Auto-netnography: First encounters as a netnographer in *Minecraft*

Ashley Donkin, Edith Cowan University, a.donkin@ecu.edu.au

Abstract

This article utilises the method of auto-netnography to reflect on the challenges that the author, a netnographer, overcame in order to enter the research field of Minecraft. *Netnography uses observation and participation techniques to investigate online social and cultural groups. When entering the field in the netnographic research process, auto-netnography is an important reflexive process that can add depth and perspective to the analysis of collected data and experiences. The author is currently researching the use of virtual worlds by Australian children aged from five to twelve years. In the early data-collection stage, the author used the method of netnography to better understand child participants' online game activities. Researchers of children's virtual game worlds do not always have the opportunity to conduct netnography with their participants, and do not experience these worlds for themselves. The author's ability to fully immerse herself within virtual worlds was constrained by tight ethical requirements; however, many valuable insights were gained from conducting the netnography. The author discusses two experiences encountered in* Minecraft *and explains the insights that were gained from conducting the netnography. These personal experiences provide vital interpretive data that are analysed to gain a deeper understanding of the social and cultural practices that are central to these experiences. The challenges the author had to overcome to enter* Minecraft *and develop new game skills are also described. This article concludes that auto-netnography assists the critical analysis of a netnographer's experiences, and the value of these insights for understanding the virtual worlds in which children play.*

Keywords: auto-netnography; children; cyberbullying; *Minecraft*; netnography; virtual worlds

Introduction

The internet provides users with a range of virtual worlds in which to learn new skills, play games and develop social connections with friends and others. Virtual worlds also allow users to connect with other like-minded individuals and groups; create spaces for minority cultures to represent themselves; instigate movements for change; create and innovate ideas that might otherwise be impossible without significant physical resources; and develop new strengths and skills, which can be applied in offline settings, including schools and the workplace (Kozinets, 2010, pp. 13–17). Virtual game worlds have become popular places for children to play and connect with others

(Black, Korobkova & Epler, 2010; Kafai, 2009; Marsh, 2010; Olson, 2010; Valentine & Holloway, 2002). This article focuses on the virtual game world *Minecraft,* in which users play games and socialise with other players.

Using the reflexive method of auto-netnography, this article examines two of my first experiences of entering into *Minecraft* as a novel netnographer. Netnography is the study of online cultures and communities (Kozinets, 2010). Auto-netnography uses autobiographic and netnographic principles to better understand the researcher's experiences within virtual worlds (Kozinets & Kedzior, 2009). Through analysis of my experiences in *Minecraft*, I argue that the use of auto-netnography assists the netnographer to develop a more nuanced interpretation of the complexity of virtual game worlds.

Current research

My auto-netnographic research has become an extension of my current project investigating how Australian children aged five to twelve years use virtual worlds. I conducted netnographic research with three of my thirteen participants. My research with these young participants involved taking screenshots of their virtual game play to identify the benefits and risks they encounter in their games, and the digital skills they require to play safely online.

My university's ethics department required me to obtain informed consent from both parents and children before collecting children's online data. This was for several reasons, including to ensure that the online players were in fact five to twelve-year-old Australian children; to protect the privacy of other online players; to secure permission to conduct a short face-to-face interview with parents and children to discuss the project; and to allow both children and their parents to demonstrate their informed consent to participate in the project. According to Spriggs (2010), it is safer 'not to rely on the idea that the Internet is a public space to justify not seeking consent' (p. 31). Once I had received consent from parents and children, I began my netnographic research.

Immersing myself in virtual game worlds as a player was quite restricted because I was not permitted by my ethics department to communicate with other players, but only those participants who had been recruited offline. It was also difficult to immerse myself as a gamer because I had never played in a virtual world before; I was a newbie. Boostrom (2008, p. 3) states: 'Newbie, within a virtual world, is the title that is given to social actors who lack knowledge of the environment and in some key way can detract from the environment for themselves and others.' I encountered many difficulties because of my lack of game skills. Additionally, I was a novel netnographer who was learning how to take screenshots of, and make field notes about, my participants' game play, while in a fast-moving game. The culmination of these limitations and challenges influenced my entry into *Minecraft*, but gave me a deeper understanding of virtual game play. The experiences that I discuss in this article relate to my encounters in *Minecraft*, because this was the virtual game that my first participant played.

