

The Story is Everywhere. Dispersed Situations in a Literary Role Play Game

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Abstract

This paper draws on the history and development of digital ethnography. The point of departure is that it is characteristic for digital environments to enforce feelings of being there and not being there simultaneously. Instead of invoking digital exceptionalism, however, it is assumed that mediated ways of acting sensitise research for the fact that all situations are dispersed in one way or another. Acknowledging the distributed character of situations means accepting their fragmentary and nested character. Using the example of a literary role play game, the paper invites the reader to follow selected interconnections between heterogeneous actors, strings of actions and layers of reality.¹

1. Mediated Presence and Digital Ethnography

Coming to terms with the boundaries and characteristics of what constitutes a situation is a long-standing issue. It is complicated enough even without the involvement of digital media or ethnographic research. Even in face-to-face encounters, the beginning and the ending of action chains, the degree of mutual awareness, and the frames of what happens are contingent, layered and subject to negotiation (Goffman 1974). It is not surprising that further uncertainties arise when technical media or mediating technology enter the equation. In the past 30 years, studies of mediated presence have significantly re-framed the understanding of situations with regard to different types and usage of tech-

nical media. One common trope is the “doubling of place”, a phrase originally coined with regard to witnessing public events on TV (Moore 2004). Another trope is “liveness”, understood as “a historically mutable concept” (Auslander 2008: 62) of cultural performance and mediation of presence. In addition, research in other fields of trans-local communication, interaction and/or working suggested a re-arrangement of space-time relations. These relations were conceived in different ways, as “intimacy at a distance” (Thompson 1995: 82ff.), “mediated proximity” (Tomlinson 1999), “absent presence” (Gergen 2002), “connected presence” (Licoppe 2004) or “synthetic situations” (Knorr-Cetina 2009) – to name just a few.

Needless to say: it is not possible to transcend the primordial physical location of *one* individual in *one* place – not even in the holodeck. Therefore, metaphorical usages of notions such as doubling of place or third places (in between, across etc.) have their limits. However, even if nothing and nobody is actually in motion, from the angle of mundane experience, media users are cognitively, emotionally and sensorially mobile (Urry 2000). They are challenged to synchronise and synthesise the different sources of experience of what they perceive as ‘the situation’. Adding mediating technology into the analysis of situations reveals the relative significance of bounded physical places as shared common grounds. This applies to ethnographers as to anyone else included in situations dispersed in time and space.

When scholars like Baym (1995) began to study “virtual communities”, they abandoned conventional field sites and forms of participation “in order to take the setting on its own terms, just as any ethnographer within an unfamiliar culture would do”. (Hine 2017: 21) Their methods of conducting ‘online-only/first’ ethnography suited the early web communities’ self-perception as spheres of their own. An undeniable achievement of ‘online-only/first’ ethnography has been to reveal the various uncertainties and the lack of knowledge and perception arising when communication, interaction and cooperation are de-localised and

shaped by the constraints of the ‘channeling’ media involved. Subsequently, methodical literature rightly emphasised that the de-localised placement of researchers in ‘armchair’ settings was a huge challenge. Although ethnography always includes feelings of alienation and ignorance, online interaction lacks the sensual richness of physical co-presence. Naming this feeling, Rutter and Smith (2005) spoke of a “nebulous setting”: “The online ethnographer faces the issue of ‘being there’ while also, in a non-trivial sense, ‘not being there.’” (Rutter/Smith 2005: 91)

