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Cyborg Ethnography

Expanding the Borders of Virtual Worlds

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Abstract

Det videnskabelige felt Game Studies rækker i disse dage ud efter nye metoder til at undersøge og problematisere computerspillets allestedsnærværende indvirkning på samfundet. Dette speciale er skrevet med det formål at validere den etnografiske tilgang som et værktøj til at udforske spilverdener, samt konkretisere hvordan etnografien rekonfigureres når den bruges til at udforske sådanne verdener. Specialet etablerer sit teoretiske udgangspunkt gennem en nærlæsning af tre hovedværker, som omhandler studiet af virtuelle verdener, et koncept som er blevet indskrænket af forfatterne (Boellstorff 2006, Nardi 2009, Pearce 2009) til kun at omhandle visse typer af computerspil, de såkaldte MMOG (Massively Multiplayer Online Game) og MMOW (Massively Multiplayer Online World). Formålet med denne nærlæsning er at forstå de metodologiske tilgange og mest betydningsfulde konventioner bag virtuelle verdener. På denne baggrund argumenteres der for at man set i lyset af den moderne forståelse for kultur inden for antropologi kan udvide dette felt, også kaldet *virtual etnografi* til også at inkludere andre typer af spil. Dette argumenteres der for, gennem et feltarbejde foretaget i skydespillet Counter-Strike. Her analyseres begreber som "embodiment, spatiality og persistence" og hvordan disse begreber skifter etnografisk betydning, når de optræder i verdener, som ikke ligner virtuelle verdener. Baseret på Donna Harraways tænkning omkring cyborgs og menneske-maskine relationer udvikles begrebet *cyborg etnografi* som en ny tilgang indenfor den virtuelle etnografi, der kan undersøge kulturer i og omkring computerspil, som hidtil har været oversete eller umulige at undersøge med den virtuelle etnografi.

Contents

Introduction

Game studies is still in a relatively young field of study. Because of this, it is constantly evolving its approach and engagement with the cultural, political, artistic and technological dimensions of the increasingly ubiquitous and important media form, video games. Game studies, or *ludology* as it is sometimes called, began as the study of play. Dutch philosopher, John Huizinga's *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, considered the founding text of game studies, did the important work of detrivializing the idea of play and centralizing it in the history of human behavior and culture (Dovey and Kennedy, 2004). Since then, game studies have taken on video games as an object of inquiry, often using a sociologically-informed research approach to study video game cultures. Video game cultures can be said to be the ultimate representation of our increasingly mediated everyday lives, in which we have learned to flow seamlessly between the virtual and the actual in our constant interactions with technology (Corliss, 2011). The video game industry is the most established and profitable in the media landscape, outclassing both music and film in terms of revenue (Nasdaq, 2016). Recently, the video game Red Dead Redemption 2, a cowboy themed video game, grossed 750 million dollars in its opening weekend, effectively making it the largest grossing entertainment product ever (Forbes, 2019). But while the numbers of the industry are easy to understand, video games themselves undergo constant change and continuously prove hard to define. Scholars repeatedly attempt to establish the boundaries that determines what qualifies as a video game. Because of these challenges, game studies have been characterized by a broad palette of theoretical and methodological approaches in its attempt to explore how we can understand video game culture (Corlis, 2011). Games and gaming technologies change with rapid speed, and as they do, game studies must try and keep the pace. As the field evolves, new methodologies are needed to further expand its frame of understanding. This thesis attempts to participate to the development of the field. This is done by proposing new ways that anthropological thinking, which has so far been relatively absent in game studies in comparison to other social sciences like sociology, can contribute. It is argued that the ethnographic approach and anthropological thinking can reveal new aspects of digital game culture. These arguments are made by building on the discipline known as virtual ethnography through a close reading of three highly influential works that have each in their own way

pioneered scholarly understanding of video games (e.g. Boellstorff 2008, Nardi 2009, Pearce 2009). Virtual ethnography has been conducted in games like Second Life and World of Warcraft where classic ethnographic methods such as participant observation and interviews have been re-configured and deployed. Although they have all fruitfully pioneered our thinking about game worlds and cultures, they all share a narrow conception of what constitutes a virtual world. On this background, this thesis attempts to expand the conception of virtual worlds and widen the scope of ethnographic inquiry into a broader spectrum of games. This is done through a theoretical analysis combining the close reading of the three major works with theories of embodiment, phenomenology, ethnography, Donna Haraway's Cyborg, internet studies as well as studies of networked cultures and communities. In addition, a short ethnographic fieldwork is conducted in the game Counter-Strike: Global Offensive, an online, first-person shooter game that takes place in a virtual environment different to that of conventional virtual worlds. This thesis argues that the game world of Counter-Strike can be viewed as a hybrid world, because the games culture is observable not only *in* the game, but also in other virtual spaces such as Reddit. This raises several questions concerning the boundaries of digital games and virtual worlds: Where is the culture of the game located? How can we locate and study such boundless game cultures? What is the arguments in favor of a narrow conceptualization of game culture, and what are the costs? The fieldwork also results in novel ways of thinking about ethnography in games, by conceptualizing a more phenomenological approach.

The thesis advances the following research question:

How can we expand the concept of virtual worlds and how does that reconfigure virtual ethnography?

Ethnography of the digital

Ethnography is a cardinal approach in anthropology. At the core of ethnography lies the act of deciphering and textualizing culture. That endeavor has been shaped through revision and debate, just like our understanding of culture itself has been subject to change, as it became understood as a "shifting anthropological object" (Hastrup and Olvig, 1997). Ethnographers of virtual worlds and video games have largely built their research on the heritage of classical anthropologists such as of Bronislaw Malinowski (1884–1942), who's influence has fostered many and inspire many others (Boellstorff et al., 2012). Another origin for many contemporary viewpoints and practices concerning the inscription of culture comes from anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1926–2006), who famously described ethnographic research as an "interpretive science in search of meaning" in his milestone work *The interpretation of Cultures* (1973). Curiously, in another of Geertz' famous works, *Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight* (1973) he attributed the notion of play as pivotal for cultural meaning-making.

Classic anthropological studies such as those by Malinowski and Geertz that are characterized by the ethnographer's lengthy exposure to the field, combined with thick description have been found useful in the study of technologically mediated field sites as well. The community of scholars who apply ethnography to virtual spaces are numerous, as are their definitions of themselves and their work. Kozinets, author of the book *Netnography* (2010) argues that "ethnography is ethnography, prefixing it with digital, online, network, internet or web is entirely optional" (Kozinets, 2010:5). Virtual ethnographer Tom Boellstorff explains how adding the term *virtual* to *ethnography* suggests that online research is in some way, less real (Boellstorff, 2006:65). Boellstorffs point about online research being less real comes out of a longer debate surrounding the offline/online dichotomy, in which contemporary research has acknowledged that "virtual life" is not any less authentic than "real life", and that stating that there is a dichotomy at all is problematic. (Miller and Slater, 2000). In part, virtual ethnography is rooted in the debate concerning the offline/online dichotomy, a debate that emerged as the internet blossomed into existence and grew in influence. In the early 1990s, there was a predominant tendency for researchers to denote virtual identities and cultures

as somehow detached from real life. The online was a new space, and identities developed and maintained in this space could be studied as belonging solely to a monolithic entity (Miller & Slater, 2000). New perspectives were cultivated by scholars like Daniel Miller and Don Slater in their book; *The Internet: An ethnographic approach*. Even though this book is nearing its twentieth anniversary, the ideas it contains are still cornerstones in the arguments made by contemporary virtual ethnographers. Miller and Slater argue for the internet's ability to facilitate "alignments" and "elective affinities" between communities of people (Miller & Slater, 2000). The internet cannot be seen simply a space called "cyberspace". Instead, it is a complex system of networked technologies and people with diverse geographic positions and social attitudes. The book presents ethnographic findings to support this claim, citing for instance a group of siblings who disagree on the value of online friends, some discarding them as meaningless while others believe them to be just as valid, if not even more that traditional friends. Miller and Slater successfully convey the assumption that there can be no consensus on what "virtual" truly is. The authors reference Anderson (1986) and his notion that the modern nation-state consists of an "imagined" (virtual) community which would not have been possible before the invention of printed press, enabling people to understand and imagine themselves as part of a nation state. The focus of study in virtual ethnography therefore, becomes the elusiveness of the virtual, as Slater and Miller move us away from being concerned with the "effects" or "use" of the internet as a medium, and towards an understanding of the cultures that are co-constituted by the internet.

Dissolving the online/offline dichotomy

Alongside the evolving understanding of the internet as a medium followed novel new thinking of methodologies to study it. A key voice in debates around investigating digital culture is Richard Rogers who has argued that the distinction between the "natively digital" and the "digitized" should not just apply to objects of the medium, but also to the research methods used to investigate them, naming this methodological field "digital methods" (Rogers, 2013). Rogers focuses on analyzing digital objects and creating new methods for that purpose, in contrast to the virtual ethnographers mentioned here, who are digitizing methods for the study of online culture, albeit in virtual worlds devoid of hyperlinks and search engines. Rogers aims to define a new era

of internet research which dissolves the boundaries between the real and the virtual and suggests utilizing computing techniques to that end. The goal is not to discern what is online and what is offline, but "rather to how to diagnose cultural change and societal conditions by means of the Internet" (Rogers, 2013:21). Rogers proposes a conceptual departure from the recognition that the internet is no longer just an object of study, but a source of actual world knowledge. The web is a "participatory medium, closer to the ground than one expects" (ibid:23). This methodological paradigm converges nicely with that of the virtual ethnographer, as it allows for a serious investigation of cultures that are rooted in designed interfaces and gameplay features. However, Rogers contends that the purpose of inquiry should be to make claims about cultural and societal change, unlike for example Tom Boellstorffs more philosophical orientation towards questioning "what it means to be human" – a question he argues is not necessarily only answerable in the actual world and its cultures, but also in the virtual. In his ethnographic study of the MMOW (Massively Multiplayer Online World) Second Life, Tom Boellstorff proposes that one can study virtual worlds "in their own terms", making no attempts to uncover the people behind the avatars he includes in his studies or reaching out to Linden Lab, the game studio behind Second Life. In doing so, Boellstorff takes a conscious step in a new direction, away from the otherwise established idea that there is permeability between the virtual and the actual, choosing not to focus on how the virtual affects the actual. He stands in direct contrast to the two ethnographers, Miller and Slaters' work on internet use in Trinidad & Tobago, where they demonstrate "how Internet technologies are being understood and assimilated somewhere in particular, but that this somewhere is complex because Trinidad, as a culture, stretches much of the world. Miller and Slater explain that what can be researched online inevitably has a place and a physical groundedness somewhere. So, while Miller and Slater challenge the idea that cyberspace is somehow a separated realm, they research it to understand its relation to new aspects of the actual world culture.

Tom Boellstorff questions the assumption that online cultures are necessarily predicated upon actual-world cultures, or that they arise for the sake of evolving them. It is a fundamental ontological contestation of the idea that the actual world is considered the only "real" social world. Boellstorff does not reject the idea that the online and the offline are woven together but asserts that cultures of virtual worlds can, at the same time, be understood as cultures in their own right.

We might exemplify his idea by proposing that ethnographers should be able to study a character in the MMOG World of Warcraft. Let us imagine this character is the highest level possible and has achieved many feats, being a revered hero in his world by fellow inhabitants. Boellstorff suggests that such a character should be understood and examined, without having to also understand the person who dedicates 10 hours per day, every day, to achieve this goal for the character. The character can take on goals and desires that are separate from the actual world, and crucially inspire and affect the surrounding virtual culture. Inversely, if we imagine Daniel Miller examining the same thing, he might be keener to explore the connection between the character and the person behind. We can imagine perhaps, that the outcome of his analysis might be that virtual heroes such as the one described are often controlled by people in western countries who have access to the time and perhaps the social welfare, required to play for ten hours every day.

Why study video games with anthropology?

Traditionally, the field of anthropology has only sporadically dealt with video games as an object of inquiry although a few scholars have reasoned that the anthropological tradition provides a novel perspective on digital games, which enables a non-normative understanding of games and game play unlike most other research traditions (Malaby, 2012). Most often, anthropology has treated games and its assumed supercategory: *play*, as inferior to labour and defined by their lack of productivity. Play was seen as a less important human activity than work, and because of that it was studied less. Malaby cites Clifford Geertz' work on play and how play gives an opportunity for cultural meaning-making as a pivotal figure in the anthropological inquiry of games and play. However, Malaby argues that Geertz has overlooked important aspects of play by accentuating play's potential for meaning-making and consequently limiting games to a static cultural function, where play is only seen as an expression of culture, rather generative force (Malaby, 2012).

Literature review and analysis

Studies that investigate cultures in games, how they emerge, spread and take shape are prominent within game studies, but those that take an ethnographic approach to do so are a rarity. A central part of this literature review is to investigate the foundations and conventions of inquiry in the field of virtual ethnography by providing a close reading of three monographic works in the field. These texts very explicitly define virtual worlds and how to conduct ethnography in them. The scope of the reviewed literature is limited to works by researchers who have done ethnographies in virtual worlds or written about such practices. Notably, the work done by Taylor (2006) on the MMOG (Massively Multiplayer Online Game) Everquest is missing from this review. However certain theoretical points from that work appear within those reviewed here and are used to exemplify the importance of avatars and embodiment as part of identity creation in virtual worlds. The close reading of these works function as the primary theoretical backdrop of the thesis, and also serves as the methodological inspiration for the conducted fieldwork. Each work is presented and reviewed for its contribution to the field of virtual ethnography, both in terms of methodological approaches and theory, with the intention to extract and understand the conventions of virtual worlds. The virtual ethnographies are done in games like World of Warcraft, Uru and Second Life and the central argument is that these worlds are unique in their ability to foster a number of 'real world' metaphors, and that this sets them apart from other online games, such as Counter-Strike. The most significant difference between the spatial world of Counter-Strike, and that of a virtual world is their *persistence*. The world of Counter-Strike is only "on" when it is played, whereas Second Life, World of Warcraft and Uru stay online continuously whether a player is playing or not. This thesis investigates what happens, when we move from applying ethnography in conventional virtual worlds to a different type of game world.

Tom Boellstorff – Coming of Age in Second Life

Tom Boellstorffs monograph represents an early and very ambitious attempt to reconfigure the ethnographic method to the virtual domain and to question and investigate the relationship between culture and virtual world. The book spans three years of field work, and takes its point of

departure in a comparison of his own anthropological work in Second Life with the classical work *Argonauts of the Pacific* by Malinowski, as he embarks on a journey with the goal of conducting fieldwork inside of Second Life, studying it "on its own terms" (Boellstorff 2008:4) clearly indicating Boellstorffs close affinity classic anthropological thinking and its exoticism. Boellstorff notes the relevance of studying virtual worlds as part of updating the anthropological lens, so that it can keep up with the realities of technological change. At the same time however, Boellstorff also claims that ethnography serves a key role in the study of virtual worlds because it has anticipated them. He draws upon Malinowski and Geertz to illustrate how anthropology has always been about imagining yourself to be somewhere else, to be "virtually there". He claims, that since anthropology has always been about "avatarizing the self, standing virtually in the shoes (or on the shores) of another culture", classic anthropology should also function in the study virtual worlds (Boellstorff, 2008:6). He then develops a description of Second Life as a setting and demarcates Second Life as a virtual world rather than a game, stating that virtual worlds have no notion of winning or losing- typically a key defining characteristic of a game - advancing the notion that Second Life is more of a venue that one can play games *in*, rather than a game itself. He does however concede that many virtual worlds are experienced as games by their participants, citing Taylor (2006) who regards gaming as a predominant mode of sociality in virtual worlds. Boellstorff never describes his process of learning how to manipulate and navigate in Second Life and does not mention or discuss any possible effects or issues related to the skill-level of the researcher in-game. Boellstorff does however mention that he has innate talents for designing and building, and that those talents came to good use when he designed his Second Life home, Ethnographia, which was central to meeting new people and was the location for the workshops he facilitated in Second Life. His ability to build a house that looks impressive and beautiful and had the ability to attract strangers and admirers undoubtedly affected his experience of being in the world. Boellstorff who echoes the sentiments of Second Life residents, who reject that Second Life is a game still describes how understanding its mechanics and being good at them, such as having the necessary skills to not only build but also understand what a pretty house is, came to good use. Thus, while he never acknowledges it, the level of game skill does in fact seem to affect one's experience and abilities within the world, and consequently the researcher's disposition for

researching the virtual world. The idea that game skill has an impact for the ethnographer is further explored later in this thesis.

