

Ethnography, Mobility and the Central Premise

Reflections on an ethnographic virtual world research project

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Abstract:

The author reflects on the ethnographic nature of his virtual world research. He argues that the research transcends anthropological conceptualizations of ethnography. He deems it ethnographic nonetheless, as he stresses ethnography's central premise of participant observation, reflexivity and inductivism. This argument follows the application of ethnography for researching the importance of organizational behavior that players of virtual worlds exhibit, to the business organizations they work for. The research entails two sites of participant-observations: a community of players of the virtual world *EVE Online* and a business organization. Within each site, the key concerns of *site*, *access*, *time*, *identity* and *interaction* are addressed. This shows that the research project adopts elements of two different types of ethnography: games ethnography and organizational ethnography. Contrary to anthropological conceptualizations of ethnography, the existence of two sites is not an insurmountable problem, but an opportunity for relevant theorizing.

Keywords: games ethnography, organizational ethnography, central premise, virtual worlds, organizational behavior.

1. Introduction

I am one of the happy few who can boast that they play computer games for a living. I like to play a specific subset of computer games, i.e. *massively multiplayer online games* (MMO games). The big players of the computer games industry have been developing MMO games each year for over a decade. The result: there are over a hundred MMO game titles currently available¹. Each attracts thousands, hundreds of thousands or even millions of players worldwide.

In MMO games players interact with each other a lot. Moreover, they organize themselves into communities often known as ‘guilds’. Being a member of such a community can become important to one’s life. Some researchers have argued that a member of an MMO game community acquires leadership skills that are relevant to their work contexts (Reeves, Malone, & O’Driscoll, 2008; Yee, 2006, p. 323). These researchers show how playing an MMO game can be important to a player’s professional life. They shed some light on the relation between two seemingly very different contexts: an MMO game community and a business organization.

I aim to shed more light on the relation between those two contexts in my research. I am developing an organizational perspective on MMO game-play and subsequently determining what elements of organizing are influential to work within a business organization. Thus, the goal of this research is to determine the organizational behavior an MMO game player can exhibit and the importance of such behavior to the business organization one works for. To reach the above goal, I set up an ethnographic study encompassing a specific MMO game community as well as a specific business organization in September 2008.

In this paper, I reflect on the ethnographic nature of my research methodology. I deem anthropology as the scientific discipline in which ethnography was first developed. Therefore, I base my reflection on anthropological conceptualizations of ethnography. I reflect on my research approach using five key concerns of ethnography, anthropological or otherwise: site, access, time, identity and interaction.

In the following section, I further explain the relevance of this research. I review previous MMO game research and the recent interest in them of business organizations. Subsequently, I further explain the relevance of an ethnographic approach. I introduce the two contexts of this research: a community of players within the MMO game *EVE Online* and a business organization interested in developing a corporate virtual world. In section 4, I use the aforementioned five key concerns of ethnography to reflect on my research within the *EVE Online* community. I use previous conceptualizations of *games ethnography* to further ground this part of the research. In section 5, I use the same aforementioned five key concerns of ethnography to reflect on my research within the business organization. I use previous conceptualizations of *organizational ethnography* to further ground this part of the research. The applicability of two different conceptualizations of ethnography reveals the mobility of this research. I therefore conclude by reflecting on the problems and possibilities of this mobility and how this influences my definition of ethnographic research.

2. MMO games and virtual worlds

What makes a game an MMO game? Basically, an MMO game is a computer-generated, three-dimensional and persistent environment shared by thousands of players, who are represented by characters or ‘avatars’. MMO games encompass elaborate world constructs mostly in science-fiction and fantasy themes reminiscent of the works of George Lucas or J.R. Tolkien². They encompass a virtual economy, as a virtual currency can be used to trade items. They also encompass game mechanics, i.e. limitations and affordances specific to the character. Using these game mechanics the player can develop his or her character in the game world, specifically its strength, appearance and abilities. In time, a player will become more and more dependent on the

help of other players for developing his or her character. Thus, a final characteristic of MMO games are the communities players can form often known as ‘guilds’.

Worldwide, millions of people of all ages play MMO games extensively³. Players can spend years playing one or more MMO games. Social psychologist Yee discovered that players play them for anywhere between 11 hours and 40+ hours per week (Yee, 2006, p. 316). Moreover, he discovered that the mean average of MMO game players is 26. Thus, MMO games have been classified as a broad societal phenomenon and as something more than ‘just’ games (Bartle, 2004, p. 475; Yee, 2006, p. 325). Indeed, I do not consider these games to be only about entertainment. They are worldlier in terms of the scope of game-play and the number of players involved. I therefore often refer to them as virtual or ‘synthetic’ (Castronova, 2005) worlds.

