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Microethology: Methods for Studying Gameworlds

This chapter will set out the methods I use in studying play, the conceptual enquiry that underpins these methods, the theoretical and empirical traditions that situate this work and some of the practical considerations it raises. It will address the methodological demands of studying the relationships between the virtual and the actual, cyberspace and domestic space, in everyday popular digital culture. The book as a whole attempts to identify and theorize both human and non-human agents in the moment or event of gameplay: so the object of study here is neither human players nor dynamic software but what happens when they come together to generate an event of gameplay.

Ethnography

My approach to empirical research is in some key respects part of an interdisciplinary tradition of small-scale ethnography, particularly studies that describe cultures or subcultures within the Western or developed world – that is participant observation not of exotic or pre-industrial others, but groups with which researchers have some familiarity. Media and cultural studies have their ethnographic strands, with attention to television audiences (Ang 1985, Morley 1992) or to youth culture (Willis 1978, Hebdige 1979). To overgeneralize, these studies were primarily concerned with the discursive and identity-forming processes of media consumption or everyday performance. However, in this book I am less concerned with the *meanings* constructed around children's media culture and more concerned with the materiality of both new media and the lived experiences of their consumption or playing. The

media technologies themselves (both hardware and software) and their agency as machines (or bodies in play) are of concern, not just their transmission of images and scenarios.

The case studies used in this book, those written by myself and those by others, are very much concerned with describing the experiences and texture of everyday culture; they are descriptive and interpretive and not scientific in their aims. Clifford Geertz has described the potential for ethnography not only to 'reduce the puzzlement' we face in encounters with different cultures, but also in the study of more familiar worlds in which it can usefully *induce* puzzlement:

[...] displacing the dulling sense of familiarity with which the mysteriousness of our own ability to relate perceptively to one another is concealed from us. (Geertz 1993, in Hine 2000, 64)

I am personally interested in, and influenced by, a stream of empirical engagement with the everyday that can be traced back to the Surrealist movement of the 1920s. Surrealist writers and photographers in particular regarded the mundane everyday world not as a static environment against which everyday life took place, but rather as a realm shot through with the marvellous, a strangeness that can be revealed through playful and poetic activities and attention:

Surrealism is not just a technique for making the ordinary extraordinary; the everyday in Surrealism is *already strange* (it is collage-like). In Surrealism our drab habits of mind understand it in this way. Instead the everyday is where the marvellous exists. (Highmore 2002, 46)

Thus we could 'read Surrealism as a form of social research into everyday life' (Clifford 1988, Highmore 2002, 46). This Surrealist stream was fed by, and into, critical thought and anthropology in France that was concerned with social and cultural phenomena that can broadly be connected with play. Marcel Mauss' work on pre-industrial gift economies was influential on Georges Bataille, who worked with Roger Caillois on the study of sacred and ritual cultures (including aspects of everyday Parisian life), and on the Situationist International in the 1950s and 1960s, who were also avid readers of Huizinga and saw play as a transgressive revolutionary force (Giddings 2007c). The Surrealist ethnographic attention to the intangible forces of desires, dreams and the unconscious – as well as the ambiguous but powerful persistence of spaces of the sacred in the modern world – offers aesthetic and conceptual resources for the operations of virtual media, imagination, play and non-

human agency in the every day. An ethnographic surrealist sensibility, then, can address not only the marvellousness of the adult, urban, environment, but also the inherent surrealism of children's play. Consider this account from a book on child development, for instance:

The dolls seem to take our lives of their own as children create devices to create the illusion that the dolls are making decisions and reacting to events within their own autonomous story world. Furthermore, in speaking about for their dolls, children come to speak about things that are not visible, such as the thoughts and feelings of the dolls and the objects in the story world that are not part of the setting in which the story being told. By the end of the preschool years, children often can create entire autonomous story worlds, complete with characters facing problems and resolving them 'on their own' in scenes that are quite fantastic and distinct from the actual scene in which the play is taking place. (George et al. 2005, 62)

Children's play brings the inanimate to life, collages together disparate material and semiotic fragments and effects all kinds of syntheses and transductions. It is utterly everyday, but marvellous and phantasmagorical (see Chapter 7, 'Real Worlds').

