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Abstract: The character of authorship, evaluation, canonization and production of artworks is altering in new communication technologies. A mass of amateur and participatory works and reviews is challenging the existing symbolic and economic structure of the field. This article focuses on the function and the workings of an online digital community of amateur authors, considering the community as a network with actors. Drawing from the field of literary sociology and of cyber-ethnography, a qualitative analysis is made of the online exchanges between 2001 and 2004.

The function of the community in question is in the online exchanges themselves, which have creative agency. What is produced a reservoir of critical, technical and poetical knowledge of the genre. This implies a form of collaboration with a 'product', which is however not to be measured in any pragmatic or economical sense of the word, but in pleasure and creativity.

A second conclusion is that the exchanges themselves perform classic institutional functions. This community is constructed like the 19th century societies of amateur writers or artists, that formed their own institutions. As in those societies, emphasis is on craft and creativity rather than on the economic or symbolic value of the products.

Suggested Reviewers: Ronald Soetaert Professor  
Professor, Pedagogical Studies, University of Gent, Belgium  
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Prof.dr. Soetaert is an authority in the study of digital literary culture.

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Dr. Brillenburg is an eminent scholar of literature, with an emphasis of the changes that are taking place in the digital era. Her NWO-funded project 'back to the Book' is a perfect example of ways we can study Art at a crossroads.

James Leach Professor  
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Professor Leach has laid the theoretical basis for research into creativity within an artistic community in his anthropological studies.

Amsterdam, December 17<sup>th</sup>, 2012.

Dear editor,

Please find enclosed my submission to *Poetics*. The article, ‘Amateurs online: creativity in a community’ was written during a research scholarship at the University of California. It examines how authorship, community and creativity are performed in a digital context.

Fortunately, it was selected by Anne Bowler and Victoria Alexander to enter the second round of peer review for the special issue ‘Art at a Crossroads’. If you need any additional information, I will of course be happy to provide it. Please find my contact details below.

Respectfully,

Dr. Yra van Dijk, University of Amsterdam

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## **Highlights**

- I examine an online community of amateur authors, which is considered a network with actors.
- A qualitative analysis is made of a database of online exchanges between 2001 and 2004.
- The exchanges have creative agency and form a reservoir of critical, technical and poetical theory.
- The exchanges perform classic institutional tasks and emphasize craftsmanship and creativity.

**Title:**

**Amateurs online: creativity in a community.**

Submission for the special issue: 'Art at the Crossroads'

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**Author Biography:**

Yra van Dijk (1970) is Assistant Professor of Literature at the University of Amsterdam and the (co-) author of various studies and articles on contemporary poetics (*Leegte, leegte die ademt* (2006), *Reconsidering the Postmodern. European Literature beyond Relativism* (2011)). She was a visiting scholar at UCSD in 2011, and is a member of ELMCIP, a collaborative research project funded by Humanities in the European Research Area (HERA). We are investigating how creative communities

of practitioners form within a transnational and transcultural context in a globalized and distributed communication environment.

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The research was done in the context of the HERA-funded research into '**Creative Communities: Electronic Literature as a Model of Creativity and Innovation in Practice**'. ([www.elmcip.net](http://www.elmcip.net)).

## **Amateurs online: creativity in a community.**

### **Abstract**

The character of authorship, evaluation, canonization and production of artworks is altering in new communication technologies. A mass of amateur and participatory works and reviews is challenging the existing symbolic and economic structure of the field. This article focuses on the function and the workings of an online digital community of amateur authors, considering the community as a network with actors. Drawing from the field of literary sociology and of cyber-ethnography, a qualitative analysis is made of the online exchanges between 2001 and 2004.

The function of the community in question is in the online exchanges themselves, which have creative agency. What is produced a reservoir of critical, technical and poetical knowledge of the genre. This implies a form of collaboration with a ‘product’, which is however not to be measured in any pragmatic or economical sense of the word, but in pleasure and creativity.

A second conclusion is that the exchanges themselves perform classic institutional functions. This community is constructed like the 19th century societies of amateur writers or artists, that formed their own institutions. As in those societies, emphasis is on craft and creativity rather than on the economic or symbolic value of the products.

**Key words:** digital community, creativity, symbolic field, authorship, collaboration.

### **Introduction:**

With the large possibilities of online communication and participation, the character of art communities and institutions seems to be changing. The world wide web, and the availability of mobile screens and interactive software has altered authorship, processes of distribution, evaluation, and canonization. In the field of literature, for example, we seem to be moving from a closed system of institutional hierarchies to a more participatory mode, in which the public has influence on production, canonization and evaluation of texts. Online communities are coming into existence in which work, reviews or information on texts is exchanged. Apart from a few publications (cf. Boot e.a., 2012), we do not as yet have much insight into the character and function of such amateur literary communities. While there is a wealth of research material on large social networking websites like Facebook, the function of small

