The Study of Cultures Online:
Some Methodological and Ethical Tensions

R.M. Milner

This paper, birthed out of personal, methodological and ethical tension, examines the study of cultures online. Reflecting on my previous research on fans of the videogame series Fallout, *I argue anyone studying interaction online, and making cultural claims based on these studies, must be mindful of two tensions. First, the study of cultures online demands we decide whether we frame online interaction as 'place' or as 'text'. Next, the study of cultures online demands we decide whether we construct our role as 'participant' or 'observer'. These tensions have methodological and ethical dimensions. Ultimately, scholars of cultures online must make these decisions reflexively. Their research questions should work in concert with their methods, and their claims must be appropriate for the methodological and ethical positions they take.*

Keywords: culture, online, methods, discourse, ethnography

A budding methodological crisis

This paper is birthed out of a personal methodological tension, which I'm trying to address before it grows into a crisis. I have, whenever pressed, essentialized my research as the study of *cultures* online. I'm interested in the ways our digitally-mediated interactions create and reflect cultures, subcultures, and social collectives. Coming from the Communication discipline, this project has bent toward the discursive: the study of social texts. In particular, I've closely followed the tenets of discourse analysis (e.g., Fairclough 2003, Mautner 2005, Tracy 2001) in my own research. I've only given minimal attention to how a detached observation of texts online might be inadequate for understanding cultures online.

My goal here is to correct this, to problematize what has been accepted unproblematically in my own research. I call this a *personal* reflection because I don't aim to decide for anyone else how to conduct research. Any project demands independent contextual sensitivity, especially regarding methods and ethics. Rather, I aim to reflect on broader methodological and ethical issues and critically apply them to my own methods. My hope is that this reflection, coupled with a clear outline of some of the tensions inherent to the study of cultures on-

line, will be useful to other scholars grappling with the same questions. This outline might point out some prescient questions, if not easy answers.

The discussion I join is an increasingly important one. It's not a new one. Methods textbooks for qualitative data online have been around for years (e.g., Jones 1999, Hine 2005b, Markham and Baym 2009), and digitally-mediated interaction is gaining prevalence in qualitative analysis across disciplines. As Hine (2005a, 1) argues, 'there are few researchers in the social sciences or humanities who could not find some aspect of their research interest manifested on the internet'. This is true whether your study culture discursively (Herring 2001, Mautner 2005) or ethnographically (Hine 2000, Markham 1998).

These methods texts argue the study of cultures online isn't as simple as replicating old methods in new contexts. Markham (2008, 250) says 'new communication technologies privilege and highlight certain features of interaction while obscuring others, confounding traditional methods of capturing and examining the formative elements of relationships, organizations, communities and cultures'. Gajjala (2002, 184) says questions of cultural representation 'are complicated by the nature of the medium for communication, which blurs various categories such as public/private, audience/author, producer/consumer,

and text/human subject'. In short, new communicative contexts mean new methodological tensions.

In this essay, I'll focus on the two methodological tensions most salient to my own research. I'll therefore address two dyads: one dealing with the nature of the object studied and the other with the role of the researcher in that study. In regards to the object of study, there's a tension between whether cultures online should be considered place or text. Regarding the role of the researcher in analysis of cultures online, there's a tension between whether the researcher should be a participant or an observer. These two dyads will be the source of this reflection, even as I admit they're an oversimplification of a myriad of methodological issues and perspectives.

The methodological tensions highlighted here are riddled with ethical tensions because:

in a very real sense, every method decision is an ethics decision, in that these decisions have consequences for not just research design but also the identity of participants, the outcomes of our studies, and the character of knowledge which inevitably grows out of fieldwork (Markham 2008, 251).

Therefore, in each dyad, I'll focus on the ethical as well as the methodological. I'll ask what makes for sufficiently honest or accurate representation when studying cultures

online; to what extent should we treat discourse as public and published; and to what extent are we responsible for revealing ourselves and our research purposes to those we study. First, however, I'll provide background to my own research, the methodological assumptions that underpin it, and the methodological questions that birthed this budding crisis.

Culture and discourse in the study of Fallout fans

In many ways, the field of 'online ethnography' spawned this reflection (Hine 2000, 2005b; Markham 1998, 2008; Miller and Slater 2000). My engagement with this field first caused me to wonder if my methods matched my claims. When I read Markham's (2008) discussion of methods, politics, and ethics in ethnography online, it haunted me for days. For a communication scholar who was content with keeping analysis at the level of discourse, Markham's warning about 'interpreting the other as text' (251), instead of fully sentient subjects, resonated. Was it essentialist or reductionist to assume that silently analyzing 'discourse' from a forum, comments section, blog, chatroom, or Twitter feed was good enough to get to 'culture'? Methodological work on online ethnography provided guidance as I began to problematize my own notions of what 'culture' and 'discourse' might mean to a researcher of interaction online.