I draw also, therefore, on a range of theoretical and methodological resources that are critical of the humanist assumptions of the humanities and social sciences, and that suggest ways for studying the everyday world as technocultural, constituted by both human and non-human bodies and forces. These include science and technology studies (STS), actor-network theory (ANT) (and the work of Bruno Latour in particular), Donna Haraway's work on science and cyberculture and the realist philosophy of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. This book isn't the place to set out or synthesize these diverse bodies of thought and practice in any detail,¹ but I will pick up and use ideas and approaches from them when useful throughout. For the purposes of the book, underpinning them all is a fundamental questioning of fixed discursive and methodological separations of, variously, the human and the technological, the natural and the cultural and the material, and the imaginary in culture.

Anthropology of technology

Broadly, then, I have been influenced by a range of approaches that might be loosely bracketed together as an 'anthropology of technology':

...technical objects and people are brought into being in a process of reciprocal definition in which objects are defined by subjects and subjects by objects. It is only after the event that causes are stabilized. And it is only after the event that we are able to say that objects do this, while human beings do that. It is in this sense, and only in this sense, that technical objects build our history for us and 'impose' certain frameworks. And it is for this reason that *an anthropology of technology is both possible and necessary*. (Akrich 1992, 222, my emphasis)

The problems and possibilities here are both terminological and actual: how to study the lived nature of humans and objects in digital culture? An emergent 'cyborg anthropology' (Downey et al. 1995), or 'cyborgology' (Gray et al. 1995), would at least need to interrogate the humanist assumptions of both the cybernetic organism and the *anthropos*.

Actor-network theory contributes to this anthropology, or sociology, of technology. Mackenzie and Wajcman introduce it as identifying 'the reciprocal relationship between artefacts and social groups' (Mackenzie and Wajcman 1999, 22). However, ANT draws in a far more heterogeneous array of agents or actors as constituent of sociotechnical networks:

If human beings form a social network it is not because they interact with other human beings. It is because they interact with human beings and endless other materials too [...] Machines, architectures, clothes, texts – all contribute to the patterning of the social. (Law 1992)

A study proceeding from an actor-network theory position, then, would assume no primacy of agency between humans and non-humans (whether artefactual, scientific or natural) in any network, phenomenon or system, implicitly or explicitly rejecting the humanist worldview of the humanities and social sciences. The implications of this are far-reaching and go beyond the nuances of the effects and determinations studied as SST (social shaping of technology). It questions engrained conceptual distinctions between nature and culture, humans and artefacts, subjects and objects:

Both society and technology, actor-network theory proposes, are made out of the same 'stuff': networks linking human beings and non-human entities. (Mackenzie and Wajcman 1999, 24)

For Bruno Latour, then, society has always been an indissoluble network of technological and human entities: society is (and always has been) constituted by humans, machines and tools.

The technocultural circuits of the video game, then, are only one, particularly intense and intimate, network, but one that consists of material and technical, aesthetic and embodied connections:

Digital games are objects that exist in the world; however much their digital virtuality is celebrated they are enacted and produced in strikingly visceral – ontologically virtual – ways. The noise that a PS3 game makes when it is pushed into the blu-ray drive, the cables over which Xbox LIVE arcade games are downloaded, and the wars and environmental depletion taking place to produce the coltan-based batteries in your wireless devices [...] all suggest a materiality to gaming that links digital games to the world and demands that they are also understood as objects in the world. (Apperley and Jayemane 2012, 15)

The intensity of the video game as event or network rests not only in digital components and virtual gameworlds, but also in the particular ways in which they are instantiated – the intimate and cybernetic circuit between the human and the non-human. Here I mean cybernetics not in its loose discursive sense of ‘something to do with computers’ but literally as the material feedback of information and control between machines and organisms (Wiener 1961). Donna Haraway’s work is particularly influential here. For Haraway, ‘a cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction’ (Haraway 1990, 191). This ambiguous status is bound up with the cyborg’s descriptive and utopian possibilities for Haraway, and it is reflected in the diverse ways in which this figure has been discussed. For some it suggests that the posthuman is predicated on observations or warnings that the corporeal aspects of the human are, or will be, undergoing transformation. Others invoke the cyborg and the posthuman (following Latour, for example) to argue that humans and human societies have always been technosocial and hence never simply or exclusively ‘human’. The question of what kind of relationship between the human and the technological is brought into being in video game play runs through this book, and the ramifications of conceptualizing everyday media experience as cybernetic or cyborgian will be addressed specifically in Chapter 5 (‘Soft Worlds’).²

For now, I will give one example of how everyday play with digital media constitutes bodies and networks between bodies in new and distributed ways. Knowing my research interests in children and technology, a colleague told me how she often talked to her young granddaughter, who lives in the United States, via FaceTime on their iPads. The possibility of cheap and easy video telephony is in itself new, but *skyping* is becoming increasingly familiar and unremarkable.

