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 social aggregates 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 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...
ultimately tries to piece together how the people in the community live and function in certain situations, and what they think is important and meaningful for them. The purpose of this immersion is to give the researcher experience of the living conditions and other factors that affect the social reality being studied. (Mann & Stewart, 2000) In terms of length, participant observation is usually long-term, taking months or even years (Miller & Slater, 2000). It is because of these characteristics that participant observation is often closely connected to ethnography.

The open-ended nature of participant observation means that studies using it typically follow an emergent design, in which the research plan can be changed during the research process if necessary (Frey, Botan & Kreps, 2000). As a method of data collection, then, participant observation offers a fairly open-ended and flexible way of getting an insight into social phenomena in the Internet. For example, the range of data that can be collected during a participant observation is very wide. The actual data can consist of field notes, pictures, recordings, and so on. Participant observation is also often combined with other means of data collection, like interviews (Mann & Stewart, 2000). This multiplicity can be seen as an advantage since social phenomena on the Internet rarely constitute orderly ensembles. Social interaction on the Internet tends not to be bound to any one specific program or technology (Taylor, 1999). For example, the members of a multiplayer community can communicate with each other in the game they play, in a shared IRC-channel (Internet Relay Chat), by e-mail and so forth. In such cases concentrating on only one technology or channel of communication would be ill-advised, giving an overly simplified and narrow view of the operation of the community.

In addition to its openness and adaptability, participant observation easily takes into account the temporal changes within an online community (Kendall, 1999; Nocera, 2002). Communities, virtual or not, are inherently continuous and variable social processes. They are not born out of nowhere, and neither do they disappear instantly and without trace. This means that in order to understand its present situation one has to know something about the history of the community. On the other hand, in the case of new communities it might be wise to let the community develop before attempting to see its special qualities or define its motivations (Harrison & Stephen, 1999). Because of this continuity of the community process, the results of a study might vary greatly depending on whether the community studied has just been born, is already diminishing, or just happens to be experiencing a slower phase of interaction during the data-gathering period. Issues such as when the data are collected and how long the data-collection takes are of special importance when conducting a study of online communities. If not enough time is spent in the process, it is hard to estimate the reliability of the research (Kendall, 1999). Participant observation also offers the possibility of reflectivity during the research process. For example, the researcher can be in contact with the participants of the study long after the official period of data-collection is over, and this continuous connection can be used both to test new ideas about the study, and to confirm the reliability of the analysis (Ward, 1999).

**CONDUCTING PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION IN A MULTIPLAYER COMMUNITY**

Before venturing deeper into the realm of multiplayer communities, it is perhaps important to stop and ask what exactly distinguishes multiplayer communities from other forms of online community. Unfortunately there is no easy answer to this question without making sweeping generalizations. In many ways multiplayer communities can be seen as sharing qualities with other forms of online communities, such as their voluntary nature, their dependence on computer-mediated
communication, and their possible geographical and cultural dispersion. However, there are some qualities that are especially typical of multiplayer communities and help one to understand the challenges of conducting participant observation in this particular context. The most important of these are the closed nature of many multiplayer communities, and their emphasis on shared activities as opposed to only shared beliefs. Closedness in the case of multiplayer communities can refer to both the environment in which they operate and the permeability of the community’s social network. Unlike in many other forms of online communities, much of the social interaction of a typical multiplayer community takes place within the closed system of a game, or within other channels where participation is limited, such as voice-over-IP applications. Multiplayer communities also typically represent closed networks, where membership has to be applied for and where most community activities are hidden from casual observers. The emphasis on shared activities in multiplayer communities stems from the gaming context. While there are some documented cases where playing the game is of little or no importance to the multiplayer community (e.g. Schiano & White, 1998), it is typically the activity of playing a game together that operates as the major motivation behind the community effort. Together these qualities mean that anyone wanting to conduct participant observation in multiplayer communities should be prepared to truly enter the community and “play along”.

