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Multiverse Ethnography

A replication and recontextualization as an audience study

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Media Studies

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Multiverse Ethnography: A replication and recontextualization as an audience study

This study is a conceptual replication of an exploratory study introducing a new method for the study of interactive media (Karhulahti et al. 2022). *Multiverse Ethnography* tasks a team of researchers to write fieldwork journals that are coded and subsequently analysed to create a design of thematic structures presenting the findings of the study.

The original study concerned *Cyberpunk 2077* (CD Projekt RED, 2020) and *Among Us* (Innersloth, 2018), tasking a class studying game studies-methodology with the fieldwork and a co-operative coding process. As a more contained study with a single researcher, this replication excludes *Cyberpunk 2077*. The participants writing fieldwork journals did not have an academic role in the study, as it lacked the classroom context.

The contextual differences of the data collection seemed to lead to fewer hours of interaction, possibly causing players to write down less observations of emergent meta-strategies or changes in the form of updates and customization. This would identify such themes as increasing in relevance relative to player's experience. Comparative applications of the method are encouraged, as differences between different language game servers were identified.

All elements of the thematic clusters emerging in the original study were identified in the data for the replication, though some themes lost relevance possibly because of these contextual factors. Applying the method as a solo researcher is not recommended, due to the large workload of data collection and the increased validity offered by co-operative coding and analysis.

Key words: ethnography, methodology, digital culture, qualitative research

Contents

1 Introduction

My master's thesis helps in establishing a new method for ethnography, specifically meant to create more comprehensive data on interactive artifacts. Named *multiverse ethnography*, it requires a team or group of individuals who produce separate works of fieldwork journals. These texts are then coded, with each observation put into a category. This enables the creation of numerical data for deeper analysis.

This thesis aims to partially replicate the first piece of research published on the method called *Multiverse Ethnography: A Qualitative Method for Gaming and Technology Use Research* (2022) by Karhulahti et al. For transparency, I have second authorship on this original publication. I assessed the codes from the researchers. Together with the team we made a spreadsheet with the codes and proceeded to analyse the data. As a conceptual replication, the study collects new data, using a modified study protocol. (Peels & Bouter 2018, 2)

The original study analysed fieldwork journals on two games, *Cyberpunk 2077* (CD Projekt RED, 2020) and *Among Us* (Innersloth, 2018). As a master's thesis, my study is on a smaller scale. In practice this means a smaller overall number of journals, as well as me as the single interpreter and author. Thus, I will only study *Among Us*. In the original study, the diaries on *Among Us* were shorter and less numerous when compared to *Cyberpunk 2077*. The game also has a simpler structure. Therefore, it seemed like the better choice for a more contained study with a single researcher.

Among Us is a science fiction themed multiplayer game where players attempt to complete tasks while trying to identify the imposters among them. The randomly selected imposters try to sabotage the mission and assassinate the rest of the players. When a body is found or a meeting called, the players can finally communicate with each other which is not normally possible. During these moments the players can vote on suspected imposters. The most voted upon person gets automatically killed. Killed players are out of the round.

The name *multiverse ethnography* underlines producing a variety of different ethnographic data on an interactive artifact with user agency. This creates a multiverse of interpretations and experiences that will provide a more comprehensive, rounded look into what types of observations people make in relation to these specific artifacts.

Scholars have put forward the idea of games as worlds or playgrounds, not strictly restricted experiences. The implied openness to player agency emphasizes variety between player experiences. This is explored through the method in question by enabling a variety of experiences to create unified data. (Newman 2013, 19-20)

As the replication-crisis receives increasing amounts of attention, so does encouragement of more vigorous study replication. Humanities often get overlooked as studies within it can have the misleading reputation of not being replicable. This leads humanities to lack studies specifically designed to be replication studies, though encouragement of increased effort towards replicating studies in the humanities has increased. (Peels & Bouter 2018, 2-3) Especially for a new method, a replication of its introduction seems appropriate for increasing its validity for future research.

As a methodological study, there is no clear or obvious theoretical background or primary source to build upon, outside of the original exploratory study. Additionally, new media does not have as rich of an established canon of theory as other forms of media, especially as its nature is so rapidly evolving. This lack of a handy primary source requires this study to apply sources from a broad variety of game studies, ethnography, and new media studies.

Some theories might appear tangential but should be seen as offering a broader context for the method and the process of applying it to future studies. As a new method, *multiverse ethnography* should benefit from a comprehensive exploration into the type of data it creates. Mapping out its place in the area of new media studies, theory and ethnography is essential to understanding the method.

Since the nature of my work is inherently methodological, it is valuable to explore the larger methodological context around virtual ethnography, as well as reflect upon the role of previous ethnographic and methodological research in the framework of my thesis. I will start by describing the method in the context of ethnography and methodology, presenting the original method and its differences to my replication, consider the method in the context of the data, and finally aim to map out ways the method appears through the lens of audience studies.

To verbalize specific research questions, this study is exploratory in its nature and attempts to replicate the original (also exploratory) study, considering the differences in practical research experience and resulting data. This study identifies its primary differences to the object of

replication when approaching the method as a solo researcher, considers how contextual elements could affect data results, and how the method can be applied in audience studies. Shortcomings and limitations of the method and study are considered, and future applications suggested.

2 Methodology around multiverse ethnography

2.1 Introduction to multiverse ethnography

The definition given in the original research is central to understanding my study and it is fitting to start with one as a foundation:

> *Instead of applying the ethnographic method to produce a single in-depth account of the studied research object, multiverse ethnography includes multiple researchers carrying out coordinated synergetic ethnographic work on the same research object, thus producing a multiverse of interpretations and possible meanings.* (Karhulahti et al. 2022, 86)

In the original research, the participants were students taking part in a course "Methods in Game Research" at the University of Jyväskylä. 42 BA- and MA-level students enrolled, with 38 passing. The students produced ethnographic fieldwork journals based on their time engaging with a video game, their choices being between the aforementioned *Cyberpunk 2077* and *Among Us*. The students were asked to engage with the games ethnographically either by playing one or watching a livestream of it for a minimum of 30 hours.

The task was supported by the assigned reading, as well as the content of the lectures in the class. The course essentially prepared the students to produce ethnographic data and give them first-hand experience of ethnographic work through the assigned task. Students were told to write down any observations they felt as relevant. The statements in the journals were coded and categorized to produce data, with the first layer of coding done by the participants through exchanging the final texts with each other.

Multiverse ethnography is presented as a possible method for future research. No strong conclusions were drawn from the results themselves, with the study acting as an exploratory proof of concept for the method. In the text it is said that the study had "no explicit research questions beyond methodology testing". (Karhulahti et al. 2022, 6)

After the journals were done, the students exchanged journals to code them. These codes were assessed by me, to ensure a consistent result. Together with a team of researchers we then transcribed these codes to an online spreadsheet program. Through co-operative analysis the team was able to produce a framework of themes to illustrate what things people see as relevant to these specific games, combining the codes into large central themes in the form of clusters. (See figure 1)

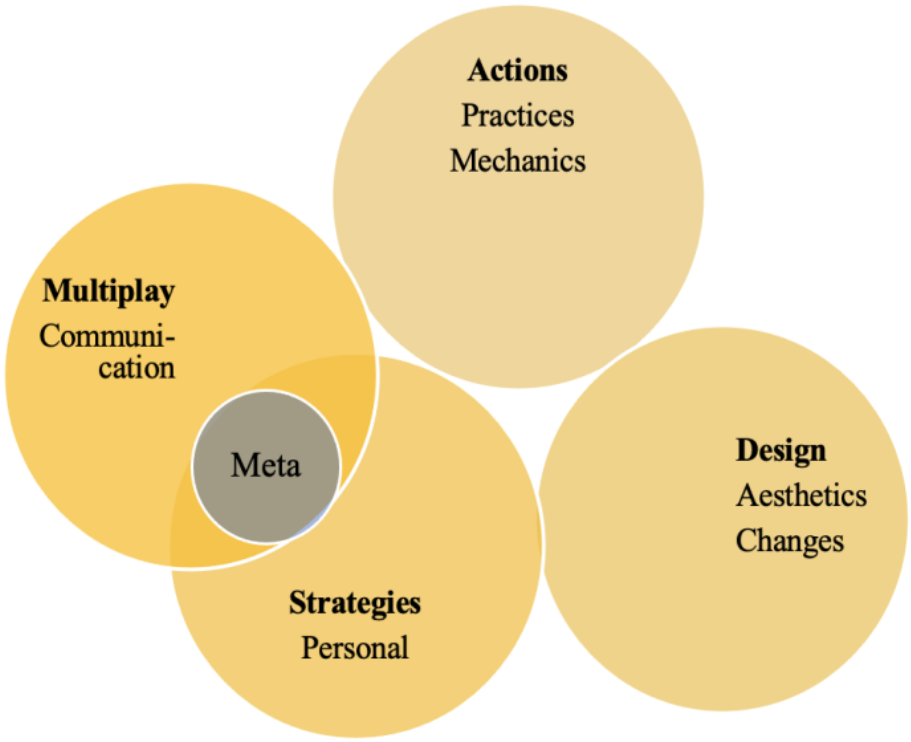


Figure 1: The structure of *Among Us* according to the codes present in the original research. The image is from the original study. Each macro-level theme is bolded with its sub-themes under it. Note that *meta* is considered a sub-theme shared by the macro-level themes of *multiplay* and *strategies*.

The presented themes were combined from the individual codes resulting from the coding process by the students handling each other's journals. Some codes were connected to a macro level theme but were also numerous enough to warrant the status of an internal sub-theme. A macro level theme called "subjective" was removed from analysis with the observations it included. It referred to observations based purely on the writer's opinion on the game, or other external elements. The unique status of this theme seemed to not fit in with the rest of the themes and worked well to identify and disqualify a specific type of observation from the results.

Explanations of the different macro-level themes and subthemes follows, with code examples from the original study:

Theme 1: Actions includes different descriptions of what players can or cannot do, and observations concerning the rules of the game. This theme consists of two sub themes named *mechanics* and *practices*. According to the original text, mechanics refers to codes about the "general principles of action", like *minigames*, *vote*, *spectating* and *loss*. Practices includes codes that imply an event the players are expected to take part in and affect, like *missions*, *chat discussing imposter* and *getting caught*.

Theme 2: Design includes observations on the audio-visual design of the game, as well as the effect both the official designers and mod designers have on the game. The macro-level theme is divided into *aesthetics* and *changes*. Aesthetics consists of all aesthetical observations not included in the changes-sub theme, including *comics aesthetics*, *player voice covers game sound* and *browser-like game*. Changes refers to codes such as *new roles* and *evolving player-created rules*. This is content that has been newly added to the game or altered, whether by the designers, or the players themselves.

Theme 3: Multiplay refers to codes on the social aspects of the gameplay. It was divided into the sub themes of *communication* and *meta*. Communication includes codes such as *teamwork* and *trust*, as well as more technical observations like *forgetting to mute mic* and *language*. Meta as a sub theme is shared by the macro level themes of multiplay and strategies. It refers to shared knowledge or agreements amongst the player-base. Examples include codes like *social contracts* and *handicap*.