With fading novelty, normalisation and the first wave of so-called social media, various relations between online and offline came (back) to mind. Subsequently, ‘online-only/first’ ethnography was deemed insufficient. The new common ground was the combination of online and offline field sites, backed by general trends in ethnography promoting multi-sited approaches (e.g. Hannerz 2003) and openness regarding what to follow (things, metaphors, narratives etc.). Postill and Pink (2012), for instance, introduced an understanding of “(digital) ethnographic places” as collections of intertwined things and processes connected, among others, through the ethnographers’ navigations and their narrative. Referring to Amit, Hine (2015: 60) stressed the basic ethnographic assumption that a “field site is an artful construction rather than something one simply ‘finds’”. Another example for overcoming the on/off dichotomy in digital ethnography can be found in the concept of “digital wayfaring” (Hjorth/Pink 2014). Drawing on ethnographic work on location-based service games, visual practices and mobile media, Hjorth and Pink broke with the “network(ed)” metaphors in social media research. Following Ingold’s (2007) notion of wayfaring, they explored and defined an anthropological attitude based on sensing the world and articulating experiences ‘on the move’, which has no (special) place for “online” or “offline”.

2. Dispersed Situations as a 'Default Mode'

Obviously, the experiences observed and made in digital environments stimulated research strategies favouring multiple 'entry points' and the contextualisation of the phenomena of interest from multiple angles across online and offline sites. Rich descriptions seem to emerge out of a style that could be described as 'connecting fragments'. To some extent, any kind of ethnographic inquiry relies on this style, but in or across digital environments in particular, following the practice(s) of interest and their traces can turn into solving a jigsaw puzzle.

Giving the debate a further twist, we can learn from the experiences made in digital ethnography by inversion and adopt a perspective in which we consider *every* 'social' situation as dispersed – including face-to-face and physically co-present encounters. Usually, we only understand situations as dispersed or distributed, in which (1) individuals located in different places interact with each other by means of technical media, (2) people 'participate' in distant (media) events or (3) immerse themselves into literary or game environments in order to 'interact' with or empathically follow fictional characters, or to turn themselves into avatars or similar. Broadening the perspective, however, the attribute "dispersed" can equally apply to technically mediated and constituted situations as to special forms of 'non-mediat(is)ed' religious experiences ('to be close to god'), 'distraction' (daydreaming, trance), living with imaginary companions (children are experts in this area) or forms of remembering the ancestors, the dead or long-distant friends. These examples of the 'imagined/felt' distribution of situations in time and space demonstrate the artificial nature of the on-off distinction. Undoubtedly, it is a powerful distinction, deeply incorporated in our self-perception and subjective media theories. Yet, being there and not being there is not only a problem of virtual or digital ethnography or of living in mediatized worlds. It is part of human life. We are 'offline online' as we are 'online offline' in multiple ways.

Distinctions and hierarchies of presence have to be learned and incorporated. If Mead was right, infants are born into a fully animated world of undifferentiated ‘intersubjectivity’ (Joas 1996). It requires strong efforts of socialisation and enculturation to *de-socialise* and *dis-connect* our emerging “self” from the material world, including our own body. In other words, through socialisation, in thousands of situations, we learn to differentiate the imagined other from the merely distant or the ‘really’ present other. We learn to differentiate the ‘here and now’ from ‘now, but not here’, ‘here, but not now’ or ‘not here and not now’. We also learn to differentiate fact from fiction and to interiorise ontological hierarchies. In modern western socialisation, for example, face-to-face interaction is often considered as more precious than mediated interaction and human others as more ‘real’ than non-humans. However, an interactionist theory of socialisation is open to change, as it is a theory of practice. Cross-cultural views easily reveal culture-specific differences in “deep role play” (Lewis 2013: 19f.). The factual contents, forms and subjects/agents of interaction are the ‘independent variables’ of socialisation and enculturation processes. If plays, games, rituals and the ontological mix of reference groups change, the ontological biases also change in the long run.

Methodologically, acknowledging the dispersed character of situations means accepting the fragmentary character of any participation (irrespective of being co-present, technologically mediated, online, offline etc.), being sensitive to heterogeneous types of participating actors and modes of participation, being aware of our own ontological biases and following the efforts which make the dispersed elements’ interrelations accountable in practice. What is visible or observable is a current or past fragment, consisting of strings of action that partly cross over and partly run in parallel. Following the strings leads to other fragments and/or other situations, knotted both synchronically and diachronically. The increasing attention given to the dispersed character of situations in media research shifts the focus away from the question

whether online or offline or online-offline is the appropriate form of conducting research. Instead, we should ask the question: what can we learn from the given, visible part of a situation in order to understand its other parts, relations and interconnection with other situations?

