

Chapter 27

Understanding and Using Virtual Ethnography in Virtual Environments

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ABSTRACT

This chapter proposes to outline a process of virtual ethnography that combines emic and etic methods of data gathering adapted to the virtual context to provide a ‘true’ (Richardson, 2000) accounting of the social constructs inherent in the virtual world. The first section of this chapter discusses the unique characteristics of virtual ethnography when used to explore virtual environments such as Second Life or MMORPGs such as World of Warcraft. The second section presents some of the methodological issues related to conducting such research. Finally, the third section offers for consideration some unique challenges related to the application of such methods. Two concerns are discussed: 1) identifying an understanding the phenomenological structures unique to a particular virtual environment and 2) the implications of such knowledge with regard to the design of new virtual educational environments.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter is divided into three sections. The first discusses the unique characteristics of virtual ethnography when used to explore virtual environ-

ments such as *Second Life* or *World of Warcraft*. These online environments are the virtual home of tens of millions of individuals who now spend almost as much time in the virtual world as they do the real one. Ethnography or ethnographic evaluation is “a descriptive account of social life

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and culture in a particular social system based on detailed observations of what people actually do.” (Johnson, 2000). Ethnographic fieldwork can and should be meaningfully applied to virtual worlds with appropriate tools (Garcia et al. 2009). Virtual ethnography is the application of ethnographic methodology to virtual worlds, for purposes of this chapter, focusing on the graphically based Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs) such as World of Warcraft, Guildwars, and EVE online or Massively Multiplayer Online Learning Environments (MMOLEs) such as Quest Atlantis. Second life is the real world’s most popular virtual world with the world’s most popular MMORPG being World of Warcraft. MMORPGs are focused on here as they are more similar in structure to the MMOLE’s currently in development, and general, MMORPG’s require more in terms of interaction and task completion than virtual worlds which often focus more on world building (second life, Active Worlds) rather than interaction as a primary activity.

These new environments have rapidly evolved over the last decade and have proven very addictive to millions of people from diverse cultural backgrounds. Some such as World of Warcraft being specifically for diverse environments (Ducheneaut *et al*, 2006). They also pose unique challenges for the qualitative researcher. Typically an ethnographic approach offers perhaps insights into communities, but, due to the unique nature of virtual worlds, such methods require a special understanding and consideration of the phenomenological constructs which are the underpinnings of virtual society. For example, in traditional real-world ethnography, age is a factor which can usually be assumed to have a linear relationship with certain other variables such as status. Where in many online environments, virtual age (i.e., the age of the character, alter-ego, or toon), not physical age, has the linear relationship. Thus it is much more common to find a 12 year old leading a virtual guild that includes individuals 5 or 6 times his/her real world age than it would be to

find a similar construct in the real world. Doing ethnographic research on virtual communities requires different tools from those used in traditional ethnographic studies (Pacagnella, 1997) for which excellent methodological literature already exists. Doing ethnographic studies on graphically based virtual environments requires an additional set of approaches to those traditionally used to assess text based online environments.

The second section of this chapter outlines a process of virtual ethnography that combines emic and etic methods of data gathering adapted to the virtual context to provide a ‘true’ (Richardson, 2000) accounting of the social constructs inherent in the virtual world. This process of virtual ethnography will be defined in light of the following key components.

1. Establishment a tabula rasa in the mind of the ethnographer.
2. Digital Fieldwork and Key Informants
3. Problem Definition
4. Sample Identification
5. Cultural Layering
6. Approach Design
7. New Proxemic and Kinesic Structures
8. Data Collection Methodologies
9. Methods of Analysis
10. Publication of Findings
11. Ethics

The third section of the chapter offers for consideration some unique challenges related to the application of such methods. Two concerns are discussed: 1) identifying an understanding the phenomenological structures unique to a particular virtual environment and 2) the implications of such knowledge with regard to the design of new virtual educational environments.

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