Theme 4: Strategies refers to game knowledge that affects the players' idea on how to be successful at the elements of competition presented by the game. It is divided to *personal strategies* and the previously explained *meta*, a sub-theme shared between the theme of *multiplay*. Personal strategies might not be common knowledge within the community and refers to codes reflecting upon the players personal playstyle or skills.

It is worth mentioning that even in the original study it is accepted that these themes can be structured around the specifics of the study in question and should reflect its research questions. Themes should emerge from the fieldwork journal code analysis, undoubtedly affected by the instructions given to the participants as well as the research question. (Karhulahti et al. 2022, 92) Different types of thematic clusters would result in different

worthwhile insights towards the researched artifact of interest. In this study the thematic clusters will stay the same as the original study, to create easily comparable data for the replication.

The method shares some aspects with game studies research that relies on a meaning-making partnership, referring to in-depth interviews between a researcher and a participant with particular knowledge on the research topic. Co-operative meaning making happens reciprocally, even if participants do not take an academic role in the study. (Hesse-Biber & Leavy 2006, 128)

Using players as coresearchers is an established approach to game research, with participants playing an active role in the research process of many studies. Perspectives of experienced players are valued in interpretation and evaluation of the research artifact. This idea has been applied to using both researchers who are experienced players and experienced player participants who are positioned to give analysis and interpretation usually through interviews. The supposed benefits are partly shared by *multiverse ethnography*, particularly the emphasis on the value of multiple separate experiences on a single game. (Jørgensen 2012, 378-380)

Using fieldwork journals instead of interviews makes managing larger groups of participants less resource-intensive and produces a different type of data on the research object(s). Reciprocal meaning-making happens in the coding process, which is when participants can potentially be invited to take on the analytical role of a researcher. After this process the codes are verified and analysed, with themes starting to emerge.

Multiverse ethnography does not imply a specific level of expertise when it comes to the participants. Some studies might benefit from a group of participants with no prior video game experience, while player experience might not be a priority question for some other studies. The method relies on the value of ethnographic data which can be applied by controlling the research questions, participants, and their instructions.

2.2 Ethnography and the fieldwork journal

The fieldwork journal is one element of ethnographic research tradition that is very central to the method of *multiverse ethnography*. A lot of ethnographic data is created as observations in fieldwork journals. Ethnography is defined as a reflective work, already supposed to be

pushing observations in a scientific direction and documenting the research process. (Kurki 2010, 160-161)

Fieldwork journals are sometimes described as a research text on the research process itself (Kurki 2010, 164). My study is essentially research on these journal texts, and thus on the process as well. However, it is important to notice that as the primary author and researcher on this study, I will not take part in journal writing or the process. I will observe and analyse the process from an outsider's perspective, though I have prompted it myself.

It is accepted that many variations of fieldwork journals exist, and that they can have vastly different attributes depending on how they are produced and handled, or the roles of the researchers or writers relative to the study and the artifact. This underlines the subjectivity of the fieldwork journal, which is a subject of concern when relying on them for data. Any study dealing with such data needs to acknowledge and consider the nature of the fieldwork journal in relation to the study.

Viewing ethnographic data as a narrative is a common tool for managing and understanding its subjectivity. The rise of this perspective has put some disciplines through discussion over narratology. Acknowledgement of the emerging story within the research and unfolding it responsibly emphasizes the agency of the researcher in communicating the conclusions of the study. The narrative is created in the process of research and requires transparency and reflexivity by the research team. Application of this idea to modern ethnography and fieldwork journals is exemplified by Tuulikki Kurki (2010, 163) as a way to point self-aware attention to the narrative relationship between researcher and research data during ethnographic process.

This is based on work by Carlo Ginzburg, arguing for more complex, self-reflective methodology that acknowledges the preparatory stages, as well as the entire process of research and writing as a meaning-making process of sorts. For Ginzburg, this is specifically in the context of creating narratives in history and historiography, though it is smoothly applied to any study of interpreting interpretations. (Ginzburg 1999, 101-102) Layers of interpretation cannot be ignored in ethnography either, as it recolves around understanding data that has already been filtered through the narrative perspective of a study participant. Thus "interpreting interpretations" is a relevant perspective to consider.

Multiverse ethnography revolves around interpreting the fieldwork of others, especially in the unique single researcher-context of this study. This seems to imply that the method cannot escape the aforementioned narratological elements either. A certain narratological perspective feels appropriate to point towards the fieldwork journals in order to understand their subjectivity and how to take it into account.

Analysing a fieldwork journal seems often to be essentially analysing, or at least confronting, the subjectivity of the material itself. It is important to consider the relationship between this subjectivity of fieldwork journals and the *multiverse ethnography*-method. The results are closely tied to this subjectivity, and thus it requires careful analysis.

If a narrative perspective on ethnographic data is held, it is interesting to see *multiverse ethnography* essentially work against the variety and uniqueness within the journals, stripping them of identifying, perhaps even narratological elements. It separates the text by observation into categories, ripping them out of their contexts. The resulting sheet data might appear to lose some nuance or personality from the original journals, but it is a prerequisite for creating a unified result out of a great variety of data.

This of course does not imply that the narratological issues between the researcher, participants, artifact of study, and data should be ignored. The role of narrative cohesion may not appear in the data outside of excerpts, but the processes of fieldwork, coding and analysis are still dependent on interpretation and making meaning out of texts.

The end result of this is the published study text, which can also be studied in narratological terms. Applications of the *multiverse ethnography*-method should have a transparent and open attitude towards the meaning-making process in the same way as any ethnographic study should openly self-reflect upon the emerging story of the different texts being produced and analysed.

While it is not possible for journal writers in my study to provide exchange coding as they did in the original study (Karhulahti et al. 2022, 87-88), consistency with the original study is explored through reusing the same codes and analytical processes as in the original. This is done to create an exploratory comparison with the original data and research process.

Closer textual analysis is a natural part of the coding process, especially as themes are identified and start to emerge. This means that the unique nuance of the diaries is still an

integral part of the study, and examples and justifications for themes and conclusions may arise from the texts in the analytical process. It is through analysis of fringe examples that this study aims to explore the boundaries of the original thematic clusters. It can also offer opportunities for noting possible shortcomings or alternative future applications of the method.

Because of the sociological history of ethnography, it is closely connected to the study of social worlds. Participants are seen to have vital information concerning their social worlds and processes. (Boellstorff T. et al. 2012, 20) *Multiverse ethnography* enables data from multiple perspectives, even within the same game event. Regardless of not being designed with social worlds specifically in mind, it can be utilised to study any number of teamwork-, competition-, and social experiences in and around different game worlds, like matches in first person shooter-games or “raiding” in online role-playing games.

Ethnographic methods put more attention on social and historical aspects of culture, as opposed to literary studies and its use of close textual analysis. This in turn suggests that ethnographic methods can give different, and possibly more accurate and detailed data on the audience experience and the meaning of an artifact to its audience. It also implies a benefit in mixing methods for more comprehensive analysis. (Sonnet 2003, 255)

Multiverse ethnography does not imply any social aspect in the artifact being studied, but the methodological history of ethnography seems to have an emphasis on social worlds specifically. This brings to question what this implies in terms of single player video game experiences. Single player experiences could be considered to have a social element in the larger context of an audience experience with potential participatory and social interaction concerning the media artifact. The multiple perspectives offered by the method reflects the polysemy of game experiences. This is the basis for applying the method for audience studies, detailed in chapter 5.1.

These participatory elements of the audience experience imply a collective, social side to a media experience, even if had in solitude. Adjacently, the ethnographic elements of this study invite analysis through the lens of audience studies. The exclusion of subjective observations contradicts this goal slightly. If the application of the method was designed with audience studies in mind, it might be preferable to consider the theme of *Subjective* more attentively, letting possible sub-themes emerge. Designing the participant instructions around these ideas

would also benefit the results. Still, the existence of a separate category for subjective observations already gives a basis for some exploratory analysis through the lens of audience studies in said category. On top of this, audience studies is useful for the rest of the ethnographic data as well.

In this study, the total fieldwork hours do not appear as particularly extensive based on the amount of data. The original request for 30 hours of interaction was removed in later versions of the research information sheet. This was done to encourage participation, likely causing the total amount of resulting fieldwork to suffer. This issue was mitigated by following instructions in the original text in terms of applying the method to the needs of this specific study. Practically this meant concentrating purely on *Among Us* over *Cyberpunk 2077*. Even with the comparably larger amount of data concerning it, the original text mentioned the rather narrow perspective provided by the limited 30 hours of interaction with *Cyberpunk 2077*. (Karhulahti et al. 2022, 98) The fewer hours of interaction were better applied to the more contained structure of *Among Us*, also because it was connected to less diaries and less playtime in the original study.

It is necessary to try to pin down a definition for ethnography, to give a clear idea of what is meant when the term appears in the context of this study. In a historical sense the term originally referred to the attempt to scientize journalism, personal memoirs, and similar texts (Press 1996, 114). This definition seems safe to use in the context of *multiverse ethnography* as well, as the method could be seen as using codes to extract scientific data out of non-scientific text. In my replication the journals will not be necessarily written by people with academic experience, so positioning them as non-scientific texts to scientize seems appropriate.

A rich history of interpretations has been built on this original basis as ethnography has progressed through the years. The emphasis on creating objective data gave room to more modern ideas, such as ethnographers inscribing social discourse to create a scientific document (Geertz 1973, 19). This definition describes the use of *multiverse ethnography* even more sufficiently. The social discourse happens between the writer of the fieldwork journal and the digital artifact being studied, as well as during the self-reflection of the writer. This self-inscribed material is the ethnographic data that this method studies.

In a different light, Clifford Geertz' widely regarded development over the idea of "thick description" also brings a perspective to shine on *multiverse ethnography*. A thick description views the individual interpretation and process at their most extreme in the same frame of study as wider, even global structures. Studying localized cultural practices helps researchers consider the structures of the larger contextual world being interacted with, interpreted, and considered by the active, critical audience. (Gibson 2000, 265-266)

While observations of *Among Us* are bound to include mentions of the mechanical workings of the game experience, ethnography is tasked to also acknowledge a thicker understanding of the complexity of contextual and background information that morphs and makes up the observation. These layers of description are hopefully partially unfolded by the proper application of *multiverse ethnography*, through the emerging thematic clusters that are powered by self-reflective and sufficiently thick descriptions of the observations.

A case can be made that as an ethnographic method, *multiverse ethnography* approaches these micro-level, personal cultural experiences as interpreted by the audience itself. As a collection of different ethnographic research objects, the fieldwork journals attempt to be more than the sum of its parts. Both the artifact itself, as well as the larger contextual world the product exists in can be considered through the journal texts.

As a qualitative method for studying social worlds through experience, ethnography is supposed to provide access to the perspective of the participants. (Brown 2015, 78) Certainly a multiplayer experience is one of social worlds, but arguably also single player experiences can be studied as social worlds as alluded to before. Certain expectations are directed at the object, based on prior knowledge and some sort of a relationship, or lack thereof, to the communities surrounding even single player games.

