Ethnography and Virtual Worlds: a Handbook of Method
Tom Boellstorff, Bonnie Nardi, Celia Pearce & T. L. Taylor
Review by Mitul Shukla

This book is approximately A5 in size and made up of around 240 pages. Overall this was a pleasant read in a subject area that is somewhat off the beaten track. That said, I really would have liked to have read this book maybe three of four years ago when it could have greatly assisted me in my doctoral studies. However, it is still a timely piece of work when we take into account the continued growth of virtual worlds, especially with brands such as Xbox and Playstation using these technologies to garner a sense of community amongst their customer base. This is an excellent primer within the fields of virtual worlds as well as ethnography, but
moreover about conducting an ethnographic study within virtual worlds.


Chapter 1 (p.1):

‘As ethnographers, what interests us about virtual worlds is not what is extraordinary about them, but what is ordinary. We are intrigued not only by the individuals in a group, but by the sum of the parts. We aim to study virtual worlds as valid venues for cultural practice, seeking to understand both how they resemble and how they differ from other forms of culture. We do this by immersing our embodied selves within the cultures of interest, even when that embodiment is in the form of an avatar, the representation of self in these spaces. The goal of this handbook is to provide ethnographers with a practical set of tools and approaches for conducting successful fieldwork in virtual worlds.’

The four authors of this book have a solid history in this type of research across a variety of virtual worlds. Their works are highlighted in the first chapter as well as interspersed throughout the rest of this book as examples of a salient point.

I was pleased to see the authors acknowledging the many disciplines that may be interested in this type of handbook from sociologists and anthropologists through to computer science sub-disciplines. Unfortunately a fair amount of ink is used in defining and explaining the handbook format of this work. While this is understandable in the sense of contextualisation and in explaining why some areas are not covered in great detail but in essence, I felt these issues were somewhat extended.

The authors go on to say:

‘to frame our discussion, we describe virtual worlds as possessing the following characteristics. First, they are places and have a sense of worldness. They are not just spatial representations but offer an object rich environment that participants can traverse and with which they can interact. Second, virtual worlds are multi-user in nature; they exist as shared social environments with synchronous communication and interaction. While participants may engage in solitary activities within them, virtual worlds five through co-inhabitation with others. Third, they are persistent: they continue to exist in some form even as participants log off. They can thus change while one participant is absent, based on the platform itself or the activities of other participants. Fourth, virtual worlds allow participants to embody themselves, usually as avatars (even if ‘textual avatars’ as in text only virtual worlds such as MUDs), such that they can explore and participate in the virtual world’.

One of my only slight disappointments with this chapter was the fact that the authors chose initially not to distinguish between social and game virtual worlds. However this is a legacy issue from my own research interests rather than any intrinsic problem with what the authors of this handbook were actually writing.

Chapter 2 provides histories of ethnography and virtual worlds as well as the history of ethnography as a practice in virtual worlds.

With regard to ethnography, the distinction is made between the movement to describe the world in terms of encyclopaedias during the 18th century and the use of ethnography as a more detailed perspective on situated accounts of specific cultures. Here the authors also discuss positivism, essentially that the world can be described in terms of generalised laws. This applies also to human experiences.

It is interesting to note that originally field work was done by the likes of traders, explorers and missionaries. In the mean-while the intellectual high ground was taken by scholars using those self-same filed reports. This state of affairs started to change with the work of Malinowski (p.15), who is described here as ‘the single most pivotal figure in the history of ethnography’.

The authors then go on to describe a variety of perspectives, practices and terminology, in particular structuralism, post colonialism, and feminism are discussed as well as the contributions of many scholars, Weber of course making an appearance when sociology is discussed.

It was particularly interesting to see a section describing the similarities and distinctions between ethnographers and journalists.

The section about the history of virtual worlds weave together nicely an account of science fiction fantasy literature multiplayer and single play games throughout history as well as the early computer multi-user dungeon types of text based adventure games and early graphic games such as Pong.