Minecraft

Minecraft is a massively multiplayer online game that was first created in 2009 by Markus Persson (Mojang, 2016). There are numerous *Minecraft* servers that allow players to access an array of different worlds, in which players progress through different portals in order to advance to new levels, gain points, and acquire weaponry, tools or new attire for their avatars (Williams, 2007, p. 15). Players can also create their own online communities, either independently or collaboratively with their friends. This is why *Minecraft* is also known as a sandbox game: just like playing in the sand, 'players create the game themselves by manipulating the world within it' (Neimeyer & Gerber, 2015, p. 2).

Many *Minecraft* players have also developed player-generated resources to assist in the development of new game skills. These resources include walkthroughs uploaded onto YouTube, whereby players demonstrate how to manipulate or play within various worlds; and *Minecraft* chat forums and wiki pages, where players can ask, or answer, game related questions (DanWantsTech, 2013; Minecraft Forum, 2010, 2012; Minecraft help, 2013; Minecraft Wiki, 2015; PotsPotsie, 2015; PRQADE, 2015; Slow Silver, 2013). Neimeyer and Gerber (2015, p. 2) state:

> With *Minecraft*, the possibilities are endless. The catch is that the game does not come with a manual, so players immediately must navigate the Internet and other resources to find information about the game and how to play.

Consalvo (2007, p. 9) explains that these resources – known as paratexts – are the 'peripheral industries surrounding the games'. According to Apperley and Beavis (2011, p. 133), paratexts include both 'the text and surrounding material that frame text consumption', which helps to 'give meaning to the act of reading'. Thus it is the paratexts that provide players with more detailed information about the games they play. I relied on many of these resources while conducting my netnography.

Auto-netnography

According to Walters (1980, p. 33) ethnography is 'an analytic description of the behaviours that characterize and distinguish cultures or sociocultural groups' and includes a 'description and analysis of the knowledge and beliefs that generate and interpret those behaviours'.

Ethnography has always been a 'geographic project, traditionally involving practices of dwelling in physical locations, mapping and understanding the practices within these locations, and retreating to spaces to write research reports' (Leander & McKim, 2003, p. 213). Leander and McKim (2003, p. 213) state:

> Imagining where the ethnographer would go in terms of Internet research suggests an expansion or revision of social situations to include locations that are not physical settings as we have typically thought them to be.

Similar to ethnography, netnography uses observation and participation techniques to examine online social and cultural groups within chat forums, social networking sites

and a variety of other virtual worlds (Kozinets, 2010). Some of the various methods of netnography include 'interviews, descriptive statistics, archival data collection, extended historical case analysis, and videography' (Kozinets, 2010, p. 60).

Auto-ethnography is a method that combines autobiographic and ethnographic principles to reflect on, and analyse, ethnographers' observations and participation within the research field (Anderson, 2006). The origins of this method date back to 1923, when Nels Anderson wrote *The Hobo,* which examined his experiences with the lifestyle of homeless men. Sociologists and anthropologists have since used this method to reflect on their various experiences within the research field (Bochner & Ellis, 2002; Denzin, 1989; Richardson, 1994).

Auto-netnography stems from auto-ethnography, and is an 'approach to netnography that highlights the role of the netnographer's own online experiences' (Kozinets & Kedzior, 2009, p. 8). Auto-netnography has been used to reflect on the netnographer's personal experiences to provide a more nuanced account of online cultures and communities (Kozinets & Kedzior, 2009; Markham, 1998; Weinberg, 2001). According to Kozinets and Kedzior (2009, p. 5), 'at least some of the important effects of virtual worlding (as a verb) take place on an interior dimension of perspectival change and experience'. The authors explain that entering virtual worlds (re-worlding), becoming embodied by an avatar (re-embodiment) and gaining multiple perspectives (multiperspectivality) from experiencing many different worlds 'may not be as tractable to researchers employing traditional methods of data gathering'.