Ethnography is often characterized by acknowledging the researchers' relationships with others and using careful self-reflection -or reflexivity- to "interrogate the intersections between self and society". Reflexivity has been considered an integral part of ethnographic game studies and thus remains relevant. In a methodological context, it refers to being able to justify the choices made in the data collection and analysis. This is true also in autoethnography, consideration of which follows. (Brown 2015, 80) (Adams 2015, 1-2)

Autoethnography is often seen as a response to problems present in ethnography, specifically in the discourse about the limits of ethnographic knowledge. Autoethnography operates under

the view that observations and interpretations are the most valid when made about the experiences of the observer and interpreter themselves. This is to address criticisms that have been made over what extent a researcher can study the experience of another.

According to Johanna Uotinen, autoethnography originally referred to adding autobiographical elements to ethnographic texts and has since grown to include many kinds of practices and perspectives. This is evident from the decades of different methodological studies conducted on autoethnography throughout the decades. This includes a view on it being a method that connects the private to the cultural. (Uotinen 2010, 178-179)

The fieldwork journals provided by participants in the *multiverse ethnography*-method can be positioned as autoethnographic data; first-hand experiences written by people directly interacting with the artifacts being researched. The method collects these autoethnographic journals and combines them into one, unified, quantified collection of observations. The details that exist in the uncoded journals disappear during the coding process, but the frequency of observations in each theme can be tracked, and detailed fieldwork journal data accessed later. Private experiences connected to a larger, collective cultural experience.

This is where a methodological point of conflict happens between the original study and my replication, considering their relationship to autoethnography. Autoethnography is a research method that revolves around the producer of the autoethnographic data also being the researcher to analyse said data. It invites the diary writer to the position of researcher.

The role of the diary writers as researchers taking part in the coding process thus appears natural and productive in the context of the original study, but not so in this replication. This is the most striking methodological difference between the two studies, and it is brought to light by this difference in the relationship between the data and its producer.

Acknowledgment of this fickle role of the journal writers seems ingrained in the choice to call the method *ethnography*. Though in the original study the journal writers had a status of researcher, the study itself was still not conducted nor completely written by these participants, making the results ethnographic data. This is in spite of the fact that the original writing consists of data that could be argued as autoethnographic, at least if the researchers approached the journal writing task autoethnographically.

Considering this detailed methodology behind autoethnography, it seems unfounded to claim that a person could produce autoethnography without putting active effort into using the autoethnographic method. This is something that was not part of the instructions for this study. The consent form only encourages the person to "document anything that they personally feel relevant", with a note that "observations should reflect any thoughts or feelings you have during the experience that has to do with the game and the play-session" (see figure 2).

While it seems productive to consider the autoethnographic value of the fieldwork journal data, its usefulness is directly linked to the status of the writers. Had the participants been researchers knowingly producing autoethnographic efforts, there would have been an opportunity to analyse the data as such. It would also require a framework for the codes and research questions designed with this specifically in mind.

Using journal subjectivity as part of the process itself, instead of an obstacle to overcome, is admittedly an inviting possibility. But reflexivity and studying the subjectivity itself does not seem like an impossible feat with *multiverse ethnography*, even without autoethnographic implications. The multiverse of interpretations is built around being able to compare different subjective experiences and to see what emerges from these separate, but collective narratives.

Autography is a descriptive term with less academic baggage than autoethnography, as it does not imply such a specific relationship between the writer and their data. It is less restrictive to use autography, as it is defined as text written by one's own hand. While it implies handwriting, it should be fitting to apply it here to differentiate written experience interpreted through an ethnographic relationship between a researcher and the data from purely autoethnographic material. As the name implies, *multiverse ethnography* is defined by ethnography, though it uses autographic data as a research object and asset.

To practice reflexivity for this study, I acknowledge that I have a passing understanding of *Among Us*, with 30 hours of play and watch time at the time of writing, done to reach a similar familiarity that was expected from the participants of the original study. The limited personal experience encourages me to not make assumptions on the social norms or player cultures around the game, or otherwise overstep my boundaries as a researcher.

This is important during data analysis, as not to deem things normal or abnormal without understanding their full context in both the game world and the contextual world. It seems

beneficial to encourage reflexivity about subjects like this in the journal data, as well as the subsequent process of analysis.

This reflexivity might be especially relevant if the data is positioned as autoethnographic and the participants can take on the role of a researcher themselves, as the validity of the fieldwork journals should be maximized. This study does not consist of an academically uniform group of researchers and thus rather positions the varied group of participants as an audience.

Acknowledgment of these questions can be supported and developed through the research questions and other preplanning, used synergically with the rest of the study. In this study, I avoid considering the minutiae of the social world per say, instead aiming to compare methodological elements and results with the previous study, interpreting new data in the frame of the original study. In this situation I think experience with the artifact is necessary, but the game itself is secondary to the methodology.

The original article posits the method's relationship with ethnography as "systematic autographic engagement with subjectively observed and experienced events documented as field notes". Unlike the text itself, this quote on ethnography does not describe the participants as scholars or researchers, so it applies to this replication as well. (Karhulahti et al. 2022, 3)

3 Differences of this replication to the original study

3.1 The practical experience of conducting this study

Outside of methodological and theoretical efforts, this study required lots of organizational and social undertakings as well. The original study describes the method as too time and resource intensive for a small team or solo researcher (Karhulahti et al. 2022, 2). While I attempted to simplify and streamline the method to its basic structure, being a solo researcher still felt suboptimal for the practical side of the study. The workload of the analysis- and coding-processes were reduced for the purposes of this study, but finding and working with participants was still complicated, though in a unique way compared to the original.

Having to rely on personal relationships to produce this data ended up being the dominant difference between the practical experiences of conducting the studies. The effects of these differences on the results requires intense research before it is possible to make more definitive statements and conclusions concerning them. Before acquiring the journals for further analysis, it was already apparent that there was a noticeable difference to the organization that a classroom setting provides.

All the journals promised by the people originally taking part in my research were late by multiple months, which is the reason I decided to rely on the internet for extra participants. The idea of a deadline seems much more powerful in a course setting, where there is a desire to pass the course and do assigned work. I approached 15-20 people personally in different live social situations, as well as posting on both my personal social media, and on (pseudo)anonymous platforms online. Two participants had to write in a secondary language: a Brazilian and a Danish person writing in English.

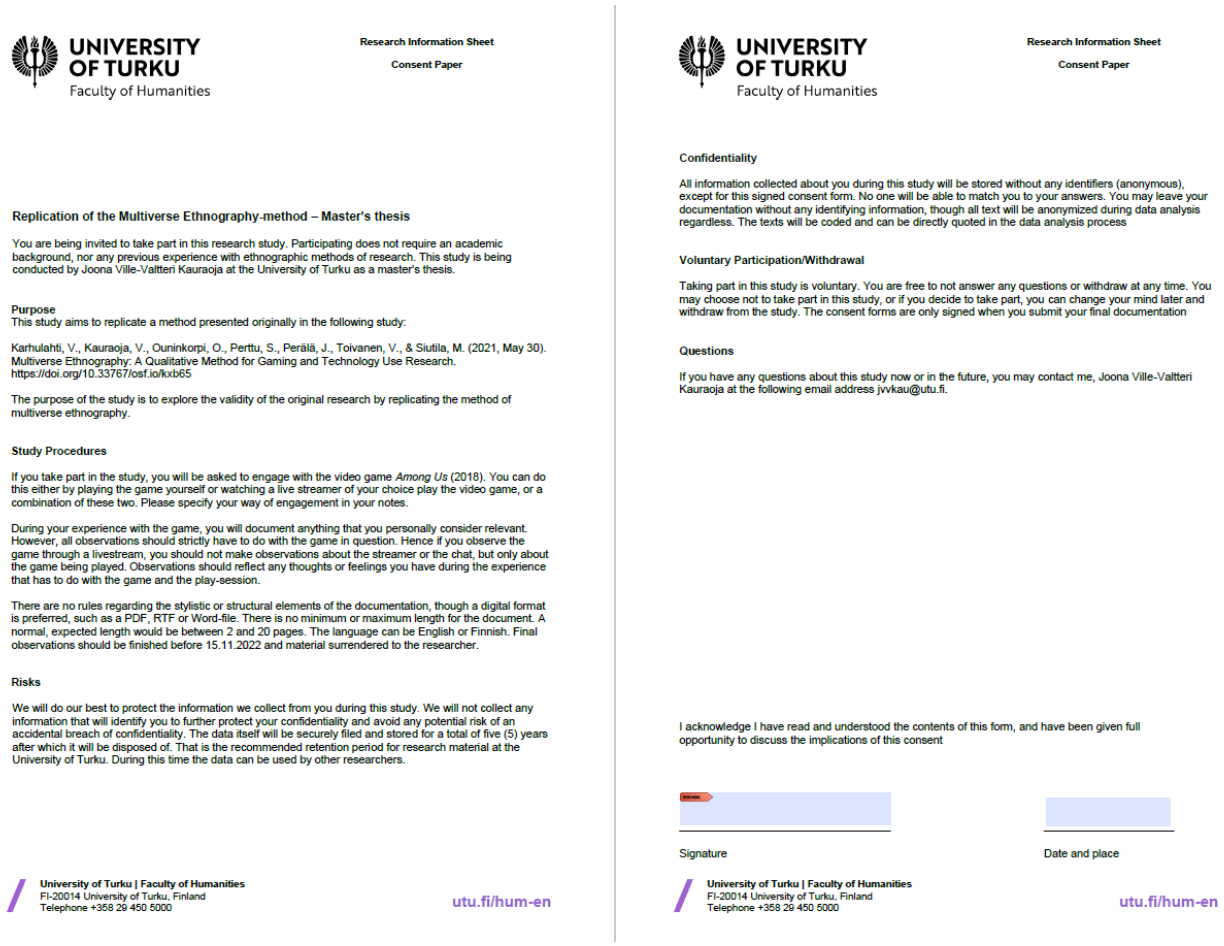
When it comes to the public internet, I posted on two separate forums, both within the social media website Reddit. I posted on two subreddits, which are sub-forums within the site divided by subject matter. The two subreddits were “/r/SampleSize”, dedicated to finding survey participants, and “/r/AmongUs”, dedicated to the titular game. The latter forum gave my post more attention than the other one, with 82 “upvotes” (every user can choose to upvote a post to increase its visibility) and 10 comments. Six people ended up receiving the information sheet from me, with one of them returning the fieldwork in the end. The post on /r/SampleSize received no interaction.

A more efficient and thoroughly planned process for gathering participants seems to be of paramount importance. The organization created by a classroom context was not achievable for this single author thesis, ironically increasing the overall required effort to gather participants and data, since it had to be done independently. The simplifications made to the overall study procedures did not relatively balance the intensity of the workload.

A few differences were made in the research information sheet and consent form when approaching potential participants after the first batch. This was done in an attempt to encourage them more. The minimum time limit for interacting with the game for 30 hours was removed with the idea that the people volunteering online will likely already have experience with the game, thus not needing as much time to familiarize themselves with the mechanics. Nevertheless, this choice led to some journals with comparatively few play hours and no prior experience.

Additionally giving the participant the freedom to choose the intensity of their workload should make it easier to complete something that one does not feel guilty returning. The deadlines given to these later participants was also tighter, with under a month given for completion as opposed to the 3 months given to the original participants. A closer deadline should be more difficult to forget about or ignore.