The portability of the mobile device and its wireless network connection, however, meant that the child could walk around with the iPad chatting to her grandmother on the move. It appeared that the fact that her grandmother's face could be seen on the device's screen made her more 'present', or even that the device (with its face and voice) stood in for, or fused, grandparent and communication device in a way more profound than the disembodied voice of the telephone. This was borne out when the child began a game of hide and seek with her parents, taking the iPad/grandmother with her to hide in a cupboard, whispering together in the dark.

Ecology and ethos

The notion that media are not discrete devices and channels, but are always already part of an ecology of other media, technologies, cultural patterns, technical practices and material substrates has proved productive in recent years (Fuller 2005, Parikka 2010, Taffel 2013), and draws on the ecological or environmental ideas of Marshall McLuhan (1964). This book takes a broadly 'media ecological' approach to everyday play with technology. On one level, an ecological perspective resists the tendency to see particular new technologies as having an 'impact' on the home, households, children and so on. Rather they must find their place and time within the existing technical and domestic environments. Children today are born into digitally augmented environments, there is no unmediated, non-technological environment on which devices impact. On another level, this natural-artificial ecology resonates with the images of tangled technocultural networks sketched out above. Moreover, it echoes the terminology of childhood research, particularly the educational and psychological studies that observe and interact with children in ordinary environments rather than setting up lab experiments (Avedon and Sutton-Smith 1971).

Assemblage

A useful concept that can be loosely connected to all of these bodies of work is *assemblage*. T.L. Taylor explains how the term can help us to understand the complexity of technocultural phenomena, and contemporary videogame

cultures in particular. She lists some of the heterogeneous bodies and agencies that 'make up the play moment':

Games, and their play, are constituted by the interrelations between (to name just a few) technological systems and software (including the imagined player embedded in them), the material world (including our bodies at the keyboard), the online space of the game (if any), game genre, and its histories, the social worlds that infuse the game and situate us outside of it, the emergent practices of communities, our interior lives, personal histories, and aesthetic experience, institutional structures that shape the game and our activity as players, legal structures, and indeed the broader culture around us with its conceptual frames and tropes. While looking at a game as it is presented as a boxed product may tell us something about the given structure of the artifact or its imagined player, understanding it as a living object – as a playful artifact – comes via an attention to the assemblage that constructs our actual games and play. (Taylor 2009, 332)

The events in and around Sandy Bay, on- and off-screen, cannot be described simply as children's play with a new toy or medium, nor would a detailed analysis of either the screen images or the structure of the game, its rules, spatial dimensions and so on. They were constituted by an assemblage, a set of tight loops through all of these entities, none of which could be said to be dominant, in control, or to have initiated the game event in the first place. This raises questions about the terminology and conceptual underpinnings of empirical research in media and culture. My initial term for my approach in the *Lego Racers* research was 'microethnography', referring to the small scale and short duration of the technocultural event under scrutiny, but also – more playfully – alluding to the micro-circuits and micro-worlds of the video game and the digital video technologies used to record them. The term 'ethnography', however, is not adequate for the description of this intimate technoculture. Literally the 'writing of people', ethnography, like its parent discipline anthropology (the study of humankind), always already has the human – bodies, language and society – as its object of study and focus of its attention.

Ethology

To examine how the game as software and computer, console, peripherals as hardware are part of, or participants in, children's lived media culture, I use a research approach that takes technologies (both hardware and software) and

media images as its objects of study – or, more precisely, an approach that describes an event constituted by the circuits of agency, affect and play between human and technological participants. My term for it was initially temporary and playful: ‘microethology’. ‘Ethology’ was suggested by my colleague Iain Grant. Since the nineteenth century, the term has primarily been applied to the study of animal behaviour. Gilles Deleuze (1992) gave it a different application through his reading of the philosophy of Spinoza to denote an ontology of bodies and affects, natural and artificial, in which no prior assumptions are made about the nature or primacy of these bodies. Ethology is an approach that defines

bodies, animals or humans by the affects they are capable of. ... Ethology is first of all the study of the relations of speed and slowness, of the capacities for affecting and being affected that characterize each thing. For each thing these relations and capacities have an amplitude, thresholds (maximum and minimum) and variations or transformations that are peculiar to them. And they select, in the world or in Nature, that which corresponds to the thing; that is, they select what affects or is affected by the thing, what moves or is moved by it ... an animal, a thing, is never separable from its relations with the world ... The speed or slowness of metabolisms, perceptions, actions and reactions link together to constitute a particular individual in the world. (Deleuze 1992, pp. 627–628)