3. Digital Team Ethnography in the Context of Transformative Literary Fan Works

The fragments of situations we explore in our research derive mainly from digital platforms, working tools and communication services. Our research objects are transformative literary works in the area of fan fiction and role play. The research background is the CRC's project "Media practices and copyright law" (Bo7). This project is a joint venture of media sociology and copyright law scholarship. One of the objectives is to elaborate field-specific proposals to enhance copyright law in order to better match the reality of transformative working and publishing in digitised/mediatised social worlds. To capture this 'reality', we conduct empirical research using mixed methods. In its empirical parts, the project combines semi-structured interviews with fan fiction authors, platform and document analyses (e.g. of platforms' TOS, selected forum discussions/threads, commentary), 'offline' observation (e.g. participation in comic/manga conventions, book fairs) – and *digital ethnography*.

For the latter, we have chosen an auto-ethnographic approach. Auto-ethnography emphasises "the embodied and emotional experience of engagement with diverse media, attending to the influences that shape and constrain the experience, and the opportunities and restrictions that emerge" (Hine 2015: 83). The ethnographic participation in Bo7 is conducted by Svenja Kaiser. Svenja has been a fan fiction author and role player for many years. While she is the one who actively participates, we work as a team in steering and focusing the observation, and with regard to data analysis and interpretation.² Based mainly on protocols and screenshots, within the interpretation group, we attempt to 'relive' and reconstruct the cooperative text production. In this regard,

we benefit from the persistence of traces in digital media and the availability of options to record data in-situ. This special arrangement includes continuous mutual alienation. Our starting point is Svenja's experience while participating in-situ. Used as a methodical instrument, the reactions of the interpretation group's members while examining the archived material are equally important. The extent to which the members are familiar with the research subject differs greatly. Figure 1 illustrates the team ethnography process:

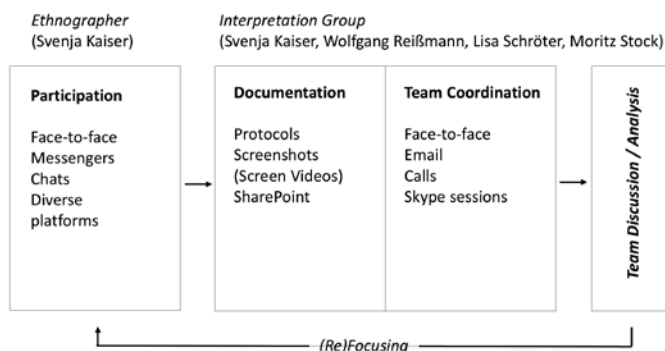


Fig. 1: Team Ethnography Process

Below, we draw on data we collected on a *literary role play game* observed between February and August 2017. Role play (RP) games are forms of collaborative writing or playing, respectively (cf. the classic work of Lancaster 2001). The literary RPs observed are usually performed in chat-like media environments, but also using forum sites and/or instant messenger services. The story evolves from the dialogue between the characters, who pen both narrative text and direct speech. Each player is in charge of one or more characters. The boundaries of literary RP and text-based MUDs (Multi User Dungeons) or pen&paper role plays are fluid. In literary RPs, the emphasis is on character and story

development. MUDs and pen&paper role plays are usually determined by game rules.

4. Seeing with Wraiths' Eyes: A Literary Role Play Game on *Stargate Atlantis*

The RP we observed is part of the *Stargate* fandom and hinges upon the species of the *Wraith*, which is significant in the military science fiction serial *Stargate Atlantis* (5 seasons; 2004–2008). *Stargate Atlantis* is a spin-off from *Stargate – SG 1* (10 seasons; 1997–2007), which itself has its roots in the movie *Stargate* (1994, directed by Roland Emmerich). *Stargate Atlantis* draws on the discovery of the supposedly lost city of the “ancients” in the 7th season of *Stargate SG 1*. The serial describes the expedition into the Pegasus Galaxy which, after a war between the ancients and the Wraith 10,000 years ago, is now dominated by the Wraith. In the original serial, the Wraith are introduced as a permanent threat to the Atlantis expedition.