A light suggestion on the length of the document was also given. There was no definitive limit, but it was mentioned that 2-20 pages would be a normal length for the document. Knowing an acceptable example length should also give a less abstract and difficult to define character to the task of writing a fieldwork journal.



UNIVERSITY OF TURKU
Faculty of Humanities

Research Information Sheet
Consent Paper

Replication of the Multiverse Ethnography-method – Master's thesis

You are being invited to take part in this research study. Participating does not require an academic background, nor any previous experience with ethnographic methods of research. This study is being conducted by Joona Ville-Valtteri Kauraoja at the University of Turku as a master's thesis.

Purpose
This study aims to replicate a method presented originally in the following study:

Karhulahti, V., Kauraoja, V., Ouninkorpi, O., Perttu, S., Perälä, J., Toivanen, V., & Siutila, M. (2021, May 30). Multiverse Ethnography: A Qualitative Method for Gaming and Technology Use Research. https://doi.org/10.33767/osf.io/kxb65

The purpose of the study is to explore the validity of the original research by replicating the method of multiverse ethnography.

Study Procedures

If you take part in the study, you will be asked to engage with the video game *Among Us* (2018). You can do this either by playing the game yourself or watching a live streamer of your choice play the video game, or a combination of these two. Please specify your way of engagement in your notes.

During your experience with the game, you will document anything that you personally consider relevant. However, all observations should strictly have to do with the game in question. Hence if you observe the game through a livestream, you should not make observations about the streamer or the chat, but only about the game being played. Observations should reflect any thoughts or feelings you have during the experience that has to do with the game and the play-session.

There are no rules regarding the stylistic or structural elements of the documentation, though a digital format is preferred, such as a PDF, RTF or Word-file. There is no minimum or maximum length for the document. A normal, expected length would be between 2 and 20 pages. The language can be English or Finnish. Final observations should be finished before 15.11.2022 and material surrendered to the researcher.

Risks

We will do our best to protect the information we collect from you during this study. We will not collect any information that will identify you to further protect your confidentiality and avoid any potential risk of an accidental breach of confidentiality. The data itself will be securely filed and stored for a total of five (5) years after which it will be disposed of. That is the recommended retention period for research material at the University of Turku. During this time the data can be used by other researchers.

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UNIVERSITY OF TURKU
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Research Information Sheet
Consent Paper

Confidentiality

All information collected about you during this study will be stored without any identifiers (anonymous), except for this signed consent form. No one will be able to match you to your answers. You may leave your documentation without any identifying information, though all text will be anonymized during data analysis regardless. The texts will be coded and can be directly quoted in the data analysis process

Voluntary Participation/Withdrawal

Taking part in this study is voluntary. You are free to not answer any questions or withdraw at any time. You may choose not to take part in this study, or if you decide to take part, you can change your mind later and withdraw from the study. The consent forms are only signed when you submit your final documentation

Questions

If you have any questions about this study now or in the future, you may contact me, Joona Ville-Valtteri Kauraoja at the following email address jvvkau@utu.fi.

I acknowledge I have read and understood the contents of this form, and have been given full opportunity to discuss the implications of this consent

Signature

Date and place

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Figure 2: The updated consent form with removed play time instructions, added page amount recommendation and a later deadline

3.2 Reflection on the differences and their nature

To refer to the summary of the method quoted in chapter 2.1, the original research presents everyone on the team as a researcher. They had shown interest in academic game studies by enrolling in the course. Having the role of students, their engagement with the production of these ethnographic texts is unique. Since everyone is a student enrolled in a specific course, there might be reason to assume a certain level of standardization in the perspectives taken in these ethnographic fieldwork journals.

For my thesis I did not have access to a group of students studying methodology. I approached my personal social circles, as well as the open internet for the data. This means that alongside journals written by people experienced in ethnographic methods, there are also journals written by people with no experience in any academic research traditions.

Approaching people outside of academia is not the only reason I hesitate to present my team as a team of researchers. In the original study, the researchers coded each other's journals. Thus, they had an active part in both the producing of the data and analysing it. Even then, I assessed the codes to increase their validity specifically because "the students were from many different fields and had varying academic experience" (Karhulahti et al. 2022, 6).

This is one of the reasons why I decided to take the responsibility of coding the diaries from the start, further removing the journal writers from the final work of analysis. The academic experience of the writers is even more inconsistent in this study than the original where it was already a concern. It would be worthwhile to try to achieve better consistency by (for example) using researchers with comparable or significant experience in ethnographic methods.

Having a team of experienced ethnographers was obviously not realistic with the scale of a master's thesis, which is why this study concentrates on framing the method as an audience study. It is important to remember that the role of this data is still central to the entire study and the importance of the people taking part should not be underestimated. Still, it is worth noting the difference in the relationship between the journal writers and the research.

The course context implies a certain standardization that is worth noting. Every participant in the original study was associated with the university in question, which creates a group of people who have something in common. Taking part in the course could be seen as a show of interest towards game studies for example. The effects of the writer's background towards the data created by them is something that could be useful to study by using multiple standardized groups.

The study under replication explicitly states that "the idea (of the exploratory study) was simply to map out what BA and MA university students in Finland consider worth documenting about Cyberpunk 2077 and Among Us in a 30-hour process of engagement." (Karhulahti et al. 2022, 89-90) It is then the idea of this replication to estimate if the changes in participants, modes of participation, or the single researcher role have identifiable effects on the process or the results, as well as to see how it appears through the lens of audience studies.

In this thesis, the variety within the participants is large. One participant found my study through the Among Us-subreddit and thus likely has an existing relationship or interest in the

game. This does however not apply to most of the participants who found the study through having a personal relationship with me.

The participants of this thesis were also very international, spanning across multiple continents. Different individual variables offer points of reference and comparison, but as the study was not built around these themes, it would not be appropriate to emphasize them in the analysis. One example of playing in a different language server will be used to exemplify the potential of this direction in chapter 4.5.

The smaller scale also means that I will concentrate on just one video game, coding and analysing all the data on my own. This is very different from the original study, which was a much more team-oriented effort. This undoubtedly also affects my interpretations, though I will replicate the system of coding and categorization from the original study to see how the results might be affected by these differences. See appendix 1 for an example of an uncoded fieldwork journal, and appendix 2 for an example of a coded fieldwork journal.

Simplifying the process in such a way is sure to remove some of the validity multiple perspectives brings to the analysis process, but also ensures very unified, consistent decisions and interpretations. Gladly the efforts put into the search of participants in this study yielded 8 journals on *Among Us*, the same amount as in the original study. Though admittedly the average length of the journals is shorter, the variety of perspectives now mirrors the original study, at least in numerical terms.

The purpose and most obvious benefit of this simplified process was that it was feasible for a single researcher to produce. Streamlining the process for a single researcher without co-operative coding seems like the biggest risk for the validity of data. As coding-related judgement calls between the original study and this study are compared, it appears difficult to confirm which one was more successfull. Still, it is presumable that multiple researchers are able to create more valid data through co-operative analysis as opposed to a single perspective.

As the project is done by a single researcher in this case, the data can at the very least be considered internally consistent, especially as this study aims to emulate the judgement calls of the original. With enough reflexivity the coding process should appear as satisfactorily transparent in the research text and offer examples of the logic used in categorizing observations.

The replicated study states that the minimum number of ethnographers is two, so a smaller team of participants should not invalidate inquiries into the method. It is still important to recognize that a higher diversity of accounts should usually be beneficial, even if detailed size justifications are yet to develop. Thus, in terms of the diversity of data, it is difficult to say how exactly the lower quantity of data and larger variety of personal backgrounds affects the end results. (Karhulahti et al. 2022, 3)

When it comes to game ethnography, it seems accepted that the ethnographer is in some aspect required to actively take part in the studied culture. (Pearce 2009, 195-196) No commonly accepted standards for the specifics of game culture familiarity exist, so it seems like it is the individual responsibility of each study to be transparent and reflect upon the ethnographic relationship between the ethnographers and the artifact. This circles back to the importance of preplanning. Planning the number of participants and hours of interaction around the research questions, -objects and -resources at hand supports the rest of the study.

To streamline the process for a single author, the coding system of the previous study was used. Since the emergent themes and sub-themes had already been created, the analysis and coding process revolved around identifying which theme and sub-theme fit the considered observation. This essentially skips a step; Instead of multiple outside experts separately coding and assessing texts, afterwards putting it through team-based collective analysis, a single researcher uses an existing design of thematic clusters to guide the coding process.

Returning to consider the ethnographer's work as one of attempting to create a thick description of the study object, the role of the journal writer changes dramatically. Clifford Geertz uses the example of ethnographers using thick description to "sort winks from twitches and real winks from mimicked ones". This is to say, thinner descriptions lose validity to nuance, context, and lack of interpretation. (Geertz, 1973, 16-17)

As the participants in this specific study are not expected to interact with the artifact academically, they cannot be positioned as ethnographers, but only as participants. This implies that they cannot be expected to provide a thick description. The thick description happens instead in the process of coding and data analysis, and as such points towards the fieldwork journals, not directly to the artifact.

Even if the journals are used to consider elements of the artifact, this seems to be a central methodological difference caused by the participant context. With an application of

multiverse ethnography that utilizes a team of academically positioned participants, a thicker description could be created already in the process of fieldwork. The number of layers of interpretation is the same, but in this replication, the fieldwork-layer is not academic. This partly motivates the recontextualization of the method for audience studies, as it implies emphasizing the journals and writers, instead of what the provided data can tell us about the artifact being interacted with.

Since the purpose is to test, evaluate and recontextualize the method, this practice of replicating the thematic cluster design is fitting. It will provide a mirror to the original study and open the method up to more detailed consideration. If the research questions of this study revolved around *Among Us* instead of methodology, it would be more beneficial to create an appropriate system of coding and be open to creating a completely new network of thematic clusters relevant to those research questions.

The original study mentions coding journals differently based on their length. A longer journal could have an entire paragraph coded as one or two observations, while a shorter journal might have every sentence coded separately. This was to mitigate the effect that personal writing style and verbosity had on the final data. While incapable of completely evening out the differences, it works to diminish issues emerging from the significant length differences between the shortest and longest journals. (Karhulahti et al. 2022, 98)

In this study such a tactic was used only a few times during lengthy and thematically consistent paragraphs. The length differences were of little issue, as the journals were fairly consistent in the number of observations. This is not entirely a good thing however, as the reason for this is that no journal exceeded three pages. This quite limited amount of data led me to code it in detail, usually separating observations by sentence. Problems emerging from this will be considered in chapter 4.4, through a fringe example existing within a grey area.

One fieldwork journal specifically mentions having only played 4 hours in total, a massive difference to the expected 30 hours in the original study. Significant differences like this should be noted when comparing the results between the replication and the original. Another fieldwork journal mentions playing the full 30 hours and a third one reported 20 hours of playtime on top of previous experience, so this discrepancy is not consistent through the entire data set, which needs to be acknowledged as well. The majority of participants did not report play time.

If the play hours are not dictated in the fieldwork instructions, it might be worthwhile knowing how long each participant spent interacting with the artifact. Temporality is an essential part of the fieldwork journal in this context, with interactive media experiences deliberately evolving or changing throughout the experience.

