

# Arbor Inversa – The SIC Method and the Reverse Engineering of Hypertext

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to introduce the SIC project as a foremost example of web-based, scientifically devised collective production of literary works, to examine the qualities of its narrative production, to analyze its literary implications, and to discuss the connections between production of collective literature, hypertext and derivative works.

## Categories and Subject Descriptors

H.5.4 [Information interfaces and presentation]: Hypertext/Hypermedia – *architectures, theory*.

J.5 [Computer Applications]: Arts and Humanities – *literature*.

K.4.3 [Computers and society]: Organizational Impacts – *computer-supported collaborative work*.

## General Terms

Documentation, Experimentation, Theory.

## Keywords

Hypertext, Collaborative writing, Writing methods.

## 1. THE SIC METHOD

According to the first description published in the SIC website, [www.scritturacollettiva.org](http://www.scritturacollettiva.org): “SIC indica un metodo di scrittura collettiva e la comunità aperta di scrittori che lo utilizzano”<sup>1</sup> (SIC indicates a collective writing method and the open community that uses it). The project, whose conceptual roots dig in combinatorial literature, open-source software development and role playing games, was first made public on May 12, 2007 at the Turin International Book Fair. In the following years, the SIC method was tested and developed through the production of five short stories (each one having 4-6 authors), and once it was well-adjusted, was used to produce the first 100 authors novel in history.

The first declared goal of the project was “far diventare la scrittura collettiva una prassi letteraria” (to make collective writing a literary praxis). Collective writing always suffered a bad reputation in modern literature. Even when practiced, it was almost always “for fun”, or the authors hid themselves behind *noms de plume*: that is to say, that even they implicitly or explicitly denied its literary status. The second declared goal was writing a solid novel with the SIC method, hence the SIC method aimed at demonstrating that a) Collective writing can produce works of literary dignity, b) Collective writing can be or become a “normal” writing practice.

The guiding principles and the mechanisms of the SIC method were devised through the observation of the pros and cons of various collective writing practices, such as “round-robin” practices (where every part or chapter is written by a different author, in rounds), crowdsourcing writing (like *A Million Penguins*) and novels by Luther Blissett and Wu Ming. Every practice had its own advantages, but none seemed to be able to fully exploit the potential of teamwork. We wanted to overcome the expressive limitations inherent to round-robin writing, to tap into the creative freedom of wikis while curbing the tendency of authors to control and determine every aspect of their work, and create a method so objective and effective that would allow even people who don’t know each other to produce good text.

The first innovation introduced was the division of the narration into parts, not only sequences, but characters, places and so on, each one addressed in a specific file or “sheet”.

The second innovation was to divide the participants in two different roles: writers and art directors. The latter edit, but don't write. They have a regulatory and organizational function, necessary to minimize the problems arising from group work, like the said tendency to egocentrism of writers. Since the AD doesn't participate to writing, she is impartial, and can tie her judgment to parameters of quality and usefulness.

Each sheet is filled out by a group of three or more writers. The AD collects the individual sheets and "composes" them. The process of composition is an innovation of the SIC method: it consists in the selection of the best, most useful or most coherent parts of each individual sheet, which are then all meshed together in a new "final" sheet. More than a description, a fictional example can be useful to understand how composition works. Let's assume that the AD has received two individual mini-sheets, or cards:

(1a) To be, or not to be: that is the issue

(1b) Existence is indeed a big question

Her task is just to discover, as if it were hidden between the two:

(1c) To be, or not to be: that is the question

When the AD completes the composition of a sheet, he forwards it back to the writers (and puts it in the online "sources section") for reading. When all the elements of the story have been written, composed and returned to the writers, the drafting begins, with the same procedure of individual sheets and their composition. After the last sheet, the AD edits all the final draft sheets together (needless to say, the composition process, which involves lots of copy/paste, cuts and redraftings, is viable only thanks to modern word-editing software).

This mechanism should ensure the maximization of the two main benefits of having "many heads" available:

1. According to a purely quantitative principle, the more material is produced, the more good quality material is produced as well (whichever the quality standard employed). We call this "principle of redundancy": in group work, it is better to have many different versions of the same thing to choose from, as well as many different options for the development of a story, than relying on a fixed path. The principle is reflected by the SIC motto, "Tutti scrivono tutto" – "everyone writes everything": no part of the text is ever written by a single person.
2. The second principle is qualitative. When a collective text undergoes a number of rounds of writing, revision, editing, a positive feedback cycle can arise that makes the participants more individually conscious and collectively attuned. This contributes to a better quality. In the SIC method, the crucial moment that closes the feedback ring happens when the AD hands a final sheet to the writers, who then read it and retune their idea of the character/place/situation with the collective version. We call this "principle of sublimation".<sup>2</sup>

## 2. REVERSE ENGINEERING

The peculiar field of application of the SIC method – fiction – suggests an opportunity to consider an often overlooked facet of

collaborative writing: that a text written by many is by nature a text *of its own kind*. The traces of the participants, of the way they worked together, do not disappear when the text is completed. The text does not flatten to a neutral surface, indifferent to its genesis. Suture lines and structural nodes, which are at the same time unavoidable leftovers and useful reference points for writers, are still visible. Of course, the conversion of a text into a literary product involves a work of concealment and erasure of such "bumps", but the SIC text permits to bring them back in sight, as an intertextual database of the completed sheets is always available to writers and readers, thus acquiring a new hypertextual dimension, which is established by the relation between the text and the system of sources used to generate it.

