A Discussion on the Affordances of Online and Onsite Ethnographic Observations

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Abstract
The current video gaming culture has had a significant move to online platforms for live streaming as well as video on demand (VOD). There is a virtually infinite supply of VODs of video gameplay and archived live streams. Despite this abundance of publicly-available video footage of gameplay, there has been little discussion towards how to conduct ethnographic observations in an online setting.

The author’s research project has taken two forms of ethnographic observations: online and onsite. This work documents the affordances of both forms of observations. Through following observation exercises of unstructured observations, temporal mapping, spatio-temporal mapping, and power mapping taken from Christena Nippert-Eng’s book *Watching Closely* [1], the author has conducted observation exercises on both online (~20 hours) and onsite (~60 hours) environments. Online observations were taken watching both live streams and archived VODs of the Games Done Quick (GDQ) charity event, while onsite observations were taken by physically attending Games Done Quick for the entire week and taking observation on-premises.

Online observations were useful for preparatory, confirmational, and flexibility purposes. The author found taking observations of GDQ VODs made identifying observation fo-
cuses and goals easier for when attending the GDQ event. Data that were missed or ambiguous taken at the GDQ event were able to be confirmed and clarified by referring back to the event's VODs on YouTube, and online observations allowed for ease in scheduling when to do observations.

Onsite observations were useful for depth and breadth in data as well as understanding the nuances of the experience of the space. VODs has limited field of view of the event, and attending the event allowed the author to fully experience and understand the GDQ event. Observations were taken in spaces outside of the field of view of the VOD camera, and through experiencing the GDQ event as an attendee made specific insights possible that were not possible through VODs alone.

Online observations using VODs also served as a useful introductory teaching tool ethnographic observations. The flexibility of allowing students to pick and choose videos that interested them, work around their schedule, as well as allowing the instructor to watch the same video to provide more engaging and reflective feedback.

As video game research, specifically ethnographic-related methods, become a growing area of research, online VOD observations can become a powerful tool for data collection as well as learning and teaching opportunities. However, due to the lack of experience and discussion about this new media of observation, more work needs to be done exploring the affordances and best practices of online observation practices.

Author Keywords
Video gaming, live streaming, ethnographic observations, pedagogy

About the Author
The author is a second-year PhD student at Indiana University Bloomington in the School of Informatics, Computing, and Engineering, focusing on human-computer interaction design. The author did his Bachelor of Science in Computer Engineering Computer Science and Master of Science in Computer Science from the University of Southern California. He is now researching the subculture of video game charity events, namely the massively successful Games Done Quick, to explore possible design implications for other charity events. His research interest also lies in the speedrunning video gaming subculture, esports casting, and new methods and approaches to video game research.

REFERENCES