RECIIS – R. Eletr. de Com. Inf. Inov. Saúde. Rio de Janeiro, v5, n.2, p.69-74, Jun., 2011
[www.reciis.icict.fiocruz.br] e-ISSN 1981-6278

*** Original article**

Uses of ethnography in image-based virtual worlds

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DOI:10.3395/reciis.v5i2.496en

Abstract
Ethnography is a well-established technique in social sciences research, especially in Anthropology. However, the new communication spaces mediated by technology have presented challenges to its application, in the face of deterritorialization, anonymity and registers limited mostly to the written text. This allowed the appearance of various adaptations of ethnography for the online environment, addressing the typical characteristics of websites, discussion forums, social networks, chats, and MUDs1. Nonetheless, the massive online games, known as MMORPGs (Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing) strongly incorporate the image in their interactive experience, featuring graphic avatars2, gesture interactions between characters and a simulated experience of the visual world in three dimensions. Moreover, one can see the formation of identities that expand themselves beyond the game by using other online channels and reaching the offline realm. These innovations open new dimensions for the use of ethnography (including visual anthropology) in online virtual worlds requiring adaptations of the existing techniques. We made a review of the main ethnographic techniques applied to the online environment and we discuss modifications that the specific characteristics of the MMORPGs would make in such techniques. We conclude that the imagetic aspect and the ambiance based on the three-dimensional environment of such games in a certain way enable the application of the most classical techniques of ethnography.

Keywords: ethnography; virtual worlds; online games; image; mmorpgs

Introduction

A century ago, Anthropology knew a revolution from the works of Haddon, Boas, and Malinowski, which not only studied the objects created by certain cultures, but also studied their individuals in their natural environment, making a long-lasting immersion in these societies, as a form of understanding their cultures. Ethnography is an emblematic technique of social sciences research. Starting its pathway in Anthropology, it has migrated to Sociology and other human sciences until it reached communication (WITTEL, 2000). However, the new online environments bring peculiar challenges to ethnography: the social contact deterritorializes itself, the body expression is absent or severely limited and the online medium often takes several guises simultaneously (forums, blogs, chats, virtual worlds, etc.) and overflows also to the physical world. Such transformations stimulate a reflection about the use of the ethnographic technique in these new environments. Isabel Travancas, explaining ethnography and its use in researches in the communication field, starts from the earliest definition, which presents ethnography as a description of the habits and customs of a given social group (TRAVANCAS, 2009). Although historically the emphasis of ethnography has been on the act of describing in detail, this is only the first phase of the process. According to Clifford Geertz, the detailed description, the use of field diaries, customs registration, names, and everything else is an initial step, which must be followed by an interpretative process, in the attempt of giving sense to the collected information:

> What an ethnographer faces, in fact – except when (as he must do, naturally) is following the most automatized routines of collecting data – is a multiplicity of complex conceptual structures, many of them superimposed or tied in each other, which are simultaneously strange, irregular and inexplicit, and which he has to, somehow, first apprehend and then present (GEERTZ, 1989, p. 7).

For Geertz, the attitudes of the researched individuals are necessarily inscribed in a shared cultural context. This system organic, collaborative, dynamic and of diffuse contours, has both general characteristics of human behaviour and other ones specific of the group, people or society in question. As the acts described by the researcher do not occur isolated in a sterile environment, but with this background, such acts must necessarily be interpreted on the basis of the culture that gives them sense, which he calls "dense description".

Although initially ethnography was used for the description and interpretation of exotic societies, the School of Chicago distinguished itself in early 20th century for applying the ethnographic research and fieldwork techniques to big urban centers. The work in social groups closer to the researcher presented clear advantages, making unnecessary great displacements or the learning of the language. On the other hand, this work imposes its own restrictions and demands on the researcher. The main one is the researcher's need to make the "estrangement", be able to displace him or herself out of his or her culture, transforming what is familiar into something exotic, in order to do the analysis with a renewed look. This way, cultural attitudes and habits that seem natural to him or her start having a new meaning or present unheard-of questionings to his or her perception. As Isabel Travancas says, such a researcher examines society trying to "[...] look at it through other eyes, through the eyes of a foreigner in search of meanings."(TRAVANCAS, 2009, p. 100).