Every research process is unique, but there are certain steps that most studies utilizing participant observation take. These steps are well illustrated in Nocera’s (2002) model for the ethnographic study of virtual communities. In Nocera’s model, the first stage consists of the researcher’s attempts to get to know the phenomenon that he or she will be studying. This stage includes things like learning the language of the community and the basics of using the necessary communication technologies. In addition, the researcher typically contacts at least some members of the community and explains to them his or her role as a researcher. Here it has to be noted that Nocera is effectively of the opinion that the researcher should always tell the participants about the research. This first part of a research project could be described as more passive and orienting than the sequential phases. During the second and third stages of Nocera’s model, the researcher becomes a member of the community. In addition the researcher can conduct selected interviews with some members of the community. Data gathered during the participation can be used to deepen the themes of these interviews. The purpose of these stages is for the researcher to immerse himself within the social dynamics of the community. The fourth stage consists of categorizing and analyzing the data gathered during the participation. (Nocera, 2002.)

**Step One: Into the Game**

When using participant observation as a method of data collection, knowing how to play the games related to the study is usually essential. First of all, it is often impossible to participate in the life of the community if one is unable to “play along.” Second, in order to understand what members of the community are talking about the researcher needs to know something about the language used in the game and in the community. Last but not least, the researcher needs to be aware of the many game-connected rules, rituals and roles that govern communication within the community, as well as the motivations behind play (Mortensen, 2002).

Taking the first steps in learning the vocabulary, or jargon, of a game and the community within it is usually straightforward. Most of the general communication follows conventions usually followed in the Internet, like the use of certain abbreviations such as “lol” (laughing out loud) and smileys. The manual of the game might also provide some explanation of the vocabulary used in the game. Still, there are some things that can only be learned through playing the game and by
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being in contact with other players. These usually include game- or community-specific jargon (like names of places, players or events), and nonverbal communication (as when using voice or graphical representations to communicate).

Learning the basics of any given game is usually not difficult. What might be difficult, however, is to master the game well enough to be able to participate fully in the activities of a multiplayer community. Depending on the game and the community, the level required from members of the community may be quite high, and even if the community is not inclined toward competitive play, continuous shortcomings on the part of a new member are not generally appreciated. Even after learning to play the game and understand the communication surrounding it, the learning process is far from over. Most online multiplayer computer games are under constant development, with newer versions and updates being published all the time. The social reality of any given game might also be in continuous flux: returning after a short break even an experienced player might encounter a feeling of disorientation, encountering changed language practices as well as changes in the in-game social dynamics (Siitonen, 2007). Because of this complexity, it is typical for players of online multiplayer games to provide mutual support and share their knowledge with other players (Taylor, 2003; Siitonen, 2007).

In addition to knowledge and skills, a participant observer also needs resources such as machinery and software. Of the resources required to conduct participant observation in multiplayer communities, perhaps the most important is time. For example, a typical playing session of an MMOG can last several hours, with some people staying online for even longer. In addition, most popular online computer games are typically synchronous. This means that the time of day can have an effect on the number of members of the community who are online. For example, if the researcher is European but the majority of community members are from North America, then the time difference means that he or she must find time to play in the very late or early hours of the day. This time-consuming nature of online computer games can be wearying even for an experienced gamer. Moreover, in a game that is evolving twenty-four hours a day, it is not always clear that one can participate in all the activities one would like to. Rather, the researcher is forced to accept that the data will capture only a sample of the total social interaction occurring in the game.

Step Two: Into the Community

It is not always easy to reach into a multiplayer community and look at the social interaction that takes place there. Many contemporary online computer games are built so that some parts of the game are hidden from a casual visitor or a new player. It is therefore unrealistic to think that quickly dropping into a game would provide sufficient data for a deep analysis of the communication that takes place in that game’s community. A researcher might, for example, encounter only other casual players and “newbies” (new and/or inexperienced players), and thus miss the social interaction that is taking place between more established players (Kendall, 1999).

