Hosting a Symposium as Data Collection: Bringing Together Dispersed Participants & Creating “The Field”

Abstract

How should qualitative researchers approach the messy, disjointed reality of contemporary technical and cultural industries—wherein “corridor talk” is a transnational or transglobal phenomenon and industry connections are smeared across continents and time zones? In this paper, we forward techniques that are used to turn symposia and other events into data collection actives that permit the bringing-together of geographically dispersed actors that—while sharing certain vocational properties—rarely congregate. What follows are strategies for manufacturing a working para-site: an ephemeral space where data may be gathered among participants whose position at the margins of their own organizations and polyvalent, loose connections to adjacent actors, industries and, institutions, render the nature of their work difficult to apprehend (see Deeb & Marcus, 2011; Silverstein, 2011). Here we demonstrate how symposia—or other curated, ephemeral events—are able to bring together dispersed participants, allowing them to coalesce into concrete, albeit unstable, populations that smooth over the temporal and geographic disjunctures that characterize tech and cultural-sector work environments.

Keywords

Para-sites, Events-Based Research, Cultural Intermediaries, Dispersed Populations
Introduction

As industries move away from traditional 9-5 offices and towards contract-based models of “at-a-distance” gig work, the sociology of work has had to adapt. For example, social theorists have recently developed several frameworks through which to analyze a globalized economic reality that encompasses the work of social media influencers, bloggers, and streamers (see: Freberg et al 2011; Fietkiewicz et al 2018; Zimmer and Scheibe 2019). However, relatively little methodological innovation has occurred that allows for the in-depth contextual analysis of increasingly dispersed actors, particularly in culture industries such as taste-making, artistic critique, game development, and publication. Cultural intermediaries—such as curators, event organizers, critics, and community organizers—are not only taste-makers, but also brokers and bridges between geographically dispersed clusters of cultural producers, funding bodies, publishers, promoters, and audiences. However, the kinds of work that cultural intermediaries do can be rendered invisible, or difficult to access, at their actual sites of work.

In order to address the temporal, geographical and epistemological issues related to studying cultural intermediaries and groups with similar characteristics, we outline a methodology for using symposia as a site of data collection. This hybrid method allows for rapid, deep, and participatory engagement with geographically-dispersed research subjects performing work that is otherwise difficult to apprehend. Our use of the ‘para-site’ permitted us to tease out data about cultural intermediaries’ practices and relationships that was otherwise hidden in their ephemeral, dispersed communications networks. We ameliorated the time-limited nature of our para-site by adapting Swarm Ethnography and Rapid Ethnographic Assessment methods to coordinate the efforts of several graduate student researchers. Alongside their research efforts, these graduate students were also responsible for “intermediating the intermediaries” through facilitation, which allowed us to construct a research site and constitute our participant community; in so doing, we were able to document a wider range of locations, contexts, and interactions than would have been accessible with a single ethnographer.

In what follows, we begin with an introduction to Bourdieu’s (1979) concept of cultural intermediation and how it has been taken up and adapted by contemporary scholarship. The two sections subsequent move into a detailed discussion of the difficulties cultural intermediaries pose to methodological approaches commonly employed by cultural researchers, and how the ‘para-site’ might be fruitfully applied to ameliorate these quandaries, respectively. The remainder of the paper recounts how we adapted recent methodological innovations to construct a research apparatus capable of coordinating a team of seven researchers so as to gather rich, nuanced data from a time-limited fieldsite whilst also foregrounding the needs of—and interactions between—the symposium’s attendees.

Who are Cultural Intermediaries?

Cultural production cannot be reduced to a series of geographically dispersed hubs. Cultural producers do not function, as either an assemblage or industry, without the

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1 The size of the authorial team for this paper may appear unusually large. The method we employed—which is described throughout the paper—necessitated the use of a large team of researchers gathering data at a single fieldsite over a short period of time. Each of the researchers involved in this data-gathering effort is credited here as an author.
cross-pollination of ideas, trends, and directions determined by a select few individuals. Here, cross-pollination is actuated by those individuals who do not engage in creative labour themselves, but act, instead, as cultural intermediaries (CIs) that draw together, define, and articulate the currents and trends present within the wider cultural communities, the language that piques the interests of peers, producers, funding agencies, and organizers, investors, and so on. Much of what CIs do is located at the intersections between industry partners, adjacent professionals, and hidden away behind the scenes (Authors removed). This is not to say that CIs are utterly inaccessible and never cross paths with one another; many CIs participate and meet at industry conventions, showcases, and events, but they are dispersed. As such, the work of the CIs only begins to come into focus when situated in its wider contexts—for example, among other CIs working the same interstitial spaces of the industry. Doing the same sort of work does not necessarily mean belonging to a shared sense of identity or, even more basically, understanding the shared task-scape one might share with their (sometimes) hidden compatriots. To work inside the margins of industry is to be, unfortunately, blind to the wider picture of what one works towards and to rarely, if ever, see their own work settle into the comfortable categories that mark traditional workplace hierarchies. Moreover, their slippery position at the edges of industry render them difficult—if not impossible—to pin down, locate, or seek-out in their own element.