1 creative communities on the internet largely remain to be analyzed. How does such a  
2 community form and interact? For the community of digital writers on which this article  
3 focuses, one might expect similarities with the way communities of print authors were  
4 constituted. They tended to form around an institution, a journal mostly, a bookstore, or a  
5 publisher, and were often characterized by a common poetics, understood here as a shared set  
6 of norms on what the form and content of their work should be (Van Rees and Dorleijn,  
7 2006). The function of this shared idea on literature had, apart from a creative effect, also a  
8 strategic and partly economical effect: it was a joined effort to prepare the readers and critics  
9 for a new kind of literature, to attract attention and thus to gain symbolic or economic capital.  
10 Are similar functions performed in a community that centers around digital texts? What is  
11 produced there seems to be more than only creative works: there is a production of an  
12 institutional framework, too. Since editors, bookstores and professional critics are largely  
13 absent in this field, the internet community seems to have taken over the functions that in  
14 print literature were performed by institutions like academic criticism, literary venues, circles  
15 and societies, editors, journals, bookstores or universities. Digital authors have to criticize,  
16 judge, and sell their own work, in the absence of people to do it for them (Rettberg, 2009).  
17 Apart from the social function of such networks, and the emphasis on the production of  
18 works, an important function thus appears to be the production of a critical and institutional  
19 framework within the community.  
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21 We will focus on the exchanges in a specific international digital community over a  
22 determined period of time: interactive fiction<sup>1</sup> writers between 2001 and 2004, who  
23 communicated intensively on the discussion list *rec.arts.int-fiction*. Additionally, the way in  
24 which the contributors have archived their own discussions is telling self-descriptive meta-  
25 data. In archiving different strata of the discussion, the contributors have mapped some of the  
26 discourse space. This implicit self-presentation is combined with explicit self-description in  
27 some of the discussion strands. Both this self-reflexivity and the consistency and long-  
28 livedness of the discussion list makes *rec.arts.int-fiction* a complete case from which  
29 conclusions may be drawn on the function and the structure of online amateur artistic  
30 communities.  
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<sup>1</sup> Defined by the community itself as 'computer-based text adventures. These games  
involve the player entering textual commands in response to the game's output. In turn,  
this output is influenced by the player's input'.

(<http://plover.net/~textfire/raiffaq/FAQ.htm#howauthor>)



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Firstly, I will sketch the interdisciplinary theoretical framework, that draws on sociology, sociology of art and on literary theory. This is followed by an introduction in the nature of the interactive fiction community (paragraph 2). In paragraph 3 a description and analysis of quality and quantity of the exchanges in the community in question is presented, and the answers to the questions will be discussed in the fourth paragraph.

## 1. Literary sociology

The analysis of a digital community is based on a multi-disciplinary theoretical approach. It is not a strictly sociological, nor a strictly literary study, since one has to operate halfway if the question is how in *sociological terms* this community or rather ‘network’ functions, and how it relates to other *literary* communities and their production of conceptions, works, ideas or exchanges.<sup>2</sup> This is why the data, the archive of online exchanges between members of the network, will also be analyzed on the level of self-defining and meta-statements (see paragraph 3). In this manner I hope to be able to describe and explain both the general nature of the network, as how it relates to other literary networks.

Firstly, what constitutes a community? As Latour points out on a more general level (2005: 5), if one defines the collective of authors beforehand as a community, one takes as a starting point the fact that actually needs to be researched. Therefore, I will speak henceforth not of ‘community’ but in Latour’s terms of a ‘network’. The difference is, firstly, that one avoids deciding preliminary what constitutes a group, but that the group defines itself as such: ‘we follow the actor’s own ways and begin our travels by the traces left behind by their activity of forming and dismantling groups’ [Latour 2005: 29]. This actor-network theory emphasizes the dynamic character of the network- it is more a process than a product: ‘groupings have constantly to be made, or remade, and during this creation or recreation the group-makers leave behind many traces that can be used as data by the informer’ (Latour, 2005: 34/ 35). The ‘traces’, in this case the statements made by individuals on the online- discussion list and the archives of this list, are a way to discover the connections that make up the network. They perform the social in all practical ways and form the source of what it means to be in a society (Latour, 2005: 232).

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<sup>2</sup> Beaulieu argues that an analysis that departs not only from sociology, but also from literary or media studies is generally fruitful because of the textual nature of online communities (Beaulieu 2004, 159).

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Studies of communities on the internet tend to see a ‘Latourian’ central role for the activity of members of a community. Such *Cyber-ethnography* does not start with a preconceived idea of what constitutes a community- but with what the participants themselves see as their group, avoiding the risk of enforcing a framework on a virtual community. This does not mean that the community is considered to be merely ‘virtual’, but it does mean that it is more fragmented and shows less obligation to loyalty- members have an unconditional relationship to the community. Collective ideals are no longer a condition for a virtual community, and there is no fixed communal identity. Instead, ‘the spirit of community’ itself is crucial (Ward, 1999: 98).

This specific community of digital authors constructs not only their community, but a new genre too. DiMaggio argued in his *Classification in art* that new artistic genres are partly based on ‘social relations among producers’ (1987: 441). Genres therefore are socially constructed. DiMaggio studies ‘processes by which tastes are produced as part of the sense-making and boundary-defining activities of social groups’. This model, in which a network develops and constructs the outlines of a *genre*, will be applied to the digital network of IF writers, as manifested in the online discussion list. Creativity and production will be understood to work three ways here: the outlines of a genre are created, as are specific works. Thirdly, the connections that establish the network itself: ‘Taste then, is a form of ritual identification and a means of constructing social relations (..)’ (DiMaggio, 1987). What is foregrounded is not only artistic production but sociability itself, that has taken the place of family- and geographical social structures.