I recognize 'culture' and 'discourse' are not simple terms, even less so when tied to interaction online. 'Culture' has meant many things to many different scholars over the years, and 'discourse' is just as ubiquitous and amorphous. However, each of these ideas is essential as I problematize the methods and ethics of my own research. I recognize culture is something of a chimera: an explanatory 'god-term' for broad practices and perspectives that can't easily fit into one word. It's often even useful to write it in the plural, acknowledging that we exist in a social world of many diverse, contradictory, and overlapping 'cultures'.

However, it's a useful chimera, in that it gives us a way to understand social processes as intricately tied together, as socially-constructed. When I say my goal has been the study of 'cultures online', I mean I'm working toward a better understanding of practices that exist in the mediated interplay of micro-level interactions and macro-level social processes. In this sense, I rely on Geertz' (1973) foundational definition: that the study of culture is the study of 'representations'. A sensitivity to representations means I foreground 'discourses' as a methodological tool to understand culture. I see discourses as the means of cultural production and reproduction. Discourses are the social practices that reflect and reproduce culture. This position is common in

discourse analysis (see Fairclough 1989, 2003, van Dijk 1997, 2009).

Before I read Markham's (2008) work, I took for granted that discursive observation was a sufficient method for studying cultures online. In my research on the videogame series *Fallout* (Milner 2009, 2010, 2011), I used discursive observation to study how fans and producers of the series engaged with each other on the series' official website. *Fallout* 1 and 2 were computer games released in 1997 and 1998 to much critical acclaim, if not wide commercial success. The fans they did garner developed a reputation for intense devotion, however. They populated several thriving fan sites, online spaces of interaction and engagement. On these sites, fans posted advice, information, screenshots, art, modifications to the game, etc. These collectives continued to produce and interact, even as *Fallout*'s developers, Interplay Studios, faced financial trouble and *Fallout* 3 became a fleeting hope.

In 2004, there was an announcement about *Fallout* 3: the title had been sold to Bethesda Softworks, an industry giant. *Fallout* 3 was to-be updated and re-imagined. Between 2004 and 2008 (when *Fallout* 3 was released), fans of the series engaged with Bethesda Studios directly in order to influence this process. They became fixtures on Bethesda's forum space and interacted with producers and other fans of the game, as they debated what *Fallout* 3 should become. As I explored the agonism and controversy in the year leading up to the release of *Fallout* 3, I took the message board posts I collected and analyzed them as public texts. I observed from afar, reasoning that the posts were no different than letters to the editor or television commercials or political addresses.

The study did produce results. Or rather, I made arguments about cultural norms and social practices based on my observations. I argued *Fallout* fans were doing cultural work for immaterial ends: a better *Fallout* 3. I said they were 'working for the text' online (Milner 2009), engaging as a loosely-organized subcultural collective that would be impossible without mediation. I characterized fans' perceptions, goals, and even personalities, as managerial, antagonistic, cynical, or deferential, solely by reading their posts (Milner 2010). I went so far as to claim *Fallout* fans are exemplars of Lévy's (1997) 'knowledge communities': mediated subcultures built around information and interpretation (Milner 2011).

My point is not that these results are invalid, or even that my methods were dubious. Instead, I bring them up because they need to be questioned, along with what I argued from that research. I made many claims about culture and discourse online in those studies, and did so without enough critical reflection on my methods. I read the forum as a text, but reported it like a place. I

observed discourses, but reported like I was a participant in a culture. I will reflect on these methodological and ethical tensions now. I hope the practice provides utility to future research on cultures online.

Methodological and Ethical Tensions: Place/Text

The dyad. This dyad pertains to how we conceive of the cultures we study. In Hine's (2000) terms, do we see 'the internet' as culture or cultural artefact? In Markham's (1998) terms, do we see 'the internet' as a tool or a place or a way of being? In my terms, is the interaction that occurs online to been seen as a place or as a text? I mean here that we might first frame cultures online as being a bounded 'place': a community or site much like any traditional site an ethnographer would study. This is true even if 'place' here is metaphorical (i.e., in entirely-digital online environments). Second, we might frame a given online artefact as being 'text', that is communicative representations that are part of a larger cultural system. This is the position I've been most accustomed to in my experience with discourse analysis (e.g., Mautner 2005, Schneider and Foot 2005). I've chosen 'text' and 'place' over other labels because this dichotomy resonates with my own tensions. On one side, it resonates with tendencies to see cultures online as stable, public, and representative of broader societal discourses. On the other side, it resonates with notions of interaction online being dynamic, communal, and relatively-bounded to a metaphoric 'space'. How we interpret this dyad has methodological and ethical implications. I'll discuss each here.

