incipit*. I'm just looking for a way to express myself and, if I have to do it via mobile phone, so be it! Talk to you soon.)

4.1.4. A Working Plan and the Writing Process

Author's Ethnographic Notes: The work in progress of a Keitai Novel

06/04/2014

Despite some first difficulties, I have set up a clear working plan with the following operations listed:

A. Write the novel in Italian;

- B. Translate to Japanese;*
- C. Send the Japanese translation for a check to my Japanese friend (for editing); and*
- D. Upload the checked translation on the BOOK page of Maho no Irando.*

The difficulties of writing on trains started already with the writing and translation process (points A and B) as this was slowing down the development of the story and the use of yet another device to translate: an electronic dictionary.

Author's Ethnographic Notes: Translation issues

06/04/2014

Today I started the day translating my novel from Italian into Japanese. Like I did yesterday, I attached the Italian text from a text file to one of the pages provided by the application Note and added the text once translated in Japanese. I am thinking about publishing the Italian text as well, but I still have to find the right platform. Anyway, I have to also find a way to archive the text on the computer to track the ongoing process and keep memory of it.

*At the moment I can provide a translation of 390 Japanese characters for one hour. I need to improve my speed. I am trying to do everything with the mobile except for the dictionary. **I could use the translators provided by the Net and sometimes I do but usually I consult an electronic dictionary. Also this device is mobile and easy to carry. As I work with multiple devices I hold my mobile in my right hand and type with the thumb and I use the left hand to type on the dictionary when necessary.***

The editing (point C) was another step that slowed down the whole process. I was never sure when exactly the text would have been ready to be uploaded; my Japanese friend would be working on it on his spare time, and he could not set precise deadlines. I was entirely dependent on him, and this frustrated me as I had to wait for his call and I could not afford to hire a professional editor.

After receiving the edited text and making all the corrections, one might think that the text was finally ready to be uploaded (point D).

This was not quite the case, however, as there were, in fact, some questions related to the layout of the text on the website, plus a series of issues related to the modalities of composition of my text, rather different from those of the other texts present in the platform. Furthermore, my writing process had so many different steps and such a complex stratified structure that all this work was preventing me to use my time to read other stories and was limiting my contact with other users. I also observed the

layout of the text, and I started wondering how to adapt my novel contents to it.

Readers expected my story to resemble at least some aspects of a mobile story.

Author's Ethnographic Notes: Mobile novels features

04/07/2014

*The frame in which I could insert the text fits exactly the dimension of the screen layout provided to the reader. If I had added more text exceeding the frame, the reader would have had to scroll the page down to complete the reading on the page. I chose to fit the model frame in order to avoid the scrolling down operation by the reader and facilitate his reading. One problem was how to fill the frame with the text. Copying and pasting from the Word document was not possible. **There's a code in composing the layout of the text in mobile novels.***

From what I have learned from previous research on keitai shosetsu (Honda 2008), a mobile novel's spaces between one particular line of text and another stand to:

1. facilitate the reading operation on the small screen of a mobile;
2. cut the action and separate one scene from another; and
3. the blank space can be read as an emotive space resembling the one in shojo mangas.

Author's Ethnographic Notes: Reading as a way of learning how to write
04/07/2014

*My sentences were often too long so I tried to break them in correspondence of commas, but I was not sure this was the right solution to adopt. I have to observe what other mobile novelists were doing with their novels and more important I had to write directly on the frame provided by the BOOK tool and avoid using Note in order to produce more natural results. **It seemed texts needed to be created for the space they need to fit in.***

Reading on the phone was a *fragmented* endeavor. Its success hinged on technical conditions (having a functioning Internet connection and enough battery on my mobile phone) as well as physical ones (finding a seat or, if standing, the necessary space to take the phone out of my pocket and start reading among the other standing passengers; needing to pay attention to the announcements and visual notifications on the train which told me how much time I had left to read before my stop; having to change trains, when I had to temporarily look away from my phone to get off and follow the signs which would lead me to the next train).

There were also a series of factors at play connected to my inexperience with the

means offered by the platform to facilitate or keep track of the reading process.

Author's Ethnographic Notes: Reading tools

04/22/2014

And the train stops. I have to interrupt my reading and I forget to use the "Bookmark" option to be able to start from the point I have reached last time. Luckily I still have that window open on my browser. Definitely I will try to leave a comment. I like her (the author of the novel) style.

I have read several keitai shosetsu and I was thus familiar with their internal codes; still, the inability to write and upload my story in a fast and more natural way via the tools provided by the website frustrated my initial plans: writing my story and at the same time reading and commenting on the stories of other users, thus fully becoming a part of the community of authors.

Author's Ethnographic Notes: Recognizing my failure on *Maho no Irando*

14/05/2014

I remember C's words. C. was the keitai shosetsu novelist I interviewed before starting this autoethnography. She said: "I write, readers read, they leave their comments, and there I find the motivation to keep on writing." Well, although the number of my readers is increasing, the absence of comments makes my activity very frustrating. The translation of the text from Italian into Japanese,

the corrections of the editor and then the adjustment to the phone display and to the layout of a keitai shosetsu ... Not to mention the partial irrelevance of my style if compared to that of other stories ... The slowness of the uploading and the lack of time to read other stories... all these factors make the beginning of a relationship with the audience extremely difficult.

Now I realize what C meant by “motivation for writing ...”

However, I must admit that this first failure then became a very helpful experience: I interiorized the operational times of the digital writing, I noticed a series of questions about the use and management of different electronic devices, and I recognized the importance of interacting and communicating with other users to grant a story its success within that reading community.

While I was thinking upon these points, I stumbled upon *The Incipit*.

4.1.5. Conclusions

During an autoethnographic study on digital writing at large, the act of digital writing proceeds as *a trial and error process*: the field of investigation becomes more precise

the more one proceeds in the analysis since the Internet is a fluid medium in constant flux and change. The knowledge of the researcher is not something certain that remains immutable; rather, it changes the more he advances wider and deeper in his study (Hine 2015).

I decided to start with *Maho no Irando* because my purpose was to experience in first person the field I investigate about in previous studies (Rebagliati 2014). Nonetheless the fieldwork shifted from the Japanese platform to the Italian platform, as some practical, linguistic, and cultural difficulties arose during the writing process.

Such an autoethnographic experience proved to be very helpful to pinpoint some of the challenges that an aspiring author has to face when she/he decides to start writing digital fiction. This point is valid no matter which platform one eventually selects to investigate.

At the same time, my experience helped me highlight that each and every case of writing represents a very specific and unique moment defined by a series of contingent instances, choices of the author and responses of the readers that do not repeat themselves twice.

Participation in first person in the writing process gave me the chance to understand just how difficult it could be to pinpoint exactly the field of research and how myopic it could be to establish an actual point of arrival (finishing the novel). The possibility to expand my field of study allowed me to acknowledge my linguistic and cultural limits, limits that may become obstacles when one decides to start a writing activity online. It also helped me to understand that every contribution is personal and different from other contributions although a sort of common sociotechnological infrastructure to which all the users of online platforms conform. In this context, the novel written on the digital platform is not an actual point of arrival. It is, instead, a sort of research landmark through which it is necessary and helpful to pass in order to enrich one's own writing experience. In this interactive way of producing and consuming a work of

fiction, authors must put themselves in confrontation with the community following their stories. This ongoing dialogue is unavoidable, since it is not only a valuable way of exchanging information within the community but also of connecting with other users of the same platform and therefore expanding one's reading public.

4.2. The Italian Platform *The Incipit*: A Brief Explanation



Figure 4.3. Home page, *The Incipit* (15/09/2016) [Translation: change the development of the story- The first interactive online novels Italian platform].

I found out about *The Incipit* while I was surfing the Internet to find answers and cope with the sense of frustration after my seeming failure on the *Maho no Irando*. At the

beginning I worked on both the platforms, then I progressively stepped out of *Mahono Irando* and concentrated my energies on *The Incipit*, a more fitting environment to carry on my experiment of autoethnography.

Author's Ethnographic Notes: First time on *The Incipit*

12/05/2014

Today I was surfing on the Internet to find a website to upload my novel in Italian. I was not too confident, but I found something very interesting: a platform where I could upload digital stories featured as a community. I had still to find out the details, but I think it could be very useful for my research purposes. I have first tried to join the community registering on the website but doing so on an iPhone was quite hard because the frame where to insert the information did not fit the mobile screen. So I had to register on the computer, even if the website advertised that the platform can fit the screen and format of whatever reading device.



Figure 4.4. Instruction page, *The Incipit*, 15/09/2016 [Contents explanation: the platform guarantees compatibility with computers, tablets and smart phones].

The following data are the result of an interview I had with the platform administrators at the beginning of my fieldwork on *The Incipit*.

The Incipit is a digital platform of collaborative online writing created in 2011: in its first year, the website offered a limited number of stories manually managed and organized by the creators of the website. In October 2012, the platform underwent a complete redesign to face the demands of a constantly growing number of users. The new model for *The Incipit* now allows each user to publish freely her/his own story within an interactive frame in which it is possible to communicate with the other members of the community.

At the time of this writing, *The Incipit* counts 8,000 users per month who access between 90,000 and 100,000 web pages altogether. The stories on the website are more than a thousand, with more than half of that in development, while the

comment section reaches a whopping 100,000 units. These figures show that the level of activity of the members on the website is extremely high; in fact, more than half of the active users access *The Incipit* on a daily basis. Users tend to spend about nine minutes on the pages; this data indicates a great interest in the contents of the website. Authors approach their work in different ways; tendentially they publish one episode of the story every nine days. Every day, five to six new chapters are uploaded, these being either new stories or updates of the stories currently underway.

In comparison to other online communities of collaborative writing, *The Incipit* does not allow its users to rewrite or add parts to the story of an author. This has been done in order to maintain the stylistic uniformity of the stories. The users can instead intervene in the developments of the story on a deeper level. We can now take a look in the functioning of this digital platform.

4.2.1. The Incipit: *First Steps*

First and foremost, one has to create a personal account in order to write a story on

The Incipit website.

Figure 4.5. Members' access page, *The Incipit* 15/09/2016.

It is possible to use the information available on the platform for other online services and social media, such as Twitter and Facebook. This method allows the users to access and to exchange data which are integrated within other online platforms.



Figure 4.6. Home page, *The Incipit* 15/09/2016, Stories are shared on *The Incipit* Twitter account.

The reading of the stories online does not require the users to be a member of the community. However, if one wants to intervene in the development of a narrative, registration is necessary.

Once registration is completed, each and every user has the chance to start writing her/his story.

1. Scrivi il prossimo episodio

Titolo dell'episodio



Continua la tua storia: scrivi un nuovo episodio riprendendo la trama dalla **soluzione più votata** dai lettori. E in caso di pareggio, perché non provare a mescolare le due possibilità? Ricorda che ogni storia si compone di **10 episodi** e ogni episodio ha un limite di **5000 battute (spazi inclusi)**, che ti consigliamo di sfruttare fino in fondo. E con una frequenza di **2 o 3 episodi a settimana** i tuoi lettori si divertiranno al meglio!

B I U [List icons] [Link icon] [Text color icon] [Background color icon] [Undo icon]

Percorso: p

Figure 4.7. Story editing page, *The Incipit* 15/09/2016. Translation: Continue your story: write a new episode inspired by the option with more votes. And in case of a tie, why not try mixing the two options? Remember that every story is made of ten episodes and every episode has a 5,000

character limit (spaces included), which we suggest you fully exploit. And if you post two or three episodes per week, the readers will enjoy themselves even more!

Each story is usually ten chapters or episodes long, which can be uploaded by the author whenever he wants.



Figure 4.8. List of the story episodes, *The Incipit*, 15/09/2016.

At the moment of the publication each author is asked to insert a question with a multiple-choice answer, providing three options of development of the story for the next chapter.

A screenshot of a web form titled '2. Suggestisci i possibili sviluppi della tua storia'. The form has a yellow header bar with the title. Below the header, there is a small tree diagram icon. To the right of the icon, there is a paragraph of text explaining the purpose of the form: 'Una domanda conclude ogni episodio: come proseguirà la storia? Scrivi le tre possibilità e gioca insieme ai tuoi lettori nel cambiare il corso degli eventi. Sarà la maggioranza dei voti a guidare la tua mano nello scrivere l'episodio successivo. Fai divertire i tuoi lettori: il loro numero, i loro voti e i loro commenti determinano gli INCIPPOINTS, il punteggio della tua storia, e di conseguenza la visibilità e i premi che daremo a te e al tuo racconto!'. Below this text, there are four input fields. The first field is labeled 'Quale domanda chiude l'episodio?'. The next three fields are labeled 'Possibilità 1', 'Possibilità 2', and 'Possibilità 3' respectively.

Figure 4.9. Question with multiple-choice answer, *The Incipit*, 15/09/2016 Translation: Every episode ends with a question: how will the story continue? Write the three options and play with

your readers to change the course of the events. The option with the most votes will guide you when writing the following episode.

Entertain your readers: their number, their votes and their comments will make you earn INCIPOINTS, the score of your story, and therefore the visibility and the prizes we will award you and your story!

Which question concludes the episode?

Option 1

Option 2

Option 3

Each story is also equipped with a wall for comments where the readers can interact with the author and with other users by posting comments, criticism, etc.

Lascia un Commento

Autenticato come **shesanalien**. Logout?

Comment (required)

SCRIVI IL TUO COMMENTO

49 Commenti

**pinkerella**
Autore di Le Maschere!
01/12/2014 at 16:30

Mi è stato consigliato di leggerli e son venuta. 😊 ma direi di vedere la trasformazione in aliena e avviarci al gran finale. 🤖

Replica

**Lucia Sparagna**
Autore di Quando il mobbing ti fa "Cane"?
01/12/2014 at 00:29

effetto della pozione irrita Saori...

Replica

**annalisacaravante**
Autore di All'erta, sentinella!
09/08/2014 at 23:28

Saori scatena Tessa. Una storia particolare 🤖

Replica

**Rossana Kurata**
Autore di Amore a prima vista?
05/08/2014 at 14:32

Bella storia, mi piace!! 😊

Replica

**Francesca Rossini**
Autore di Jonas
15/07/2014 at 20:39

Si trasforma in un'aliena!!!! Come storia rosa è davvero particolare! Più la leggo più mi piace

Figures 4.10-4.11. Wall of a specific story, *The Incipit*, 15/09/2016.

Each action of the contributors on the page gives the author points, called “Incipoints,” which measure the popularity of the story.



Figure 4.12. Incipoints marker, *The Incipit*, 15/09/2016.

The Incipoints serve to rate the popularity of a story on the platform.

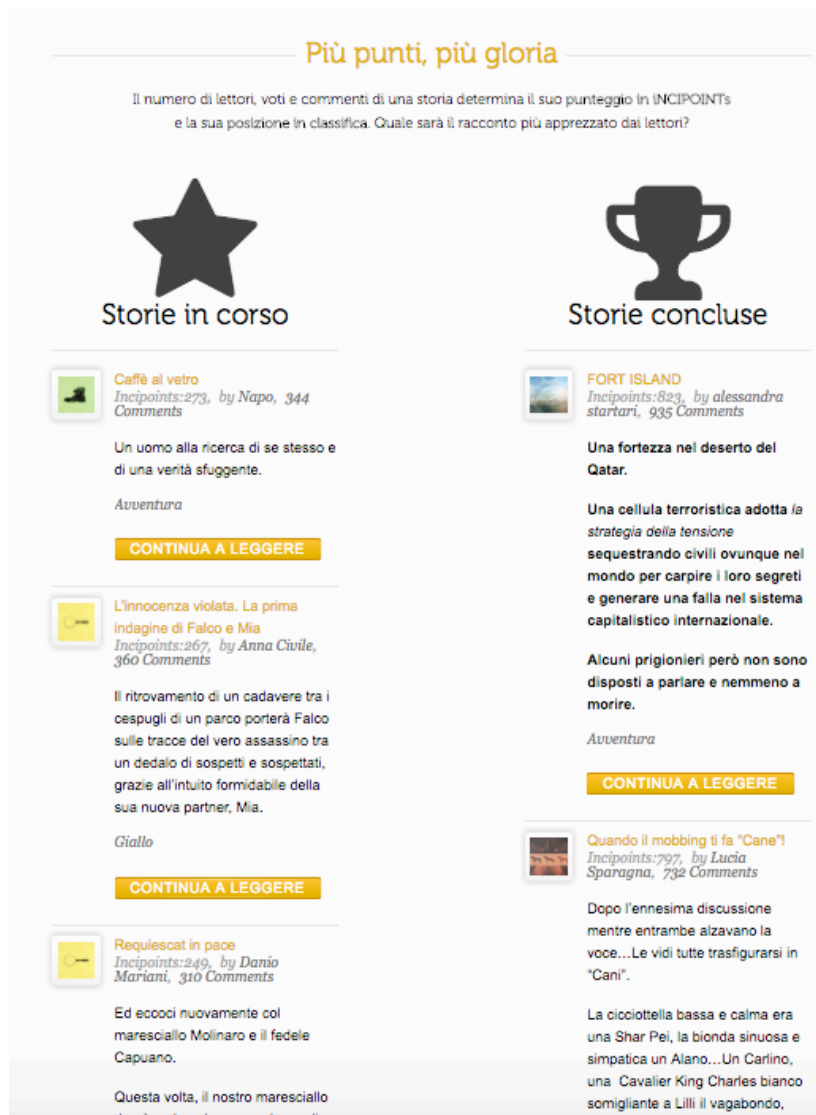


Figure 4.13. Platform chart for top-ranked stories, *The Incipit*, 15/09/2016.

The system confers Incipoints also when a user decides to follow the story or the author who wrote it (i.e., she/he will receive regular updates of the story via e-mail).



Figure 4.14. Mail notification of a new upload, *The Incipit*, 15/09/2016.

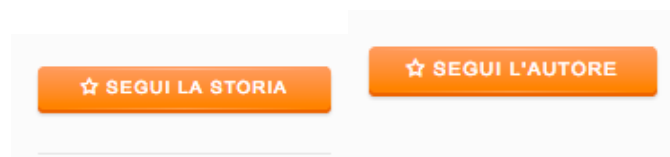


Figure 4.15. “Follow the story” and “Follow the author” buttons, *The Incipit*, 15/09/2016.

This system contributes to strengthen the net of relations between the members of the website.

4.2.2. First Attempts at an Autoethnography on The Incipit

For the characteristics mentioned above I have decided to expand my autoethnography to the platform *The Incipit*. My first classification of the website was built on a comparison with the Japanese platform of digital writing and on some considerations on some critical points of a story potentially to be uploaded on both the platforms, in Italian and Japanese respectively.

Author's Ethnographic Notes: Comparison between the two digital fiction writing platforms

15/05/2014

On the Italian platform the story can have a limited number of characters (ten episodes of 5,000 characters) and a maximum of ten episodes, and an individual author cannot handle more than one story at a time unless she/he uses a different identity.

At the end of each episode the author is asked to insert a question to the readers providing three possible directions for the development of the story.

