

Chapter 33

Participant Observation in Online Multiplayer Communities

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses participant observation as a method of data collection for studying social interaction in online multiplayer games and the communities within them. Participant observation has its roots in the social sciences, and especially in the field of anthropology. True to a natural inquiry approach, studies utilizing participant observation try to understand the actual habitat or “lifeworld” of those participating in the study. This chapter looks at various practical issues connected to conducting participant observation in online multiplayer communities. Examples of data collection are presented, including saving log files, capturing images and video, and writing field notes. Participant observation seems well suited for studying online communities since it can respond well to the challenges of the ever-changing technology and social situations, the need to take into account multiple channels of communication, and the complex and sometimes hidden nature of computer-mediated social interaction.

INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of online multiplayer gaming has grown enormously since the beginning of the 1990s. Many online games have social sides to them and require social interaction among players for the game to function as designed. It is around and within these kinds of games that groups, teams and communities are formed. These

social aggregates have many names in the world of online computer games, ranging from “clans” to “guilds” to “teams.” In this chapter the term multiplayer community is used for consistency.

Studies on social interaction in online multiplayer games span multiple approaches and contexts. For example, there have been studies looking at communication in text-based virtual realities (e.g. Reid, 1996; Schiano & White, 1998; Cherny, 1999; Utz, 2000), massively multiplayer games (e.g. Tosca, 2002; Jacobsson & Taylor,

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2003; Ducheneaut & Moore, 2004; Kolo & Baur, 2004, Taylor 2006, Siitonen, 2007), and first person shooter games (e.g. Manninen, 2001; Wright, Boria & Breidenbach, 2002). Many of these and similar studies have used some form of participant observation as a part of their methodological arsenal. Here games-related research has reflected the broader field of research into social interaction online, where participant observation has been regularly chosen and used since the earliest forays into the dynamics of life online, such as Howard Rheingold's "The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier" (1993).

The purpose of this chapter is to provide some insight into the use of participant observation by examining the process of data collection within the context of online multiplayer games and the player communities that operate within them. The chapter opens with an introduction to participant observation as a method of data collection. The bulk of the chapter deals with the use of participant observation in practice.

The approach taken in this chapter is both theoretical and practical. Selected literature on participant observation, ethnography, and studies of social interaction in online multiplayer communities are contrasted with practical examples from a real-life participant observation. The actual examples work as illustration on two levels. First, they help concretize the topic in question. Second, they highlight the role of presenting data when writing research reports. In research that utilizes participant observation, data are typically presented to illustrate a point and in order to put forward a sound argument.

While the focus of the chapter is on issues related to collecting data, it is important to acknowledge that in studies utilizing participant observation the division between data collection, analysis, and writing the final presentation of the study are typically blurred: the process of analysis starts as soon as the observation begins.

The examples used in this chapter are based on a period of participant observation that went on

from spring 2004 until the beginning of 2005. The participant observation took place in one of the MMOGs (Massively Multiplayer Online Game) available at the time, *Anarchy Online*. During the period of participant observation, the author participated in two multiplayer communities. The data used in the final analysis included images and log files of the actual gaming situations as well as field notes and interviews with players. The examples, written in the first person, are interwoven into the discussion presented in this chapter – a stylistic choice that highlights the intrapersonal dimension of accounts of participant observation. A more detailed account of the data collection, analysis and the results of the study can be found in the original research report (Siitonen, 2007).

PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION AS A STARTING POINT FOR A DEEPER UNDERSTANDING

Participant observation has its roots in the early days of social science, and especially in the field of anthropology. It is often connected to *ethnography*, even though the two are not synonymous. Put very simply, ethnography can be seen as a broad methodology that aims to produce richly written accounts of human experience through direct contact with human agents in natural settings. Ethnography is based on an iterative-inductive approach and typically utilizes multiple methods of data-collection. (O'Reilly, 2005.) Ethnography usually includes participant observation, but all studies utilizing participant observation should not automatically be labeled "ethnographies" (see e.g. Wolcott, 1995).

The approach taken in participant observation is that of *naturalistic inquiry*, where the researcher tries to understand the actual habitat or "lifeworld" of those participating in the study. When using participant observation to study a community, the researcher tries to get as close as possible to the social interaction in the community and

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