Virtually Valid?
Ethnography in virtual environments

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January 2011

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1. Introduction

When reviewing the literature to write this essay it became evident that one of the first things to do was define exactly what is meant, in this context, by virtual world (VW). In the past the term has been applied to text-based MUD (Multi User Dungeon) systems (which are as relevant to this topic as their modern, graphical counterparts), single- and multi-user virtual reality environments, and (particularly in the 1980s and '90s) the cyberspace that we now simply call the web. In fiction agreement over the terminology has also been rare; William Gibson coined the term 'cyberspace' on page 10 of 'Neuromancer' (1984) but his abstract vision of virtuality, although seemingly traversed using an avatar, was lacking the explicit representational components (Gibson was always deliberately vague about any specifics). By way of contract, Neal Stephenson in 'Snow Crash' (1992) envisaged a world very like current VWs, though with a much greater immersion factor than is commonly experienced. He also coined the term 'metaverse' (p. 22) which is often used when discussing these environments, particularly Second Life and systems based around it's open source equivalent, OpenSim. Over the years, as technology has changed and terminology with it, the meaning of the term has gone through several stages toward describing the systems thought of today as virtual worlds, such as World of Warcraft, Second Life, Blue Mars and Twinity. These are typically characterised by the following features:

- They are network-based.
- They can have many concurrent users.
- They feature avatar representations of users.

In the context of this essay, virtual worlds are considered to follow the criteria listed above. The most important of these is that of many concurrent users; a single avatar does not a world make.

Other factors related more to ethnography than to VWs also make an appearance when debating the validity of these endeavours. This essay attempts to look into some of these issues, and is arranged in the following manner:

- Is ethnography, as a form of data collection and presentation, a valid method of research or merely a genre of writing? This question is dealt with part 2 (“Ethnography”).

- In part 3 (“The virtual”) a very short and partial history of VWs is presented and some of the points of impact of these are assessed. The 'virtual-specific' knowledge and skills required by the ethnographer are then highlighted and discussed.

- The specific issues related to documenting existence within a virtual environment are examined in part 4 (“Data-gathering”).

- In part 5 (“Validity?”) as attempt is made to answer some of these questions, as well as to draw some conclusions regarding the chances of success of ethnographic projects in virtual environments.

There are innumerate sources of information, opinions and interesting points that have been made about this topic; this piece only scratches the surface but, hopefully, it presents some valid arguments for virtual ethnography as an area of research.

2. Ethnography

The problem of ethnography in virtual worlds begins with the problem of ethnography itself. Critics, generally proponents of more quantitative methodologies, have called ethnography into question and have asked if it is a form of constructed (and therefore fictional) writing, or whether it is a genuinely useful form of data collection and presentation. There are many in the field who feel it is indeed a valuable part of the anthropological toolbox; Boellstorff (2008) defines ethnography as '.. the method anthropologists and others use to study “culture”.' (p. 66), whereas Hine (2000), quoting the work of others, writes: 'Hammersley and Atkinson provide a basic definition, applicable to most studies, of what ethnography is: "In its most characteristic form it involves the ethnographer participating, overtly or covertly in people's daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions - in fact, collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the focus of the research." (1995: 1).' (p. 41). Cyberspace ethnographer David Hakken (1999) joins the debate: '”Ethnography” refers both to the study of the distinctive practices of particular human groupings and representations - pictures of a people - based on such a study.' (p. 38). He continues 'the typical ethnographic explanatory move is to highlight rather than to try to banish context.' (p. 40), but then turns his critical eye toward the method saying 'the risk of ethnography is that any knowledge remains tightly tied to its space of production.' (p. 41) and continues with an illustration of criticism provided by others: 'Arguing that there is a “crisis of representation” in ethnography, James Clifford and George Marcus (1986), Marcus and Michael Fischer (1986) and John Van Maanen (1983) recently stimulated another critical wave. Their humanities-oriented critique questions the value of ethnography for any purpose other than telling nice stories.' (p. 63).