*According to this last point, it is necessary to develop a different story for each platform unless I want to give the priority to the Italian story and wait for Italian readers' feedback to develop further the story in Japanese. **In contrast, the Japanese story will follow the natural flow development according to my thoughts, while the Italian will be developed according to readers' choices ...***

Despite the first wave of enthusiasm as mentioned before, I progressively focused more and more on the Italian platform because it enabled me to experience complete immersion, allowing me to smoothly perform the writing of digital fiction without being disturbed by activities that previously distracted me from the writing process, such as writing in a foreign language and the need to translate. Moreover, I was writing my ethnographic notes in another language: English; managing different

languages at the same time represented another relevant complexity connected to the project which ultimately pushed me to switch my analysis to *The Incipit*.

Author's Ethnographic Notes: Two platforms, two different stories

22/05/2014

The story "Fragments of an alien love story" was originally written in Italian. Wanting to upload it on the Maho no Irando website meant that I, while translating it into Japanese, had to modify it according to the website's format and to the style (making it simpler and removing descriptions that weighed down the story) and have it edited. Now that I write on The Incipit too, things are more complicated: the story, despite being published in Italian, is constantly the object of readers' comments which completely alter the plot as soon as they can intervene on the options at the end of each episode. I'm trying to keep following the original plot listing in the options three parts of the story I have developed independently so that, whatever the choice of the readers, I can carry on without radically altering the plot. This keeps getting more difficult because, should the readers find out that the choices at the end of each episode are conditioned by my strategy, they would lose interest in reading it because they would feel like their input into the story is devalued.

Also, I will encounter more problems if I want to keep managing at the same time the Italian and the Japanese versions: if the comments on the Italian platform come quickly, it's getting progressively more difficult to manage the process of translation and coordinate the two stories which, inevitably, are heading in two different directions ...

4.3. A Reflection on the Act of Generating and Consuming a Story: The Summer

Competition

Completing a story on a collaborative writing platform requires both the interiorization of the rules of the online platform and the efficient use of the resources provided by the website. It also requires the elaboration of writing and reading strategies to maximize results, with the goal of maintaining credibility as a member of that specific platform community.

To better understand the process of writing a story on such a platform embedded in the dimension of “here and now,” it may be useful to give as an example the one that I wrote for the competition hosted by the website in June-July 2014, two months after I joined the website. The writers joining the competition only had one month and a half to write a story complete of all its episodes. The winner was the author who could score the most Incipoints, which indicate the readers’ level of interaction with the story.

4.3.1. *About Story Production and Upload*

In such a stressful situation and with such a tight deadline, I noticed some problems connected to the website and to the dynamics of collaborative digital writing that I would have hardly individuated within the usual frame of the platform outside the competition.

The main issue was the fact that readers didn't have time to enjoy the stories because of the rapid publication and they easily lost interest in the stories they had started earlier; they had, indeed, to catch up on all the episodes they hadn't read before they could intervene with their choices on the future developments of said stories. These stories were, therefore, penalized because the interaction with readers (and therefore the Incipoints earned) noticeably decreased as they continued. According to the platform's settings, the readers can only play with the options of the stories currently uploaded, while they cannot intervene in the previous parts of the story.

The brevity of the contest forced the participating authors to quicken the publication

rhythm; I also had to establish a strict calendar to publish the episodes in order to meet the deadline of the 20th of July, when the story had to be completed.

Author's Ethnographic Notes

16/07/2014

The author of "L'estate non esiste" is uploading the story too fast, and I find it hard to keep reading more episodes of the same story in order to reach the last one and play with it. The fact that it is not possible to play with all the story episodes because the rhythm of publication is too fast, contributes to cool down my interest towards them.

Author's Ethnographic Notes: Planning a schedule for the contest

17/07/2014

*At the moment most of the authors are about to write the second half of the story but the deadline is scheduled for the 20th. In order to get some new Incipoints the authors should be aware to let the readers have the time to read the story and play with the options. We all know that if the story is too fast reader won't be able to follow it. **That is why I have to plan a tight schedule in order to meet the deadline.** It is the first time in a platform like the Incipit where for me the uploading time is exclusively decided according a strategy about the best way to allow the reader's fruition of the story*

I also found it very complicated to follow other authors' stories, comment, and "play" with them in an impartial way when my real goal was to favor my story over the others; I had to interact on other people's walls so that they would feel obligated to visit my story's page as well. My comments, however, did not stem from a careful and interested reading, but rather from the desire of being followed by others.

This need to publish the episodes at a nonstop pace was ill fitted to the mechanism of the website's contest. Readers had to favor the stories which they could intervene in (which means they had to have the time to read every episode). This accordingly necessitated a slower publication schedule.

Another issue was that the stories, once completed, were rarely read and voted by readers, because they no longer had visibility on the website unless, due to the amount of their Incipoints, they had been included in the ranking list of the top favorite stories. If they hadn't, they were forgotten.

A discrepancy was therefore arising between the competition, which should have granted transparency and offered equal visibility to every story (both those completed and those still in progress) throughout its duration, and the website structure, according to which completed stories had never had any room on the platform's pages. This imbalance was also worsened by the lack of a database³ to browse the stories. The system of the Incipoints also clashed with the logic of the competition because, paradoxically, the stories still in progress could earn Incipoints both through the readers' choices for future developments and from potential new readers, while completed stories could no longer be played with and were therefore penalized, partly because it had become difficult for potential readers to find them.

The platform's managers partially responded to these issues in real time, modifying the website's set-up.

³ At the moment of this writing a database function has been instituted, but it is not organized with the filters for "Author," "Story," or "Genre," but rather for single words or a combination of words. Therefore, finding the desired author or story is not as straightforward as can be desired and one has to browse through several results before finding the desired one.

Author's Ethnographic Notes: Complaining about the website structure

15/07/2014

*I have some complaints about how the competition has been organized and carried out. The stories already finished but which did not gain enough Incipoints to reach the top chart have been forgotten until today. **I think somebody complained about that, so that from today you can find two top charts, one with a list of the stories already finished and one with a list of the ones ongoing.***

Also, in order to limit the issues connected to the compulsive uploading of episodes and the obsolescence of the stories, I started studying more closely the publication strategy in connection to the visualization system of the website.

Author's Ethnographic Notes: Strategies on how one's own stories can be visualized better on the site

01/07/2014

*I discovered that once the new episode of a story is uploaded for the time no other story is updated on the site, that story is at the top of the flow presenting all the ongoing stories on the main page of the contest. **I should try to upload an episode at a certain time when other people are not uploading but there are some occasional readers still prowling online.** It is important to try to figure out what is the best time to get readers' participation, which means more new Incipoints.*

The need to respect the deadline of the competition, and writing using different

devices while travelling led me to publish unrevised material which still contained errors.

Author's Ethnographic Notes: Managing mistakes correction (part one)

02/07/2014

*In the morning I spent the day composing the new chapter of the competition's story. At this rate I should be able to upload all the stories within the 20th of July. Today I have used computer to edit the story and the iPad to upload it. **Unluckily I have found out I made several mistakes so I had to contact the site staff in order to replace an updated version of the chapter.** They replied immediately, but the old version is still available online.*

Luckily, the administrators allowed me to edit and partially revise the text, which didn't however exclude the possibility of remaining errors which only a careful reader would be able to notice and point out on my wall, easily compromising the story's reputation.



Figure 4.16. Wall of the story “Lady Donut” by Celine Tuser, 02/07/2014.

Author’s Ethnographic Notes: Managing mistakes correction (part two)

02/07/2014

Since it is a pity if the readers see the old version I have posted a comment on the story’s bulletin system to let them know to wait 24 hours to read the chapter, in order the final version to be uploaded. One reader told me she read the old version and she liked it. Let's wait and see ...

4.3.2. The Creative Component

Participating in the summer competition organized by *The Incipit* proved to be a valuable experience for my research. The lack of time and the need to maintain a decent profile to avoid looking bad when compared to the other participants exacerbated criticism of said experience and, at the same time, highlighted its issues. One issue was certainly managing the creative component. Initially, I had decided to use for the competition a story I had already written on my blog in 2013: I changed the

title and uploaded the first episode adapting it to the 5,000 character limit as suggested by the platform.

Altre mille e una notte giapponesi

lunedì 12 agosto 2013

La venditrice di ciambelle- Figlio sciagurato

Dora riordinò le idee e si divincolò dalla stretta dell'avventore con un "Torno subito"sussurrato a bruciapelo prima di sparire nel retrobottega. Sprofondata sul sofà cominciò a sventolarsi con un ventaglio in preda al panico. Il responsabile poteva essere uno solo: suo figlio. Afferrato il ricevitore digitò sulla tastiera del telefono un numero che credeva di aver dimenticato. Dall'altro capo del filo rispose una donna:

"Pronto?".

"Pronto", confermò Dora con voce stanca. "Cerco Eugenio".

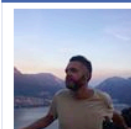
"Dora, che piacere. Purtroppo ora non lo trova, è al lavoro. Immagino sia per la faccenda del negozio..."

Perfetto, pensava: tutti ne erano al corrente tranne me. "Che cosa ha combinato Eugenio per l'amor del cielo?". E intanto ricordava quanto si era mostrata contraria alla strampalata idea del marito di lasciare il negozio al figlio invece che a lei. Si era opposta fino alle lacrime ma quel buon uomo pensava che Eugenio commosso per il nastro del

Badge di Facebook

Gabriele Rebagliati

facebook



Nome:
Gabriele Rebagliati
E-mail:
gabrieleecologne
@mac.com
Stato:
-90

Crea il tuo badge

Figure 4.17. Gabriele Rebagliati's blog, Post: The Donuts Seller, 12/08/2013.

This way, I thought, I could shorten the time of publication offering already written material, where I would just need to edit the connection between one episode and the next according to the system of *The Incipit*. Unfortunately, things didn't go as planned because, starting from the fourth episode, the readers' choices forced me to deviate from what I had already written and to develop the story in a different direction.

Author's Ethnographic Notes: Readers' choices

03/07/2014

*It was surprising to discover that, instead of the appearance of the husband's rifle that the protagonist would use to chase off the bad guy (as already written in my story), **readers favored a more resigned approach from the protagonist** (who will content herself with drowning her sorrows with a doughnut, temporarily forgetting about the antagonist). This unexpected turn of events forces me to revise the entire story less than a month from the deadline of the competition.*

On the one hand, the readers' decisions which prevailed on my initial intentions were stimulating and were also generating a much-followed debate on my wall (good for the competition since the greater the interaction with the story, the more Incipoints I would earn); on the other hand, needing to stick to a tight upload schedule to finish the story before the deadline became a deterrent, because it undermined the possibility to implement my strategy and brought into play the aspect of creativity, which I hadn't taken into account for that story. Under these circumstances, I started reflecting on the management of the creative process when generating a story on a digital platform.

For *The Incipit*, or pilot episode, I referred to plots I had already developed but that, for various reasons, I had never completed, and were languishing in the “Unfinished Stories” folder on my desktop: I believed that the regular publication schedule required by the platform would encourage me to complete them.

During the competition I had decided to publish an episode every three days, two of which I would use to think about how to continue the story and one to write and upload the corresponding episode. Due to the need to write a story that readers would enjoy and that would engage them, it was precisely the readers and their comments that influenced my decision on how to proceed: if a reader suggested I add a character, I would try to satisfy them; if they left some criticism, I tried to understand why, and so on. Obviously, I only took into account the readers I deemed truly interested in my writing; I didn’t pay much attention to those who only visited my page so I would visit theirs, also because they usually didn’t offer constructive criticism or suggestions.

These suggestions usually appeared on authors’ walls following this structure:



Figure 4.18. Wall of the story “Lady Donut” by Celine Tuser, Emanuele Volpe’s comment (16/09/2014). Translation: I am looking forward to read the next chapter! [This story] reminds me of ancient times ... Visit my wall if you like.

Other sources of inspiration were the other stories and the way in which authors managed to attract the attention of the platform users to their stories. Before writing it was therefore necessary to read a lot in order to identify the taste of the most active users on the platform and the persuasion tactics used by authors to attract potential readers: for this last task, the best approach was to check the wall of the stories, where authors and readers freely exchanged messages.

The mobility of the medium through which I wrote allowed me, when I noticed something interesting on the street or in the places I visited, to transform what I was seeing in a potentially useful element to add to my story. The Note app allowed me to instantly jot down these suggestions and save them in a dedicated folder, which served as a creative workshop.

Author's Ethnographic Notes: Inspiration in motion

30/04/2014

*When I reached the top of the temple in Shikoku, I decided that Saori, the protagonist of my story, would be its custodian. **I took some photos and wrote a description of the place on my phone.** I've finally found the location needed to continue the story: I didn't think that such a process could be so automatic and that the doubts that tormented me in the past few days could vanish so easily thanks to an accidental inspiration connected to where I was ...*

The mobile phone allowed me to take pictures and record sounds which could be useful during the writing phase; in addition, being able to save and record everything I deemed interesting obviated the fragmentation of the writing process, whose issues have been previously discussed.

4.3.3. Genres

In a constantly evolving world such as *The Incipit* platform, the competition also allowed me to get a snapshot of the submitted stories: I was able to quantify their number, dividing them by genre and compiling a general list:

- Love story 16
- Adventure 15
- Humor 14
- Crime 9
- Fantasy 9
- SF 6
- Horror 4
- Fairy tales 2
- History 2
- Eros 2

The stories published on *The Incipit* follow the steps of paraliterature: it represents first and foremost a production intended for large-scale consumption, and is labeled, unlike literary texts, according to its genre. This directs the reader in the consumption of the text, safeguarding her/his expectations (Pagliano 2008).

Writing styles are varied, unlike the uniformity of the Japanese keitai shosetsu. These have a well-established style when it comes to content, even though they are

expressed in different genres. Specifically, Honda (2008) pinpointed seven patterns which are constantly repeated in the keitai shosetsu and are its “canon” of reference: underage prostitution, rape, pregnancy, drug use, incurable illnesses, suicide, and true love. Even when it comes to form, as specified in chapter one in the discussion of the factors that made the keitai shosetsu possible, it is believed that this genre can be traced back to e-mails (Kyoung-hwa 2012).

While the keitai shosetsu stories are born in a subculture that creates its canon from the inside, without reference to an external canon, the stories of *The Incipit* maintain the connection with paraliterature and an external canon of reference.

The stories of the competition shared the requirement to have a summer setting, as suggested by the name of the competition itself: “Summer Competition.” The genres were the same ones generally featured on the platform: both during the competition and during my experience writing on the website, however, I experienced firsthand the difficulty of defining the story I was writing as belonging to one of these categories.

This irreconcilability between genres and stories was a common problem for other users of the website as well.

Author's Ethnographic Notes: The difficulty in categorizing stories' genres
12/07/2014

*The story "Only hipsters like Trainspotting," according to its author, is difficult to be categorized into one single genre: reading the wall of the story the author refers to this problem replying to readers comments complaining this story would have been better categorized as noir. Same problem as I have: **I think my story doesn't necessarily fit completely into the default categories provided by the platform ...***

The categorization of the stories into recognizable genres by the platform's administrators was justified by the will to facilitate the fruition of the stories listed on the website and, from a long-term perspective, to allow the most talented authors to easily join in the "traditional" circuit of paraliterature once their stories were deemed worthy of actual publication.

4.3.4. Publication

The competition's prize was the opportunity to publish one's story as an e-book,

available for download on the website. In *Maho no Irando*, as in *The Incipit*, the basic concept is to give credibility to the platform's stories publishing them digitally or in print.

The stories in digital format, at least in the case of the keitai shosetsu, were a strategy used by publishing houses to revitalize the publishing market. According to the chart listed in the table below, keitai shosetsu were among the most sold books among 2003 and 2007.

年	タイトル	ランキング	出版社
2003	Deep Love	3	スターツ出版
2004	Deep Love	6	スターツ出版
2005	「もっと生きたい...」	1	スターツ出版
2005	赤バナ(青・赤)	3	スターツ出版
2006	恋空 切ない恋物語	3	スターツ出版
2006	天使がくれたもの	5	スターツ出版
2006	羽の折れた天使たち(空・海)	6	双葉社
2006	ライン	10	スターツ出版
2007	恋空 切ない恋物語	1	スターツ出版
2007	赤い糸(上・下)	2	ゴマブックス
2007	koizora'another story	3	スターツ出版
2007	もしもキミが	5	ゴマブックス
2007	純愛	7	スターツ出版

Table 4.1 Table 2-1 Mobile Novels within the Annual Best 10 rankings of Literature Category

(Source: Tohan 2012)

However, if one takes a closer look at the printed version of mobile phone novels features will reveal that just very little of the classic printed book is left.

Characters are printed horizontally and not vertically as in traditional Japanese novels.

Flipping through the pages, one finds a new type of layout embodying the screen frame of the phone on which originally the stories were written. The characters printed on the page are few and sometimes unusual (borrowed from text message typography); empty spaces on the page are dominant and resemble the blank ones in shōjo mangas, used to convey hidden emotions.

Publishing digitally and in print requires a partial revision of the content also for the stories produced on *The Incipit*: the winner of *The Incipit*'s competition was asked to edit the story, as stated by the platform's administrators when advertising the competition.

The story must work even without “the secondary plot,” as Klaiber (2014) describes the place where the author shares the stages of the development of the story and which represents the spine of the narrative fabric. In addition, without the limitation of the 5,000 characters per episode and its division into ten parts, the author is finally free to add sections of the story she/he had been forced to delete because of length constraints. Finally, since this phase no longer requires the reader’s invasive intervention to steer the plot, the author can feel free to alter its course as she/he wishes.

Author’s Ethnographic Notes: The author’s freedom is limited

15/01/2015

*If I had the chance, I would completely rewrite “Miho’s closet.” **So far, readers who follow me have never once guessed correctly which was my favored option for the continuation of the story.** So, in the end, if I had the chance, I’d like to write another version ... If I ever finish the current one ...*

4.3.5. Conclusions

I used the example of the competition to investigate the resources and some of the limitations of the platform in generating and consuming a story embedded in the

dimension of “here and now.” Furthermore I have tried to reflect on the writing and reading strategies that were leading me in this task. Autoethnography allowed me to point out several aspects of the writing process such as: the harsher publication schedule damaged both the relationship with the readers and the story’s quality. Intensifying the pace of the uploads made me think about the nature of the creative process and its relationship with the rapid mobility of the writing medium. In addition, the questionable management, on the administrators' part, of the mechanism of the contest regarding transparency and efficiency allowed me to see for the first time the extremely fickle nature of the platform on which I wrote my stories. Moreover, this reflection on the act of generating and consuming a story led me to think that every story drew its value as it unfolded in the production stage and in the interaction with readers.

Finally, the commitment in the process of digital writing allowed me to get precious insights related to the differences between digital and printed works.

4.4. A Reflection on the Fragmentation of Identity, Narratives Roles, and the Writing

Experience

The partial or complete anonymity granted by the writing platform when interacting with other participants; the variety of narrative roles when taking part in the production and consumption process of the stories; and the need to be a researcher, author, and reader all at the same time emphasize the need to manage fragmented, fake, and temporary identities, whose management directly influences the writing experience. In addition, the mobility of the medium, some of the platform affordances the need to write, respond to feedback from readers, read and comment on almost simultaneously contributed to create a *fragmented* perception of the writing process.