Staying Within the Virtual World

Boellstorff's methodology is based on core ethnographic methods: Participant observation, interviews, group interviews and workshops. He uses these methods *within* the context of the virtual world, carefully avoiding any attention towards the 'actual' people behind the screen. Instead, he concentrates on the in-world avatars and analyses them as subjects in their own right. He gives an example of how his approach entails not distinguishing between who is controlling an avatar in Second Life at a given time. To Boellstorff, it makes no difference whether it is the wife or the husband controlling the avatar he interviews, the avatar remains the same to him regardless of this fact. This illustrates how dead-set Boellstorff is to his idea of exploring virtual worlds as worlds in their own right. However, he does take inspiration from the outside world with him into Second Life, when deciding which subjects and cultures to study. Boellstorff makes many references to studies that he did alongside his fieldwork in second life which was focused on gay Indonesian culture, in which many issues of self expression and sexuality are paralleled in Second Life. Boellstorff makes it obvious to the reader that he is homosexual himself – and that this fact coupled with his lifetime interest in video games is probably the reason for his interest in such topics within Second Life, but also his interest in virtual worlds to begin with, since, as he explains, virtual worlds are seen as refuges to some, who feel like they do not fit into the actual world. Boellstorff investigates identity (particularly gender), economics and intimacy, and the choice of Second Life as his field site serves Boellstorff's claims that traditional anthropological thinking and methods can be applied, because the world of Second Life is designed to emulate as many aspects from the real world as possible. Because many of the issues he has studied previously, such as studies of gender and sexuality, are prevalently expressed in Second Life, Boellstorff is essentially utilizing the same methodological apparatus he has used in his previous, actual world studies, in the virtual world

The inhabitants' sense of the virtual space and place, the spatiality of the world, is considered of fundamental importance to Boellstorff, because they "simulate abstractions of reality" (Boellstorff,

2006:92). Boellstorff considers these factors decisive, because they "above all else, make virtual worlds what they are" (Boellstorff, 2006:92). That way, he enters a larger debate on whether or not "place" and virtuality can coexist. Massumi (2002) argues that the virtual is inaccessible to the senses while Rutter and Smith (2005) state how there is no "place" in the virtual beyond the metaphor. Boellstorff counter argues referring to a number of studies which argue for the salience of online sensory experiences and sense of place (Reed, 2005). Boellstorff dubs virtual worlds a new kind of place and explains how "a shift from the 2D web to the 3D web is really the shift from network to place or, more accurately, the addition of online places" (Boellstorff, 2006: 93). For something to be a place, Boellstorff clarifies it has to enable the simultaneous presence of more than one person at a time. Virtual worlds then, are online places in which you can look around, because they contain three-dimensional visuality, and because they are places, your view can be ruined by someone who builds a skyscraper in your backyard. Boellstorff builds on this argument by accounting how culture is bound to certain physical places within Second Life. A beachside community for instance, went into riot when a person opened up a sleazy nightclub next to a high-class restaurant. Such instances again illustrate how his ethnography aligns itself with 'actual world' ethnography.

Boellstorffs concept of Techné

Boellstorff explains how humanity has always had a conceptualization of the virtual, long before the digital age. Technology simply provides us with a new medium in which culture can be created and expressed. In that sense, virtual worlds are not simulations – even Second Life, which contains so many aspects from the real world only "approximates aspects of reality – enough for the purposes of immersion" (Boellstorff, 2006: 243). This is why Boellstorff argues that these worlds should be studied in their own right, because they are ontologically different from the actual world. The culture which can be created and expressed within them are not metaphors for the actual world but entirely new cultural expressions. Boellstorff uses the example of a coffee cup in Second Life. He explains how this coffee cup is not a metaphor of an actual world coffee cup. Its meaning is relevant entirely within the world of Second Life. Should anyone mimic the design of this coffee cup to develop a new one, this new coffee cup will now have evolved from one virtual

object to another, all entirely within the boundaries of Second Life. This phenomenon is what Boellstorff describes as *techne*, which is the core theoretical construction in the book.

*"Techne refers to art or craft, to human action that engages with the world and thereby results in a different world. Techne is not just knowledge about the world, what Greek thought termed episteme; it is intentional action that constitutes a gap between the world as it was before the action, and the new world it calls into being "(*Boellstorff, 2006:56).

Boellstorff reasons that virtual worlds allow for techne to be acted out within themselves recursively. Boellstorff argues that "in virtual worlds, cultural objects are not divorced from their referents, because both object and referent are within the virtual world" (Boellstorff, 2006:243) just like the two virtual coffee cups. This is what separates virtual worlds from rituals, religion and other forms of previously existing forms of virtuality. The fact that they can, as Boellstorff puts it, swallow their own ontological tails. Drawing on Lyotard's notion that it is our ability to "create a second nature of ourselves" that makes us human, Boellstorff explains that a study of techne in virtual worlds, is a study in radically new ways of understanding what it means for humans to evolve culturally (Boellstorff, 2006:58). Boellstorffs theoretical construct of 'techne' effectively validates the anthropological study of the virtual, as it creates grounds for us to understand the human condition, not only as something that can exist virtually, but also evolve virtually. If we accept Boellstorffs construction of techne, then we might begin to ask questions as to how it might apply, if the common frame of what constitutes a virtual world is broadened. If the cultural objects of virtual worlds are allowed to be ontologically bound within their virtual borders, then perhaps we might question why these borders necessarily have to look and behave so much like the actual world. It could be argued that cultural expressions within online video games, be it in spaces where everything is made of cheese or where the players are ants, are also subject to the same cultural recursiveness and ontological tail-biting. Such worlds could potentially also, with a few reconfigurations, be explored by anthropologists not afraid of stepping outside the confines of virtual worlds that look like the actual. We might find that creating virtual ant communities is just another way of being virtually human.

Celia Pearce - Communities of Play

In this book, written in 2009, Celia Pearce, who has a background in game design, explores how virtual worlds, through their technological affordances, can foster emergent cultures and create new types of play communities. Pearce follows a group of players who meet in an MMO (Massively Multiplayer Online) game and describes their attempts to stay together after the game is shut down and their shared world disappears. The book is an ethnographic enquiry into emergent behavior in MMOs with *emergence* referring to how complex systems come into being and organize and act unpredictably. She adopts the term 'communities of play' building on communities of practice, an analytical focus originating in anthropology and widely used in internet studies. Pearce does recognize that play could be defined as a type of practice but maintains that "the adoption of a new term suggests that play practices warrant their own understanding of how communities form and are maintained" (Pearce, 2009:5). She argues that video games, in some cases are extensions of non-digital forms of play, while they in other cases offer entirely new play experiences. Because digital games can be networked, this further amplifies the scale and geographical reach of play communities. Pearce is primarily concerned with the genre of Massively Multiplayer Online worlds. The most common of these is known as MMORPG's (Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games), in which players take on roles originating from fantasy literature. Another type of world in the same genre is known as MMOW (Massively Multiplayer Online World), which provides players with a sandbox environment they can take part in shaping, for instance by adding new structures to the landscape. Both genres afford networked play and can facilitate the development of online play communities and emergent social phenomena (Pearce, 2011).

Pearce presents a theoretical framework defined as a continuum of online game types, which ranges from "fixed synthetic worlds" (such as World of Warcraft) to "co-created worlds" (such as Second Life) (Pearce, 2011:30) In the former, users have little to no agency in terms of manipulating and shaping the world because there are no content-creation tools, while in the latter such tools are an integral part of the game. One of her main points is that games that allow for content-creation

enables users to re-create environments and objects from one game in another, effectively allowing them to travel with their culture like digital nomads from game to game. She refers to her approach as "multi-cited cyberethnography", a blend of anthropology, sociology and virtual ethnography in which the focus is to stay flexible and wide reaching in order to properly study the unpredictability of emergence and play. This approach illustrates an interesting difference between Pearce and Boellstorff, who in his proposal to study virtual worlds in their own right would arguably be blind to the kind of context introduced by players who bring specific cultural behavior with them from another game, given his stance on only interviewing Second Life avatars as they appear in that world, and to never leave his virtual field site. Pearce puts focus on what the MMOW design-wise affords its players in terms of fostering emergent behavior. The analysis details how the players move from one game to another, and that the affordances of the co-created world allow them to re-create elements of their former culture in the new world. It could be argued that emergent behavior does not necessarily need specific affordances or game mechanics to emerge. One might imagine how eSport teams revolutionize static battle arenas in strategy games, unpredictably changing how the game should be played without the need for content-creation, by performing what has been called "Metagaming" (Boluk and LeMieux, 2017). Similarly, groups or clans of players that stay together through different competitive games can be imagined as bringing their culture of play into other games, for example by having the same roles within in the team although the game changes.

The process of Avatarization

Throughout her fieldwork, the methodology becomes more and more improvisational as she becomes more and more intertwined with the group she is studying, ultimately transforming her role from observer to participant, which she finds enables a more journalistic, emotional ethnography that adds an element of realness to the otherwise virtual (Pearce, 2011:10). This approach means that the reader is exposed to Pearce's experience of being in the virtual world on a deeper, personal level. By doing this, she makes herself a participant in her field work, but this is done not with the purpose of conveying her own experience, but as a way to detail the dynamics of the community she is part of. Pearce describes her formation of identity as a "social construction of an avatar identity" (Pearce, 2011:139). She explains that this formation of identity, seems to

emerge not as part of her individual desire for who or what she wants to be, but rather through a collective feedback loop between her and those whom she is close with in the virtual world. Pearce argues, that because the virtual world is persistent, her socially constructed avatar identity cannot remain anonymous. Eventually, people will know who she, her avatar, is. They will eventually recognize her traits and qualities, and at some point, she will also recognize these things about herself. Pearce explains that players often will be surprised about the capabilities of their avatars, because they sometimes exhibit qualities of which they were not aware they had, for example leadership which is drawn out from play and enabled by the group (Pearce, 2011:140). This thesis will draw upon this understanding of the avatar as a constructed concept that is enacted through play and group cohesion.

Intersubjective Flow

One of Pearce's main findings is the theoretical construct she calls "Intersubjective flow", which cites Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's psychological concept of "flow" (1990) associated with a deep and energized focus in an activity. Flow is achieved when an individual becomes so absorbed in the moment and the task at hand, that their sense of time is forgotten. For this to occur, the challenge of the activity must be at level with the person's skill. Most people experience a state of low when they are involved in deep conversation with others, because most people have trained this skill throughout their lives. For flow to occur in other experiences, the subject must have attained a certain level of skill that fluctuates with the challenge. When the challenge level becomes too high, the subject becomes anxious. When the challenge level is too low, boredom takes over (Pearce, 2011:131). Pearce mentions that flow for some time has been of interest in game studies, as video games have a particular tendency to produce this effect. Pearce explains, that since video games are a dynamic medium, they have the ability to adjust their challenge ratings on the fly, to meet the players skill level in real time. The concept of flow has an innate focus on the individual, but Pearce relays variations of the term which illustrate the state of flow can be observed in group contexts as well, such as sports or networked play environments. In such settings., flow has a social dimension which creates balance between a player's individual identity and the connectedness of the group: *"If the player is too aware of herself, she becomes self- conscious, isolated,*

and alienated. If she is too immersed in the group, she runs the risk of conformity (Pearce, 2011:132). Additionally, Pearce explains that players can use this balancing effect to challenge each other or play off each other, in the pursuit of a higher balance between challenge and skill and in the end, flow. In lieu of this observation, Pearce proposes the concept of "intersubjective flow" as a way to place flow as a state *between* people, thereby moving it from the realm of the individual psychology to the realm of the social. It is then argued that flow, as a social concept can accelerate the creation of group cohesion between strangers who play together and over time increase the feeling of intimacy and sync between players. Pearce argues that group cohesion in the form of intersubjective flow is a central element in the formation of play communities and individual identities. In this thesis, I subscribe to the concept of intersubjective flow as a generator of group cohesion, and therefore also interpersonal dynamics between players which helps define identities.

Bonnie Nardi - My Life as a Night Elf Priest

My Life as a Night Elf priest (2009) is perhaps more than anything else an ethnography of assimilation. It is a comprehensive and richly detailed account of a player's life in World of Warcraft – Nardi was told about the game by her son and had only a vague knowledge about what in entailed when she decided to try it, inspired by her academic interest in virtual worlds. The book vividly describes her experience of creating her avatar and taking the first uncertain steps into an unknown world. Nardi describes how she slowly grasps the, to her, alien aspects of gameplay, and starts to socialize within the virtual world, eventually joining a "guild" (a large collection of allied players). Over the course of three years, Nardi develops her skills in the game, as well as an established social presence. She partakes in challenging end-game activities known as "raids" which involves large scale encounters with the most powerful monsters and requires tremendous organizational efforts from 40 players who complement each-other in various roles to complete the encounter. To be part of such an endeavor requires the player to have developed a high degree of in-game competencies as well as having achieved a high level of social capital, and Nardi's book is her testament to that achievement. A methodological point can be made here, in that Nardi is in fact only able to observe these high-level raid encounters because of a significant

time investment and acquisition of skill in the game. Had she chosen to play only sporadically or without much effort at becoming good at the game, her ethnographical account would have looked radically different, since she would simply not have been able to participate in, and observe, the game activities she did. Furthermore, Nardi describes how the ethnographic experience was unique, because she was seen just as another regular character in the game by most players. She was not standing out, walking around with a notepad being an obvious ethnographer. In World of Warcraft, she was not obviously an outsider. In World of Warcraft, she describes the "overwhelming need to play" as dominant over all other interactions (Nardi, 2009:35), which means that she, first and foremost, was a player of the game.

An Artistic Skinner Box

Nardi defines two anthropological approaches to describe and analyze field sites. The first is through the application of theory, which in her case means Activity Theory, an approach in which the action rather than the actors is central to investigation. Like ANT, it considers human and non-human actors to be equals, and also leans slightly on the shoulders of American Pragmatism. However, it's draws the most from the Soviet psychological activity theory pioneered by Lev Vygotsky. Nardi herself has been a key actor in reshaping and repurposing Activity Theory to understand contemporary, socio-technical issues. Furthermore, she has lead discussions on how, as a psychological theory, activity theory can be scaled to collaborative settings but still investigate the participation of individuals (Nardi, 2019). She expands her theoretical approach by a reading of Dewey's Aesthetic theory, which is articulated in his book *Art and experience* where he provides an account of art as being an experience, as opposed to a set of material properties. Dewey argues that the aesthetic experience comes from an engaged moment that takes place when the viewer's abilities are challenged but not overwhelmed. Nardi then argues that playing World of Warcraft can be an aesthetic experience. She describes it as "absorbing, pleasurable and fun"). What Nardi is trying to convey is a theoretical understanding of why World of Warcraft is, to her, such a wonderful game to play and why some people consider it 'addictive' (she uses these citation marks as well to demonstrate her skepticism). Nardi makes the case that it is tempting to call World of Warcraft an "elaborately designed skinner box" (Nardi, 2010:39) because the game contains so much 'intermittent reinforcement' which we can define as moments in the game that

affirms the players progress, however small or big that process might be. This can range from finding a relatively uncommon piece of mining material in a cave system, to gaining a level or receiving a piece of valuable end-game loot in a raid. The functions are of the same principles as gambling but the main differentiator between for example a game like Blackjack and World of Warcraft is that World of Warcraft socially reinforces the 'gambling' behavior because of the social recognition by other players when something important happens for the player's character, for example the messages "gratz" (congratulations) one receives when leveling up. However, Nardi asserts that there is more than Skinnerian dynamics at play in World of Warcraft, and explores experiences of sociality, visual beauty and a sense of performative mastery by weaving together Dewey's understanding of the aesthetic experience and her own distinctions of activity theory. Activity, Nardi states, is at its highest level motivated by an *object*. An object can be seen as a material manifestation of a person's needs or desires. Sometimes, such motivational objects indicate deep emotional involvement, what Kaptelinin and Nardi (2006) refer to as *passion*. Nardi then couples this with Dewey's idea of the aesthetic experience and calls it a *subjective disposition towards activity*. In other words, doing something for the sake of doing it, focusing on the activity at hand – not just the end result and especially not "just to get it over with" mentality. The aesthetic experience should entail a temporal flow of actions that are valued in themselves, ending in a satisfying consummation. Nardi compares this to the act of 'running a dungeon' in World of Warcraft, which consists of several small quests, tasks and fights that must be completed before facing the final encounter of the dungeon, resulting in a satisfactory consummation. Again, the social aspect sets it aside from gambling as these activities are done in unison with others, sharing both failures and success. At the core of this aesthetic experience is the biological reality that we as humans want to interact with our surroundings and engage with its challenges. Dewey thought that the enemies of this very experience was the inflexibilities of the modern world with its conventions of practice and rigidity. World of Warcraft can, as a medium reinstate the aesthetic experience into modern life because it provides the opportunity to engage in a temporal flow of actions within a designed work of art that feels, in spite of its encoded ruleset, much less rigid than the actual world. Now, one could argue that there are many activities that could achieve the same state of temporal flow in the real world as well, avoiding its rigidity, such as going surfing or ice skating. But for Nardi, what separates World of Warcraft from many activities is in fact the same