Previous ethnographic research of MMO games

Since MMO games are a pervasive societal phenomenon, it is important to research them socio-culturally to develop an understanding of their meaning to people’s lives. Some MMO game researchers have applied an ethnographic methodology for such research. They position their research as a socio-cultural study of computer games, although each researcher focuses on different behavior and its meaning, e.g. role-play (Copier, 2007), learning (Galarneau, 2009; Steinkuehler, 2005), collaboration (Chen, 2009; Galarneau, 2009), tourism (Miller, 2008) or simply the experience of ‘growing up’ (Boellstorff, 2008). From these studies one learns that MMO games can mean more to players than entertainment, as ‘play’ connotes.

One learns that when players need to tackle an MMO game’s complex environment collaboratively, they effectively need to organize themselves. They do so without having clear ‘modes of organization’ (Powell, 1990, p. 296) imposed on them by the game’s designers. The only basis for organizing the MMO game’s designers offer is the ability to form ‘guilds’ or otherwise named communities. They are specifically geared towards learning and collaboration for the purpose of progressing in the game world (Galarneau, 2009, p. 26). Some researchers of MMO games formulate the same conclusion: MMO game-play may be based on entertainment, i.e. on play, but it tends to resemble work. They argue that upholding the play-work dichotomy is fruitless or can simply be incorrect when it comes to conceptualizing MMO game-play (Malaby, 2007, p. 97; Taylor, 2006, pp. 88, 153).

Perhaps researchers would need to focus more on the ‘work’ of MMO game-play than on the ‘fun’ of it. From the perspective of the MMO game player, it is interesting to research what organizational behavior players exhibit. Researching the organizational behavior of players entails a focus on how they ‘attract participants, acquire and allocate resources to accomplish goals, use some form of structure to divide and coordinate activities, and rely on certain members to lead or manage others’ (Shafritz & Ott, 1987, p. 2). Subsequently, this organizational behavior can be related to the context of work that we are most familiar with: business organizations.

Business organizations’ interest in virtual worlds

From the perspective of a business organization manager, it is also interesting to develop an understanding of MMO game organizational behavior. Business organizations have already expressed interest in virtual worlds. Roughly from 2006 onwards, business organizations have experimented with virtual worlds of their own making⁴. Given the above short exposé of MMO games as a pervasive phenomenon, two interrelated reasons can be distinguished for this ‘real-life’ interest. Firstly, the high amount as well as popularity of MMO games suggests that they are a new Internet-based infrastructure – a social space that needs to be conquered to ensure continuance of the corporation’s brand (Klein, 2000). Secondly, what happens in these virtual worlds seemed to spark the imagination; these players seem to be very apt collaborators and learners within the complex environment of an MMO game. Thus, business organization managers who express interest in virtual worlds acknowledge the organizational behavior of

MMO gamers, even though there is only a partial understanding of what that entails. These were two reasons why many business organizations across the Western world have been experimenting with ‘serious virtual worlds’ (De Freitas, 2008). What makes these virtual worlds ‘serious’ is that they are not developed by and for the entertainment industry, but by business organizations for the purpose of learning and collaboration that affects ‘the real world’.

Thus far previous research has shown that MMO game-play can be important to a player’s professional life. Moreover, recent developments show that MMO game-play is important to business organization managers. Thus, the organizational behavior of MMO game players could influence business organizations culturally and structurally, if MMO game communities organize themselves differently from business organizations.

Some have already argued that MMO gamers are socially distinct, i.e. forming a *gaming generation* or at least adopting a pervasive *game culture* (Beck & Wade, 2004, 2006; Castronova, 2007; Steinkuehler, 2006). Beck and Wade argue specifically that MMO gamers adopt a culture, i.e. a set of norms and values concerning social interaction, that can affect business organizations. They theorize that in order to harness the potential of active MMO gamers as ‘heroes’ (Beck & Wade, 2006, pp. 101-102), managers of business organizations need to focus less on managing their organization’s structure and more on the individual people. They seem to suggest that a game culture is more personal and geared to personal success than managers of business organizations are used to.

If virtual worlds – both ‘serious’ and ‘non-serious’ – continue to grow in number and usage in both personal and professional contexts, it would seem we are facing an ‘exodus’ from physical reality to the virtual world (Castronova, 2007). Virtual worlds could influence business organizations extensively, if they are indeed socially distinct contexts. In essence, in this research I am interested in the “‘gaming of cultures”—that is, how cultures worldwide are being shaped by gaming and interactive media’ (Boellstorff, 2006, p. 33). The working hypothesis is that MMO game cultures affect business organizations.

