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# Autoethnography of digital fiction in Japan: a case study

Digital fiction  
in Japan

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to show how autoethnography applied to digital fiction can give us deep insights into collaborative writing through a case study of a Japanese mobile novel platform.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The paper is based on the author's autoethnographic fieldwork as an ethnographer and a writer, arguing that the autoethnographic method is an effective tool for the understanding of digital fiction.

**Findings** – Through this approach the researcher, could not only reflect on the possibility of autoethnography as a methodology, but he could also enter into the dynamics of how the community of people surrounding a digital novel and his/her author is organized.

**Originality/value** – Despite the fact that Japan has been a pioneer in the development of mobile novels, almost nothing has been written on the topic in languages other than Japanese. This paper is an invitation for further investigation that could foster comparative studies between the Japanese case and those in other countries.

**Keywords** Information systems, Autoethnography, Collaborative writing, Ethnographer/author, Mobile novels

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

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 the new technologies have reshaped this relationship, opening new scenarios/perspectives such as the redistribution of roles during the creative process, the formation of new identities, and new modalities of creation and fruition of stories created within this frame.

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 partial results of an autoethnography on digital fiction that took place in Japan from May 2014 to the present (October 2015). During this period, the author has 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 platform, 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



### Autoethnography in the internet era

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 the mobile phone 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, enjoying contact with other community members.

I started studying Japanese digital fiction early in 2011. The goal being a new definition of author in the context of digital fiction (a highly developed genre in Japan since early 2000s), I undertook research both using qualitative methods such as deep interview and the discourse analytic approach.

The research of the early phase (Rebagliati, 2014) led to the confirmation of some of the already found by other researchers:

- (1) the importance of the constant interactivity between author and reader in the creative process of the digital fiction (Asano, 2008); 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 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 on 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 (2015), 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 (Hine, 2015, p. 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.

### *The autoethnographic method and digital fiction*

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 experience 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.*, 2010).

*Aim.* Being myself a writer and a teacher, the ultimate aim of my research activity is that its results might be shared by a wider community than the adepts of the academic world. The analysis of digital fiction might help us understand better the way we relate to technological systems, and it is only 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. Due to the nature of digital media and the mixture of the virtual and the real, direct participation in the writing activity allows registering and describing passages that otherwise would have remained hidden.

Tuncalp and Lê (2014) offer directions to define and 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 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.

As for the research location, this paper refers to a single Japanese website, *Maho no irando*, the first platform on which this creative form took place.

*Time.* As I mentioned above, online autoethnography allowed me to have a deep immersion in the process of writing digital fiction as an author. Content analysis was a further way to collect data but 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 site and set up my personal page. I have tried to actively participate both as an author and as a reader of other people's stories, keeping my anonymity intentionally in line with my previous findings in which I could show how relationships are built on this basis.

*Japanese mobile novel "Keitai Shosetsu"*

The cell phone novel, *Keitai Shosetsu* in Japanese, 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. It was called "Deep Love," which was then published, made into a movie, drama, and ultimately, a whole franchise. In the beginning, there was no website or location on which his cell phone novel could be read, so instead, he sent out his ongoing chapters to readers via e-mails and MMS. Yoshi later created the first mobile website with a small investment, providing access to his content on phones all across Japan. Using various campaigns such as promotion leaflets handed out on the streets, he targeted high school students and gathered a huge reader base.

Since its beginnings, *Keitai Shosetsu* was a new literary form mostly addressed to Japanese High school girls. Even today, it keeps this characteristic. Stories are published in the form of episodes, which are uploaded on special websites which readers can access for free through their mobiles. Anyone registered on the site has the opportunity not only to read the published stories, but also to leave comments and spread the stories among their friends by means of their mobile phone. The reader/user may become an author himself/herself.

Since the distance between author and reader is blurred, in the mobile novel the author and the readers' roles merge now together, marking a neat difference with the encrypted relation that characterized the printed book era. Mobile novels become an example of choral work narration, where the author takes suggestions from the reader's opinions to further develop his/her story[1].