factor, which separates the conventional state of flow from Dewey's aesthetics, namely its accessibility and the relative ease with which it allows its players to feel a sense of mastery over something beautiful. One could even argue that in the state of flow, the ends are forgotten in the moment and everything is focused on the means, on the present moment. Dewey however has conceptualized a unity of means and ends and their dependence of each other for meaning, purpose and satisfaction. For Dewey, the satisfying completion is integral to the aesthetic experience. Furthermore, in another contrast to flow, Dewey describes the aesthetic experience as being part of everyday collective activities or in other words, accessible activities that are not extraordinary. World of Warcraft players, according to Nardi, echo Dewey's disappointment in modernity and look to World of Warcraft to find these collective activities, which bring about beauty and satisfaction in everyday life. World of Warcraft offers a combination of visual art and performative experience that is not otherwise easily accessible. This is, according to Nardi one of the pillars of the game's massive success, which peaked in 2010 when player numbers reached 12 million (Statistica, 2019). It seems that Nardi here provides an argument for why some people choose to play in virtual worlds. To find meaning in everyday tasks. Or perhaps to alter the look and feel of everyday tasks to something of higher beauty and meaning. Gaining allies and finding lost treasures in a vibrant world of color, instead of going bowling with colleagues perhaps evokes a deeper sense of meaning, importance and accomplishment, as well as higher level of aesthetic experience. To Nardi World of Warcraft provides "a release of creativity and a sense of empowerment in conditions of autonomy, sociality, and positive reward" and dubs it a new performative-medium (Nardi, 2009:7).

Aesthetic Rules

It becomes clear from reading Nardi's ethnography that a recurring issue keeps presenting itself to her, namely how the design and rule system of the game affected her and her guildmates' play experience. From these observations and building on her previous work, she probes different ideas on how designers can create the arena in which aesthetic experiences take place. Here, Nardi is actively discussing the design of the game, more so than both Boellstorff and Nardi, in terms of how it affected her. This is phenomenologically, and Nardi is not subtle in her taking with World of Warcraft's design. She clearly enjoys playing the game and often uses words like "vibrant"

"colorful" "joyful" to describe her play experience. This kind insight Nardi provides is interesting, because it analyses what it means to be present inside the game. How the game feels like an aesthetic experience *to her*. This is a very inspirational approach, given the goal of this thesis which is to explore how games that do not look or behave like conventional virtual worlds, can still be regarded as such. Nardi believes that for a game to become an aesthetic experience it must first and foremost be a piece of art. For example, she contemplates that different methods of participatory design that are meant to give players more ownership of the game by involving them in the design process, are not necessarily valid here because World of Warcraft is more art than product. This raises an interesting question about the role of the ethnographer, because he needs to weigh his attention between informants, himself and the software artifact itself. Nardi proposes a study of "well designed software artifacts" as being neither inflexibly totalitarian or requiring user modification, but as "nurturing, protective and caring" (Nardi, 2010:76). She contrasts this with types of virtual worlds in which the inhabitants are responsible for the its creation and content using Second Life as an example. She argues that the radical freedom envisioned by its designers has resulted in users gravitating towards creating content devoted to two actives, shopping and sex. This means that the design that was meant to facilitate limitless behavior has instead resulted in a limiting play experience, whereas the structured rules of World of Warcraft makes the world feel limitless because of its design and inherent feedback loops. It could of course be argued that Nardi's experience of what constitutes elements of beauty and gameplay elements that can facilitate aesthetic experiences are potentially radically subjective. It might be universally accepted that the art of World of Warcraft is some of the best in the business, but some might not enjoy that aspect at all. Some might only 'endure' this experience to advance to some part of the game they enjoy more, such as the slaughter of opponents of lower levels. This raises the question, what kind of ethnography can be carried out under such circumstances? It is not clear from the book whether Nardi has, for example, interviewed her fellow players about their attitudes towards the art in the game and how it affects their gameplay.

Interestingly, Nardi's focus on the meaning of rules and immersive gameplay sets her apart especially from Boellstorff. She take up gameplay as a way to engage with the culture she is researching, using play as a motor that seems to drive her deeper into the culture and community

of the game, and because of this gives gameplay considerable analytical attention. One of the things that makes World of Warcraft such a great experience is, according to Nardi, how it handles rules. She mentions the concept "tyranny of emergence", which suggests that although many scholars of online worlds hope for online communities to emerge in a "bottom-up fashion from participatory activity" (Nardi, 2009:70) the software and its designers ultimately have the power to shape such activity. She puts forth examples where players historically have acted to circumvent certain rules. For example in the now almost ancient game Lineage (1995), players formed clans whose finest task was to patrol low-level zones and vanquish those players who came to such zones to kill weaker players. The game itself had not implemented a design to prevent this and thus the good-hearted players acted on the game's behalf. This showcases the flexibility of rules in MMO's, but also a certain paradox: "Paradoxically, the clans' (re)actions served to reinscribe the very rules whose outcomes distressed them. Lineage's designers had no need to exercise their power to change rules because the clans instituted a workaround. Clan actions, rather than asserting dominion over the rules, redoubled the rules' power" (Nardi, 2009:72).

Nardi argues how the rules of World of Warcraft in many ways were deliberately designed to enable not just creative workarounds but emergent cultures of handling various tasks and social interactions in the game. She describes her personal long-term and in-game experiences, emotions, choices and bonds that are facilitated and guided by the rules and content created by the game studio, Blizzard Entertainment. Specifically, she recounts the moment her guild was fractured after the games first expansion was launched, changing the number of people who could participate in raids. This created a rift between the serious, competitive players who wanted to reach the end-content and those who could not be as committed, resulting in the shattering of the guilds otherwise very friendly and pro-social demeanor. Her focus on how certain aspects of social interplay changes and emerges in accordance with the rules illustrates how virtual ethnography can shed light on complex aspects of non-human actors in virtual worlds. Nardi describes much of her observed behavior in World of Warcraft as a feedback loop. Her own, and her co-players' respond to the game challenges, because solving them gives them experience, which is central in their pursuit of new abilities and the ever-appealing 'loot' (virtual goods and items). Gaining new abilities and items means that their characters become more powerful, and because they are more powerful, they are now able to respond to new and increasingly difficult game challenges. Nardi

argues that this feedback loop is constitutive of a new "visual-performance medium", linking World of Warcraft to actual virtual-performative activities such as dance, in which the game rules apply in terms of increasing in skill to take on new challenges (Nardi, 2009:52). Nardi's focus on the performative as the link and central object of investigation in the nexus between skill and the three-dimensional visual world is unique in the field of virtual ethnography. The perspective falls in line with the investigation of immersion and embodiment explored in game studies (Dovey and Kennedy, 2006) and will be used later in this thesis as theoretical grounding for understanding notions of presence and the self in Counter-Strike.

Ethnography and Virtual Worlds

A handbook of methods - Tom Boellstorff, Bonnie Nardi, Celia Pearce, T.L. Taylor

The four authors of this handbook have all previously published ethnographies on different virtual worlds. Together they authored a concise handbook of methods that takes the reader through easy-to-follow case studies, from research design to analysis, to illustrate their praxis. Their goal is to present the reader with a set of tools that be neatly be "stashed in a backpack, easily consulted and kept 'on hand' when doing fieldwork (Boellstorff et.al, 2012:190). This work is included in the literature review, because it provides the collectively produced conventions of the virtual worlds of the authors.

The handbook opens with a definition of virtual worlds, combining the individual thinking of virtuality of the authors. "Virtual worlds are places of imagination that encompass practices of play, performance, creativity, and ritual" (Boellstorff et.al., 2016:2). Virtual worlds have "a sense of worldness", which "offer an objective environment", they "are multi-user in nature" and "continue to exist in some form even as participants log off", what the authors also refer to as "persistence". Lastly the authors that "virtual worlds allow participants to embody themselves, usually as avatars" (Boellstorff et.al., 2016:7). The authors explicitly claim that games such as

Counter-Strike do not fall within this categorization. The argument is that the world is not does not meet the requirement of persistence (Boellstorff et al., 2016:7).

In Defense of Ethnography

The third chapter is focused on debunking ten myths about ethnography. The authors state that there are many opponents of ethnography who view the approach as "less valid" and "simply anecdotal". The authors take great lengths to challenge these statements, reinforcing their view of how the practice with its in-depth, often lengthy approach can uncover deep rooted issues and cultural details that would be missed by quantitative approaches. This sentiment of wishing to bring forth and both protect and showcase a coherent and classic version of ethnography in relation to the study of virtual worlds is something that is echoed especially in Boellstorffs own work, Coming of Age in Second Life. It could be argued that ethnographic exceptionalism such as this, could prove to make collaborations with other fields of study, or the practice of mixed methods difficult. Approaches that are more quantifiable are by far more prevalent in the field of video game studies (Yee, Consalvo, Castranova are notable examples) and perhaps less loyal to classic ethnography, opening op to collaborations, could open the field more towards the social sciences in general. Perhaps being this dead-set on following in the footsteps of the classic ethnographers could also be what is holding the practice back from studying a broader spectrum of virtual worlds. Given the fact that contemporary anthropology has long since understood culture as a "shifting anthropological object" that is not rooted in a particular place (Hastrup and Olvig, 1997) accentuates how peculiar it seems, that Boellstorff et al. in their attempt to reconfigure ethnography for the virtual, draw the line as soon as a world is no longer persistent or spatial in a particular way. This thesis challenges this idea, and motions for a broader conceptualization of virtual worlds in which virtual ethnography can be deployed.

Multi sited virtual worlds

Virtual worlds create new practices and communities. These are seen as embedded within and crossing specific cultures, creating cross-cultural interactions that should be studied. Here, the authors understand cultures as "shared systems of meaning and practice", shaping "our hopes

and beliefs; our ideas about family, identity, and society; our deepest assumptions about being a person in this world" (Boellstorff et.al, 2012:1). A core idea of the work is that virtual worlds always contain and highlight cultural differences, and that ethnography is well suited to observing such interactions and cultures.

The authors discuss the methodological implications of studying virtual worlds, and stress importance of being multi-sited in ethnographic research. One field-site cannot be attributed with more importance than another, which means that visiting forums, being on Skype calls or reading game-related wikis are equally important sites to visit for the ethnographer. The authors highlight the classical issues of dynamic field-sites. This concept is part of a methodological approach known as multi-sited ethnography, portrayed by George Marcus as an emergent part of anthropological research challenging the conventional ethnographical tradition of hunkering down in a single field site, with the sometimes implicit assumption that communities and cultures are geographically bounded, internally homogenous and can be studied in isolation (Muir, 2011). Multi-sited ethnography has since become widely used in studies of phenomena that are not contained within a single geographical site, such as labor market flows or communication and media. Although the term multi-sited ethnography often refers to the ethnographer physically moving between several physical locations in a single study, it might also refer to the ethnographer staying in a single location that is investigated as part of a larger context which breaks the boundaries of the field site (Muir, 2011). The essence of the methodology is to *follow* people, connections metaphors and artifacts in the pursuit of establishing interrelations between sites (Marcus, 1995). The authors of *virtual ethnography* contend that this practice is vital but the issues that come with it are enhanced in the virtual context because boundaries are more fluid and harder to trace. They note that virtual field-sites can be understood as an "assemblage of actors, places, practices and artifacts that can be physical, virtual or a combination of both (Taylor 2009 in Boellstorff et.al, 2012:60) highlighting what a complex exercise it is to understand their borders and traverse them to the right place. They present examples of how Celia Pearce followed players who migrated from game to game, noticing how they continually kept an internet forum as their primary form of communication. Pearce notes how this forum had an almost "world agnostic" status, since it was seemingly unaffected by whatever virtual world her informants inhabited.

Later, she also followed her informants to their homes in an attempt to examine how their "play contexts influenced their inworld activities", crossing yet another border in her multi-sited ethnography (Boellstorff et.al, 2016:60). Marcus recognizes that doing multi-sited ethnography is a compromise because the ethnographer in return for a deeper understanding of contextual factors will lose the depth that comes with digging in to a single field site (Marcus, 1995). When reading Tom Boellstorffs own work, *Coming of age in Second Life* it becomes clear that, although Boellstorff certainly takes a deep dive into the context of Second Life and its position in the history of virtual worlds, his own ethnographic study is focused on understanding Second Life in itself. This is a compromise of depth over context. Virtual nomads, like those studied by Pearce, coming into Second Life with cultural baggage and behavior from another game, might not be recognized as such by Boellstorff because of his insistence on researching them purely as avatars of Second Life. This highlights the complexities and balancing issues that the ethnographer must understand and take into account when doing field-work, both virtually and actually.

Staying True to Classic Ethnography

The authors argue that performing experiments or being actively deceptive would be antithetical to ethnography, and that being completely honest is a full requirement. Here again it appears that the authors' commitment to true, classic ethnography is unfaltering. In their quest to reconfigure ethnography for the virtual, they wish to keep the virtues of the tradition alive. One might dare to suggest that ethnographies of virtual worlds could benefit from incorporating structured data collection methods, for example by combining data-mining with observations and note-taking might enable a wider perspective in certain cases. A noteworthy example of an unexpected data enabled discovery within World of Warcraft happened in 2007 at Blizzard Entertainment's yearly convention, Blizzcon, where game designers revealed that despite the terrifying powerlevel of the end boss "Ragnaros, The Firelord", by far the deadliest enemy in the game was the low level "Defias Pillagers", who were killing more player characters than any monster in the game, due to the inexperience of the players who encountered them (WoW Wiki, 2019). It could be argued that some form of well-handled and contextualized behavioral experiments conducted with such data in the back of the ethnographers mind, could help them find issues to investigate, or enhance or become prepared to encounter local cultures. Another example of a fruitful, but "deceiving"

ethnographic study comes from Kuznekoff and Rose (2012) who did an experiment in HALO (a first-person-shooter game) examining how differences in gender provoked different responses from online gamers. Using pre-recorded audio clips of both female and male recordings, they found that female voices produced three times more responses over males, and that the responses were decidedly more negative or sexual in nature, potentially indicating that some online games contain toxic masculine cultures.

Defining key concepts

The Virtual World

The aim of this section is to establish a clear definition how contemporary virtual ethnographers and scholars define the concept of virtual worlds, so that the differences between virtual worlds and other game worlds become clearer. The worlds studied by the virtual ethnographers are different from each other. They take place within differently designed and graphically mediated worlds. They all however meet the definition of a virtual world.

Sisse Siggard Jensen, Professor of digital communication at Roskilde University has written extensively on how players and inhabitants make sense of virtual worlds focusing especially on Second Life and Everquest. She argues in line with Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce and Taylor that virtual worlds, such as Second Life, represent persistent, multiuser environments and creates a sense of *inhabiting the world* or *being inside it* and therefore also the embodied experience of being present somewhere together with others. This feeling is created by the world because it emulates many metaphors of worldness through scripts and animation. Spatial and visual metaphors mediate worldness by surrounding the inhabitant or player with tree-covered highlands, vast oceans dotted with tropical islands and cobbled streets. All of them inhabited by other players who walk along them, interacting with the environment in ways that look and emanate a sense of the known (Jensen, 2016).

For a world to be considered a true, virtual world, it is apparently of critical importance that it looks, behaves and feels like the real world, or at least obey rules of well known, fictionalized, science fiction like worlds: The environment must contain a sense of either geographical continuity, a sense of "geospatial adjacencies within the world" or fictional constructs for breaking continuity like "interplanetary travel in science fiction worlds" (Pearce, 2009:18). This means, that for a world to emanate "worldness", it must first and foremost be at least metaphorically believable (Jensen, 2016).

