Book Review: Ethnography and Virtual Worlds: A Handbook of Method

by Blog Admin   July 29, 2013

Ethnography and Virtual Worlds is aimed at students, teachers, designers, and scholars interested in using ethnographic methods to study online virtual worlds, including both game and nongame environments. Written by leading ethnographers of virtual worlds, and focusing on the key method of participant observation, the book aims to provide invaluable advice to aid researchers through every stage of a project, from choosing an online fieldsite to writing and publishing the results. Reviewed by **Yves Laberge**.

Ethnography and Virtual Worlds: A Handbook of Method. Tom Boellstorff, Bonnie Nardi, Celia Pearce and T.L. Taylor. Princeton University Press. August 2012.

Find this book:

During the recent decade, an impressive amount of possibilities and an unpredicted sum of apparently new forms of online interactions between individuals have been created, through computer games, emails, websites, blogs, Twitter, Facebook pages (although not included here in this study), and other similar places of virtual networking. Consequently, scholars have investigated these recent phenomena in various ways, with some innovative, adapted methodologies (see Chadwick and Howard's *Handbook of Internet Politics* and Marichal's *Facebook Democracy*). This *Handbook of Method* – among the firsts of its kind so far, at least in the English language – presents various ethnographic methods and related approaches in order to study the particular social interactions emerging from these virtual worlds which are now part of our everyday lives.

Tom Boellstorff, Bonnie Nardi, Celia Pearce and T.L.Taylor have produced a very interesting and timely contribution; clearly written, with easy-to-follow case studies. The definitions of virtual worlds provided right at the start are useful and situate the authors' viewpoint: even though virtual worlds are not real, they are nevertheless embedded in the "real world". Hence, virtual worlds are places and have "a sense of worldness" which "offer an objective environment"; they "are multi-user in nature" and "continue to exist in some form even as participants log off" (p. 7). Finally, the authors observe that "virtual worlds allow participants to embody themselves, usually as avatars" (p. 7). In other words, "virtual worlds are places of imagination that encompass practices of play, performance, creativity, and ritual" (p. 1), even though "the social lifeworlds that emerge within them are very real" (p. 1).

These new practices related to virtual worlds create newer forms of communities which are embedded within and across specific cultures; these cross-cultural interactions are to be studied. And within this context, cultures are understood as "shared systems of meaning and practice", which "shape our hopes and beliefs; our ideas about family, identity, and society; our deepest assumptions about being a person in this world" (p. 1). But the authors insist on one point: even though virtual worlds seem like new phenomena, they always imply social interactions based on cultural similitude (or they highlight cultural differences), and experienced ethnographers will already be aware of observing interactions and cultures in contexts. This is one of the book's main ideas.
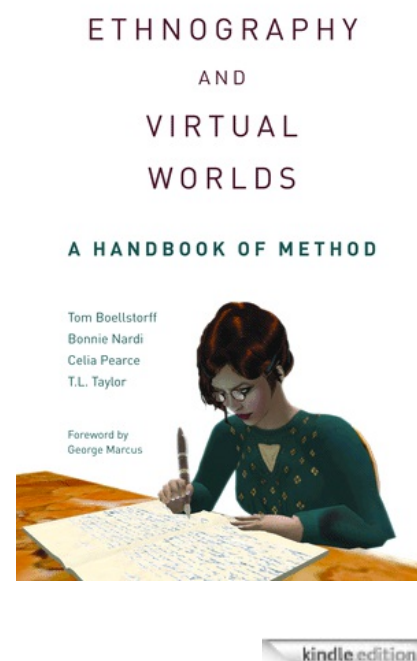
In fact, the aims of *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds: a Handbook of Method* are twofold: it is a plea in favour of ethnography as much as it is an efficient illustration of how to address the current research on the Internet, computer games, and virtual world contexts. For instance in the third chapter, the authors debunk ten current myths often raised – still today – against ethnography as an approach; indeed many opponents argue ethnography might be "less valid" or "simply anecdotal", or to be confounded with grounded theory or even with ethnomethodology; all these past critiques are challenged and discussed in detail by the authors (p. 29). This one of the strengths of this book. Furthermore, the authors also compare and oppose ethnography with apparently similar practices of inquiry such as journalism, but in reality, ethnography requires months, if not years, of research and field notes while "most journalists, by contrast, generate copy on short deadlines and are tasked with producing 'stories', usually brief texts that speak to the moment" (p. 21).

Each step of the ethnographical research is rigorously brought. Conceptualisation begins with the definitions of online community, keeping in mind the fact that six decades ago, George A. Hillery, Jr. provided about one hundred definitions of community (see Hillery Jr.'s article from 1955, "Definitions of Community: Areas of Agreement" in Rural Sociology, 20) (p. 57). Examples of virtual communities and group types are "guilds, communities of practice (such as modders), and members of offline groups such as a professional organization, family, or workgroup that enters virtual world together, as well as diasporic game communities who choose to play together" (p. 57).

Online communities can be created for example through forums and wikis; in these cases, virtual world ethnographical research would focus on the participants' interactions as such: "while humanities scholars study texts in and of themselves, ethnographers study texts as they link up to people in a community or activity" (p. 119). In other words, ethnographers "study forms of interaction, meaning making, and cultural production through text" (p. 119).

The outcomes of this book are numerous. In many cases, these virtual identities are flexible (or perhaps "liquid", as Zygmunt Bauman might say), because individuals operating in virtual worlds can change avatars at any moment without being noticed, or can carry many avatars (and therefore many identities): "Because virtual worlds often allow several avatars to be attached to the same account (or allow persons to have more than one account), players and residents may frequently switch avatars, for example, to gain a desired raid configuration, or to engage activities they do not want associated with their primary identity avatar" (p. 100). As its title indicates, this *Handbook of Method* also provides some tips and practical advices for the younger researchers, for instance, what to do when one realises a mistake or an impolite formula was used during an interview or when dealing with an informant or a Native (p. 79).

Even though ethnography as a method is often linked with anthropology and sociology, *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds: a Handbook of Method* will be useful to any graduate student in social sciences, but as well in humanities, media and Cultural Studies or in any interdisciplinary approach focussed on virtual worlds. It is not an introduction to ethnography as such, rather a helpful guide to help scholars already familiar with ethnography and related methodologies to adapt their approaches to cases using the Internet and interactive virtual worlds.

———————————

Dr. Yves Laberge is a Canadian sociologist. He is Associate fellow at the Groupe de recherche EA 1796, ACE, at the Département d'anglais of the Université européenne de Haute-Bretagne (Rennes 2, France). He serves as a Series editor for the Book series "L'espace public" and "Cinéma et société" at Les Presses de l'Université Laval, and also for a Parisian publisher, L'Harmattan. Among various publications, Yves Laberge has contributed more than 100 articles and entries in a dozen of encyclopedias and reference books. Read more reviews by Yves.