DiMaggio states that the West is in a period of ‘declassification’ in art. Since the elites have become less cohesive, and the economic profits in art low, classification has lost its function. Community and networks of literary artists traditionally formed in specific ways. Centered around mostly institutional nodes (a *salon*, a journal, a university), authors have tried to establish common conceptions of literature: ‘a set of mostly *normative* ideas and arguments on the nature and function of literature, on literary techniques and their alleged effects on readers’.<sup>3</sup> Common ground for author networks, centered around institutions, was found in rebellion against prevailing poetics, and in the collective development of new poetic notions. Expressed either textually or paratextually in manifesto’s, essays or letters, *new* ideas on the form and the function of literature were made to converge, giving rise to the birth of a literary movement. Authors joined forces to defend these new ideas and create a readership for them.

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<sup>3</sup> Van Rees and Dorleijn, 2001, 340.

1 Studies on authorship and group constitution tend to focus on ‘strategic routes that serve to  
2 claim and legitimize a position in the literary (or in the scholarly) field’ (Dorleijn e.a., 2010).  
3 The sociology of literature, therefore, is used to approach the question whether a network of  
4 IF-authors shows a similar shared interest in claiming a place for the new genre, or in the  
5 professionalization of its authors. Which place do the actors in the network try to find for their  
6 work in the cultural field? New ‘players’ in the field tend to defend a new position for their  
7 work, starting at the periphery. This is also what Serge Bouchardon (2010) found in his  
8 research of a French community of digital literary authors. ‘The actors of *e-critures* have been  
9 attempting to categorize the works in order to structure and delimit the field of digital  
10 literature. The traditionally defining features of the genres under construction seem to be  
11 discarded in favor of new features by the authors themselves, hereby challenging the very  
12 notion of literary genre.’ Bouchardon found an emphasis on format: the discussion was on  
13 semiotics rather than semantics (e.g.: on the ‘language’ of the work rather than on the  
14 meaning of it) and on technical formats rather than on formal features.<sup>4</sup> The question is  
15 whether in the IF-discussion list, too, the chosen software technology has become a central  
16 factor in the exchanges and the formation of this digital network. The role of the *institutional*  
17 *or poetical* center seems to have made place for a *software and genre-based* center:  
18 discussion-lists tend to be distinguished rather by questions of format than questions of  
19 aesthetics.

20 In digital literature the writing technology is a crucial part of the strategy of signification: the  
21 ways in which a work can have meaning are determined by the choice of software and  
22 hardware. Poetics in digital media may be found in its ‘its conceptualization and facilitation’.  
23 (Memmot, 2006, 300). A large part of the exchanges is expected to focus on technical issues.  
24 So may code libraries perform as a vector of poetic effects. Different media formats (e.g.  
25 animation, hypertext, interactive fiction) seem to be decisive in the electronic literature's  
26 crucial interventions into our globalizing communication networks.

27 Digital literary theory is needed to analyze the paratextual statements by the authors on a  
28 poetic level. How is the new genre defined and what shared conceptions do the actors have of  
29 it? What function and what status do they see for their work? How do paratextual comments  
30 relate to the works itself ? And how are authorship and agency distributed? Barrett Watten

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<sup>4</sup> Bouchardon (2010) sees a number of creative forces occurring on the list: ‘To sum up, the original idea of a work can be born on the list, the exchanges can inspire its author as for the contents, the comments can entail an evolution of the work. Finally, the explanations of the author’s approach on the list can then offer a paratext for the work’.

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(2006) has been one of the scholars that point out that the character of authorship is different in online communities: ‘Currently, we may discern a movement away from poetics in the single-authored mode (with exceptions) toward a return to a multi-authored, metadiscursive, dialogic practice particularly in online zines and blogs.’ Authorship is distributed here, and the system itself may have agency. The computer and the discussion list, and the internet on which it appears, are not neutral intermediaries, but *mediators* (Latour, 2005, 39) . The system itself is a mediator in the discussion that will have to be taken into account: it has agency.

## 2. The IF community

The above survey of theory leads us to a couple of hypothesis about networks of digital authors. Firstly, the cyber-ethnographic assumptions mentioned above: in online networks the participants themselves are expected to ‘take the lead role in establishing the reality, status and principles of their group’ and membership of the group is unconditional. Next, the network is expected to be international, especially one like the IF discussion-list, which is in English.

Thirdly, there might be a blending of roles in this network as in most digital literature: practitioners, scholars and consumers of digital literature tend to be the same persons performing different roles. These institutional functions were also behind the foundation of a larger network of digital authors, the Electronic Literature Organization, the object of which was to ‘promote and facilitate the writing, reading, and distribution of electronic literature’ (Rettberg, 2009). The ELO came forth from a concern that works would disappear in the mass of internet information and would not find their way to an audience. The network of IF-authors indeed seems to take over some of the institutional functions which were traditionally divided over different institutions. Works are written, read and evaluated by the actors of the network. Prizes are awarded to the best work in different categories (<http://www.ifcomp.org/> and [xyzzy-awards](#)), resulting in a ‘canon’ of works of interactive fiction.