My auto-netnography came about from experiencing a range of spontaneous online encounters while I was navigating my way through *Minecraft*. I immediately reflected on these experiences because they were so profound to me, and I realised that they were providing me with new insights into the world of *Minecraft*. I decided to record field notes so I could further analyse my experiences, following Kozinets, who states (2010, p. 114):

> In reflective fieldnotes, netnographers record their own observations regarding subtexts, pretexts, contingencies, conditions and personal emotions occurring during their time online, and relating to their online experiences. These fieldnotes often provide key insights into what the online culture is and what it does.

The following section contains my field notes and analysis of my entrée into *Minecraft*. This section examines two of my very first experiences within one public *Minecraft* world in which my first participant played. I have included my encounters within the game, the obstacles that I had to overcome and my analysis of the social and cultural implications of these experiences.

Results: Experiences in a Minecraft server

Entering the field

According to Wernholm and Vigmo (2015, p. 231), 'gaining access is one of the most problematic aspects when it comes to conducting ethnography research and can only

proceed where access has been achieved'. My initial problems included learning how to connect to a *Minecraft* server and how to navigate within the virtual space. During this time, I utilised the plethora of online *Minecraft* chat forums, help pages, wikis and YouTube videos, aimed at troubleshooting problems for players.

The YouTube videos detailed other *Minecraft* players' experiences and demonstrated step-by-step 'how tos' in order to solve various problems and develop new skills (DanWantsTech, 2013; PotsPotsie, 2015; Slow Silver, 2013). The chat forums including the *Minecraft* forum, help and wiki pages offered multiple suggestions for resolving different issues regarding connecting to and navigating the different Minecraft servers (Minecraft Forum, 2010, 2012; Minecraft help, 2013; Minecraft Wiki, 2015). These paratexts helped me to develop new skills as well as demonstrating the types of digital game skills my child participants need to play in *Minecraft* worlds.

During my observation sessions with my participants, I began to explore the world of *Minecraft*. During these sessions, I experienced a range of unexpected encounters, some of which involved other players (not my participants) or the game itself. I recorded my experiences as field notes in order to analyse their deeper social and cultural significance. The following sections analyse two of my experiences whilst navigating through *Minecraft*.

Community

My very first experience of entering *Minecraft* was unfortunately a negative encounter that made me reflect on my understanding of the term 'shared community'. Below is an excerpt from my field notes.

> I was walking along and another avatar approached me asking me why I had 'their skin'? I attempted to turn around and walk away when two more avatars approached and blocked me in. I looked at both of them and they said 'Yeah YOU!' and I actually felt quite intimidated. I immediately exited the game and went and changed my 'skin' and avatar name.

As I was exiting the game to get away from these avatars, I thought to myself: What if I had been a child? Were they children? I wondered whether knowing each other's age and even gender would have changed the way they perceived and communicated with me. I realised that my position of objective adult researcher is compromised once I am inside the game and embodied by my avatar. I appeared as another player and that is how other gamers treated me.

The 'skin' that I had originally chosen was also one of a few default options that I was offered when I signed up for the game. Banakou and Chorianopoulos (2010, p. 3) observed in their research that 'users with the more elaborate avatar had a higher success rate in their social encounters than those users with the default avatar'). My default appearance was apparently making me a target of unwanted attention. I felt so threatened by this experience that I changed my avatar's name and appearance, which I felt was necessary to avoid further harassment. While it was an interesting and complex experience that affected me personally, I realised that it also reflected a broader social and cultural issue of bullying.