4.4.1. Users' Multiple Identities

I decided to join the competition using a fake identity: "Celine."

Author's Ethnographic Notes: Creating a new identity

09/05/2014

I spent the morning trying to create a new identity for The Incipit. The reasons are as follows:

First, I wanted to challenge myself in more than one story of different genres.

Second, I wanted to create an identity completely out of the social network I usually use.

Third, the administrators of the site know me as a researcher so I was somehow "familiar" to them.

Fourth, I think I have some new clues about how to gain Incipoints which is about keeping the first incipit of the story as long as possible without writing the following episode. Since I have not yet finished the story with my first identity, Shesanalien with Celine I will be able to manage the story development according my new enlightenments. From the management there is a lot of effort to promote the new stories as for the users they are easier to play than the old ones.

I created Celine to elude some of the restrictions of the website and to avoid contact with the website administrators, who knew my research purposes and the nickname I had used when I first registered on *The Incipit*, "Shesanalien." My intention was to share on Facebook the notifications of the uploading of new episodes of Celine's story, as if she were a friend of mine, in order to raise interest among my contacts and hope someone would become one of my readers on *The Incipit*. Eventually I revealed to my Facebook friends that I was writing under the name of Celine; this caused me some problems in administrating my writing profile and identity.

For instance, once my cousin addressed me as “Gabu” (my nickname among relatives and friends) in a comment to Celine’s story on the story’s wall.



Figure 4.19. Wall of the story “Lady Donut” by Celine Tuser, reader comment. Translation: Well done Gabu! Mrs. Dora’s doughnuts are really mouthwatering!!! 16/07/2014).

Administrating two identities had its own share of risks and problems, nonetheless.

Author’s Ethnographic Notes: Troubles in managing two different identities

1

17/06/2014

***I am starting to feel the pressure of the competition, and I feel frustrated because nobody has yet commented on the story.** As nobody has commented, I am afraid of commenting on anybody else’s story because it is a competition and I do not want to promote him or her without getting some exposure back too. It is very hard to manage such a situation. Now I have two ongoing stories.*

And somehow I have to continue uploading the two of them. If I quit Shesanalien's story, I will lose the few readers I have collected. On the other hand, as for Celine's story, I used one that I was writing on my blog (www.gabrielerebagliati.com), and I had eventually to delete it because it was partially uploaded; there was always the risk that the Incipit administrators would discover this story to be mine and not "Celine's."

A personal conflict arose in me because I chose to start this investigation in order to understand the practice of digital writing on an online collaborative writing community and the issues about switching between the author's and reader's roles, but now I was acting exclusively with the aim of pursuing my own success as an author on the platform.

Having two different identities also meant managing two different profiles; the margin of error in this case was minimal and the risk of making mistakes very high.

Author's Ethnographic Notes: Troubles in managing two different identities

2

28/06/2014

As one week has passed since I last updated my fieldwork notes, I feel quite bad with devices and identity separation. For example, I risked to compromise my

experiment, writing a comment in response to Tadan on “Streghe si Nasce” (Celine’s story; translation: Natural Born Witches) under the identity of Shesanalien instead of Celine. (I forgot to log out from the account of Shesanalien and inadvertently logged in as Celine on my iPhone.) Luckily, it appeared simply as a comment from a reader (Shesanalien) about the mechanism of the story rather than a reflection of Celine on her own story. I was that close to being discovered.

The management of multiple virtual identities was not only due to fact that I wanted to feel free and at ease by writing a story incognito.

Author’s Ethnographic Notes: Anonymity helps self-confidence

01/07/2014

Recently I have adopted the identity of Celine more often because it helps me to be confident about what I am writing.

It was, in fact, related to the possibility of attributing a higher number of Incipoints to one’s own stories while acting under another identity; this was crucial to succeed in the competition. The winner would have been the author who had received the highest number of Incipoints. This strategy happened to be also common, I found out, among the other authors.

Author’s Ethnographic Notes: A case of multiple identities

18/09/2014

“Perla” is one of the multiple identities of Napo on the site. He is using it to read and comment other popular writers and to add Incipoints to his stories as well. By mistake Napo wrote his reply to Boostwriter’s comment on his wall using Perla’s identity forgetting to log off and pretending later to have written the comment on the wrong computer to justify such an accident. Boostwriter did not rely on Napo’s words and replied to “Napo/Perla’s” comment letting him know in an ironic way that he understood what Napo has been doing by using two or more identities on the platform.

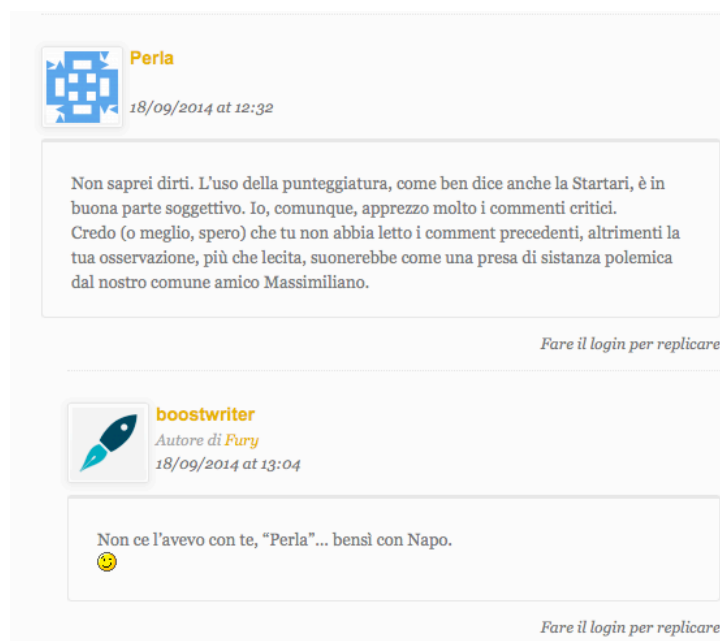


Figure 4.20. Boostwriter’s comment to Napo’s message written using the account of his fake

identity Perla, 18/09/2014. Translation: I wasn’t talking to you, “Perla” ... but to Napo.

Author’s Ethnographic Notes: Napo/Perla

19/09/2014

What I can do is trace Perla’s behavior on the site in order to understand why Napo has been using this alternative identity ...

To confirm my intuition, I checked Perla's page. Every author's page lists the main information about their activity on the platform: stories both written and in progress, followed authors and stories, and their followers.

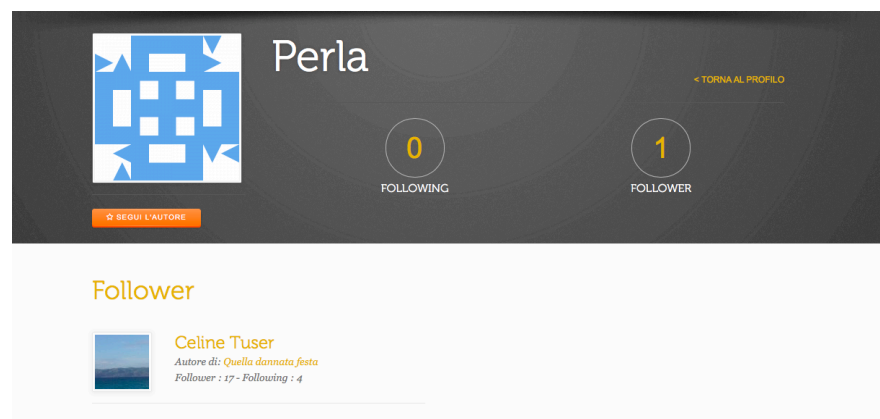


Figure 4.21. Perla's almost empty profile page, *The Incipit*, 19/09/2014.

It wasn't long before Napo, surprised by the fact that someone was following Perla, became suspicious and started hanging out on Celine's page.

Author's Ethnographic Notes: Watching Napo/Perla

19/09/2014

I have discovered that Perla has never published any stories on the website, doesn't have followers, and doesn't follow any stories or authors. I'm sure that this account has been created by Napo exclusively to write on his own wall and "give" himself Incipoints. I registered with the Celine account and added Perla

to the authors I followed to give Napo/Perla a warning: ***“I’m watching you and I know something is off.”***

4.4.2. Being an Author and a Researcher on The Incipit

My struggling with the “juggling” of multiple identities was also fueled by the conflict which arose inside me being aware that the administrators knew I was acting both as a researcher and as an author my activity on the platform.

My relationship with the administrators of *The Incipit* was born at first as a privileged form of collaboration due to my research scope. They not only provided me with precious information about the website and its users, but they also opened a privileged channel of communication to illustrate some of the dynamics specific to *The Incipit* and to show how they work for the implementation of the platform. They also helped me organize some qualitative interviews with the most loyal users in an anonymous form. As my e-mail was connected with my identity on the platform, they knew I was Shesanalien. Their answer appears as it follows:

Date: 2014 09:57, Gabriele <gabrielecologne@mac.com> wrote:

To whom it may concern,

First of all, let me take the chance to thank you for the precious service you offer those who read and write on their mobile phones.

I'm researching precisely this field in Japan and am currently writing my mobile novel on a Japanese platform, too. I accidentally stumbled across your website and I would like to talk with you to share our respective knowledge.

I am also writing to ask a few questions about the platform:

1. after completing and uploading the episode, occasionally I notice mistakes that I would like to fix. Is there a tool to make minor edits to the text?
2. Occasionally, I write on my computer, but mostly on my mobile phone (which is also the goal of my research). When I copy the text from the mobile phone to paste it in the proper frame, the text results cut in half. Would it be possible to solve this issue?
3. I was wondering whether you could add more tools for authors and readers to interact, maybe a shared wall or spaces for private conversations; also, adding notification for GPS locations and the possibility to link to other points within the story could enrich the authors' experimentations.
4. I would like to write two stories at the same time. Is this possible?

I look forward to your answer.

Best regards,

Complimenti

G. R.

Their reply goes:

We find your research very interesting. Let us know how it goes!

Regarding your questions about the platform:

1. at the moment, it's not possible to edit or alter the text after publication. If you noticed any mistakes, send us the edited text via email and we will fix them.
2. do you copy/paste from a specific program? This is a problem we've never been notified of. The main thing I would suggest is to verify that the text doesn't go over the 5,000 characters limit (spaces included) which is the limit for each episode.
3. thanks for your suggestion, we could definitely introduce a wall or a forum in the future.
4. No, authors can only write one story at a tie. Once finished the story, you'll be able to start another one right away.

Talk to you soon,

kind regards and have fun on The Incipit.

The general administrators of the website take the role of agents: they give prizes to the most successful authors, they solve technical problems of the website, and they update it. The platform is also the place where they fulfill their function of mediators, dealing with controversies among users (for example, problems related to censorship, the breaking of rules and netiquette on the website, etc.).

As a researcher I valued the help that the administrators were giving me to gather information on the website and its users. However, the more I became involved as a

writer, the more I realized how invasive their presence was and how much they controlled other users. Also there were some obscure aspects concerning the management of the website and its pages.

The rather unfortunate choice to develop a *The Incipit* page on Facebook where the members could publicize their stories brought about double-edged results. On the one hand, it strengthened the bonds among users outside the platform, also giving space to complaints about the not very clear mechanisms of the website, such as the attribution of Incipoints and special covers (digital covers decorating the story-page).

With the case of “Lucia Sparagna,” an author who had been on the platform for weeks without being assigned a cover, however, the rules that were considered to be behind that assignment were put into question, creating a sense of mistrust among the users.

The same happened with the coach editor's comments, an authority on the website who highlighted some stories with evaluations that didn't appear connected to the Incipoints. On the other hand, it also became a source of further complaints: the comments of the users indeed were subjected to a moderator with a rather censorious

attitude. Due to these reasons, the users created other groups wherein they acted not exclusively as writers and readers of *The Incipit* but also as independent subjects actually rather critical toward the platform and its mechanisms.

I decided to distance myself from the administrators mainly because as a user of the platform I noticed their inexperience in managing the website combined with a rather strong will to control the users. However, there are also personal reasons behind my decision.

Author's Ethnographic Notes: Breaking a tie

10/05/2014

*On May 8, I received a comment from Tadan, one of the veterans of the website, telling me she was sorry but chose an option to my story so that the three options had the same preference of 33 percent. This meant I would have not been able to write further the story unless some other reader had expressed his choice. **Today I wanted to write the new episode so I have decided to proceed using my Google account (Celine) to enter the site and vote for the option of the episode I hoped to be chosen.** This is not really the right way to proceed, but according to the site rules it is not clear what to do if a situation like that occurs.*

First of all, this had something to do with my breaking of the rules of the website during the competition, when I logged in using one of my alternative identities to vote for one option of my story and unblock a stalemate.

The second reason behind my decisions was that I needed to protect my anonymous identity; although I continued to write stories it seems that they did not encounter much favor from the readers.

Finally, I felt being part of a group, despite the fact that I did not have so many readers, therefore I realized that I could nonetheless gather information without passing through the filter of the administrator.

Things changed even more in September 2014, when Celine's story earned a comment from the coach editor and the highest-ranking place in the Fantasy genre; some publications in print also progressively made me rethink the choice to use a fake identity and led me to the decision to just use my real name and surname instead, thus

exploiting my network of external contacts to increase the popularity of the story and actualizing the possibility to offer an alternative fruition of the story apart from the one offered by the platform.

Author's Ethnographic Notes: Another profile created

Date 16/09/2015

*I have decided to create another profile after the previous experience. This will allow me to better analyze the process of writing and promote my novel with the social networks using my real name. **My story will be published at the same time on The Incipit, but also on my blog.** This will allow me to understand if the traffic from the blog is relevant to increase the number of the readers. I have planned to insert the text on the blog for the readers who don't want to play with the story options. In this way on the blog the reader will be able to consume the story avoiding the interactive part. As I have noticed before in the interactive version, the reader is not interested to further read the story if he misses playing the interactive part or if he skips the Incipit and is not allowed to follow the story from the very start. For this reason I will provide both the versions trying to remark on The Incipit that on my blog the non-interactive version is available and vice versa.*

The decision to start writing as "Gabriele Rebagliati" caused a series of unforeseen issues:

1. the need to come clean with the website admins, who already knew about

my first identity (I was admitting to using two separate identities, Shesanalien and Gabriele Rebagliati; they didn't know about Celine at all) and I was doing it without first announcing it on the preferential channel I had created with the admins;

2. the stress was altogether not insignificant, because writing with my real name led me to pay extreme attention to details and possible mistakes before publishing, an attitude that wasn't well suited to writing via mobile phone and to the upload speed required by the platform; and

3. the need to rebuild my reader base which, when I was writing as Celine, had cost me the effort of reading and constantly commenting on other people's stories; this time, with the added issue of having to avoid referring to discussions or comments I had with the same authors when I was still posing as Celine.

The stress caused by this last development of my character led to the publication on my blog of an outburst before I temporarily stepped away from the platform.

The outburst, which I also published on *The Incipit*'s Facebook group, was immediately followed by a reaction from the staff, in the shape of an encouraging note left by the coach editor for my story.

Author's Ethnographic Notes: One year after

10/05/2015

It's been almost a year since I started writing on The Incipit. I started for reasons connected to my research on digital fiction, but I also secretly wanted to get past the obstacle of the first page, the story packaged on the page and perfectly refined, without any imperfections. But with too many question marks. And never connected to other stories. I was afraid to take on something bigger; I justified it with the search for new themes, that always ended up being a mere facade. I was afraid to consciously linger on something, to analyze its complexities, to live with it, for better or for worse. Every story has its highs and lows: I flattened it, reducing it to a quick sketch, maybe pleasant, but nevertheless incomplete. The technology weaned me better than a writing school. The need to emerge in that jungle of stories, to make my voice heard and be appreciated by someone else, as well as a constant reflection on creating the extended stories that the digital platform forced me to write, allowed me to move on to the next level. The constant confrontation with readers, what I learned, the hours spent on the train writing and re-writing, commenting and reading other people's stories, moderating and censoring my feedback which might be considered too aggressive, and understanding the dynamics of the creation of a collaborative story completely drained me. Those tools (my mobile phone and the other devices I used to write) that I always carried with me were very much different from the friends I contacted through

them, on distant continents. I had the illusion that everything was close at hand. But that wasn't the case. They started to hurt me. At first it was my tired eyes at night, tired from a device that was always on even when the lights in my house had been switched off for hours. Then came the calluses on my fingers as I kept writing my stories on the phone's touch screen. My hand, too small to clutch the iPhone 6 plus, a step to make reading easier thanks to the bigger screen but that, inevitably, slipped out of my hand at every bump of the train. Or a feeling of exhaustion when my brain looked for these tools to connect to the Internet jungle and pushed my tired body to greedily cling to it. I wished I had a couple of hours a day when I could banish—totally and completely—these objects.

The unavoidable constrictions were such that, at some point, I decided to step away. Knowing, however, that I could land on new shores.

In my answer (fig. 4.26.), it is possible to detect an argumentative attitude toward the administrators, which anticipates my final abandonment of the website.

4.4.3. Tellership on The Incipit

Deep commitment to the writing practice allowed me to also understand some of the dynamics related to the distribution of the various narrative roles in the management of the story and its developments.

Even though the platform was established with the goal of promoting stories born from the collaboration of several authors in which the narrative is usually attributed to multiple authors, each story in *The Incipit* is attributed, contrary to much collaborative writing, to a single author. The author always has the last word, since she/he is the one who can decide when to upload a new episode or interrupt the story, even though the readers' actions can influence the story's development and its popularity on the platform.

On *The Incipit* there is a special figure which takes care of evaluating the stories, which at first acted at random, wandering on the walls of the stories that the platform readers had found especially interesting; its intervention on a wall was marked by a yellow box at the top of the story wall, unlike the comments left by readers, which were listed in a chronological order.

This figure, called the "coach editor," could, with his or her intervention, change the fate of a story. His/her comment came "from above" and was unidirectional, since the

coach editor never and does not reply to any author's responses. In addition, this shadowy figure didn't weave connections with the other platform participants, perhaps to maintain the appearance of "impartiality" implied by its role.



Figure 4.22. Celine Tuser wall page of the story “Streghe si Nasce,” Coach Editor’s special

comment, *The Incipit*, 18/09/2014.

One day, I woke up and I found on Celine’s wall a comment from the coach editor, usually posted on the most popular stories. I have been waiting for this comment because since this is my fourth story on the platform, I was wondering why I still had not received any reward. This is how I replied:



Figure 4.23. Celine Tuser wall page of the story “Streghe si Nasce” Reply to Coach Editor’s comment, 18/09 /2014. Translation: Hi Maddalena! Thanks for your comment! I’ll welcome these nice words fallen from the sky, and I’ll try to bear them in mind when completing the story! Thank you.