Cultural intermediation work is a matter of boundaries and perimeters; CIs absorb diffuse nodes and sites into greater collectivities. As such, their role places them in a liminal space outside the boundaries of multi-sited ethnographic inquiry and in the interstitial margins of what could be called a global developer assemblage.

Recent theoretical work has brought assemblage theory to the forefront (Ong & Collier, 2005; Puar 2007; Tsing, 2015; Haraway, 2016; Puar 2017). Through these authors, assemblage theory has produced a wide range of fruitful analyses of strange and unobvious collectivities. While illuminating, this tendency to seek out strange and unlikely partnerships has tended to preclude empirical investigation. Our goal here is to instill this analytic with a sense of place: to create—if only temporarily—a site that draws together the far reaches of a new corporate diaspora. Although multi-sited ethnography is often used to examine the globally-distributed parts of a larger collectivity, such an endeavor does not capture the loose, tenuous—although sometimes intense—connections that our subjects have with one another despite their geographic de-linkage. Even if multi-sited ethnography can bend itself to determine the connections between participants (lab coordinators, scientists, central disciplinary figures) it does not contend well with those industry actors who are, themselves, multi-sited and move seamlessly between various corporate and non-corporate environments and tie together those facets of the culture industry that seem far away but are, nonetheless, intrinsically linked together.

How Can We Study Cultural Intermediaries?

While intermediation work is essential to the economic sustainability of culture industries, CI work does not easily lend itself to fieldwork. CIs are epistemologically slippery as embodied ‘lines of flight’ (Deleuze & Guattari 1988), not only because they are highly mobile and geographically dispersed, but because they may not share roles or job titles, see themselves as a discrete occupational community, or organize as a centralized group. On the occasions CI congregate, such as at international industry events, their time is outwardly focused on interacting with and supporting the creatives they work with, leaving little time to interact with
CI in similar roles. CI research also does not easily lend itself to fieldwork because of temporal restrictions. Given that one of our research goals was to make positive interventions in the industry, particularly in terms of economic stability, the rapid pace of change in the game industry (Kerr, 2017) necessitates the development of new and effective methods for producing fast, relevant data. Thus, we adapted qualitative methods that emphasize site, capture, and speed: creating a ‘para-site’ with an international symposium that brought CI and scholars together to discuss how CI contribute to more sustainable culture industries.

Roughly defined, a para-site is the creation of a “research event” wherein researchers might convene with other kinds of experts in a cross-disciplinary setting (Deeb & Marcus, 2011). Thus, the para-site aims to develop and capitalize on “a mutual shift in stance from researcher–subject to epistemic partnership [the purpose of which] is to risk interpretations together in a manner that disrupts both researcher's and participant's habitual analytic modes in order to access in situ the emergence of ideas” (Deeb & Marcus, 2011, p. 51). Our use of an ephemeral para-site, coupled with the desire to generate fast data for our participants, precluded any possibility of allowing our research to play out across multiple months. Thus, to ameliorate temporal limitations, we drew upon and adapted elements from ‘Rapid Ethnographic Assessment’ (REA) and ‘Swarm Ethnography’ to create a hybrid, multi-researcher approach for the in-depth study of ephemeral events (see Bentley et al., 1988; Taplin, Scheld, & Low, 2002; Pierce, 2009b). Our use of the symposium as para-site afforded us multi-modal data collection opportunities, facilitated a mutual exchange of knowledge, and fostered more equitable partnerships between researchers and industry participants.

This method allows researchers to bring hidden and geographically separate actors to the surface, creating an artificial space where participants and researchers alike might come to better understand the work participants perform. In essence, what follows are strategies for manufacturing a working para-site wherein data may be gathered among actors whose position within their own organizations and industries makes them and their work difficult to capture and apprehend (see Deeb & Marcus, 2011; Silverstein, 2011). While we have applied this method to CI, this approach might be adapted for other groups that are otherwise difficult to surface, congregate, and/or pin down for sustained periods of time, such as online communities, event organizers, streamers, and others.

The Symposium as Para-Site

Para-sites emerged as a way to extend ethnographic inquiry into contexts that do not easily lend themselves to traditional methods of observation (Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Ong & Collier, 2005; Collier, Lakoff, & Rabinow, 2006; Rabinow, 2006; Rabinow, 2011). Marcus (2001) advocates innovative developments within the ethnographic toolkit that recognize and harness the need to move beyond nebulous notions of “rapport” and into a new domain of reflexive, authorial partnership with one’s research participants. In part, this is a result of the aforementioned erasure of rapport in favour of participation, and yet, it also belies an increased anthropological interest in “returning from the tropics” and engaging in the now much maligned term “studying up” (Nader, 1972; Gusterson, 1997).