Regarding 'place', the term might apply most easily to 'virtual' game environments, where the technology affords a feeling of place simply by its use of computer-simulation (see Boellstorff 2008 and Williams, et al. 2006). Steinkhuler and Williams (2006) call online games 'third places': 'vital sites' of sociability and recreation that are neither work nor home. But it doesn't take graphical simulations to make online sites feel like 'places'. For instance, Kendall's (2002) 'virtual pub' is entirely text-based, and many studies of interaction online talk in terms of communal space (see Baym 2010, Elliot 2004). Markham (1998, 17) says what's important is a sense of connection:

> Although cyberspace is nothing more or less than a network of computer systems passing digitized strings of information back and forth through copper or fiber-optic cables, people who connect to this network often feel a *sense of presence* when they are online. Even in purely text-based online contexts, people establish and maintain intimate friendships, romantic relationships, and stable

communities.

Markham is very aware of her own use of spatial metaphors in her research. 'I can't help but talk about *going* to various *locations* or *places* where I meet and talk with people… Spatial metaphors are certainly ingrained in our language; we hardly notice how much we use them' (1998, 40, original emphasis). Some might point to the word 'sense' as evidence the community metaphor doesn't work for online interaction, because the best a sense can provide is something 'virtual'. Yet, others see the virtual as very real. For instance, both Baym (2010) and Chayko (2008) argue we should expand our notion of community from geography to that of more interactional criteria like social capital, shared practices, collective identity.

Markham (1998) says spatial metaphors establish a 'sense of being' in interactions online. This moves beyond a 'textual' understanding discourse online. For instance, Markham (2008) tells the story of how she framed some conversational data as 'interview texts' and therefore subjected it to unnecessary 'clean up'. This yielded less fruitful results than when she framed the conversations as vibrant, situated interactions full of social cues, conversational asides, and meta-commentary. She found that in 'cleaning up' these transcripts, she was wedging something dynamic into a tidy 'text' box. In the process,

she was missing nuances needed to understand her interaction as socially and culturally contextual. Conceptualizing the interaction less as a tidy text, and more as situated and dynamic, alleviated these shortcomings. Thinking in terms of place meant a more appropriate method and richer results.

But the 'place' metaphor has its limitations. Hine (2000, 27) provides a prescient critique. She warns that, while helpful in validating the attachments and experiences of those using online spaces, an over-reliance on the 'place' metaphor for online interactions can mean analytical blind spots:

> In claiming a new field site for ethnography and focusing on the construction of bounded social space, the proponents of online culture have, however, overplayed the seperatedness of the offline and the online. A focus on community formation and identity play has exacerbated the tendency to see internet spaces as self-contained cultures...Observing online phenomena in isolation discounts social processes offline which contribute to an understanding of use of the internet as a meaningful thing to do.

Hine's answer is to couple communal understanding with sensitivity to how discourse online works as cultural 'text'. This perspective appreciates the potential for online cultures to exist as a bound-

ed 'place', while interplaying with broader cultural 'texts'. This is akin to Markham's (1998) argument we understand technology as a 'tool' as well as a 'place'. While the internet is a 'tool' for building a sense of place, it is also a tool for producing relatively stable texts. A 'text' perspective sees the internet as a medium for the production and maintenance of societal discourses more than as a bounded place of cultural engagement.

Framing the internet as an integrated text rather than a bounded place fits with a trend in study of interaction online. Studies of 'the internet in everyday life' (see Wellman and Haythornethwaite 2002) argue we stop seeing 'the internet' as an entirely-new place, enabling entirely-new modes of being. Instead we should look at its integration as one part of a broader social system. Taylor (2006), who speaks of the 'play between worlds' that occurs both within and outside of the game *Everquest*, expresses a similar sensitivity to how the 'online' and the 'offline' collide and merge in the lives of players. Those seeing communication online as cultural texts are increasingly calling on us to mix 'online' data with 'offline' data in our research.

Whether our methods should always mix 'online' data and 'offline' data is an open issue to internet researchers. Orgad (2005, 2009) consistently appeals for methods that span the online and the offline,

combining online analysis with offline interviews. Hughey (2008) argues that focusing solely on online interaction (i.e., conceptualizing the research environment as an independent 'place') means ignoring critical offline categories (in this case, racial identity). Conversely, Markham (2008, 268) warns that 'if one is studying internet contexts as cultural formations or social interaction in computer-mediated communication contexts, the inclusion of embodied ways of knowing may be unwarranted and even counterproductive'. If the 'online' is the extent of the 'world' being studied, then it may not be helpful to try to get a more 'authentic' truth behind this world. Boellstorff (2008) makes a similar argument as he defends the study of *Second Life* as a bounded 'culture'. He refuses to conceptualize *Second Life* a hobby for members of other, more 'real' social worlds. Orgad (2005) acknowledges either choice might lead to essentializations or misinterpretations, saying an 'online' emphasis might favour the text and an 'offline' emphasis might favour embodied markers