3. An ethnographic methodology

I adopt an ethnographic methodology to develop an organizational perspective on MMO game-play and determine what elements of organizing are influential to a business organization. There are two reasons for this choice:

1. *The importance of inductivism.* To be able to critically develop an organizational perspective on MMO game-play, I need not let previous organization theory determine my empirical research. It is important to *construct* an organization theory that could (in time) be well-informed by existing organization theories. Inductivism, i.e. the epistemological paradigm that stresses the importance of theory construction rather than theory testing, is an important principle of an ethnographic methodology.
2. *The importance of participant observation.* To construct an organization theory, it is essential to experience it firsthand. To subsequently determine what elements of organizing are influential to work within a business organization, it is important to experience organizational behavior in both an MMO game community and a business organization.

With an emphasis on experience and understanding people’s behavior in their own terms, ethnography is an applicable methodology. This research is about people, how they make sense of their organizational behavior and how they themselves relate their behavior in an MMO game community to their behavior in a business organization. It is important to experience the crossover from the organizational context of an MMO game to that of a business organization to be able to understand it. I ask the people I interact with about the relation between their MMO game organizational behavior within an MMO game community and the business organization they actually work for. That way the importance of MMO game communities for business organizations becomes clear and thus the research goal is reached.

For this reason I set up an ethnographic study. The study has involved active participation in two business organizations: one which is part of the economy of physical reality and one which is part of the economy of an MMO game.

The *EVE* corporation

The chosen MMO game is called *EVE Online* (or *EVE* for short): a fictional universe encompassing hundreds of solar systems and inhabiting just over 300.000 active players (CCP, 2009). Although this universe is fictional, the game-play is designed to be highly capitalistic. A comprehensive market system allows players to buy and sell practically any virtual item for a virtual currency: from small parts for space ships to massive preassembled space ships. Players can even form quite non-fictional ‘corporations’, i.e. communities that indeed resemble business organizations in terms of their function within *EVE*’s virtual economy. I consider *EVE* to be an MMO game in which organizational behavior is most apparent.

Having played *EVE* recreationally for almost a year, I started playing *EVE* as a researcher as well on September 1, 2008. I was able to join a specific corporation in November 2008. This corporation focuses on manufacturing, i.e. using minerals and semi-manufactured articles to manufacture an end product that could be sold on the market. The corporation consists of about 30 players and had managed to stay active for over 3 years, in fact since the conception of *EVE*. For the sake of clarity, I refer to the corporation consistently as ‘the *EVE* corporation’ throughout this paper.

The business organization

The business organization that kindly opened its doors to an ethnographic researcher shall remain anonymous throughout this paper. It is a multinational business organization within the oil and gas industry. I was able to join a specific team situated in The Netherlands at almost the same time as the *EVE* corporation: November 2008. This team was in charge of organization-wide ICT innovations. The team consisted of 6 full-time staff and between 7 and 10 contractors, i.e. temporary hired staff. Some of the team members were also MMO gamers and virtual world enthusiasts. The team attempted to start a project to develop a corporate virtual world. The research department I am a part of was asked to become involved in this project primarily because of our experience with developing and evaluating games for learning purposes. For the sake of clarity, I refer to the business organization consistently as such throughout this paper.

The methods

I have been keeping two diaries for each type of organization under study ever since I joined both of them in November 2008. In the diaries I kept records of my experiences and interactions as much as possible. I was faced with what any ethnographic researcher is faced with: setting up and doing participant observations – a combination of participation and observation within a certain group of people (O’Reilly, 2005, p. 101). Regardless of its specific form, participant observation requires an ethnographic researcher to concern him- or herself with defining:

1. a site for the participant observations;
2. a procedure for getting access to this site;
3. an amount of time to spend within the site;
4. a participant-researcher identity;
5. what interactions with the people under study are possible and of importance.

Of the above five key concerns, the last three are concerns about the act of participant observation itself. The first two are *a priori* concerns. They are characteristics of participant observation that a researcher must concern him-/herself with prior to the actual participant observations.

In the following section I reflect on my ethnographic methods within the *EVE* corporation by addressing the above five key concerns. In the subsequent section, I reflect on my ethnographic methods within the business organization by addressing the same five key concerns.

4. Ethnographic research within an *EVE* corporation

Not many previous MMO game researchers reflected extensively on the ethnographic nature of their research. They applied ethnography as a methodology for their research without clearly explaining the differences in methods from anthropological conceptualizations of ethnography. The first ethnographic studies of MMO game communities appeared in the early 2000s and continue to thrive (Bainbridge, 2007). These studies adopt the supposition that sound computer game analysis can only result from playing the computer game extensively (Aarseth, 2003). Considering MMO game-play as a form of participant observation, it already seems plausible to consider MMO game research by playing it as ethnographic.