However, in a increasingly globalized world, the cultural pluralisation makes problematic the very notion of "field" as a geographically defined area. It becomes more and more difficult to separate what one must look at, what is "inside" and what it "outside". Some scholars point out the difficulty of estimating the limits of a given society, suggesting an always conscious research that takes into account the system of the world outside the analysed society or even the separation of the notion of field from its geographical attributes, understanding it as a political position. To embrace the multiple global forces influencing the local contexts, the ethnographies themselves would have to be multi-localized and in movement (WITTEL, 2000).

The appearance and expansion of the online medium will add new challenges to the methodologies of anthropological research. Although the use of the computer outside the military context has started just after Second World War, the development of the graphic interface and its adoption by the industry, in early 80's make computer operation more accessible to the public. The combination of graphic environment and a growing user community is what allows one to speak, for the first time, of a computer culture and to be able to understand a computer as a symbolic system (JOHNSON, 2001). Soon the computers established themselves not only as work tools, but also as entertainment and media equipment. Precisely this proliferation of computer-mediated communication makes possible the birth of the cyberspace (SANTAELLA, 2005), the virtual environment formed by computer-mediated communication flows, potentially unlimited. In this virtual space the understanding of what is environment and culture suffers successive transformations as the computer enlarges its presence, occupying professional and personal spaces. Such an environment will become a fertile ground for investigations in the most diverse areas, among them the social sciences. However, this new scenario required analysis tools appropriate to its specificities. There was no possibility of a mere application of the classical ethnography (AMARAL et al., 2008) in an automatic way, without a careful adaptation that should take into account the peculiarities of the virtual environment (MONTARDO and PASSERINO, 2006).

Virtual environments

Pierre Lévy is one of the first thinkers to reflect about virtuality and its unfolding on the Internet. In its book, "Qu'est ce que le virtuel?", he discusses the virtualization processes and lists the marking characteristics of this modality of existence, highlighting the virtualization of the body, the text, economy, new constitutions of subject and object and the deterritorialization, described in an age in which the Internet was still in its infancy (LÉVY, 1996).

For Lévy, virtual is not synonymous with non-existence, nor opposed to real, but to present. Virtual is a "knot of tendencies", a potential that realizes itself in a constructive process that is influenced by the medium and, on its turn, influences it. This realization of the virtual is the updating process, in which its potentialities collapse in a finished entity. An example would be the tree, which has its virtual presence contained in the seed. As well as the artistic making, which starts with an initial germ full of potentialities still not expressed and resolves itself in a materialized work, the updating process responds to virtual (LÉVY, 1996).

Virtualization, on its turn, is the inverted path of updating. It is to start from a defined (and definitive) object and elevate it again to the category of potential, go from a particular case to another case or a general case. It can be seen here a first result of virtualization, flexibility with

respect to time and space. This deterritorialization is one of the salient features of the virtual. Paul Virilio, in speaking of technological innovation suggests a similar effect on the human relationship with the environment (VIRILIO, 1998). However, this deterritorialization is in fact well before the advent of computers. The written text is itself a facilitator of this detachment from time and space and there are many other vectors of this phenomenon. Nevertheless, it is with the computer and especially with the advent of the Internet, that virtualization will gain greater visibility.

Still according to Pierre Lévy, one of the main fronts where virtualization occurs is the human body itself. The physical body would suffer virtualization through the image diagnosis techniques, interventions like the piercing and the plastic surgery, drugs like antidepressants and stimulants and even with a whole range of new lifestyles. In parallel, the psychic and physical life becomes more and more exteriorized, shared and visible. However, it is on the human perceptions, extended through the new media, that the virtualization of the body has more impact. Media like the radio, television, and the telephone have long been granting new eyes and ears in distant regions, able to apprehend all kinds of information free from geographical barriers. Moreover, particularly with the popularization of the Internet in the past few years, not only do the senses enlarge themselves spatially, but they also gain new cognition capabilities through three-dimensional and interactive maps, diagrams, infographics, real-time audio streaming and infrared cameras. The image starts to be widely used to support the authenticity of the virtual world and the sight, directed to the computer screen, is the most crucial sense for this process. Not only the senses, but also the arms and voices are projected, becoming able to act at formerly unimaginable distances. The acting, speaking and even constructing are no longer geographically circumscribed. These new conquests fragment the space and time, challenging conceptions kept by generations. The virtualized body becomes an experimentation vehicle for new spaces and new speeds. Such a body allows the human being to be, act and socialize in the virtual environment (JOHNSON, 2001).