Pearce argues that virtual worlds across genres can reinforce 'active creation of belief', a term she borrows from Janet Murray, who describes it as a "function of immersion reinforced by agency" (Murray, 1997). Coined as a contrast to the classic term "suspension of disbelief", Murray argues how this effect can happen when works of fiction are extremely detailed and consistent. In such cases, audiences can ask questions about them, explore their worlds and theorize about them (at the time of writing one only has to glance at the various subreddits pertaining to Game of Thrones to see this happening). When audiences do this and discover that the worlds they are exploring produce consistent facts, their belief in the world grows because of their own actions, and they experience active creation of belief (Murray, 1997). Pearce believes that this active creation of belief happens in virtual worlds as well but instead characterizes it as "collective creation of belief", indicating that in virtual worlds, every inhabitant is co-authoring the fiction of the world, as Pearce puts it, virtual worlds are "social constructions" (Pearce, 2009). Pearce argues that well-written fiction in virtual worlds can align with its inhabitants' emergent behavior to create a believable world that contains the "elusive quality of "worldness""(Pearce, 2009), making it seem believable through its own co-created fiction. We can argue then, that in part, worldness as a form of believable environment can arise from both the comprehensiveness of a world's fiction and from other actors who explore and add to it, making it come alive. One of the key arguments of this thesis is that worlds do not necessarily have to mimic something that closely resembles the actual world, and that "worldness" is not only found in such spaces. One could argue is that worldness is a much more abstract phenomenon that cannot be encapsulated by just mimicking what we already know. The sense of being part of something can be ascribed to other elements than being virtually present in a persistent spatial environment that emulates the actual world. In fact, given

the contemporary arguments of culture as a concept not bound to specific places, it is striking that there exists such an insistence on only performing ethnography in these defined virtual worlds. We are moving away from the idea that cultures "live" in certain places towards a broader conceptualization of culture as networked activity, not bound to a specific place (Hastrup & Olvig, 1997). The narrow conceptualization of culture and ethnography present in the leading scholars within virtual ethnography and their insistence on only performing ethnography in worlds that are so alike our own is surprising and limiting because it largely ignores the concepts that have developed around culture in other areas of anthropology.

Immersion and Flow

A central element in discussions on how players inhabit or exist in a virtual space is tied to notions of flow, immersion and embodiment. Nardi's analysis of World of Warcraft's ability to engage its players in aesthetic experiences, is a novel contribution to the theoretical understanding of why video games can be so captivating and meaningful. This discussion ties itself into a longer debate in game studies surrounding concepts of flow, immersion and embodiment. Playing video games very intensely is sometimes described as causing a loss of sense of time, place or self (Dovey and Kennedy, 2006). This phenomenon can happen across different media, but game scholars argue that it appears to be different in games. Games offer challenges, thrills and threats which are experienced and produced through intimate mental, emotional and physical engagement by the player interacting with the game technology, to the point where physical discomfort might even begin to recede, as the players skill develops (Dovey and Kennedy, 2006:104). This particular state of consciousness described by Dovey and Kennedy is linked to Csikszentmihalyi's conception of 'deep flow' and Pearce's 'intersubjective flow' (Pearce, 2016), highlighting the prevalent use of this concept in the analysis of games. Pearce argues for a social concept of flow when studying multi-player games. The concept of intersubjective flow describes how the interplay between players helps align gameplay challenges with the skill of the players, causing a dynamic creation of immersion as the state of flow is collectively reached. The study of immersion in games however, is also deeply contingent of the psychological effect on the individual player. Therefore, this thesis analyzes both the individual and the group aspect that occurs in Counter-Strike. Moreover, some

scholars argue that the study of immersion and flow in video games is sometimes studied with an inherent humanism by the researcher, which has a tendency to privilege the human player as the agent in computer gameplay, undermining the agency of the game technology itself (Dovey and Kennedy, 2006). I therefore argue, that the state of flow which happens is the game is constituent of group cohesion, psychological immersion and technological mediation.

The body and the machine

The ethnographic study of immersion in gameplay is important because it tells us something about what it means to be *present* in the game. To investigate it to its fullest, gameplay should be analyzed as a technologically mediated embodied experience where the agency of the players *and* the game are both weighted with equal analytical meaning. To assert the importance of this, the work of Marie-Laure Ryan (2001) is drawn and built upon. Ryan has paid significant attention to how immersion and interactivity occurs in game worlds, with special focus on the intersection between the body and the technology. Ryan examines "what features of digital systems produce an immersive experience" and uses a phenomenological approach to analyze "" the sense of "presence" through which the user feels corporeally connected to the virtual world" (Ryan, 2001:14). Ryan uses the work of Merleau-Ponty and his arguments of the "embodied nature of perception" (Ryan, 2001:14) as the starting point. The theory is that we are embodied subjects while we engage with the virtual but that we are at the same time re-embodied in the virtual space through our interactions with its interface and our presence as someone else, an avatar, or *something* else entirely giving us a sense of presence and agency. This in turn means that Ryan is able to argue that *perception is embodied*, which then allows her to assert that the virtual experience counts as an embodied experience. In other words, physical action and perception are interdependent. This argument is an extension of Merleau-Ponty's contention with Cartesian dualism. The famous phrase *Cogito, ergo sum* uttered by René Descartes is questioned as Merleau-Ponty claims that feelings and perceptions cannot be reduced to just mental states (Merleau-Ponty, 1945) In video games this is expressed when the player feels something *as his* avatar, for example shock, anger or fear. Those are perceptive and bodily experiences. The bodily experiences that occur in video games are both emotional and physical: "The body is always committed or engaged

in gameplay, from sensorial perceptions experienced as embodied emotional states, through busy hands and fingers" (Sweetser and Wyeth, 2005:107). This serves as a magnificent reminder to the virtual ethnographer, who should investigate themselves and others in virtual spaces, noticing how consciousness cannot be distinct from embodiment Realizing that one is *present* in the virtual moment and sensing it through new-found agency and perception and physical sensations. This theoretical underpinning might be critical to understanding and providing a thick description of the virtual environment and is one that will be utilized in the analysis of this thesis in my attempt to reveal new aspects of the concept of avatars and embodiment.

Observing the bodily experience

The framework provided by Ryan proposes the importance of the body in gameplay, so we should find ways in which we can investigate this importance ethnographically. Playing an online video game with a high difficulty, such as Counter-Strike and being completely immersed in the game and teamplay, is in many ways a bodily experience. Mastering the game might be comparable to the moment a student of dance *finally* falls into the rhythm and is able to move with it and her partner. Ethnographers have been interested in the body and its role in understanding and adapting to field sites for a long time, and a great example of such studies is in fact, dance. In studies of dance, the ethnographer can take part in the dancing, generating special knowledge only accessible by participating in the concrete bodily practice (Wulff, 2015). Ethnographies of dance explore how meaning making occurs through bodily movements. Here, dance is understood as a kind of cultural knowledge. Anthropologist Deidre Sklar, in his work *On Dance Ethnography* argues that this cultural knowledge is embodied in "highly stylized and codified movements", which encompasses not just the somatic, but also "cultural history, beliefs, values and feelings" (Sklar, 1991:6), and it is worth noting that some ethnographers of dance do not just attribute the importance of movement to dance. Any movement can be regarded with this perspective (Kealiinohomoku, 1970). This thesis attempts the same type of approach in its study of movement in Counter-Strike, attributing importance not just to *how* movement occurs in the game, but also *why* it occurs.

Avatars

Virtual ethnographers argue that embodiment is primarily accomplished through the players identity as an avatar. As hinted by the term's original Hindu meaning, "descent" or "to make one's appearance" players often experience their avatars as a medium for some form of deep, inner persona. The avatar is able to express a personality that might not be consistent with that of their actual selves. Indeed, researchers have often found the creation of avatars to be the catalyst for transformative inner journeys, during which the avatar and the player often become interchangeable (Pearce, 2016). Avatars can represent a multiplicity of identities and personas, both in terms of a separation between a person's physical body and his or her avatar, but also as a signifier of the different roles or personalities a player "puts on" depending on the situation (Markham 1998, Taylor 1999). Players speak of their avatars in both the first and third person, distinguishing between the body, physical or real, and who is "channeled" through the avatar (Pearce, 2016, Taylor 2003).

Virtual ethnographers define as a lasting representation of the virtual worlds as inhabitants. In virtual worlds such as Second Life or World of Warcraft, avatars *inhabit* the world, in the sense that their presence allows them to participate and impact the virtual worlds' culture, as opposed to other types of fictional worlds in film and literature (Klastrup, 2003). They can interact with other avatars, and the interactions can be remembered and create history and lasting bonds, not just between the avatars but also embedded into the virtual world itself. (Taylor, 2006) (Jensen, 2016). Avatars act together in the world and create dynamic changes to the environment, resulting in a co-creation of content present in the virtual world (Jensen, 2016). The agency to do this varies depending on whether the world is a "fixed synthetic world" or a "co-created world" (Pearce, 2009), but the primary argument is that avatars give shape, identity and meaning and a lasting representation to people's virtual selves.

The conventions of the virtual world

From reading the works of virtual ethnographers, it has been established that ethnographic field-work undertaken in video games is so far limited to games that contain virtual worlds that share certain descriptions and conventions. Regardless of being considered games or worlds by their explorers, I here present an outline of what characterizes virtual worlds.

1. **Spatiality:** The representation of virtual space in the world made from visual metaphors of environments. Must contain a sense of geographical continuity.

2. **Persistence:** A defining characteristic for most virtual ethnographers. The world must always remain online and active, even if no inhabitants would be online. Actions taken in the world can have lasting consequences and affect other inhabitants, even when they are not online. Affords ongoing character/avatar development.

3. **Avatarization:** A lasting representation of the inhabitant, his or her body over which they have varying degrees of creative control. Close relationships between avatars and their corresponding human actors have been documented (Plessner and Phillips, 2016). Avatarization also plays a role in terms of the ethnographer's ability to stand virtually on the shore of another culture, taking on the role of inhabitant (Boellstorff, 2006).

4. **Inhabitability:** The world can be inhabited by people who through avatarization have gained identities in the world and the ability to contribute to the worlds' culture. This would for instance entail that an inhabitant's absence could affect the world, effecting the experience of other inhabitants.

5. **Populous**: Virtual worlds contain substantial number of inhabitants and are by definition social worlds.

6. **Worldness:** Worldness is perhaps the most elusive quality of virtual worlds. This term is used to express a sense of coherence, completeness, and consistency within the world's environment, aesthetics, and rules" (Pearce, 2009:20).

Other types of game worlds

A defining factor of virtual worlds is that they look like social worlds. However, there exists a plethora of games that are not situated in worlds that are social., Games like Tetris, which takes place in a two-dimensional space of moving geometrical shapes, are hard to define in terms of their worldness. But does that necessarily exclude it from being investigated ethnographically? Even if we admit that Tetris can be considered to be taking place in a world, that world does not exhibit any of the qualities of a virtual world. However, that fact alone does not mean that culture cannot emerge within the world of Tetris, however arbitrary that emergence may seem. As Hastrup and Olvig (1997) point out, culture is "deterritorialized", putting an anthropological question mark next to the concept of place (Hastrup and Olvig, 1997:39). This thesis attempts to illustrate this argument, and to validate the ethnographic study of game worlds, that cannot be called virtual worlds according to the contemporary definition. To achieve this, it is central to first establish a framework of game worlds that are different from those that are dubbed virtual worlds. For this framework, we turn to game theorist Jesper Juul (2005) who in his book *Half Real: Video games between real rules and fictional worlds* asks: "How and why does the player imagine the world of a game?" (Juul, 2005). He writes: "To play a video game is [...] to interact with real rules while imagining a fictional world, and a video game is a set of rules as well as a fictional world."Juul's argument is that games present players with fictional worlds and invites them to imagine them through a combination of fiction and rules. The rules and the fiction work together to make the game world real. Juul uses the game Legend of Zelda: The Wind Waker (2003) as an example. This game is a three-dimensional adventure game, in which the protagonist has traveled to a far-off land in search of his missing sister. The game, for its time, boasted detailed graphics and a beautiful fantasy world. In addition to the fictional world of the game, several on-screen displays provide information to the player about her health and other rule-bound knowledge. There is also a bouncing arrow which indicates where the player should go, and which non-player characters to

interact with. This arrow tells the player, that although the game presents an idea of an illustrious and grand world, only a small section of this world is actually incorporated into the game as a part of its ruleset, and thus accessible to the player. Juul explains that the fictional world is what separates video games from non-digital games, and that the interaction between these fictional worlds and the rules of the game are a central feature to understanding video games. The interaction between the fictional world and the rules, gives the player an option to either accept and imagine the fiction as part of the game, or simply observe the fictional world as a placeholder for the rules of the game. Furthermore, one can focus on the game itself, or on the player. The rules can be examined as they are found mechanically in the game, or as something players experience and negotiate between themselves. Similarly, the fictional world can be examined as a fixed set of texts and signs, or as something the game cues the players into imagining, and which they then continue to imagine in their own ways (Juul, 2005). Based on this theory of the interplay between rules and fictional worlds, Juul presents five types of worlds in which rules and fiction interact differently.

1. **Abstract Worlds:** games that do not represent something else, either in fragments or its entirety. These games are centered around their rules and contain little to no story or fiction. Examples include Tetris and Backgammon.
2. **Iconic Worlds:** games that contain fragments and components that have iconic meaning, such as the kings and queens in a set of playing cards representing higher values without having actual stories and fiction tied to then, although the stories are not told in the game. Examples include a classic deck of playing cards, in which the king and queen are supposedly married, and the jack is somehow tied to the court as well, but that is the most we can discern.
3. **Incoherent Worlds:** games which tell fictional stories that are impossible to understand without referring to the rules of the game. The first arcade version of Donkey Kong is an example of this. The player could potentially imagine the story or how an Italian plumbers' girlfriend is kidnapped by a giant gorilla and that he has to rescue her. But the fact that he the plumber is able to come back from the dead three times in his attempt can only be explained by the rules of the game. Other examples include Chess and Counter-Strike.

4. **Coherent Worlds:** games in which at least most of the rules are integrated within the fiction and the majority of the game can be explained without referring to the rules. This means that nothing prevents us from imagining them to a very detailed extent. Examples include many Adventure and RPG games like Tales of Monkey Island and Baldur's gate, but also many MMO's like Second Life or World of Warcraft.
5. **Staged Worlds:** These are examples of abstract games that are played within a larger and more elaborate game world. This can only be done in fictional worlds, for example you can play slot machines in the original Pokémon game. The recent example of Gwent, a popular card game that could until very recently only be played inside The Witcher 3, but has since gained popularity and moved outside the game world. These games are limited to appear inside elaborate world and not vice versa, as it would make little sense to play World of Warcraft within Tetris.

(Juul, 2005)

Most virtual worlds as they are presented by scholars today, would most likely fall within the category of Coherent Worlds. The difference between coherent and incoherent worlds lies in how the fiction of the game is impacted by its rules. The example of Mario's multiple resurrections in Donkey Kong can be reversed if we look at a game like World of Warcraft. When the player dies in WoW, she appears as a ghost at the nearest graveyard and must find a way back to her corpse to come back to life or speak to a spirit of death to resurrect with a penalty to her abilities. Coherent worlds often contain very believable fiction, both in terms of their geospatial structure, that is, the actual three-dimensional space can be navigated and traversed by the players. There are for instance no bouncing arrows in World of Warcraft or Second Life signaling that you can *only* go in one particular direction. This leads to an experience of a seamless world that seems open ended. Furthermore, because these worlds are populous and inhabited by many players at the same time, Pearce's notion of "collective creation of belief" enhances how the world can be continuously imagined by its inhabitants as they explore it together. Such virtual worlds look and feel like the real world in ways. Communities form within them because people meet and share common interests, and they can do this just like in the actual world, by bumping into each other on the street or at a party. The rules of the game make these things possible, and in some cases even invite

the players to act in these social ways as part of the game, there are for example quests in World of Warcraft that require players to team up and communicate to solve a problem together. In this way, World of Warcraft appears as a coherent experience. Many of the unbelievable things that happen in the game refer back to established norms of written fantasy, and the related fantastic things that happen in the game can be explained through magic or the the games incredibly deep lore (Nardi, 2007). Additionally, players can read about the lore out of the game in several published books related to the stories that take place in the game and explore it in depth, further adding to their creation of belief. It is easy to imagine why these worlds are popular as ethnographic destinations. Because they evoke a sense of the real, while being so different.