However, researching an MMO game community ethnographically as a thing in itself requires the researcher to at least let go of the need for ‘prolonged face-to-face contact with members of local groups’ (Conklin, 1968, p. 172). This key methodical difference already sparked the use of the term ‘virtual ethnography’. Virtual ethnography denotes ethnography in a virtual rather than physical domain. Arguably this is ‘virtually ethnography’ (O’Reilly, 2009, p. 216), i.e. *almost* ethnography. An MMO game researcher can do as the researched do, but one will never really know who one is dealing with, in terms of the physical person ‘behind the screen’. So virtual worlds seem to fuel the tradition of virtual ethnography, as identified at the end of the 20th century when the Internet truly started to pervade Western society and seemed to call for a different kind of ethnographic research (Hine, 2000).

Yet, virtual ethnography does not do justice to the influence of the MMO game on the ethnographic research. Researcher of game culture Chen adds the adjective ‘games’ when he explains the ethnographic methodology behind his MMO game research (Chen, 2009). He argues he follows the ‘tradition of games ethnography’ (Chen, 2009, p. 52). However, he does not explicitly explain the importance of adding *games* to the term *games ethnography*. Perhaps it is reasonable to assume that the adjective only serves the purpose of denoting the context in which ethnography is applied.

However, when considering ethnography as a methodology for researching an MMO game as ‘a thing in itself’ (Taylor, 1999, p. 437), an ethnographic researcher must conform his or her methods to the MMO game. What makes ‘games ethnography’ truly a valid term is the importance of the game context, i.e. the ‘game mechanics, the emergent game culture, and personal beliefs taken up by the players about what it means to play and have fun’ (Chen, 2009, p. 50). This is what the researcher is actually experiencing when researching MMO games ethnographically.

Thus, games ethnography is a subtype of ethnography that differs from anthropological ethnography. The difference lies in the fact that this games ethnography is heavily influenced by the functionalities and mechanics of the MMO game *EVE*. From an anthropological perspective, the key concerns of ethnography – i.e. site, access, time, interaction and identity – still deserve further attention. In the following I reflect on these concerns within the context of the ethnographic research of the *EVE* corporation

Site and access

It would perhaps seem that with ethnographic research of an *EVE* corporation, the idea of a specific site of research is quite applicable, as a virtual world is a much more distinct ‘place’ (Bartle, 2004, p. 475) than the World Wide Web. Indeed, this is a world of its own, only completely digital in nature. Moreover, the existence of communities known as corporations allowed me to look for and select one as a ‘site’ for my research. Yet, even then, the site is still

very dynamic. Many interactions take place 'outside' the virtual world, i.e. on the World Wide Web. Players of MMO games have been known to develop fan websites that contain screenshots, walkthroughs for game mechanics and other 'user-generated content'. Moreover, my *EVE* corporation has its own website on which the corporation's rationale and structure are explained. The website also has a large and actively used discussion forum, subdivided in accordance to the corporation's structure. Finally, my corporation even has its own Internet Relay Chat (IRC) channel and players are encouraged to be logged in to the channel as much as possible. Together, all these technologies may figuratively instantiate a sense of 'site' for ethnographic research, but this site is not all static. When players identify new technologies for communication, many of the aforementioned technologies will be questioned again.

Interestingly, the fact that the site for participant observations is less clear in games than in anthropological ethnography does not mean that access to it is more difficult. On the contrary, access is much easier, since I was covert by definition. Being covert stems from the MMO game's functionalities and mechanics. Everyone interacts with and within the MMO game with an avatar – a personalized character. The character already induces anonymity. Moreover, every character is by definition developed from the same starting point. Since everyone experiences character development as a continuous process, a sense of openness is common. Everyone is going through a similar process, which automatically creates some sort of a bond. Moreover, everyone needs someone else to get further in the game, as the game mechanics reveal character interdependence. One can imagine how the important MMO game characteristic of 'the character' makes access to an MMO game community as a researcher, both formal and informal, quite easy.

Time, identity and interaction

Once I had gained access to the *EVE* corporation, it was important to determine the amount of time I would spend 'in' it, both per week and in total. The consideration was determined mostly by the amount of time my subjects were putting in. Yet, this seemed to differ a lot. Many fellow corporation members seemed to be logged into the IRC chat channel each day for hours and hours, perhaps even more than into *EVE* itself. Then again, many corporation members seemed to do the exact opposite. Because of this, I turned to other sources to help me determine the prudent amount of spent time. Some social-psychological researchers have concluded that the mean amount of time spent playing MMO games is almost 26 hours per week (Williams, Yee, & Caplan, 2008, p. 1002). This seemed unattainable for me. I simply decided to uphold a simple rule of thumb: 1 hour a day on average, or rather, preferably 7 hours per week. Sometimes this was completely unattainable, while sometimes it was closer to 12 hours per week.

In *EVE* I was not a researcher from the start, but a player first. In fact, the necessity of using an avatar or character makes it almost impossible for a games ethnographer to present him-/herself as a researcher first and a player-participant second. Of course, this firstly sparks reflections on research ethics (Copier, 2007, p. 208; Siitonen, 2007, pp. 44-45). Similar to any covert anthropological research, the researcher must ask him-/herself the question: how important is my participant's right to decline becoming a research participant? I have found that the researched players hardly seem bothered by this ethical conundrum at all. Other games ethnographers found this as well (Copier, 2007, pp. 208-209; Siitonen, 2007, p. 110).