2 Although this paper draws inspiration from innovations in ethnographic methodology, our work is not—and does not aspire to be—ethnography.
Marcus (2014) carves space inside the ethnographic repertoire for experimental forms of engagement that “[rebound] traditional understandings of research relationships in fieldwork [and recognize] certain affinities and identifications between the reflexive predicaments of the ethnographer and those he or she studies” (Marcus, 2001, p. 523). Here, Marcus is suggesting not only a joint literary effort between ethnographer and subject, but the need for an ethnographic method capable of addressing informed and engaged subjects who may contribute, as equal partners, to the task of knowledge production. Marcus also places the notions of “site” and “knowledge” under pressure, aiming towards an ethnographic technique that is, at once, reflexive, literary, transnational, global and, in its more experimental form, meaningful outside of academic circles. This is precisely the space where the para-site comes into focus. For Marcus, the para-site is a way of producing a temporary ethnographic laboratory—one that joins researcher and subject together as equal partners in the production of mutually beneficial and actionable information and that remedies the spatial and temporal disjunctures endemic to our globalized reality. It is important to note that the para-site is not meant to permit the assessment of some oft-neglected cultural periphery, but rather, is one method of approaching an array of necessary questions surrounding the study of global assemblages and the lines of flight that determine their shape and networks. As such, the laboratory conditions of the para-site are not only justifiable, but necessary in order to apprehend the fluid, interstitial nature of embodied ‘lines of flight’. As such, the artificiality of the para-site here is a strength, rather than weakness as it can serve as a ‘basin of attraction’ around which the edges and boundaries of global assemblages might coalesce into a delineable object.

Lacking an extant “site” from which to draw ethnographic data proper, we drew on work conducted by Deeb and Marcus in their experiments with convening para-sites with which to facilitate the creation of “a bounded space of orchestrated interaction […] to enlist collaborations with subjects who, in their own contexts of everyday practices, display analytic interest and conceptual curiosity that evoke the ethnographer’s mode of thought” (2011, p. 52). In short, para-sites allow the formation of a single site of ethnographic inquiry where none existed before. While Deeb and Marcus attempted to convene a para-site in a Genevan courthouse with then-WTO Director General Pascal Lamy—an ambitious project that resulted in ambivalent participants—we propose “hosting” as one method to ensure the success of a para-site and to secure the active engagement of all participants. In contrast to merely “setting up shop” in the midst of an illustrious cast of global policy makers, “hosting” aims to provide an atmosphere of comfortable egalitarianism conducive to the open exchange of information and is about actively cultivating an atmosphere with care that attracts, enrolls, and benefits all participants.

We built our para-site with an eye to fostering “analytic interest and conceptual curiosity” (Deeb & Marcus, 2011, p. 52) about CIs’ work, their relationship to one another, and their place in the larger game development ecosystem. In this way, hosting a symposium engendered a temporal and geographic propinquity, creating the space for ‘corridor talk’ to occur (Downey, Dumit, & Traweek, 1997), but we also constituted the community itself, using the event to create a conceptually coherent labour identity around cultural intermediation which participants previously lacked.

Research Design and Methods
In September 2017, we convened a three-day international symposium, inviting approximately fifteen cultural intermediaries in the game development ecosystem in addition to an equal number of academics working in the field. Our attendees included directors of co-working spaces and community organizations, festival and showcase organizers, ‘indie’ advocates, and representatives from funding organizations. Session themes and activities were expressly framed to generate discussion related to three research questions:

- What activities define the work of cultural intermediaries?
- Which discrete roles and physical spaces do cultural intermediaries occupy within cultural industry ecosystems?
- Can the presence of cultural intermediaries be associated with healthier co-productive ecosystems?

The symposium was designed to produce many different types of data from many different modalities of speech and participant engagement. To this end, the symposium schedule consisted of both formal panels and informal activities. One such activity, for example, was the “post-it note Taskscape”, designed to help participants discover commonly shared aspects of their quotidian working life. In groups, participants jotted down brief descriptions of their daily tasks, regardless of their perceived mundanity, on a series of post-it notes (each participant had a different color). They then sorted their group’s tasks according to the practical and/or thematic commonalities they uncovered. Another such activity was the creation of a large “network diagram” where participants could map out their connections with adjacent industry professionals in order to give shape and structure to their vocation.

The symposium was also designed to facilitate multiple forms of inquisitive gaze. Part of this gaze relied on having a large team with diverse experiences and disciplinary training. Our research team was comprised of three faculty coordinators (hereinafter referred to as “faculty”), and four graduate student researchers (hereinafter referred to as “researchers”). The researchers served a dual role, providing logistical support as well as being responsible for the bulk of data collection, including videography, semi-structured interviews, photography, and fieldnotes, as well as collating, documenting, archiving, and coding the material artifacts created during group activities, including polaroid selfies, the network diagrams (described below), and the Taskscape post-its. A swarm of researchers enabled collection and surplus of different data sources in a short timespan.