The Wraith are insect-like beings organised in hives and subject to the strictly hierarchical reign of their queens. While the queens are feminine (only in exceptional cases hive masters are masculine), all other hive members are masculine and divided into “blades” – fighting actors – or “clevermen” – technical-scientific staff in charge of the spaceships and the infrastructure.

The original serial, *Stargate Atlantis*, is told from the human point of view. The humans' knowledge on the Wraith is limited. Often, they depict the Wraith in stereotypical, antagonistic patterns. Compared to the serial, the *role play group fundamentally inverts the perspective*. In the RP, all main characters are “Wraith-OCs”, with OC standing for “original character”, i.e. self-created and formed figures.

Members of the RP group are Natalie (29 at the beginning of the observation), Mario (31), Nadja (24)³ and Svenja (27). Mario, Natalie and Svenja are friends and live in a medium-sized German city. Nadja is Canadian and also lives in a medium-sized city. The initial group met

over a RP in the *Star Trek* fandom. After an initial period of observation, Svenja became an active player and writer. The *Stargate* fandom was new to her.

The RP is performed trans-locally in the “virtual rooms” of the chat service *Chatzy* in English. After each RP session, Mario “logs” the newly evolved text corpora in *Sta.sh*, a cache of the fan art platform *Deviant Art*. *Chatzy* and *Sta.sh* are both only accessible for those who get the exact link. In the overall period of observation and participation, around 200 RP episodes were stored and played in different player constellations. The playtime of each episode is around five to ten hours.

5. Connecting Fragments in “The Chatzy View”

RP is performed by players (dis)located in different places, developing stories and characters located in other places/spaces. While RP is clearly an activity of mediated situational entanglements, we would like to focus on aspects of the dispersion beyond the mere facts of distributed locations. In particular, we want to explore what we call “*The Chatzy View*”. The chat service is the most important means of role playing within the observed group. Therefore, participating in *Chatzy* is a core activity both for the ethnographer and the interpretation group during sessions of ‘secondary re-living’.

Overall, we identify three action chains in *Chatzy*, attributable to (1) involved characters, (2) involved author-personae and (3) involved players as ‘civil persons’ (see below). Applying a conventional attitude (and ontology) to our interpretation, we could refer to theories of experiencing narrative worlds (e.g. transportation thesis, initially coined by Gerrig 1993) or to theories of performance and play to describe our observations as different modes of acting (play-perform/non-play) and shifts from one to the other and back. In fact, from the players’ point of view, this is one possible and appropriate way of describing the action chains. As a matter of course, Nadja, Natalie, Mario and Svenja know who ‘they’, their author-egos and their characters are. They know to use

communicative conventions to distinguish the mode of playing from other modes of (inter)acting.

However, alternative views are equally justified. If we take the situations' fragments in *Chatzy* seriously, in close-reading the documents, we are constantly confronted with *mixed realities*, with participations and mutual influences of actors who dwell in worlds determined by incommensurate ontologies. On the one hand, this is not surprising. *It is a role play*. On the other hand, in *Chatzy*, these otherwise separated worlds are drawn together – they are knotted. At this point, the 'Chatzy View' differs from research that regards a narrative experience merely as a special action mode (requiring suspension of disbelief etc.). The questions 'who takes which role?' and 'who participates in which kind of reality?' are not easy to answer – at least not from the perspective of the 'Chatzy View'. To provide some impressions, we connect data collected on Friday, 16th June 2017, the beginning of an RP-filled weekend, with further observations made during the participation.