As can be expected, an identity of being a player first offers easier interaction with the researched. Ever since I joined the *EVE* corporation, I have spent many hours in its main IRC channel, which I now consider to be a virtual 'common room' of sorts. Moreover, I have spent countless hours 'working' on tasks that are relevant to the corporation's success in *EVE*, as well as my own character's. I had access to the *EVE* corporation website and forums, just like any other member. This offered invaluable information about how players coordinate their actions and define the corporation's rationale and identity. I was able to interview two of the

corporation's leaders in an in-depth manner in which we discussed how the corporation was organized and their personal involvement in defining it. Moreover, I assembled a focus group of eight members for a discussion about the whys and wherefores they enjoy playing MMO games.

The question remains *who* I really interacted with. Without face-to-face contact, I am never sure who the players are. A player can present him- or herself quite differently within an *EVE* corporation than in physical reality. The only way to remedy this is to build rapport through active involvement and to prolong as well as vary interactions with my fellow members to determine whether my observations and interpretations are valid.

Ethnography and meritocracy

Reflecting on my ethnographic research of the *EVE* corporation from an anthropological perspective, it seems that access, i.e. being accepted into a community and building rapport as a researcher, was not difficult. Moreover, I was able to interact with people and gather data in the form of documents and conversation logs easily. I was 'just another member' of the community in the first place, and only a researcher in the second place. I was rewarded for my efforts within the community as a player. It did not matter so much that I turned out to be a researcher, since I might as well have been a dog⁵. My character had certain abilities that were valuable to the corporation. Thus, by showing commitment, I was rewarded with access and interactions with which I could conduct my ethnographic research.

The sociological concept of meritocracy is highly relevant here. British sociologist Saunders defined meritocracy as a society that rewards ability and effort with power, money or social status (Saunders, 1995). He operationalized ability through the Intelligence Quotient (IQ), while later British sociologists Breen and Goldthorpe critiqued this and operationalized it through educational qualification, i.e. the level of education one has achieved (Breen & Goldthorpe, 1999). Regardless of the specific operationalization of ability, it denotes a given. It denotes a level of cognition that a person must learn to understand and apply in his or her life.

Interestingly, in the context of an MMO game ability is needs to be redefined. The existence of the character means that ability is not a given, it is chosen and then developed. In an MMO game such as *EVE*, every player can operate one or more characters that he or she can then develop through abilities relevant to the virtual universe, e.g. the ability to fly a specific powerful war ship, or the ability to refine minerals necessary for manufacturing such a space ship. Every active player will have relevant abilities and put in high amounts of effort to develop them. Moreover, an MMO game community judges a player firstly on their merit, i.e. their abilities and effort. As a player puts effort in developing abilities, the player will principally be able to become a member of an MMO game community. The meritocratic nature of MMO game-play makes ethnographic research quite easy.

In a way the ability to do ethnographic research in the business organization was based on merit: the fact that I had proven ability in helping with the corporate virtual world project by being part of a games research team and the fact that I was willing to put in effort in realizing the corporate virtual world project. Yet, within the business organization, my ethnographic methods were quite different from the *EVE* corporation. The following section explains how my research was firstly *organizational* ethnographic in nature within the business organization.

5. Ethnographic research within a business organization

From the start it seemed doable to perform ethnographic research within the business organization. Unlike in games ethnography, prolonged face-to-face contact is indeed possible within the business organization. One can approach the organization simply as another "'foreign" social group' (Rosen, 1991, p. 17) and thereby consider it as a form of anthropological research. Consequently, one could adopt participant observation as a primary method. The explicit boundaries that a formal organization will often have – e.g. office buildings, uniforms, social

benefits – creates the impression of a ‘site’. This makes the application of ethnography for the purpose of organizational research indeed plausible. Conceptualizing ethnography as the ‘intimate study and residence in a well-defined community’ (Conklin, 1968, p. 172) strengthens this argument. Indeed, ethnographer Van Maanen deemed this possible (Van Maanen, 1979). He used the term *organizational ethnography* to denote the organizational context in which ethnography was applied. He did not seem to consider this use of ethnography a specific variety or interpretation of the methodology itself.

However, there is a reason for considering organizational ethnography as substantially different from anthropological ethnography. ‘Traditional’ anthropological ethnographers can relate their constructed theories to existing cultural theories. Yet, organizational ethnographers need to relate theirs to organization theory, resulting from the importance of such theory to the field under study (Rosen, 1991, p. 15). I argue that this is the main argument for considering ethnography applied as a methodology for an organizational study as *organizational ethnography*.