My answer was partly ironic: “words fallen from the sky” referred to the fact that the coach editor only commented on certain stories, which caused discontent among those who hadn't received any “institutional” feedback on their own work at all. With my provocation, I wanted to point out, on the one hand, to the platform administrators that this meritocratic comment system wasn't explained anywhere on the website, and caused confusion and envy among the authors. On the other hand, I was really happy because I had finally received positive feedback on a story of mine. I was beginning to want to be recognized for who I really was and, in parallel with my job as a freelance author of children's books, *I wanted to be traditionally published.*

Recently, the coach editor has become a paid service offered by the platform, growing more similar to a “writing school” in which students can benefit from the offered “services.” The website lists, in a category called “Editorial Services” services such as “Promotion,” “Evaluation,” and “Support.” “Promotion” allows the selected story to be featured on the website’s homepage for a week; “Evaluation” provides an evaluation of the story by a coach editor once the story is completed; and “Support” allows the authors who select this service to be accompanied via email by a professional through all writing phases of the story “in real time,” as mentioned in the advertisements of said services. “Support” also includes help in promoting the story through “traditional” editorial channels.

Author’s Ethnographic Notes: Lucia, an online friend

12/12/2014

*Lucia carefully reads my story, comments on it, votes for the episodes and explains her vote on my wall. She’s a faithful reader and her precious comments help develop the next episodes of the story ... I’m on the seventh episode and she’s always been there ... Obviously it’s not a unidirectional relationship, since I comment on her work and we keep in touch on Facebook, but **I feel like she’s being honest with me ...***

On the platform, there are faithful, fond readers who aren't just passively consuming the story, but also communicate their impressions, demonstrate their presence with their comments, and actively contribute to the writing process, which otherwise would have been quite solitary and aimless. The author tends to pander to them because of the connection developed with them which, like with me and Lucia, transcends the platform and continues through other channels (Facebook Messenger); there is, therefore, a development of preferential circuits for direct and private communication with these readers, which both encapsulates and symbolizes the daily aspect and the continuity of the writing process on *The Incipit*.

There are also occasional readers who visit the author's page simply out of curiosity toward the story, who then disappear or simply vote the episode without interacting on the story's wall; other instead show up to mark their territory and affirm their authority within the platform; or they show up because they've been visited by the author and want to return the courtesy.

Then, there are authors who visit an author only once, exclusively to invite him to read their own story. Technically, by writing a comment they allow the story to earn an Incipoint, even though their actions don't influence the development of the story. Such authors always introduce themselves with a formula that underlines their desire to be visited by the authors they visit, which allows for an equal exchange of Incipoints.

There are also readers who choose to remain completely anonymous and select the option at the end of a story episode without explaining their choice on the wall. They behave therefore like traditional readers, but exploit the architecture of the website to express their preferences while remaining anonymous. It is possible to pinpoint this kind of reader by checking the amount of earned Incipoints and subtracting the amount of comments and followers, which all earn Incipoints. These readers can also be tracked through autoethnography. Occasionally, I wanted to vote for an author because I was interested in his story, but at the same time I didn't want to comment on his wall and give him more points; I chose therefore to vote anonymously.

Moreover, a group of authors gathered together and tried to cowrite a story. As previously mentioned, the platform doesn't allow users to directly intervene in the text of an author's story, nor does it offer private areas to share information between authors. The authors, therefore, according to the website's limits, can only communicate on each story's wall. This issue was later solved when the Facebook group "Authors and Readers of The Incipit" was opened.

Therefore, the experiment of Ten Small Pens is noteworthy: ten authors from *The Incipit* who wrote a story, writing an episode each, all commenting and following the common thread of the style and the meaning of the story.

Their manifest is included in one of the answers to the comments left for the story:

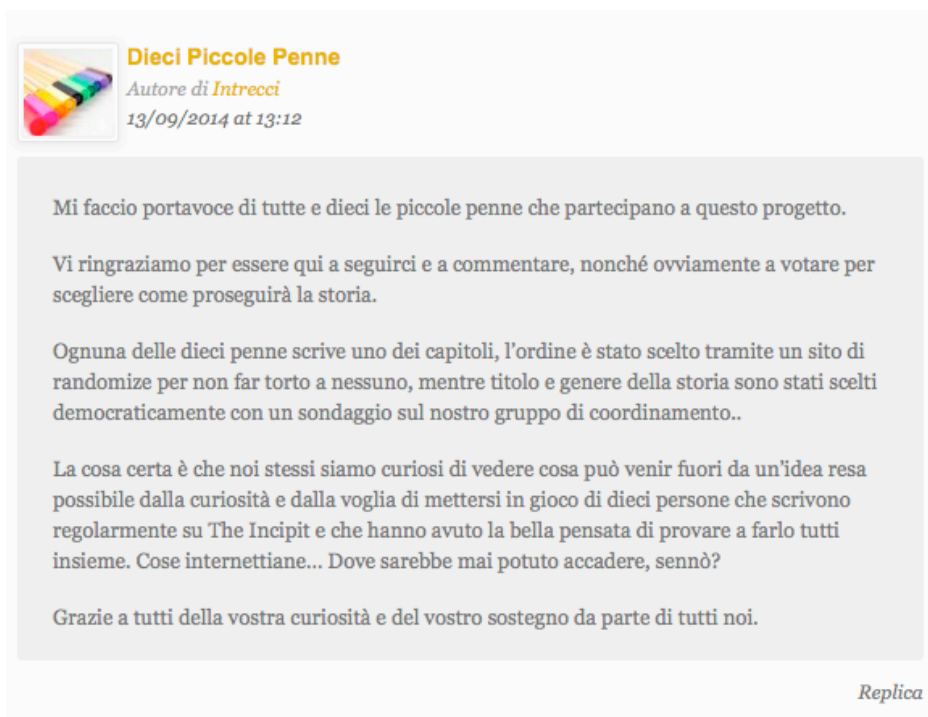


Figure 4.24. Dieci Piccole Penne's wall, Authors' manifest, *The Incipit*, 13/09/2014)

Translation: I speak for all of the ten little pens taking part in this project.

Thank you for being here, following us and commenting, as well as voting to choose how to continue the story.

Each of the ten pens writes a chapter; the order was chosen using a randomize website to keep things impartial, while the title and the genre of the story were democratically chosen with a poll on our discussion group. What's certain is that we're curious to see what will come out of an idea made possible by the curiosity and the desire for a challenge of ten people who regularly write on *The Incipit*, who had the idea of doing it together. Internet things ... Where else could this have happened? We all thank you for your curiosity and your support).

Veteran authors of *The Incipit* organized themselves into an anonymous group for this experiment. I immediately expressed my enthusiasm for this project: I was wondering whether I would be able to recognize each of the pens from their writing styles and

whether the authors themselves (with their usual accounts) were commenting on the story's wall to fuel the debate about their experiment, or whether they were leaving room for the comments of users who, like me, were not part of it. It looked like the authors of the project wanted to reproduce the website's dynamics on a small scale where there was only one story instead of several, and they were all working to complete it maintaining a consistent style and meaning. They wanted, therefore, to take one another challenge which followed the usual mechanisms of the website but with increased difficulty, a kind of elitist game to confirm their presence on the website as an “independent group” and highlight their “seniority.”



Figure 4.25. Dieci Piccole Penne’s wall, Declaration of seniority, *The Incipit*, 15/09/2014..
Translation: Yes, we are veterans of TI. Thanks Tommy, bye.

Author’s Ethnographic Note: An offer to collaborate
20/12/2014

I took the liberty of volunteering to collaborate as an author for potential similar projects, but I was never taken into consideration. I followed the development of the project and eventually raised my concerns about the consistency of the story and about some cryptic comments on the story's wall, which were incomprehensible for those who, like me, were not part of the project. The story of the "Ten Little Pens" remains unfinished to this day, stopped at the eighth episode.

4.4.4. Writing Digital Fiction as a Fragmented Activity

The problems connected with writing environments like *The Incipit* also contributed to underscore the idea of writing digital fiction as a *fragmented* activity. These kinds of problems were mainly due to technical difficulties since I was unable to upload my stories in real time via mobile phone. When I was writing the story using the page provided by the website, the word count was automatic. Yet, in my case, while I was trying to write my text on the mobile phone, I was unable to save the story while writing it and the risk of losing my work was quite high as I was busy managing different pages and windows (in the virtual world) while commuting and changing trains (in the real world).

In addition to this, when I was trying to paste a portion of text on the writing page of

the website, the layout completely changed and problems in visualizing the page occurred. The solution was to write on the Note App only (the proceedings of the story were periodically saved on my iCloud account), and then to copy the text and paste it on the writing page of the website: in this way I could have an idea of the number of characters left before closing each episode. The final upload was done at home via computer. I started writing on a train since these long commuting times were my only productive and free moments during the day. Having a mobile electronic device with which I could access the Internet and on which I could work made my choice to use this spare time to write a story online seem rather natural.

The counting of characters is directly connected to the specific architecture of the stories and their episodes, which must always present options of possible developments at the end. More than once did I forget to count characters, and I realized that the episode had already exceeded the fixed 5,000-character limit only during the upload. I had then to sit again and to work to modify the text to make it fit the parameters of the website, this restriction thereby dramatically affecting the

narrative development of that specific episode.

It is also worth noting that such a system does not allow reusing stories previously written since such writing environment and its rules would completely change them after the first 5,000 characters.

Managing stories which are not sequential was another problem related to the structure of the website. Flashbacks and flash-forwards would not work well with the rigid chronological structure of *The Incipit*.

Author's Ethnographic Notes: Form versus fit

16/05/2014

On the way back from home I started writing the sequel of my first story. I was not really sure how to proceed with it. I just started writing from the point I ended the first story.

I realized quite soon enough that the structure of this story doesn't fit the architecture of the site. The site is made for a story which is linear even if one uses flash-forwards and flashbacks. One chapter is linked to the other. My story has been designed not to be linear but fragmented in pieces which are disconnected temporally and which have different voices. It is extremely hard to find a valid question to address the reader because of this fragmented

rhythm.

Finally, it was and still is very easy to make typing errors or grammar mistakes due to many distracting factors such as the reduced physical dimensions of electronic devices, the cut-and-paste operations from one app to the other, the transfer of data from mobile technology to computer, and the urgency to reply to user comments as quickly as possible.

What follows is my reply to a coach editor who pointed out a typing error in the title of one of the episodes of my story. It is also a sort of statement of my condition of “writer in motion”:

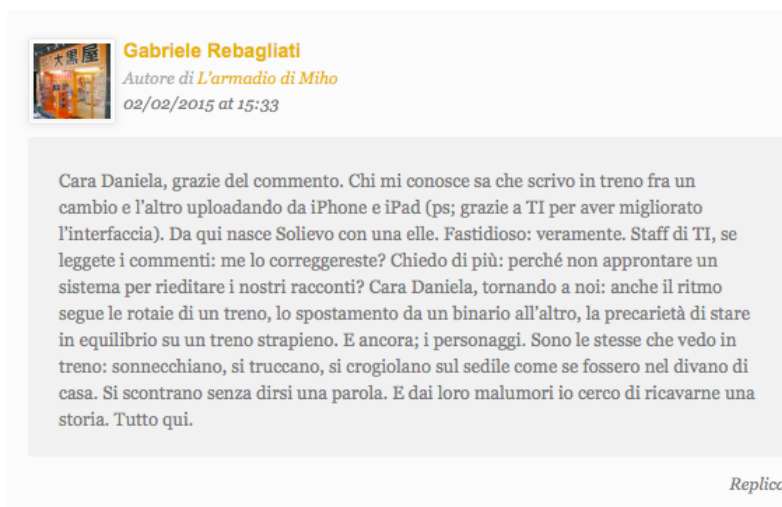


Figure 4.26. Gabriele Rebagliati wall page of the story “Miho’s closet,” Reply to the Coach Editor’s comment, *The Incipit*, 02/02/2015. Translation: Dear Daniela, thank you for your comment. The people who follow me know that I am writing on the train and that I upload my texts from iPhone and iPad (PS: thanks to TI for the improvement of the uploading interface). This has caused my typing error; I acknowledge that this is rather annoying. TI Staff, in case you read this comment, could you please correct the mistake? I would also like to ask if it would be possible to set up a system that would allow us writer to edit our stories. Dear Daniela, going back to your point: also of my stories follows the railway, the movement from one to another rail, the difficulty of standing in balance in a packed train. Also: the characters of my stories: they are the same people I see in the train. They sleep; they fix their makeup; they stretch themselves on the seats as if they were on the sofa in their own living rooms. They bump into each other without exchanging a word. I try to see a story through their bad moods. That’s all.

4.4.5. Conclusions

The autoethnography allowed me to reflect on the dynamics that lead *The Incipit*’s members to use multiple identities, in the context of a strategy concerning the management of their writing activity and their interaction with other community

members: a choice which is reflected in the differentiation of the narrative identities that participate to the development of the single stories on the platform. The roles of author and reader as we know them to be still remain but become fluid and changeable, and are accompanied by other roles which intervene in the story's production process. In addition, each member of the platform divides his or her activity on the platform according to these roles and identities, a choice which leads to a "fragmented" experience of the digital fiction writing process. Such an experience of "fragmentation" is also emphasized by the characteristics of the device used for the writing process, and of the surrounding sociotechnological environment. Finally, my own experience was exacerbated by the struggle to be both author and researcher at the same time on the platform.

4.5. A Reflection on the Relationship with Other Members of the Community

In this section I will illustrate the places of the platform where the communication between members take place and try to clarify the nature of this interactions.

The digital writing platform is not just a place where one can take on a writing process; it is a space where one can develop human connections, born through the collaborative production of stories with others, but that can evolve despite the limits imposed by the platform itself. Here too the “Intimate Stranger” model works in shaping members’ relationships on the platform: “Stranger” because of high degree of anonymity is conferred to its members. “Intimate” because the main motivation to the author is the presence of the contributors which acts as a guide in the writing process. However, I will also point out of people try to overcome the platform affordances to create better connections according to “hypertextual paths” within and outside of the platform.

Investigating the nature of such relationships allows us to reflect on the nature of human connections born on the Internet.

4.5.1. *The Options at the End of the Episode*

The kinds of options that the author presents her/his readers are a symptom of the

attitude of the author toward the audience of her/his story. In this very moment the author has the chance to rediscuss her/his position and to leave to her/his readers the command of the narrative. Readers cannot only select an option among the one proposed, but they can also add comments and establish a very constructive dialogue with the author.

The author can decide what her/his own stand is. She/he can play along with the reader, leaving to the audience the responsibility to decide for the story and potentially putting the narrative in danger if the reader selects an option that could completely alter the narrative and disrupt its rhythm. She/he can surprise the reader presenting three options which are not directly related to the dynamics of the story but which intervene to surprise and dazzle the audience and thus justifying their use.

She/he can also favor her/his own point of view and propose three options to the reader which have not direct impact on the development of the story and prevent any possible manipulation of the plot. This choice excludes the reader from any significant activity over the story and has an unfavorable impact on her/his interest in the story

and its author.

All these strategies are completely legitimate, but they do not prevent the author from “sabotaging” the mechanism via the use of fake identities to comment on the story and balance the votes of readers in order to regain control over her/his work.

An author who is open to dialogue and ready to play with her/his audience is surely the creator of a story which may not be perfect but certainly is more successful and enjoyable for his readers.

4.5.2. *The Wall*

The Wall is the place where the author meets with the readers of her/his story. There are no real-time chat mechanisms on the platform, and the Wall represents the only public place where the different narrative roles can meet and discuss. Each story has its own wall and in each wall a para-story on the current story is created via the flux of messages.

The flow of messages is ordered chronologically and the platform sends an email to the authors when they receive a new message. Normally, a message is answered by the author, which can generate a real debate between author and reader on a specific issue. The messages have no title and can be read by all the visitors of the platform. Most messages are about a comment on the option for the continuation of the story chosen at the end of an episode. For example, in this instance the reader has to choose one of three options:

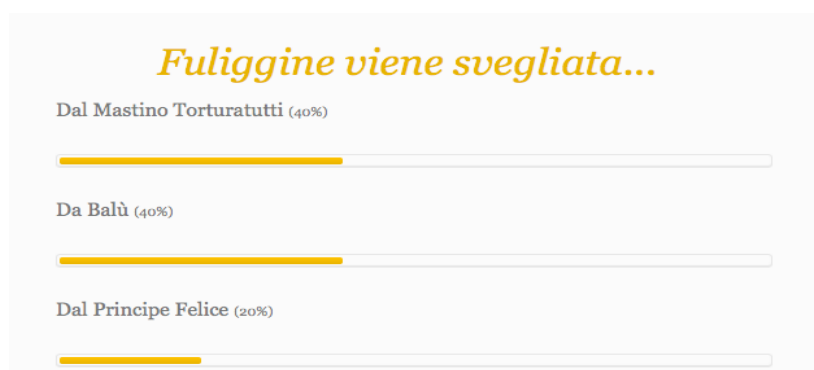


Figure 4.27. Perla's profile page, *The Incipit*, 19/09/2014. Celine's wall, Options at the end of the seventh episode, *The Incipit*, 18/09/2016. Translation: Who wakes up Fuliggine?

- The Torture-Mastiff
- Balù
- The Happy Prince

Usually, after selecting their preference, readers explain it on the Wall:

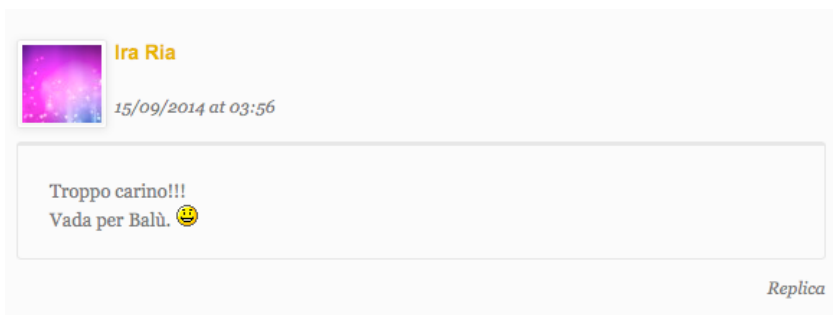


Figure 4.28. Celine’s wall, Comment of a reader, *The Incipit*, 15/09/2014. Translation: That's too cute!!!
Balù it is.

Aside from this kind of comment, we can include in the same category those which, apart from simply explaining the reader's choice, include a message for the author, confirming the usual contact between author and reader. For example, user “Giorgia Muscas” writes:



Figure 4.29. Celine’s wall, Reader’s comment, *The Incipit*, 15/09/2014. Translation: Balù. I really liked this episode too, ironic and well written, you're really good!

Finally, among this kind of comments, there are those who reveal to other readers, who still haven't read the episode, what happens in the plot, spoiling the surprise. In *Maho no Irando*, this kind of comment is labeled “Neta-bare” (spoiler), but in *The Incipit*, comments are posted chronologically and the most visible one on the page is the last one that has been posted. If an unlucky reader who still doesn't know the structure of the website happens to venture on the wall of an old story after reading the first episode it is possible that, reading the comments about the latest published episodes, she/he might be spoiled.

Author's Ethnographic Notes: Comments and spoilers

13/07/2014

*The problem is that, while the comments are marked with the date when they have been written, **the episodes themselves have no publication date**. It would be enough to compare the day of publication of a certain episode with the comments left on the wall around that time to create a reliable connection between episode and comments, and avoid reading spoilers.*

A second category of comments is connected to the evaluation of the stories from a

narrative and stylistic point of view.