Chatzy – A gathering point for diverse beings

The gaming situation starts with assembling.

In the afternoon of Friday, 16th June 2017, Svenja receives a link via *Discord*, an instant messaging service. The link is necessary to enter the group's "virtual room" in *Chatzy* and delegates the actors towards the actions' place. Natalie has started an RP episode and invites Svenja to follow the story. Svenja logs in as *Luckless*, the character she usually plays. Having entered the scene, *Luckless* is thrown into an ongoing story. Two characters are playing together, *Diamond* and *Zenith*. Both are new characters. Figure 2 is the first of nine screenshots of this evening. On the right-hand side, *Chatzy* identifies the four actors playing. Besides the playing characters and *Luckless*, Pat is also present. As we know from previous episodes, Pat is not a character. He is an author-persona.

Diamond and *Zenith* are present in *Chatzy* and in the story world at the same time. *Luckless* and *Pat* restrict themselves to "lurking" and

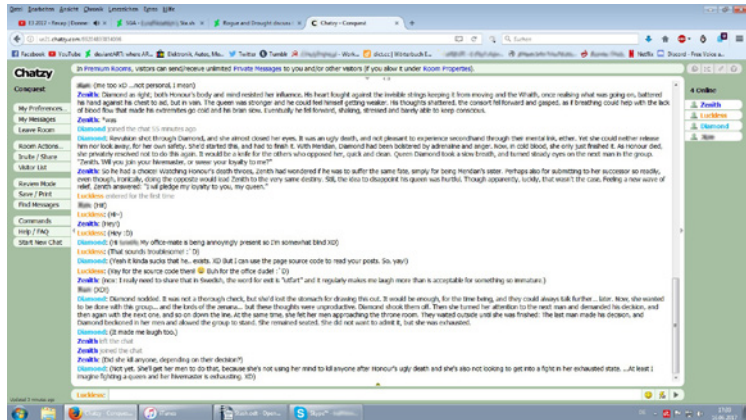


Fig. 2: The first of nine Chatzy screenshots on Friday, 16th June 2017

eventually comment on the story's progression by using bracketing communication. For them, following the ongoing action is comparable to reading a book or attending a performance. As offstage voices, they do not directly take part in the textual performance of *Zenith* and *Diamond*. However, *Zenith* and *Diamond* also often drop their 'roles', using bracketing communication and asking each other questions to coordinate story development. In a sense, *Pat* is the most interesting participant in this assembly of unequal beings. We know it is the artist name of Mario. As 'informed researchers', we also know that RP players never log in with civil identities. Yet, *Pat*, as almost every other 'nickname' used by fan fiction authors and role players, is not just *any* artist name. In most cases, they refer to a fandom, often the one the players or authors used when they first actively participated. *Pat*, as an author-persona, is a hybrid being, relating as much to the writing body ('the author/player as civil person') as to world(s) of fan fiction.

To put it succinctly, just by listing their names, we encounter a diverse gathering of beings in *Chatzy*.

Three beings inhabiting one body

In the story's progression, we find the RP characters in the following situation: some minutes before *Luckless* arrived in *Chatzy*, Queen *Diamond* caused the death of queen *Meridian* and her hivemaster *Honour*. In the first posts of the new episode, Queen *Diamond* considers the attitudes of the defeated hive's Wraith and attempts to submit them under her control. *Zenith* is *Meridian*'s brother (designated as "sister" in the first post, later always as "he") and fears to "suffer the same fate".