Organizational ethnography differs from anthropological ethnography as it concerns itself with the ‘hodgepodge’ (Huczynski & Buchanan, 1985/2007, p. 6) hundred-year-old field of organization theory. Traditionally, organization theory has been dominated by ‘structural-functionalism’, i.e. managerial perspectives that prescribe organization structures based on the organization’s function within a society. One can indeed consider an organization as an entity in itself and focus an organization theory on that entity’s continuance. Yet, such a theory tells little about the people who are a part of that organization and who actually make it work. Thus, organizational ethnographers choose to focus on people’s norms, values and agency within an organization. They choose to develop an organization theory based on what many organization theorists call an ‘organizational culture’ school of thought (Alvesson, 2002). One premise of organizational culture is that an organization *is* a culture that every employee – manager or otherwise – expresses through their behavior (Alvesson, 2002, p. 27). Also, managers express it through the rules and regulations they develop. From the perspective of organizational culture, the constructed organization theory should describe the norms and values people tend to uphold and only afterwards describe its relation to the organization’s structure and function, if the latter should be discussed at all (Schwartzman, 1993, p. 35). A perspective of organizational culture justifies participant observation and theory construction far easier than any structural-functionalist school of thought.

With a focus on the importance of MMO game-play to business organization, I treat the premise that contemporary researchers of organizational culture uphold as a working hypothesis: culture permeates and underlies all theories that focus on an organization’s function and structure. Specifically, the working hypothesis is that MMO game-play is organizational and encompasses norms and values of social interaction that players take with them into the context of the business organizations they work for. This assumes that some elements of this culture would turn up in the day-to-day interactions of employees who play MMO games or perhaps a lot more explicitly following the active use of virtual worlds within the organization.

Although the methodological underpinnings of organizational ethnography have now been explicated, it is as yet unclear what *methods* one must apply specifically as an organizational ethnographer. In the next section, I therefore again reflect anthropologically on my ethnographic research within the business organization.

Site and access

It seems the idea of a specific site of research is quite applicable in organizational ethnography. For this research I claimed as the site of participant observations a team in charge of organization-wide ICT innovations in which roughly 8 employees worked on a corporate virtual world development project and were also active players of computer games. The site of ethnographic research was well-defined, quite similar to traditional anthropological research.

The key concern of *access* is quite important to reflect upon in this organizational ethnographic study. Access was first granted thanks to the business organization's interest in academic involvement in the corporate virtual world project. After months of meetings and planning, our department was asked to develop a proof of concept for a corporate virtual world geared at collaborative learning. This enabled access to the business organization's main location. I was offered a workplace and an access pass. I was encouraged to work at the main location regularly. Although it took months to set up access, the 'pull' strategy of having the business organization come to us made it immensely easy compared to the arguably more common 'push' strategy that organizational ethnographers have to employ (Smith, 1997, p. 425).

However, even with this arrangement, access was not yet settled. In a way access not only denotes how a researcher formally enters the field of participant observations, it more importantly denotes something informal: the extent of a group's acceptance of the ethnographer as being an equal within the community. This proved quite a challenge. As Rosen explains, an organizational ethnographer will often remain a 'guest participant' (Rosen, 1991, p. 17) in the organization under study and not a full member. Indeed, since I was not hired as a full employee, I was frequently confronted with the downside of not having a formal contract and therefore function in the organization, i.e. not having access to the resources that my participants had access to and generally not being seen as an equal.

Arguably, the researcher can deal with that downside in different ways, e.g. by formulating terms in a research contract that are similar if not equal to the basic terms of an employee contract or by simply building rapport over time. Indeed, like an anthropological ethnographer, an organizational ethnographer will be overt by definition, and only become less overt over time, as he or she builds rapport with the researched. An anthropological conceptualization of ethnography seems applicable for ethnographically researching organizational behavior within an organization.

Nevertheless, the existence of formal contracts renders successful participant observation in an organization very difficult. In this research the downside of being a guest participant was compensated somewhat by the fact that I was formally deemed a 'contractor' - i.e. externally hired temporary staff - a type of worker that the business organization in question employed a lot. In fact, in the team in question more contractors were employed than full staff. I was not seen as an outsider, but simply as a specific type of employee.

Time, identity and interaction

Arguably, in case of organizational ethnography, the amount of time an ethnographer spends in an organization each week and in total should depend most on the amount of time the researched spend there. If the researcher chooses a specific 'field' for participant observation within an organization where employees spend 40 hours per week working, the ethnographer should spend close to that amount of time there as well. In practice this will work out differently. Whatever the amount of time spent, such concerns are not necessarily different from anthropological ethnography.