One of the traditional functions of sub-networks in the print literary field was exactly this: to find a way to a specific audience, and even to *create* and educate such an audience. In print this obviously implied creating a market for the work in question. This does not seem to be the primary function in e-literature communities, however, since after Infocom, and apart from a single editor like Eastgate for hyperfiction, no attempts have been made at creating a market. Rettberg (2009) compares the e-lit community to the sub-network of print poetry since both are ‘an other-than-mass-market’:

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2 Very few books of poetry make the best-seller lists, and very few people outside of the  
3 poetry community could name more than a handful of famous living poets. Yet a  
4 vibrant global poetry subculture nevertheless exists, because of the fact that poets do  
5 buy each other's books, attend each other's readings, critique each other's work, select  
6 poetry for awards, and conduct extended esoteric debates. Furthermore, people still  
7 pursue advanced degrees in the writing and study of poetry, generating new  
8 generations of poets and scholars long after the culture at large changed channels. The  
9 popular culture doesn't care much about poetry, but poets do, and that itself has been  
10 enough to sustain a diverse literary culture.  
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20 In terms of the cultural sociology of Bourdieu, this is the field in which producers produce for  
21 each other: the autonomous field. The difference is, of course, that poetry has 'high' symbolic  
22 capital, as Bourdieu would call it (1993, 47), and that digital literature still has to obtain a  
23 status for itself in the literary field.  
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26 Since most actors in the IF-network seem not very interested in 'symbolic capital', one could  
27 draw another comparison: the networks of digital authors seem to share characteristics with  
28 19<sup>th</sup>-century literary and cultural societies as they thrived in Europe and in the United States.  
29 Unlike the 18<sup>th</sup>-century 'salons', these societies were not organized around a single person or  
30 a small group. They were larger, democratically structured and more explicitly humanist in  
31 their goals. Emphasis was on rhetorical excellence as a means of civilization and education,  
32 and writing competitions were organized around a theme. Like in digital literature, there was  
33 no clear cut division between amateur and professional authors- this came to an end when  
34 professionalization of literary authorship began around 1900.  
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37 In the digital age, new types of author-networks emerge that perform some similar functions  
38 as the 19<sup>th</sup>-century networks: emphasis on technique and rhetorical craft, the formation of an  
39 institution in its own right, distributing the work among the actors of the network. Many  
40 differences are to be found as well: the absence of face-to-face contact and of underlying  
41 humanist ideals, but mostly the fact that the new networks have to find a place for themselves  
42 within a literary world that is organized around the distinction between amateur and  
43 professional, and between 'popular' and 'high art'. It is therefore to be expected that part of  
44 the criticism of the new digital genres, and part of the social exchanges between authors of  
45 electronic literature are about these distinctions.  
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1 This idea is confirmed with a look at the existing scholarly discussion on IF, beginning with  
2 the print books. They are part of the community conversation, and give us an insight into how  
3 the genre and its status are viewed upon within the community. Thus they reflect how the  
4 community presents itself, partly to the outside world, partly to itself.  
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7 Nick Montfort commences the first history of interactive fiction, *Twisty little passages*, with  
8 an elaborate discussion of the literary status of the genre. Just like many publications on  
9 digital literature, Montfort argues why it is more than a ‘triviality’, as many people still seem  
10 to think. [Montfort 2003, 9]. Montfort gives three arguments for the literariness of the genre:  
11 due to the puzzle-character of IF, the narrative is revealed gradually. Secondly: there is also  
12 the sense of exploring a new world or space. Finally, it belongs to a longstanding tradition of  
13 literary riddles (2003, 3/4). Thus the question of literariness, and of the cultural capital, is put  
14 early in the book. By referring to Barthes, Baudrillard and Greek drama, Montfort firmly  
15 places IF in a high-brow literary discourse. Graham Nelson did something similar when he  
16 opened *The Craft of Adventure* with a literary quote from the work of Jean de la Bruyere.<sup>5</sup> It  
17 is telling, though, that Nelsons other mottos are derived from players, children, practitioners:  
18 here we see the explicit absence of cultural hierarchies. More than in some other digital  
19 literary genres the opposition between high-brow literature on the one hand, and the  
20 entertainment culture on the other, seems to be deconstructed in Nelsons study.  
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23 On the level of professionalization of the genre, the same distinction occurs between Nelsons  
24 and Montfort’s studies: the latter slightly downplays the share of ‘amateur’ contribution to the  
25 genre, and the online community of IF-authors is not much of a quoted ‘source’ for him.  
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27 Graham Nelson, on the contrary, quotes the discussion list regularly in his study on IF, for  
28 example when he sketches the history of the genre (2001, 365).  
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What distinguishes the IF-community from many other digital literature communities (like,  
again, *é-critures*<sup>6</sup> or the Electronic Literature Organization) is firstly the concentration around  
a single genre, if not a single software. Typically, IF will be a text-adventure. It is written like  
an interactive riddle, in which the reader can control characters to solve the riddle by

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.ifarchive.org/if-archive/info/Craft.Of.Adventure.txt>

<sup>6</sup> The variety in the characterization of the works by the actors raises an issue: if there is no common definition shared by the various actors (authors, researchers and readers), there cannot be any conventions for the genre. Nevertheless, even if the conventions of writing and reading of the various forms (hypertextual fiction, animated and kinetic poetry, generative and combinatorial works, collective writing) are not stabilized, they are debated within the framework of the list. The *e-critures* list can thus appear as a laboratory of forms, which may one day give birth to genres. (Bouchardon 2010)

1 performing certain tasks. This lack of distance between the reader and the protagonist (or: 'the  
2 player-character') is one of the defining characteristics of IF.