Imagining ethnographic studies in the other types of worlds become harder. For instance, the abstract world of Tetris seems inaccessible. Where could the ethnographer go? From where should she observe the geometric, shape-shifting landscape, and how would she even begin to observe the omnipresent player of the game who has no avatar form? It is difficult to imagine the ethnographic validity of Tetris, but not impossible. There is without a doubt a Tetris culture that surrounds the game. There is a community devoted to hosting world championships in the classic version of the game every year which holds discussions on the different ways to play the game. (Thectwc.com, 2019). One could even imagine a study that investigates whether or not people in the west are more inclined to become fascinated with the assemblage of animated geometrical shapes, and if so, why that is.

It is beyond the scope of this thesis to explore all the different types of game worlds, instead it begins the examination of how different game worlds can be explored ethnographically, by moving just one step down in Juul's framework, from coherent games to incoherent games. Counter-Strike is an incoherent game in terms of its fiction. To explain why, we might use the example of death once more. Death in Counter-Strike is not fictionalized in the same way as it is in World of Warcraft. The player simply dies and then respawns in the next round, ready to fight and die again. This illustrates the how the coherent game aspires to be as immersive as possible, as even in death the player must act to come back to life, by running back to her corpse or making a deal with an angel of death. In incoherent worlds like Counter-Strike the player simply waits until

she can play again because the rules allow her to do so, without the added fiction. One might think that this lack of an explanation for the miraculous return to life might cause the player to become less immersed, but that is only true if the fiction is what makes the player immersed. The fiction of Counter-Strike is, to me, not very immersive. It offers a fiction of Terrorists versus Counter-Terrorists in a bomb defusal scenario. However, at no point does the fiction of bomb exploding seem to have an impact on the me, or those I played with during my field work. What has an impact is whether the bomb exploding results in winning or losing the game.

Counter-Strike explained

Counter-Strike is a video game in the genre of first-person-shooter. This effectively means that the player is situated in a first-person field of view, looking out through the eyes of someone wielding a firearm. Different types of FPS games put different significance on who is wielding the gun. In some story driven FPS games, the player takes the role of an established character, like the famous 'Master Chief' of the HALO series. In other games, like Counter-Strike, who the player is exactly is less important.

Counter-Strike is a tactical team game. The objective of the game, is for one team to win the most out of 30 rounds, switching sides halfway through. The games main competitive mode is called "bomb defusal". Each team consists of five players. For the terrorists to win, they must tactically infiltrate and take over one of two bombsites placed on the map, called A site or B site. Then, they must plant a set of C4 explosives on that site and defend it until it detonates, which it does after 40 seconds. The counter-terrorists need to delegate defenders to each bomb site and defend it until the round is over, which takes 1:55 minutes. If no bomb is planted within that time, they win the round. If either team succeeds in *fragging* (killing) all five players on the other team before the round timer goes to zero, they win the round. The game is deemed *tactical* because using tactics will drastically improve a team's chance to win. Tactics in Counter-Strike are not built in to the game system. There are no tactical options to choose from in the game, each tactic must be conveyed using voice communication. The most basic example of this would be for a player on the

terrorist team to say, “Let’s go B” This is one of the most recurring suggestions in Counter-Strike on a low to mid-level. It implies that the player wants the team to fight towards the B site and plant the bomb there. If the terrorists send all their five players towards the same bombsite, they will most certainly be outnumbering the defenders and have an advantage, since the counter-terrorists need to defend two bomb sites with five players thereby spreading out on the map. Defenders however, if playing correctly, will be positioned behind cover and be ready to provide each other with crossfires (a crossfire refers to a situation in which player X and player Z are positioned so that they are able to shoot advancing enemy players from opposite directions). The attackers will be out in the open if all five players just rush on to the site. Because of this, to simply say “Let’s go B” is often not enough to secure a round win because it sends a team straight into crossfires. A slightly more advanced example of the same approach would be for a player to say:

“Three people go mid, smoke the AWP off in Window, molly connector and go through short. Two people go through apartments and pop-flash your way into the site and make sure to save smokes for the after plant” (Field Notes, 2019)

This quote contains a lot of information that is packed into game related jargon and collective understanding of the game situation. Mid, Window, Connector, Short and Apartments refer to positions on the map (in this case the map is “Mirage”) which the player wishes to use as a route. To smoke is to throw smoke grenades that block the vision of a player, to molly is to throw a molotov cocktail which sets the ground on fire and to pop-flash is to throw a flashbang grenade in such a way that an enemy player cannot avert their vision in time to avoid getting blinded. Jargon and positions will be unpacked in further detail later in the analysis, but this example gives an idea of how the game has evolved a certain language that quickly and effectively dictates tactics and ideas. In essence the above quote means that the player wants to wrap around the B site, attacking it in a pincer movement while tactically using grenades and molotovs to avoid getting shot on the way to the site and try to ruin the defenses on the B-site before entering, so that the crossfire becomes redundant. “Save smokes for the after plant” refers to smoking off the entries to the site once it is taken, prohibiting the enemies from seeing into the site and “re-taking” effectively.
To participate tactically requires the players to know the jargon and call-outs and timings (how long it takes to run to a position) for the map they are playing. To know these things requires a

deep level of involvement from the players. The game can essentially be played completely without tactics, which sometimes happen in games of lower skill. A common scene in such games is for teams to rush at each other and try to be the first to wipe out the opposing team. A minimum of tactical communication is however almost always present. “Giving info” is a key aspect of the game and refers to players calling out when and where they spot enemies, giving the team a tactical advantage by understanding the opponent’s positions. Furthermore, a key tactical element is the players’ options to purchase different types of weaponry. This ability is determined by an economy system where actions that aid the team, like killing opponents and planting/defusing bombs affords players with cash. This can then be spent on weaponry in the beginning of the next round. Managing economy as a team, and understanding the economy of the opposing team, or whether to save money or spend it is a key part in securing victory.

Maps

A game of Counter-Strike in defusal mode takes place in a single “map”. A map represents an area of graphically rendered space. Each map has a different layout which determines much of how the game is played in terms of tactics specific to that map. Some maps are considered to be either Terrorist or Counter-Terrorist sided, as they provide a tactical spatial advantage to either attackers or defenders. Maps with a lot of narrow choke points leading into the bomb sites are examples of Counter-Terrorist sided maps. These maps give the Counter-Terrorists the comfort of knowing where to look for the attackers. Maps that are very open or that have several ways to approach a bomb site will sometimes be considered Terrorist sided.

Image 1: An overview of the map Mirage (Tobys Counter-Strike, 2019).

An example of a map seen from above, in this case Mirage. The legend means the following:

T	The zone where the Terrorists spawn at the start of each round.
CT	The zone where the Counter-Terrorists spawn at the start of each round.
A	The A bomb site.
B	The B bomb site.
Words like Jungle etc.	Callouts, used by players to communicate positions on the map to each other.

Methodology

Field Work

I planned the field work to consist of seven days of playing and decided I wanted to primarily play the game in the most popular mode, the standard competitive "matchmaking" mode, which is the mode of play described in the section above. The mode allows everything from "solo-queueing", which entails playing alone and getting paired with four random players to playing as groups of two, three four and a full team of five. My choice was to "solo queue" from the beginning, since it allowed me to conduct my field work precisely when I wanted, not having to rely on others. Additionally, playing with others would entail either playing with friends or finding a group to play with consistently. I believe that both options could become detrimental to my research, because the experience potentially would revolve more around team chemistry and interpersonal relations rather than the pure experience the game is able to afford in its standard form. To get the most comprehensive experience of the game, I would have liked to play all the available modes and maps. However, I believe that doing this within a realistic timeframe would jeopardize my ability go in depth in the field work. I therefore decided to limit my modes of play.
The field work conducted in this thesis deploys the toolset of virtual ethnography in an incoherent world and then reflectively analyses how the toolset becomes reconfigured in the process. Through a short field study and reflective writing, I argue that the world of Counter-Strike is not a fixed place but that a series of converging community sites, media platforms and the game software itself together create a space that evokes one collectively defined cultural world related to the game, and that this world, although it is not seamless and world-like in a 3D rendered manner, can be explored ethnographically. I call this type of world a Hybrid World. Additionally, it is argued how avatarization takes place in incoherent worlds through the embodied perception of presence. The goal of this ethnography is therefore not to uncover the specifics of Counter-Strike culture per se. Instead the ethnographic field work is used as a vehicle of enquiry to describe how the concepts of virtual worlds reconfigure as they are explored in incoherent worlds.

Observing and writing culture as a native

It is very difficult to maintain a balanced perspective on a game I am so familiar with and used to playing. This is an old, well known problem among anthropologists, and dealing with it hinges on one's ability to fluctuate between what Spradley has described as the insider/outsider perspective (Spradley, 1980). I have attempted to actively use the writing about my own praxis as an attempt to exoticize the experience and become more reflective in turn, thereby being able to shift my perspective. Some things that were implicit to me, and have been for more than a decade, have since become points of analysis as I became aware of them through writing. An example of this, which will also be explored in detail later, is how nonsensical the spatial environment in Counter-Strike is. How cars, roads, furniture and almost every object in the game are placed in ways that do not correlate with how they would be placed in actual settings. This realization came as I explored how the importance of spatiality differs from game to game, and I realized that although I feel at home in some of the Counter-Strike spaces, that is not because they *feel* or *look* like something I would normally associate with home. Furthermore, writing about the sensations of selfhood and avatarization in the game, allowed me to reflect on abstract ways in which I felt embodied in the game, something that had certainly never crossed my mind while playing in all the years before writing about it.

In my process of reflective writing I have taken inspiration from scholars who promote writing as a reflective methodology in itself. The book Writing Culture by James Clifford and George Marcus (1986) has been highly influential, sparking a debate concerned with the adequate way to write ethnographically. The debate whirled up new ways of thinking about reflexivity, objectivity, culture and ethnographic authority in the post-colonial world. This marked a turn in anthropology, which has been described as “literary, deconstructive and reflexive” and strongly polarized anthropological circles at the time, some heralding it as a long overdue postmodernist critique of anthropology while others declared it an existential threat to the discipline (Zenker, 2014). This heated debate has since cooled down, and the publication of *Writing Culture* has prompted ethnographers to explore the epistemic predicaments that that come with ethnographic writing. The writing process constructs not just the subject matter, but the author himself. It is for

example how the transition from data to text happens, something which Boellstorff et al. has declared to often be black boxed as "the brilliant minds of individual researchers that make connections and draw conclusions" (p.159). In their book). During the fieldwork, I accessed the world of Counter-Strike as an already established insider, effectively being an expert in the culture I observed. Therefore, I simultaneously dealt with the dilemma of exoticizing the field to myself and explaining it in layman terms to the reader. I believe that a solution to both problems is to be open and reflective towards the issue while writing. By doing this, I might explicitly demonstrate the significance of certain concepts which I find self-evident, thereby not losing you, the reader in video game jargon. At the same time, staying within this frame of mind also helps the author to not lose himself. Trying to stay reflective while writing is a way of anchoring oneself in the position of an ethnographer, as it helps returning to that role whenever one strays too far within the constraints of tacit knowledge (Pryke and Rose, 2012). This approach helped me realize things like nonsensically designed terrain and what the experiences of embodiment entails.

Participant observation

During the field work, my primary method was participant observation. The name of this method has been dubbed an oxymoron (Cohen 1984:216), since it inevitably positions the ethnographer somewhere between two extremes. One involves acting alongside the investigated subjects, while the other consists of being the classic fly on the wall. To clarify what the ethnographer is actually doing, Cohen suggests rephrasing the concept to "observation through participation". I can fully attest to this understanding of the concept as I often found myself fully immersed in situations while trying to observe my own actions, and at other times observing and pondering the actions of others without as much care for my own immediate state. The anthropologist James Spradley has conceptualized this exact phenomenon as the insider/outsider perspective (Spradley, 1980:54). Curiously, Spradley's own example of this also revolves around an ethnographer playing a game, in this case poker. Spradley describes how the insider at the poker table experiences the situation with immediacy and subjectivity. He creates a meaningful and cohesive understanding of the experience, feeling the same emotions as the regular players he is there to observe. This in turn, allows him to better understand the situation from an outsider perspective, since he can view not

only the game and its participants, but also himself, as *objects* (Spradley, 1980:54). Spradley notes that the simultaneous insider/outsider perspective does not happen all the time. At certain times the ethnographer might act as a full participant, other times he might become a static observer (Spradley, 1980:57). Spradley's description of the poker playing ethnographer could hardly be a more fitting way to describe my own field work. I fully recognize the state of flux between being an insider, perceiving my own actions and building cohesive and meaningful interpretations of those around me. However, being an expert in the studied culture bears the risk of "going native", where the ethnographer completely forgets his own position as a researcher. I believe this happened to me several times during the fieldwork. The following paragraphs detail how I attempted to handle those situations.

Different states of participation

Because of the multi-sited nature of my field, I found myself in a variation of different levels of involvement. When I was within the boundaries of the game itself, I was exhibiting what Spradley calls "complete participation", a state in which the ethnographer study situations "in which they are already ordinary participants" (Spradley, 1980:61). To me, this was the case simply because I was used to playing the game. Spradley notes the existence of many examples where ethnographers have done excellent work turning their ordinary activities into subjects of study, but also warns that the more an ethnographer knows about a situation, the more difficult it is to study. I fully recognize Spradley's argument, as there were several times where I ended up playing the game on auto-pilot, simply because it is activity I am so used to doing. I had to develop techniques to stay observant, such as using my notepad as a reminder of my ethnographic duties. When I was able to observe while playing, I found myself better able to notice reflect on the exotic within the mundane, although I undoubtedly missed many elements because of my tacit knowledge.

Because I wanted to observe not just the other players, but also the game itself as an ethnographic object, that is, how the dynamics and interactions of the gameplay made a phenomenological impact on myself, I took on a phenomenology-based ethnographic approach, which entails not just

"being there" in the midst of the action, but involves "doing it yourself", which "generates data derived from the immediate experience that can contribute to the reconstruction of the internal viewpoint by uncovering the essence of a phenomenon" (Pfadenhauer and Grenz, 2015). Because of the high levels of immersion, I sometimes experienced during the fieldwork, I had several episodes where I went native and just played the game. Fortunately, the gameplay in Counter-Strike does not afford activity all the time. There are moments when one dies during a round where the player is demoted to the role of "spectator". In such circumstances, the game normally expects the player to remain quiet unless they had critical, game-related information to share. Although this role might look like it only entails sitting passively, waiting to play again, in fact watching your teammates perform in intense situations can be as enthralling as playing yourself, causing me to stay within the role of the insider unless I actively used my notepad to write down my impressions.

Using a notepad as an ethnographic artifact

During my fieldwork I always kept a notepad handy on my desk. On this notepad, I would write down field notes which I would examine and analyze later. Field notes are of course a very individual exercise. Each ethnographer differs in terms of style, level of detail and language, and some might even prefer to take digital notes while researching. I found however that the physical notepad worked well, because I was able to stay within the game while I wrote manually on it. Sociologist Geoffrey Walford (2009) has interviewed several ethnographers on their use of note taking in the field, and articulates their importance by concluding:

> *"Fieldnotes are the basis on which ethnographies are constructed. They are the record from which every article and book about the ethnographic research draws, and against which every ethnographer tests developing ideas and theories"* (Walford, 2009:117)

Because of fast paced nature of Counter-Strike gameplay, there is little time to take notes, with only a few natural breaks occurring during play. Given those circumstances, I used the technique known as 'jotting'. Jotting translates as "to be remembered" (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1995) and

serves to jog the ethnographer's memory after the field work. The obvious implication of this technique is remembering what the jottings entail hours after writing them (Walford, 2009:126). I can verify this issue, as I experienced several analytical epiphanies getting lost to time during my research, because I failed to compose them in proper detail. On the upside, there is no risk that any informant will glance towards your notepad looking for delicate details about themselves when your informants are avatarized on your screen.