Cyberbullying involves a group or individual repeatedly bullying victims online (Chesney et al., 2009, p. 530). People who cause grief, known as 'griefers', are people who 'find enjoyment in negatively affecting the experience of other people in virtual worlds' (Kozinets & Kedzior, 2009, p. 12). Griefing is very similar to cyberbullying; however, players are usually unknown to each other. They can end the griefing by using avoidance tactics; however, this denies the victim access to all areas of the game (Chesney et al., 2009, p. 530). Griefers can intimidate in various ways, which can include taunting a newcomer to the game as they are learning new skills, using obscene language, cheating and lying (McQuade, Colt & Meyer, 2009, pp. 72–3). If players are experiencing griefing or bullying, this will impact on their ability to connect with others and join online communities. According to Chayko (2002, p. 40):

> Communities in general are formed when three or more people become socially connected in a generally structured or patterned way, develop a collective identity and purpose, and share an extra-dyadic 'sense' of belonging to a social entity larger than the individual or dyad.

In addition, Mead (1934, pp. 154–7) claims that an individual will assume 'the organised social attitudes of the given social group or community' and will enter 'into a special set of social relations with all the other individuals who belong to that [group or community]'. In this way, the construction of the community is made possible through mutual consensus of shared relations and values, and is not limited to offline settings.

According to Kozinets (2010, p. 7), virtual worlds 'carry the complex markers of many cultures' and they 'manifest and forge new connections and communities'. It is the technology that acts as a mediator between 'two spatially separated individuals' who thus 'have a chance to learn enough about one another so that they can become oriented toward and get to know of one another' (Chayko 2002, p. 42). Online communities can greatly influence the way players interact within virtual worlds, and can even be the reason why players continue to play a particular game (Koivisto, 2003, p. 1).

While it was only a small group of players who confronted me, their coordinated efforts to intimidate me were effective. I did not conform to their social conventions regarding appropriate avatar wear or 'skin', and my subversive behaviour – of which I was completely ignorant – was reprimanded. If I were an average game player (rather than a researcher) trying to connect with others in this game, this experience alone would have made me reconsider re-entering this world. In addition, for those netnographers without ethical constraints, this experience could have made it difficult to join this or other groups on this *Minecraft* server.

Kozinets (2010, p. 96) argues that when conducting netnography, it is important for researchers to become accepted within the online group or community they are studying so they can learn about the various social and cultural rules that shape online groups. Pearce, Boellstorff and Nardi (2011, pp. 198–9) also state that 'the development of trust and rapport is always vital to the success of ethnographic research'. Thus becoming immersed within a virtual game world requires not only understanding how to play the game created by the producers, but also being able to competently play the game, with all the complex rules that govern virtual world

communities. I realised from my experience that although I was not communicating with other players or participating in their groups, I still had to integrate within *Minecraft* so as not attract unwanted attention.

Keeping a low profile

After this first encounter, I began learning how to keep myself (my avatar) alive by reading through various chat forums, wikis and YouTube videos, which taught me how to navigate through *Minecraft* servers (DanWantsTech, 2013; Minecraft Forum, 2010, 2012; Minecraft Wiki, 2015; PotsPotsie, 2015; Slow Silver, 2013). I also developed certain skills in order to become somewhat 'invisible' within the game, which included using avoidance tactics such as moving very quickly past other avatars and finding corners to hide in when I needed to plan my next move. Conversely, most netnographers aim to participate in online groups and not hide from potential research participants (Isabella, 2007; Kozinets, 2010; Pearce, Boellstorff & Nardi, 2011; Weinberg, 2001). However, I had to follow the ethical guidelines that aimed to protect other players' privacy, and to ensure that I was researching child participants who had been recruited offline.

It took me longer to learn about *Minecraft* than I initially expected, and I was still negotiating many difficulties due to my low skill level. Below is an excerpt from my field notes detailing an experience that happened while I was walking through *Minecraft*.

> I [my avatar] was walking along a path and as I turned a corner I found myself trapped in a locked room. The door would not open and I could not escape any other way including out the small windows that surrounded the room. One other avatar, [whom] I shall call Avatar 1, was outside the door and every time I approached the door to try and escape they would stick an arm in, sometimes with a sword, and would begin to hit my avatar thus pushing me back into the room. A second avatar, Avatar 2, was inside the room and proceeded to kill me, which seemed to log me out of the game. I re-entered the game and I and Avatar 2 were still in the room. Every so often Avatar 2 would come over and begin hitting my avatar as though to try and kill me again. I tried to look up how to exit from this room and could not find anything online in any chat forums. I was trapped in this room for a few days until one day I logged in and was somehow free again.