Among these comments, the ones left by the coach editor were especially relevant, as previously mentioned in the section about tellership. When the coach editor intervened it was to promote a story on the platform; it was a great opportunity for the author to free her/his work from the often dubious and not very transparent judgment of the Incipoints and highlight her/his story on the platform. From then on, the story was perceived by the other platform users in a different way and receiving a comment from the coach editor conferred it the same status of the stories that had been assigned the much coveted covers by the administrators (the covers were assigned to the stories which received the most Incipoints). This comment, apart from having a positive effect on my self-esteem, also increased my performance anxiety regarding the episodes I still had to write:

Author's Ethnographic Notes: Getting the administrators' attention
18/09/2014

*It was a while that I was waiting for a sign from the administrators' side. Finally and without knowing who I am, **they are starting evaluating my work as***

worthy of their interest. *For sure this comment will have the effect to attract more readers so the story would benefit of more Incipoints. All I have to do is to continue like I have always done. No fear of failing, exactly in the same way ...*

Apart from the coach editor, the other readers also commented on the story's style and narrative structure.

This kind of comments could be extremely critical and merciless, or encourage a discussion between author and reader to find a solution for the story's issues. They weren't to be underestimated, though, and a professional and direct answer from the author contributed to the transformation of the critical reader who regularly read the story at hand. The reader's esteem wasn't just gained with the story per se, but also with the author's ability to answer the questions about style and narrative posted by other readers on the wall.

Usually, readers first attempted more neutral contact with the author, maybe with a message justifying their choice of a specific option for the continuation of the story; after establishing this first channel of communication, it was easier to approach more

thorny issues or general critiques about the story. It was therefore unadvisable to comment rashly, since readers risked offending an author's sensibilities and compromising the creation of a constructive and durable relationship between author and reader.

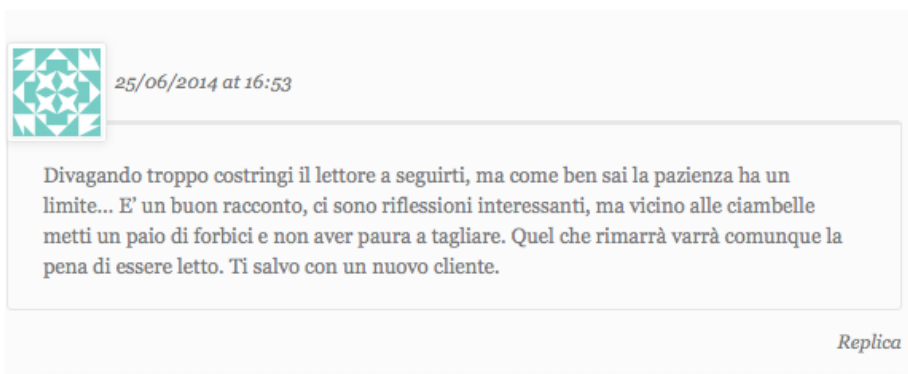


Figure 4.30. Celine's wall, Reader's comment, *The Incipit*, 26/06/2014. Translation: By digressing too much you force readers to follow you, but as you know patience has a limit ... It's a good story, there are interesting considerations, but put a pair of scissors next to the doughnuts and don't be afraid to cut. What's left will still be worth reading. I'm saving you with a new client.

There were also comments that weren't about the story, but about the platform's inner workings. As previously mentioned about the way the summer competition was managed, the mechanisms of the website were far from transparent. There were doubts about the assignment of Incipoints and covers, complaints about the platform's inefficiency, and a general discontent toward the administrators.

One example is a discussion I've transcribed between several users on an author's wall, which weren't about the story but rather about general topics concerning several platform members. These comments weren't directed at one specific person, but rather required the collective participation of the website's members.

Author's Ethnographic Notes

30/04/2014

One of the unclear aspects of the platform is certainly the infamous algorithm, the mechanism for the assignment of the Incipoints. Every user has a theory about it, but the admins have never given a clear explanation. What little I know, I dragged out of Tadan during a conversation.

Again, the wall is the space where an author can give public service announcements about her/his story or possible malfunctions of the website, attract the readers' attention or announce something.

The Wall is an excellent tool to obviate to the impossibility of editing the stories, fixing possible mistakes once they've been published. On this website, the admins are the

only ones who can, after being informed by the author, edit an uploaded story. Since the admin's intervention isn't always immediate, this time I used my wall to inform the readers of a mistake in my story.

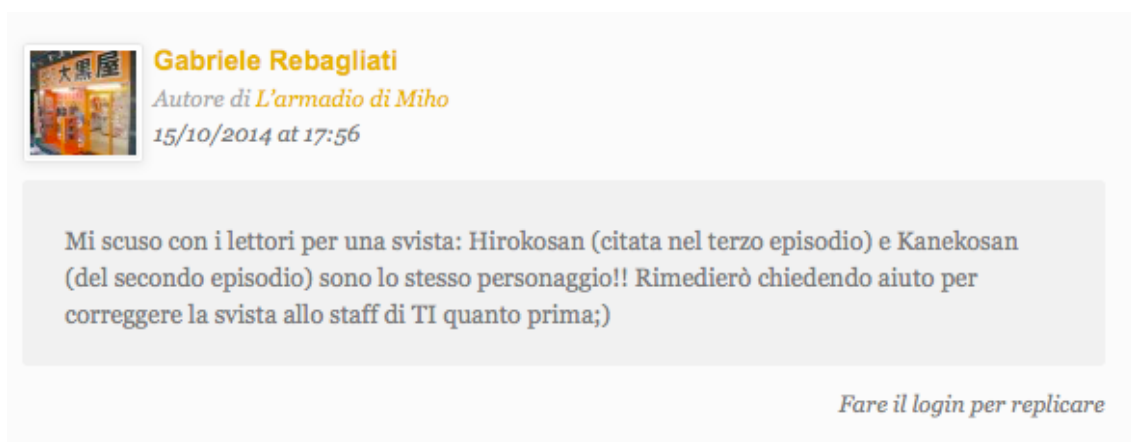


Figure 4.31. Gabriele Rebagliati's wall, note of the author, *The Incipit*, 15/10/2014.

Nonetheless, the relationship between the story and the wall cannot be reduced to these categories only. All the interventions of the readers must be judged in relation to the answer given by the author of the story (i.e., to which extent the author takes into account the suggestions of the readers to develop the story further).

Moreover, also the “emotional” factor needs to be considered (i.e., the relation

between the author and the reader), which may lead to unexpected twists in the narrative, not directly linked to the more technical aspects of a comment and to the creation of “hypertextual paths” to develop the relationships. As an example of this last point, I can mention some interaction that occurred between a reader and me, and that influenced the story I was writing. It can be considered an “original” feature in our relation.

In one of my comments addressed to Napo, a rather popular author on the platform, I affirmed that although he had shown a rather cynical attitude toward the other users of the platform, he had talent and he should keep writing.

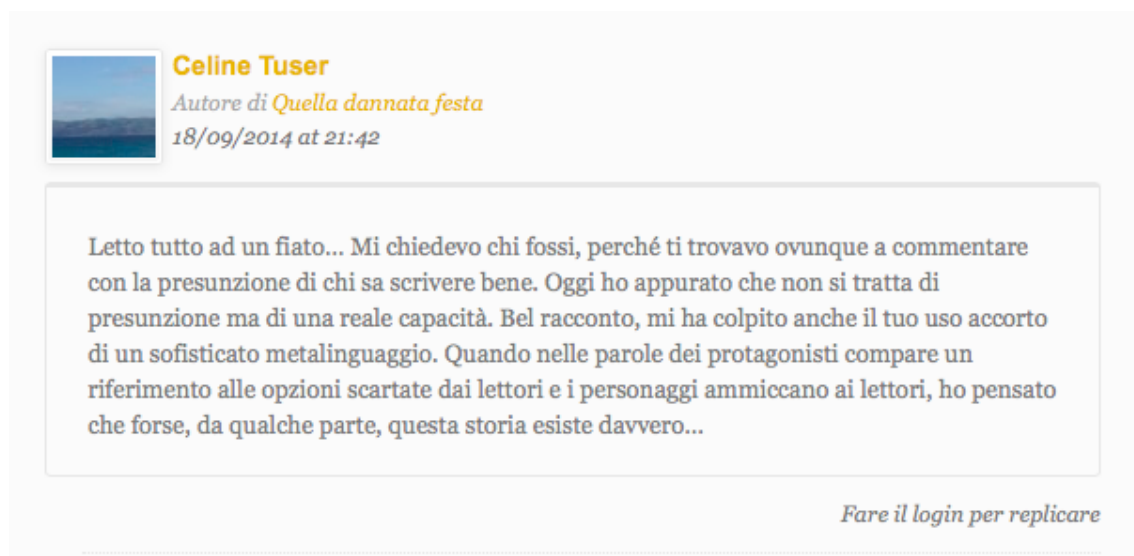


Figure 4.32. Napo’s wall, Celine’s comment to Napo’s story, *The Incipit*, 18/09/2014. Translation; I read it all in one go ... I was wondering who you were, because I saw you commenting everywhere

with the arrogance of someone who can write well. Today I discovered that it's not arrogance, but real skill. Nice story, I was also impressed by your skilled use of a sophisticated meta-language. When in the character's words there's a reference to the options discarded by the readers and the characters nod their heads to the readers, I thought that maybe this story really exists somewhere ...

He replied saying: *First you punch me in the stomach and then you caress me.*

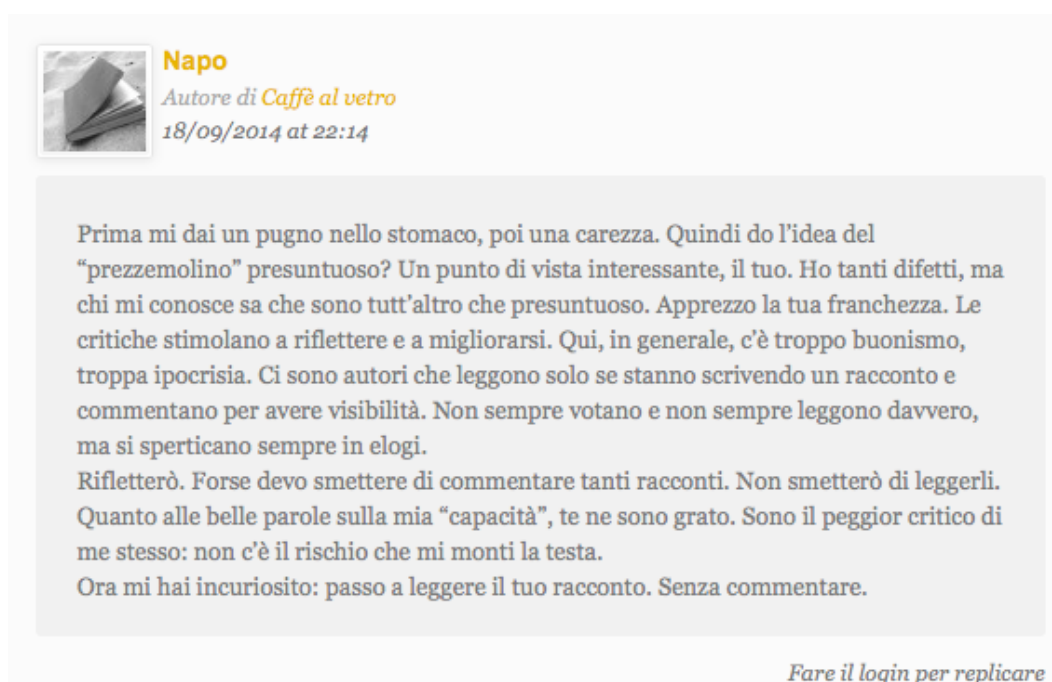


Figure 4.33. Napo's wall, Napo's reply to Celine's comment, *The Incipit*, 15/09/2014. Translation: First you punch me in the stomach, then you caress me. So, I give the impression of being a presumptuous "know-it-all"? That's an interesting point of view. I have plenty of flaws, but who knows me knows that I'm anything but presumptuous. I appreciate your frankness. Critiques are an encouragement to reflect and improve. In general, there's too many bleeding hearts here, too much hypocrisy. There are authors who only read if they're writing a story and comment just to get visibility. They don't always vote or actually read, but they're always lavishing compliments. I'll think about it. Maybe I should stop commenting on so many stories. I won't stop reading them. As for your kind words about my "skill," thank you. I'm the harshest of my critics: there's no risk of me getting a big head. Now I'm curious: I'll come read your story. Without commenting.

This comment indirectly influenced the way I wrote the three options at the end of my way of the “Streghe si Nasce” ninth episode for I used as story options words similar to “punch” and “caress.”



Figure 4.34. Celine’s “Natural Born Witches” story page, story options to the ninth episode, *The Incipit*, 25/09/2014. Translation: In the courtyard

... a goodbye
... a punch
... a caress

I wanted to attract Napo's attention and apologize for what I'd written on his wall. If he carefully read my story, he would notice that I had deliberately used his same words to make up for the comment I had left him. And he did:

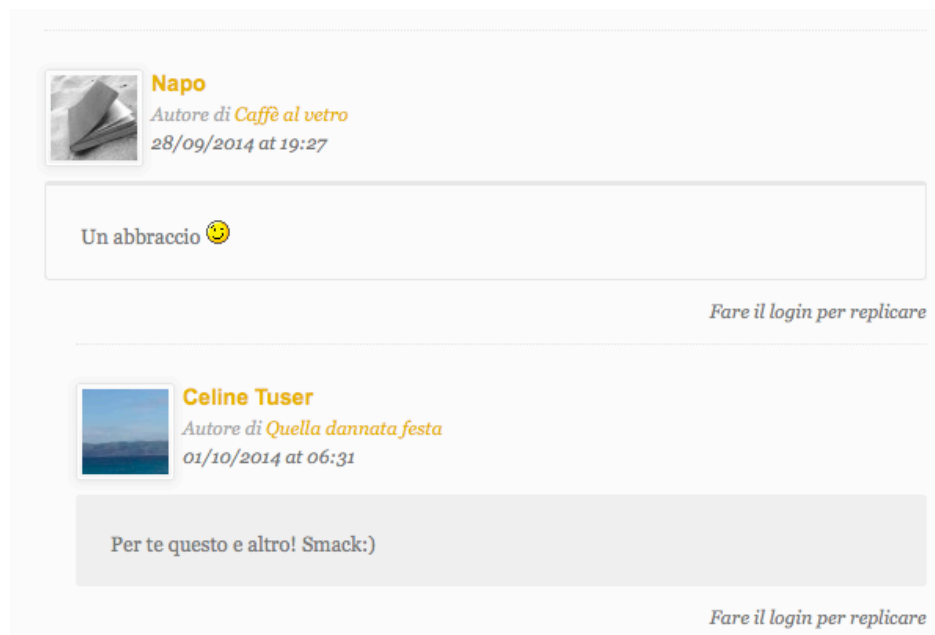


Figure 4.35. Celine’s wall, story options to the ninth episode of Celine’s story “Natural Born Witches,” *The Incipit*, 25/09/2014. Translation: Napo: A caress. Celine Tuser: For you this and more! Smack:)

I used certain language cues that Napo and I shared and that he found again during the reading of the story to which he assigned a completely different meaning, yet brought a positive outcome to our previous argument and became the starting point of our collaboration on the platform.

4.5.3. Strong Ties on The Incipit: The Case of Lucia Sparagna

Another user I met and had significant interaction with was Lucia. I met Lucia when I'd already started using my real identity on the platform. Lucia is a teacher, and she had the courage to write a story on the platform to expose a real case of mobbing in the workplace. Her story was listed in the Humour category because she narrated her experience turning her real-life tormentors into purebred dogs.

I got to know her because, visiting the platform daily, I found her comments about most of the stories I followed. I was struck by their precision and accuracy toward the stories. Obviously, Lucia was also reading to advertise her own story; it was after all about social issues and she needed supporters—but her skill in involving people and start debates on other stories' walls had made her on the one hand one of the most popular authors of the platform; on the other, her energy and her desecrating attitude could be perceived as too intrusive by some readers. Since she was visiting almost all the walls of the platform, I was waiting impatiently for her first visit to my wall, which was soon after.

From that point on, Lucia became a constant presence on my wall: I always read her comments with pleasure. Her explosive energy and originality made her the undisputed queen of the walls. She also acted as a moderator for comments that didn't concern her and, after a few months, she was able to understand in detail the dynamics of the platform and the connections between the authors. Lucia was friends with everyone and willing to advertise her favorite stories to authors who still hadn't read them; from this perspective, she was very socially skilled in creating new connections between the members of the platform. She was also an excellent informer: she kept me updated on the latest news and what I had missed when, due to the difference in time zones, I wasn't active on the platform. She seemed to live camped out on the platform's walls, ready to move as soon as a new story to comment on or a new author to welcome appeared. Curious about the skill with which she moved on the platform, I decided to follow her story.

In this story, Lucia parodied an episode of school mobbing turning the characters into dogs and caricaturing them.

Unfortunately, at least at the beginning, I couldn't help but notice that she wasn't a talented writer. This was due to the form (spelling mistakes, repetitions, etc.) but also to the content: some parts were chaotic and the structure of her story itself wasn't suited to the website; Lucia herself complained about her writing, so much so that she advised me to start reading her story from the fourth episode, because she needed to rewrite the first three. Nevertheless, her wall was full of comments and, judging from the amount of her Incipoints, her story was the most popular on the platform. Lucia thought this was because, reading silently, of all those people who, despite not being active members of the website, supported her stand against mobbing: it was therefore her family, along with her real-life friends, who supported her without any visible intervention, but giving her Incipoints at the end of each episode. The interest toward her story was also increased by the strange and (seemingly) orchestrated attempt by Oskar to imitate Lucia's story parodying the most active members of *The Incipit* by turning them into dogs. His story caused such discontent among the authors that the admins decided to delete it. There is no trace left of the mysterious author and his

unclear relationship with Lucia: the story's data and its wall were all irrevocably deleted. This episode brought Lucia some negative publicity but also increased the number of curious readers visiting her page. Finally, as she admitted in one of our subsequent conversations, Lucia used multiple identities on the platform to increase her story's Incipoints. Her story's incredible success surprised the administrators, too, who, due to the author's lack of transparency and fearing the eventual repercussions of the publication of a true story, procrastinated giving a cover to the story, angering the author.

Thus, I decided to privately contact Lucia on Facebook and was subsequently invited by her to join a private group to talk about the issues that were arising between the authors and the website. Our relationship grew, with more frequent contact and conversations in real time, initially about the platform; progressively, our talks deviated from these topics and shifted to issues in her personal life. I gave her advice on how to behave in real life, and she gave me advice about the platform. Our experience culminated in an unfinished narrative experiment in which she planned to

write and publish on the website a story about her love life; I would read her drafts and give voice to some of the characters. Due to geographical constraints, we never really met in person, but I know that she took part to some events with other writers from the platform. We still keep in touch on social media, but we no longer talk.

Once I gathered the necessary data and completed my autoethnography, I started publishing academic articles and working, and I no longer had time to write. Then came some publishing success, which led me to definitively step away from the platform. At the end of the day, ours was a kind of friendship, but one based on the premise of a literary collaboration: we share some secrets, but they are always filtered by the need to use them as tools to produce something.