In the following section, we outline how we adapted REA and Swarm methods, providing a brief overview of how we structured the symposium and attuned the schedule and activities so as to better address our research questions. We also consider the differences between REA, Swarm and our own method. This builds off of our discussion of the symposium as para-site, and will be used to demonstrate how the para-site’s artificiality leverages social intensity, interstitiality, and facilitation to access new data and insights.

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3 The formal schedule included a daily opening and closing comments, three panels from the invited academics, who pre-circulated short papers and presented brief snapshots of their research, and three facilitated industry roundtables. Rather than follow traditional protocol, the majority panel and roundtables time was reserved for whole-group discussion. The remaining schedule was geared towards informal activities, such as the public keynote and mixer, shared group meals, small group activities, and socialization. These less formal activities and events were designed to facilitate participant engagement, seed relationships between the attendees, and provide extra avenues for data collection.
Swarm and Rapid Ethnographic Assessment Methods

Methodological innovations (Bentley et al., 1988; Taplin et al., 2002) show how qualitative data can be gathered under strict time constraints by employing multiple, coordinated “ethnographers”, who have undergone an initial calibration period. This, coupled with ‘re-calibrating’ via engaging with one other over the course of (what they call) ethnography and afterwards, condenses the research timeline in a way that is both responsible towards participants and capable of generating more contextualized data than, for example, other rapid methods such as surveys, site visits, or interviews alone. Our approach to conducting a coordinated, multi-researcher qualitative assessment of CIs was informed by literature on Swarm Ethnography (Pierce, 2009b), as well as Rapid Ethnographic Assessment (Bentley et al., 1988; Harris, Jerome, & Fawcett, 1997; Taplin et al., 2002; Van Holt, Johnson, Carley, Brinkley, & Diesner, 2013). We have summarized key differences in Table 2, below.4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Swarm Ethnography</th>
<th>Rapid Ethnographic Assessment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Researcher Distribution</strong></td>
<td>Multiple researchers at one site</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Research Questions and Method</strong></td>
<td>Each researcher has own set of questions or methods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Coordination and Triangulation</strong></td>
<td>Occurs during data collection during regular research meetings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Adaptability and Mutual Intelligibility</strong></td>
<td>Privileges adaptability over mutual intelligibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Final Product</strong></td>
<td>Multiple complementary datasets</td>
</tr>
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Table 2: Comparison of Swarm and Rapid Ethnographic Assessment

Swarm Ethnography, as described by Pierce (2009a), involves a group of researchers whose specific academic interests in the fieldsite are largely unrelated. The Swarm approach permits each researcher access to all of the information gathered by the collective, while leaving them unrestricted in their individual research aims. This allows the production of a more detailed, in-depth account of their fieldsite, and also access to greater and more diverse data than would have been possible with a single researcher or a conventional research team. REA, on the other hand, delegates the labour of data-collection to a comparatively large number of field researchers, each working towards addressing a centrally-defined set of research questions, determined by an individual or group of principal investigators. In short, whereas Swarm

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4 Here, we draw on methods that self-identify as ethnographic, but we do not wish to advance any argument about whether or not the events-based data collection methods outlined here are or are not ethnographic. The same applies to our own use of symposium as para-site.
Ethnography espouses a ‘flat,’ egalitarian, multi-purpose methodological paradigm, REA might be described as a single-purpose, hierarchical approach to ethnographic research.

Our coordination and preparation efforts represent a hybridized approach not wholly encapsulated by Swarm Ethnography or REA, particularly in terms of i) how researchers were calibrated, ii) how they divided their labour, and iii) how they re-calibrated during and after the event. In short, to address drawbacks we associated with Swarm, such as entering a site without shared goals or significant background preparation, we drew from REA’s emphasis on early preparation and shared research objectives. To balance REA’s emphasis on top-down rigidity and to fully benefit from the perspectives, skills and insights of each research member, we drew from Swarm’s emphasis on conceptual openness and an organic division of labour.

What follows is a detailed account of our best attempt at translating insights and guidance from the concepts of para-site, REA, and Swarm methodologies into a set of pragmatic guidelines for creating a research-oriented symposium. As might be expected, this translation was not always one-to-one; at many points, we found ourselves beset by ambiguities, misunderstandings, and outright contradictions between the needs and aims of two or more of our stakeholders. We would also like to emphasize that ours is but one of many possible configurations one might employ to address similar research questions and practical concerns. Our hope is that, by presenting a detailed account of the quotidian aspects of our approach—warts and all—we might assist other researchers in learning from both our tribulations and our triumphs, with the ultimate goal of helping more researchers create the best possible sites of focused, fruitful knowledge exchange.