If we imagine a SIC text where the names of characters and places link back to their respective sheets, its inherently hypertextual nature immediately strikes the eye – it is worth noting that, during its generation, a SIC text is a "reversed" hypertextual tree: the authors start from the leaves, the single elements of the story, to get to the trunk, the final text. What is more, SIC fiction does not hide but shows a natural feature of any literary work: the fact that it draws from other texts which came before it. Hence, a SIC text can be "reverse engineered": it already carries within itself its first philological and narratological analysis.

Middle Age and Early Modernity writers found natural to take possession of previous writings for alterations, continuations, remakes, while, later, authorial culture favoured a shift in the relation between author and tradition, giving more value to unicity and originality of the work: to difference from previous works, instead of continuity. A SIC text does not "feel ashamed" of showing out its debts: instead, it carries around its own little "tradition", not one created by the slow workings of past generations, but with a guided and accelerated path of hoarding and distillation.

## 3. THE GREAT SIC NOVEL

With the undertaking of the ultimate goal of the SIC project, the Great Novel the method was modified to handle and coordinate online a much larger group of writers. While the short novels had 4-6 writers, the Great Novel would have at least fifty – eventually they would be twice as many.

At first, we asked writers to send us stories and anecdotes of events occurred to their relatives and their acquaintances during World War II in Italy. They could send what they wanted, the only requirement was that they sent stories passed down orally and not yet coded by historiography. We outlined a story based on these recounts<sup>3</sup>: an historical drama that tells three parallel stories of an Italian naval officer stranded after the armistice of September 8, 1943; of his sister, alone and in distress in a Milan subject to devastating bombings, eventually becoming a factory worker and later a partisan; and of her husband, who spends the war hiding in a garret in the countryside, where he gradually loses his mind.

The sheets phase was accomplished through a system of online reservations: every sheet had between 4 and 8 available slots, depending on its importance. We prepared a staggered schedule for the delivery of the sheets, so that the ADs could handle the production of an average of 4 final sheets per week.

<sup>2</sup> The rationale and theoretic position of the SIC method is discussed in depth in Magini, *La Scrittura Industriale Collettiva*, 2008, University of Florence.

<sup>3</sup> Available at <http://www.scritturacollettiva.org/gruppo/1205/soggetto>.

First, we completed the sheets about characters and locations. Then, we focused on the “treatment” – a term borrowed from cinema – which consisted in an elaboration of the story aimed at providing us a detailed specification of every scene of the novel. Lastly, we proceeded to drafting. The whole work took fifteen months.

Some statistics:

1. 8 Art Directors (4 from the beginning, 4 more promoted from the ranks of the writers as the work proceeded).
2. 41 “war stories” inspired the plot.
3. 78 writers delivered at least one sheet or an anecdote. 40 of them delivered at least 10.
4. 20 proofreaders, historic editors and translators (the novel features many dialogues written in various Italian dialects).
5. 935 individual sheets delivered.
6. 170 final sheets: 24 characters, 35 locations, 18 treatments, 93 drafts.<sup>4</sup>

#### 4.SIC – ESSENTIAL CHRONOLOGY

2006

November Ideation of the SIC method.

2007

March SIC short story #1, *Il Principe*, is completed and published.

May 12 Presentation of the project at the Turin International Book Fair.

June SIC short story #2, *Un viaggio d'affari*, is completed and published.

June 19 Lecture about the SIC project at the University of Siena.

2008

February SIC short story #3, *Alba di piombo*, is completed and published.

May SIC short story #4, *Notturmi per ipermercato*, is completed and published.

June 3 Participation in the New Italian Epic debate with the essay *Verso il realismo liquido*, published in Carmilla literary magazine.

October 2 Lecture on “Italian perspective on metahistorical fiction” at the University of London’s Institute of Germanic and Romance Studies, whose content was later published in Carmilla magazine with the title *Letteratura come network*.

December SIC short story #5: *Il sopralluogo*, is completed and published.

2009

February Opening of subscriptions for participation in the “Grande Romanzo SIC”.

April 25 The production of the “Grande Romanzo SIC” starts.

October 23 Lecture at “Scrittori all’Arsenale” seminar, promoted by the University of Venice, whose content was later published as an essay with the title *Solve et coagula*.

2010

January After the production of characters, locations and treatment, the “Grande Romanzo SIC” enters the drafting phase.

September Simplicissimus book farm publishes the first five SIC short stories in e-book format.

2011

February Participation in the book *Rethinking the Historical Novel in Italy*, curated by Margherita Ganeri, Marco Codebò and Sandra Waters (going to be published in 2012 by Legenda, London), with the essay *Elective Affinities: Historical Novel and Collective Writing in the Telematic Age*.

March 19 The “Grande Romanzo SIC” is completed.

<sup>4</sup> The archive of the final sheets is available at <http://www.scritturacollettiva.org/gruppo/1205/schede>.