An internal debate seems to have been ongoing for some time, and Ingold (2007), in his Radcliffe-Brown Lecture in Social Anthropology 'Anthropology is *not* ethnography' delivered to the British Academy, opened his talk with the proposal that ethnography is a different discipline to anthropology: 'The objective of anthropology, I believe, is to seek a generous, comparative but nevertheless critical understanding of human being and knowing in the one world we all inhabit. The objective of ethnography is to describe the lives of people other than ourselves, with an accuracy and sensitivity honed by detailed observation and prolonged first-hand experience. My thesis is that anthropology and ethnography are endeavours of quite different kinds. This is not to claim that the one is more important than the other, or more honourable. Nor is it to deny that they depend on one another in significant ways. It is simply to assert that they are not the same.' He continues to illustrate this with some historical evidence of the debate: 'In a 1951 review of Evans-Pritchard's book Social Anthropology, in which the author had propounded the same ideas about anthropology and history as those set out in his Marett lecture, Radcliffe-Brown registered his strong disagreement with "the implication that social anthropology consists entirely or even largely of … ethnographic studies of particular societies. It is towards some such position that Professor Evans-Pritchard and a few others seem to be moving." And it was indeed towards such a position that the discipline moved over the ensuing decade, so much so that in his Malinowski Lecture of 1959, 'Rethinking Anthropology', Edmund Leach felt moved to complain about it. "Most of my colleagues", he grumbled, "are giving up in the attempt to make comparative generalizations; instead they have begun to write impeccably detailed historical ethnographies of particular peoples." '

Hine (ibid.) participates by describing what '...Denzin describes as a `triple crisis of representation, legitimation, and praxis' (1997: 3) for qualitative research, including ethnography. The triple crisis that Denzin describes threatens ethnography on all fronts: its claims to represent culture; its claims to authentic knowledge; and the ability of its proponents to make principled interventions based on the knowledge they acquire through ethnography.' She continues by choosing to take a positive perspective: 'The `crisis', rather than suggesting the abandonment of ethnography altogether, can be seen as opening possibilities for creative and strategic applications of the methodology.' (p. 42).

It seems then that ethnography itself is a point of contention in some quarters, but most seem to value it. The issues of the virtual must now be considered.

3. The virtual

Since the advent of electronic virtual environments, particularly those inhabited by humans in avatar form (including the original Multi User Dungeon, MUD1, created in 1979-1980 at the University of Essex by Roy Trubshaw and Richard Bartle), questions have been raised about the actual versus the virtual, embodiment and identity, and the very nature of the medium has been put under the spotlight.

Rheingold (1994) writes that 'previous communications media dissolved ancient barriers of time and space that had separated people, and in the process changed the way people thought; first alphabetic language and then printing technology created a kind of community memory, a stored groupmind accessible to many, not just to the bards and priests who had been the keepers of collective knowledge in the era of oral cultures....The telegraph, telephone, radio and television, as Marshall McLuhan pointed out, turned everywhere and every time into here and now' (p. 146). He continues: 'Similar to the way previous media dissolved social boundaries related to time and space, the latest computer mediated communications media seem to dissolve boundaries of identity as well. One of the things that we...seem to be doing with our time...is *pretending to be someone else*, or even pretending to be several different people at the same time' (p. 147). These are ambitious claims for what many consider to be computer games that undergraduates use to waste time.

Others quickly saw that virtual environments could serve solid, practical purposes. Following an initial military foray into computer simulation with a version of the 1980 Atari video game 'Battlezone' (of which only two were apparently built), The Defence Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) in the United States commissioned SIMNET (SIMulator NETworking) in 1983. This was a distributed virtual environment developed for training purposes by BBN, Perceptronics and Delta Graphics. It was finally delivered in 1990, and was used by the U.S Army (Singhal and Zyda, 1999). The sector most interested today in networked virtual worlds is, understandably, the gaming industry. World of Warcraft is arguably the largest of these environments and many other gaming worlds exist, as well as those with a more free-form but game-like nature, such as Blue Mars and Second Life (SL). Modern virtual worlds, such as SL, have millions of users, tens of thousands of concurrent logins and, arguably, complex internal cultures worthy of study, but these kinds of VWs offer particular kinds of difficulties to researchers; the learning curve can be remarkably steep and can intimidate some. Heng (2007) writes: 'for many ethnographers, the world of online gaming communities remains closed off, largely because gaining access requires knowledge of how to play a computer game, as well as dedication to exploring the game through play and interaction. If one has never engaged in one of these reflex-based, graphics-intensive, multi-tasking oriented [sic], it may be prove more daunting than meeting a tribe of natives in a tropical jungle.'

