



Collisions and Constellations: On the Possible Intersection of Psychoethnography and Digital Storytelling

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Abstract. This proposal outlines the development of a collaborative model of ethnographic storytelling that utilizes readily available digital technology and ethnographic methodology to facilitate generative interactions toward the production of complex and evolving digital stories. Building on a methodology that I call *psychoethnography*, this project aims to create a fluid form of interactive digital storytelling that can be used in both academic and non-academic settings as a research and pedagogical tool.

Keywords: Ethnography · Digital storytelling · Visual anthropology · Situationism

1 Introduction

The stories of culture are not static, and therefore it seems only logical that the way we, as anthropologists and anthropologically-minded storytellers, convey them should be equally dynamic and fluid. The ways that we practice and teach anthropology and storytelling are primed for a new approach, one that foregrounds and embraces polyvocal, interactive, collaborative and unpredictable elements. In what follows, I outline the beginnings of a project that offers numerous possibilities for both research and pedagogy at the intersection of cultural anthropology, community development and digital storytelling. It is my hope that this project will offer an additional departure point for considering how, when, where and why we collect, translate and disseminate the stories of culture.

In the experimental theory and practice I have called psychoethnography, encounters with informants and fieldsites emerge from open-ended movements through place and the accompanying instances of participant-observation. For example, a would-be psychoethnographer might begin their ‘drift’ by simply taking an unknown bus or subway route and disembarking at either a randomly chosen stop or some predefined marker (the first stop containing the letter P, the 4th stop, wherever the man in the blue jacket gets off, etc.). This practice mirrors the Situationists’ Psychogeographic Game of the Week, published in their journal, *Potlatch* throughout the mid-1950s. Here, I imagine extending this model to develop a series of Psychoethnographic Games of the Week, a series of prompts to encourage and guide psychoethnographers in their encounters with (and documentation of) the stories of everyday life. These prompts might be as simple

as “visit the nearest/most distant ethnic restaurant/grocery in your city/town and ask customers and/or employees to tell you a brief story about their happiest memory”, or as in-depth as “take the subway to every stop and ask for a story about riding the subway from one person at each station”. These prompts could be delivered on a regular basis via email, text, or a more complex mobile application that allows participants to upload their ‘responses’ to the prompt using whatever media they choose. Here, the goal is to transpose what was first imagined by the Situationists of mid-century Paris as an anti-capitalist artistic practice into something to be undertaken as a form of collecting ethnographic and narrative ‘data’ in the field. This project aims to expand the original scope of what the Situationists called psychogeography (a sort of psycho-emotional response to random encounters as a result of ‘drifting’ through city streets) to include narrative and ethnographic practices that it was never intended to encompass.

While the Situationists initially imagined their project as a sort of artistic and political critique of capitalism [1], my transposition of these theories centers on an ethnographic foregrounding of chance occurrences, a re-imagining (and re-mapping) of the location of cultural anthropology, and on the process of storytelling-storyasking as a viable form of data collection. And while I understand that these practices are certainly not new to ethnography or storytelling, this project makes these elements of anthropological inquiry more explicit by essentially unplanning and reimagining many of the existing methodologies in contemporary anthropological fieldwork. More traditional modes of ethnographic fieldwork place significant methodological weight on developing relationships with key informants (often called ‘gatekeepers’), language acquisition and extensive archival research ahead of any entry into the field. Psychoethnography, as I have envisioned it, does not seek to discredit current practices or refute their utility, it simply offers an additional (often parallel) avenue of cultural analysis that acts more like an overlay, or experimental tool. From my perspective, the more tools an anthropologist has in their tool-kit, the more well-rounded and dynamic their work will become. My intent is not to react against any prevailing issues in anthropology, rather it is to build on and add to existing modes of inquiry (for more insight into the process of researching and writing ethnography, see James Clifford and George Marcus’ *Writing Culture* [1986] [2]). To better understand this proposed hybrid of psychogeography, narrative and ethnography, it is important to examine more carefully the Situationist concepts of psychogeography and *dérive*.

The beginnings of what would come to be known as psychogeography emerged in the mid-1950s with a small group of artists calling themselves the Letterist International, a collective of cultural producers and theorists whose goal was to enact a radical criticism of urban and capitalist power structures through artistic interventions. One of the first uses of the term psychogeography can be found in Guy Debord’s 1955 essay “Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography” in which he defines psychogeography as “the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals” [1].