According to Williams (2007, p. 16), finding 'one's bearings and navigating these immense spaces is at first disorientating to a participant observer'. I did not ask for administrative assistance while I was trapped in this room because I was only allowed to interact with my participants, and I did not want players to start asking me questions about myself. I did, however, study a few online chat forums to see if there was another way to escape from this room. It was suggested that one option for getting your avatar out of a difficult situation was to try and kill yourself so that you would re-spawn, or basically return to the start of the game. Some of the suggested ways to kill your avatar included: drowning; pouring lava over your avatar; falling off a stack of blocks; or

dropping a stack of blocks on top of your avatar (PRQADE, 2015; Minecraft help, 2013). All of these options seemed quite drastic and I knew I did not have the skills to attempt any one of these suggestions, so it was a relief when my avatar was finally released from the room a few days later.

Although I tried to calmly resolve this problem, I found that being trapped inside the room and attacked and killed by other avatars was not only frustrating, but also made me panic. I was concerned that I would never be able to escape from this room and my attempts to exit through the windows were futile. Even though my offline self could get up and walk away, I actually felt as though my physical body was trapped inside the room, and at one point I began to feel claustrophobic. When a gamer becomes immersed within a virtual environment it is not uncommon for them to 'become' their avatar and feel as though what is happening to their avatar is happening to their offline self. As Taylor (2002, p. 44) states:

> Through action, communication, and being in relation to others, users come to find themselves 'there'. It is through placing one's avatar in the social setting, having a self mirrored [sic], as well as mirroring back, that one's presence becomes grounded.

Ratan and Sah (2015, p. 368) also explain that players who have a 'stronger emotional connection to an avatar during use exhibit stronger physiological responses while watching the avatar receive negative treatment'. The attachment to one's avatar, according to Ratan and Sah, is known as avatar self-relevance, whereby a player strongly identifies with their avatar. I initially had no idea that I would experience avatar self-relevance, and feel as though I really was inside the game.

The experience of being re-embodied within *Minecraft* gave me a deeper understanding of how gamers identify with their avatars and become invested in virtual worlds. While the experience of being trapped was confronting, it was invaluable to my learning this lesson, and I would not have experienced this had I not conducted netnographic research.

Discussion and conclusion

This auto-netnography has examined my online entrée into the virtual world of *Minecraft* through examining my early experiences as a netnographer. The participation aspect of netnographic research can be more challenging for a researcher who is learning how to negotiate virtual worlds as a newbie, particularly when there are ethical constraints due to researching with children. However, I still managed to feel a strong connection with my avatar and gain valuable experience and knowledge about *Minecraft*.

From my experiences within *Minecraft,* I learnt new digital skills, such as how to connect to *Minecraft* servers, how to navigate my way around *Minecraft* using the various shortcut keys and functions of the game to change my avatar's appearance and how to avoid other players. Despite the challenges I had to overcome, these practical experiences contributed to my netnographic research into Australian children's use of virtual worlds.

My analysis of these experiences within *Minecraft* also demonstrated the presence of two social and cultural phenomena: online communities and griefing. The construction of community is formed from shared social values and is not limited to offline settings. Griefing can involve taunting other players, cheating or lying. Griefing can happen at random and cause emotional distress. These phenomena need further research attention, with a focus on how communities can bring people together and how we can empower gamers – especially young gamers – in dealing with griefing or bullying. Through my personal experiences, I developed a more nuanced understanding of these issues, as well as how to play in *Minecraft*.

Taking field notes about my experiences using Kozinets and Kedzior's (2009) method of auto-netnography helped me to better understand *Minecraft,* and gave me new insights into how players interact within gaming worlds, as well as the types of skills that are necessary to negotiate these online spaces. From entering into *Minecraft*, I slowly but surely came to the realisation that although I am an adult researcher of virtual worlds, I am not an expert in them. Thus all netnographers can greatly benefit from the auto-netnographic process, which allows for greater insight into virtual worlds, which will lead to more in-depth research findings.

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