Calibrating a Research Team. As useful as an iterative, grounded method of coordinating and calibrating our research team may have been in the abstract, our limited time-frame required us to expedite this process. Our goal was to get every researcher operating as a kind of ‘hive mind,’ or, if you will, as a controlled swarm, by sharing the same research goals (see above). We addressed this need by gathering all of the researchers together for an intensive, day-long ‘boot camp,’ wherein our theoretical grounding, areas of focus, and research questions were introduced. These goals were re-iterated in a shared document, focusing researcher’s gaze:

“We need survival stories, tales from the trenches and descriptive war stories that address the pragmatics of ‘making do’ in indie scenes. We need to know what our informants do as a vocation, for a living - how they get by and how they plan to get by in the future. We need to know how they perceive their working world - who matters and who doesn’t matter and why, what do they want to do, what kinds of impediments challenge them and how do they overcome them or not.” (excerpt from Orientation Document)

Calibration also included a reading group on both Swarm methods and cultural intermediation, background profiling exercises, and an ‘qualitative research bootcamp’ directly before the symposium’s start. The bootcamp attuned the research team to the Project’s theoretical grounding, primary avenues of inquiry, and a plethora of specific tensions, fulcrum points, and elisions to watch for. In this way, we produced an ‘oriented gaze,’; a collective locus for our attention, as seen from multiple different—though coordinated—individual perspectives.
**Division of Labour.** Both REA and Swarm Ethnography are fundamentally predicated on the division of labour amongst multiple researchers. REA’s division of labour is primarily geographic; each researcher is charged with performing identical (or very similar) data collection tasks in a predefined area (or amongst a predefined group of people, which is often synonymous with location). In this way, a team of researchers can gather information from a large, distributed population in a much shorter time than it would take an individual researcher. Swarm Ethnography’s division of labour is more concerned with forms of data collection than with location or subject. This division of labour emerges organically from a shared recognition of the researchers’ individual interests, assets, and skills.

We borrowed from REA’s focus on individuals when determining how we would tackle the task of conducting 1-on-1 interviews with sixteen participants. It was decided that each researcher would be given four participants to focus on; each researcher was to watch for opportunities to capitalize on momentary gaps in participants’ schedules within which an interview could be conducted. However, marks were redistributed according to researchers’ own workloads and the different relationships they formed with attendees. Researchers organically developed an observational division of labour that coincided with their different training, data collection preferences, and preferred modes of parsing information. For example, during the symposium’s formal sessions, one researcher took on audiovisual recording, whereas another documented audience body language, conduct and responses.

Dividing our labour as such was immensely helpful for covering a more complete range of the contexts within which cultural intermediation transpires but also better leveraged the intersubjectivity of individual researchers to further evolve our questions and themes. Rather than simply answering pre-set research questions, the researchers had more autonomy about what data they collected and how. Researchers shared data sets and were encouraged to submit their own interpretations of—and codes for—the data, as well as generate new avenues for investigation. In this way, our methodological approach struck a balance between REA’s capacity for clear coordination and unified research aims, while also borrowing from Swarm Ethnography’s focus on reflexivity, generative collaboration, and adaptability.

**Coordinating and Recalibrating.** REA’s top-down research design emphasizes an initial period of calibration before entering the field, with researchers afterwards sending their data to the primary investigators to be analyzed and triangulated. In contrast, Swarm emphasizes holding regular research meetings during the data collection period in order to discuss emergent themes and point others towards recommended data sources. The calculated intensity of our schedule coupled with hosting duties meant that our research team was fully embedded. A considerable portion of our fieldwork was conducted during lunch breaks, dinners, at after-hours parties, and during the breakfasts offered by the small hotel where attendees were staying. This form of always-on, round-the-clock engagement lacked regularly-scheduled meetings and moments where we could ruminate, reflect, share observations, triangulate data, and recalibrate using grounded theory.

Instead of relying on regular, scheduled, full-group meetings, the research team developed a number of techniques to coordinate and refocus their efforts on-the-fly. The most important element of this arsenal was Slack - a cross-platform instant messaging system intended for use in small businesses, product development teams, and creative collaboration. The research group had shared logistics and research “channels”, which they regularly used to share
in-the-moment observations, raise theoretical queries, and coordinate efforts. These channels became research artifacts themselves. Our re-calibration included culminated into a two-day debriefing session to develop common themes from multiple complementary datasets, start preliminary theoretical analysis, as well as pragmatically reflect on how we might improve future para-site symposia. In the following section, we share some of these findings, reflecting on how para-site symposia generate insightful data from ephemeral events.
In the subsections that follow, we further unpack three conceptual operators—*intensity*, *interstitiality*, and *facilitation*—that are produced via the operation of para-sites, generating different data and more insightful interpretations.

**The Social Intensity of Para-Sites**

The creation of a para-site symposium does not consist solely of gathering participants together under one roof. It involves assembling a carefully curated selection of participants with complementary areas of expertise and enrolling them in an ongoing series of activities, discussions, meals, and leisure time. A para-site symposium is, by design, a site of social intensity. The intimacy generated by a concentrated guest list and program compresses social interactions into a high-pressure timeline that produces ‘social surplus’ in the sense of generating unanticipated interactions that are more intense than the everyday. This was achieved by i) assembling participants who do not naturally orbit, ii) aligning them with a common focus, and iii) prompting sustained interactions via a dense schedule that started at breakfast (approximately 7:00am in the mornings) and ran to the late hours each night.