I argue multiple methods can be used to bridge the online and the offline. Ito et al. (2010) take a 'media ecology' approach when framing the media-use habits of American youth, and therefore use embodied ethnographic methods to better understand mediated interaction. Miller and Slater (2000) conduct an entirely 'online ethnography' of

Trinidadians, but do so mindful that Trinidadian identity is a cultural category embedded in broader contexts. Other authors argue we appreciate how texts and discourses work between sites, and therefore call for methodological sensitivity to 'web spheres' created by hyperlinking (see Beaulieu 2005, Schneider and Foot 2004, 2005). No matter the specific method chosen, appreciating online interaction as a cultural text means a sensitivity to connections.

The 'online' and the 'offline' are connected, just as 'place' and 'text' are connected. Neither of these sets have to be mutually exclusive. For instance, it might be theoretically and methodologically useful to treat the online cultures studied as a 'place', even while acknowledging the 'place' we're studying is producing and responding to cultural 'texts'. In this understanding, the offline and the online are bridged, even when studying a single site. My research on *Fallout* took such an approach. I investigated as if I was in a subcultural place, but I did so acknowledging the discourse there would incorporate and reflect cultural texts. I might have bound my site too narrowly; investigating a single *Fallout* interest site rather than multiple sites, investigating only those sites instead of other sources of data. I might have made claims about a 'place' without fully immersing myself in that 'place'. But I always appreciated that the place I was studying was interplaying with broader cultural texts.

The place/text dyad is largely determined by how the researcher constructs the project: what issues are pertinent, what questions are asked, what claims are made. So we should be *reflexive* in those choices. We should think through their methodological implications, questioning their core assumptions, problematizing their unstated values. Reflexivity is the process of analyzing self and data in concert. It's important because how research is conceptualized has implications for analysis and findings. Constructing a site or network as a 'place' means the researcher might foreground interpersonal relationships, or the relationships between subjects and social structures. It might mean emphasizing the site or network as self-contained or distinct from broader social discourses, even if relationships to broader discourses are appreciated.

Constructing a site or network as a 'text' means the researcher might foreground discourses or arguments, favouring 'social perspectives' instead of 'subject positions'. It might mean emphasizing the site or network as interrelated with broader social discourses, or an exemplar of them. My research on *Fallout* tried to balance both: it studied a place ethnographically, while discursively analyzing texts. This goal was not problematic in and of itself, but should have been approached

reflexively, to ensure my methods matched my claims.

Ethics. The stance a researcher takes in the 'place/text' continuum has ethical dimensions. A critical personal reflection on the ethical implications of methods is more important than a 'right' or 'wrong' answer. This is why the Association of Internet Researchers Ethics White Paper emphasizes the personal responsibility of the researcher in deciding how to construct and intervene into research environments (Ess 2002). However, this does not mean the ethical dimensions of these discussions should not be publically reflected on, or even debated. It is in this reflection and debate we come to make our own ethical stance. This is what I hope to do here.

One prevalent issue in the study of cultures online maps well onto the 'place/text' dyad. Questions of what is 'private' and what is 'public' in communication online are closely related to how we frame the sites we study. If discourse online occurs in a bounded place, it might be given the same ethical esteem of private communication. If discourse online is published text, then it might be subject to the same analysis as public communication. There are implications here for how data is privileged, whose consent is sought, and even whether university Institutional Review Boards (IRBs, those interdepartmental committees that assess the potential harm to 'human

subjects' during research) must be consulted during research design.

Gajjala (2002, 182) argues 'ideas of private/public, closed and open spaces are blurred and reconfigured' when looking at online interaction. The complication comes from the ambiguous nature of communication online. As Garcia et al. (2002, 73) claim, 'the boundaries between public and private "spaces" are drawn differently in online locations than they would be in comparable offline spaces'. In offline conversations, it's often hard to be unintentionally 'public' with discourse intended to be private. Hushed conversations in public spaces might be overheard, but without media, their transmission ends at word of mouth. Even with other media, the implications aren't quite so far-reaching or fast. In online interaction, things are more ambiguous for a few reasons. First, anything said might be more readily stored and replicated. An angry email from a CEO or ex-lover might be transmitted to thousands and thousands without any consent or even awareness from the author. While this replicability was not impossible before the internet, its speed and scope are increased by technological affordances.

