Proliferating Presences:
Ethnographic Subjectivity in a Distributed
Educational Research Consortium

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For the past two and a half years, I've been a graduate student, fieldworker, research assistant, and project manager with an educational reform project that spans over 25 different community, educational, and research institutions. These institutions are scattered around the US, as well as in Mexico, Russia, Australia, and Israel, and involve countless children and community members, as well as 14 Principal Investigators (PIs) and a steady stream of administrative, undergraduate, and graduate research support. The bulk of communication between project nodes is conducted over email, with the addition of yearly consortium-wide meetings, and frequent travel of individual consortium members.

This multi-million dollar project, funded by the Mellon and Russell Sage Foundations, and led by Mike Cole at the University of California, San Diego, involves the establishment, administration, sustaining of, and research on a network of afterschool clubs where children work with undergraduate tutors on computer-based educational activities. In contrast to other pieces of the project that focus on site development, community relations, or psychological testing, the charter for my team's piece in the broader consortium is to conduct an ethnographic evaluation of the workings of the clubs, examining children's learning, as well as the institutional dynamics of the research and implementation effort. My team includes 4 faculty members, 2 other graduate students, a multiplicity of audio-visual and networked computer equipment, and 3 or more
undergraduate research assistants and data collectors. The project has provided me with ties to an intellectual community, funding, and access to a diversity of data and research sites.

Recent calls for multi-sited ethnography (Martin 1994; Marcus 1995), and anthropological attention to objects such as the state (Gupta and Ferguson 1992; Gupta forthcoming), commodities (Appadurai 1986), mediascapes and technoscapes (Appadurai and Breckenridge 1988; Appadurai 1990; Fischer 1991), online communities (Escobar 1994), or large institutions (Nader 1969 [1972]) have stressed the importance of reshaping anthropology to address these different kinds of ethnographic objects. While empowered by these calls to action by senior ethnographers, I have also struggled, in pursuing my doctoral study, in trying to define a series of research practices that would count as my rite of passage into the discipline: puzzling over what to include in an area exam bibliography on mediascapes and technoscapes, wondering if virtual participant observation still gave me an ethnographer's habitus, fretting that I would never get a job as an Americanist anthropologist of cyberspace.

For this paper, I want to explore some of the issues and dilemmas I have encountered in working with a translocal, technologically mediated, and interdisciplinary research and implementation project. I realize that many of these issues are ones with which anthropologists have a long standing engagement with, especially those working in media studies, institutional contexts, applied anthropology, translocal ethnography, and large research projects. So I am not suggesting that these are totally new categories of research process, but rather that they are inflected in somewhat new ways through certain technologizations of anthropological fieldwork and writing, and increasing analytic attention to translocal objects. How can anthropological methods grapple with translocal, informed objects of study? What is enabling and disabling about using video and new information technologies to mediate the fieldwork and analysis for multisited ethnography? In other words, how effective is virtual witnessing as a form of ethnoographic observation? Finally, how can we understand and shape the contours of anthropological participation in late capitalist technosocial networks and translocal flows of knowledge?

First, some background.
I began my doctoral study with an interest in Internet enabled communities, and wondering how one could possibly begin to study, ethnographically, such a distributed phenomenon. It was easy enough to log online conversation and activity, instant transcripts without the hassle of audiotapes and hours at the transcription machine. Surely participation in an online community such as a MUD, a text-based Internet environment, would count as participant observation, since the online world was precisely a site of consequential social activity, observed and noted by the ethnographer. As with other less mediated forms of anthropological observation, I had access the ambient talk in the community, serendipitous meetings, and the usual problems of initiating contact with natives in a strange new world. What was different, however, was the ongoing process of referencing their lives off the screen, "real life," of "RL" in net speak, the inaccessible vastness beyond the scrolling lines of text, worlds and experiences not mediated by computational prostheses. This is not to insist on the primacy of phenomenology over text, but rather, more simply, to begin to note the peculiarities of these forms of mediated interaction.

While the focus on online activity certainly enabled an understanding of forms of computer mediated social life, it also seemed like there were interesting things happening in the RL habitats of users, that in fact, one of the most crucial research questions for computer networked communities was around that relationship between virtual and RL activities and identities, the relation between the particular, spatially distributed sites of use and the online sphere that brought these people together. How are different localities and forms of participation being reshaped through a global networking infrastructure? To get at this, it seemed the ethnographer must travel, bringing her methods of observation to bear not only on the shared online domain, but on the distributed sites and people that constituted that "other world" of real life.