As *Luckless* arrives, *Chatzy* states: "Luckless entered for the first time." *Pat*, *Zenith* and *Diamond* welcome *Luckless* using the bracketing communication style. In doing so, *Zenith* and *Diamond* are present in two different ways: in *their* situation *and* in a welcome ceremony that crosses the different realities of characters and author-personae. Surprisingly, it is not *Luckless* they welcome, but *Serious* (Svenja's artist name). Queen *Diamond* tells her to use "the page source code to read your posts" as "[m]y office mate is being annoyingly present". If you attempt to adhere to the 'Chatzy View' on the situation, this information is perplexing. As Wraith are telepathic beings, Queen *Diamond* should be able to find more efficient ways of getting in touch with others, while pretending to work. Obviously, this information is an external reference transcending the character's life world. In a sense, *Diamond* forces us to anticipate that characters, author-personae and players can *inhabit the same body* and that, from time to time, one of them is speaking through the mouth of the other.⁴

According to Svenja's protocol, the information regarding the "office mate" was helpful in understanding the relationships between the different beings. As Svenja did not know the new characters yet, the post helped her assign *Diamond* to Nadja or to her author-persona, respectively. While in Germany, it was about 5:30 pm, in Ontario, Canada, it was about 11:30 am. So Nadja was at work. With her, while roaming fantastic worlds, *Diamond* and the author-persona were in the uncomfortable situation of being watched by the "office mate".

The beginning of a journey – Diamond leaves the text world

Although partially sharing bodies, the different beings have an existence of their own. This applies not only to the players and author-personae, but also to the characters. Their natural habitat begins to exceed the minds of their players, the other players' minds or *Chatzy*. On Friday, 16th June 2017, we witness the beginning of *Diamond's* journey – not in terms of narratology, but in coming alive outside of the story world. At the end of the episode, *Diamond* sends a link to an image uploaded to the file hosting service *imgur*. The image shows herself (see figure 3).

As 'informed researchers', we are able to identify this image as a piece of fan art created by Nadja. However, there are also other ways to grasp the event of linking: the newly born character, *Diamond*, appears in a quasi-physical form and begins to travel. Until this moment, except in minds and bodies of Nadja and her fellow players, *Diamond's* place was the text-driven performance in *Chatzy*. Now she becomes visible and quasi-tangible. She begins to conquer other environments, appears in *Chatzy* and in *imgur*, here and there... We do not know what else



Fig. 3: Diamond, fan art on *imgur* by Nadja. Source: *imgur* page, link is not provided due to anonymisation reasons



Fig. 4: Diamond Brand Coconut Milk. Source: http://www.jctrading.us/assets/product_images/drinks.jpg (4th October 2018)

will happen. One day, will we meet the queen at a convention, a cosplay event or a talk show?

Beings mutually influence each other

With the help of the mental powers of *Razor*, her first watch captain, and the drones led by him, Queen *Diamond* immobilises those refusing her will, then asks the remaining “new officers” to prepare the ship for her inspection. As the characters are new, the episode is accompanied by a lot of metacommunication in brackets, concerning the characters’ development and relationships. One of *Diamond*’s posts mentions the name of a character:

Diamond: (I want Diamond’s current hivemaster to be called Brand, solely because every day at work I see this box of “Diamond Brand Coconut Milk” as I got [go to, W.R.] the freezer.)

Diamond, or Nadja speaking through her mouth, refers to a freezer bag with coconut milk (see figure 4). In mentioning this detail, we do not intend to reveal a curious momentum or to conjure up the agency of coconut milk for storytelling. Yet, it is a good example to illustrate that the situations and lives of characters, author-personae and players not only co-exist, but *shape each other*. Nadja’s attachment to the product, its name, visual rhetoric and the daily look at it merges with the hivemaster’s character.

We have identified many situations, in which players, author-personae and characters act in interdependence (see figure 5). For instance, if one of the active players has to hurry (due to external commitments etc.), it has *direct consequences* on the characters’ (inter-)actions and conversations. Characters then are under pressure to come to the point and/or author-personae are urged to adapt the plot and find an appropriate end. Conversely, the characters’ situations influence those of the players. The way they conduct their life in *Chatzy* has consequences be-

