Introductory remarks for an auto-ethnography of digital fiction

With the on-going fervent debate over book digitization, an analysis of the phenomenon of digital fiction may be helpful in making significant statements concerning the future of the book, and of literature in general, in the era of new media. This analysis parallels the investigation of the important changes undergone in the relationship between the author and the reader in the Internet era.

This paper aims at investigating and exploring the theme of writing digital fiction through the example of the fiction-sharing platform The Incipit.

The Incipit is an Internet community based in Italy, where its members share digital fiction in the form of serial stories. The success of each story and consequently of the author who has written it, depends on a specific algorithm, based on the number of readers visiting the story page, the comments on the story's bulletin board and the frequency with which the readers intervene on the story line to provide an alternative development.

While platforms for sharing digital novels are not a novelty, the point, which marks the difference between this platform and others developed with the same intention, is the possibility for the reader to influence the mechanism of the story to an extent that goes beyond the mere comment. That is, while it is rather common to see authors changing their plots on the basis of readers' comments to an ongoing story, in this case the action of the reader is perpetrated directly on the plot. This presents a challenge to the author to try to figure out what are the reader's needs during the creative process.
The author has spent seven months on line as a member of the community, writing five stories with alternative identities investigating particular aspects of online writing, exploring new possibilities of writing with technological devices like the computer or the mobile phone. This kind of writing experience implies the embodiment of the writer in the virtual environment, thus establishing an unavoidable connection between the virtual and the real.

The sharing platform studied in this paper becomes the fieldwork where the researcher realizes his investigation. The fieldwork is delimited by the digital context but also by an active online community, which constantly questions the position of the author with respect to his or her story and the reading public.

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. In this interactive way of producing and consuming a work of fiction, the authors must put themselves in confrontation with the community following their stories. This ongoing dialogue is unavoidable, since it is a precious way of exchanging information within the community but also to get connected to other users of the same platform and therefore to expand the reading public. The reading community acts as co-author, whether by contributing to the production of the fiction, intervening in the text through specific digital functions, or by commenting on the bulletin board. The interactivity of the platform is also a powerful tool, through which the digital fiction can be promoted to other communities and spread exploiting the sharing options within the platform itself or the social media connected to it.

This community is a space for cultural innovation but also for the rise of conflict with the corporation administering the sharing platform, obliging members to find alternative ways when they feel that their freedom of expression is being restricted.

The author "entered" the fieldwork not only as a researcher but also as a writer, opting thus for an analysis performed through the method of auto-ethnography. Auto-ethnography reflects on the ethnographic- I in the fieldwork. In this case,
since the focus of the analysis is digital fiction, the ethnographic field is the online community, The Incipit, with its characteristics of alteration, anonymity, accessibility and archiving.

Hence, the need to reflect on a methodology, that conducts auto-ethnography in a netnographic context.

This paper will therefore aim to reflect on the evolution from traditional writing up to its digital expression and, at the same time, 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 auto-ethnographic method as an effective tool for the understanding of digital fiction.