Creativity and Digital Research Methodologies: A Conversation between Institutional and Anthropological Research

Benjamin C.H. Kao and Nicole Cizauskas

Key:
Benjamin C.H. Kao – "*I/my*"
Nicole Cizauskas – "I/my"

Abstract

Digital research methods are relevant to both institutional and anthropological research, and there is a need to address discipline orientated creativity principles in this field. In institutional research, quantitative data has a stronghold – this results in a "Leaky Box' theory, stating that quantitative-only data collection does not address all cohorts present in the tested student population, and that a quantitative and qualitative combined creative method would be more inclusive. Likewise, anthropology research on video games shares similar adherence to accepted models; using video games to understand human interactions is presently accepted only in multiplayer online games with intra-human interactions. However, research on single-player games with human and more-than human interactions are a valid, albeit novel, creative method in digital research. Creative research methodologies are not intended to be a silver bullet solution to paradigmatic flaws but rather it should guide us towards different disciplinary perspectives.

Introduction

Creative digital research methods have the potential to lead us towards novel paradigmatic understandings. However, when sharing research experiences in our respective fields – institutional research and sociocultural anthropology – both of us expressed frustration with practicing creative digital research methods in our research projects. In effect, this article is born out of various conversations we had about encounters in the proverbial field; problems that we believe are important to consider regarding digital research in theory and practice.

Institutional research refers primarily to work done by universities, colleges, or other educational bodies. The research aims to improve the institution; this is a broad purpose, and the research is interdisciplinary. Groups of institutions can collaborate on regional or global research encompassing collective communities. Institutional research is purpose-driven and focuses on making direct recommendations to units within the institution(s) based on the results of internal research. My experience in institutional research focused on the impact of emergency online learning on the student experience, with the goal of determining the positive aspects to keep for the future. This project is longitudinal and ongoing. My methods include online questionnaires, focus groups, and social media analysis.

Sociocultural anthropology's foray into digital space has been in five primary areas of concern which Geismar and Knox

(2021) articulate as: (1) interrogating the digital/human binary, (2) thinking about social infrastructures and the politics of the digital, (3) 'other' perspectives in digital spaces, (4) anthropology beyond the academy, and (5) digital ethnographic methods. Holding the virtual world of video games as a field site, *my* research aimed to explore emptiness as a heuristic to understand our relationships with/in technology in the Japanese role-playing video game, *Persona 5 Royal* (P5R). Following recent work in speculative anthropology, the (digital) humanities, and ethnographies of digital worlds, *my* research methods are a mix of participant observation, discourse analysis, and digital storytelling (Boellstorff et al. 2012; Tsing 2015; Byrd 2018).

The larger prosaic question that we aim to answer is: *What aspects of digital research are in demand?* Despite our collective frustrations, we believe that the increasing demand for digital research methods across disciplinary boundaries lays in their orientations towards accessibility and creativity. With a focus on methodology and visualization techniques, this article will outline our suggestions for expanding discipline relevant creativity based on our experiences in digital research.

Moving Beyond Institutional Research Binaries – Creativity and 'The Leaky Box of Digital Research Methods'

One of the issues we have encountered while conducting digital research is the persistence of misconceptions about the accuracy of creative methods. In Bergstrom and West's (2020) recent work, *Calling Bullshit: The Art of Skepticism in a Data-Driven World*, they outline the crisis that the easily accepted statistical data potentially contain vast (in their words) "bullshit." Quantitative data, as in statistically significant questionnaire responses, is often viewed as clean, accurate, and inherently truthful. As Kitchin (2014) points out, the notion that quantitative research is more accurate is an especially pertinent epistemological problem considering the 'big data revolution'. Kitchin (2014) illustrates how thinking that quantitative based big data can solve all problems is a fallacy: first, far from being exhaustive, big data is still only a representative sample from a non-omniscient vantage point; second, data cannot 'speak' for itself without human framing, so big data is still beholden to human design philosophies; moreover, the interpretation of data requires expertise not necessarily accessible for the layman. Not only does this fallacy harm the ability to be critical of quantitative data, but it also positions qualitative, especially unconventional or novel, research as "less accurate" compared to quantitative research.