Online ethnography

With the proliferation of computer-mediated communication, the online environment became a fertile ground for investigations of the most diverse areas. However, this new scenario demanded analysis tools appropriate to its specificities. Online ethnography is, therefore, an application of ethnography on the cyberspace environment (AMARAL, NATAL et al., 2008). It is not, however, a mere transposition:

> The appearance of cyberspace made pressing the use and application of research methodologies that should permit to "capture" the essence of the phenomena present therein. However, the application of already existing research methodologies, mainly of qualitative nature as ethnography, cannot be carried out in an automatic way without adaptations and analysis of the possibilities and the limits of such adaptation to the research done on the Web (MONTARDO and PASSERINO, 2006, p. 4).

While ethnography presupposes a physical field where the researcher inserts him- or herself to make his or her observations and description, in online ethnography the geographic proximity gives way to the computer-mediated interconnection, or how Amaral describes:

> From the researcher's insertion in the computer-mediated communication to the observation and investigation of cultural and communication practices, one exchanges the field not for a "non-place" as verified by Augé (1994) at the 90's, but for a territory adjacent to the offline one, which constitutes a means of communication, a relationship environment and a cultural artifact [...] (AMARAL, NATAL et al., 2008, p. 36).

Although the field transforms itself, the importance of observation is common to both ethnography and its online parallel, although the deterritorialized nature of the cyberspace provides a redirect to the participating observation (MONTARDO and PASSERINO, 2006). This way, one will observe the online behaviour of the group members through interaction via forums and mailing lists, comments and posts on blogs and websites, interactive forms and various other resources (ROCHA and MONTARDO, 2005). However, much of the material collected, contrarily to a traditional ethnography, already comes in textual format, which releases the researcher from the task of transcription. As opposed to this advantage, there is the natural loss of the verbal inflections, intonation and gestures captured by a face-to-face interview (MONTARDO and PASSERINO, 2006).

Wittel describes the movement of ethnography to the virtual world pointing out that this pathway is a consequence of the displacement of ethnography beyond the local context, due to the multiple transcultural influences on the field. Its movement occurs from the field as traditionally understood to the Internet (WITTEL, 2000).

He underlines the need of copresence in ethnography and how much the limits of the field on the

Internet become much more arbitrary. While in the physical world geographical aspects are natural borders, in the online medium the research requires a previous framing by the ethnographer, which by itself would characterize a political practice. Moreover, the time would have to be divided to observe the network and not its individual knots. This, linked to the much less intensive observation than on the offline world, would tend to abort Geertz' ideal of "dense description" in favour of very shallow descriptions of the online phenomena, negatively affecting the search for the deeper meanings in the research (WITTEL, 2000).

Besides these factors, Wittel lists four problems in the ethnography made on the Internet: the questionable validity of the data, harmed by the online anonymity, the reduced dimension of the participating observation due to the limitations of the online medium, the fragility between the knots of the online network and the disregard of the physical world, which would make it unable to reveal the context and the social complexity to the researcher. Due to these reasons, he believes that, although online ethnography has its validity while a method, it cannot be considered by itself as ethnography (WITTEL, 2000).

Virtual Ethnography

Christine Hine, on her turn, will conceive virtual ethnography as a form of researching communities in which computer networks are routine means of communication. For her, the main characteristic of ethnography remains: the ethnographer becomes involved in the environment and is face to face with the natives in such a way that he gains an understanding of their practices. Researching in the laboratory environment, she explains that it is in it that the technologies as inscription artefacts first enter ethnography. However, she argues that the researcher's competence in the use of the communication technologies is not necessary only to relate with the natives, or to obtain privileged information on the daily practices, but mainly to assess the role of technology in this society (HINE, 1994).