The time for the creation and consumption of a mobile novel is very different from traditional novels. Mobile novels are generally written by high school girls, during their long trip from home to school and vice versa. Stories can instantly be uploaded on the net and shared simultaneously with other users of the site.

**The autoethnographic fieldwork: *Maho no irando***

I decided to start this investigation choosing the Japanese platform *Maho no irando* as my fieldwork. There are many sites on which mobile novels are uploaded everyday. 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.

In order to place my autoethnographic attempt into a larger context, it is important to give a brief panorama on Japanese mobile novel, which represents a cultural revolution in Japan in the way of producing and consuming the literary product.

*Maho no irando: the platform*

*Maho no irando* hosts more than 2,300,000 titles; the function allowing the upload of mobile novels has been operational since 2000. Users register themselves with nicknames, and their relationships are mostly anonymous. The continuity and intimacy

of these relationships are granted by the fact that novels are regularly uploaded and that contact between readers and authors takes place on a daily basis.

The site has, indeed, a number of functions allowing interactivity between authors and readers. 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 e-mail exchange process, the so-called “perpetual contact” (Matsushita, 2012) policy is in force. This means that a received message requires an immediate reply, since the transmission of the digital text is instantaneous. This particular feature of e-mail exchange on mobile phones is also reflected in the exchange of messages between author and reader, whose relationship becomes close.

The site includes 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. 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 the author. User can write a comment about the novel they are reading and share it, appropriately labeling spoilers if they have written information that could compromise the pleasure of readers who are just at the beginning of the story.

Reader may express their appreciation for the novel by clicking the button “*ü ne*,” which means “like.” This appreciation will directly influence the ranking of the stories on the site. Moreover, readers can choose to catalogue the story in a subgenre among a range of choices; they can use predefined keywords shared with other readers to describe a story, thus inserting it in a further classification of genre. Using the Share buttons for Facebook and Twitter, he/she can link the story and share it. Finally, they can also keep track of his reading progress through the bookmark function.

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

#### *The writing environment: the socio-technological frame*

Digital writing is not an automatic process; it is indeed a technique to learn just as the traditional way of writing. The internet gives us an almost infinite number of tools which enrich and expand this writing practice but which need to be mastered in order to be used effectively. With regards to mobile technology, the iPhone5 was certainly 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 three main points.

*Personalization.* First, the Japanese mobile phone has been developed mainly as a personal medium, a fact that Matsuda (1999) calls “personalization.” New Japanese generations 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 (Mizukoshi, 1993; Yoshimi, 1995; Nakamura, 1996).

*Multifunctionality.* 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 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 virtual environment in which to seek refuge, and write at any time and in any place. The second result is the spread of e-mail culture that has become the predominant way of communication among young people. Proceeding from the mobile pager technology of the early 1990s, e-mail 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, *Keitai Shosetsu* needs to be understood as “refashioning e-mails rather than literature” (Kyoung-hwa, 2012).

*Portability.* 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 impolite and thus avoided in order not to disturb them (Ito *et al.*, 2005). Therefore, during the long train commuting time to and from work or school, mobile phone use is limited to internet services and related to the consolidation of a strong reading and writing habit via mobile phone.

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

### **Writing and reading on the run: an autoethnography of digital writing**

I described above the socio-technological frame into which my autoethnography has been conducted along its whole duration. My physical person was located in Japan and the writing process occurred almost entirely on trains and through mobile phones. In Japan, mobile phone novels are read, written and commented on by thousands on their daily train rides to and from work. Most of my novels were written while commuting:

I am on the train to work: it takes one hour to get there, the right time to try to open my account on Maho no irando. I am using my iPhone 5 but sadly there is no specific application designed for writing with it. This means that I have to scroll up down left and right the page when I am working on the settings. I have started this operation choosing a domain for my homepage hosted in the site.

I am holding my mobile with the right hand and typing the text with the toe 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 (Author's Ethnographic Notes, 4/7/2014).

The use of a smartphone to write and read short stories and novels was a choice determined for several reasons:

- (1) the time spent to commute on trains (around two hours per day) and the wish to make use of this time in a productive way;
- (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; and
- (4) the time spent in Japan made me familiar with the general environment of Japanese trains, where people use individual contents such as books and mobile phones, and interpersonal contacts or conversations among the passengers are avoided.