To generate this intensity, we worked with three key CI collaborators from the start, carefully curating our invite list, expressly selecting those who may not know each other but would directly benefit from the connections to a larger group, were interested in our research goals, and had the experience and reflexivity to make meaningful contributions. Our invitation to participate was framed as an incitement to discourse, a provocation asking attendees to reflect on themselves, their work, and what they might like to discuss together: “There is economic, cultural, social and even technological impact in what you do and how you do it and we’re all here to sketch this out as much as we can in the few days we have together” (excerpt from Participant Invite Letter). We framed and constituted the group even as we invited participation, which aligns with para-site goals of treating participants as informed partners, invested in producing mutually beneficial results:

“You are generators of game culture rather than of games. You are making and remaking the sites within which games are created, sold, appreciated, played and made meaningful. No one knows much about you and the work that you do. This symposium is an attempt to rectify that.” (excerpt from Participant Invite Letter).

In this way, the symposium explicitly and implicitly invited participants to come prepared to ruminate on topics of shared interest and drive the conversation. Through official communications, opening comments, keynote speeches, panel moderation, and social interaction, the symposium fostered conversation, created a shared sense of identity, and sustained interest in the topics of discussion.

The symposium was intended to serve as a space of ‘anti-anonymity’. By restricting attendees to forty, the symposium was of a size that everyone in attendance would be able to rapidly develop familiarity with each other and have multiple opportunities to speak. This process was encouraged through a variety of means, such as the biographies distributed on the
first day, or via activities like the ‘post-it Taskscape’ that highlighted commonalities between the attendees.
To facilitate immediate social interaction upon arrival, attendees were asked to take a Polaroid picture of themselves and affix it to a poster in the venue’s main hall. Attendees were asked to draw lines connecting their portrait with other familiar faces in the network, along with a brief description of their relationship. The poster served as a conversation generator throughout the event as attendees were added, new lines were drawn, and connections were revealed. This low-fidelity network diagram demonstrated attendee’s interconnected position in a larger ecosystem of cultural production, as well as articulating the specific collaborations, histories, and experiences shared by participants.
Passages from one short timeframe in one of the researchers’ fieldnotes evidence how effective we were in seeding these social ties and interactions, documenting the sheer amount of (often-clandestine) conversations taking place in these spaces:

As the talk begins, John and Kyra are still talking in a corner. It's difficult to hear John’s conversations, always conducted in hush tones. But as they part, John says "It's just an idea", suggesting that he might have pitched a project to her. Right before the panel starts, Kyra, Owen and Hannah are talking about how gaming and geek communities are made up of "very young people" who have too much influence on the content of games. John has several one-on-one conversations with industry people, including Kyra again; they speak in hushed tones, away from everyone else, and sometimes even on the windy terrace.

We can think the para-site here as an informal incubator for potentially industry-reshaping ideas. Participating in these discussions also offers an opportunity for a mode of academic engagement more closely aligned with participatory action research in terms of both brokering connections but also contributing ideas directly. Para-sites create the space for this talk to occur, but additionally intensify it, as the CI knew they had a limited time to engage with their peers and
used their time accordingly. A single viewpoint is unable to ‘follow the action’ from breakfast to bed, thus a Swarm becomes appropriate to capture this social surplus. However, even if our researchers could not capture and document all these conversations, valuable connections were made nonetheless, a topic we return to in the section on facilitation.

**Interstitality**

By nature, ephemeral events are non-spaces. A para-site symposium acts as a vacuum, sucking participants in from their own dispersed locations, creating a space of intimacy. Para-sites are interstitial zones between institutions, zones that are far from ‘everyday life’. Within the symposia itself, much of the schedule was dedicated to interstitial time. This vacillation between brief bursts of ‘front stage’ formality, and other modalities led to important data points.

Interstitial, organic encounters were far richer sources of data than the semi-structured interview process. For example, at the small hotel where the participants were lodged, at least one researcher was present for each communal breakfast, as it was predicted (and later confirmed) that many of the most insightful and productive conversations would transpire in the mornings before the symposium’s schedule for the day began in earnest. We adhered to a similar process for transitions: by frequently gathering the attendees in a single, shared location and inviting them to travel together from one event or venue to the next, we provided opportunities for casual, incidental conversation between the participants to emerge.

Some of our most evocative data came from intimate ‘off-the-record’ moments, such as during communal dining or moving furniture together in order to prepare a space. Although the overall structure of the symposium was curated, the social interactions that it fostered cannot be reduced to a mere artifact of design. The interstitiality of the symposium actively created corridors, allowing for a more privileged access to conversations, connections, and spaces not normally made to be public facing. Researchers were able to hear CI passing on tips, insights, and strategies about their work, listen on practical gossip and off-the-record conversations, and receive common-sense, informal mentoring from the attendees (Downey et al., 1997, p. 245).