Although Hine recognizes the facility that technology creates in alternating the roles of participant and distant researcher, in a similar manner as Wittel, she recognizes the need of a new concept of field. However, she seems to be sure of the feasibility of the research through the online means and concludes that the field must be seen as an epistemological, and no longer a territorial category. In her words, the research field "[...] is a state of mind" (HINE, 1994, p. 8).

The virtual ethnography proposed by Hine has some important similarities with traditional ethnography. Researching the community of a research laboratory, she gains access to the group's discussion forum (her "field entry") and to a conversation environment (chat) that was developed with a professional application from a program for online role-playing games, a MOO (Multiuserdungeon,Object-Oriented). Unlike the most common chats, the MOO in which the researchers' conversations occur contains many characteristics typical of games of this sort: although it does not contain images, there are various conversation rooms with specific descriptions and each one is supposed to create a physical description of their avatar, which is fictitious.

However, she herself points out important safeguards: first, the virtual ethnography that she proposes does not intend to replace the traditional one, but to put in focus the role of technologies. In fact, in her experience with the interaction on MOO, she tells how her colleagues came to her room to see the conversation occurring. This conjugation between offline and online observation was permitted by the fact of her being both on the net and inserted in the very laboratory where she was doing her research. In fact, her ethnography does not depend exclusively on the virtual and this double data collection will permeate all her work.

Another safeguard is that, although virtual ethnography has the advantage of being self-transcribed, the data must not be naïvely accepted: the persuasion of the text may lead the researcher to forget that the participants in the online chat are not real people, but avatars or records that may or may not correspond in a univocal way to an individual. The distinction between primary and secondary data is diffuse in virtual ethnography, but triangulation procedures are still necessary to assess them properly. Finally, she highlights the need of a minimum of technical competence in the computer-mediated communication technologies so that the ethnographer can do his or her work. At the same time, one must not lose sight of the technology estrangement, once such technology is not only a means of apprehension of the data, but it moulds them, as well as the users' perceptions and the very immaterial environment in which they participate (HINE, 1994).

Netnography

Netnography (junction of net and ethnography) is a term coined by the American researchers Bishop,

Star, Neumann, Ignácio, Sandusky, and Schatz, in 1995, to describe the use of the computer-mediated communication conceived to investigate consumption behaviour of cultures and communities present on the Internet. It's based on the understanding that a relevant ethnography in groups of consumers could not refrain from investigating them in the online environment. (BRAGA, 2006). The same reasoning can be applied to other groups, particularly in the health context, where many users will join online communities in search of information on illnesses and support for healthy living (MADEIRA, LEFÈVRE et al., 2007). At the beginning, netnography started being used as a mere description of online events, but it has been refined until it became a well-defined qualitative methodology of detailed practices (KOZINETS, 2010).

Netnography presents itself as a purely virtual technique (although it does not do without other techniques of data collection that complement it) and due to this existence purely in the virtual space, netnography permits a kind of non-participating observation, characterized by the figure of the lurker, participant of lists and discussion and forums who remains in silence, only listening to others. In spite of this almost non-presence, some authors consider the figure of the lurker also as participation, not only insofar as it is possible to deduct it from the difference between the number of participants inscribed in the list and the total of participants who effectively participate in the conversation, but also in the sense that the mere possibility of existence of lurkers formats the participants' discourse, leading them to have a more specific care in their enunciation. Anyway, this feasibility of the invisible observer in the online medium leads many defenders of netnography to be even more emphatic as to ethics in research:

> "In a physical environment, the simple presence of the ethnographer is put as an aspect to be negotiated in the field, while the net presence (Agre, 1994) presents itself as something turbid, indistinct (Barnes, 2004). In relation to traditional ethnography, authors like Winkin (1998), for example, radically defend the ethnographer's clarity about his identity of researcher in field situations and a reasonable opening about his research agenda. The fact is that the relation between presence and absence has specific implications for research on the Internet." (BRAGA, 2006, p. 6)