4.5.4. Conclusions

The relationships formed on *The Incipit* are born in the context of the production of a story, and are concretized in the comments left on the walls; in the author's anticipation of the readers' taste and his ability to keep their requests in mind; in the

reciprocal interest in managing a common project. They are developed in relation to the frequency of the comments and according to the various members' importance within the community. Thanks to the autoethnography it also became clear how, apart from the comments, the story itself is part of the development of the relationship between author and reader. Thus, the story's characters talk about topics that have already been shared by the authors, presented as options or that fuel the debates on the story's wall: this creates a chain of references and allusions which tightens, loosens and mends the relationships between the participants to the production of collaborative digital fiction. This relationship is "hypertextual" and, since it develops in multiple spaces, it becomes understandable in the light of the complex network of interactions and actions in the context of the production of digital fiction by the community members. The opening-up of the community to social networks such as Facebook, where anonymity is no longer an essential prerequisite of the interaction, allows these relationships to develop in a climate of seemingly increased trust. Actually, as proven by the autoethnography, these relationships are born on the basis of the completion of a common project and, even though they can develop, their main focus

is the collaboration to a writing project. Anonymity is no longer essential for the development of close relationships in online collaborative writing digital fiction communities, but it is essential within the collaborative fiction community to give shape to the authors' strategies and to safeguard the community members' self-esteem.

4.6. The Next Steps

The autoethnography is inseparable from the chronological dimension which accounts for the maturation process of the researcher within the fieldwork. Each of the phases described in the autoethnography is a key point of the ethnographer's progress during the investigation. The fourth chapter discusses the autoethnography from the chronological perspective in relation to the four key phases of my experience as an author of digital fiction:

1. The first phase, during which a reflection on digital writing as a trial and error process takes place, corresponds to the initial attempts, to the acquisition of technical competences, and the definition of the fieldwork of

investigation;

2. The second phase, during which a reflection on the act of generating and consuming a story takes place, corresponds to the writing experience while completing a story on the platform;

3. The third phase, during which a reflection on the fragmentation of identity, narrative roles, and the writing experience takes place, is devoted to the position of the author/researcher within the community;

4. Finally, the fourth phase, during which a reflection on the relationship with other members of the community takes place, pinpoints the location, the typology, and the nature of the relationships on the platform.

Each of the phases corresponds to one of the narrative dimensions by Ochs and Capps (2011) already employed by Page (2012) to analyze social media.

So, the first phase corresponds to the embeddedness that allows the analysis of the context in which the writing process takes place; the second phase corresponds to the

linearity which pinpoints the narrative structural properties of the stories and of the process of production and consumption of the stories; the third phase corresponds to the tellership which pinpoints who creates and contributes to the story; and the fourth phase corresponds to the tellability that concerns the value that the narrative acquires in relation to the participation of its audience.

The application of the four narrative dimensions frame allows us to abstract from the chronological dimension of the autoethnography to propose a comparative perspective to frame the problem in question in the debate on digital fiction.

The presentation order of the categories of analysis follows Page's exposition and does not correspond to the chronological structure of the autoethnography. In the next chapter, for each category of analysis I will however explain the contribution of the autoethnographic methodology and its contribution to the debate on digital fiction.

Chapter Five

Analysis of the Autoethnography

In this chapter, my aim is to analyze the autoethnography according to the four dimensions of narrative (Ochs and Capps 2011) already introduced in chapter three.

The reasons for this are, firstly, because this frame allows a comparative perspective in relation to other narrative forms such as the traditional book novel and the writing practices in social media as described by Page (2012).

Furthermore, since the narrative orders of first and second level blend in the autoethnography (Alleyne 2015, 150), using a theoretical frame connected to the narrative structures will allow to make observations not only on the practice of digital fiction writing, but also on the autoethnography itself, revealing the crucial importance of the author/researcher relationship in this methodological approach.

The issues that arose in chapter four will be revisited in light of the narrative

dimensions, highlighting the autoethnography's contribution to the analysis compared to text-immanent methodologies (Page 2012, 204) and allowing a systematic discussion of the various topics isolating them from the stream of consciousness typical of the autoethnographic methodology.

The analysis will allow me to shed light on some writing possibilities that have been temporarily suppressed by the advent of the traditional book and which are now being concretized thanks to the mobility, accessibility and immediacy of the medium on which they are produced.

5.1. Tellership

As I explained in chapter three, the dimension of tellership indicates exactly who creates the story. Within this dimension we swing between two poles: at one extremity we have the single author organizing and supervising the whole narrative; at the other extremity a plurality of contributors who actively engage with the creative process and the development of the story.

The physical book normally maintains the communicative model of the classical narrative illustrated in 1978 by Chapman. This model imagines a single author narrating a story through the fictional voice of a narrator to a recipient with whom the reader usually identifies himself. There are thus two fixed roles: the author and the reader, who mirror the act of production and the act of reading/fruition, respectively.

5.1.1. *Tellership in Online Collaborative Digital Fiction Writing Communities*

Page (2012) states that, on social networks and specifically in collaborative digital fiction writing communities, the tellership detaches itself from the idea of a unique author and shifts closer to the idea of multi-tellership.

The distribution of tellership between the community members is connected to the following conditions:

1. on the one hand, if the narrative is developed in single contributions that take place in separate textual units or in multiple contributions that take place within a single unit;
2. on the other, if control of the text is maintained by all contributors equally or is handled by a single author.

The realization of this multi-tellership would depend on the hierarchies present on the platform, on the website's technical affordances, on the participants' relationships and identities, and can be analyzed by evaluating the community participants' contribution to the storytelling.

In online collaborative digital fiction writing communities, as specified in chapter one, we encounter what Klaiber (2014) calls the "double plot," already described in figure 0.1. When attempting to establish which role the various participants have in the tellership process, we have to acknowledge that two levels of analysis coexist on such platforms: the "primary plot," where the actual story is developed, and the "secondary

plot,” which represents the paratext, where the interactions between the platform users take place, influencing the development of the story.

According to this theory, the roles of “author” and “reader” are not at all fixed and, within the context of the primary and secondary plot, they can alternatively carry out several tasks according to the technical affordances offered by the administrators and to the number of stories they are following on the platform. It is, however, necessary to specify that if a collaborative digital fiction writing platform allows the editing of text authored by others, the story’s consistency is put at risk.

In her analysis, Page considers the case where the primary plot is the responsibility of several authors, but their interventions are limited to single independent episodes of the main story; in the secondary plot, contributors comment on the various episodes and plan the continuation of the story. These interventions, evaluated according to the frequency of the author’s participation to the story and to her/his importance within

the platform, influence the choices regarding the management of the story about the primary plot.

Kozinets (2010) already noted how, among the members of an online community, of which collaborative digital fiction writing communities are an example, there are different participation styles in regard to the prosuption activity (discussed in chapter two) depending on seniority and on the role within the platform. So, a “newbie” has a greater need to acquire information about the functioning of the community, rather than immediately participating in the prosuption activity. In contrast, an “insider” is required to participate in the prosuption activities in order to maintain and consolidate his role within the platform.

Specifically, Rettberg (2011) pinpointed three participation styles in the context of collaborative digital writing platforms, which suggest the degree of responsibility of the various contributors to the development of the story. These are:

1. conscious participants: the contributors have full responsibility of the project and its completion;
2. contributory participants: the contributors who occasionally follow the project, without having a central role in its completion; and
3. unwitting participants: those who influence the narrative without realizing it.

Page (2012) pinpoints five roles of multi-tellership in collaborative digital fiction writing communities, which combine elements of the two classifications mentioned above, and are respectively:

1. the Creator, the writer who contributes most of the story;
2. the Editor, the one who provides literary criticism and concrete suggestions with regard to the management of the story, and points out any mistakes;
3. the Convener, the one commenting on all the episodes of a story. He/she gives the Creator an idea of the continuous participation of the audience to the story;

4. the Reviewer, who comments on the story, with the main goal of activating communication with other contributors; and
5. the Collaborator, somewhere between the Editor and the Reviewer, who evaluates the story and provides comments that are useful for the management of the project.

In the following section, using Page's categorization, we will discuss multi-tellership dynamics on *The Incipit* while also referring to the information gathered through the autoethnography.

5.1.2. Tellership on The Incipit

The idea of multi-tellership on *The Incipit* is valid because, both in while writing the story and in the activity of every single author on the platform, we can detect several roles that go beyond the crystallized ones of author and reader as described by Chapman (1978).

Maintaining Klaiber's division of primary plot (the narrative aspect) and secondary plot

(the paratextual aspect) and starting from Page's analysis, we can argue that:

1. on this platform, the narrative is developed through contributions from a single author, which take place in separate textual units (episodes);
2. at the end of each episode, there is a space in the primary plot where "readers" can intervene with their preference on how to proceed with the narrative (the three narrative choices);
3. the paratext is developed through comments from various contributors which take place in separate textual units (the wall of the story);
4. each author's activity is spread over different roles, corresponding to a specific strategy on the platform on the author's part.

5.1.3. The Incipit: *Tellership and the Primary Plot*

The primary plot is dominated by the presence of a single author, who takes full responsibility for the completion of the story published on her/his personal page; the

intervention of other platform members in this space is limited to their function as readers. They do have, however, the opportunity to actively influence the story's development with their choices, and therefore to increase the popularity of the author within the platform (let us remember that the author earns one Incipoint every time a reader makes a choice about the story).

The fact that, in the primary plot, platform users can't contribute to the other authors' writing process is hypothetically due to three kinds of factors:

1. technical factors: for economical and technical reasons, the platform administrators can't manage an infrastructure that can support the interventions of multiple authors on a single primary plot;
2. "political" factors: the administrators seem to favor a "transparent" management of information between the users in order to control the flow of data on the platform; and
3. narrative consistency factors: as anticipated by Klaiber (2014), the collaborative writing of a text by multiple people carries the risk of losing

consistency of style and meaning.

The administrators of *The Incipit* claim to avoid such risk through a “more controlled” system of intervention on the stories, which translates to the limiting mechanism of the three options at the end of each episode and the implementation of a wall for the comments about the story.

There are, however, exceptions that can turn the primary plot into the stage for various forms of multi-tellership, bending the technology to men’s will to express themselves. One such instance is of the Ten Little Pens and their experiment, mentioned in chapter four. In order to coordinate their work, which consisted in a single intervention (one episode) on the primary plot per author, this group of authors had to rely on the Facebook Messenger social network, which allowed direct contact between the project members in real time and wasn’t “under surveillance.” The secondary plot was not a viable alternative because, if they had been published on the wall of the story, the messages between the project contributors would be visible to all

other members and to the administrators. This would inevitably reveal the details of the project, including the identities and the choices that led to the allocation of the episodes between the authors. In addition, it would deny to the project participants the chance to intervene on the secondary plot as unbiased commenters (going unnoticed). As a result, the successful completion of the project, which was interrupted after episode 7, was compromised: the challenge of conducting this experiment on two different social networks due to the lack of a private chat function on *The Incipit*, through which the exchange of messages to organize the work could be done. Another challenge was the absence of a space where it would be possible to add several contributions to the same primary plot. Both challenges were determining factors in its subsequent failure.

5.1.4. The Incipit: *Tellership and the Secondary Plot*

As for the different roles the story's contributors play in the secondary plot, (the online wall of the story) of *The Incipit*, they can be listed as follows and correspond, with the necessary clarifications, to Page's textual analysis:

1. The Creator. On The Incipit, it corresponds to the author on whose page the story appears.
2. The Editor. On The Incipit, in addition to the normal contributors who take on this role, a special “coach editor” also exists, in charge of giving comments to stories that the website administrators consider noteworthy.
3. The Convener, who gives the author an idea of the continuous participation of the audience to the story; in the case of my story, Lucia Sparagna was the one in charge of this role, having followed and commented all the episodes of one of my stories and having publicized it among the members of the platform.
4. The Reviewer, the one who is either an occasional reader or an author in search of potential readers for her/his stories. She/he leaves comments on the pages of other authors in order to catch their interest and persuade them to follow her/him. In this case, it is apparent that the intentions expressed through the secondary plot (an unbiased comment on the story) may indeed hide other scopes not openly conveyed in the text.
- 5.) The Collaborator, who is a faithful reader and also a faithful commenter,

who can be spotted because he consistently follows an author and her/his stories.

To these roles, I would add that of the Observer, the one whose simply reads the story without adding any comments. Page doesn't mention her/him in her list because, in the platforms studied by this researcher, this shadowy figure doesn't contribute to the narrative, while on *The Incipit* her/his presence is traceable via the Incipoints she/he might give the story. She/he is otherwise a silent presence not directly observable by the author of the story.

From this list, it is clear that the number of actors on collaborative platforms of digital fiction cannot solely be reduced into the author vs. reader system.

On the one hand, the readers actively engage in the process of production of a story. On the other hand, the authors keep up their popularity via the interaction with the readers, becoming themselves users of other stories published on the website.

5.1.5. *The Autoethnography Contribution: Reflection on the Fragmentation of Identity, Narrative Roles, and the Writing Experience The “Fragmented” Author*

However, in her analysis, Page does not consider the case of an author who can manage multiple identity profiles and who is thus able to act on her/his own story under a different identity. To observe such a phenomenon is only possible via an analytical process that goes beyond the context of the comment walls and adopts the autoethnographical perspective.

Why should an author use multiple identities on *The Incipit*? There are indeed a few answers to this question:

1. to obtain Incipoints via a comment;
2. to intervene in the development of the story voting for her/his narrative option or unblocking a situation where the points are in a tie; and
3. to intervene in the Comments wall to defend her/his position against the critics of other readers.

From autoethnography, it clearly emerges how the roles so far described can be extrapolated from the textual analysis of the comments left on walls or from calculations connected to Incipoints: they are, therefore, visible on the platform.

In practice, the issue is more complex because the author takes on all these roles at once in her/his writing experience on the platform. In order to survive, make connections, and advertise her/his story, she/he is asked to take on one of the previously described roles depending on the circumstances. In addition, these roles can be diluted *among* several identities reserved for one or more of these tasks. Using more than one account, the author can even interact on her/his own wall as if she/he was someone else and change the fate of her/his story, exploiting to her/his own advantage the voting system of the episode and the Incipoints. In order not to raise suspicions, however, she/he has to create a credible character for each of her/his accounts: identifying Perla as one of Napo's fake accounts was easy since Napo mistakenly used Perla's account to reply to a comment addressed to him. On closer

examination, it was sufficient to visit Perla's wall to understand she was an identity created by Napo with the purpose of gaining a few more Incipoints and breaking ties should two options at the end of an episode be equally liked, and the development of the story therefore halted. Perla wasn't integrated in the platform and she only appeared, if she appeared at all, sporadically to comment exclusively on Napo's stories.

Developing and taking care of an alternate identity requires considerable effort because the author has to create a credible character and move carefully through the platform in order not to raise suspicions. Since at the time of the autoethnography I was feeling especially prolific, I wrote stories for each of my accounts, experimenting with different styles and genres, and interacting with the same people in different ways. Having three accounts, I could override some of the website's restrictions (such as the rule of each author writing only one story at a time), escape the scrutiny of the platform administrators, and prove if the commitment of some readers to my story was real or not, questioning them about it using a different account.

5.2. Linearity

Linearity points at the narrative structural properties. One pole presents a kind of close narrative that develops along precise temporal lines, the other pole offers instead a narrative organized in open, multilinear circuits of narration.

The traditional book is a tangible object, which follows a series of conventions in matters of reading logic and fruition order. The narrative usually produced within the frame of the traditional book follows these conventions and it is organized via a paratextual apparatus (table of contents, pagination, and chapterization, for instance), which allows the reader to navigate the text and keep track of his reading process. Moreover, the content of the narrative is normally organized according to what Ryan (2004) defines as the narrative principles (a guide to the events in chronological order, cause-effect dynamics, teleological focus, etc.).

5.2.1. *Linearity on Social Media*

Page (2012) claims that, on social media, narratives are characterized by a macro-level structural coherence. This means that every single narrative has value in itself, but it is inextricably linked to the network of relationships between the participants and to the contexts where the narrative is produced and consumed.

This general consideration is followed by a more detailed analysis of the structures of the single narratives. They can be of two kinds: (1) a closed structure and (2) an open-ended structure: a closed structure narrative follows the narrative principles exemplified by the physical book, therefore it favors a guide to the events in chronological order, such as cause-effect dynamics and teleological focus, also considering that it is physical and finite; an open-ended structure, in contrast, is oriented toward the present and the moment when the writing takes place. It is not articulated in a single unit, but has an episodic structure and derives its consistency from the readership patterns in the network and from the interaction between narrators and members of the audience.

A narrative takes on one characteristic or the other depending on the nature of the social media format. Moreover, the chronological frame of a story is not only determined by its contents but also by the discourse context in which the process of storytelling is embedded. Page (2012) pinpoints three levels of analysis which allow us to analyze the chronological frame of the platform in question.

Firstly, it is necessary to consider whether the template used by an audience to interact with the narrator provides time stamps for the various interventions and whether it is organized in chronological order or in reverse chronological order.

Secondly, it is necessary to analyze how the website administrators keep track of activity on the platform.

Finally, it is necessary to evaluate the relevance of the narrator's activity and of the audience's responses; more interventions lead to a greater perceived regency, which can transform the time perception of the participants to the communicative exchange

and give an illusion of “copresence.”

On this, Bronwen (2011), in his study about collaborative writing platforms tied to fan culture, identifies updating and reviewing as the core operations of such narratives, which trigger the participation of the audience members.

In the case of collaborative digital fiction platforms, the linearity seems therefore to develop in two different areas: the written story and the wall containing the audience’s comments.

5.2.2. Linearity on *The Incipit: The Primary Plot*

All the stories that appear on *The Incipit* have a linear sequential development because they are organized in ten units, each representing a chapter of the story and marked with progressive numbers. The stories follow the narrative principles of Ryan, briefly mentioned above. However, there is the tendency to concentrate on an event at the end of each chapter that is crucial for the later development of the plot. This might

seem a sort of stretching in terms of narrative strategies, but it is actually due to the very mechanisms of production of the stories and to the administrators' policy of the platform, which allows readers to intervene or to modify the story line only at the end of the episode or chapter. It could be said then that the structure is halfway between closed and open-ended. It is closed because the administrators determined that a story must be built according to specific rules, bearing in mind the character limit and the maximum limit of ten episodes, which are normally connected by a logical thread constantly verified by the reader when selecting the best option for the continuation of the story. In the autoethnography chapter, I have demonstrated the impossibility of continuing a story whose contents are fragmented, which was not suited to the 5,000-character limit and to the need to have a chronological order involving cause and effect.

Inversely, it is open-ended because each episode, except the final one of course, is open to the readers' intervention. This activity on the reader's part highlights the recreational component of *The Incipit* platform which, unless skillfully managed, can

undermine the consistency of the narrative, in a way similar to the one I mentioned in the previous paragraph about the multi-tellership in the primary plot. As specified by Alleyne (2015), the game is incompatible with the narrative because it implies the impossibility of anticipating the player's moves (in this case, the reader's). With the primary plot of the stories on *The Incipit*, however, technological affordances limit the reader's intervention to the choice of one of the options already planned by author, and the recreational component is functional in regard to the development of the story.