My next project, after a couple of years of online fieldwork, was to begin to seek out some sites where I could observe and have access to real bodies participating with virtual environments. This is the effort that eventually brought me to my current research project, sites where children and adults get together to play with computer games and Internet technologies, where conversation and
interaction happens both via computational media, and more traditionally embodied forms.

I’d like to begin to describe, now, in a bit more detail, the research apparatus that I have been engaged with. Fieldwork during this 3-year project is ongoing, but concentrated during the 95-96 school year. During this period, several research assistants, including myself, shot videotapes at 3 target sites in California for most days of operation. I functioned as the nomadic ethnographer, participating in one local site and traveling at a rate of approximately once per month between three other target sites, as well as sites in North Carolina, videotaping, interviewing, and participant observing. In addition to the video, interview data, and my own observations, the project also generates daily fieldnotes by undergraduates participating at the clubs, which they write as part of their coursework. These fieldnotes for the past four years are digitally databanked at UCSD, along with project archives spanning over ten years.

The videos record the activity at a computer of children and undergraduates playing a computer game or on the Internet. A scan converter translates the computer monitor input to NTSC video format, which is recorded, with sound from a microphone, onto a Hi8 videotape. Additionally, a video camera with a wireless microphone captures the real life context of people interacting. These two tapes, of the computer screen and of the interaction setting, are eventually edited together into a picture in picture format, where the online activity is juxtaposed with RL activity [Figure 1].

Midway through the project, we began to encounter difficulties in organizing the translocal flow of research data. Videotapes needed to be copied, edited together, and distributed to research nodes in San Diego, North Carolina, Los Angeles and Palo Alto, and collated with other forms of data such as the fieldnotes, transcripts, and records of analysis done. We eventually devised a database which is shared over the Internet, which can be dynamically accessed and updated by all project participants.

The database currently records the whereabouts of over 300 videotapes and their copies, as well as the related fieldnotes, content logs, transcripts, and pointers to supplementary materials such as permission forms, games, and curriculum.
Through the course of the year, our data has been gradually disciplined and informed, transformed from an unruly set of happenings at computer clubs to a standardized series of integrations and juxtapositions in various storage media.

In terms of the analysis process, most of my access to fieldsites and research subjects is mediated by this translocal flow of video and fieldnotes. While I was able to spend participant observation time at all of the sites that I am writing about, my primary data is not my own observations, or even my interview data, but rather the videotapes produced by other research assistants, and fieldnotes written by the undergraduate tutors. Most of my "participant observation" time involves viewing and reviewing of videotape and playing the computer games that my research subjects play.

The video record and undergraduate fieldnotes provide me with an intimate yet voyeuristic relation to kids and undergraduates that I may never meet in person. Often when encountering these subjects during field visits, I am struck with a kind of media fan mentality, finally meeting in the flesh the vivid personalities that I had known only through a TV monitor, a silent but avid witness to their daily lives as captured on video. Here I encounter a related but refracted version of the issues encountered during online ethnography. While I certainly have a form access to the real lives and bodies of my research subjects, video mediation, in contrast to the conversational mode via computer networking, strips my relation of any interactive immediacy.

The video record, in some ways, produces a panoptic gaze, where I can see without being seen, a scientist occupying a privileged position with which I can draw together the scattered datapoints of my distributed research sites and subjects, calling forth an overarching apparatus of knowledge production by virtue of my alliances with expensive machines and talented, well-funded colleagues, situated in the flow of philanthropic dollars that support educational reform. Video is a peculiarly authoritative medium in this sense, appealing to a sense of reality and immediacy, and yet still manipulable, recombinable, reproducible, and distributable. Clearly there are dangers in highly mediated and distributed forms of fieldwork: the loss of embodied engagement and interaction with subjects and locales, or the forced juxtaposition of elements through a techno-ethnographic apparatus. In this context, it seems crucial to remain critically reflexive about the
nature of knowledge production in technologized and capitalized settings, remaining attentive to the dangers of detached or desensitized looking and knowing, as well as the inequities of access to resources of various kinds.