Another big advantage I found with using notes as my primary data collection method was how the notepad functioned as what I call an anchoring artifact. As explained above, I sometimes encountered the issue of going native, but I found that keeping my notepad right in front of me often jolted my memory and made me remember that I was an ethnographer. Because I do not normally keep a notepad next to my keyboard when I play (I in fact always clear my desk completely so that only the mouse and keyboard remain) the notepad stood out as a reminder of the unorthodox playing situation, and seeing it was a big help in entering the reflexive mindset and recollect what had just transpired. I might for instance initially be frustrated over a mistake leading to my virtual death, but then notice my notepad and fall back into the ethnographic mindset. In essence, the notepad became the pendulum which continuously switched me between the insider and outsider perspective.

The Advanced Player and the Transparent Machine

I want to acknowledge my standpoint as someone who has played online video games extensively for two thirds of my lifetime, contrasting the virtual ethnographers who I refer to in this thesis. My birthdate, and carefree western childhood surrounded by computers, simply disqualifies me from stepping into the field of digital games with an authentic sense of wonder, which in turn perhaps limits my ethnographic viewpoint. I am not standing on the shores of a foreign land, able to be awestruck by its unfamiliarity's, I am a native in the culture I seek to understand. This is contrasted by ethnographers like Boellstorff, who's introductory chapter in his monograph on Second Life paraphrases Malinowski's *Argonauts of the Pacific* in his attempts to illustrate how exotic his own journey into the virtual has been. Perhaps it could be said that ethnographers like

Boellstorff, Nardi and Pearce belong to a small generation for which true wonderment and a sense of the alien could be found as they traversed the borders of the virtual. They represent the small gap in human history in which it was possible again, to feel as Malinowski did, setting foot upon unfamiliar shores, able to observe tacit cultural rules at work (Spradley, 1980).

However, being knowledgeable about one's field also has advantages. The cultural environment in video games is very niche, and it contains a certain jargon and types of behavior that is inherent to those that are part of it. It might be compared to the social codex that exists with football fans, although in my experience video game fans are in general less forgiving to outsiders. Being knowledgeable about the field gave me the advantages of a "complete participant" (Spradley, 1980:63), meaning, it allowed me to *do* what my informants did, not just observe or attempt to do the same. In *Game Cultures* (2005) Jon Dovey and Helen Kennedy describes how the process of getting "into the loop" of a computer game requires the player to master the interface. "From loading the game through to making the settings suit your play style, and at the very extreme, making skins, patches and modifications to the game. and modifications to the game" (Dovey and Kennedy, 2005:110). Knowing how to navigate Counter-Strike, which is fast paced, difficult and competitive, allows for doing participant observation in the midst of an expert culture, a place where amateurs would immediately be called out. A player's hand-eye-coordination, reaction times and general dexterous ability with the mouse and keyboard must be routinely practiced to "stay in shape" as the micro adjustments needed to successfully perform in the game are fine tuned and easily forgotten. Dovey and Kennedy quote a player who captures some of the complexity involved with playing a fast paced, first-person shooter game that resembles Counter-Strike:

"... you have to be able to use the mouse for more than just point and click, you have to sort be able to use it around in space which is bit different at it's easy to end up looking at the ceiling or getting struck in corners [...} and your left and right hands are doing totally different things, you've got to really know where all the keys are [...] at first i couldn't get it all sorted out, changing weapons, jumping, moving around and shooting it was all a bit much and my mouse hand would be doing one thing and I'd have to look at the keyboard to try and find the right keys … then after a while it all sort clicks and you're just staring at the screen and your

hands are going like crazy and you just sort of do it all on automatic and you feel like it's you in there sneaking around corners"

(Xena, Quake player interview in Dovey and Kennedy, 2005:100)

The experience conveyed here is a journey I have taken long ago at a time when I was not thinking at all about ethnography or games research. Because of this, I cannot portray the learning process of Counter-Strike. Such an ethnography would have proven a valuable insight, potentially observing much of the basic tacit knowledge that has, for me, vanished in a shroud of the mundane. Additionally, such an ethnography might examine other social dynamics of Counter-Strikes culture, which I have not been able to observe. A player who steps into the game for the first time will be unable to properly move, aim and navigate. The player will be able to play the game to some degree but to a more experienced player, watching the newbie (or as it is often referred to, *spectating*), it would look like Bambi on ice. The game offers no tutorials for the novice and the game does not try to teach the player how to move correctly, because in a way the technique is not teachable. It is not a matter of pressing certain buttons at certain times or using the right abilities when appropriate, and because of this, there is no tutorial mode. Doing participant observation in this game as a beginner, would result in a very different type of ethnography than the one presented in this thesis, and would probably be an excellent case study in the famous "toxic" behavior of some gamers, who have no time or patience for beginners on their team. Because I was already an established player at the beginning of my fieldwork, I could be as close to the action as possible without standing out and disturbing the natural flow of the game, or in other words, it allowed me to observe the "everyday life" of the field, a hallmark of ethnography (Pfadenhauer and Grenz, 2015). This fieldwork assumes, because of the intricacy of skill involved with the game that there are two ways to play Counter-Strike. The player can either play it, or they can *play* it. The reason why the latter option is so relevant to research is that it allows the ethnographer to investigate the everyday life of the game. But also because, as I argue in this thesis, the specific embodied sense of presence that occurs in the game might only occur to the player once he no longer needs to concentrate on the keyboard to control his movement, as it instead *disappears,* in a much similar vein as Heidegger's famous example of the hammer and the

concept of thrownness. Thrownness emphasizes the experience of full mastery and full immersion with a particular context and is closely linked to the idea of *readiness-to-hand* or *transparency*, which refers to the way that objects, things or activities may disappear in the course of everyday action. To the person much experienced in hammering, the attention to the act of hammering simply disappears and stops being viewed as an external object but instead in the bodily process of moving the arm up and down to hammer, melts together into an intricate assemblage of body, tool and activity. (Marshall & Hornecker, 2013: 146-147)

The Cyborg Ethnographer

Using the approach described as multi-sited cyber ethnography (Pearce, 2016), I want to explore how Counter-Strike can be viewed as a hybrid world by examining how culture emerges both as part of playing the game, but also through its community, using Reddit as the main source. In doing so, I attempt to illustrate how Counter-Strike, although it takes place in an incoherent game world, offers a world for the ethnographer to explore. Building on Ryan's (2001) phenomenological notion of embodied perception, my goal is to illustrate how this embodied perception can be utilized in ethnography. I take inspiration from Boellstorff and Nardi, who both start their own ethnographies by setting the physical scene. What does it actually mean for me, the author, to access the field site? My way into the field differs from Boellstorff, who describes how he is able to conduct ethnography on his laptop at a coffee table or in a café (Boellstorff, 2008:9). This is different from my experience, because the game I play requires more graphical and processing power to run. When playing a fast-faced, graphic intensive game like Counter-Strike, the best playing experience occurs when you have access to what is affectionately known in gaming communities as a *Battlestation*. A setup consisting of a powerful desktop computer, high quality peripherals, the gamer-term for a mouse, keyboard and headset, and a gaming monitor.

Image 2: An example of a Battlestation, taken from the subreddit /r/Battlestations[1]

The significance of this setup is that it allows for complete, immersive performance. In the same manner that a well-tuned Formula 1 car allows its driver to focus solely on performing in the race without worrying about lacking in top speed or being able to brake properly. Similarly, the battlestation allows the graphics to flow seamlessly on the screen, without the user having to worry about *lag,* or delays. Strictly speaking you could take part in a Formula One race in a Citroen Berlingo, but if you did, your experience would probably be thoroughly frustrating. Much in the same way, you *could* play Counter-Strike on a mid-range laptop, but the difference in how many frames-per-second your monitor displays would be extremely notable and without question impact not only performance but also immersion. You would be at a disadvantage in terms of reaction and precision, both in terms of movement and aim, because the images would move with less fluidity. Such a severe handicap would hinder the ethnographer's ability to engage in the field, because like the Berlingo driver, his focus would not solely be on the race, but also on the extremely obvious fact the he was driving a slower car. I should note here, that it is only possible for me to notice this difference is because I have tried playing on bad laptops in the past, which is

[1] www.reddit.com/r/battlestations

why I can make the distinction between the two experiences. What I mean is not that it is strictly necessary to have a good battlestation to conduct good fieldwork. What I mean is that to make arguments towards the nature of embodiment, it is helpful to experience the game as it was intended to be played. The same is true if the ethnographer wants to experience the everyday life of Counter-Strike. Of course, It might be a good idea for any future Counter-Strike ethnographers to try playing on a bad machine, so that they can fully appreciate and understand the feeling of being embodied when playing on a battlestation. Playing Counter-Strike on a powerful desktop computer, wearing a high-quality gaming headset with one hand resting on an expensive mechanical keyboard and the other on a Razer Deathadder gaming mouse lying on a gigantic mousepad, I feel ready to play. A potent, hybridized warrior whose sense of bodily self disapporates as he is consolidated into the game. A well-known conception of this state has been theorized by Donna Haraway (1991) in her throughs on the hybridities between the human and the machine. Being technologically connected to the game, to the avatar that shoots people for competitive sport, mediated through software and hardware designed specifically for that purpose, Donna Haraway's words ring true: “we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism. In short we are cyborgs. The cyborg is our ontology” (Haraway 1991:292).

AUTHORS NOTE

Writing the paragraphs above was my attempt at explaining the significance of my primary ethnographic tool, the battlestation. In writing those paragraphs, and re-reading them afterwards, I realized that my attempted allegory, comparing a good computer to a Formula 1 car, excellently exemplifies the arguments from Writing Culture. Namely, how the ethnographer will try his damndest to recreate the cultural meaning of something in his readers world, but stands at risk of conveying something entirely different, because the reader received it from a different perspective. My attempt with the Citroen Berlingo was just that, an attempt to recreate the meaning of what it means to be gamer, as something which might be more widely understood, namely Formula 1 racing. In Writing Culture, James Clifford writes that all ethnographical texts are "inescapably allegorical" (Clifford and Marcus, 1986:98), because the *writing* itself enacts a *western* allegory. The problem with western allegories is one of the primary focuses of Writing Culture, and was also part of sparking the Writing Culture debate, but this text is not meant to convey non-western culture to a western audience. In fact, the culture I am trying to convey in this text could hardly *be* anymore western. The point still stands however, the writer is writing for someone, and cannot hope to deliver his message without having some concern for who they might be and how the writer might be perceived. Perhaps a hint of gamer-ethnocentrism can be identified here. My comparison between a supercar and a supercomputer could very well be an attempt at glorifying my hobby.

Exploring Counter-Strike as a hybrid world

In this section I will describe how Counter-Strike can be understood as a hybrid world. This is done by exploring Counter-Strike as a game that is entangled with other media, and rather than attempting to create a set of methodological guidelines on how to study what is deemed to be *inside* the world of Counter-Strike and what is *outside*, this thesis approaches the world of Counter-Strike as single hybrid world with an emergent culture that spans the borders of the game itself. As such, I argue here that the Counter-Strike world has elements of *Worldness* and that it can be studied ethnographically.

As we saw in the literature review, Boellstorff, Nardi and Pearce also mention how conducting multi-sited ethnography helps with capturing holistic images of life in virtual communities (Boellstorff et.al, 2016). Notably however, Boellstorff refrains from doing so himself in his personal monograph, arguing for the value in studying virtual worlds within their three-dimensionally rendered confines. This difference in approach has a profound impact on what kind of knowledge the ethnographer can create. Boellstorff would for instance be blind towards the types of digital nomads studied by Pearce. I would also argue, that perhaps Boellstorffs view of what constitutes a world is too narrow. I argue here, that the emergence of virtual culture sometimes happens outside the three-dimensional space in which that same culture is enacted. That is what I deem to be a hybrid world.

To create this image of a single hybrid world, I explore the Counter-Strike community as constantly emerging across a multitude of sites. One of the more central and fast-updating hubs of information is the subreddit dedicated to Counter-Strike located at Reddit.com/r/Globaloffensive[2]. Visiting this site is like visiting a pub dedicated to your favorite football team, without the beers. You enter through the front door and find yourself surrounded by people who are talking loudly about your favorite subject, with the potential for you to partake in every discussion at your own pace. The hottest topics are the easiest ones to spot, since they get the most attention. On Reddit,

[2] www.reddit.com/r/globaloffensive

good attention comes in the form of comments and upvotes and medals. Because of this you will always see the most talked about thing first when you enter, but you are free to scroll down or search for something more specific instead. Also, all posts on Reddit are stored unless deleted, so we must imagine a pub with very durable conversations. If you want to be a part of the club, being present in the sports pub is just as important as going to the games or playing with the lads. In the pub, you can always trust that someone is discussing the latest player transfers or the price of player jerseys, or you can seek out a quiet corner to discuss the nerdy stuff like the how VAR technology works. In Counter-Strike culture, the same thing applies. I will now present an example of how Counter-Strike culture can emerge and become enacted in the game itself. I will use the example of an animated GIF made by a Reddit user illustrating how weapon usage changes over time, when influenced by trends and design changes.

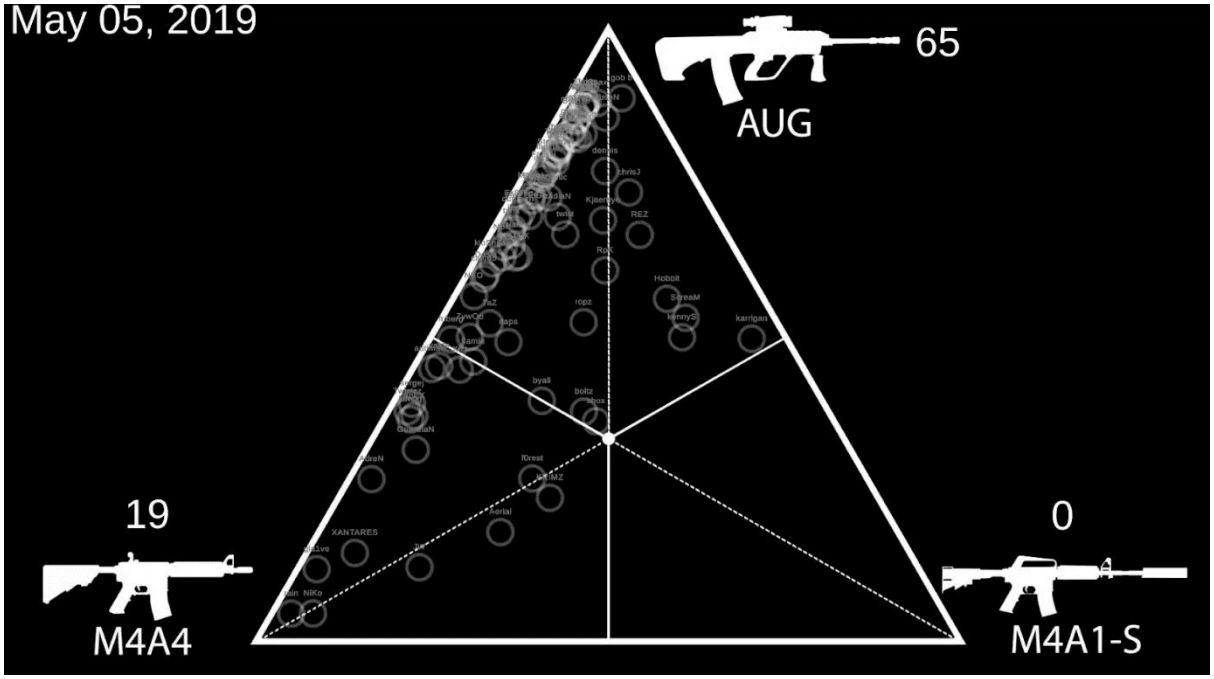

Image 3: Picture of animated GIF showing how weapon use shifted. At the start of the game, only the two M4 versions were used, until the AUG came in favor of the players.