Creating this space away allowed the research team to follow and compare how participants moved between formal and informal events and engaged much differently when ‘off-camera’. For example, during the short presentations, participants seemed to absent themselves into their mobile phones: answering emails, striking off small parts of their CI ‘to-do’ lists, or socializing with those not present. If we were gathering data during these formal moments alone, we might have mistakenly assumed they were disengaged. However, the other, interstitial, moments belied this assumption, making the interactional differences legible. For example, the off-site and after-hours functions including dinners, community talk and playtesting, and pub visits, broke down social barriers and opened participants up to new conversations and providing information impossible to glean by merely watching.

Based on the team’s past research (Author removed), ‘pitch mode’ was developed as a way of describing CI’s knee-jerk propensity for launching into quasi-sales pitch for the organizations they represented. This ‘pitch mode’ is a modality of speech that dominated formal settings such as panel presentations and interviews and can be compared to public relations ‘soundbites’ that are framed for press. It differs from the informal modality that emerges during casual conversation. By rapidly cycling between rigid, high-intensity activities (such as the
panels) and free-form, low-intensity activities (such as coffee breaks or strolling to events together), the symposium provided the research team with many opportunities to contrast the CI’s formal, on-script descriptions of their work with informal, off-script comments and discussions overheard during coffee breaks, meals, and after-events.

A pair of passages from the researchers’ fieldnotes demonstrates this; the first describes a shared taxi-ride to the symposium’s venue and evinces a formal modality of speech and interaction:

As the trip is coming to a close, Jacques describes his role as operating a collaborative workspace for indie games developers with a metaphor. He asks the three of us what the most important part of car is. We list parts - the engine, the wheels. Jacques interjects: “Everyone mentions the engine. Nobody ever mentions the oil. We’re the oil. The developers are the engine. But we’re the oil that keeps the engine running smoothly.” He argues that the fact that no one mentions and recognizes the importance of oil, or even acknowledges it, directly explains the lack of funding for intermediaries like himself. In order to economically support themselves, intermediaries are forced to pitch themselves as if they were startups and studios, promising “hard metrics” and products, rather than connecting and educating studios helping them to run better.

Calling back to Goffman’s concept of face-work (1955), we noted this as an example of ‘pitch mode’, indicative of the transactional mode of speech employed by CI and their presumed audience. Our methodology, however, permitted the researchers to engage with the symposium’s participants across a range of contexts that might not have otherwise been available to us in a more formal, rigid setting. Another researcher had a very different encounter with the same attendee:

After discovering a shared love for fine tobacco, Jacques and I agreed to have a chat—over cigars—about the kinds of things he deals with on a daily basis. Stepping out into the warm summer afternoon, Jacques and I saunter to the end of a large terrace overlooking the city of Montreal fourteen stories below. As we walk, his countenance changes completely. No longer are his eyes darting around, looking for contacts or conversations he can’t afford to miss; instead, the two of us gaze into the distance. Our conversation covers a handful of topics at a leisurely pace, but one—in particular—stands out as an ongoing worry of his: how can people like himself encourage developers to espouse both sustainability and scalability, when indies usually value the former exclusively and the investors who sustain them are only concerned with the latter? As he pauses to ponder his quandary, it becomes apparent: he’s still looking for an answer.

Rather than slipping into ‘pitch mode’, this second conversation with Jacques was conducted in a more colloquial, conversational mode, and allowed us to contrast his personal thoughts on certain subjects—and his lack of pat answers—with his professional, public-facing persona. This
provided us with a perspective on Jacques’s daily lived reality, as well as his perceived struggles—not the kind of thing that one would foreground in an interview, presentation, pitch, promotion, government report, or business negotiation. Thus, these interstitial spaces allowed us to observe multiple modalities of interaction and make comparisons to better understand how information is transmitted.

**Facilitation**

Ephemeral events necessarily limit time to develop rapport and collect data. Facilitation places researchers at the centre of intensity, making them indispensable to others and positioning them where their perspective may be the greatest. Facilitation allows for different relationships and interactions with participants: data is generated by signaling receptivity to the needs and desires of participants and attending to the careful and responsible management of the para-site. The research team was responsible for facilitating not only the bookings and formal events but also group dinners, regular breakfast periods, and social activities. Despite this additional workload, taking on the role of hosts cemented the researchers as more than passive observers and led to their most memorable moments; it gave them a way of turning a potentially one-way, observational relationship into a two-way exchange involving giving back to and looking after the attendees. The benefits of this approach were twofold: first, hosting duties helped the researchers to become familiar with, be seen by, and valued by the symposium participants. Secondly, the researchers noted that many of their most insightful observations were made when they were performing perceptibly hospitality-related tasks, such prepping meals or setting up for the next event. Performing an overtly research-oriented modality was more likely to make the attendees feel scrutinized, putting them on guard; while hosting helped avoid this perception by emphasizing mutual benefit.