Next, the audience of online discourse is not always readily evident. A quick look around a party might reveal who's in earshot and who's likely to transmit a message. A letter or a telephone call is mostly addressed to a specific audience

member. The potential for these messages to reach beyond their intended audiences is relatively limited- excepting rare circumstances like wiretaps. However, online interaction often comes with scores of 'lurkers': those that read online interaction without posting themselves. Those invisible participants are not always considered when people post to forums, comments sections, or profiles. Further, audiences of messages might be inaccurately constructed during online interaction. A post meant for a specific audience might be hyperlinked to from another and the communicator might suddenly have a comment intended to be 'private' interpreted by those they never imagined.

Those seeing online interaction as 'text' might be more inclined to view the interaction that occurs therein as 'public discourse'. This is especially true if the site studied requires no password to access, or comes with no explicit distinctions of secrecy. They might also defend a decision to merely lurk when researching. Denzin (1999) takes this position. Walther (2002) argues discourse on *public* sites is produced inherently for public audiences. Researchers should be included as potential audience members. I took this position in my *Fallout* research, silently analyzing community norms, subcultural ideals, and poster perspectives. I framed my research as one of public texts.

Those seeing online interaction

as 'place' might argue participants in a communal setting are more than a series of published texts and therefore are entitled to more protections than one would give public discourse such as a newspaper clipping or Presidential address. Hine (2000, 23) says 'arguing that online interactions are sufficiently real to provide a context for an ethnographic study has an ethical corollary: online interactions are sufficiently real for participants to feel they have been harmed or their privacy infringed by researchers'. Rutter and Smith (2005) have strong opinions on the 'publicness' of online discourse. They claim that even on sites of 'public' discourse, not all of that discourse is meant to be public, and that not all those posting there intend it to be public, or imagine it being the subject of social research. Further, 'even if we accept the discourse of online interaction as public, what right does that give us as researchers to appropriate that talk and do with it what we will?' (Rutter and Smith 2005, 90).

This is not a tension easily resolved. For instance, Carter (2005, 152) lists a few criteria for ethically studying cultures: non-maleficence, protection of anonymity, confidentiality of the data, and obtaining informed consent. Of those four, 'informed consent' is sacrificed by framing online interaction as text to be observed, but only informed consent. Furthermore, is informed consent even ethnically necessary

on discourse that's public anyway? Informed consent might be even less relevant in many online contexts given the prevalence of pseudonyms and transitory membership. It might be a secondary concern, relegated to a more primary ethical investment in participant wellbeing. Under this perspective, informed consent would only to be an issue when there's need to protect from unnecessary intrusiveness or coercive manipulation.

These ethical questions are ultimately tied to how we frame the cultures we're exploring. A 'text' emphasis might mean the necessity for minimal intervention of any kind with those producing those texts. This perspective might be a good fit for those who want to emphasize things like the natural flow of social discourses, or how members of a culture publically articulate perspectives and roles. However, this emphasis might also mean claims made from the study of those 'texts' must be kept to the realm of the public and discursive. It means extra steps on the part of the researcher to ensure the artefacts studied are indeed conceived of as public, published, and as relatively static representatives broader cultural discourses. Conversely, a conceptualization of online cultures as 'places' might mean the necessity of direct interaction with those creating and participating in that culture. This means claims from the study of those 'places' can be more

'rounded' than those that take a textual perspective. However, this perspective would have to be sensitive to a classic ethnographic trade-off: sacrificing 'generalizability' for 'situatedness'. It also means extra steps on the part of the researcher to ensure participants in the 'place' studied are not being harmed or taken advantage of.

For my research on *Fallout* my lack of reflexivity meant I jumbled the place/text dyad, leading to inconsistencies with ethical ramifications. For the ease of research, I framed the official *Fallout* forum as a 'text' to be analyzed discursively. However, as I approached the 'field', I did so using a spatial metaphor. This meant that I wasn't looking for public perspectives related to broad social discourses. Instead, I was building up paper figures of 'subjects'; assigning personality traits, values, and motivations. And while discourse analysis can certainly serve as 'ideology analysis' when the cognitive elements of discourse are emphasized (see van Dijk 1995), I constructed a community of 'selves' during my analysis of the forum, which wasn't triangulated by cognitive interpretation, ethnographic interaction, or qualitative interview. Markham (2008) was right to warn of interpreting the other as text, but I might have been guilty of the opposite: reading texts and constructing a fictionalized 'other' without sufficient depth to do so. My stance as an observer was also cul-

pable here, which leads to the next section.