To create a consistent data set, it is important that the fieldwork journals consider the same stage of the artifact as each other. *Among Us* is a good choice for a study allowing for limited play time, as a full game takes mere minutes to finish, and less time is required to experience most of what is offered by the game. This is relative to linear or more in-depth experiences that might require dozens, or even hundreds of hours to complete.

It cannot be denied that play time still appears to be a factor in the data. Lower amounts of play time could be behind the low number of observations listed under the theme of *Strategies* during this study. Perhaps a higher amount of play time would be beneficial for players to develop their own strategies, or to start identifying the strategies of others.

Such conclusions are dangerous to draw. *Design* was even less relevant of a theme, being the smallest of all, but it does not seem to intuitively result from less play time the same way as strategies. Instead, the original text also makes a point of *Among Us*-observations rarely considering audio-visual stimulation. The game itself does not attempt to realistically simulate the real world graphically, instead opting for a different aesthetic style. (Karhulahti 2022, 96-97) This does not exhaustively explain why the theme was not so prevalent, but it is perhaps one of the main differences between the graphics of *Among Us* and *Cyberpunk 2077* which were compared in the original study.

The additional code separated from the data, *Social Manipulation*, is one that can be seen to connect to both themes of *Strategies* and *Multiplay*, perhaps existing somewhere within their shared sub-theme, *Meta.* If we see the manipulation experiences and techniques as descriptions of strategy, it seems to be such a central element that it is amongst the only descriptions of strategy in the data, strongly affecting the results and our view on it. A more detailed consideration of these themes appears in chapter 4.

In game studies, attention has been directed towards the duality of studying the participants and studying the game itself. The complexity of the interpretative process when using the expertise and empirical knowledge of a player participant implies the importance of remembering and considering this distinction. (Jørgensen 2012, 380)

In the context of *multiverse ethnography*, the importance of the research questions, coding process, participants, and the instructions they receive is continually emphasized in this text for similar purposes. The instructions participants receive affects the emphasis within the data, as might contextual factors in the players, such as age or existing game experience. Preparing for these variables is possible before committing to specific participants and instructions.

The practical side of the study should reflect the research questions. This also requires acknowledgment of what is studied, the participants, and the game itself. This dichotomy is explored in this replication. The original text certainly concerns itself with *Among Us*, but like previously quoted, the emphasis was on what the participating students found worth observing. This is partly why the method seemed applicable to audience studies. While it is possible and encouraged to use the method to produce data about the game, this replication considers how it could be applied to audience studies, which concerns the participants more than the artifact itself.

4 Data and macro theming

In this study the data is used in an inquiry into the method. The data is also used to consider the original study that introduced the method in question. To achieve this, the new data will be compared to the original results. There is an interest towards identifying the same themes from the data as in the original study. To examine this, the same themes and sub-themes were used in the coding and their validity considered. All quotes from journals written in the Finnish language have been freely translated to English for the purposes of this study.

The data was fed through Google Sheets to produce some calculations. By considering figure 3 below, we can identify *Actions* as the largest theme in total. This means that in interaction with the artifact, game mechanics and events within the game were central in the player experiences and can be further analysed through its sub-themes. In figure 4 one can see that despite being the largest theme, it did not include the largest sub-theme, *Communication*, which is considered a part of *Multiplay*.

The smallest theme appears to be *Social Manipulation*, which is hardly surprising considering its specificity and how it exists alone without internal division into more broadening sub-themes. Worth considering however, is that another single theme without sub-themes, *Subjective* was much more significant. With 16% of observations, it is mid-sized and the third largest theme. Perhaps subjective and miscellaneous remarks are such a natural part of writing that they are difficult to avoid in any extended writing task. If we ignore the admittedly unique and separate *Social Manipulation*, the smallest theme appears to be *Design*, with surprisingly few observations concerning the look, design, sound, atmosphere, or developmental changes within the game world.

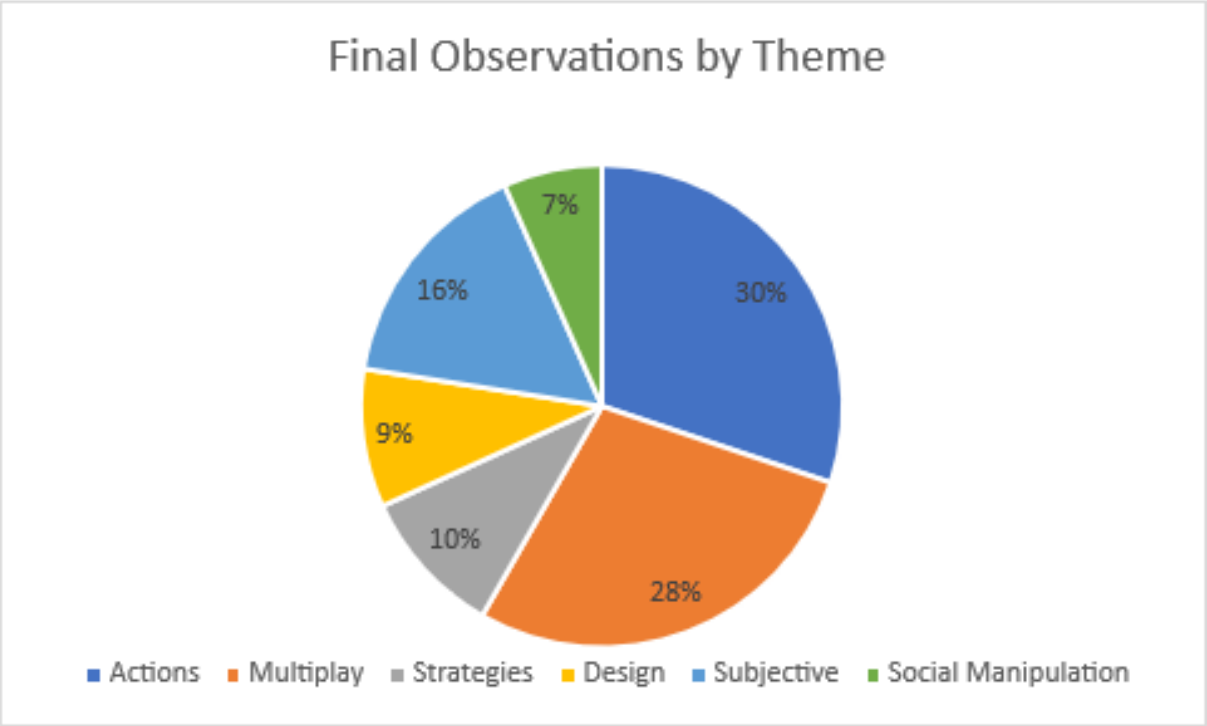

Figure 3: Observations categorized under themes

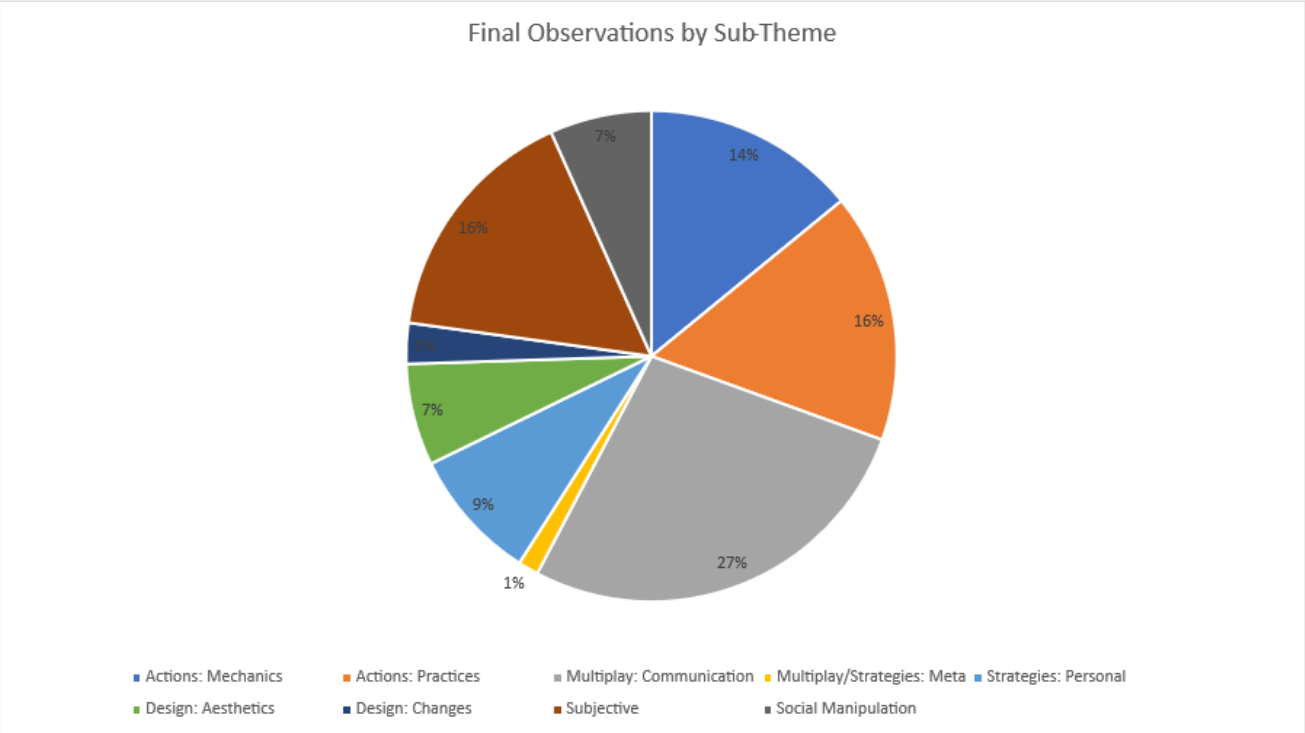

Figure 4: Observations categorized under sub-themes

4.1 Social Manipulation

The original text mentions *Among Us*' potential for social analysis. The theme *Social Manipulation* received special attention in the text as a core mechanic in *Among Us*, despite not emerging as a dominant category of observation. (Karhulahti et al. 2022, 92-94) Descriptions fitting into this category appeared in the data for this study as well, though they made up only 7% of observations. It is still a significant sub-theme with more relevance in these study results than *Meta* and *Changes* put together, or the exact same as *Aesthetics*. As an entire macro-level theme however, it would be the smallest of all. This implies how strongly the data can appear to have different implications depending on how it is framed.

This theme is separated from the other themes. In figure 1, we can see how in the original study this category was not even included in the thematic cluster design. It was identified as a relatively unique theme of *Among Us* and separated for easy comparison with a relatively unique theme found in the other game studied in said text, *Cyberpunk 2077*. In that game, the recognized unique theme was *Society*.

These unique themes emerged as something the original text posits as "micro-themes", non-dominant categories. (Karhulahti et al. 2022, 91-92) Fittingly, *Social Manipulation* was not a dominant category in this study, but it does bring into question the role of the sub-themes that were even more minor, *Meta* and *Changes*. Consideration into why these two sub-themes ended up so minor in the data will follow in their respective chapters.

Observations of social manipulation happening both through audio and text are mentioned in the original study (Karhulahti et al. 2022, 94), but the data for this study did not include any mentions of voice chat. The reasons for this can be hypothesized upon, but more research with specifically aimed research questions, participant instruction, theming and coding/analysis process would be required for more definitive answers to form. The varied backgrounds of participants included people with little or no experience with video games or *Among Us*, which could be a significant factor in this.