There are several ways to get into a multiplayer community. Some of these, such as being a founding member of the community, can be relatively difficult to achieve as a researcher. For research purposes it is more common that the researcher either requests permission to join or is drafted into a community. Requesting permission to join is an uncertain way of entry, especially in more competitive multiplayer computer games, where such requests can be seen as pleading and will therefore be ignored. A more certain, but by no means foolproof way of gaining entry is to be drafted into a community. During a typical drafting process a member of a community approaches the candidate and asks him or her to join them. Drafting is often conducted by high-ranking members of the community. Some organizations have even
appointed their own drafters especially for this task. (Siitonen, 2007.) In an application procedure the new applicant encounters for the first time the social norms of the community, as expressed by the interviewer, a “symbolic gatekeeper” (Taylor, 2006). The next paragraphs present an example of gaining entry into a multiplayer community:

“During one typical gaming session I was resting my character in between missions in an area generally used for such “downtime”. While resting, I was approached by another player with whom I had teamed up sometime earlier. This person started to chat with me about the game and my preferences while playing it. What had started as a simple chit chat quickly turned into an interview when it became clear that he was a high-ranking member of a community, and that his community was on the lookout for possible new members.

The interview was relatively short, as we had obviously dealt with many issues already when we played together earlier. The person interviewing me said that how I had acted in the team had had a considerable effect on his decision to approach me. Soon enough we concluded that the socially oriented goals of the community might fit my playing style and person, and before I knew it I was a member on probation.” (Siitonen, 2007: 107–108.)

Whatever the method of gaining entry is, it can be very beneficial if the researcher knows someone inside the community. Indeed, in some multiplayer communities a new applicant is not even considered without recommendations from established members. (Siitonen, 2007.)

It is important to note that, despite one’s good intentions, it can happen that sometimes the intended participants-to-be in the study do not believe the researcher or do not want to be studied. In the social reality of the Internet it is almost the norm not to trust people too quickly. This can sometimes prove problematic for a study, since the researcher has only limited means by which to convince participants of the legitimacy and intentions of the study. One way of adding to the transparency of the study is to provide a web page with information about it (Catterall & Maclaran, 2001). This is especially useful in cases when there are many participants, or when the members of the community are continually changing. In these situations, constant reminders of the role of the researcher might be tiring for both the researcher and the participants. A web page can contain information that it would be inconvenient to share within the game or in a similar fast-paced social setting. Special care should be paid to the style and language used on the page. The use of institutional addresses, logos and other such symbols might also help create a feeling of reliability (Fogg, Soohoo, Danielson, Marable, Stanford & Tauber, 2003).

Collecting Data Online

After learning to play the game and getting into the flow of social interaction taking place within it, questions related to the actual data collection arise. Unlike much of the social interaction in the Internet, the social reality of online games does not necessarily consist only of textual communication. This means that it is not as simple to gather data as, for example, when looking at discussion forums or chat-based communities. In this respect, online games resemble the physical reality: it is nigh impossible for a researcher to grasp the whole phenomenon; instead he or she will mostly be restricted to the observations and notes that can be made while playing. On the other hand, the involvement of computers means that there are many ways of recording and collecting data that would be difficult or impossible to obtain in a traditional face-to-face setting.

When choosing to use participant observation as a method of data collection, one is choosing at least partly to adopt a qualitative research approach. Research approaches utilizing participant observation take into account the interconnected-
ness of the methods of data collection and the actual data collected. In other words, they recognize that the data include not only the actual social interaction involved, but also the experiences and feelings of the researcher and the thoughts that led to the choices made during the research process (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1995; Frey, Botan & Kreps, 2000).

The next paragraphs look at the process of data collection from the point of view of recording log files, making field notes, and capturing images and video. In addition to these, there might be several other ways of obtaining relevant data. For example, researchers using participant observation can use interviews or even surveys to deepen their knowledge of the research topic. However, this is moving into topics that go well beyond the scope of this chapter, and are thus omitted from the consideration presented here.