It should be noted that Deleuze’s use of the term ‘affect’ is not limited to its more usual sense in the humanities and social sciences as the experiential and emotional aspects of human embodiment and subjectivity, although the latter would be included within it, or, rather, constituted as particular products of it. ‘Bodies’, for Deleuze (again following Spinoza), are not only human or animal bodies, but any material or immaterial entity in the world: microscopic particles, organs, machines, a body of literature and chemicals. As the quote indicates, bodies are defined in part by their affect on the bodies around and within them and by the affect these other bodies have on them. Ethology’s concern, then, is with behaviour, and should make no *a priori* assumptions about the most significant bodies or agencies doing the behaving.

Gregory Bateson uses the term ‘ethology’ somewhat differently from Deleuze, but given that his use touches on anthropology, cybernetics and a broad ecological worldview, it is worth briefly summarizing here. For Bateson, the ethos of a social group refers to the lived, felt and affectual dimensions of culture. Though intangible, it helps to perpetuate and reproduce culture; in cybernetic terms, it is a corrective mechanism to the runaway transformative impulses of schismogenesis, where the latter is the social tensions of differences in power

and hierarchy between individuals and groups (Bateson 1972, 126). Highmore describes the manifestations, the ‘real concrete elements’, of ethos in everyday communication and interaction:

[W]ays of greeting (hugs, handshakes, kisses, etc.); forms of perceiving (social recognition and misrecognition of class, caste, gender, sexuality and so on); affective intensity (the permission, or not, to be angry, the uses of humiliation, etc.); and so on. Ethos may well best be approached as something like a touching, or a feeling, but its polyphonic dimension, its complexity must be continually stressed. (Highmore 2009, 13)

Bateson’s notion of ethos, and the anthropological, cybernetic and ecological fields in which he developed it, resonates with the ethological and ecological approaches in media studies and philosophy briefly noted earlier, as well as influencing his friend Edith Cobb’s work on the ecology of children’s imagination.

An ecological/ethological approach to contemporary children’s culture, then, would resist a priori conceptual distinctions between individuals (the child, machines), social groups (families, households, classmates), technologies (hardware, software, toys, play equipment), physical environments (bedrooms, lounges, gardens, beaches) or symbolic environments (images and ideas from popular media, oral/practical traditions of play and games, etc.). So, in the Lego Racers event, cameras, domestic space, family relationships, screens, songs, movements, toys, and gestures, software, boredom, video editing and compositing, media/animated images and environments, are all in play. Material bodies (human, technological) are looped together with intangible circuits of information (light emitted from the screen, captured by human eyes and the camera, processed and transmitted by nerves, muscles and microprocessors), affects (competitive and collaborative performance and humour, the imperative to play itself) and imagination (itself distributed between the boys and looped out through the media imagery).

Practical approaches

The events I describe here are generally captured on video, though some were recorded mainly as written notes and some as photographic sequences edited to audio documentation. More often than not these microethologies are opportunistic and improvised. An interesting event seems to be unfolding so I pick up any

documentary resources to hand.³ There is a long history of film and photography in anthropology, and digital media have made the visual documentation and dissemination of ethnographic studies inexpensive and accessible. In my own practice, I find that much of the descriptive or analytical work takes place in the editing of the audio-visual material. Video and audio recording captures an event in more depth than written notes – one finds unnoticed activities in the background, innocuous spoken phrases reveal themselves to be full of inadvertent insight, and complex connections and relationships appear as video and audio tracks are cut and placed on the editing software timeline. For example, I had made a video essay of the Lego Racers event (Giddings 2003) initially to explore the transduction of virtual to actual space. Through a straightforward montage, I placed moments from each in sequence – the cars set off from the start line/ the boys set off on their own race around the room; a car ‘drowned’ in the virtual sea/an actual Lego car was driven gently across the crayoned paper; and so on. Through the repetitions of viewing, logging, editing, rendering and reviewing, I began to question why the boys’ actual movement of the cars over the plastic mountain was so graceful. So, though I had no intention of conducting a study of the transduction of virtual gravity, the process of media ethology proved a kind of extended and technically augmented deep description. Of course cameras can inhibit behaviour, though I have always found that children very quickly ignore their presence (and Alex and Jo are very used to being recorded anyway) – perhaps from time to time remembering and leaping up to perform, mess about or – inevitably – push an eye or nose right into the lens.