Since *Among Us* has no native voice chat inside the game, experiencing it would require joining a channel on a third-party voice chat application. Analysis of the resulting data revealed no mention of playing in existing friend groups. On the contrary, mentions were made of how the players were alone, and how the experience could be different with people

one already knows. This journal writer is comparing their anonymous *Among Us*-experience to playing *Werewolf*, another social deduction game, played at a party face-to-face:

> *Playing with people you already know is especially fun because you can use your knowledge of the other players to your advantage.*

It is then likely that a player trying the game alone for the purpose of this study would not go through the trouble of installing, operating, and socializing through a third-party software just for this study, especially when social anxiety already defined many experiences, even with just the existing mechanics:

> *I felt too much shame to enjoy playing the role of impostor. The shame led me often to just hide in the vents and I succeeded in killing under ten players during the 30 hours.*

This does not explain why voice chat does not appear in field journals considering streams of the game, which often include people engaging in voice chat. A simple reason for this could be lack of data and its margin of error; the vast majority of participants seemed to play the game themselves based on the journal texts. Only one field journal explicitly mentions stream watching as a mode of engagement and no mentions of voice chat appear.

This sort of general shyness and careful, outsider approach is present in other journals too, possibly reflecting the removal of the 30-hour limit which led to shorter diaries reflecting more limited experiences with the game. Indeed, this illustrates another reason why a larger, more organized effort for acquiring participants and providing them with an environment encouraging of the effort will likely increase the validity of the data. A larger number of participants with more time of engagement will more likely lead to a more comprehensive look into the research object.

On the other hand, even 30 hours is relatively little for an extensive field journal exercise. The previous quotation mentions 30 hours of play time despite still emphasizing the shame of playing the game. As the original text also states, this produces a bias towards the earlier content in the game. Experiences of the earlier game hours are the ones shared by the largest number of people, so this bias is not inherently damaging towards validity as long as it is acknowledged and considered. (Karhulahti et al. 2022, 90)

The original study applied no existing manuals or design structural models to the coding. For the sake of replication, only codes introduced in the original study were used. Results of their

categorization into the themes and sub-themes follows in the same format as the original text. While all ethnographic data and analysis is purely subjective, the arguability and grey area present in the coding process still presented me with a great challenge.

A team of researchers gathering for meetings with the specific purpose of merging and scrutinizing codes and themes is a significant help for keeping a consistent system of categorization. I noticed an increase in self-doubt and getting lost in the grey areas of interpretation, as many observations could be argued to fit into multiple codes. Like previously suggested, applying existing systems of coding or analysis could also help mitigate this issue.

4.2 Subjectivity

Subjective is a theme that worked to exclude personal opinions and aspects outside of the gameworld from the analysis. 16% of observations were considered subjective, making it the third biggest theme under *Communication* and *Practices*. Underlining the subjectivity of the process is important and relevant in the context of analysing all this data and every different theme, but this theme works as a good example of the issue of subjectivity. Many observations could arguably fit in multiple categories.

Most observations include some sense of the person's own emotions or opinions, and thus could be categorized as subjective and removed from further analysis, if the study is so designed. The researcher responsible for the coding process has the power to interpret the observations as they wish, and they should detail their process for staying consistent. The influence that the coding has on the results is direct and clearly visible. This is also why multiple researchers, and a co-operative coding effort can help in achieving consistency and increased validity as a result.

I used two codes to help me categorize observations as *subjective*. *Emotion/experience* and *other*. While most observations on things outside the gameworld were on the emotions and experiences of the player themselves, the code of *other* worked as a code to put on miscellaneous observations that had little to do with the categories already established. A sentence considering the UI (categorized under *Design* and *Aesthetics*) was followed by one about the pricing difference between platforms. This was coded as *other* and categorized under *Subjective*:

> *I found that interesting, considering how the game is apparently free on mobile phones, while I paid money for it on Steam.*

The other code under *Subjective* included observations where the emphasis was on feelings and opinions that were not directly pointed at a specific aspect of the game itself. There is much grey area, but the idea of what is emphasized with the observation helped me stay consistent. While aspects of multiple themes might be mentioned, the observation is usually mainly directed at one. The following excerpt works as an example of an observation categorized as Emotion/Experience:

> *That feeling never went away no matter even after returning to the game days later.*

This observation follows one on the experience of the asymmetrical design in *Among Us*. That previous observation was coded as *Mechanics* and included in the homonymous theme. This subsequent observation, however, emphasizes and considers the emotions of the player, even though it is connected to the feelings considered in the previous sentence. It is then coded as *Emotion/Experience* and categorized under *Subjective*. This same system of evaluation was applied to the other themes as well.

Stringed sentences are often thematically connected, and this is mirrored in the results of the coding, where paragraphs of multiple sentences can often be themed with strong internal consistency. In this case the previous sentence included subjective feelings and opinions (again extrapolating on an even earlier observation), but still revolved around a mechanic. The emphasis is flipped on the previously quoted observation, which considers only the subjective experience of the player outside of the gameworld, even if connected to those previously mentioned mechanics.

To exemplify the difference, that previous sentence on mechanics follows and leads into further consideration on the theme of *Actions*. Worth noting is also how another researcher might argue in favor of categorizing this observation within *Multiplay* or perhaps even *Strategies*, if we chose to include considerations of one's skills within that theme:

> *This asymmetrical design is obviously a core strength of the game and the success it has found, but to someone not terribly used to player-versus-player gameplay it can feel intimidating.*

4.3 Mechanics and Practices

Mechanics and *Practices* are the sub-themes under the theme of *Actions*. Actions refer to descriptions of being or not being able to do specific things, as well as different considerations of rules. Mechanics points to a general sense of what is happening and how the game works and progresses. Practices considers codes for more specific events instead, like *the dead cannot converse*. (Karhulahti et al. 2022, 95)

This was among the more challenging separations to draw confidently, especially without a team to consult. The original study suggests that the method would benefit from more complex models for (inter)action when assessing what players do in games. This conclusion can also be drawn from the replication process. Many game experiences seem to include non-mechanical interaction, be it about planning or social interaction. (Karhulahti et al. 2022, 96) It is then difficult to separate statements of actions from each other or from statements of strategy and communication.

This issue seems related to the structure of *Among Us*. Conclusions of the original article consider how the commonly used 'game mechanics' apply generally well to genre-based games, while players of *Among Us* see their actions through more general events enabled by the social and "party"-game aspects. The genre of *Among Us* is not as clearly defined as some other games with a more traditional, canonized structure. As such, themes of mechanics can be difficult to interpret. (Karhulahti et al. 2022, 95-96, 99)

These elements that make observations on actions difficult to define perhaps show a weakness in the thematic cluster design. Gladly this only seems to be a problem in this cluster for *Among Us*, as actions in *Cyberpunk 2077* were easily sub-themed as play styles, interactions, and bugs. (Karhulahti et al. 2022, 95)

A weakness in theming is not a weakness in method however, as a different thematic structure supported by research questions and participant instructions could apply better to *Among Us* than to a more traditionally structured genre-based video game. This again emphasizes the required planning and preparative work done before commencing with the fieldwork and analysis.

Observations on specific 'game mechanics', as considered in the original article through *Cyberpunk 2077*, usually have fairly clear objects of interest. Mechanically aware

observations on *Among Us* were more abstract in their recollection of events and actions, which could cloud some observations in narrative. The following excerpt was categorized under *Mechanics* because of its description of the general flow of the game. It also considers the specific practice of the discussion and voting process, but it seemed secondary to the larger implications towards game flow which motivated its categorization into *Mechanics*.

> *But if you weigh it different, more complex and deeper discussions might require spending even more time in the chat, hence stopping the game flow even more. The way it is now is I suppose the best way to keep it short or to the point.*

The coding process was of great importance in keeping consistent with this theme. On occasion an observation would be directly coded into *Mechanics* or *Practices*, but often more specific codes were used to make the coding process easier. Afterwards codes like *voting* or *minigames* were categorized under *Mechanics* while more specific events and experiences represented by codes like *being a crewmate* made up *Practices*.

Mechanics represented 14% of all observations and *Practices* 16%, making the latter the second most represented sub-theme. It contained one more entry than the theme of *Subjective*, which also represented 16% of the observations. Together *Mechanics* and *Practices* make *Actions* the dominant theme with a total of 30% of the observations being categorized under it. The dominance of this category shows that even if *Among Us* defies genre, players still understand their play experience largely through gameplay and actions. Even a game with a strong focus on the social elements seems to center around its interactivity.

4.4 Aesthetics and Changes

Aesthetics and *Changes* are the sub-themes under the theme of *Design*. Aesthetics describes the style, look and audio-visual atmosphere of the game. Changes refer to observations on updates, mods, new roles, and the progression of the game through its public life cycle. A total of 9% of all observations were categorized under *Aesthetics*, making it one of the lesser sub-themes.

In this study, *Aesthetics* will also include mentions of graphics and practical visual design, like UI elements and the relationship between environmental design and gameplay, as well as sound. An example of a gameplay-oriented observation categorized under *Design* follows to illustrate how in the context of this analysis the theme also includes considerations into the environmental design:

> *The structure of the spaceship makes sense because the game area is supposed to be modular and enclosed spaces.*

This showcases a limitation in the sub-themes of *Changes* and *Aesthetics*, for this sort of observation does not seem to consider graphics or visual design, but the practical spaces in a gameplay context. As a fringe example out of generally a fairly consistent coding process, this quote does not represent a significant issue in this analysis. Still, as seemingly a grey area it seems to present an issue to confront.

The observation could be argued to be categorized under *Mechanics* if we include in it all comments on environmental design. Still, such observations do not seem to be related to actions or rules, so this was not the direction taken in this study. A new sub-theme to support unique elements of this observation could be suggested, but the quoted statement remained the only example of such a note. Thus, it would not have represented a significant theme of observations despite existing in a grey area. The lack of perfectly appropriate theming seems like the opposite side of the problem considered in chapter 4.2, where observations could be argued to fit into multiple categories, especially when deeming them as subjective.

Such grey areas and fringe examples are bound to appear, and they should be dealt in a consistent and transparent manner. Another way to deal with this issue would be to connect the observation to the previous or next sentence. Vague comments often work in tandem with other ones, and sometimes multiple sentences form a more complete observation together.

This is similar, but not the same as when the original study suggests coding shorter journals in a more detailed way than longer ones, balancing the number of coded observations between writers and leading to more consistency. (Karhulahti et al. 2022, 98) The method and result of coding multiple sentences as one remains the same, and it is done for increased validity in both situations, but the issue it is applied to is different.