In the case of this research, I was unfortunately only able to spend 2 days per week within the business organization. This lack of time was mediated by the fact that my most important subjects visited my faculty for a meeting each week and maintained close contact via e-mail and telephone concerning the virtual world project's progress. Moreover, many of the involved team spent roughly 30 hours per week at the team's location, as they at times worked from home, at differing locations of the business organization or under part-time contracts.

My colleague researchers and I were able to interview 23 people in total, formally and informally, as part of the corporate virtual worlds project (Warmelink, Meijer, Mayer, & Verbraeck, 2009). The interviewed were people high up in the organization's hierarchy who had an interest or simply a saying in the setup and continuance of the project. We needed to interview

them to determine how we could make the proposed project viable as quickly as possible. The business organization's leadership hierarchy was a clear control mechanism for this ICT innovation project. The interviews allowed me to experience the tension between organization structure and the agency of the team who wanted to build a corporation virtual world. The tension between organization structure and individual agency is often a result of organizational ethnography (Smith, 1997, p. 427).

However, after 4 months the amount of time spent participant observing decreased and soon drew to a close. The project team was downsized because of general budget cuts within supportive departments like ICT innovation. Moreover, the project team needed to finish formal control processes that emphasized defining clear project goals, boundaries and planning. My presence would be possible again only once these processes had been finished. Time – as a key concern of ethnography – has so far been severely limited.

Moreover, my interaction with and identity within 'the field' caused me concern. My identity of being a researcher was always made abundantly clear from the start. My role within the organization was framed in accordance with that identity as a result. Even though my 'gatekeeper' often explicitly positioned me and my colleague researchers as equals within the corporate virtual world project, the basis of being a researcher kept us out of certain meetings and presentations, thus limiting my interactions with the people under research. I was therefore never really satisfied with my identity within the project team of the business organization. Indeed, this is common to organizational ethnography and renders a highly reflexive stance of the researcher indeed an absolute necessity.

Ethnography and bureaucracy

As the above explained, from the moment I attempted to access the business organization for ethnographic research, I was confronted by an order that hampered me along the way. The explicit contract researcher identity made building rapport much more essential to this ethnographic research. Moreover, it made it impossible to spend more than two days per week at the business organization's location, thus limiting my experiences and conversations. It also made it impossible for me to access certain information or attend certain meetings with people high up in the hierarchy. Finally, it rendered it impossible for me to stay 'on site' while the innovation team dealt with the organization's project management controls.

The organizational concept of bureaucracy is relevant here. According to sociologist and organization theorist Weber, the defining characteristic of the bureaucracy is the centralization of power. This is explicated through the existence of 'office hierarchy and of levels of graded authority' (Weber, 1946/1947, p. 9), i.e. the existence of managers at the top of the hierarchy who carry sole responsibility for the actions that people below them take. As a result, they have full decision-making authority. They formulate clear rules and regulations that ensure that all the subordinate's actions that cannot be reviewed at least concur with their judgment.

Indeed, this business organization seemed a lot like a 'firmly ordered system' (Weber, 1946/1947, p. 9). This was bureaucracy: 'a power instrument of the first order' (Weber, 1946/1947, p. 26) of which I was not the owner. The innovation team did express agency, but also had to conform to the organization structure. The bureaucratic nature of the organizational ethnographic research rendered this part of the research much more difficult than the games ethnographic research.

6. Discussion

Conducting ethnography within a business organization that is part of the economy of physical reality and within a business organization that is part of the economy of *EVE* seems like combining organizational ethnography and games ethnography. Using site, access, time, interaction and identity as key concerns of ethnography, I discussed the characteristics of each type of ethnography.

Combining both types of ethnography is a challenge. This challenge concerns mobility. It is the challenge of crossing over from one social context to the other in the name of ethnography, while defining ethnography differently within both contexts. Within 'traditional' anthropological ethnographic circles this mobility might raise some eyebrows. The research's emphasis on virtual worlds and business organizations do not go well with anthropological ethnography's emphasis on a specific site of research. Instead, the research would seem to encompass multiple sites, if a site can be demarcated at all. From a macro perspective, characterizing this research as ethnographic would require an acceptance of the researcher's mobility in the process. The result is a 'crisis of context' (Schlecker & Hirsch, 2001, p. 76), where anthropological ethnographers 'become increasingly concerned about the integrity of their discipline' (Schlecker & Hirsch, 2001, p. 70).

A clear downside of this ethnographic approach is the fact that I at times have had to split the time available among the *EVE* corporation and business organization quite unevenly. Addressing this issue of time can lead the researcher to instinctively formulate a generic 'prescriptive list of requirements' (Murphy & Dingwall, 2001, p. 347) to ensure the multiple sites get the same amount of attention and thus roughly produce even amounts of data. Yet such a methodology would arguably start to resemble more a comparative case study approach. It is my reflexive stance towards these key concerns that helped me to construct a theory of differences in organizational behavior. The *EVE* corporation experiences were meritocratic, while the business organization experiences were bureaucratic.