The graphic tells the story of how professional players shied away from using the AUG (an automatic rifle with a small sniper-scope), something that has been happening since the game's inception. An old veteran of the game, now acting as coach for the Danish team Astralis, suggested that there has always been a "gentleman's agreement not to use the weapon" (Sørensen on HLTV.org, 2018). In a game update from 2018, the developers lowered the price of the rifle from $3300 to $3150. This meant that players could now buy the weapon and still afford essential grenades in money pressed rounds, which caused a slow increase in the use of the weapon. The slow increase started to snowball, and soon every team was using the weapon. Then, the game developers increased to the price of the weapon again, returning it to its original $3300 price, but the players kept using it. Lowering the price had made them try it out, and when they finally did, breaking the age old "gentleman's agreement" in the process, they found that the weapon served a powerful purpose in many situations, and because Counter-Strike players so frequently share their experiences, this trend spread quickly. This in turn, changed the way Counter-Terrorists are able to defend their bombsites, because the gun allows them to take more aggressive positions and survive. The change was one of the few times the "metagame" (Boluk and LeMieux, 2017) of Counter-Strike has changed dramatically because of specific design decisions, and it has been discussed heavily amongst players. Some are still for, against or want other changes implemented to the weapon. Others discuss how the change itself came about, pondering what other ways the game might change in the future.

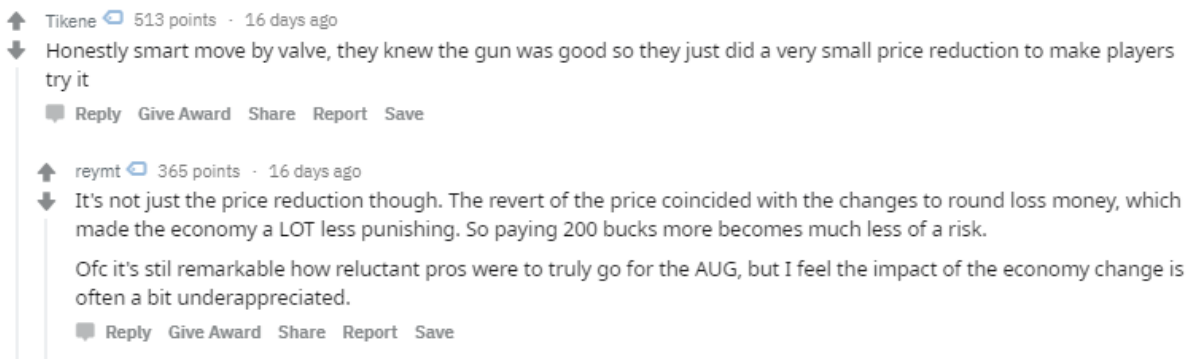

Image 4: An exchange between two Reddit users discussing the graph:

Here the Reddit user Tikene is praising the game designers for their foresight in player behavior, stating how the price reduction was the factor that made players try the gun. User Reymt answers back, how the change actually also coincided with another change to what is known as the "round loss bonus" system. A system that now ensures that the losing side of a match, will receive exponentially more money for each round they lose, balancing out the game to prevent teams from getting "stomped", to lose by embarrassing margins. The user is pointing out that since this system became even more lenient, player in general will risk buying more expensive equipment. Additionally, he notes how remarkable it is that this gun went unused for so long, apparently because of some ingrained cultural rule. The exchange serves the purpose of highlighting how in-depth and game related the discussions on Reddit are. Visiting Reddit is arguably as big a part of being in the community as playing the game itself. As with football, in-depth discussions are not possible during play or while watching games together, there must be a forum for such things, whether they are at the clubhouse, a pub or on Reddit. Whenever I visited the Counter-Strike subreddit, I soon after felt the urge to play. To enter the game and test out whether it was true that "Strafing up ladders makes your ladder movement speed 40% faster" or try to do my best impression of that guy, who got five headshots with the Desert Eagle on Dust 2. Visiting that place, reading the conversations, watching the videos and learning the tips, is me as a fan engaging in the mythos of Counter-Strike. I would argue that this constitutes "active creation of belief" (Murray, 1997). The players make meaning and stories out of the wins and losses and intense situations. They refer and talk about these happenings, the ingenious use of a flashbang, the one-versus-five situation that went the way of the one player. When those stories are shared and read by other inhabitants, it becomes "collective creation of belief" (Pearce, 2016) despite the fact that the stories are not told from one humanoid avatar to another inside a three-dimensional landscape, these stories become epic fictions to the inhabitants of Counter-Strike, as thus create the world. The Counter-Strike world is one where the inhabitants share a flow of information and ideas through different media and platforms. The Counter-Strike world is a *converging* world (Jenkins, 2016) and it is a hybrid world.

A very concrete example of how media converges between Reddit and the Counter-Strike game itself, is that some players will shout out "Reddit!" when they perform well in the game and are recording or streaming their gameplay at that time. This trend has evolved because very good players, who are also streaming their gameplay, will have clips of their prowess uploaded to Reddit. If the clip is good enough, it will be upvoted and have its visibility improved, serving as a status symbol for the player. Shouting "Reddit" after a good play has therefore become a meme to some, but also serves as an example of the interconnectedness between the two spaces. Performing a good play and recording it in Counter-Strike simultaneously creates content for Reddit. Reading an informed discussion on which rifle is better on Reddit in turn could affect how a player acts in the game. This brilliantly describes the significance of visiting the site as an ethnographer, and that is simply, that it is significant for any player of the game to do so. Being aware of the multi-sitedness of online games, enables the ethnographer to experience the games culture in ways they are not expressed within the game itself. It is how the games culture mimics the complexity of dynamic field sites of the actual world, and just as they should do it there, so too should ethnographers "follow the actor, people, metaphor and artifact" in video game worlds, whether they are coherent or incoherent. Both can be said to have emerging cultures, which have a sense of worldness to them.

Embodiment in Counter-Strike

Embodiment in Counter-Strike is at first glance very different from the embodiment described as a "lasting representation of the self" by virtual ethnographers (Boellstorff et al., 2016). The player in Counter-Strike cannot create this continuous avatar form or customize the way their virtual body looks. There are avatars in Counter-Strike, but they are not chosen by the players. Instead, they come in form of different looking terrorist and counter-terrorist models, which are distributed between players at random. They have no impact on how the game plays and arguably do not affect player identity.

Image 5: Screenshot taken from CT Spawn area, showing two Counter-terrorist avatars from my field of view

In a typical game, players are not referred to by their avatar, but instead by their chosen nickname which can be changed at any time. What the actual model of the player looks like is of little to no importance, except for the fact that it serves to distinguish between ally and opponent. Furthermore, a player's avatar is only in existence for the duration of one game. Even if the player chooses to play more games on the same day, he or she will do so as different avatars. While playing the game, the player has no way of seeing him or herself in avatar form. In virtual worlds, Avatarization is both the result of meticulous design decisions when the player creates the avatar, but also the bond the player forms with how the avatar looks and the lasting representation of the player's self it becomes (Taylor, 2006).

I argue however, that although that particular form of avatarization is impossible in Counter-Strike, avatarization still happens to a high degree. The avatarization of the player is represented

by the embodied and immersive sensation of being *present* in a virtual space through the phenomenon of becoming a cyborg. Immersion, flow and the mediation between body and computer creates the embodied *presence* as a cyborg, but more importantly it also enables gameplay *as* a cyborg. As a cyborg in Counter-Strike, I exist as a field of view, looking out through a set of eyes at a pair of hands holding a gun, with a crosshair in the middle of my sight. I am avatarized, not as a customized model, but in the sense that I am *present* as a hybrid version of myself. While I undertook my fieldwork, I observed my fellow players as cyborgs of their own. When I did, I saw distinct patterns for each cyborg. I saw the particularities of the way they controlled and navigated themselves through the world. I saw whether they moved with confidence, or whether they were stricken with nervous twitches. I saw how well they traversed and knew the maps, how well they were able to anticipate the movements of the enemy, and I heard how they communicated their thoughts, their ideas and their team banter. Behind all these observations, there was a distinct presence of *someone*. I have described how the ethnography of dance has been an inspiration to this thesis, and the reason is that I can recognize what the ethnographers of dance express about the codified, cultural meaning of movement in my own observations. I won't step into the age-old cliché and say that movement in Counter-Strike is like a dance, but then again, I just might. In Counter-Strike, players cannot choose their hair color or put on different sets of clothes to express their identity. But through their movement as cyborgs, they relay a deep sense of intimate understanding of who they are. Using ethnography of dance is grounded towards what happens in the body, focusing on doing thick descriptions of embodiment to understand not only *how,* but *why* people move, illuminating the correspondences between different types of dance and their underlying poetic metaphors (Sklar, 1991). I take inspiration from this and will attempt to provide thick descriptions of what happens in the "body" of the cyborg.

During my fieldwork I attempted to observe both my own and my fellow players' movements, to understand how each player differed. Each player had a certain way they moved, and that made each players presence and identity distinct. Within Counter-Strike one can move with a fluidity and speed that is simply not possible in the actual world. When engaging in a firefight, the term "dance of death" quite literally comes to mind because of the many complex ways one can weave

in-and-out of cover to either kill or be killed. The visceral responses to these situations are intense. I often noticed that I would lean my body to the left or right, when I was trying to glance sideways from a position of cover in the game, which is of course a totally useless thing to do, since leaning my body in the real world does not move my body in the game. But I moved as something other than myself, as a secondary self. Other times I would duck my head if I felt it was exposed while crouching behind a plateau, or if I saw someone throw a grenade towards me I might also instinctually duck or lean away to avoid getting hit. There existed a clear connection between what was happening in the game and what was happening in my body. Examining this feeling of embodiment, I observed it as a "cybernetic" creation of self. I was not outside the game, and the game not outside me. The game and myself were both part of an interconnected loop, through which my identity as a Counter-Strike player was being born. I observe this identity as a secondary physiological entity. This entity is a construct, born from the interplay between player, machine and avatar, a cyborg and a conceptualization of subjectivity (Haraway, 1991). I would argue that this is what players *are* in Counter-Strike, and probably other games as well. They are conceptualizations of subjectivity, and through each players recognition of the other, a social construction of an avatar identity is formed. This is what I attempted to ethnographically observe. I would argue, contrary to Boellstorff et al. (2016) that persistence and customization is not necessary for avatarization to occur. There is a distinct creation of an avatar that happens for each player in every game of Counter-Strike, because they are present as their cyborgian selves and through that presence, an identity is formed.

Observations of bunnyhopping

As I carried out my field work, I took note of how different movements within the game, seemed to carry with them certain meanings based on how they were performed, and under which circumstances. The ability to jump, crouch, sneak and spin around in a 180-degree motion to shoot back at a *lurker* (a player that goes rogue into enemy territory) all showcased different aspects of expertise. The main example I want to illustrate is the concept of *bunnyhopping*, a movement that is considered a trademark of high skill and stylistic refinement in a player. Bunnyhopping is a technique that allows a player to increase his movement speed by jumping continuously while

strafing in the air, exploiting the movement mechanics by gaining speed in the air and then jumping at the exact time of landing, staying airborne for as long as possible. It is extremely difficult to explain in words, which is why it is ever more difficult to do in the game, and only few players can do it effectively. If executed properly however, it is a critical skill, and the player can gain big advantages by being the first to get to a specific place on the map. Bunnyhopping under pressure, in *clutch* situations, is even harder and more admirable. Bunnyhopping looks, in-game, a bit as it sounds, silly. It doesn't fit the bloody nature of the game, as it looks like an armed person skipping merrily along. Bunnyhopping looks almost jolly in comparison to how players normally move. Normally, players maintain what is known as *crosshair placement*. This means, that players who are skilled at the game, always keep their crosshair fixed on the edge of every wall or construction at head height in an attempt to predict where enemies might appear.

Image 6: A graphically altered screenshot showing the optimal place for crosshair placement

Moving while maintaining crosshair placement, if done elegantly looks smooth, but also somewhat mechanical as the crosshair continuously snaps onto new edges where enemies might

appear. Bunnyhopping on the other hand is a much freer flowing movement. There is a kind of softness and carelessness to it, which is heavily contradicted by the normal assertiveness that comes with having good crosshair placement. Therefore, the movement is hard to do under pressure, because it requires the player to be in this careless, playful state to perform the movement, comparable to a soldier skipping happily along the street of a city infested with snipers. The few times I myself attempted this movement during my fieldwork, were times where I was playing very well, and was strongly confident in my abilities to win. Other times, when I watched others do it, it felt almost reassuring. As though one could sense the determined and tenacious presence that emanated from them as they bunnyhopped along, gun in hand.

In the above example, I state how I *watched* other players bunnyhopping, feeling a presence from them. To explain what I mean by that, I should start by saying that watching, in this case, does not mean that I moved as my own cyborgian self, and looked through my point of view at another player. This did happen sometimes, but the more profound insight came from *spectating* other players. Spectating happens when a player dies in the middle of a round. The player is now able to look through the eyes of their teammates, and follows the remainder of the round this way, able to shift perspectives between the players that are still alive on the team. During the field work, I discovered how this situation could sometimes feel very intimate. This was especially likely to happen in situations where there was only one player left with four teammates watching through his field of view. This poor lonely player would then be expected to *clutch*, winning the round in a so called "1 versus X" situation. This can be a daunting task, especially if the round-win means the difference between *eco'ing*, saving money in the next round and most likely loosing, or having a *full buy*, with an optimised chance to win the next round. Being the last player alive comes with the knowledge that all other players on the team are spectating you, which can increase the amount of nerves, as it can be stressful knowing that four people are literally seeing the world through your eyes in a do or die situation. What is so interesting about this phenomenon in Counter-Strike, is that nervousness can be observable, because the game is played with computer mice often set to high sensitivity. The result of this, is that a shaky hand becomes mediated as a shaky crosshair which moves wobbly across the screen. Nerves can also be projected as a general awkwardness in movement. The player might act flustered and suddenly take out a grenade, or jump randomly,

because of a missed button on the keyboard. Sometimes the awkward spectacle of a player attempting a clutch is observed in total silence and ignored, with everyone seemingly feeling the pain of the situation. Other times players will speak, either to help or to ridicule. A player might say "calm down, you got this. Deep breath dude" in a jovial manner, to lower the tension. Followed by a polite "nice try" (Field Notes, 2019) after the player fails anyway. Other players have less patience with their nervous teammates and might let out audible sighs through their microphone or comment "oh my god you're so bad" in a deprecating tone, or cite the known meme "clutch or kick" (Field Notes, 2019) meaning that if the watched player did not succeed, the rest of the team would kick him from the current game (this is mostly meant as a joke). Because I was seeing the world through this player's eyes I almost felt their pain and desperation as they tried to perform against all odds and their own nerves, watching how this affects their ability to control their hands. There was always this very real sense of someone *being* there, because the rich details of their movement were so obvious, combined with the knowledge that they were embodied in the same way as myself.

Throughout my time in Counter-Strike, I observed interesting movements on several other occasions. It was particularly interesting to observe other players express emotions by moving. Such examples might happen when a player succeeded in a clutch, after which I often saw them doing celebratory spins and jumps or inspecting their weapon (pressing a button makes the avatar showcase the gun)

Image 7: Screenshot of me inspecting my gun with a "Stattrack" counter on it, showing how many kills the specific gun has.

Such expressions of joy are interesting, because they are limited to the movements that can be done in the game. Counter-Strike contains no movement that is innately celebratory. There is no way to make your avatar dance or raise a victorious fist in the air, like in Second Life or World of Warcraft. Instead such movements are improvised by the players. Some like to move their crosshair, and therefore their field of view, wildly around in circles. Generally, the movements will be erratic and absurd in contrast to the standard "crosshair placement" way of playing. Similarly, there are instances where spectated players survive, but still lose the round. A player might be trying to *save* a weapon for the next round, so as not risk losing unnecessary economy. In such cases the player will hide somewhere on the map, hoping not to be found by the opponents before the round ends. In this situation I also noticed players moving their crosshair in wild ways while they were hiding, as if communicating the hopelessness of the situation, and the impatience for the round to end.