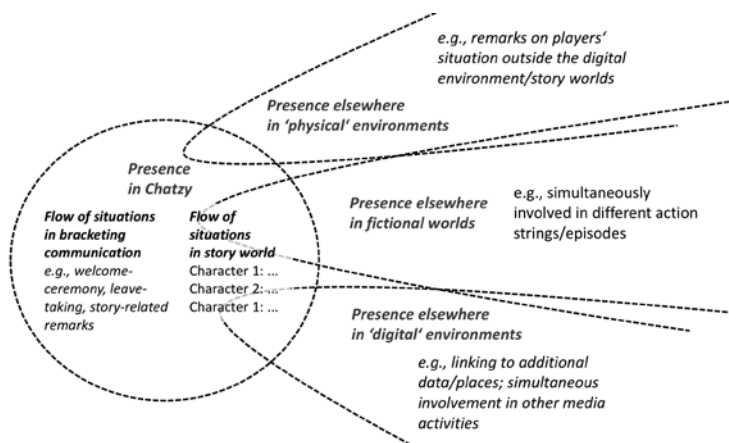


Fig. 5: Synchronic Distribution of Situations in RP

yond tying the players to screens and keyboards. Within the period of observation, Svenja felt tired and exhausted after hours of gaming more than once. However, abandoning the character and consequently immobilising the ongoing interaction was not a viable option.

Author-personae and moderately directional story development

At around 8.20 pm, *Diamond* and *Zenith* decide to “[e]nd RP” and “start the next one with *Zenith*’s turn”. Frequently, short sequences of joint planning occur before or at the very beginning of a new episode. In this case, *Diamond* or *Nadja*’s author-persona asks how much prior knowledge should be taken for granted:

Diamond: (How much do you know about *Zenith*’s backstory? aka how much should I ask)

Zenith: (I don’t really know anything, but I’ll make shit up whenever convenient.)

In the observed *Stargate* RP, the style of story and character development is best described as ‘*moderately directional*’. Most minor aspects and small-scale developments are realised “on the fly”: story progression is partly accompanied by intragroup negotiating and, partly, players and characters inform each other about the next steps or players and characters just go ahead in a certain direction. Choosing the hive-master’s name with reference to “Diamond Brand Coconut Milk” is one example for on-the-fly development without seeking consensus. *Diamond* announces the name rather than discussing it first (in general, players respect what others stipulate for their characters – as long as these decisions do not influence their own characters too heavily). The “backstory” question involves more negotiation. Beyond that, moderately directional story and character development includes a *loose planning of event corridors* and/or *obligatory plot points*. This planning occurs before or within certain game sessions. The greater the communicative interaction, the less the planning is documented. The story and its development are evolving in the players’ minds. Conversely, short character profiles, fan art images of the main characters and short memos in analogue (post-its) and digital form (e.g. posts in instant messengers) synchronise and stabilise the story’s progression. Moreover, each *Chatzy* room gets a short header (here: “Conquest”) paratextually indicating the overall topic.

Further observations obtained by accompanying *Nadja* and *Mario* outside *Chatzy* (not on Friday, 16th June 2017), demonstrate the diachronic interconnection of situations more far-flung. *Natalie* and *Mario* share a flat and spend a considerable portion of their lifetime together. Watching series, sitting in a pizzeria, ... – possible progressions of the RP and episodes they want to play are permanent subjects of conversation. Again, we observe the peculiar entanglement of the different beings and realities inhabiting the same bodies and wandering through different sites. Of course, we could classify this as an “offline activity”, but if you follow the story development, you recognise: the story is everywhere.

From Chatzy to (his)story

After asking the remaining officers to prepare the ship for the queen's inspection, *Diamond* asks:

Diamond: (And then we do the inspection thing later?)

Zenith: (Sounds good!)

Within the evening's *first* episode, the actors figure out the main theme of the evening's *second* episode – the inspection of the defeated hive / ship by *Diamond*. The fascination of literary role play games arises from their liveness, from the in-situ experience of not knowing what comes next, from surprising each other with unexpected turns, and from a text which is not predefined, but evolves during role play. However, by *closing an episode*, it becomes *pre-history*. The dialogic interaction ends as a literary text. While the occurrences remain open while playing, they become fixed after the role play ends. Each episode played is adopted into the fan story's "canon". The canon is relevant for all future story strings, which eventually include the same characters, their relations or the events that shape them. Although not obsessed with building an ultra-coherent storyline, the group considers the existing story strings in further episodes. Thus, the in-situ emergence of text is not *ex nihilo*.