**Recording Log Files**

At first it seems that the Internet provides many relatively easy means of collecting data automatically. After all, almost every act leaves some kind of a trace on the network, and these traces can often be saved fairly easily for later use. For example, the possibility of automatically saving log files does enable the researcher to gather a large number of messages quickly into a static and easily accessible form. Here a word of warning is in place, however. The promise of the automated saving of data might lead the researcher to try to record everything – a position which is not only unnecessary, but may actually be detrimental to the completion of the study (Wolcott, 1995).

There are some well-known problems that can arise when analyzing log files. One of the most important is that log files simplify the actual communication in at least two crucial ways. First, the stable form of the log files cannot fully represent the temporal dimension of the social interaction, such as the dynamics of turn taking. Second, log files cannot convey what the participants in the social interaction actually experience when they are communicating in a computer-mediated environment (Marvin, 1995).

The oversimplifying nature of log files is evident when looking at social interaction in online games. Many games function not only on a textual, but also on an audio-visual level, which is totally ignored in the creation of textual log files. Still, log files do provide an interesting avenue of data collection, and should not be ignored entirely. Instead, the researcher should be aware of the importance of situational information when interpreting automatically generated log files.

The next example presents a portion of an automated log file generated by the Anarchy Online software. This excerpt shows three characters talking to each other while playing the game (the names of the characters have been changed).

16:10: Crell: aggro here
16:11: Fiendpower: insig here
16:11: Lilah: poor doc got loving
16:11: Crell: heh, I like loving
16:11: Crell: atrox can take some
16:12: Lilah: ah buffs dropping...
16:12: Fiendpower: yeah if it get to bad i’ll mongo them to me
16:13: Lilah: omg crell you scared me
16:13: Crell: hee
16:13: Crell: nothing like a little scare in the morning!
16:13: Lilah: i’m an old lady don’t do that to me
16:13: Crell: oih, sorry

Without situational information, it is impossible to know for example what happened between 16.12 and 16.13 in the conversation. The automatically generated log file alone cannot answer the questions posed by the researcher, but instead situational information has to be included in some way. For example, one can go through the log files after playing the game and insert additional information when necessary. Here follows the excerpt with added information:
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“The game takes place in a science-fiction themed MMOG. A group of players have chosen to team up in order to be able to fight better against the opponents that the game provides them. At the moment of recording this log file, the team is hunting monsters on a swamp. One player in the team is playing a “doctor”, a character that can heal other characters. This character, Crell, is at first under attack, but the situation calms down.”

16:10: Crell: aggro here [aggro = when a monster turns aggressive towards a character]
16:11: Fiendpower: insig here [insig = insignia, a collectable item in the game]
16:11: Lilah: poor doc got loving
16:11: Crell: heh, I like loving
16:11: Crell: atrox can take some [atrox = one of the character races in the game, usually a muscular, enduring humanoid]
16:12: Lilah: ah buffs dropping...
16:12: Fiendpower: yeah if it get to bad i’ll mongo them to me [mongo = (in this case) to use special skills or spells to force a monster to attack a certain character]

“The fight is over, and the team sits down. The water of the swamp is half covering the characters. Crell lies down, and is totally covered by water. Suddenly Crell emerges from the water.”

16:13: Lilah: omg crell you scared me
16:13: Crell: hee
16:13: Crell: nothing like a little scare in the morning!
16:13: Lilah: i’m an old lady don’t do that to me
16:13: Crell: oih, sorry

Adding so much detail into every excerpt might prove impractical at times, but what the above example illustrates is the importance of situational information when interpreting automatically generated log files. In practice, screen shots and other similar forms of data can be used to increase situational awareness of a log file excerpt. However, it must be said that whatever their shortcomings, automated log files can be an invaluable aid in collecting large amounts of textual data concerning social interaction in online computer games.

