THE PLAY-ALONG METHOD: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACH TO ANALYZE VIDEO GAME CULTURE

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Online games are integral to the daily lives of young people, yet their social, material, and commercial dynamics remain underexplored. The study of online games is a multidisciplinary field influenced by a multitude of empirical approaches that lack transparency and standardization, prompting calls for advancements in methodology (e.g., Daneels et al., 2022; Pérez-Latorre et al., 2017). Methodological challenges arise from the constantly evolving technological and social nature of gaming culture, the unreliability of self-reported data, and barriers to accessing in-house data from developers. This paper aims to address this call by introducing the play-along method; a novel approach well-suited for observing informants' lived play experiences. Specifically, this paper explores how the play-along method can be utilized to engage players within their gaming environments to better understand issues relating to gaming culture, social interactions, and the commercial architecture of online games.

Utilization of the method

The 'play-along' method, coined by Mainsah et al. (2020), is inspired by 'go-along' (Carpiano, 2009; Jørgensen, 2016) and 'walkthrough' methods (Boe & Mainsah, 2021; Light et al., 2016). The play-along is conducted digitally, allowing researchers to meet informants in their familiar gaming contexts, where they can utilize their own gaming equipment. Informants are asked to share their screens and play a game of their choice while the researcher observes and plays along. The play-along can be conducted in individual (e.g., Reich & Steinnes, 2023; Steinnes, 2025) or group interviews (e.g., Mainsah et al., 2020). Specifically, the play-along method has been piloted and carried out in three independent research projects (i.e., Mainsah et al., 2020; Reich & Steinnes,

2023; Steinnes, 2025), totaling up to 60 young informants, aged between 10 and 24 years.

In the first project, Mainsah et al. (2020) explored how Norwegian children and youth approach and interact with commercial elements in virtual games. The study involved 19 informants aged 11-17 in group interviews to discuss their gaming habits and knowledge of the gaming industry. Play-along sessions were supplied to the focus groups, where the informants demonstrated their gameplay while being observed and questioned by the researchers about commercial aspects such as revenue streams and in-game marketing.

In the second project, Reich & Steinnes (2023) investigated how 19 Norwegian children (aged 10-15) socialize in video games and navigate manipulative design elements and in-game purchases. By incorporating a play-along session into individual interviews, the researchers were able to observe the details of why and how video gaming plays a key role in children's socialization, affecting their friendships and consumer behavior.

In the third project, Steinnes (2025) examined how consumption patterns in online gaming shape and reinforce gender identities. The dataset, which included the 19 informants from Reich & Steinnes' (2023) study, was expanded with 22 older informants aged 16-24. Play-along interviews revealed gendered consumption dynamics by enabling intimate access to gendered character designs, purchasing behaviors, and in-game communication.

Methodological potential

The use of ethnography in research on video games is encouraged (e.g., Boellstorff, 2006), and we argue that it is a welcome supplement to traditional interviews. Adding observational data through participatory methods enables both the informant and the researcher to collaboratively make sense of what is unfolding on the screen before them. The informant is invited to be a co-analyst of the video gaming environments that they regularly navigate without critical reflection. As co-analysts, informants can demonstrate their everyday gameplay routines, which can trigger memories of past experiences.

The play-along has demonstrated several methodological advantages, including high ecological validity, procedural flexibility, and the ability to capture contextual information. Importantly, the play-along is emphasized through its collaborative nature. Drawing on participatory methods (e.g., Sevón et al., 2023), the play-along recognizes informants as skilled resources in gaming culture. This approach offers insights that may be missed by non-player researchers, strengthening data validity. Players are typically skilled in navigating digital spaces, and meeting them in their virtual gaming contexts provides a comfortable atmosphere for players and a novel experience for researchers, helping to reduce traditional power dynamics in research settings.

The method allows the observability of gaming interfaces and commercial landscapes, yielding unique and rich insights. The play-along makes it easier to discuss consumption and game design when both the informant and the researcher can see the

gameplay. Commercial aspects like virtual stores and currencies, cosmetic products, battle passes, in-game marketing, and purchasing methods integrate more seamlessly within the game's design and structure.

Moreover, it enables affective articulations and relational elicitations. It allows informants to express pride while displaying their digital items and to verbalize each item's attached meaning and use. Researchers can observe how players interact within games and their level of familiarity with in-game content. The informant can share experiences and relationalities with (non-)humans, such as other players and non-player characters, drawing on tacit knowledge upon seeing digital video game interfaces. This allows us to tap into the role of interactions, relationships, and experiences, uncovering potentially divergent or subversive gameplay in contrast to the video game design affordances or community norms such as cheat codes, modding, or hacking.

Despite multiple strengths, the method also raises important ethical considerations, as well as practical and technical issues. For example, the play-along brings to the foreground the ethical challenge of gaining visual and narrative access to informants' personal digital spaces. It is thus relevant to ask which ethical implications such intimate observation has, and what risk dissemination strategies could be applied. Other challenges include ensuring complete data privacy, technical interference, and informants having to balance the formal research context and their personal gaming environment.

Conclusion

The play-along method underscores the need for child-centered approaches that acknowledge the relationalities between players and digital infrastructures, and map unexplored digital terrain in video games. The method's participatory nature positions informants as experts in their own lives, providing rich, authentic insights into the commercial and social dimensions of online gaming.

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