Participant/Observer

The dyad. Very closely tied to our conceptions of the interaction we study are our conceptions of the researcher's role in the study. This section will highlight another prominent tension when studying cultures online. The essential question is this: when we engage with cultures online, should we engage as 'participants' or engage as 'observers'? Of course such a question is not unique to cultures online, but the ability to frame just what were studying so freely means that the question here is especially complicated and especially consequential. As Garcia et al. (2009, 58) argue, 'while in the offline world, observation requires at least the minimal participation of "being there," many online settings provide the opportunity for completely unobtrusive observation', and therefore might mean the potential for doing 'ethnography' without ever interacting with the individuals being studied. While perspectives from the last section might influence perspectives taken here, this is not a given. A 'place' emphasis might naturally work with a 'participant' role, and a 'text' emphasis might work with an 'observer' role. However, these perspectives can interact in multiple ways.

Much like those who argue for participation in the study of cultures more broadly, those arguing for participation in the study of cultures online claim observation only gets to part of the cultural context important to a researcher. Text can only be part of the story. Markham (1998, 25) reflects on her realization that she must shift from observer to participant during her analysis of online interaction:

These case studies were designed to allow me to answer one research question across three situations: 'How do people make sense of the concept of reality in or through online interaction?' So it began. And after several painstaking weeks of trying to write the first analysis of metaphors, I realized something was missing. Now, three months later, I realize I was missing. I was surprisingly absent from my own study, which I now realize is an ethnography. I was beginning to understand that cyberspace is not simply a collection of texts to analyze; rather it is an evolving cultural context of immense magnitude and complex scope.

To Markham, the move from understanding what happens online as 'text' to understanding it as 'cultural context' necessitates participation over observation. Likewise Hine (2000, 23) says ethnographic engagement requires a move from passive observation to active participation, because the shift 'allows for a deeper sense of understanding of meaning creation'. The ethno-

graphic perspective sees observation as supplemental to participation when studying cultures. Boellstorff's (2008) research on *Second Life* dips into blogs and forums on the virtual space, but he foregrounds participation. In ethnographies of cultures online, many authors advocate for moving from 'observer' to 'participant' as the field site is increasingly understood (e.g., Orgad 2005, Hughey 2008).

The discourse-analytic perspective, perhaps because of its emphasis on texts, does not problematize the role of 'pure observer' the way the ethnographic perspective does. Dong (2009) pulls discourse from forum threads to analyze without mentioning any ethical need to do more than collect public discourse. Mautner's (2005) argument for the use of 'web-based corpora' in discourse analysis focuses on a gamut of methodological and ethical questions: how to trust authorship online, what cross-cultural interaction online means for research, how to manage the wealth of data afforded by studying discourse online, how to arrange and interpret data in non-imposing ways. What is absent is a discussion of whether the discourse analyst should be merely observing online interaction, and analyzing it as one would a traditional text. Lemke's (2002) discussion of 'hypermodality' in online discourse tells researchers to be mindful of how hyperlinking and multimodality in discourse online mean method-

ological opportunities and pitfalls. Again, the underlying premise is the *observation of texts*.

Of course, differences between discourse analysis and ethnography exist beyond the internet. Discourse-analysis emphasizes a corpus over a field. It sees discourses as more stable and 'textual'. It predominantly focuses on those available for analysis as public and published artifacts. It also might define its data more narrowly in order to provide intricate depth of a discourse over broad statements on a culture. So when van Dijk (2009) does an analysis of a petition from a right-leaning think-tank, he cites the think-tank's website as the source of the petition, but is not concerned with whether there are interactive norms on the rest of the site, or even what other discourses occur on the site. His goal is the analysis of a single text as it's tied to macro-level arguments. When taking a discursive perspective, participating might be an unnecessary methodological choice. After all, the researcher here is analyzing texts to glean perspectives on cultural representation. If the goal is to observe the micro-level discourses that fuel macro-level cultural phenomena, then analyzing those discourses is a sufficient method. It allows a more narrow and purposeful methodical focus than broader and more general ethnographic participant-observation.

Reflecting on my *Fallout* research, a purely-observational

method fits my goals of understanding culture through discourse. I had specific communicative questions about specific social roles. However I could have been more sensitive to the limitations of an observational position. I asked how fans and producers 'negotiated' and 'constructed' their relationships, as well as how fans 'envisioned' their contribution to *Fallout* 3. In these verbs (particularly 'envision'), I was moving beyond the scope of what I could learn by purely observing discourse. Likewise, when I categorized types of 'roles' fans had toward producers- managerial, adversarial, cynical, or deferential- I bordered on making claims about the posters instead of just the posts they made. I might have inaccurately characterized something dynamic as something stable. Even if my methods fit my goals, I could have matched my questions and claims to those methods more appropriately.