3 Secondly, the IF-community has a long history, going back on the days of the first text-  
4 Adventure games, the first of which was exploited by Will Crowther in 1975, and elaborated  
5 by Don Woods. Later on, the text-games were even exploited commercially, an episode which  
6 still influences the community. In the online exchanges, the actors not only review the works  
7 that are produced, but also sketch the history of IF- another part of the tendency to self-  
8 reflection and genre constitution. The interactive fiction community is well documented and  
9 had highly structured archives of both texts and paratexts. Finally, different than in  
10 Bouchardon's French case, the IF-list is in English, the *lingua franca* of digital art, and  
11 therefore may be assumed to be accessible to many authors from different language-areas.  
12 Due to the accessibility and to English, and moreover due to the emphasis on media and  
13 software rather than on national cultures, the network has an international character. French,  
14 Spanish, Swedish, German and Italian works are quite abundant in the BAF's archive.  
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### 27 **3. The network**

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30 Originally (since the beginning of the 1990's), and until recently, digital exchanges between  
31 authors of IF were posted to two newsgroups: rec.games.int-fiction and rec.arts.int-fiction:  
32 the first for players and the second for authors, although the division between these two  
33 roles is not very static, as we will see later on. This is where most discussion took place.  
34 Apart from these newsgroups there are discussions within a smaller network on the  
35 MUD: <http://ifmud.port4000.com/>. Most actors in that medium were also present in the  
36 newsgroups, but the MUD is more 'in-crowd'. The MUD organizes the yearly XYZZY  
37 Awards, which attract much attention within the community. It has a different and  
38 broader social function than the newsgroups: 'Basically, regulars from the IF  
39 newsgroups sit around talking about things ranging from IF-writing to hints on games to  
40 general computer stuff to music to monkeys, alpacas, and corn. It's fun.'<sup>7</sup> Finally, there is  
41 the IF Archive, <http://www.ifarchive.org/> and "Baf's guide to the IF Archive":  
42 <http://www.wurb.com/if/>. This is the location were all the practitioners put their works  
43 and games, 'the main distribution channel'.<sup>8</sup>  
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59 <sup>7</sup> From FAQ, rec.arts.int-fiction.

60 <sup>8</sup> Victor Gijbers in personal communication.  
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1 For younger generations, blogs and forums are a more obvious medium of exchange,  
2 therefore the importance of the newsgroups has diminished over the last few years.<sup>9</sup>  
3 Another new development is the tendency to leave the virtual domain and meet up in  
4 person- one group of IF-authors meets every first Saturday of the month in Berkeley, for  
5 example.<sup>10</sup> The augmentation of infrastructure has fragmented and altered the network.  
6  
7 Apart from a wiki, there are many private blogs with reviews, under [http://planet-  
9 if.com/](http://planet-<br/>8 if.com/). A new central location is the 'IFDB', where players review works and  
10 practitioners publish it: 'IFDB is a Wiki-style community project: members can add new  
11 game listings, write reviews, exchange game recommendations, and more'.  
12  
13 Additionally, there are a few yearly events: the IF Competition  
14 (<http://www.ifcomp.org/>), organized for 16 years now, and smaller competitions. And  
15 of course the XYZZY Awards (<http://xyzzyawards.org/>), where players vote for works in  
16 different categories. Finally, there are a number of smaller websites like Brass Lantern  
17 (<http://www.brasslantern.org/>) and SPAG (<http://www.sparkynet.com/spag/>), which  
18 is a place for reviews.  
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20 Here, the focus is on the original newsgroup for practitioners. This is partly motivated  
21 by practical reasons (the necessity to limit the network) and by the fact that it is  
22 amongst practitioners, rather than amongst players, that we might expect to find more  
23 information on the network itself, and on genre-construction, distribution, evaluation or  
24 aesthetics of IF.  
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### 39 **3.1 Rec.arts.int-fiction 2001-2003<sup>11</sup>**

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42 The selection of discussion-strands that are relevant for the issues at stake, is organized  
43 around the three different theoretical layers of the central question: sociology, literary  
44 sociology and literary theory. Sociological are the questions that refer to the self-reflexive  
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51 <sup>9</sup> From an average of 1100 posts a month in its peak years, to an average of 88 posts a  
52 month in 2011. (<http://groups.google.com/group/rec.arts.int-fiction/about>)

53 <sup>10</sup> An initiative of Dan Fabulich on June 29th, 2011.

54 [http://groups.google.com/group/rec.arts.int-  
55 fiction/browse\\_thread/thread/2b0375a511263227#](http://groups.google.com/group/rec.arts.int-fiction/browse_thread/thread/2b0375a511263227#)  
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58 <sup>11</sup> From January 1<sup>st</sup> 2001, to December 31<sup>st</sup> 2003. In this period of three years a total of  
59 39339 messages were posted (resp. 14.504, 14.166, 10.669). This adds up to an average  
60 of 1092 messages a month, around 36 a day.  
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1 activity on the list: how does the network establish and define itself (if at all)? Is there a  
2 moderator, are there criteria, do people introduce themselves, and how? Do they create online  
3 identities or use 'real' ones? How do the actors reflect on the list itself?  
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7 What springs to the eye most is the self-organization and self-archiving of the exchanges. On  
8 a special wiki 'a collection of interesting discussions' is presented.<sup>12</sup> The quality and  
9 accessibility of the archives points already to the status given to the exchanges within  
10 the community. Exchanges are not just like phatic speech acts: their function is not only  
11 to communicate that the actors are communicating, but their content is obviously  
12 considered by the community itself to be of enough value to be kept accessible.  
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17 In this archive, there are 23 subdirectories, which range from a broad theme like 'art' to  
18 a more specific one like 'mapping-tools'.<sup>13</sup> The main subjects are 'development, game  
19 mechanics, writing, player and PC, IF theory, NPC's and artificial intelligence, community  
20 and miscellaneous'. If we structure these, it turns out that emphasis lies on technical  
21 questions of programming and writing. On another level, we find an emphasis on theory,  
22 self-reflection and analysis of the own community: aspects that in print communities we  
23 would see performed by critics, newspapers and other institutions. This gives the IF  
24 community an aspect of high self-sufficiency and self-reflexivity.  
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33 An auto-description of the community and the rec.arts list is also to be found in the FAQ  
34 (<http://plover.net/~textfire/raiffaq/FAQ.htm>) as:  
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39 In this newsgroup, we discuss the technical and artistic aspects of  
40 interactive fiction, as well as the actual processes of and tools for  
41 writing it. While we do mention specific IF games, it is typically in the  
42 context of comparing and contrasting their structure or artistic merit--  
43 with emphasis on the development of IF as a literary genre and/or a  
44 form of computer-based art/entertainment.  
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51 The explicit intention is thus to focus on the creativity of the community at the  
52 formation and definition of a *genre*. This implies that discussions within the newsgroup  
53 have to be well organized and limited to specific subjects, as the text of the FAQ shows.  
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58 <sup>12</sup> [http://www.ifwiki.org/index.php/Past raif topics](http://www.ifwiki.org/index.php/Past_raif_topics)