Robert Kozinets is be one of the main proponents of netnography, applying it mainly on marketing and market researches. It is him who will organize in a methodical manner a body of procedures for the technique. The first procedure described by Kozinets is entrée, which involves both the precise definition of the research problem and the survey of the community to be studied. It is recommendable that one choose a relevant (focused on the research issue), active (recent and constant communication), interactive (wide exchange of messages between the participants), with a reasonable number of participants, heterogeneous (in the sense of there being participants of various opinions) and data-rich (with detailed and descriptive messages) community. Moreover, it is essential that the researcher makes a previous study of the norms followed by the group (KOZINETS, 2010).

The procedures of data collection and analysis, according to Kozinets, are concurrent, once it does not suffice to collect the data by copying them directly from the online medium (which would only be online contents analysis), but to collect and try to understand the people represented in these interactions in their cultural context of online community. The data collection is also associated with an active participation in the online community and it will capture three types of data: archive data (copied from pre-existing registers in the community, without the influence hereof in its creation), extracted data (created in partnership between the researcher and community members with whom he or she interacts) and field data (which the researcher obtains from his or her own report of the experiences lived during the research). Regarding the analysis of the data itself, the codification and the categorization of the data surveyed are crucial, as the comparison in search for recurrences, contradictions, and detours. This task can be aided by specific software and its results will be based on the context of the activities of actors (KOZINETS, 2010).

The procedures related to ethics in research receive detailed attention from Kozinets and other theorists, due to the peculiarities of the online medium, where the borders between public and private often get confusing and where ephemeral acts remain registered in a permanent way. Due to the nature of the online medium, the researcher has more freedom on determining the form of participation in the community he or she investigates, from a clear and operative participation to a purely observational one. Notwithstanding, this does not exempt him or her from the ethical care with the information surveyed. Even considering as public, for example, the posts and comments in a blog, even so it is advisable that one obtain permission from the group members for utilizing and divulging them. In a similar way, it is recommendable that the researcher initially present him- or herself to the group by the time of the entry in the field, making clear what his or her purpose is in that virtual community (AMARAL, NATAL et al., 2008). Such procedures are even more important when it comes to health-related netnography, an area that traditionally has high regard for the care and ethical procedure in research. Finally, there is a validation of the interpretation and results with the

members of the community studied, in order to verify the correction and reach of the work, which permits correcting occasional faults in the elaboration of the data (KOZINETS, 2010).

Netnography presents great advantages in terms of time and reach of the research: it is a non-obstructive method and takes less time to be applied, requiring also fewer financial and human resources than other methods, like interviews, focal groups or ethnography. Moreover, it grants certain flexibility, both temporal and spatial, to the researcher and the researched. In spite of this, it is important to be attentive to its disadvantages: many times there is an excess of information that must be adequately filtered, there is loss of important dimensions of communication, like intonation and body language and difficulty in confirming the data obtained, given the anonymity that permeates the virtual world. However when one understands that it analyses the online discursive acts and not the individuals themselves, as pointed out by Kozinets (2010), it is able to provide valid results, mainly if combined with other research methods (NOVELI, 2010).

Virtual Video Ethnography

Neither the virtual ethnography nor netnography seem to pay special attention to the visual aspect of cyberspace, which seems contradictory, since the great popularization of the online medium is mostly due to its visual appeal, both in the use of the graphic interface and in the presentation of multimedia pages on the World Wide Web. As Steven Johnson says, it is from the moment in which the computer gains a visual interface that one can speak of informational aesthetics, where one has the windows, icons and images on the screen acting like a symbolic system generating and being influenced by a culture of its own (JOHNSON, 2001).