However, writing in 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 enough space to use a mobile phone to write or read:

I left home at 11:15 and took the train to work. During the commuting time 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 to find myself in a crowd with no chance to move a single muscle. It's April, and all companies welcome the new employees with after-work parties. From the middle of the month, the situation will hopefully change with the new employees forced to over work until late evening (Author's Ethnographic Notes, 4/7/2014).

Sometimes the battery of my mobile phone simply decided to abandon me in the middle of my commute:

My mobile was dying, and I connected it to my computer which I have brought today with as I had to use it in the classroom. Normally I do not take the 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 (Author's Ethnographic Notes, 15/4/2014).

In this case, I witnessed a complete technological bound: while the mobile was charging the battery through my computer, the computer was connected to the internet via the mobile.

On the other hand, often read and written in transitory, "third spaces" like trains, *Keitai Shosetsu* are a great example of how mobile media tethers us psychologically and emotionally to a sense of home and the domestic while often on the run.

Only the creative moment of the stories remains still, interposed and articulated through the continuous flux of readers' comments and authors' replies. The story results eventually 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 the web of relationships built up around it.

Finally, the fieldwork shifted from the Japanese platform to an Italian platform, as some linguistic and cultural difficulties arose during the writing process. Even though I tried to set up a systematic methodology to keep up with the writing, as revealed in the account below, it was not enough to overcome the linguistic and cultural barriers.

Such an autoethnographic experience proved to be very helpful to pinpoint some of the challenges that a want-to-be authors have to face when they decide to start writing digital fiction. This point is valid no matter which platform one eventually selects to investigate.



*A working plan and the writing process*

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 writer and responses of the readers that do not repeat themselves:

Despite some first difficulties, I 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 (editing); and
- D. Upload the checked translation on the BOOK page of Maho no irando (Author's Ethnographic Notes, 4/6/2014).

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:

Today I have started the day translating my novel from Italian into Japanese. As 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 Chinese 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 am supported by the help of 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 (Author's Ethnographic Notes, 4/7/2014).

The editing (point C) was another factor that slowed down the whole process. I was never able to know when exactly the text would have been ready to be uploaded; my Japanese friend was working on it in 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, you might think that the text was finally ready to be uploaded (point D). This was not quite the case 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 of the platform. Furthermore, my writing process had so many different steps and such a complex stratified structure that all this work was preventing me from using my time to read other stories and was limiting my contact with other users.

I also observed the text layout, and I started wondering how to adapt my novel contents to it. Readers expect my story to resemble at least some aspects of a mobile story:

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. Copy and paste from the word document was not possible. There's a code in composing the layout of the text in mobile novels (Author's Ethnographic Notes, 4/7/2014).

From what I have learned from previous research on *Keitai Shosetsu* (Honda, 2008), a mobile novel blank spaces between a line of the 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:

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 have a more natural result. It seemed texts needed to be created for the space they need to fit in (Author's Ethnographic Notes, 4/7/2014).

I have read several *Keitai Shosetsu* and was thus familiar with their internal codes. Still, the inability to write and upload in a fast and more natural way my story via the tools provided by the website frustrated my initial plan: to write my story and at the same time to read and comment on the stories of other users, and to thus become part of the community of authors/users:

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 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 with motivation for writing [...] (Author's Ethnographic Notes, 5/26/2014).

However, I must admit that this first failure then turned into 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 among the reading community.

### **Observations on the digital collaborative writing**

Participation in first person in the writing process led to some findings related both to the object of the study (digital fiction) and to the methodology itself.

#### *The community and its organization*

One of the points which become clear while actively participating in the fieldwork writing a digital novel is the importance of the community and its organization. *Maho no irando* operates with what can be defined as a community of practice (Wenger, 1999), that is, a community of actors 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-recognized role during the processes of production and consumption of the contents. The stories produced on the *Maho no irando* platform are the outcomes of team work by interconnected people; the specific

characteristics of the platform itself allows these stories to be identified in discreet analytical units.