The upload frequency of the episodes is determined by the interaction of the readers with the story; if an author unfortunately receives no indications on how to continue the story because the readers do not state their preferences, he must temporarily interrupt his uploads, take on the role of the reader and promote himself elsewhere on the platform, or resort to other strategies, such as interacting with his own story using a different identity.

On the platform, the stories are shown in their progressive development, meaning that the episode appearing on the story-page is the last one to have been uploaded and still “playable” by the community members. Within the primary plot, the attention of the readers is on the process of production of a story (the story can be modified), while less attention is given to the completeness of the story. This means that the more a story proceeds in the narrative, the more difficult it is to follow it. In fact, the first episodes cannot be modified any longer while the reading of the whole story requires the readers to spend a considerable amount of time on the website. This last action clashes with the general characteristics of the reading practice on the Internet, usually short, fragmented, and sporadic. The mechanism appears even more visible once we consider that on *The Incipit* only the stories currently active are well marked and signaled on the platform; it doesn’t provide a proper database to search for the stories. Since the focus is concentrated on the process of production of the story and on the involvement of the reader in this very process, the author is forced to constantly stir up the attention of the readers through fast uploading of new episodes of the story hoping the readers will keep on reading. Nonetheless, an exception to this mechanism

of fast production-fast publication exists: it is up to the first chapter of the story, the most important episode for the author, to gain readers and popularity and generally the one that the users read the most. Subsequent episodes, in general, have fewer readers. As a result, the time between the uploading of the first and the second episodes is generally longer in comparison to the time separating the other parts of the story.

5.2.3. *Linearity in the Secondary Plot*

The secondary plot is organized according to a time template in reverse chronological order: all the comments written by the collaborators and the author's replies are listed starting from the last comment uploaded on the story's wall, except for any comments by the coach editor, which is placed at the top of the list to be always visible to the users, and which in a way legitimizes the story. As we have already noticed in the autoethnography chapter, there are different kinds of comments with different functions. Some of them reveal to other readers, not involved in the story production, details about what happens in the primary plot. While on *The Incipit* these comments

are not labeled as spoilers, it becomes very easy for one to be spoiled. As stated by Bronwen (2011), we can therefore conclude that updating (on the primary plot) and reviewing (on the secondary plot) are the engine which powers collaborative digital fiction writing platforms.

It is, therefore, important to maintain the regency on the story's wall which, as reminded by Page (2012) can give the illusion of copresence of the participants in a communicative exchange which is actually asynchronous.

5.2.4. *The Autoethnography Contribution: A Reflection on the Act of Generating and Consuming a Story*

5.2.4.1. The "Fragmented" Management Process of the Story

The management process of the story on a digital platform is made up of interactive moments and others that require effort on the reader/author's part. Instead of alternating, these moments are seamlessly overlapped, because they concern the activity on multiple stories hosted on the platform. For convenience's sake, we will

illustrate them one after the other in the following picture:

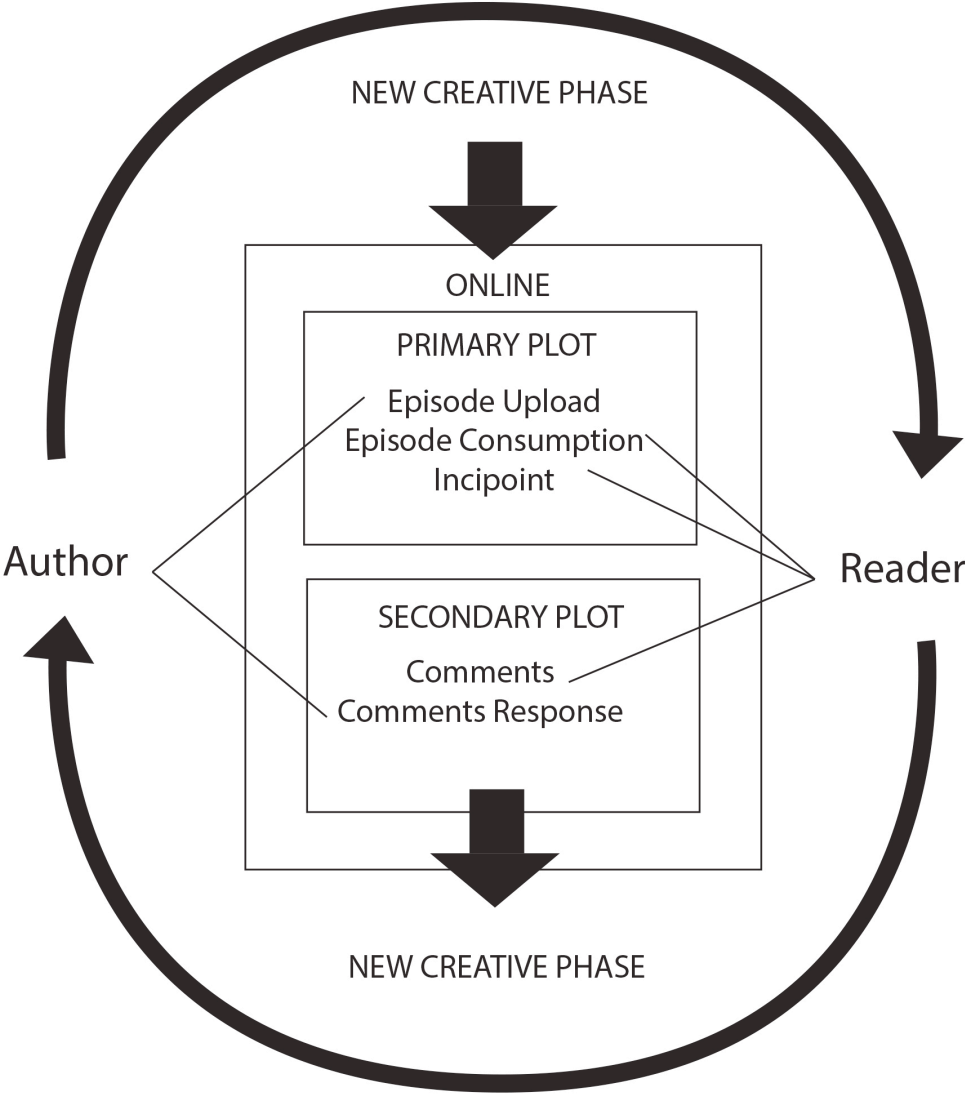


Figure 5.1. The “Fragmented” Management Process of the Story.

This process, and therefore also the illusion of copresence on the platform, is

obstructed by all problems connected to the physical aspect of the act of writing (the impossibility of writing on trains during rush hour), to the malfunction of digital devices (the impossibility of uploading an episode from one's cell phone, the lack of an Internet connection, running out of battery, etc.), to the writing process (lack of inspiration, the need to find new readers to "unblock" the story) which make the experience itself a trial and error process.

5.2.4.2. The "Fragmented" Reading Patterns

The reading patterns on *The Incipit* are of a hypertextual nature and are heavily influenced by the activities of uploading and reviewing which characterize the collaborative digital fiction platforms. Bronwen uses the term "zapping" between "stories" (2011, 207) to indicate the possibility on the readers' part to move from one story to the other without any limitations of order or sequence. On *The Incipit*, readers also have the option of shifting their fruition activity from the primary plot to the secondary plot of a story. The reader has the ability to distinguish between the text as a "story" and the text as a "system" (Bolter 2001) ; she/he alternates her/his activity as

a reader participating in the narrative pact, with her/his active role contributing to the production process of the story.

Reading can be triggered by the notification of the upload of new material on the platform. An automated notification e-mail is sent to the corresponding e-mail address should one of the following happen:

1. A new episode is uploaded by the author
2. A reader/author receives a message answering one of her/his comments on the wall.

This social network aspect of collaborative digital writing platforms also allows alternate reading and writing. The fragmented character of this activity, also due to the portable, movable devices used for it, requires the presence of short texts, hence justifying the 5,000-character limit per story episode on *The Incipit*.

Reading choices are connected to genre preferences, to the chart of the most popular

stories, or to the connection with a specific author which leads the reader to read and comment on her/his stories. Finally, they can be determined by the need to expand one's readership.

5.2.5. *The Dimension of Tellability*

Tellability concerns the value that the narrative acquires in relation to the participation of its audience. Of great interest are the strategies developed by the narrator to keep the level of attention of her/his audience high and to widen her/his readership. At the other pole stands a story which has no reason to be told.

In the case of the traditional book, tellability appears justified by the fame of an author in certain literary and intellectual circles, while the advertisement done by her/his publishing house allows a vast resonance of her/his literary activity in the public sphere. The bounds with the readers and their reading retention are periodically strengthened via public events, where the author promotes her/his new work and often signs copies for the fans. While the book is being read, what is called a narrative

pact is created between author and reader. This is defined by Grosser as an unspoken agreement:

“according to which the reader partially and temporarily suspends his critical faculties and accepts as true a story which he knows to be largely fictional.”
(1985, 25; translation mine)

It is thanks to the readers’ support that an author’s work, on which depends his importance over time, remains in the collective memory. The production and consumption of a text happen at different times: therefore, there isn’t a dedicated space where author and reader can instantly discuss the text.

5.3. Tellability in Social Media

Page claims that a narrative’s tellability on social media depends on “the dialogic and interactive characteristics of social media” (2012, 16). A narrative’s success on social media is therefore the result of the audience’s interaction with the text in question and with the narrator: a general disinterest on the audience’s part leads therefore to the failure of the said narrative. According to Page, in regard to the online

collaborative digital fiction platforms, the contents of the comments, which constitute the interactions between the author of the story and her/his contributors, visible through the analysis of the text, can be classified into three categories:

1. Retrospective evaluations: these are the comments that the contributors leave concerning the contents of the story.
2. Potential suggestions: They are actual suggestions about possible developments of the story and stand as tangible proofs of the engagement of the audience with the story, marking its success.
3. Thoughts about the writing process: these are comments about the collaborative writing experience and about the platform as the place where this writing practice is possible.

On closer examination, we find that tellability does not only concern the interaction, but rather the creation of actual relationships through the production of the narrative. This means that “storytelling practices operate within negotiated contracts” (Page 2012, 16) between the narrator and her/his audience. These norms have the goal of:

1. enabling face-enhancing involvement between narrator and audience and
2. avoiding telling stories damaging the face of the narrative participants (Page 2012, 91).

According to the researcher, however, respecting said norms is not always easy, and any incongruence or infractions in the narrator's activity on the platform can push the audience away, leading to the boycott of the narrative.

Here too works the "Intimate Stranger" model in shaping members' relationships on the platform: "Stranger" because of high degree of anonymity is conferred to its members. "Intimate" because the main motivation to the author is the presence of the contributors which acts as a guide in the writing process.

5.3.1. Tellability on The Incipit: *The Primary Plot and the Canon*

In her examination of tellability on social media, Page considers exclusively the narrative that narrator and audience build thanks to the interactive component

offered by the platform; in actuality, there are two levels of tellability in collaborative digital fiction communities. There is clearly a level connected to the narrative born from the interaction between the author and her/his contributors during the creation of the story (the secondary plot), but there is also a level connected to the relationship of said story with the reference canon, respecting the “narrative pact” between author and reader.

Online digital writing platforms are not exempt from having a canon, the respect of which allows the story to be accepted on the platform and by its members.

As Bronwen (2011) points out, writers of fan fiction find their canon in the traditionally published work that inspired the stories hosted on the platform with its world, its characters, and its setting; the tellability of such stories is therefore valued according to their faithfulness to this canon.

The stories published on *The Incipit*, as pointed out in the autoethnography, refer to

the genre of paraliterature. The canon of the online collaborative digital fiction writing platform *The Incipit* is external and has its references in the genres of paraliterature (Pagliano 2004).

Before starting a story on the platform, the author needs to select the genre it belongs to and follow the conventions of the said genre. The consistency between the story and the genre conventions is one of the first assessment indexes available to the readers to evaluate it on the platform, even if the semi-open structure of the story and the specificity of the medium used to write it can undermine its adherence to the genre, as pointed out in the autoethnography in the story “Only hipsters like Trainspotting.”

As we already observed in the autoethnography, readers can choose one of the options in the primary plot given by the author at the end of each episode. The legitimization of the story by the readers on the primary plot is not only tied to its adherence to the reference canon, but is renewed at each episode based on two

factors:

1. On the one hand, the author's ability to offer options that allow the readers to feel involved in and responsible for, via their choice, the story's development;
2. On the other hand, the author's commitment to follow the option with the most readers votes when continuing the story.

5.3.2. *Tellability and the Secondary Plot*

In *The Incipit*, too, the interactions between readers and author have a fundamental role to safeguard the story's tellability: they take place on the story's wall or constitute the secondary plot, as called by Klaiber (2014).

If adhering to the canon is the correct way to guarantee the story a following of readers, another element related to tellability influences the management of the story during the publication of the various episodes: it is the author's duty to steer the story in the direction selected by the readers via their choices.

Due to the fact that author and readers are constantly in contact, the audience monitors and intervenes in the writing phase of the narrative, and feels therefore more involved and connected with the author following the model of the Intimate Stranger (in the case of C. in chapter two).

The author is therefore forced to follow the readers' directions, because the readers themselves and their interaction with the story generate points that can sustain the story in the platform's economy. If the author chooses not to listen to her/his audience, the story risks losing popularity and can be forgotten along with the person who wrote it.

As we have seen, the author's intervention in the story is concretized in the primary plot with the attribution of points through the choice of the best option for the continuation of the story. In comparison, the secondary plot instead takes the form of the comments which also influence the development of the story.

The comments, which we can trace back to Page's theories, are not considered as merely isolated interventions, but are also part of a debate between the author and various readers on the story's wall, or transcend it in a dialogue between author and reader which happens on both their walls, where the roles of the participants are constantly inverted. The frequency of comment exchanges between the participants is a symptom of the weight that the "relationship" between author and reader has on the economy of the story. This is true both in regard to the points (every time a reader comments, the story earns an Incipoint), and in regard to the reader's influence on the story's development.

5.3.3. *The Contribution of the Autoethnography: A Reflection on the Relationship with Other Members of the Community*

Through the autoethnography, it becomes clear how not just the comments, but also the story itself is complicit in the development of the relationship between author and

reader. Therefore, the characters of the story talk about topics that have already been shared by the authors, presented as options, or that fuel the discussions on the story's wall: all of this creates a chain of references and allusions which tightens, loosens, and mends the relationships between the participants to the production of collaborative digital fiction. These relationships are enriched by a component tied to an imagined story which belongs to both and influences the relationships' development.

Following the rules of the website and the mutual respect between the platform members allow the consolidation of the relationships between the author and the audience. This positively influences the story's degree of tellability and its author's reputation on the platform. In contrast, any misconduct on the author's part causes a negative reaction from the reader/readers involved, undermining her/his legitimacy.

The example taken from the autobiography is connected to Oskar's story, which parodies the main authors of the platform turning them into dogs and revealing sensitive information about them. Oskar knew very well the members of the platform, their activities on and off the platform, and had purposefully used a different

username in order not to be recognized. The discontent of the platform members, initially in the form of comments of protest on the story's wall, led to the intervention of the administrators themselves, who deleted it.

There are also forms of legitimization of the story which do not directly depend on interaction with the readers, but are rather connected to the administrator's intervention. The assignation of covers and of the coach editor's comments proclaims an author's skill regardless of her/his ability to entertain relationships within the platform which would guarantee visibility to his story; on the other hand, the website administrators' arbitrary distribution of such acknowledgments is frowned upon by the platform members, because it clashes with the principles of collaboration which support the production of multi-tellership stories.

A correct approach to safeguard the story's tellability requires the author to *become* a reader, and to actively participate and comment on her/his followers' stories. This activity translates into a network of repeated interventions on the author's wall and on

her/his readers' walls, which are the written and visible manifestation of the relationship formed between the two, which can further develop beyond the boundaries of the platform.

In the autoethnography chapter, this kind of relationship is demonstrated by Celine and Napo's example. Celine leaves a provocative comment which doesn't fit any of the categories described by Page; this triggers an interested reaction from Napo which transcends the platform's patterns and results in Napo's comment on Celine's wall, using the platform's code to send her a message whose meaning can only be understood by the two authors in the context of the construction of their relationship through a network of interventions of which they alone keep track of. I call this kind of relationships "hypertextual" since they develop in multiple spaces, and become understandable in the light of the complex network of interactions and actions in the context of the production and consumption of digital fiction by the community members.

5.4. Embeddedness

The dimension of embeddedness refers to the dependence of the narrative to the context(s) in which it happens to be produced.

In the interpretation of a book and its contents, the sociohistorical context has, of course, great relevance. Information about this specific context can be found not only in the text contained in the book itself, but also in both biographical and autobiographical works by and on the author, or in her/his private and public correspondence. Moreover, a sociolinguistic analysis of the textual data of the narrative provides information about the literary context in which the author operates.

5.4.1. *Embeddedness in Social Media*

The stories that appear on online platforms of collaborative writing are highly integrated in their specific context of production and fruition. Page states that “the narrative qualities of social media stories cannot be assessed without reference to the context in which they are embedded” (2012, 91).

The researcher pinpoints the different contexts she considers relevant for the analysis of the narrative structure on the social networks in the following list:

1. The textual context, including all the textual expressions surrounding the narrative;
2. The generic context, representing the platform hosting the narrative;
3. The behavioral context, defined as “the physical situation in which the participants' engagement with social media takes place” (Page 2012, 91); and
4. The extrasituational context, representing “the offline social practices in which the participants are involved” (Page 2012, 91).

She fails, however, to consider in her analysis of the extrasituational context and the behavioral context.

Page claims that this choice was determined by the limitations of her method: “The importance of the physical setting in which a social media story is produced and

received is often neglected in text-immanent analysis of narratives and of CMC more generally” (2012, 204).

These are the very limits that the autoethnography of digital fiction, the method employed in this research, allows us to overcome. On the one hand, it allows us to reconstruct the sociotechnological context in which I was writing. On the other hand, it brings to light the physical component which characterizes the writing activity and the experience of embodiment with the device used to write. This autoethnography was made possible thanks to a perspective which sees the Internet as embedded in the human practices and steps away from the rigid separation between reality and online experiences, opening up new research possibilities.

In the following section, I will illustrate the contexts described by Page, with reference to online collaborative writing platforms and integrating the aspects connected to the extra situational and behavioral contexts reconstructed through the autoethnographic method.

5.4.2. *Embeddedness on The Incipit: Recovering the Behavioral and Extrasituational Contexts Thanks to Autoethnography*

First, the textual context is represented by the wall or secondary plot, where the stories are produced and where the plurality of contributors to the stories takes shape and acquires precise narrative identities. Uploading the story episodes generates a response by the contributors on the wall, and helps cement the relationship between the author and the contributors, consolidating the tellability of the story on the platform. The hyperlinks, which allow movement from one story to the next with ease and from one wall to the next, create a privileged network of meanings which are concretized, for those who share them, in the creation of a personal story born through the various stories and their walls.