One of Debord’s central tenets of psychogeography is the practice of *dérive*. This exercise explores the possibility of “rapid passage through varied ambiances” based on “playful-constructive behavior and awareness of psychological effects” that are “quite different from the classic notions of a journey or stroll” [1]. This reimagination of urban

space questions the prevailing patterns of movement and civil engagement that dominate the post-industrial capitalist city. Here, the psychogeographer becomes something of a conduit through which the “varied ambiances” of the city are read and translated into a critique of the urban environment and its various forms of psychosocial affect and narrative. It is the reading and translation of the affect of marginal and secondary space that opens up the possibility for an engagement with alternative, coexistent views of the city. Moving this framework into the realms of cultural anthropology, the narratives that form the core of any ethnographic encounter emerge in a more generative and unpredictable manner. The story begins always-already unwritten with the anthropologist functioning more as a director than an author.

Using this psychoethnographic model for digital storytelling, one or more ethnographically motivated participant-observers head out into a given fieldsite to collect and collaborate with the people, places and things of a particular research setting. This setting might be a neighborhood, a small village, an institution, or some other sort of -scape [3] where the researcher-storytellers might encounter their subjects and their associated narratives. This data collection may take place over the course of an afternoon, a week, or even a year, offering either a snapshot of the narrative landscape of a given location or a multi-layered, in-depth ethnographic study. These forays might be themed (stories of first love), or completely open (“tell me a story”), allowing the people, places and things of a given site to dictate the form of its narrative. In this way, this project aims to maintain a rhizomatic [4] ethos, creating a work that is constantly in flux and open to revision. Non-hierarchy is key to the success of a project such as this in that it is important to avoid assigning a value to stories. All stories are equal and all data is valuable in building this ‘storyscape’.

It is important to note that potential psychoethnographers should be keenly aware of the ethical concerns that may arise in the field (just as they would in any other ethnographic encounter). Among these must be the willingness to accept a refusal to share a story, the avoidance of mental, physical or emotional harm to your subjects, and the legal impact of collecting stories on sensitive topics. It is also important to explain to any participants what you will be doing with the data and how it will be distributed/archived. And of course, permission to record/document the storyteller is always necessary. In general, common sense should prevail, but ethical considerations should always be at the forefront of an ethnographer’s interactions in the field.

An example of a psychoethnographic endeavor might involve a group of psychoethnographers beginning a drift in a small rural village with the simple goal of collecting stories as told by locals, visitors and even other members of the group. With smartphones in hand, they might simply move through the location, accumulating impressions and encounters as still images, videos and/or audio recordings. This ‘raw material’ could then be archived on the Web in a way that allows both ethnographers and their subjects to assemble and reassemble their own narratives of the village and its environs, thereby creating a fluid, rhizomatic ‘living’ ethnography from a variety of perspectives. This type of approach to digital storytelling draws heavily on the work of visual anthropologists and filmmakers. Films including Jean Rouch’s 1967 *Jaguar*, Trĩnh Thĩ Minh Hũa’s 1982 *Reassemblage* and Apichatpong Weerasethakul’s 2000 *Mysterious Object at Noon* offer important touchstones for what collaborative visual ethnographic storytelling

might look like. These films all present the subjects as collaborators where the filmmaker draws back as much as possible and allows the narrative to be guided by the people, places and things on the other side of the camera. Here, the ethnography becomes a collaborative, constantly evolving document of culture, a project that begins to blur the lines between author and audience.

This project is still in the development phase, but I believe that it offers a valuable jumping-off point for considering the rapidly evolving relationship between technology (using collaborative Web-based platforms, mobile devices, and digital image capture), anthropology and narrativity. Here, there are certainly a multiplicity of applications in both academic and non-academic settings, including community outreach, activism, education and policy making. Ideally, these psychoethnographies would be archived on the Web as open-access multimedia documents (photos, video, audio, interactive web design) wherein the collaborators would have editorial access over the content. Participants could receive an invitation and login to work as editor-collaborators on their particular storyscape. One example of a possible application of this form could involve the development of a psychoethnographic account of indigenous communities in northern Canada where the community members act as both contributors and collaborators in developing a storyscape of life in Canada's remote First Nations communities. A project such as this would hopefully help to foster a greater sense of community through shared experience across a vast geographic area. An approach such as this presents a democratic endeavor that sees storytelling and anthropological research as a collaborative, decentered pursuit. It is time to let the stories of everyday lives become moments of true critical insight.

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