Making Field Notes

Making field notes while participating in an online computer game differs from doing so in face-to-face contexts in one crucial way – other members of the community have no way of knowing when the researcher is actually making notes, or even if he or she is doing it at all (Paccagnella, 1997). Mostly, this can be seen as liberating, which helps the researcher to make notes without disturbing the ongoing social interaction. In many face-to-face situations it would be inappropriate for the researcher to start visibly recording what is happening. In other situations it might even be altogether forbidden. Of course there are solutions to this dilemma, such as withdrawing from the scene to write the notes somewhere else, or waiting until the situation is over before starting to make notes about it. On the other hand, it can be claimed that the actual act of writing notes contributes to how the relationship between the researcher and the other members of the community forms (Emerson et al., 1995: 25). From this viewpoint, the visible note making is not a hindrance, but rather an important part of the
whole ethnographic research process that is being missed when note-taking is hidden.

The freedom to make notes while participating in a game cannot always be taken for granted. Many of the games that include social interaction require players to be active at least some of the time, and sometimes this level of activity is so high that it is almost impossible to do anything else while playing. In these cases, note taking is very similar to that done in face-to-face contexts, where most of the actual writing happens after the situation is already over.

There are several types of field notes one can take. For example, observation notes might include accounts of how certain things happened. Such notes are typically written either during an activity or directly after it, for example straight onto the log files. Another example of field notes are personal notes, which might include feelings statements about the research process (For information concerning different types of field notes see e.g. Richardson, 1994). A single note could also include both aspects, as illustrated in the next excerpt:

2.2. Monday Gaming time two hours. I played at the end of the workday, from three to five. There were surprisingly few people present at the server, and it was difficult to find company. It occurred to me that if a player lives in a different time zone than the majority of the other players, the gaming experience can be truly lonely. In addition I noticed once again how much easier it would be to fare well in the game if I knew more people. In the end I did manage to get company, though. I met another player of approximately my character’s experience level, and we did some missions together. I also saved some of the conversation during this gaming event, but I started the “recording” only in the middle and had to stop it again when my gaming partner’s line went dead for some reason. Well, anyway one more name to the friends list! I still don’t know how to propose someone’s name into the friends list myself, but at least so far it hasn’t been such a big problem. I seem to get “friends” rather steadily the way I’m playing.

Field notes are a flexible way of collecting data that enable the researcher to react to changing or unexpected situations. For example, not all communication in multiplayer communities is necessarily computer-mediated. Face-to-face player meetings, middle of the night phone calls and similar occasions call for sensitivity from the researcher and trust in one’s own capacities of observation.

Capturing Images and Video

Typically, online computer games use graphical representations to create the world in which the game takes place. This means that it is possible for players to express themselves graphically.

One advantage of doing participant observation in a computer-mediated context is that it is possible to record both images and video, including sound, without the risk of “disturbing” the ongoing social interaction. This is a significant benefit compared to conducting participant observation in a face-to-face situation, where such actions could be obtrusive. In effect, it is technologically possible to record everything that happens during a gaming event.

In practice there are two ways of capturing images and video during participant observation. One is to take screen captures, which effectively freeze the situation into a snapshot. The other is to use video capture, which is the equivalent of tapping the situation with a camcorder. Taking screen shots is the simpler of the two options, and one that is already often included in the user interface of the game. In addition, taking screenshots does not usually take up much of the resources of the computer, ensuring smooth and uninterrupted gameplay.

Even though taking screenshots is relatively simple, it has its downsides. Many online computer games are synchronous in nature. This means that capturing an image or saving a log file brings
about the same problems as recording techniques in physical reality. What if the character was doing an elaborate dance, or what if the players communicated through a series of jumps or gleeful shouts transmitted through a microphone? Such creative ways of expressing oneself during the game are often the most interesting phenomena related to how social interaction takes place while playing with other people (Wright et al., 2003).

A good example of the inadequacy of screen shots versus video capture is the birthday celebration of Anarchy Online. In order to honor the launch of the game, a yearly fiesta was held, to which the grand society of the game were all invited. Hundreds of players joined in, guided by a radio broadcast transmitted via the Internet. Dancing and games took place, and most characters were seen wearing something festive and extraordinary, as seen in Figure 1. While screen shots help paint a lively picture of the atmosphere of the celebration, as a researcher I was left feeling that ultimately the better option would have been to record the whole happening using video capture. The sheer amount of dancing, music, and simultaneous communication feeds from various channels was so overwhelming that I felt no amount of notes written up afterwards could truly recreate the happening.