The act of manufacturing the para-site—including the work of recruiting, housing, feeding, entertaining, and engaging participants—conspicuously mirrored the kinds of labour that CI typically perform. Facilitating the symposium positioned the CI as beneficiaries of the kind of care work they perform for others on a daily basis. By bringing individuals together and prompting discussions about the attendees’ day-to-day role in the workplace, we foregrounded and attached symbolic value to labour—such as networking facilitation, “household management”, and emotional support—that might not otherwise have been recognized as critical to the smooth functioning of their workplaces and the flow culture industries more generally. By acting as hosts, the researchers temporarily took on the CI’s modalities of work and focus on managing relationships, leading to a better understanding of CI work. The modalities associated with researcher-as-host helped generate an atmosphere of mutual support, understanding, and value amongst the symposium’s participants.

The benefits of this facilitation work and emphasis on supporting participants were clearly evidenced by a researcher’s conversation with one CI—a co-working space coordinator—while they were setting up chairs together:

Lauren remarks that the symposium itself has been almost therapeutic in a way.

Stated bluntly to me, she’s alone in this work. Prior to Christine’s hiring, Lauren was a one-woman business with only a board of directors to answer to. While she is there to mentor and assist the indie teams, they are not her team or employees. This is the line
that separates her from the others who also operate co-working spaces. She remarks that even if they are so different, these are her peers. She wants to know how they operate their spaces, how they work with their teams, and what can she bring to her space from this knowledge. While they may have different ideologies and goals within their spaces, they are each other’s peers. [...] Throughout the conference the small group of them - Christine, Owen, Connor, and Jacques - can be seen speaking amongst one another; no longer so alone.

The collective “production” of creating and managing the ongoing function of the para-site, including event coordination and brokering relationships, expanded our methodological toolkit. During these movements, researchers moved from periphery of cultural intermediation to a more central position, achieving recognition from participants as kin and kind, or members of an emerging collectivity. As facilitators and hosts, we become confidants for their anxieties and sense of isolation, but also co-conspirators in terms of addressing them through our collective work.

While much of the logistics work could have been offloaded, facilitation is useful in that it emphasizes producing an affective atmosphere of ease and mutual identification, bringing participants together in spontaneous ways that encourage openness and reciprocity. Attending to participants’ needs and taking on mundane tasks, such as setting up chairs, is useful in breaking down hierarchical social barriers. In this sense, strategically involving participants in not-too-arduous set-up activities and sharing facilitation tasks collaboratively "makes space" and sets the terms for the ensuing interactions.

**Conclusion**

In this article, we argued that hosting symposia as data collection method allows us to address two interrelated issues we encountered studying cultural intermediation in the game industry. The first issue we addressed is *how to conduct qualitative research with dispersed, mobile, and ‘fast’ actors, particularly those who work towards common goals, yet do not regularly communicate with one another, interact amongst themselves, or congregate in a shared space*. We also considered the question of *how we might generate comprehensive and worthwhile data from such actors given limited financial and temporal resources*.

Metaphorically, we can understand our use of symposium as para-site in terms of scientists isolating molecules in a lab, which cohere only for a few seconds and then disperse again. Lines of flight are similar in nature: existing as modes of transport and deterritorialization. And yet, they are where the productive components of assemblages are located and theorized around. Para-sites, acting as basins of attraction can, for a brief moment, solidify the constant liquid flow of CIs and can, therefore, surface otherwise unobtainable data. In our case, we used the constructed artificiality of the symposium to distill dispersed and mobile CI, holding them together as a field before they dispersed again into their networks and interstitial margins. And yet, by centering ‘lines of flight’ we give them substance, character, and identity. The para-site becomes what we call a ‘thickening agent’ in terms of fostering longer term relationships between researcher and subject, but also between participants themselves. Our symposium posited a horizon of meaning in the sense that what was said and done was *because* attendees...
were there for—and invested in—the event and our research objectives. We actively induced a new reflexivity about CI, their work, and shared bonds, aligning concerns and pointing to common problems we—both CI and scholars—can address together. This ephemeral event acted as a catalyst for longer term interactions between researchers and CI, particularly in terms of aligning projects and launching new ones to address issues CI outlined during the event, such as studying governmental shifts towards promoting economic rather than arts and culture outcomes, exploring funding policies structured to increase gender representation, comparing local ecosystems, and tracking ‘discoverability’ in terms of how creatives connect to audiences. More importantly, the event fostered stronger ties between CI themselves, including a Slack group for those who run incubators and co-working spaces, discussions and podcasts on “succession planning” for when key CI retire, and hosting each other at their own international events.

In closing, we have three key suggestions for those that might consider hosting a para-site symposium of their own. Firstly, we’d like to emphasize the need for researchers to prioritize a politics of care, transparency, and shared collaboration with participants. Secondly, participation should result in immediate returns for all participants, be it pleasant social interactions and connection-building, knowledge sharing and dissemination during the panels, and/or workshops with direct outcomes and deliverables. Finally, we’d like to place focus not just on the utility of ephemeral events for fast data collection, but on their potential for seeding long-term, mutually beneficial relationships and collaborations between both researchers and those they work with.
Works Cited