How this issue transforms and manifests in practice can be articulated through my project analysing student opinion of emergency online learning at a university. I originally proposed several data-collecting methods to the institution, including online questionnaire, focus group, and social media feedback collection. The last one was my "creative" digital research method: utilizing an anonymous student-

run confession platform, 'St Fessdrews' on Facebook, to collect student feedback on online learning within a certain time-period by sorting anonymous submissions by keywords, such as "online learning", "remote learning", and "recorded lectures". In my proposal, the collected responses were to be analysed by categorising utterances into themes and observing the prevalence of different themes.

This proposal for novel creative methodology was met with criticism from the ethics committee, who stated that they did not see the point of collecting student feedback in this way instead of sticking to using online questionnaire. Their criticism reflects the persistent binary in institutional research of quantitative method (questionnaire) and the qualitative method (focus group) – anything that cannot fall into this binary is frowned upon. The reticence of the ethics committee is understandable because there is no framework in institutional research for analysing anonymous media data from students, making it difficult to adjust policies according to the findings. To address this concern, I present the metaphor of 'The Leaky Box of Digital Research Methodology' to justify the importance of moving beyond this binary.

I take the conventional binary in institutional digital research methodology as 'a leaky box': by using both questionnaires and focus groups, a researcher can form a "box" that catches the target data in a way that can be effectively translated into action points from the institutional perspective efficient way of catching the target data, but it is far from perfect. The box has

small holes where leaks in target data flow from. Institutional research does not aim to exhaust target data and is content with their Leaky Box, as this type of methodology aligns with how institutional has always been. However, "tape" can be added to the outside of the box in the form of creative, unconventional digital research methods (Figure 1). These methods are never intended to be the most efficient or even effective at collecting the target data; they are simply aiming to catch data that may have escaped the conventional data collection methods.
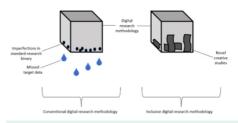

Figure 1: The Leaky Box. The above diagram visualizes the distinction between conventional digital research methodology, which allows target data to fall through the leaky box, and an inclusive digital research methodology, which tapes over box holes with novel creative studies.

So why does my anonymous social media feedback collection act as tape for research into student feedback on online learning, especially when some of the criticisms of the methodology are valid? After all, these anonymous posts are overly opinionated, containing streams of profanity and occasionally blatantly incorrect claims about the institution. They are not intended to be used as research

materials but are instead a collection of the most passionate arguments on the topic – polarizing, unorganized, and unconstructive. However, this is exactly what draws me to them. Traditional questionnaires and focus groups fail to elicit the strong feelings of a student writing an anonymous post at 3 a.m. during an exam period. These traditional responses are full of polite and cautious responses, where participants present their responses in a way that they believe to be appropriate to interact with the researchers. The anonymous media posts capture the opinion of students who ignore institutionally prompted questionnaires as fruitless and offensive and thus, give the tape to the 'Leaky Box'.

The holes in the leaky box are often marginalized and underrepresented groups of the tested population. For example, if all research occurs in the form of online questionnaires, the box does not encompass students who may not check their email frequently to spot the questionnaire or be cautious about the privacy issues. In the case of online learning, online-only data collection is only collecting opinions from students who are proficient in technology and regular users of platforms where said questionnaires are advertised. Elaborating further, the use of questionnaires as a single type of measurement excludes people to whom questionnaires are unappealing, such as dyslexic students who may not be willing to fill in copious amounts of free-text responses.

The issue of the conventional research binary of questionnaires and focus groups is not unique to my institution; I recently attended a seminar on creative digital research with other institutional researchers across the country, and not a single researcher in attendance had success with creative digital research yet. While social media and thematic analysis is common and recognized by organizations such as the *British Psychological Society* (Bps.org.uk 2022), mainstream institutional research still maintains that "formal", "clear-cut" questionnaires and focus groups should be the norm (Attride-Stirling 2001; Fereday and Muir-Cochrane 2006).

Digital research at the institutional level has great potential to utilize an expansive and immersive world of data. We can manage to break out of conventional research binaries and begin to tape up our 'Leaky Boxes'.