The previously quoted statement begins a new paragraph in the journal, so there would be only one other sentence to tie it to; the one that comes afterwards. However, that sentence includes mention of the speed of characters as well as sound design. Together with the previously quoted statement, it becomes a loaded observation difficult to categorize. While the character speed could refer to *Mechanics*, the statement revolves around the sound design in a way that it would be categorized under *Aesthetics* even if it was not connected to the first observation about the spaceship design:

> *In my opinion if the characters moved slower, and there were doors that made sounds even if they were outside your field of vision (door opens/closes in the hallway) would be a pretty nice change that would lift the mood to match the music in the menu.*

In the end, both of these sentences were coded separately, but both were also categorized under the sub-theme of *Aesthetics*. While the analysis of the surrounding text helped in coding the observation about the modular spaceship design, they were coded separately for the reasons detailed in chapter 3.2: The limited amount of data encouraged an analysis consisting mostly of the smallest readily identifiable observations. A similar tactic was used with one sentence that listed multiple different strategies divided by commas. Every different strategy was coded separately as they applied to different situations.

Changes considers alterations in the design of the game. As another likely result from the short play time and limited set of participants with varied backgrounds, this was the second most minor theme in the results. In the end, this sub-theme represented 2% of the final observations.

It is evident from many of the journals that their writers had never played the game before, with multiple writers reporting it outright. This is probably why mentions of game updates and their effects on the game were few. Exceptions appeared mostly in journals where the writer confirms previous experience with the game.

The short play time is a likely reason for not mentioning mods as well. Modifying an existing game could be seen as an activity that requires some existing familiarity with the game. It is also likely that instructing players to document things “only about the game being played” encouraged participants to avoid modifying the existing product in fear of endangering the validity of the study.

In terms of *Changes*, a more experienced *Among Us*-player considered effects of new updates and changing match rules like player speed. Other journals with no reported previous player experience concentrated exclusively on character customization. Due to the multitude of different types of changes included in this theme, it could benefit from a more detailed thematic cluster if the study wanted to concentrate on this area. Design was the smallest of the macro-themes with 9% of observations being included in it.

4.5 Communication

Communication and *Meta* are the sub-themes under the theme of *Multiplay*. Communication is quite self-explanatory, including observations about communicative interactions between players. Meta considers shared, collective knowledge emerging from the community in the form of useful information, agreements between players, and tactics. This sub-theme is included within two themes, *Multiplay* and *Strategies*, and will be extrapolated upon in connection to the latter.

The variety in participant backgrounds seemed to have an effect regarding the reporting of communication. While one example is not big enough of a sampling to draw conclusions from, one journal writer playing on servers for Portuguese-speakers seemed to have an experience distinct from the rest of the players playing presumably on Finnish, Swedish, or English-speaking servers. Admittedly, no other journal specifies the language of their game, so this is an assumption based on the mother languages, languages of communication with me, and nationalities of the other participants.

The participant playing in Portuguese detailed social situations that did not arise in the other journals. One such observation was of players often using the emergency meeting-mechanic, stopping the game just to chat with people about non-game related subjects:

This same day I played for almost five hours and in most of the games (if not all), the players pressed the emergency button at the start of the match just to talk about a random subject or just pressed it without saying anything.

This journal writer even laments that "*it* (the game) *would be a lot better if there was a voice chat*". This journal does not have exclusively positive things to say about interacting with the chat, but this is still a stark difference to journals written in Finnish, where the social aspect often seems distinctly unpleasant:

The anonymity gives room for speaking straight, and opens a fairly interesting, albeit depressing view into people's values and norms.

One Finnish participant even considered the open chat as potentially dangerous:

Hopefully the chat has strong filters against curse words for example, since in-game chats could be a "dangerous" place for a young player.

One journal has almost the opposite experience to report from the one playing in Portuguese, complaining that the chat is too shallow and the communication too blunt:

I've stopped playing at times because I was tired of spending 70% of the time just being in the chat, writing "who?", "where", "?" or "sus". I guess in a proper game board social deduction game, the level of discussion and debating is at a very different level than the technological limitations of Among Us offers.

These noticeable differences between in-game servers hint at directions to take this method. It is built around multiple different perspectives on the same object. Comparisons between in-game communities or different types of players seems natural to the method. It would seem effective to use two distinct groups and compare the data. This can reveal differences in modes of interaction and player experience when it comes to different types of players and communities. Comparisons could be made between professional players and casual players, or different servers within one multiplayer game for example.

Communication emerged as the dominant sub-theme in this study by a considerable margin, with 27% of all observations centring around communication between players and existing in the virtual space socially. This showcases how important this aspect of *Among Us* is, and how people perceive their interactions with it.

In this context it is relevant to reiterate that it is possible to argue for the inclusion of *Social Manipulation* in some sub-themes, like *Communication* or *Meta*, or as another sub-theme under *Multiplay*. These would change the results noticeably, which emphasizes the influence of the coding process and the importance of transparency over the design of the thematic structures. Decisions related to the categorizations require justification. Consideration of the effects of these decisions is also encouraged.

4.6 Personal and Meta

Personal and *Meta* are the sub-themes under *Strategies.* Where *Meta* considers a collective intelligence where players participate in their own emergent rules and tactics, *Personal* includes codes about how the players themselves have applied their own planning and tactics to achieve their goals, whether they are competitive or recreational.

Meta was the most minor of all the sub-themes, representing 1% of observations. A hypothesis could be argued that similarly to the sub-theme *Changes*, it is the shorter play time and lack of previous player experience that could explain this effect. Existing in the community consciously and deeply enough to produce opinions or observations of emerging player-generated culture and strategy might require more play time than most participants put in.

An example of one of the few observations listed as metagaming-tactics, one journal mentioned quitting matches if they were chosen as impostor. A description of early game social anxiety preceded this conclusion of deciding to utilize menu-elements outside of the intended gameworld to gain agency over the game's random number generator:

> *I will admit to even quitting games straight up if I was chosen as impostor.*

It could be argued that evaluations of the players own skills should not be included in neither of the sub-themes here, but for the purposes of this study they will be included if they consider practicing or getting better at something. Many observations exist in a grey area of skill evaluation and strategy, with journal writers often writing about their lack of skill bringing forth unique challenges and how they improve to be more effective players.

As an example, an observation categorized as a description of personal strategies follows descriptions of not wanting to be "ousted as a noob" to other players (categorized under *Communication*) and a general lack of experience and understanding towards the game (categorized under *Subjective*). This observation describes how the player practiced the game alone before playing their first public match. They did it by spending time in a map empty of other players. In this study, it is considered to represent the sub-theme of *Personal* under *Strategies*.

> *Hence my second step after watching videos was to spend a bit of time just walking around the different maps and knowing how to play the game.*

This also implies more effects of the lower amount of play time between participants of this replication and participants of the original study. It is assumed that more game experience will decrease the amount of anxiety related to the different roles and social aspects of *Among Us*. This is supported by the fact that journal writers with reported previous experience did not observe as many feelings of self-doubt and lack of confidence.

A theory could be proposed that, in the context of *Among Us*, observations of meta-strategies, changes, mods, and updates increase after a certain amount of game experience is achieved, while mentions of social anxiety and uncertainty over the players' own skills are likely to decrease after a certain amount of play time. More detailed data exploring these differences could be done using the method of *multiverse ethnography*, if approached with appropriately designed research questions and preplanning.

5 Recontextualization as a method for audience studies

5.1 Collective intelligence and participation

One thing that the participants of my study share with is each other despite the previously considered large variety in backgrounds, is their status as a possible consumer. Each of them can play or watch people play the game being studied, otherwise they would not be able to take part in the research. Therefore, it seems appropriate to frame the study as an audience study. As long as one acknowledges it, the great variety in participants can even appear as an opportunity.

As these shared attributes between participants are considered, a hypothesis emerges on a direction to apply this method. It appears this study could use the data for something akin to qualitative audience research. Theories of audience in conjunction with *multiverse ethnography* would offer a larger variety of research contexts and could prove useful for creative industries as well. In existing studies, there have been pleas for a comprehensive theory of audience, which would require combinations of different techniques and approaches, comparisons between results from different traditions, and confrontations between methodologies. (Rosengren 1996, 46-47)

A greater variety of methodological efforts within the field of audience studies thus seems to be encouraged. The benefit of *multiverse ethnography* is that it creates easily comparable data that could be critiqued and analysed through different methodological lenses. However, it is important to map out the position multiverse ethnography could have in the context of other ethnographic methods that exist within audience studies.

Participation seems key in the method. Not only have the methodological chapters of this text detailed the participation of the journal writers, but the method is also specifically designed around studying interactive media artifacts, which invite participation from the side of the audience. Video games, internet services, and other interactive media rely on user-generated actions to produce meaningful experiences.

In this sense it is fitting to consider the method in the context of participation and collective intelligence. To produce collective intelligence, people need different tacit knowledge that gets shared to the common memory. Pierre Lévy's considerations on collective intelligence have already been applied to new media audiences, and how they create their own meanings

and modes of interaction. Such perspectives often imply cooperation and collective, emergent action by the audience to pool this collective knowledge together, even when it is directly caused by commodity culture. (Jenkins 2006, 26-27)

The opportunity provided by the participant variety is connected to collective intelligence and knowledge communities. Unique, individual voices within a structured community can pool together their knowledge or pursue a joint goal by exercising their special skills. In studies of participatory culture, this usually revolves around emergent culture from different niche communities, but the idea of collective intelligence can also reflect upon the way multiverse ethnography operates. (Jenkins et al. 2016, 29-30) Central to game culture, these participatory external elements like forum discussions or walkthroughs are difficult to ignore in research at this point, and it is beneficial if the used methods can be applied to acknowledge these elements in some way. (Newman 2013, 140-142)

Planning a *multiverse ethnography* study around a specific knowledge community could potentially provide interesting results, as the researchers can design research questions and the coding process to benefit from these specific variables. There needs to be awareness about who categorizes and chooses the parameters of these communities, and it should be beneficial to allow the participants to identify themselves or their relationship to the research question, object, and related communities. It requires active effort to acknowledge and avoid overstepping the boundaries of defining people or communities when designing who participates in the research and how.

Multiverse ethnography attempts to unify separate experiences, had separately from other participants, even if participants might play the same game, or even the same match or session. From the perspective of this study, the goal is to tap into the collective intelligence, built out of the personal experiences of a collection of participants. While a method for the study of interactive media usually considers a quite personal interaction between the user and the media object, there is value in producing detailed personal data that can be unified into a consistent set with others.

If the commodity culture cannot be separated from the emerging knowledge culture built on collective intelligence, it is valuable to hold these elements within the area of study. In this study the observations on aspects outside of the game itself were separated, while the analysis emphasized the observations on the gameplay specifically. However, it would have been just

as productive to identify emerging thematic clusters consisting of observations looking outside of the game world. This implies why the method should apply to any sort of interactive media which includes the possibility for this sort of ethnographic journal writing, like different social media platforms or digital interfaces.

In game culture it is the forum discussions, stream participation, the game room context, voice-calls, and gaming hardware that continue to colour our game experiences, despite being factors outside of the game itself. An interactive game experience has never required the play of the actual game, as merely watching a game be played has been a significant part of game experiences since at least the age of the rising arcade machine popularity during the 1970's. (Newman 2013, 93-94)

People might have intimate opinions and experiences about games through these many modes of interaction. This can happen not only with the research object, but also with other people, both in- and outside of the game world. The magic circle as considered by Huizinga (1980, 10), a place where ordinary rules of life do not apply, has been challenged and seemingly fallen victim to contextualism. The real surrounding world, together with prior knowledge and expectations, all affect the game world and experience. (Consalvo 2009) Ethnographic methods benefit from documenting and potentially even emphasizing these aspects for research.