No matter the specific strategy, the participation/observation dyad constitutes a conscious choice a researcher must make. The choice doesn't have to be all-or-nothing, of course. Participating doesn't preclude observing, or vice versa. It might even be viewed as a continuum, enacted in different ratios depending on the project or situation. In online contexts, it's theoretically easier to reach the pure observation side of that continuum, making it a weighty choice. I would not go so far as to say that a researcher must

always participate in the communication occurring at a research site. However, we should be aware of the stakes of how we frame an online investigation. The affordance for pure observation might create the illusion of a stable text, hiding a dynamic and even fractured collective of perspectives and opinions, hence Markham's (2008, 251) concern for 'interpreting the other as text'. By contrast, emphasizing participation might demand the researcher take a more situated and partisan role in the research process, since distance does add some perspective. These decisions, of course, have ethical ramifications.

Ethics. The ethical dimensions of this question are primarily related to how involved researchers should be in the community studied, and how transparent they should be about their research. Those skeptical about mere observation seem to be concerned with the inauthenticity of doing nothing but observing a culture. Garcia et al. (2009, 60) are direct in their criticism:

> Lurking, first, if allowed by the site and the IRB, is acceptable if that is how participants in that setting routinely participate. If not, ethnographers will get a more authentic experience of an online setting if they jump straight into participation.

This fear of inauthenticity illustrates that questions of participation

are often seen as ethical questions. The fear is that 'mere observation', written up as holistic observations of cultures online, equates to deception. 'Covert researchers'- to use Murty's (2008) term- might be essentially lying about any conclusions they make because they are in effect unqualified to make them.

The ethical problem with 'merely observing' is not as much that representations will be wrong without participating, it is more that these representations will be less authentic. The researcher will claim to understand a culture without interacting in that culture and appreciating the nuance and even fracture beneath the seemingly-stable surface. This is why discourse analysis has generally studied 'talk' and 'text', while ethnography has traditionally represented 'participants' or 'informants'. These categories become muddled online, leading to unique ethical problems.

These ethical problems are still open questions. For instance, many researchers of cultures online who are adamant about participating in the contexts being studied are more ambivalent about the ethical need for transparency during this participation. Soukup (1999) participates in chatrooms without offering informed consent or declaring research interests, citing the public nature of chatrooms as cause for participating without disclosing. Shoham (2004) mentions moving from pure observation to participation, but does not mention any disclosure or consent from 'participants'. Kozinets (2006) speaks of the value of naturally occurring focus groups, but sees no need to inform those groups they're participating in market research. Reasons for these counterintuitive positions often have to do with the difficulty of obtaining consent in a fluid online community, the built-in protection of pseudonymity that often occurs online, or even the public nature of the discourse found there.

Hine's (2000) position- that extending the label of 'community' or 'agent' to an individual also means extending the courtesy of transparency- critiques such covert participation. On one level, it is more difficult to justify being covert when the researcher is engaging in direct interaction that would not occur if the researcher were not present in the field. Transparency is especially important if the researcher plans to quote a participant or reproduce private comments. Observing and reporting without participant's knowledge might easily be seen as a violation of trust. However, just as getting informed consent from a public 'crowd' offline isn't always feasible or necessary, a case can be made for the lack of need, provided that potential harm or additional exposure is not coming from the interaction.

One thing does seem to be agreed upon by most doing cultural research online: the need for researcher reflexivity. Even if we

are not interacting during research, we are never merely observing. Cultural research of any kind demands some form of consequential cultural participation. The researcher might be a cultural 'insider' who already identifies with the culture studied. The researcher might be a cultural 'outsider' who comes from a different perspective and must get acquainted with the norms and language of the environment studied before any observations can be dependably made. The researcher may exist at any point along that continuum. What a researcher may not do is trust objective impartiality during detached observation. Even van Dijk (2009), who sees pure observation as a viable method, argues no observation is ever-value free. Markham (1998, 260) argues the point eloquently:

> Frankly, whether or not the researcher participates or simply observes, the construction of the research report will present a particular reality of the object of analysis that is influenced by the identity and participation of the researcher. It may be more productive to acknowledge one's participative role early, so that every aspect of the research design can effectively incorporate the researcher's presence in the construction of the field under study.

This argument applies to my work with *Fallout*. I can more easily justify my nonparticipation in the interac-

tion I studied, than I can justify my lack of critical reflection about my own position. As I studied the discourse between fans and producers, I was much more partisan than my publications let on. I was a fan of the game with a critical disposition toward the producers of the game. I buried this personal criticism under academic criticism. What perspective might have been gained by keeping this cultural participation in the front of my mind during my analysis? What nuance might I have added by reflexively checking and rechecking it against my analysis and writing? Even without ever starting a thread or posting a word, I was a participant in the culture I studied.