This is particularly important on considering the modern virtual worlds, where the interactions are not registered in texts, but occur dynamically on the screen by means of synchronically animated images, many times simulating the three-dimensional aspect of the offline world. Seeking to address the need of registration and interpretation of this vast interactive environment, Michael Strangelove proposes a new technique, which he calls virtual video ethnography:

> This work describes my use of the computer as a camera and camcorder for capturing the action within the virtual world – a technique referred to herein as virtual video ethnography. Virtual video ethnography is in a long tradition lineage that utilizes communication technologies, such as recorders, camcorders and video cameras for exploring human action." (STRANGELOVE, 2007, p. 3)

Of the techniques and variants of ethnography mentioned, the one proposed by Strangelove is the one which places more emphasis on the visual aspects of the online medium, an environment for which he anticipates a great growth of possibilities, not only of dangers, but of opportunities for learning, creativity and research. According to him, recording the experience of virtual worlds from the "vision" of the ethnographer's computer gives not only a precise registration of what he or she is seeing on the screen, but it also serves as a space of reflexivity, where the researcher can reflect about his or her reactions and framing of the research field.

His proposal is an heir of the visual anthropology, which develops itself right at the beginnings of the history of Anthropology as a means of visually safeguarding (in film and photography) information of threatened or transforming cultures and also as an attempt at registering in a more precise way the visual observation of a culture (RIBEIRO, 2005). In fact, the work of Malinowski himself was strongly based on photographs and his images of the natives of Trobriand are not a mere appendage of his ethnographic text, but an essential part of it so that his anthropological description is in fact encompassing (SAMAIN, 1995).

However, according to Strangelove, registration and preservation are just the more primary levels of the use of technique. More sophisticated arrangements permit (depending on the technical limitations of the virtual world studied) to record the video from multiple camera angles, giving a multiple perspective of what occurs in the field, not only from the ethnographer's standpoint, but also from a third person's. More than the amount of data, this technique would bring a whole new layer of reflexivity upon the ethnographic experience. At the same time, the players/users of the virtual world can also record their own versions of the videos, serving as a counterpoint to the researcher's "authorized" vision: "Adding an omniscient perspective to our actions within the virtual realm also brings a new dimension to the way we experience the self and construct our identities." (STRANGELOVE, 2007, p. 9)

The ethical concern of the defenders of netnography is echoed by Strangelove, when he points out that the technique of virtual video ethnography with multiple perspectives is highly reflexive and can make the online behaviour registrations more responsible towards the communities they intend to interpret:

> The 'intense and authority-giving personal experience of fieldwork' is extending deep into the virtual realm. In-game video recording provides a novel tool for authoritative virtual fieldwork of an emotionally intense and highly personal nature. The virtual realm needs to be approached as a distinct realm of human action, one not to be collapsed into some other category of the 'real' or even the 'hyperreal'. (STRANGELOVE, 2007)

This way, the arguments cited by Wittel concerning the limitations of interaction and participating observation in the online medium could be offset by the use of the virtual video ethnography, as it is proposed by Strangelove. This technique is widely applicable in the online games due to the way the virtual images that shape the shared environment are created.

MMORPGs

Virtual video ethnography can be an extremely useful technique in the study of virtual environments that make intense use of (static or dynamic) images as a communication channel with their users. An example of this kind of space would be online massive games or MMORPGs, composed of three-dimensional simulated environments.

MMORPGs descend from the computer RPGs (Role-Playing Games), single-user games where the player plays a fictional character in the game universe, typically a heroic world of medieval fantasy. In this environment he or she lives a story, making various decisions through his or her avatar, by means of which he or she interferes with the character's fate and particularizes the living of the narrative.

The MMORPGs have existed since early 90's, but it was the launching of the game Ultima Online, in 1997, that popularized the gender, putting in evidence its peculiar characteristics of shared environment. Although games that allowed the gathering of tens of players on a local network existed before, in MMORPGs the number of players is in the order of thousands, which give them characteristics typical of virtual communities. However, unlike the previous online communities, represented by forums and discussion lists, chat channels and social network websites, the MMORPGs present certain specific characteristics that make them a peculiar space for the analysis of certain behaviours related to the communication processes and identity formation in the online medium (MASSIVELY multiplayer online role-playing game, 2010).