Some online multiplayer games support by default the possibility of recording the playing event, giving the players a chance to share and review successful games. Still, it is more common that one needs a special program to do the video capture. The need for an external program might lead to problems. Especially newer online games might require extensive amounts of resources from the computer and the network to operate properly, and the addition of a separate recording program might significantly hinder gameplay. The programs might also suffer from compatibility problems with the hardware of the computer, further complicating matters. Finally, the video sequences might be relatively long, making the handling and analyzing of the data challenging.

Sometimes it is possible to obtain videos or replays of actual playing events without taping them oneself. In the context of some online multiplayer games, like Counter Strike, sharing recorded playing events and even artistically modifying them may be an integral part of the activities of a community. Naturally, there are many questions regarding the copyright and ethical use of such videos, but as a potential source of data concerning computer-mediated social interaction it has remained largely untapped.

**CONCLUSION**

Participant observation has been widely used in studies of social life online, including the social aggregates operating within and around online multiplayer games. In order to understand the ever-developing world of online multiplayer games and the communities within, research can benefit from methods that are both open-ended and offer the researcher good possibilities for reflectivity.

As a method of data collection, participant observation is not without its limitations. It is relatively time consuming and requires exten-
sive material and temporal resources from the researcher. There are also legal and economic issues related to using data in publications, i.e. with respect to images, video and sound. Finally, participant observation can lead to difficult questions regarding the ethical responsibilities of the researcher.

Social interaction in communication networks can be collected and examined in ways that have not been possible before. Screen captures, video recording, log files, and lurking (following social interaction without actually taking part in it) offer temptingly easy ways to collect large amounts of data without the participants’ knowledge. Still, as Reid (1996: 170) states: “...it does not follow that easy access to material implies that it lies within the public domain.” The ease of data collection or the difficulties involved in obtaining written permission from participants should not be taken to mean that ethical standards are less important than in research where the human subjects are more tangibly present.

From a deontological viewpoint, I claim that people, whether they appear to the researcher as words on the screen or flesh and blood beings on the street corner, should have the right to know when they are being studied. I see this requirement as being stronger than any fear of endangering the natural flow of social interaction by intervening. After all, the risk of actually damaging the very phenomena of cyberspace interpersonal dynamics that we are studying is constantly present (King, 1996), making even an overly cautious approach more advisable than a casual, easy-going one. On the other hand, the characteristics of online social interaction sometimes make it difficult to inform all the participants in the same way or to the same extent. Often, research interests demand a pragmatic, even utilitarian approach, where carrying out the research means that some measure of non-disclosure is practically inevitable. What remains important, then, is for researchers to continuously reflect upon their actions, and to remember that in all research involving human subjects there is the potential for harm. (Reid, 1996.)

There might still be hidden potential in participant observation. For example, most of the ethnographic accounts of social life within online multiplayer games still follow fairly traditional models of ethnography rather than fully embracing the visuality of the media. Mason and Dicks suggested already in 1999 that hypermedia could offer a different kind of interpretative space than book technology when conducting and reporting ethnographic research. In their vision, it was the mixed-media features of hypermedia that were exciting, opening up new avenues of interpretation both for the makers and the readers of virtual ethnographies. (Mason & Dicks, 1999.) While time has shown that the traditional form of academic publishing is fairly resistant to change, there is still charm in the idea that the visually rich context of video games could benefit from more experimental and creative forms of conducting and reporting research.

Certainly, many more questions remain that need attention regarding the use of participant observation as a method of data collection in the study of multiplayer communities. At best, it is a flexible tool for gathering information that would otherwise be difficult to obtain due to the multi-faceted and ever-changing nature of social interaction online.

REFERENCES


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