7. Conclusion

Contemporary ethnographic researchers of organization and management who adopt a global perspective have already emphasized how the traditional notion of ethnography as being 'spatially and temporally limited' (Peltonen, 2007, p. 349) is untenable. Several researchers have already argued that ethnography should go beyond the immobile. Such an understanding of ethnography would render it 'multi-sited' (Marcus, 1995), 'global' (Peltonen, 2007, p. 352) or 'mobile' (O'Reilly, 2009, p. 145). Indeed, I acknowledge the importance of mobile ethnography to shed light on the importance of organizational behavior in one context on the other. As a whole, this research's methodology therefore involves 'multilocal work' (Hannerz, 2003, p. 206).

Rather than upholding a normative stance towards ethnography, I choose to emphasize the constructed nature of ethnography itself. Contrary to anthropological ethnography, I consider the ability to define a site and access not an important prerequisite for ethnographic research. With the use of adjectives such as 'organizational' or 'virtual', some ethnographers have attempted to deal with concerns of defining clear sites by considering them as different subsets of ethnography. Thus, they relate their use of ethnography to anthropological ethnography as the tradition. For this research, the lack of a singular site is not a problem. Addressing these key concerns already showed what it means to crossover from one context to the other: the goal of this research.

Putting differences between organizational and games ethnography aside, I can distinguish a number of common denominators underlying both types that need to be emphasized here. The research involves participant observation under the terms of the people researched.

Moreover, the research involves reflexive construction of an organization theory. Given the above common denominators, I consider three concepts to form the foundation of my ethnographic methodology:

1. Participant observation, i.e. taking part within a social context as a participant and a researcher;
2. Reflexivity, i.e. emphasizing the influence one has as a researcher on the researched, and questioning one's observations and theories;
3. Inductivism, i.e. putting emphasis on the construction of theory, rather than testing it.

Granted, these three concepts are of differing levels. The first is purely methodical, while the latter two are methodological and epistemological respectively. Yet, I consider them highly interdependent. Together they form the 'central premise' of my ethnographic methodology. In other words, for me the central premise of ethnography is making grounded statements about a culture, having been a part of it and acknowledging one's influence and responsibility along the way.

Given the above conceptualization of 'the central premise', it is clear that it is not my intention to create a loss of perspective on ethnography by claiming yet another new one (Schlecker & Hirsch, 2001, p. 76). Instead, I wish to show how this research can be understood as ethnography through the central premise. Reflecting on this ethnographic research anthropologically reveals two sites, because of the two contexts of participant observation. I do not consider this a problem, as I do not incorporate a contextualist approach that prescribes a single site of research within the central premise of ethnography.

I am not advocating for 'contextualism' to be cast aside. On the contrary, looking back at my experiences with the explained ethnographic methodology, I feel its important to call for a continued emphasis on context dependency when defining an ethnographic research project, as theorists of ethnographic methodology Murphy and Dingwall argued (Murphy & Dingwall, 2001). Without it I cannot remain true to one of the central premise's pillars: reflexivity. I simply argue that having a single site of ethnographic research is not important. Mobility should not be an issue. Being 'immobile', i.e. 'confined' to a single context, is neither ethnography's strength, nor its defining characteristic. Mobility should simply be seen as a methodical possibility, not an insurmountable problem.

Notes

- 1 Tentonhammer.com is a long-lasting commercial MMO game fan site that lists a lot of MMO games. Upon checking many of the listed MMO game's websites, I estimate that there are over a hundred MMO games in existence. Influential virtual world designer and researcher Bartle considers the MMO game *Ultima Online*, released in 1997, to be the first commercially successful MMO game that sparked a lot of interest of the computer game industry in the genre (Bartle, 2004, p. 21).
- 2 Some MMO games result literally from the works of these authors, i.e. the MMO games *Star Wars: Galaxies* and *Lord of the Rings Online*.
- 3 Regular censuses of 45 MMO games reveal an almost exponential growth of active players since 1998, totaling over 16 million worldwide (Woodcock, 2008). Virtual economist Castronova estimated the total number of virtual world players to be several times higher already (Castronova, 2005, p. 55), perhaps even reaching 40 million by 2020 (Castronova, 2005, p. 67).
- 4 The first highly publicized experiments occurred in the completely self-made virtual world *Second Life*. Many global business organizations, as well as governmental and educational organizations, 'stepped into' *Second Life* to conduct experiments. Many of these experiments occurred mostly in 2006 and 2007 and entailed corporate advertizing, recruitment, rapid

prototyping and collaborative design. *Second Life* saw an influx of users as a result, especially between December 2006 and October 2007 (Linden Lab, 2008).

- 5 A pun on the phrase 'On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog', coined by Peter Steiner in a cartoon published by *The New Yorker* on July 5, 1993.

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