59 <sup>13</sup> [http://www.ifwiki.org/index.php/Past raif topics](http://www.ifwiki.org/index.php/Past_raif_topics))  
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Newcomers to the list are assisted with this reader in six parts, but are simultaneously instructed as to the 'rules' of the list itself, which are more strict than one would expect in the free zone of the internet. Here one learns what posts may be about (and what not): 'Do not post very long or irrelevant pieces of code', or: 'when you post a dissenting view remember to attack the idea, not the person'- only a handful of 'flame wars' a year occurs, according to the FAQ, 'which is quite good for a newsgroup'. Apart from the basic rules of a civilized debate, there are rules that are specific and the condition for a network to come into existence: the obligation to communicate:

Remember, rec.arts.int-fiction is a discussion group, and will only function if people contribute to it. So, while you ought to just read for a week or two to get a taste of the flavor of the group before spicing things up with your first post, don't lurk too long. We do want to hear from you...

We may conclude that this is a strong self-structuring network. Abusers of the group are swiftly corrected by the other actors, for example if they use the list for self-promotion, or for gossiping about others on the list: 'do not ad hom'. The structuring and archiving of the network is evident from the existence of such a clear and well written list of 'rules'. The text of this 'FAQ' even begins with meta-FAQ, in which all the previous authors of it are acknowledged and thanked. Contrary to what new media scholars tend to believe, the question of authorship seems to be not entirely unimportant in digital creativity. That is a second characteristic of the list, which becomes evident when we ask the question as to the identity of the actors: who is part of the network? Many, but not all, contributors use their actual names and actual mail-addresses. Some actors explicitly rely on the anonymity of a digital community:

'Also, let's keep in mind that none of you actually know me. All (most) of the discourse below is fascinating, but it seems you all are assuming that I am an upstanding citizen. I am not. I break the law on a daily basis, and with far more serious crimes than software piracy.'  
(oblio42, 3-1-2001)

Generally actors do not operate anonymously, and act surprisingly similar as to how one would in 'real' social situations. That is: questions are answered, identities are revealed,

1 and rules of conduct respected. This confirms what *Collaborative Futures* states on  
2 collaboration: that 'rules for participation, established guidelines for attribution,  
3 organizational structure and leadership, and clear goals are necessary for  
4 participation'.<sup>14</sup>  
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7 The same goes for the newsgroup, which may be approached and described as  
8 collaboration. Leadership for example is not organized explicitly, but a hierarchy seems  
9 to be based on the frequency of posts. Google newsgroups provides data on which  
10 member contributed most (4933 messages over the years). Successful IF- and games  
11 author Emily Short is third in this row with a total of 2462 messages.<sup>15</sup> This authority in  
12 the IF world is an exception in what seems to be a man's world. Assuming that  
13 contributors either use their real name, or a pseudonym with a name from the same sex,  
14 rarely women are actors in the network.  
15

16  
17 If we look at the contributions of Emily Short, the author of for example *Galatea* (2000)<sup>16</sup>, it  
18 becomes clear why the discussion list should be approached as a collaborative network.  
19 What is produced in collaboration is not only a canon of IF works, and a knowledge-base  
20 in the archives of the newsgroup, but also a code-library. Emily Short is famous for her  
21 generosity with 'giftware': software that she developed and which she makes available for  
22 free. Although authorship is not as 'distributed' as one might expect in the new media age,  
23 there is generous exchange on free code on the list (although it is generally posted on the  
24 archive, not on the newsgroup).  
25

26  
27 On the next level, of specifically cultural and literary sociology, the question is whether this  
28 community performs similar functions as communities of artists and literary print authors do:  
29 promoting the creations of the writers within the community, and the conception of art that is  
30 behind it, preparing and enlarging an audience for the work.  
31

32  
33 Firstly, in the IF-network, the actors reflect on the necessity to create and enlarge their  
34 audience and 'raise the profile' of IF.<sup>17</sup> 'How to reach a wider audience' is the title of a  
35 thread in 2006. In a similar vein, authors discuss the possibility and the desirability to  
36 make commercial IF in 2003: Why would we want commercial IF? (long and preachy)  
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39 <sup>14</sup> *Collaborative futures*, written collaboratively, p. 4. (<http://collaborative-futures.org/>)

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41 <sup>15</sup> Accessed October 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2011.