Second, the general context is the space where the administrators of the website take on the role of agents: they give prizes to the most successful authors, they solve

technical problems of the website, and they update it. The platform is also the place where they fulfill their function of mediators, dealing with controversies among users (for example, problems related to censorship, the breaking of rules on the website, etc.), and maintaining the status quo. On an online writing platform, such a context is extremely dynamic: the website changes and evolves every day. Information that is available one day can disappear the next (in the autoethnography, I mention Oskar's story, which was deleted from the platform because it was considered offensive); new figures or elements can come into play and noticeably alter the dynamics of production and fruition of the story (in the autoethnography, I mention the intervention of the coach editor, who can influence the story's degree of tellability, and to the contest, during which the uploading and reviewing of the story were accelerated in order to meet the deadlines).

Third, the behavioral context regards all the extratextual aspects coming into being during the process of production and fruition of a given story and such a context is recovered thanks to the autoethnography. By analyzing this particular context, it is

possible to follow my activity as an author and my relationship with the different media used to integrate the narrative experience. This allows for the pinpointing of new possibilities that the online reality unfolds and their impact on human practices such as writing fiction.

Specifically, in my autoethnography, the analysis of the behavioral context allowed me on the one hand, to highlight the fragmentary nature of the act of writing, as we have already pointed out when discussing linearity. The mobility of the device used to write allows the multiplication of the spaces where the author can write, and the multiplicity of the tasks that can be simultaneously carried out, creating the illusion of copresence between the platform members. On the other hand, the analysis allowed me to identify the physical and structural problems connected to the physical act of writing on a mobile phone (exemplified in the autoethnography by the specific challenges of writing in certain situations, such as a crowded train or when one's cell phone may be running out of battery).

Lastly, the sociotechnological frame into which my autoethnography has been inserted along its whole duration represents the extrasituational context.

Although the focus of the analysis shifted from a Japanese website to an Italian platform, my physical person was still located in Japan and the writing process occurred almost entirely on trains and through mobile phones. Through my autoethnography I was able to gather insights about the environment where my research took place, especially about the characteristics and uses of cellphones and about the writing/reading habits on Japanese trains. All these factors have oriented, shaped, and concretized my experience of digital fiction writing conceived as a trial and error process.

5.5. Conclusions

The analysis of the online platform *The Incipit* according to the four dimensions of narrative allows us to shed light on some writing possibilities that have been temporarily suppressed by the advent of the traditional book and now are concretized

by exploiting the characteristics of mobility, accessibility and immediacy of the medium on which they are produced.

The story is no longer under the unique responsibility of a single author; it develops via a network of actors whose roles are well discernible. Communication among these various actors happens during the very writing of the story. In this way the narrative roles of the different participants to the creative process strengthen and tighten. Despite this, each author has the possibility to take on all these roles at once in her/his writing experience on the platform. In addition, these roles can be diluted *among* several identities reserved for one or more of these tasks. This makes the writing experience extremely *fragmented*, but functional for the author's strategy on the platform when building relationships and managing her/his projects.

On the platform *The Incipit*, we can pinpoint three coexisting structural levels.

1. The story level which, even following a closed structure, lends itself to the dynamics of the game and to being reworked by the readers;

2. The writing level, split in updating and reviewing, aimed at the here and now to maintain a feeling of copresence among the story's contributors; and
3. And the reading level, which develops through hyperlinks without limitations of order and sequence, and is constantly alternated to the act of writing.

These three structural levels coexist and contribute to maintaining the continuous exchange of information in real time among the members of the community recreates the "common shared space" that private reading progressively eliminated. This "space" provides the various participants to the creative process a certain social connection comparable to the experience of copresence in a physical space typical of declamation and recitation in oral societies as the story production and consumption is embedded *in the dimension of "here and now."*

The tellability of a story does not only depend on the value of the story, but it gets created through the strategic interaction between the author and the other members of the community which contributes to create actual relationships. I called this kind of

“hypertextual” relationships because they become understandable in the light of the complex network of interactions and actions in the context of the production and consumption of digital fiction by the community members. The continuous exchange of information in real time among the members of the community recreates the “common shared space” that private reading progressively eliminated. This “space” provides the various participants to the creative process a certain social connection comparable to the experience of copresence in a physical space typical of declamation and recitation in oral societies.

The production and consumption of the story in real time requires an analysis that takes into account the context in which it is created; thus, the textual context reflects the formation of the identities and the product of the interactions that take place on the platform; the generic context allows for a reflection on the transient nature of the Internet and the importance of the administration as a filter and to control the information; moreover, the autoethnographic analysis in which I, as an author, study the process of digital writing through my own experience allows the recovery of

behavioral and extrasituational contexts identifying the crucial roles played by different media and by the sociotechnological frame in which the writing process is embedded, while reflecting on the emotional and affective dimension of an author who decides to venture in the brave new world of digital fiction.

Chapter Six

Conclusions on the “Author on the Run”

Author’s Ethnographic Notes: Plagiarism discovered

15/05/2015

It has been a while since the last time I visited The Incipit. At the moment I am working on analyzing the data collected on the platform for my project. While doing that, I started wondering what was going on the platform and if things were still as I left them.

***Accessing the platform, I accidentally discovered that my story “Streghe si Nasce” has been copied and someone is actually using it on his own page.** To be more precise, the user “Zibaldo” has created a story with the same name as mine. On the story page, he posted my last episode as if it were the incipit of his story and added the three options for the reader. I am on the train, and I am connected to the website with my usual identity. I have realized that I forgot Celine’s account information (Celine is one of the three different identities that I use to write my stories on the platform) so I cannot immediately contact Zibaldo, neither the staff as if I were she. First I need to go home and gain access through my iPad, the device where I can connect directly to the platform as Celine. I thought that the site staff was smart and efficient enough to notice two different users having posted a story with the same name and the same contents. For the first time I started thinking about the risks one may encounter writing on a digital platform. I have written this story with a false identity. What kind of guarantees can I rely on to protect my work in the future? From the platform staff point of view, Celine is just a bunch of data corresponding to an e-mail address and an account on their site—not a real person; she never was. Since I started publishing as a professional author of illustrated books, I have become more sensitive to copyright issues than I was when I was*

writing as an amateur on this site.

As for Zibaldo, should I contact him directly on his wall bypassing the site staff? He could be someone of my reader under a false identity who tried to steal the story after realizing that Celine had been offline for quite some time ...

At least, someone is still wandering on my page.

In this last chapter, I will retrace the novel steps of the “author on the run” and the logical conclusions that have led to her/his construction and identity.

By “author on the run” I mean an author creating in an interactive, dynamic, fragmented and itinerant context. Specifically, the characteristics defining the author on the run are as follows:

INTERACTIVE

- The author writes a story which acquires value in the moment of interaction with the readers. Readers too are involved in the production process.
- Being the story a compromise between different participants, the ultimate meaning is created by the relationships built around it.

DYNAMIC

- The author writes in a context determined by the immediacy of the Internet and by the necessity to accommodate in real time the needs of the readers as well as the contingency of the mobile device he is producing his story with.

FRAGMENTED

- The author on the run switches from one role to another in order to realize his or her literary project and to forge relationships with his or her followers.

ITINERANT

- The space where the author moves is a space also shared by the community members. He has to move in this space as a nomad, back and forth from the space where his story develops to the comments on the bulletin board. Constantly on the run, the author's back-and-forth movement is what makes his story happen and develop.

As already stated in the Introduction, forms of expressions have exponentially multiplied in the Internet era, and the meanings, relationships, and roles have changed too. However, the Internet is not to be considered as an entirely new dimension completely separated and discrete from daily life. Rather, the Internet should be seen as a sort of extension of reality through which cultures dialogue, rapidly reshaping one another. Relationships are born on completely different and heterogeneous premises. The Net characterized as embedded, embodied, and everyday by Hine (2015) transforms human practices, the writing included.

It is embedded because the Net is directly connected to the writing process; it is not a

world apart but it exists within the human habits which are themselves reshaped through it.

It is embodied because with the diffusion of the mobile technology, the writing activity can be practiced anywhere and everywhere. It is through the acquisition of techniques and competencies enabling work with these devices that the elaboration of strategies of adjustment and success related to the writing environment emerges.

Finally, the Net is everyday because it represents an infrastructure that permeates our ways of acting and our practices of living in such a pervasive way that it becomes and renders itself invisible.

For these reasons, it is necessary to expand the tools of the traditional ethnography in order to investigate and understand how human habits have changed since the introduction of the Internet and the rise of new phenomena that originate from the invasive nature of the Net.

The choice then of conducting an autoethnographic analysis, related principally to the object of study: digital fiction, becomes logical. This phenomenon, in fact, shows that a millenarian practice such as the practice of writing is now combined with the logics of the Net, in which “a re-embodiment, a new sense of world or ‘reworlding,’ and an ability to inhabit multiple worlds in multiple bodies or multiperspectivity” (Kozinets 2010, 181) occur.

The advent and the spread of writing practices progressively eliminated this shared space of narration between storytellers and their audiences, best exemplified by the orality of Homer’s epics. With the invention of print, the diffusion of books, the enlarged pool of readers, and the increasing development of a culture based on the acts of writing and reading, the author became a more prominent figure in the sociocultural panorama. The progressive and pervasive establishment of the practice of writing, however, broke the space that authors and readers shared at the moment of fruition of a text. Furthermore, the interests of private publishers in expanding and

exploiting the economic potentials of a business model centered on the large distribution of the printed book contributed in creating a gap between the author and her/his own text (Williams 1981), and furthermore the author and her/his readers.

The impact of the digitalization process of books started creating problems for such a system. Today the printed book coexists with its digital doppelganger. The text in the form of a tangible book suffers the passage of time and is vulnerable to destruction. Although reproducible in an infinite number of copies, it still needs a complex and widespread network of transportation and distribution to reach its readers. By contrast, the e-book and its digital text are always available to the reader as long as she/he is equipped with a digital platform to access it.

In the meantime, the advent of the Internet and of digital tools saw the rise of original digital texts, of which digital fictions are an example. The digital text is organized according to an hypertextual structure which concretizes Roland Barthes's notion of "intertextuality" (1977 [1967]); all texts produced online are interconnected, and this

characteristic influences their mechanisms of fruition. In addition, digital texts allow a series of additional user functions such the textual search, copy, editing, and reference functions, all of which are not directly applicable to the traditional format of book. Moreover, Bolter (1991) states that the digital text can reshape writing forms, which were standardized in the shape of the printed book, and therefore can also reshape the relationship existing in this context between author and reader. With the Internet's rapid modes of communication (e-mail, chat apps, social media, etc.), the Web renders the personal computer and the mobile phone the shared space by authors and readers where roles and practices are recombined, reconfigured, and re-played in different shapes and modalities according to the specific dynamics of online communities.

The autoethnographic experience allowed me to throw some light on the following issues: within the digital context, the digital fiction and the forms it takes are defined by the hosting platform. The fiction is shaped by a series of factors inconceivable in a physical book. The participation in first person to the writing process gave me the

chance to understand how difficult it could be to pinpoint exactly the field of research and how myopic it could be to establish an arrival point; this is not necessary to the investigation. The possibility to expand my field of study allowed me to acknowledge my linguistic and cultural limits that may become obstacles when one decides to start a writing activity online: while the Internet exhibits no actual national boundaries, language is a barrier *on it*. The autoethnographic experience also helped me understand that every contribution is personal and different from the other contributions, although there exists a sort of common sociotechnological infrastructure to which all the users of online platforms conform. In this context *The Incipit* is not a point of arrival. It is a sort of research landmark through which it is necessary and helpful to pass in order to enrich one's own writing experience while learning from the communication with the other users that hidden and unknown zones of the writing experience exist outside the platform. This is why I defined the digital writing as *a trial and error process*.

The process of autoethnography allowed me to face difficulties connected to the

writing activity linked to the learning of a new writing technique and the new media with which it works. It also gave me the chance to confront problems related to the mobility of my writing environment and to elaborate consequently a strategy in order to preserve my reputation on the platform while combining the writing activity with my own daily routine.

The autoethnography allows the detection of how any malfunction in the website connected to the management of information influences the writing practice; the temporal dynamics experienced by the members help to shed light on how people read and write in relation to the acts of uploading and reviewing, on the reflections on the durability of the story and the fear of oblivion, on the connection between the temporary disinterest of the readers for the story and the subsequent choices that go against the ethics of the community.

In this interactive way of producing and consuming a work of fiction, authors must put themselves in confrontation with the community following their stories. This ongoing

dialogue is unavoidable, since it is a valuable way of exchanging information within the community but also in connecting with other users of the same platform and therefore expand the reading public.

This is why I referred to the writing practice as embedded *in the dimension of “here and now.”*

As I write in the first person, I can confirm the hypothesis that on the digital online platforms here analyzed the reading community does acts as coauthor, whether by contributing to the production of the fiction, intervening in the text through specific digital functions, or by commenting on the wall of the story. Furthermore, the autoethnography allowed to expand the scope of the analysis and to observe the author’s activity on the platform in its entirety.

Page’s research about social media, since it is structured on the basis of the analysis of the comments and the textual data hosted on the platform, offers a static perspective

anchored to the page/pages of the story/stories in question. In contrast, autoethnography allows instead a more dynamic perspective centered on the “fragmented” author who moves from the “primary” to the “secondary plot” of his story, then visits the walls of other stories and becomes a reader, or takes on the role of a contributor to other authors’ stories. This dynamic perspective is supported by the fact that the author does all this taking on different roles, taking on the identity of different members of the platform, chosen according to his specific action strategy within the community.

The friction between my identity as a researcher and my identity as an author, caused by the fear that taking on multiple identities would nullify the goals of my research, actually revealed how my identification in the writing process was the key to clarifying the dynamics of fragmentation of the identities and the narrative roles within the community, which were not confined to managing the relationship with other members, but resulted in a specific strategy on the author’s part to safeguard his work and his reputation on the platform. The difficult relationship I eventually experienced

with the administrators of *The Incipit* had exasperated the internal conflict between the I-researcher and the I-writer. I tried to cope with this problem by splitting my virtual identity into a number of different usernames—perhaps with their own personalities even—and eventually by putting some distance between me and the platform.

This is why I referred to the fragmentation *of identity, narrative roles, and the writing experience of digital fiction*.

Finally, collaborative digital fiction communities are spaces for cultural innovation and for the development of relationships between their members.

The relationships on *The Incipit* are woven through participation, effort, perseverance, and presence. The frame is essentially the story, and the key point is the wall, where the stories change and are enriched. In this process, each author takes on one of his roles within the story in question, then changes roles again when dealing with another

story.

Two stories can be hypertextually interconnected through the comments alternating on their walls. The relationship, therefore, depends mainly on one reader's appreciation of another author's story, and vice versa. However, it is also true that in order to make the relationship evolve and bring it to a new level, it is necessary to find new spaces which the platform can't and doesn't want to offer to the members. Almost every relationship on *The Incipit* begins anonymously, and can remain anonymous: this is the result of multiple factors tied to the insecurity about one's writing, the will to move freely on the platform with the possibility to manage multiple anonymous fake identities, and also to avoid nuisances in one's private life. In my interviews with the platform's authors, which were also anonymous, the interviewees describe a common pattern that explains the evolution of the relationship with other members of the group: the first contacts take place on the wall, then move to e-mails and more "complete" social networks such as Facebook.

A way to track down a specific author is through the Facebook page of *The Incipit*. On this page people post information about new story episodes published on *The Incipit*. Some authors, members of the group, use the same identity they do on *The Incipit* and are therefore easier to track down. Others use different names, but they can be identified through the story that they advertise on the social network. Facebook allows the group members to become friends on the social network and to access the private chat function. And then there are also other authors that decide to create alternative discussion groups, independent from the main group (which is freely accessible to all authors, readers, or lurkers alike on *The Incipit*) that can only be accessed upon invitation.

Generally, moving from the writing platform to Facebook allows the website users the freedom to talk about topics which don't necessarily concern the story, moving away from a "public" space such as the wall in favor of a "private" one such as chat messaging; the social network offers a space where the two people in question interact "in their entirety" thanks to the possibility to access a variety of additional

information which is not available on *The Incipit*. The evolution of the relationship between individuals or groups outside of *The Incipit* influences their behavior on the platform in the shape of alliances or joint writing experiments, such as the previously described attempt by the Ten Little Pens. The fact that this needs to move from one space to the other, on and off the platform, to cement the relationships and the “itinerant” nature of such relationships, which can be traced in and evolve with the writing process, led me to describe them as “*hypertextual*” relationships.

The experience of digital fiction writing as described thanks to the ethnographic method allows to pinpoint the characteristics of the author engaged in a project of collaborative digital fiction. The author can be defined as an “author on the run” due to the interactive, dynamic, fragmented, and itinerant nature of her/his tasks.

The writing process on collaborative fiction communities has specific characteristics which place it halfway between oral storytelling and written works.

The author uses writing as a means of expression, but the production of the story on digital fiction platforms has the characteristics of storytelling in oral societies: the story acquires value in the moment of execution and in the interaction between author and readers, who are involved in the production process of the story.

Only the creative moment of the stories remains still, interposed and articulated through the continuous flux of readers' comments and authors' replies. The story eventually results in a compromise between the different participants; its ultimate sense is given by the atmosphere created around it, by its specific mood. The narrative acquires sense not because it has an end but because of the sense of constant becoming it transmits—its essence is not its content but is the web of relationships built up *around* it.

The dynamism of the experience is centered precisely on the interactive component of the writing process. The author on the run must deal with the immediacy of the Internet, managed through the opportunity to use a constantly connected mobile

device to accommodate in real time the needs of his readers, answer any comments, be updated on the platform's and the contributors activities related to her/his story, and read the stories written by her/his followers to liven up the debate about her/his own stories.

In the oral tradition, the narrative roles of author and reader did not exist; works such as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were the result of a collaboration of and among different people, and the narrator and his audience shared the place where the work was performed. With the advent of the modern printing process, these roles became crystallized in the activities of production and consumption, and were separated by the literary industry.

The need to manage several actions in the dimension of the "here and now," where the space is shared by the community members, the opportunity to use multiple devices, combined with the anonymity that characterizes digital fiction communities, results in a fragmented experience of identity, of the narrative roles, and of the

activities of reading and writing on the platform.

Finally, the author on the run switches from one role to another, both on and off the platform, in order to concretize her/his written project and to cement relationships with her/his followers; in the meantime, she/he physically moves thanks to the mobility granted by the medium she/he uses to write, which actively contributes to shaping the act of writing—its completion within the fragmentation notwithstanding.

For these reasons, because of the interactive, dynamic, fragmented, and itinerant character of the writing experience, I identify the author taking part in a collaborative writing project on a digital platform as an “author on the run.”

This autoethnography is situated in the context of the debate of digital fiction studies, and allows the integration of elements of the investigation necessary in order to reconstruct the writing process of a collaborative digital fiction which would otherwise be neglected. A methodology studying this process “from the outside,” simply

referring to the textual data available on the platform in question, can't properly analyze and contextualize the complexities of this activity and the implications of the sociotechnological frame and the medium used.

Therefore, this autoethnography is a valid tool in investigating the interaction between technological systems and social systems in real-life settings, opening up new perspectives of investigation to clarify how human relations and practices are reconfigured on the basis of an embedded, embodied, and everyday Internet.

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