First, the MMORPGs are linked to a notion of space and time. Although a MMORPG is a virtual space, simulated by means of 3D algorithms, even so it is their creators' intention to represent a real space, possessing a specific geography fixed for all the users. This universe does not only have geography, however, it also has a history. Typically the MMORPGs occur in fictional universes of fantasy or science fiction. The creators of the game make an elaborate work of creation of the historic background of this world, in order that its coherence and depth generate greater involvement and interest from the players. (MASSIVELY multiplayer online role-playing game, 2010)

Another important characteristic is that, to interact in this environment and take part in the world history, the players create avatars that are necessarily linked to its history. Unlike the more traditional virtual communities, in a MMORPG there is no possibility of a player creating a digital version of his or her physical self. Forcefully, he or she will have to play with a character typical of that fictitious world. This otherness is a fertile space for investigations about identity construction in the MMORPGs and their relations with the player's original identity. More than that, there is a personalization of the avatar, where the player can choose how to appear to the other players. This personalization encompasses from sex and physical looks (colour and style of hair, beard, adornments, etc.) up to the garment and for many players the showiest and most powerful armours become a symbol of status to be exhibited while in the game.

What also makes the MMORPGs an interesting object of study for communication and information is not only the amount of resources they move, but the vast communication network they provide in and out of the game universe. Players relate inside the game and many times they carry these relationships to other environments, be those thematic websites, forum, online chat rooms or even real-world encounters. Psychologists like Sherry Turkle researched online games. In various interviews conducted with players, Turkle has concluded that many players expanded their emotional spectrum by exploring different roles in the game, including gender changes (TURKLE, 1995).

Finally, the MMORPGs are strongly based on image. The immersion, the phenomenon of "feeling inside" the virtual world, in current MMORPGs is directly related to the visual appeal of the game. It is not necessarily a blind search for the visual realism, since many games choose distinct visual styles, but an aesthetic concern about the environments, the characters and their articulations. Interacting

inside MMORPGs, with the world or with other players, is primarily a visual experience. The virtual world is not so much of a story to be read, but an environment to be experienced. The game universe surpasses the game dimensions and becomes a shared environment, or how proclaims the slogan of the MMORPG World of Warcraft: "It´s not a game, it's a world."(BLIZZARD'S Scrooge: Tom Chilton Dismisses Player Housing for WoW, 2009). This collective aspect of creation of virtual environments was already suggested by Lévy on referring to the MUDs (former online games in text format that could be considered distant predecessors of the MMORPGs):

> "One discovers, thus, landscapes of meanings that emerge from the collective activity in the MUDs (Multi-users dungeons and dragons), kinds of role-playing games in shape of virtual language worlds, elaborated in real time by hundreds or thousands of young people scattered across the planet." (LÉVY, 1996, p. 114)

In the MMORPGs, this collective activity extends to the visual. What a player sees in the environment is also seen by all the others. The consequences of a character's acting in the online universe are seen in real time by those who are close and the interaction also involves speech and gestures of the avatars, characterizing the MMORPG as a shared social environment.

Conclusions

On thinking of ethnography for application on the virtual worlds, specifically in the MMORPGs, regardless of being online ethnography, netnography or video ethnography, it is important to have in mind the characteristics typical of this kind of virtual environment. Besides the logistic issues about the means of registration (field diary, textual chat registration, audio and/or video or even an integral recording of the game experience) there are other peculiar characteristics of the game itself.

First, the online games will make more intensely explicit the de-territorializing logics of virtualization mentioned by Lévy. Right at the beginning, its subscription procedures, payment, and access system are all carried out via Internet, typically without any restriction of place, congregating thousands of users simultaneously from distinct parts of the world. To this, one sums a basic premise of the games like MMORPG, the one that the player plays a role in a fictional world. The virtualization of the body, on its turn, is expressed in the MMORPGs as the avatar becomes the player's "body", a digital being, his or her only legitimate representative in the game universe. More than a virtual agent, the avatar "is" the online player's identity, who by means of it perceives the world and carries out all his or her activities. The choices of personalization of the avatar do not generally have an effect but a purely aesthetic one. Despite this, they are valued by many players and many game production companies keep shops inside the game selling the called "vanity items": items that enable the creation of an exclusive looks.