Conceptualising Single-Player Video Games as Field-Sites in the Anthropology of Virtual Worlds

The impression that quantitative research is more 'accurate' than qualitative research is also a concern that anthropology has faced and sought to address in the present day. How anthropologists have historically overcome this problem is through 'dwelling' for a while within the confines of specific time-spaces (Coleman and Collins 2007). The premise is that by existing within a given site for an extended period – long-term participant observation – would allow the anthropologist to give a more accurate conception of social realities. This commitment towards 'dwelling' within has

extended towards our studies of digital realms – whether it is the ethnographies of Boellstorff (2015) and Nardi (2010) in the virtual worlds of *Second Life* and *World of Warcraft* respectively or Miller's (2016) work on social media in an English village.

While the design of *my* research's methodology holds similar commitments to long-term participant observation that other works had, where *my* work differs is in the choice of field-site. In the anthropology of virtual worlds, the sites that anthropologists consider as important often have three main characteristics: *wide* spatio-temporal scope, with a *multiplicity* of *'real'* participants interacting at the site, that consists of mostly real people interacting with one another (Boellstorff et al. 2012). The ethnographer is purportedly able to understand these virtual worlds because of their similarities to fields in the 'real' world. The focus of these studies is mostly on how technology is utilized as a manner for mediating conversation and social relations.

P5R does not suitably fit any of these main characteristics that anthropologists of virtual worlds look for in their choice of field-site. As video game's world has a narrative that has a beginning and an end, its space is foreclosed. Single-player video game also involves only one human participant in the unfolding of its narrative. The space also mostly consists of more-than human interactions with the non-playable characters (NPCs). Because this choice of field-site deviated from the norm in the anthropology of virtual worlds, many people asked *me* whether this research can fit within anthropology as a

discipline. The main point of contention is a lack of 'real' humans within the field-site other than the anthropologist/player. As anthropology broadly studies what makes us human, a field-site that is mostly devoid of human beings is unique and requires some unpacking.

To conceptualize this field, we could look at Kiri Miller's (2010) preliminary explorations of the potential for undertaking ethnographic fieldwork in single-player video game worlds. Her video games of focus are the *Grand Theft Auto (GTA)* series – various game worlds that invites the player to partake in the criminal underworld of American landscapes. Miller (2010) presents three approaches to address the lack of ethnographic subjects, humans, in the video game's world. The first approach is to consider all the possible players of a single-player video game as an imagined community. Thus, to gain access to this community, whether it is the online forums or fan-sites, the individual player-ethnographer would need to immerse themselves in *GTA's* world. In this approach, the in-game fieldwork becomes as necessary pre-cursor to fieldwork in the 'real world. The second approach is to recognize the developers of the video game as the ethnographic subjects. This approach would consider the in-game terrain and characters as an extension of the developers' agencies. A research project of this ilk would most likely pair in-game fieldwork with analysing publicly available materials about the developers and interviewing the developers themselves.

The third approach, and the one I found most convincing, is to just simply treat

them like "actual places with human inhabitants". Here Miller (2010) points out the imperialist ethnographic tendencies that players acquire when they inhabit the avatars to explore the video game's world. In *GTA* and *P5R*, players only gain access to new areas in the game's world as the player progresses – emulating fieldworkers' gradual exploration and 'mastery' of new frontiers. Like *GTA*, *P5R* also requires the player to learn about what the avatar may already know as well as learning together as the game's narrative moves forward; therefore, signalling the potential importance of participant observation and respecting local knowledge. In short, Miller's (2010) summarizes it saliently when she notes that "the participant-observer who adopts the social role of a gameworld native—the avatar—has an enriched understanding of the gameworld's culture."

During Miller's (2010) ethnographic fieldwork, she expresses an anecdote of an accidental carjacking which guided her towards thinking about the differences between the player and avatar and what it says about the game developer's representations of African American culture and violence. Similarly, during *my* fieldwork, one of the earliest encounters with a non-playable character, the owner of the café, Sojiro Sakura (佐倉 惣治郎), who owned the attic where the player-protagonist was staying for the duration of the game, guided *my* thinking and questions.