While acknowledging the fraught nature of a multi-sited video-based ethnography, I would also argue for responsible ethnographic entanglement in rather than absention from technologized and networked practices of fieldwork and representation. In my work, I have been interested in exploring new forms of anthropological participation that are entangled with technosocial practices and apparatuses both close to home and dispersed across wide distances. I have arrived, in alliance with innumerable human and nonhuman actors, at a certain kind of technologized practice as a form of activism and a way of studying spatially distributed phenomenon, while also constructing a doable project for my doctoral study.

Production of translocal, multi-sited ethnographic knowledge requires not only analytic commitment, but concrete resources: time, disciplined technologies, sponsors, supportive mentors, and heterogeneous alliances of various sorts. It has been challenging but fruitful to find a voice as a critical anthropologist of technology, while at the same time managing the pressing day to day accountabilities demanded by the co-presences of my research process: running a community technology program for teens, debugging database code, developing rhetorics persuasive in an educational policy arena, arguing for the importance of ethnographic knowledge in software production, and most importantly, conducting action research which tries to contribute to more equitable worlds for a new generation of diversely technologized kids. These multiple forms of participation have been enabled by a large, collaborative research consortium and keep me in ongoing conversation and interaction with diverse technologies, technologists, educators, and kids.

In terms of contributing to conversations within the discipline, I would ally myself with many that study mass media and technology, proposing that human relationality and interconnection is increasingly constituted by technosocial mediations linking people that may never meet face to face. By being able to look across multiple sites and distance, I can interrogate not only the particularity of local sites of consumption, but also the production of sameness and
interconnection in the face of difference and distance. In trying to understand a late capitalist moment in software production and use, it seems necessary not only to look at human action as a commensensically embodied interpersonal phenomenon, but also as it is mediated and partially standardized by commodities that are broadcast or circulated across wide distances, or by informational networks that link disparate locales. Rather than belabor this point that has been made more eloquently by many of my predecessors, I would like to conclude with a brief example that illustrates how these issues are beginning to develop in my research.

One of the commodities that I have been interested in is the edutainment software package produced by Maxis Inc., SimCity 2000™, a simulation game that enables one to build and administer a virtual city. My interest was initially fueled by fieldwork with and videotapes of kids playing the game, by the diversity of interactions and meaning making processes that happened. Some kids would use the game as a medium to explore certain imaginings around urban life: Where would I want to live if I were the mayor? How many police stations does a city really need? Other kids, or the same kids at different moments, would transform SimCity into an action game, invoking disasters such as floods, fires, and alien invasions, reducing their creations to burning rubble. My research has been informed by the diversity of uses of the game at different sites: Its extreme popularity among a group of adolescent boys at one site, a very different set of uses that it was put to by urban teens at a different site, and its failure to engage the interest of any of the kids at yet another site. Despite being a stabilized, shrink-wrapped and widely distributed commodity form, SimCity 2000™ is an extremely flexible and unpredictable actor at local sites of consumption. Heterogeneity of uses and local appropriations are of key analytic interest, and having a range of use sites, rich ethnographic material, and a multi-year research project has enabled this cross situational perspective.

This recognition of diversity in use has happened, however, at the same time that I have wondered at the homogeneity of experiences made available to kids through computer games, and at the nature of interconnection, often unequal, between different game players at dispersed locales. At the layer of the interface, kids encounter the same special effects and are interpellated into similar subject positions, expressing similar delight at being able to build a cool new building, or
at the huge mechanical space alien. Even more to the point, the kids that are fans of the game will surf the web for game hints, examples of cities, and special cheat codes posted by other SimCity 2000™ players. In other words, they are participating in a quasi-virtual or technosocial community, constituted through the circulation of a commodity, globally computer networked fan communication, and local interpersonal interactions through the course of game play. The analysis that I am working towards does not posit a scaling up, a shift from local to global or micro to macro. Rather, I am interested in looking across field sites as linked particularities, at being able to look at a cluster of spatially distributed interactions as related to each other through shared forms of technosociality.

The kids that play SimCity 2000™, and my own distributed research network, are both implicated in related problematics of heterogeneous relationality and dense technosocial mediation. I hope this paper has presented neither a univocal celebration of these processes nor a flat critique, but rather a voice in the debate on research positions and practices for a multi-sited ethnography and the anthropological study of translocal objects, one that argues for responsible engagement, reflexive technosocial practice, and ongoing conversation both within the discipline and at the many sites through which anthropologists might travel.

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References


Books.