4. Data-gathering

In comparison to other forms of ethnography, data collection in virtual environments can seem trivial. It is easy to log text chat and instant messages, to record audio, take photographs or to film events or encounters; In fact the danger is more of data deluge than of scarcity. Hine (2000) writes that 'the challenge of virtual ethnography is to explore the making of boundaries and the making of connections, especially between the `virtual' and the `real'. Along with this goes the problem of knowing when to stop. If the concept of ethnography (and/or culture) as having natural boundaries is abandoned for analytic purposes, we can also abandon the idea of a whole ethnography of a given object.' (p. 64). She considers that 'virtual ethnography is necessarily partial. A holistic description of any informant, location or culture is impossible to achieve. The notion of pre-existing, isolable and describable informants, locales and cultures is set aside. Our accounts can be based on ideas of strategic relevance rather than faithful representations of objective realities.' (p. 65), though this is not necessarily true; an environment that is designed rather than natural can still be holistically described as any ethnography of an urban population shows.

5. Validity?

When considering the informant within the context of virtual ethnography it is important to define exactly what is meant by this term. When the user and the avatar are considered as separate entities it does indeed raise questions as to the reality, and thus validity, of their contribution to a research project. However, when these are considered as informant and representation (as a single informant in other words) the enterprise becomes as relevant as any ethnographic study of a sub-culture, be it virtual or otherwise. Turkle (1995), though speaking of older technologies than are being considered here, makes the point that 'virtual reality poses a new methodological challenge for the researcher: what to make of online interviews and, indeed, whether and how to use them' (p. 324), and when doing her Internet research considered it important to meet her informants '..in person rather than simply in persona' (p. 324).

Boellstorff (2008) writes that '..the open-endedness of Second Life meant that I was able to subordinate interviews and surveys to participant observation, the centerpiece of any truly ethnographic approach. ' (p. 69). This seems a clear indication that he considers virtual ethnography to be a true form of the discipline. Hine (2000) comments on the relationship between ethnographer and informant, and states that 'new technologies of interaction make it possible both for informants to be absent and to render them present within the ethnography. In the same way, the ethnographer is both absent from and present with informants. The technology enables these relationships to be fleeting or sustained and to be carried out across temporal and spatial divides. All forms of interaction are ethnographically valid, not just the face-to-face. The shaping of the ethnographic object as it is made possible by the available technologies is the ethnography. This is ethnography in, of and through the virtual.' (p. 65). Hakken (1999) agrees with the partiality of ethnography in this context, and comments 'of course the limits of ethnography must be recognized; its ultimate dependence upon flawed data-gathering instruments (humans), it [sic] inevitably partial analytic results, its profound problems with generalization, and its dependence upon a stance of alterity. It is the ability of ethnography to produce knowledge anyway, through confronting squarely knotty tangles like the ones encountered in cyberspace, which provides its justification.' (p. 63). He then continues '..cyberspace ethnography is no more (and no less) at risk of collapse under the critique of ethnography than is any other ethnographic practice.' (p. 67). This statement could be read as an ambiguous one; is he criticising ethnography in general? His previous statement would seem to dispute this, even as he acknowledges the necessary limitations of the practice.

Given this consensus of the validity of virtual ethnography, and taking the entire system of user / interface / avatar / world as the informant, field-site and data source, ethnographic endeavours in virtual environments can be considered as valid as similar projects where 'actual' cultures are placed under the anthropological microscope.

To end with a quote from Boellstorff (ibid.): 'claims of a methodological chasm between virtual and actual are overstated.' (p. 70).

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