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43 <sup>16</sup> <http://nickm.com/if/emshort/galatea.html>

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45 <sup>17</sup> [http://groups.google.com/group/rec.arts.int-  
46 fiction/browse\\_frm/thread/bc9ad770360f196e.](http://groups.google.com/group/rec.arts.int-fiction/browse_frm/thread/bc9ad770360f196e)  
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<sup>18</sup> The question already emphasises the lack of consensus within network on this question: arguments for and against are given.

This implies that the actors do not agree on their own cultural status of either ‘amateurs’ or ‘professionals’. This is the source of numerous discussion threads which deal with criticism, commerciality, and audience. Some of the actors call IF their ‘hobby’, others strive for a higher state of professionalization, if only to make IF less of a marginal genre. The same goes for the organizations of IF-awards. Contrary to what has been said, the lack of institutional force does not automatically lead to ‘centrifugal’ cultural relations. <sup>19</sup> Looking at the exchanges in the IF-community confirms that we should not be too fast in assuming a focus on the periphery: the peripheral IF-community demonstrates that within a cultural periphery, new centers, traditions and canons are quickly established. The same was found by Baetens en Van Looy with respect to the genre of e-poetry specifically, that though delocalized, it has rapidly developed a closed canon, with a relatively small number of gatekeepers: ‘(..) in the age of globalization, it seems that the mechanisms of power, i.e. of selection, promotion, and exclusion, are strengthened rather than weakened’ (Baetens and Van Looy, 2008).

This canonizing and historical force of the network is significant and surprising, and seems to be modelled on literary history and art-history. A term like ‘influence’ for example is borrowed from artistic discourse. Will Crowther, the creator of the first adventure-game has a legendary status on the list, as do successful authors like Emily Short. Although the network is not hierarchically organised, the system of evaluation and canonization is strong and well established.

This does not mean, however, that the roles of author and reader are distinct, and the actors in the community are well aware of their double role: ‘Are we playing or programming? (Or reading or writing?)’, one IF practioner asks. <sup>20</sup> Criteria for the

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<sup>18</sup> [http://groups.google.com/group/rec.arts.int-fiction/browse\\_thread/thread/17504d4a2f01d0f4/9e9bf082463f9f2b?lnk=gst&q=commercial+IF#9e9bf082463f9f2b](http://groups.google.com/group/rec.arts.int-fiction/browse_thread/thread/17504d4a2f01d0f4/9e9bf082463f9f2b?lnk=gst&q=commercial+IF#9e9bf082463f9f2b)

<sup>19</sup> Bertrand Gervais, among others, pointed to a shift from stability and community to an ‘ever-shifting identity’: ‘The movement is centrifugal- not centripetal’ (2007: 191).

<sup>20</sup> [http://groups.google.com/group/rec.arts.int-fiction/browse\\_frm/thread/da501efb49b567e2](http://groups.google.com/group/rec.arts.int-fiction/browse_frm/thread/da501efb49b567e2) )

1 evaluation and canonization of work are discussed explicitly: the actors in this network  
2 are authors, players, and critics of each other's work. These discussion strands point  
3 towards a high level of self-reflection and analysis of the own community: aspects that in  
4 communities of 'print-authors' we would see performed by critics, newspapers and  
5 other institutions. The network of IF-authors has a high state of self-sufficiency and self-  
6 reflexivity.  
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10 Thirdly, we will look at formal and poetical exchanges: any extra-diegetic 'talk' on how IF is  
11 made or should be made, both on the level of form and content. Thus we find discussions on  
12 software and code, but also on what a story should be like, what preferences practitioners  
13 have for generic, narrative and thematic aspects of the work, and why.  
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16 First of all, IF is within the debate considered a *game* more than a work of *literary fiction*.  
17 As we have seen above, there is a fixed set of conventions. The discourse is underpinned  
18 by conceptions of what Sorolla (2011) called the three basic elements of games:  
19 'coordination, chance and problem solving'. Concepts like 'the maze' and 'the puzzle'  
20 have a main role in the discussion on forms of IF.  
21

22  
23 As far as other cultural products are mentioned as influences or examples, reference will  
24 be to popular literary genres like SF, detective- or fantasy novels: J.R.R. Tolkien's work is  
25 one of the canonical work that serve as an inspiration for IF-writers. Science-fiction and  
26 fantasy movies are a similar source. In a strand called 'suggested readings'<sup>21</sup> some more  
27 literary suggestions are made: Douglas Adams' *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*,  
28 Peter Beagle's *The Last Unicorn*, William Gibson's *Neuromancer* and Arthur Conan  
29 Doyle's *Sherlock Holmes* series- not to forget Edgar Allen Poe's work.  
30

31  
32 Reading is categorized under 'miscellaneous' and therefore does not seem to be  
33 considered by the actors as having a primary role in the establishment of the discourse.  
34 The same is to be seen in Nelsons *The Craft of Adventure. Five articles on the design of*  
35 *Adventure Games*. Literary authors are not named so much as an example to follow, but  
36 just as stylistic frames to choose from:  
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The essential flavor that makes your game distinctive and yours is genre.  
And so the first decision to be made, when beginning a design, is the style  
of the game. Major or minor key, basically cheerful or nightmarish, or

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<sup>21</sup> [http://groups.google.com/group/rec.arts.int-fiction/browse\\_frm/thread/3d557c32ad7d63ee](http://groups.google.com/group/rec.arts.int-fiction/browse_frm/thread/3d557c32ad7d63ee)

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somewhere in between? Exploration, romance, mystery, historical reconstruction, adaptation of a book, film noir, horror? In the style of Terry Pratchett, Edgar Allen Poe, Thomas Hardy, Philip K. Dick? Icelandic, Greek, Chaucerian, Hopi Indian, Aztec, Australian myth?