On the morning of our first day of school, the player-protagonist did not expect Sojiro Sakura to provide *me*/him with a bowl of curry rice (チキンカレー – kare raisu) for breakfast. As an accused juvenile delinquent who was exiled to the game's representation of Tokyo to serve out his probationary period, the protagonist did not expect such kindness from somebody who seemed to be only taking care of him because his parents paid him to do so. Thus, Sojiro Sakura's offering of curry led *me* towards thinking about how the player-protagonist is displaced from their original context, the player: from the 'real' world into the video game's world and the protagonist: from his hometown to Tokyo. It is this displacement that made the ethnographic moment notable as an event that makes the absence of traditional providers of care such as parental figures in the player-protagonist's life visible.

This dual-experience of displacement highlights the in-between state that the player-protagonist occupies in the video game's world. On one hand, because of the distance in context, the avatar and the player are incommensurable – they can never be considered as truly the same. On the other hand, it is the similarities in experience that highlights the player-protagonist's co-complicity in their actions within the game's world. *I* agree with Miller (2010) when she says that this emulates a typical fieldwork experience: not a tourist, but also not local. Perhaps one of the main takeaways we could have as anthropologists is that 'dwelling within' single-player video game world requires us to directly confront our positionality in the field – an important ethical practice.

Through the outlining of single-player video games as a field-site, this section

aims to encourage anthropologists of virtual worlds to be open to creative approaches in ethnographic field-site selection. Thinking with Myers (2020), we can consider single-player video game as a para-site – "an experimental site that takes shape alongside fieldwork" and challenges us to reorient our ethnographic sensorial tendencies and 'witness' our disciplinary work in a potentially novel and productive light (Chua 2021; Dave 2021).

Conclusion – Short Meta-Analyses and the Imperfectability of Digital Research Methods

Evocative visualization techniques allow researchers to have an additional element of control over digital research perception and interpretation – a crucial acknowledgement for those intending to challenge the field's shortcomings. One topical example is the analysis done by Oh and Hwang (2021), relating to preventative intentions in COVID-19 news reporting and visualization. They touch on the importance of emotional visualization and the perception of threat, as well as the inevitably political nature of visualization. While research often aims to be apolitical in nature, the way that data is presented cannot feign this neutrality (Kitchin 2014; Bergstrom and West 2020). This also goes the other way; political ideology has an influence on the interpretation of "neutral" data. Oh and Hwang (2021) found that, excluding conspiracy theorists, conservatives reacted with greater fear to interactive COVID-19 data visualization. This distinction emphasizes the importance of decisions relating to

digital data visualization on interpretation, and the real-world impact such decisions can have. It is the responsibility of digital researchers to take political ideology and interpretation into account when visualizing pseudo-neutral data.

Digital storytelling is one methodology that is up-and-coming within the field of institutional research. While it is complex to analyse (Oldfirestation.org.uk 2022), it offers a gestalt selection of data – including answers to questions that the researcher could not think to ask. It is a particularly crucial development for research that includes marginalized groups, as it offers an open and safe opportunity to explore these unquestionable answers. In anthropology, ethnographic 'data' is often considered as akin to storytelling. Thinking back on the 'Writing Culture' debates of the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s, how data is represented or 'visualized' in narrative is an important question for digital researchers to consider (Clifford 1986; Geertz 1988). Just as these narratives could potentially lead to new outcomes, they can also occlude other research questions and/or function as a manner of continuing neo-colonial practices (Abu-Lughod 2008). As digital researchers, if we were to consider digital storytelling as a suitable methodological approach, we would also need to understand the potential pitfalls that may arise by adopting this methodology.

To conclude, these two brief meta-analyses of creative digital research methodologies intend to display how research will never be linear nor perfect. Research should not be aiming for this and should instead focus on being holistic and representative through a

constantly changing plethora of methods and models. Creative methodologies and their associated models, like the "leaky box" and single-player videogames as a field-site, are not intended to be a catch-all that resolves all paradigmatic flaws but rather it achieves our aim of encouraging new perspectives within our respective disciplines. It is only through the recognition of both the positives and negatives of our methodologies that we can truly achieve the creative potential that digital research promises.

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