This account goes on then to describe Lucasfilm’s Habitat described here as the very first virtual world, with an account of many other virtual worlds such There, The Sims Online, Second Life, Eve Online, Ultima, Mine Craft and so on.

The third history given here is that of scholarly activity with in virtual worlds and this section provides many reference points for the reader to follow up on if they so choose. Indeed, the authors even point out that many
breadcrumbs have been left for the reader to follow up upon in this chapter to further their own personal knowledge.

Chapter 3 gives a considered and logical argument as to what the authors call the 10 myths of ethnography. These being:

- Ethnography is unscientific.
- Ethnography is less valid than quantitative research.
- Ethnography is simply anecdotal.
- Ethnography is undermined by subjectivity.
- Ethnography is merely intuitive.
- Ethnography is writing about your personal experience.
- Ethnographers contaminate field sites by their very presence.
- Ethnography is the same as grounded theory.
- Ethnography is the same as an ethno-methodology.
- Ethnography will become obsolete.

Here the authors help the reader to clarify and frame the use of ethnography, this is especially important when we take into account that ethnography does not follow the standard hypothesis driven model of science.

For example, with regard to contaminating field sites, here the authors quote Malinowski (p.44):

‘...as the natives saw me constantly every day, they ceased to be interested or alarmed, or made self-conscious by my presence, and I ceased to be a disturbing element in the tribal life which I was to study’. With this quote as a stepping off point the authors argue essentially that by becoming part of the environment the ethnographer ceases to be an element of novelty or alarm. Rather the ethnographer becomes a newcomer. And as such, the authors argue, ‘what insiders think newcomers should know about their culture tells us a great deal about what is important to them’.

Therefore the authors recognise that while ethnographers may impact upon the people that they study, that affect is one that all cultures through history have accepted: that of a newcomer who stays.

While it was enjoyable to read this chapter there were some aspects of it that were simply seemed too brief. In fairness the handbook format of this book did preclude an extended narrative on some of these matters.

Chapter 4 is based around the notion that ‘the most fundamental, consequential, and personal step in designing an ethnographic project is choosing the question we seek to answer’ (p.52).

Here three principals are elaborated upon: emergence, relevance, and personal interest.

Formulating a research question within the current context of the plethora of information that exists, especially with regard to ethnography as well as to virtual worlds, can be difficult. The authors therefore give a brief history of some of the research questions with which they began their own ethnographic research.

Emergence here is related to the concept of the ethnographer as an explorer. While simultaneously acknowledging that ethnography itself is an emergent process. Interestingly cross disciplinary or interdisciplinary research questions should not be avoided.

This chapter also gives an excellent description as to the relevance and merit of a good literature review.

Here also, the importance of passion and the personal interest of the researcher is highlighted. This is something which is rarely found in research handbooks of this nature and is as refreshing as it is insightful to read.

This chapter then proceeds to enlighten the reader on matters such as the scope of the field site and the attending to off-line contexts.

Chapter 5. The authors deem participant observation as a fundamental method to the ethnographic approach. Primarily this is so as it allows the researcher to step into the social frame of the participants. This is equally so within the realms of virtual worlds.

Within this chapter the authors discourse upon embodied participation as well as subject position. Subject position here is interpreted from the researchers’ personal position of membership from within the group being investigated.

This chapter, then, goes on to explain the history and practice of participant observation in an ethnographic research study. This is achieved by the narrative being broken into smaller sections. These sections focus on issues such as: observation practice, the research self, initiating relationships, the making of mistakes, extensive field notes, data organisation, participant observation and ethnographic knowledge, timing, and experimentation with attitude.

For example, the section about ‘the research self’ offers advice on the practicalities of conducting ethnographic research within a virtual world environment. The advice given regarding initiating relationships in a virtual world environment is focused more on issues of rapport and trust building within the group being studied.

(The second half of Mitul Shukla’s review will appear in the November issue of the JPD – Eds.)