Through the avatar, players not only experience deterritorialization, but also a reterritorialization inside the game universe, making a very literal echo to the idea that each new communication technology creates its own new space franked to the human experience, where "[...] we skip from a network to the other, from a proximity system to the following one. The spaces metamorphose and bifurcate themselves at our feet, forcing us to heterogenesis." (LÉVY, 1996, p. 23). Players who live in opposed sides of the world now fight together side by side, others live in the same quarter of the physical world, but inside the game they belong to rival clans in different kingdoms. If it is already possible to question the relation between the online actions of participants in discussion lists and their personality in the offline world, in the MMORPGs this relation is even more complicated, for the player is supposed to take on a character created according to certain specifications, inhabiting a fictitious world, possessing a peculiar history and geography. Different from more traditional online communities, in the MMORPGs there is a re-positioning in the fictional universe. Not only a reterritorialization, but the entry into a story and the assumption of a role that, at least in part, is given to the player. Moreover, his or her acting is submitted to the rules of the game that becomes part of the conversation and of "local culture".

On the other hand, the players' behavior when acting by means of their avatars is not an separated activity in relation to their "real" personalities. As pointed out by Ribeiro and Falcão (RIBEIRO, 2009), the formation of the identity through the game necessarily derives from the background with which the players enters the virtual environment. However much one wants to "enter the skin" of a given character, the player carries out this acting from a situated position, a place of speech that is his or her own offline identity. The permeability between physical and virtual also occurs in the other sense. Many players bring from the virtual world behavioral traits that influence their life in the offline world. For example, players who incarnate more powerful characters when in the game, tend to become more assertive in the offline social context, as pointed out in the work by the anthropologist Nick Yee (2007). Although the environment where the game occurs is a virtual one, the interactions have

meanings and become part of the player's life experience (YEE and BAILENSON, 2007). This way, the online identity does not replace the offline one, but at the same time it is not discarded when the game ends. Rather, it seems to complement itself to the player's identity, becoming one of the roles played in the social world. This link between player and avatar suggests that research in the health field can benefit from ethnographic techniques in virtual worlds, especially taking into account the notion of self-care, since players typically takes care of their avatars, ensuring their well-being and improvement during the game. As already discussed in other studies, self-care in relation to the avatar can show the way for innovative health interventions that deserve further investigation. (LIEBERMAN, 2001; BEALE, KATO et al., 2007; KATO, COLE et al., 2008)

From this outline of the investigation techniques of online ethnographic nature and of the characteristics of today's massive online games we can conclude that, in a certain way, the fieldwork in virtual worlds puts into scene again the social space. These virtual worlds are strongly based on image as a means of environment construction and immersion, create a participant's reterritorialization and permit the use of the avatar's gesture as a means of interaction. Perhaps these factors give fieldwork on these games more similarities with the classical ethnography than with netnography. It is our hypothesis that this conjugation between offline and online, between deterritorialization provided by the Internet and a subsequent insertion into a new geography (although fictitious), justifies not an isolated technique, but a combination of them in diverse degrees, able to cover the multi-dimensionality that the experience of the online interactive image represents. As an analysis of the virtual environments lacks a contextualization in the physical world, the online activities are not less real for their practitioners that those occurring offline. This way, it is important that any ethnographic research technique makes the relation between these two important aspects of human existence.

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Notes

1 MUD (Multiuser Dungeon) is one of the first types of online game created, where the players takes on a fictitious character and with him or her they interact in a fantasy environment, including other players. Unlike the current games, the entire player's interaction with the MUD took place by means of text, that is, the player typed commands describing the acts of his or her character and the game responded with a text describing the consequences of these acts on the virtual environment.

2 "The term 'avatar' was appropriated from Sanskrit, originally referring to the Hindu notion of a deity who descends to earth in an incarnate form. Similarly, a user wears the identity of this virtual entity to move in a parallel world. Avatars are graphical figures that can move, act and interrelate with other digital masks in a three-dimensional virtual world. Each user that enters these virtual environments can create his own avatar, when choosing a mask on an available digital wardrobe. Avatar is the representation of the player in the game universe." (SANTAELLA, 2005, p. 7)