

***Digital Ethnography: Anthropology, Narrative, and New Media.* Natalie M. Underberg and Elayne Zorn. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014. 127 pp.\***

Reviewed by Matthew D. Thompson

Digital anthropology is a rapidly growing sub-discipline limited not to studies of cyberspace and online sociality but inclusive of the incorporation of information technologies and networked communication in the classroom, the field, and professional development touching the ways in which we interact with our colleagues, collaborators, and subject communities. In *Digital Ethnography: Anthropology, Narrative, and New Media* authors Natalie M. Underberg and Elayne Zorn explore how the Internet can be brought to bear on that most quintessential and quixotic of anthropological tasks: the craft of creating representations of others. The authors share many exciting online resources that they and their colleagues at the University of Central Florida have created as the product of ethnographic field research. The authors want to show how features of digital media can be articulated with recent developments in folklore studies and anthropology, a very laudable goal. However, the reader is left wanting more than just a description of ethnographies rendered as websites, all the innovation it seems is happening online and not in the pages of this book. We must wait for another work to treat with greater sophistication the practice of writing about digital ethnography.

For Underberg and Zorn digital ethnography means, “responsibly integrating technology into cultural representations” (4). The anthropologists and their subject communities alike find empowerment in expressing themselves through this medium. It frames the research process and entices us with the promise of reaching audiences in new ways. Throughout the work the authors demonstrate a strong affinity in their practice of digital ethnography to cultural heritage studies, folklore studies, museum studies, visual anthropology, and literary ethnography in the vein of Barbara Myerhoff and Katherine Brown. All of these traditions of inquiry share a common trait in the emphasis that they place on the politics of display and the duty of the researcher to act with great tact and compassion in making objects, texts, or media about people available to the world. Given how developed the literature in these fields are, the authors could have said more about how digital ethnography sheds some new light on these issues or poses some new challenge. The great variety of media digital technology and the Internet places at ethnographers’ fingertips suggest that this will be an area for greater exploration in the future.

The authors describe their version of digital ethnography as striving towards the virtual representation of cultural experience. They place a premium on artful storytelling technique, pulling the website user along with an interface that is immersive and interactive. Drawing inspiration from game design, Underberg and Zorn write that in order to simulate cultural experience, and to reenact the ethnographic process, users should be allowed to create avatars and role play, interact with objects in the virtual environment, and interact with non-player characters that, like personas in contextual design, are based on fieldwork experiences. This is a very interesting development in the craft of ethnography because one of the great innovations of Internet communication, perhaps what most distinguishes writing online from traditional forms

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of written communication, is how it reconfigures relationships among authors, audiences, and texts. But are online representations truly more dialogical and participatory, as the authors assert? Here the supposed benefits of online communication are accepted without critical insight. They need user studies to back up such claims. Nothing is made problematic. Readers interested in employing digital ethnography in some future project may come away from this work feeling uninformed about the challenges or risks unique to this method. As a whole, methodology is not rigorously interrogated, instead the authors' focus on introducing the reader to the genre.

Anthropologists or folklorists who are interested in branching out into participatory design or human-computer interaction studies will not find a detailed account of how to tailor these methods to a social science/humanities research agenda. Participatory design is well suited to the qualitative training of ethnographers and is perhaps underutilized commercially as designers often note how messy and time consuming it is relative to other, more top-down approaches. However Underberg and Zorn never really discuss the politics of participatory design. The reader never learns of conflict among participants and how the anthropologists resolved this or if a good idea was abandoned because a local authority figure deemed it inappropriate. We do not learn what kind of person makes for a good collaborator in a participatory design project or how the researcher can pick one out from an array of potential collaborators. Clearly participatory design was of great importance to the authors as they frequently refer to the success they had using it. Through this process the anthropologists were able to identify key ideas or cultural practices that formed the foundation of their designs, but the reader is not taken behind the scenes and shown how they did this.

Information communication technologies have a profound potential to change the practice of ethnographic research, especially in how scholars engage in the practice of analyzing data. An entire chapter is dedicated to the use of Extensible Markup Language (XML) to embed tags in documents, thereby allowing for more sophisticated search procedures. For example XML might be used to allow users to search for key words in specific contexts or to reveal the process of analysis, a tool that might be useful in future open data applications. Underberg and Zorn successfully used XML to impose a theoretical narrative structure onto oral narratives of Peruvian nuns recounting their calling to take vows.

However a second project, the use of XML to allow user-generated tags and foster online communities, is more problematic. Here the anthropologists are working to create a scholarly "trading post" for the management of digital assets destined to become objects of one sort or another in an ethnographic video game. The scholars create XML codes and the users, (the anticipated user community was intended to be inclusive of the subject community) can generate their own tags. For the authors, the advantage of this approach is that it allows individuals who are not geographically collocated to participate in a group endeavor. But perhaps there are some hidden costs to this approach which is, generally speaking, not very fleshed out. When community feedback is worked into your site, how do you vet user tags for quality control or resolve conflicts? In the field when a community member lays claim to cultural expertise sometimes it is easy to verify that, one can observe the deference paid to the cultural authority of elders for example. But in an online context, how do you know that people making claims on your site in fact know what they are talking about? And what do you do about community members without access? I would have liked to have seen these concerns addressed.

I was especially interested to read Underberg and Zorn's chapters on the use of digital environments to enhance learning through games. The immersive quality of games syncs well to language immersion pedagogy in its experiential and interactive qualities. The authors have some interesting things to say about how storytelling in games is largely spatial: typically users must traverse a virtual environment in order to interact with features and figures. Thus there are particular qualities unique to games that make them different from other visual media such as comic books or documentaries. There are certain things they can do well and it is necessary for ethnographers to take that into consideration in the design phase. In their detailed example of "The Turkey Maiden," a game based on Cuban folklore and set in Depression-era Ybor City, Florida, the researchers' target audience is middle and high school students. What an interesting audience to target with ethnography! I was greatly encouraged to read that the anthropologists were actively engaged in creating products aimed at young people. However, their discussion could have been enriched further with user studies. We do not learn how the students evaluated the game. For the authors gaming enables embodied subjectivity, but it does not seem that they actually asked gamers what they thought about the experience.

The creation of a website as the product of ethnographic field research challenges much we have taken for granted about the labor of academic anthropology. With a monograph or article the researcher has, for better or worse, produced something relatively static. Even if you are not done you have, for the time being, stopped. A website, if it is to be persistent and maintain its relevance, is a much more dynamic thing and researchers should anticipate that creating one will demand some degree of ongoing maintenance, which may in fact multiply the researcher's commitment and responsibility to the community. I would like to have read more about the work that comes after the design process. If your goal is to create a vibrant online community how much effort can researchers expect to invest in upkeep? Is it your responsibility if the site peaks and then recedes in popularity? Or becomes something else entirely? Or is taken over by trolls? Instead the authors are primarily interested in introducing the concept of digital ethnography, describing what they have already done and are currently doing, and encourage others to do so as well.

At only 89 pages exclusive of back matter, *Digital Ethnography* works best as an introduction to Internet applications for ethnographic products. It will appeal most to researchers who have a background in collaborative storytelling and are looking for inspiration to experiment with online communication of research results. Readers already familiar with coding or common software packages for website creation or game design will want to look elsewhere for a more in-depth discussion of the process of getting from fieldwork data to online product. This book does not cover the technical aspects of digital ethnography in any detail. It would be nice to see this topic continue to be developed in other works that will utilize the strengths of the monograph form to include theory, politics, and critique as a balance to the digital form.

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