On an aesthetic level, emphasis is not on literature, an early discussion strand on 'interactive fiction as literature' has no more than 12 messages<sup>22</sup>.

If there is explicit discussion, it focuses on what defines IF and what defines the IF-experience as opposed to literature. 'Immersion' is one of the main qualities that practitioners see. Charles Briscoe-Smith writes:

In a film or book, the viewer or reader is not really involved with the story, since he[1] isn't actually deciding on the course of action. In IF, on the other hand, the player usually does decide on what course the action will take, at least in the short term. I doubt that IF would be able to hold a player's attention if he was not making any important decisions -- decisions that could affect the way the plot swings.

One of the arguments in the comparison to 'static fiction' as IF-developers tend to call it, is that the involvement of the player in the plot is so high that it 'offers an opportunity to make a statement that simply could not be made as effectively in static fiction', as Duncan Stevens points out<sup>23</sup>, and he mentions the 'emotional impact' of works like Andrew Plotkin's *Shade* (2000). However, literary fiction is not the most important frame of reference. The genre of commercial computer games is more relevant to many IF-authors and to the technical and narrative questions they deal with in their

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<sup>22</sup> <http://groups.google.com/group/rec.arts.int-fiction/browse/thread/thread/7346bd3834520622>

<sup>23</sup> 'Ten Years of IF: 1994-2004' by Duncan Stevens (IF Theory Reader - <http://ifarchive.org/if-archive/books/IFTheoryBook.pdf>)

1 exchanges. What IF shares with games is its function, which according to the authors, is  
2 primarily entertainment, be it on an intellectually high level.

3 If there were discussions on IF as 'art' or 'literature', they were mostly held in the  
4 nineties. For example Espen Aarseth wrote on November 12<sup>th</sup>, 1993 on this topic:  
5 "Interactive fiction", or, as I prefer to call it, Adventure Games (AG), \*is\* an art, or we  
6 wouldn't be having this discussion. It exists as an ideal, around which we draw theories and  
7 criticisms, and most importantly,  
8 try to create the artifacts themselves. As soon as you have a recognizable  
9 class of humanly created objects, and the ability to say "this one is  
10 better than that one", you have an art'. His comment ends with the words: 'we need a craft of  
11 our own'.

12 The turn the discussion has taken, indicates that this is exactly what happened. Reference to  
13 the artistic or literary value of IF made place for discussions on technical questions of  
14 narrative, plot and programming problems: 'winnability' of the puzzle for example. The  
15 question as to the 'definition of IF' was not heard often on the discussion list after the end of  
16 the 1990's. It seems as if by now, the community had defined and framed itself and its genre  
17 so well, that these discussions had become less urgent. Thus what the exchanges have  
18 produced is exactly that: a common understanding of what IF *is* and how it should be made:  
19 the conception of the genre.

#### 20 **4. Conclusion**

21 In many respects the creativity of the community is to be found in the exchanges themselves,  
22 which have themselves creative 'agency'.<sup>24</sup> Since the community (in the timeframe studied)  
23 had no other material or immaterial mode of existence, other than the exchanges, they are of  
24 crucial importance. What is created is collective knowledge of and experience with the genre  
25 in question, that has been build up in the conversations. The well archived exchanges function  
26 as a reservoir of critical, technical and poetical theory. This implies a form of collaboration  
27 with a 'product', which is however not to be measured in any pragmatistical or economical  
28 sense of the word. The individual members of the community of IF-developers produce works  
29 of IF, which are – again- not to be measured in commercial or economic value, but in pleasure  
30 and creativity on the part of the producer and the consumers.

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31 <sup>24</sup> Biggs, 'Authorship and agency'.

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A second conclusion to be drawn from the exchanges between IF-developers in a digital network, is that the exchanges themselves perform institutional functions: criticism, canonization, the writing of the ‘history’ of the genre and the influences it underwent, distribution, etc. This community in the periphery of professional authors is thus indeed built up like the 19<sup>th</sup> century societies of amateur writers or artists, which were their own institutions. As in those societies, emphasis is on craft and technique, and on production. Meizoz argued, however, that this emphasis is also a specific artistic pose since Rousseau’s distinction between the ‘craftsman’ and ‘man of letters’. His ‘posture’ has been copied by authors who want to express an ‘anti-establishment lifestyle’: ‘the modest craftsman who was independent from the powerful’. [Meizoz 2010, 83]. This may be an explanation why the question whether the works produced are literary, does not attract much attention on the newsgroup. The rhetoric of the craftsman involves no obligation to acquire artistic value for the work, therefore there is no need to ‘make it new’ by breaking with the literary ancestors or with the established institutions or poetics. My hypothesis is that this model of craftsmanship and of the 19<sup>th</sup> century artistic circle applies to more online artistic communities. This would imply that the traditional field of production and evaluation of art is not so much defied by such communities, but bypassed altogether, losing power in the process.

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