After the first episode (shortly after defeating the adversarial hive) and the second episode ("the inspection thing"), around 9.20 pm Nadja and Svenja decide to play an episode with two other characters (*Blaze* and *Luckless*). *Pat* follows the two characters to the new room, while *Zenith/Natalie* leaves. In the ethnographic protocol, Svenja notes that *Pat/Mario* asked the two players to indicate the exact point in time when the session happened with regard to the overall RP. This question highlights parallel ongoing conversations concerning the editorial and ordering work. The succession of uploads in *Sta.sh* represents the succession of plot points. Thus, positioning influences what has already happened and what can be expected to be part of the fan story's canon.

Logging is not necessarily part of playing RP, but a common practice. In the *Stargate* group, each game situation in *Chatzy* is inevitably associated with downstream editing and archiving. This activity is completed by Pat. He is the “master of key”. On its way from *Chatzy* to *Sta.sh*, the text undergoes a metamorphosis. By identifying the different players (e.g. Zenith: ...), *Chatzy* documents the cooperative making of the text. In the *Sta.sh* version, the cooperative making becomes obscured. The content saved on *Sta.sh* is not the characters’ dialogues, but continuous epic texts without authorship remarks (except that the *Sta.sh* versions are saved in Pat’s account).

6. Conclusion

In this paper, we have argued for an interpretative approach highlighting the dispersed character of situations. Acknowledging this distribution means accepting their fragmentary and nested character. The task is to reveal and describe links between the fragments and the mutual making of strings of action within and across situations. Against this background, ethnography in and of digital environments sensitises participants for the ambivalences of ‘being there and not being there’, but is not exceptional in that. Using the example of a literary role play game, we have attempted to carve out interconnections between different beings and their realities. Our main site of observation – *Chatzy* – displays an ontologically mixed reality. Writing into being is a mode of existence in digital environments. Each being has to re-embody – no matter whether his or her nature is fictional or not. The fragmentary ‘*Chatzy* View’ helps us to not only rationally understand, but also *feel* this point:

We experience characters writing their own story.

We experience author-personae whispering in brackets, often through the mouth of their characters.

We experience characters fantasising on the workplace situations of the beings who lend them their fingers to type and their brain capacity to imagine the reality in which the characters exist.

We experience players, author-personae and characters inhabiting the same body.

We experience the situation of one being producing direct consequences for the others – across and beyond story/text worlds.

We experience the *Chatzy* situation being distributed to past and future.

We experience: *The story is everywhere.*

Notes

- 1 I would like to thank Lene Faust and Inka Fürtig for their helpful comments on the paper's first draft.
- 2 Without the great commitment of Svenja Kaiser and the role-playing group's members, this study would not have been possible. We owe special thanks to all of them. Regular members of the interpretation group are (in alphabetic order): Svenja Kaiser, Wolfgang Reißmann, Lisa Theresa Schröter and Moritz Stock.
- 3 Natalie, Mario und Nadja are pseudonyms. The names of the author-personae (Serious, Pat) have also been changed, as the players use them for publishing other stories. As Svenja is the participating researcher, her name (Svenja Kaiser) is not anonymised. All names of characters are the original names (the role play is not published).
- 4 In the field of role play, the connection between 'civil persons', author-personae and characters can appropriately be described as a symbiotic relation (Haraway 2016). While this is not the case in the group observed here, characters often have their own websites or *Twitter* and *Facebook* accounts. In cosplay, they may come to inhabit the 'real' worlds. Taking into account that in Japan, for example, fictional mascots are wandering through society (Wilde 2018), the boundaries of story and other worlds seemingly begin to blur.

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