While I believe such reflexivity is essential for anyone studying any culture- online or off, I also believe this reflexivity can occur whether the researcher is 'directly' participating or 'merely' observing. A discourse-analytic position is ideal for researchers interested in letting the discourse 'unfold' as it may, without researcher intervention or guidance. It fits with notions of critical distance and naturalistic observation that are not unheard of in qualitative social science (see Silverman 2006). In this sense, it might sometimes be the more ethical methodological decision. Observation appealed to me during my *Fallout* research, since my goal was to let the discourse speak for itself instead of foregrounding my own perspectives in

the research project. However, such a position demands ethical considerations, which I'm now convinced that I haven't been sensitive to in my previous work. I could have been sensitive to my positions without foregrounding them in my analysis. Instead, I mostly shelved them.

If the goal of a project is observation, then the researcher should be sensitive to the public/private tension in online interaction, checking and rechecking data against notions of what's public and what's published. Again, claims made from that data should be limited to only what is evident in that public discourse. Conversely, a researcher coming from a participant standpoint might foreground the interpretive and interactional processes of the researcher in the research process. This position might be ideal for researchers interested in participating in discourses, in drawing those discourses out as they themselves move through a culture. This position would be appealing to those who want to work with participants to elicit the often-unstated assumptions of practicing a culture. However, this perspective carries with it ethical burdens as well. If the goal is participation, then the researcher should be sensitive to just how much of the research project is foregrounding the frames of the researcher, instead of the perspectives of participants. How close is 'drawing out' to 'writing in'? Of course, we might ask whether this

is this any more of a danger when participating than when observing. This is why the first answer to the question of how we engage with the cultures we study is most fundamentally reflexivity.

A Final Evaluation

Thinking back to what birthed this budding crisis, I appreciate Markham's (2008, 272) reflections on the power and responsibility that comes with cultural research: 'our capacity to represent cultural knowledge is a great responsibility, with many traps and difficulties. But it is also a gift, well earned through education, well honed through experience, and well intended through ethical reflexivity'. My cardinal sin has been a lack of reflexivity about what it means to study cultures online. No matter the position a researcher takes on the dyads above, what's important is critical thought on personal positions. When questions of method and ethics can be argued from opposite ends, sensitivity to our own personal positions is essential. Even if easy answers about methods and ethics elude us, the reflective process has value because it gets us asking questions. Markham (1998, 8) reminds us that during research we should ask how we know we're being meaningful and honourable in our methods. She says we don't do this to get any definitive answers, 'but because the honest pursuit of these questions leads me to a fairly honest conclu-

sion- we can never get to the bottom of it, we can never have enough, we can never know it all'. Reflexive methods acknowledge both abilities and limitations.

As far as my positions at this moment of tension, maybe it's not a problem that I treat what I find online as text and choose to observe it at a distance. 'Discourse' is certainly an element of many ethnographic projects- often a pre-eminent one (see Farnell and Graham 1998). However, discourse-analytic approaches to online interaction don't approach discourse in the same way. They often see a corpus of 'texts' more than a 'place'. They often 'observe' talk and text instead of 'participate' in it. This means the questions I ask when doing a 'discourse analysis'- and the answers I find- will have to be different than ethnographic questions and answers. If questions emphasize the situated understandings of 'participants' within cultures, or seek to draw out implicit or unstated understandings, then it might make sense to approach them ethnographically. If the questions emphasize public issues, or are concerned with public representations addressed to public audiences, then it might be ethically studied as public discourse.

All this doesn't mean I won't be properly studying cultures online, just that I may not be ethnographically studying cultures online. Markham (2008, 255) comments that ethnography 'seems to be a term that is applied by scholars who do not know what else to call their work'. Maybe the thoughtful declaration that 'I study discourse online' is more methodologically and ethically sound than making claims to ethnographic methods or conclusions, when I haven't conducted ethnography. As Hine (2000, 53-54) argues, 'discourse analytic approaches to internet texts could usefully coexist with ethnographic approaches to internet interaction. This combination could help to maintain analytic ambivalence about what the phenomena being studied *really* are'.

I can reflect now that the problem with my research is that I made claims about culture that were troublesome, given my methods. The crisis was birthed when I claimed to interpret 'text' while treating what I explored as a 'place'. I researched like an 'observer' but reported like a 'participant'. Hine (2005a, 8) says 'when we talk about methodology we are implicitly talking about our identity and the standards by which we wish our work to be judged'. My blindness to the term 'ethnography' might have well been an attempt to frame how the work was judged, while producing the kind of findings that would only fit with an ethnographic encounter of culture. However, after this moment of tension, I'm not prepared to dismiss discourse analytic methods when studying cultures online. They fit my interests as a researcher well. What I will change are the questions I ask

and the claims I make. I now understand that the study of cultures online- like the study of cultures in any context- has many dimensions. Any researcher engaging with cultures must be aware of the methodological and ethical decisions they are making in the process.

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