The complexity of examining not only what the embodied experience is like for one self, but also to observe others in the same light can be daunting. Playing with others in a multiplayer game like Counter-Strike, on a team with other embodied cyborgs, who appear, as Haraway puts it as conceptualized subjectivities (1991). I often observed how I undertook different roles in different

games, ranging from leadership to more supportive roles depending on the group I found myself in. This in turn tweaked my perception of myself and my sense of embodiment. If I took the leader role, I experience how my perception of my embodied self-changed. My presence became more assertive, and I would direct my team members where to go, *as* my cyborgian self. I thought of tactics and ways to cheer people up *as* my cyborgian self. Other times I would observe this assertiveness in others, who had taken the leader role and experience their directions as coming from that someone who was present inside the game, not a person speaking in a headset somewhere. There were moments when the roles would be negotiated between the players, for instance, the *top fragger* (the person with the most points on the team) would most likely be favored as a leader, but it was far from certain that this player wanted the role. I would argue that this collective creation of group cohesion is in line with Pearce's concept of the social construction of the avatar through intersubjective flow, albeit in a non-persistent, incoherent world. Observing how interconnected cyborgs attempt to develop group cohesion in the form of intersubjective flow is startling in how difficult it is to grasp, but also in how natural it feels to be a part of. Each individual player responds to the actions of his team members and enemies alike as the process of embodied play advances. I was able to notice the effect of this in concrete situations of play, where I found myself alongside a number of skilled players with whom I seamlessly seemed to know and understand their next moves before they happened, and because of this we moved as one unit. Because of my confidence in their abilities, I in turn would play more confidently, reacting to cues from them and communicate with more implicit understanding. As I write this, I can recall what little information I know about these players. Their voices, screen names and Steam profile pictures. But more than that I remember how they *were*. I remember them as an avatar which carried with it identity. These exemplifications invoke Haraway's notion of "networked and collective selves" (1991). During these moments of gameplay, there were no distinction between individuals and machines, only a collective togetherness where actions and reactions existed in a circuit of hybrid bodies in a hybrid world.

Expanding the barriers of the virtual world

The representation of space in virtual worlds is of critical importance to virtual ethnographers, because the three-dimensional, navigable, believable world is what enables it to be inhabited. The representation of virtual space in Counter-Strike is unlike that of virtual worlds. While it does contain metaphors of actual world elements, such as walls, cars and landscapes, the three-dimensional space is geographically finite. In Counter-Strike the player is in one 'map' at a time containing a finite level of space available to the players. Maps function like arenas, where the players spawn on their own ends of the maps. The maps are closed off at the edges, with no way for players to venture out of them. Similarly, there is no way to go from one map to another without first going back to the menu. This creates the feeling of being inside of an arena, further reinforced by the fact that all of the inhabitants on the map spawn in opposite ends of the map with about two-minute intervals as each new round begins, where the bomb site is also reset, ready to be bombed again and blood spatter and bullet holes disappear from all surfaces. The layout of the maps, the architecture and infrastructure are in many ways nonsensical. They include roads that do not lead anywhere, or boxes and plateaus placed in seemingly random spaces. Furthermore, the "bomb sites" (two spots on each map where the terrorists can plant the bomb) do not look or feel like real life bomb targets. One would expect such places to be crowded or of some importance, but in Counter-Strike the target often consists of a few sporadically placed boxes. "Planting the bomb" therefore becomes more of a competitive exercise than a malicious goal. This sort of tactical aspect of the environment is dominant. The sporadically placed items, for instance a car placed in a market without road access, is there for the functional purpose of providing tactical cover for players. There is no fiction behind this to explain the disappearing bullet holes or other unbelievable inconsistencies, the spatiality simply adheres to the rules of the game without any reasoning. As such, the metaphors of the Counter-Strike world do not invoke a sense of being in a continuous, believable world.

The different maps in Counter-Strike do try to convey some kind of fictionalized themes. They take place in different environments and the terrorists and counter-terrorists models differ accordingly

as well. Some maps, like Dust 2, is themed after a middle-eastern city, seemingly in a warlike state. Ruined cars and graffiti on the walls speak of ongoing conflict and the terrorist models look like guerilla fighters, wearing bandanas and sunglasses. However, these seem, to me, like vague fictions, and just like the bomb sites not appearing genuine, the same is true for the themes. The concept of Death in Counter-Strike is not fictionalized either. When a player dies, they become a spectator until the round is over. Then they respawn, ready to fight and die again. However, this lack of fiction never resulted in a loss of immersion. My immersion simply had no connection to the fiction. According to Juul, it is normal for games to utilize tools like graphics and sounds to cue the players into their fictional worlds. However, Juul states that in-spite of these invitations to join the world, players may "refuse the invitation and still play the game" (Juul, 2005:139). This happens when the player does not accept or simply disregards the fictional elements of the game and chooses to play the game solely through its rules. Juul uses the game Quake 3 as an example. The game is a first-person shooter game set in the future featuring laser snipers and other futuristic weaponry. However, the players do not have buy into this premise of futuristic gladiatorial combat to play and enjoy the experience. The same is true for Counter-Strike, which offers a fiction of Terrorists versus Counter-Terrorists in a bomb defusal scenario. However, at no point does the fiction of bomb exploding seem to have an impact on the players. What has an impact is whether or not the bomb exploding results in winning or losing the game. As such, the immersion does not come from the fiction, but from the embodied experience of being present in the game world with others, in a competitive and playful setting. However, this is not true for all players of Counter-Strike.

I once hosted an introductory course to eSports for ten people in Copenhagen's municipality. During the course, I had them sit down at ten computers to play a standard five-versus-five match. None of the participants had played the game before, and of course they had some difficulties playing the game, finding their way around the maps and their accuracy was, not surprisingly, atrocious. From speaking to the participants afterwards, I learned that most of them had a lot of fun and had thought the game was very exciting and immersive. To my surprise, they said things like "it felt just like a real war" and "I was so scared of getting killed". A participant even said that she "had trouble choosing whether or not she wanted to be a policeman or a terrorist, because she

liked both ideas", as if she had had an immersive, almost role play like experience. I find these statements very amusing and interesting, because they so sharply contrast my own opinion of the game. The idea of being afraid to die in Counter-Strike is a foreign concept to me. Not because I am a fearless individual, but because death in Counter-Strike has been trivialized for me. It is simply part of the rules, and if I can sacrifice the "life" of my avatar to win the round for my team, I will do so with no hesitation, while my team would praise me, not for my "heroic actions" but simply for my smart play. This difference in perception of the game, highlights my previous point about this fieldwork being about the mundane in Counter-Strike. A fieldwork conducted by one of the workshop participants would perhaps have placed a bigger focus on the fiction of the game. The mundane, everyday life of those who play the game and rejecting its fiction is what is being presented in this thesis, and I would argue that the level of embodiment that I, and other regular players of the game experience is most likely different to the more fictionalized immersion that I speculate the people from the municipality felt. This argument does have a serious limitation, in that I cannot be sure whether or not my fellow players felt embodied in the same way as myself.

During my field work I did not encounter a single player who in any way referenced the themes or the fiction of the game. Instead, they refer to rules when they speak. The majority of voice communication in Counter-Strike consists of what is called *info*. Calling out numbers and positions, like "three catwalk", indicating that three enemies are moving on a raised platform on the map Dust 2, or "all Monster! All Monster!" to inform that all enemies are storming through a tunnel painted with graffiti depicting a monster, on the map Overpass. All of these named places of the maps come with a specific meaning. I would argue therefore, that the spatial surroundings in Counter-Strike do function as metaphors, because they function as objects that relay Counter-Strike culture. I argue that there exists a spatial awareness that is unique to Counter-Strike, and that one *can* feel a sense of space related familiarity inside it. The places in Counter-Strike, while they do not mimic the actual world, can still create a feeling of the known. I have spent more than two-thousand hours in the game, and in certain maps, in all senses of the expression I know my way around. The feeling of entering a known map, is much the same as stepping onto a football pitch and feel at home on this grassy enclosed arena or stepping onto a badminton court, racket in hand. Further research is needed to examine this phenomenon in other incoherent game worlds,

but I would argue that the spatiality of incoherent worlds can evoke the same sense of belonging and place, as conventional virtual worlds. Boellstorff claims that for an online space to become a *space* it must be able to contain several people at once, and those people should be able to enact some form of cultural act, which includes the place in its meaning, for example building a sleazy nightclub on a beach only to have it demonstrated against by angry neighbors (Boellstorff, 2008). I would argue that the senses of place and the spatiality of Counter-Strike invokes meaning to the inhabitants of its hybrid world. The meaning making happens through play, but also through the culture which emerges in the various sites of the hybrid world.

Persistent Hybrid Worlds

In virtual worlds, the concept of persistence entails a certainty that the world is going to be there when the inhabitants leave and come back the next day. Jensen (2016) and Boellstorff et al. (2016) argue that this persistence allows the inhabitants of the world to form lasting bonds in a world that stays active in their absence as well as impacting the culture of the world. Arguably, because the type of virtual world presented by contemporary scholars mimic the real world in so many ways, it might be that the way online cultures are presented in such worlds, literally as three-dimensional humanoid characters partaking in activities together, has been more appealing and interesting for virtual ethnographers. Much in the same way as the virtual cultures can mimic actual world cultures, for example the idea that a virtual dance club can form, and that the inhabitants of the virtual world go to this club to dance with their avatars. In the same way, it is understandable that they have been used as testing grounds for how to apply classic ethnography in the virtual. Methodologies like participant observation or interviews can be conducted in ways that are similar to how they would normally be performed. By moving one's humanoid avatar from her home to the club, where she then begins interviewing the guests. Perhaps it is time for virtual ethnography to expand its understanding of what constitutes a virtual world. As demonstrated with the game Counter-Strike, virtual worlds can be understood in significantly broader terms than formulated by the pioneering scholars of virtual ethnography. Counter-Strike exemplifies a virtual world, that is characterized by cultural hybridity, as the Counter-Strike game culture is observable not only *in* the game, but also in other virtual spaces, such as Reddit. This

raises a number of questions concerning the boundaries of digital games and virtual worlds: Where is the culture of the game located? How can we find and study such boundless game cultures? What is the arguments in favor of a narrow conceptualization of game culture, and what are the costs? While the narrow conceptualization of game culture posited by Boellstorff, Pearce and Nardi is practical when it comes to importing and translating classic anthropological methodologies, such as ethnography, it also inhibits the study of other types of games – to which there are countless that do not resemble 'the world' as we know it – and it delimits our understanding of virtual ethnography and the role of the virtual ethnographer in game studies, but also in wider multi-sited digital ethnography and digital culture in general. Moreover, Boellstorff et al. (2016) have claimed that Counter-Strike specifically cannot be considered a virtual world because it is not persistent. However, if we foreground the cultural aspects and the cultural hybridity of virtual worlds, the current definition of persistence is challenged. In other words, because persistence is defined by being always *on* whether the player is playing or not, Counter-Strike is also in the sense of cultural hybridity always on, because the culture is in part located and generated in other spaces than the game space. Because the game itself can be understood as not only a fictional game but also a rule-based game, cultures of developing ways of playing are developed not only in the game but also in other spaces outside the game, namely on Reddit in this case. This means culture and meaning is created in the hybrid game world which consists of the game itself and countless other spaces where culture can emerge. This happens whether the player partakes or not, and therefore the game stays *on*. Thus, in response to Boellstorff (2008) we may say that the cultures of a game can also play out, outside of the game itself. We might say that techné can happen in multiple spaces as well, questioning the desire to investigate a virtual world in its own terms. A broader conception of what a virtual world is and where culture can be found, would mean that we could understand overlooked game culture practices of – instead of only *in* – Second Life. I would argue, that if we understand Second Life as a hybrid world instead of a virtual world, observing two Second Life inhabitants who discuss party plans on a forum instead of *in* Second Life, would be just as crucial if the goal was to investigate the world "on its own terms" because that forum is *part of those terms.*

We may also now respond to Nardi (2009) and Pearce (2009) who do venture beyond the three-dimensional borders of their chosen worlds in their multi sited research, but still maintains

conventions of what constitutes a virtual world. To them we might argue that the creation of avatars and identity is possible in incoherent worlds, by integrating Haraway's conception of the cyborg and the networked self. We might argue that many forms of Spatiality can be believable and invoke the sense of *being there*, even if they do not look like anything we have ever seen before. Furthermore, we could say that the world of Counter-Strike is inhabitable in-spite of its incoherence, because as we have argued above we can understand it as a hybrid world populated by individuals who create identities in it and contribute to its culture. In that sense, we can view the world of Counter-Strike as a social world, and for that reason we can and should investigate it using virtual ethnography.

Towards a new trajectory for virtual inquiry: Cyborg ethnography

So what transpired when we expanded the conception of virtual worlds and conducted an ethnography in Counter-Strike based on the thinking of Boellstorff, Pearce and Nardi? What new aspects and understandings of virtual ethnography and the role of the ethnographer emerged? And how can we move forward in the quest of expanding virtual worlds and our understanding of the cultures that they embed? With a double-fold objective I would propose of 'cyborg ethnography' as an expanding concept with the aims of 1) Enabling ethnographers to investigate games that are not world-like in the Boellstorff et al. tradition. For example, worlds that are fast paced and competitive, taking place in smaller and recurring arenas like Counter-Strike. Moreover, cyborg ethnography might be applicable to other types of game worlds. For example, abstract worlds (Juul, 2005) such as Tetris, what seems to be an untouchable game for virtual ethnography by investigating, for example, how it feels to sort, order and fit geometric pieces together, how this experience may differ across cultures, as well as illuminate the possible culture around playing Tetris. 2) To allow for new understandings of game cultures and game worlds by positioning the ethnographer as a cyborg, co-constituted by avatar, machine and game. In addition, this also provides agency to the game software itself as a cultural object, as the ethnographer is able to observe the feedback loop between herself, the game software and the other present cyborgs.

Cyborg ethnography is a way for the ethnographer to step into new game worlds as a participating, observing cyborg, instantiated not *just* as a virtual entity but also bodily present, able to observe herself and others in that state, drawing on phenomenology and the idea that perception is embodied. The term arose as a need I experienced during my fieldwork in Counter-Strike. First of all, I would never be able to do virtual ethnography in a game like Counter-Strike based on the current thinking of virtual worlds. Secondly, even if I had tried to use the methodological framework in Counter-Strike, meaning a virtual copy of classic ethnography, I wouldn't have been able to understand or investigate the significant role of movement in avatarization, for instance the experience of bunnyhopping provided insights that would be very hard to get, had I just been interviewing players about Counter-Strike. Adding to that, interviews in the game would be next to impossible, because they would interrupt the flow of information that is so vital to the game. Instead I focused on the bodily experience. Movement is a detrimental feature in Counter-Strike. A lack of movement means virtual death, which means that in order to experience immersion and flow, one must be able to master the mechanics to a certain degree. One could argue that Nardi demonstrates an aptitude for movement and mechanics in World of Warcraft, and that this is the determining factor that enables her to access deeper aspects of her field. This is partly true, because movement and the mastery of mechanics is important in World of Warcraft, however as Nardi describes, the determining factors for reaching deeper understandings of World of Warcraft are social capital and collaboration. Furthermore, Nardi never engages with the bodily aspects of participating in World of Warcraft, perhaps because it is not as central a part of the game. This indicates why the ethnographic investigation of different games require different approaches. Cyborg ethnography can be utilized to uncover elements of the social in spaces where such elements are otherwise unobtrusive, again drawing a parallel to the ethnography of dance. It can be used to get a better understanding of the intimate relationship between the player and game software itself, and finally to concentrate attention towards how the game enables and facilitates states of intersubjective flow between players.

Conclusion

This thesis set out to explore the questions: How can we expand the concept of virtual worlds and how does that reconfigure virtual ethnography? To answer these questions, the thesis undertakes a close-reading of three pioneering works within virtual ethnography and analyzes and challenges key concepts and conventions within the field. It is argued that the conception of what may constitute a virtual world is too narrow, which is further contested through a short ethnographic study in the game, Counter-Strike. Counter-Strike has not only been posited as a non-world by the authors as it does not live up to their criteria of 'persistence' but it also differs significantly from the types of game worlds that the authors have explored and build the thinking of virtual ethnography on. The aim of the fieldwork is methodological and not analytical; it aims to enhance knowledge of virtual ethnography, not the game culture in and around Counter Strike. The thesis proposes that games such as Counter-Strike and perhaps many others, can be thought of as taking place in hybrid worlds spanning many different field sites that continuously negotiate and develop culture. Because of this, it is argued that such worlds are persistent as well and can and should be studied ethnographically. Based on the fieldwork and on Donna Haraway's thinking of cyborgs and man-machine relations, the thesis proceeds with a conception of the term, cyborg ethnography, as a new development to virtual ethnography. Cyborg ethnography, it is argued, enables ethnographic inquiry in culture in and around games that has conventionally been overlooked, arguably as a result of a narrow conceptualization of 'virtual worlds. The thesis concludes that the bodily dimension and the role of the body in game cultures and game experiences can be fruitfully and innovatively examined with a phenomenological approach and that this will contribute to the advancement of virtual ethnography, enabling enquiry into a broader spectrum of games.

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