*Maho no irando* represents the virtual space connecting authors and readers. Through this virtual space a new intimate relationship is born between author and reader. Tomita (2009) calls this relation “intimate stranger,” intimacy and strangeness or anonymity being two very important points defining it. The community supporting a mobile novel is a very important point in the reading process since they are fundamental part of the leisure deriving from mobile novels. As for the strangeness, while this does not represent a real issue in books’ readership, its importance for the mobile novel is notable since it is the strongest incentive to the formation of a community around the novel and/or to the connection with the author. Anonymity being a particularity of the way Japanese people use social media, (testified also by the recent success of Twitter over Facebook) it is the perfect condition to allow the reader to open up to his author.

With the digital text the common space between author and reader is back in the shape of a virtual environment where the author composes the text and the reader consumes, intervenes, and shares it with other readers, without intermediaries.

In addition to these observations, Tomita (2009) asserts that the occurrence of these types of relationships through media take place progressively with the passage from a kind of instrumental communication to a consumptory one. The first is a type of communication is aimed at the transmission of the message, while in the second, the communicative act, the attempt to establish contact is considered as a priority.

The frame in which mobile novels are created possesses both the characteristics of mobile phone communication and online community interactivity.

During my fieldwork experience, I was not able to interact effectively with my community of readers.

This failure was one of the reasons leading me later to write on an Italian platform, on which I would be able to express myself in my native language. However, the impossibility to fully exploit *Maho no irando*, taught me and revealed to me the importance and fundamental role of online interactivity, feedback, and sense of community in digital fiction. Without these elements, it is hardly a fulfilling experience, since the mobile novel should allow the author and reader to merge, interact, and influence each other. The real-time feedback can change the course of the story; the author is concerned with the readers’ feedback and tries to gratify his/her readership.

#### *Some observations on methodology: autoethnographic method and 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.

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 (Schultze, 2001). They allow us to analyze qualitatively the interaction between social and technological systems (Schultze, 2001).

I find it 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 is in the early 1900s, when the qualitative researchers reported on their fieldwork as an object to be investigated with distance. The post-war years to the 1970s, classified as the second moment, saw researchers striving to conduct qualitative research with the same rigor as quantitative investigation.

The third 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. 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. This brief overview helps us in quickly grabbing 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. This is one of the fundamental question leading me to conduct a research on collaborative fiction from the inside. My position was not that of a researcher in the field, but that of a member of that fieldwork, as a writer, and member of an online community.

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, p. 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, p. 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 the author creates his or her story outside the established boundaries of traditional writing. His/her work undergoes fast, live feedback posted by a large audience, who not only judge the story but also participate actively in its creation.

### Conclusion

Participation in first person in 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 (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 socio-technological infrastructure to which all the users of online platforms conform. In this context, the novel written on the digital platform 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 communication with other users that hidden and unknown zones of the writing experience exist outside the platform.

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.

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 precious way of exchanging information within the community but also of connecting with other users of the same platform and therefore expand the reading public.

As I write in first person I can confirm the hypothesis that the reading community on the online platforms analyzed here 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 these platforms is also a powerful tool, through which digital fiction can be promoted to other communities and spread, exploiting the sharing options within the platforms themselves or the social media connected to them.

I “entered” the fieldwork not only as a researcher but also as a writer, opting thus for an analysis performed through the method of autoethnography. Autoethnography 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. Hence, the need to reflect on a methodology that brings autoethnography into a digital context. According to Hine (2015), the internet with its mobility, its capacity of returning an experience of embodiment, and its interactive mechanisms, is progressively transforming our notions of subjectivity, personhood, and sociability. Following Hine’s lines, it can also be argued that the act of writing is undergoing some major changes. It is thus important to recognize this moment of transition to record the current situation and paint a possible scenario for future research and the position of the ethnographer as a user and a content producer.

### Note

1. Surprisingly, mobile phone novels have made the recovery of book publishing possible: the most successful mobile stories are in fact published in the form of a paper book. In 2007, in the most-sold books “top ten chart”, five of them, were originally mobile novels. However, a close look at the printed version of mobile phone novels features will reveal that just a little of the original book is left. Flipping through the pages, we will find a new type of layout embodying the screen frame of the phone on which the stories were originally written.

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