I make more conventional notes too as soon as possible, to record aspects of the event that are not visible or audible, perhaps emotional states or connections to other events.

Though not all these studies are of my children, or of my children alone, being a parent ethologist has a number of advantages. It allows this microethological attention to the momentary and the small scale within the context of what is in effect a life-long longitudinal study (see also Sefton-Green 2004, Briggs 2006).

Aesthetics, kinaesthetics and software ethology

What do we need to add, to factor in, to incorporate virtual media and video game culture into microethological description? Images, characters and narratives flow from the more expansive landscapes of children’s media

culture into gameworlds, both virtual and actual. The aesthetics of cartoons, action, romance and nonsense are all agents in play (see Chapter 4, 'Media Worlds'). Both virtual and actual gameworlds are kinetic: video games are in effect interactive animation, and actual play is nothing if not embodied. From swinging to fighting, skipping to drawing, there is a technics and a kinaesthetics of physical play (Chapter 6, 'Playgrounds'). Finally, whereas the bodies of technocultural and sociotechnical theories sketched out earlier all emphasize the agency of technologies and other non-human objects, the software worlds of computer games have a particularly active mode of being. They are dynamic, semi-autonomous environments that change over time, and are populated with software robots and artificial intelligences. The ecology of these virtual worlds will be discussed in Chapter 5, but it is worth mentioning it now as it highlights the conceptual and methodological challenges of describing the virtual-actual worlds of contemporary life. As Jussi Parikka asks,

What defines software but its capacities, its affects, its relationality? Software is not immaterial but a body of code being executed, existing through that temporal unfolding in technological and other milieus that support (or afford) its existence. How different would software appear if we approached it as an ecological object that is capable of entering into specific relations (that are not only technical) and whose capacities for affect are due to certain internal and external milieus? (Parikka 2010, 165–166)

Any qualitative research method, of course, has its strengths and limitations; a very small scale and improvised microethology, such as the one presented earlier, can make only heavily qualified claims to identify broad cultural trends or patterns of media consumption and play. However, it is important to note that whilst studies with much larger samples and extended longitudinal reach might give a statistical sense of scale, access, distribution, discourse and attitude, they are unlikely to be able to say much about emergent phenomena, practices and behaviours. By necessity, any study of the detail and texture of any specific cultural or media practice as experienced by individuals or small groups is small scale. Also, any identifiable deviation from and innovation in established practices of media consumption are significant, but may initially be evident only at the local level of actual engagement. At the very least, a microethological approach can identify emergent behaviours that can then be looked for, and tested, in larger-scale research. I am concerned throughout with the intimate and the complex, not with the general or the scientific, but I hope that these descriptions are rich

enough to offer models or patterns of relationships and behaviours that can be applied or compared with other children, other assemblages.

My reading of others' research on children's games and play, pre- and post-digital, is presumptuous in its identification and selection of descriptive material that most closely fits my own approach – the details, chance encounters and phantasmagorical moments, but not necessarily the conceptual or cultural-political framing of the writings from which they are plundered. Though perhaps modest in its findings, an ethological approach offers a nuanced theorization of the relationships between the virtual and the actual, the technological and the social, and media images and imaginations in everyday play. Children's play, a domestic environment, and a computer game are reciprocally transformed, the everyday lives of children and adults are permeated (as we'll see in the next chapter) by colourless energy, by entities that are hybrids of computer code and symbolic figures and by hyper-real gravity. It is no accident that I have quoted the more exploratory, descriptive passages from these case studies as, I would argue, they demonstrate the necessity of description in teasing out and attending to the new and hybrid as well as the established and the familiar.

Notes

- 1 See Giddings 2006 for a brief sketch of their workings in relation to videogame culture.
- 2 There are other rich methodological and conceptual approaches to the embodied relationships between computer technology and people within Human-Computer Interaction (HCI), for instance. See Paul Dourish's study of embodied interaction and technomethodology (Dourish 2004), Lucy Suchman's anthropology of human-machine interactions (Suchman 2007) and Mark Hansen's phenomenological exploration of virtuality (Hansen 2006).
- 3 I have also conducted more organized and experimental video-ethological studies of gameplay, usually in collusion with members of the Play Research Group, and Helen W. Kennedy in particular (Giddings and Kennedy 2008, 2010).