The choice to allow both stream-watching and game-playing from the participants reflects confidence in these very different modes of interaction representing unified collective knowledge on the relationship between the audience and the research object. The modes of interaction likely affect the experience in some way, and it is an important discussion to have when analysing ethnographic data. It is important to apply the multiverse ethnography method around these modes through appropriate coding, themes, and participant instruction, enabling the study of this complicated relationship between the digital world and the user interacting with it.

This choice to see these different game experiences as representing something unified could also be seen as part of the push for acknowledging the active audience in addition to the structuralist or narratological analysis in game studies. The participatory nature of the fieldwork journals seems to emphasize the active role of the player in the creation and actualization of the game experience and the meanings that emerge from it.

The increasing relevance of the active audience is connected to the study of interactive new media, like the World Wide Web and hypertext. Beyond this, games are experienced with different levels of interactivity. (Newman 2013, 93-94) Besides the aforementioned experience of watching someone else play, *multiverse ethnography* can also consider other levels of interactivity, like modding, the social communities inside or around the game world, or emerging participatory culture.

The active audience perspective gives the audience agency, and in the context of this method it supports the role of the audience in the meaning-making process. Polysemy, in this context meaning multiple possible readings on the same text, shields mass audiences from ideological control and is a part of this reading for resistance that is implied by the active audience. Polysemic media content gets meaning from the reading process, which is then quite integral to the study of both the media artifacts and the audiences engaging with them. It then seems appropriate to aim for data that reflects the polysemic attributes of these artifacts, to identify the multiverses of experience and interpretation. (Williams 2005, 6) (Sholle D. 1991, 81)

While the work of Henry Jenkins is referred to, and questions of participation considered, it is important to note that participatory culture does not hold a stronger role within multiverse ethnography than it does in any other method for media or audience studies. While participation is central, the study of the social spaces, feelings of community or collective creativity are optional and should be applied appropriately to the research questions. With that said, participation and activity are required from game players, with these things being practically inseparable from the game audience experience. This complex relationship creates personal knowledge that research can hopefully understand better through studying the collective intelligence built from these separate experiences. (Newman 2013, 24-25)

It is worth acknowledging how participatory culture can be ubiquitous in our cultural consumption and interaction, but that is related to creation of culture. *Multiverse ethnography* could be applied to the study of consumption and creation, but in the context of this study it was pointed towards the artifact, the technological artifact. At least the thematic cluster replicated from the original study points towards the artifact, though this recontextualization aims to also consider the participants as an audience. According to the ascribed originator of the term *participatory culture*, culture is participatory, technology is not. (Jenkins et al. 2016, 11-12)

The lines definitely get blurred, as *Among Us* is a cultural product, but also a platform for community and interaction, which breeds participatory culture from within. In the context of this study, audience studies consider reception, reading, and interaction between the consumer and the artifact, while participatory culture describes the reciprocal influence between audience agency and the contextual world around this media experience in the form of emergent fan culture and audience interaction.

Passivity is often broadly rejected in game studies, though arguments can be made around aspects such as cut-scenes, where player control is taken away. This in turn seems to also emphasize participation from the player in creating meaning and the experience. (Newman 2013, 96-98) The fluidity and ubiquity of participation reveals blurred lines between interpretation and creation, as well as technology and culture, awakening questions of contextualism.

5.2 The contextual experience

This element of the "multiverse" within the method could be seen as an attempt to satisfy a certain radical contextualism, though it is not explicitly designed to document or analyse only contextual factors. Contextualism seems to be a concept of concern within cultural studies and has already been applied to the study of games. It has even convinced some scholars of a need for a "new game history", more understanding of the contexts of our game experiences which seem to be such strong defining factors within them. (Litherland 2021, 144)

Similar concerns have also been present in psychoanalysis, where the possibility of existing in multiple spaces at once underline gaming experiences with their variety of individual motives, experiences, and emotions. This is relevant to their role in the mental health of the audience. Asking how and why a game is played is at least of equal importance as asking what game is played. (Dini 2012, 497-550)

Multiverse ethnography is not the first method to attempt navigating through individual experiences and contextual elements to build a cohesive set of comprehensive data on an artifact. Having a group of players produce a team-based qualitative effort is adjacent to some other methods, like the Delphi technique or group concept mapping, as mentioned in the original text. (Karhulahti et al 2022, 86) Using ethnography to give the participants a chance to define their own identities and relations to the studied artifacts is an established perspective

in audience studies, appearing already in television studies (e.g. Morley 1986) and previously encouraged also in this text.

There have been moves to address more contextual questions in game studies, as the concept of audience is increasingly criticized. Contextualism highlights issues with previous understandings of "audience" as something institutionally defined and removed from the contexts in which the audience experience occurs. It can be implied by the researchers, or even the product and its marketing. Ethnography seems to be useful in modern audience studies, as differences between individual experiences and the ability for the participants to speak for themselves are central elements of that methodology. Because of this, it has been encouraged to give participants the chance to define their own identities and contexts in relation to the research object, diminishing problems arising from contextualism. (Shaw 2010, 59-61) (Newman 2013, 49)

Still, contextual questions always persist and require acknowledgment and analysis instead of rejection or fixing. In fact, contextual issues can be seen to rise, at least in part, from using the ethnographic model in the first place. While ethnography reveals that the reality is more complex than our theories can realistically cover, and that the concept of a specific audience cannot be satisfactorily defined, it enables research to be sensitive to these specificities. (Ang 1996, 52)

The original study includes descriptions of the course the participants were taking part in, mentioning specifically how the previous lectures and literature on ethnography and video games might have affected the results. (Karhulahti et al. 2022, 89) This is just one aspect of the contextual elements that point to differences between the original study and this replication.

These differences are certainly notable, but it should not be ignored that the contextual differences between every participant are even more severe. The groups had a different context, but every individual varied even more from each other, even within the same group. Among some of these natural contextual variables could be the playing environment, preconceptions about the artifact or the study, and the personal tastes of the participant.

The context affects, and is affected by, both the game- and journal writing experiences of the user. Thus, we can only reasonably speculate upon what, how and when contextual elements

could affect the results. The network of influence would be challenging, if not impossible to map out completely.

A study using *multiverse ethnography* to research these contextual differences could be encouraged, both for methodological testing, and as a potentially powerful tool for mapping out and comparing player experiences. If an understanding of the play context problematizes the centrality of the player, (Newman 2013, 24) utilizing a plurality of player perspectives seems like a justified way to average out some of these contextual variables.

For example, while in this study the theme of *Subjective* is identified to be separated from the other thematic clusters that include more direct observations on the media artifact, it still works to identify observations on the larger context that is being interacted with. Some diary writers would mention how their daily lives were affected by the gameplay, or gave insight into their general video game habits and how it relates in their minds to *Among Us*:

> *After extended play, I noticed that I felt suspicious towards people in real life, though the feeling eased once I noticed it. This never happened face to face though, but for example reading the newspaper I could be more critical of sources than normally, or doubt the writer's intentions, which on one hand is not a bad thing, especially since I noticed the change myself.*

If the study centred around these questions that transcend the direct interaction with the media object, it would certainly be worthwhile to construct a more complex series of codes and categories for these areas currently implied in the theme *Subjective*. This also underlines the importance of closer textual analysis as support in interpreting and coding the texts. As the process is interpretation, it invites, or perhaps even requires a methodological analysis like a close reading of the fieldwork journal data.

For example, if personally felt effects of the media experience were central objects of study, careful consideration upon effects research and its relation to the study would be a relevant inclusion for increased validity. This would be a significant variable within the research, and it would require serious consideration into the rich history of research and discourse revolving around the potential links between media and its effects. This in turn would steer the study and text in a unique direction.

Even though the consent form specified that the study required only observations that have to do with the game itself, there was much grey area included with the diaries. Reading these observations categorized as "subjective", I identified a promising sub-theme of "effects of

play" to include these observations on how the players saw the game affect their lives outside of gameplay. Including such data would not be credible however, since the consent form explicitly encouraged participants not to provide such observations, influencing the fieldwork process and leaving the potential theme with only a few applicable entries.

This method should be applicable for documenting anything that can be identified through the journal writing process. It can be combined with existing methods or manuals of analysis fitting for the subject matter, helping to explore open research questions. (Karhulahti et al. 2022, 87)

As such, it is also very dependent on the research questions and methods of coding and analysis to produce data relevant to the research. Depending on the ways the study is approached, some specific perspectives might lose validity under analysis, if they contradict the instructions given to the participants. The rejected emerging sub-theme of "effects of play" is an example of this.

Through appropriate coding and analysis, the method can revolve around contextual observations and thusly consider things like addiction, competitiveness, participatory culture, or any other subjective, contextual experience. As the method exists in this study, it only maps out points of attention, but does not necessarily detail much else about the observations. In a different study it might be worth encouraging value judgments from the journals and centring the analysis around what emotions are connected to what kind of observations. Different instructions can lead to other interesting thematic clusters fitting for different research questions.

Through the radical contextualist lens media audiences can be described as indefinite, even infinite. Conclusions about the role of media itself can only be made post facto, but many studies approach media as a pre-defined concept in one way or another. As apparent in postmodern audience studies, both audience and media are indeterminate categories. Ethnography can be seen to identify and transcribe the contextual ways in which different indefinite audience engage with different media. It enables thick descriptions with an emphasis on interpretation. (Ang 1996, 69-71)

To return to Clifford Geertz' considerations of more anthropological ethnography, it is noted that relying on other people will always complicate the issue and that as inscribers of social discourse, we fail to have a pure or direct connection to the raw social discourse. Instead, we

are dependent on the perspectives of others. According to Geertz this is not insurmountable however, as one does not need to know everything in order to understand something. (Geertz 1973, 20)

This generates questions about the purposes of ethnographic methods and how to best use them. One might have difficulty defining when knowledge or understanding is reached. We can attempt to position *multiverse ethnography* inside these parameters if we keep following Geertz further into his proposition for cultural analysis to be *"...guessing at meanings, assessing the guesses, and drawing explanatory conclusions from the better guesses..."* (1973, 20)

This definition can be seen to apply to this study. Depending on the research questions and roles of the participants, the fieldwork journal writer might guess at meanings of the artifact, or the coder the meanings of the journal observations. These guesses are assessed through the coding process, with the potential exchange coding being preferable for validity. Better guesses are determined as the codes are finalized, possibly co-operatively, and explanatory conclusions emerge in the form of the thematic clusters as the research text itself is written and coding data analysed.

In light of this, the word "guess" seems fitting. As second-hand interpretations are less dependable and emphasize the role of the context, the researcher needs to be sensitive towards this relationship. (Jørgensen 2012, 380-381) This underlines the issue of contextualism. Exchange coding is applied in order to verify and increase consistency between journals but acknowledging when guesses are made and what understanding they can bring is paramount to finding the truths within ethnographic data.

There is an uncomfortable side to following Geertz into accepting ethnographic research as mere 'guesses', seemingly undermining the method itself. Solace is found in the aforementioned idea of ethnography identifying the contextual concerns ignored by other methods, since Geertz implies all cultural studies to be defined by these guesses.

Accepting the criticisms over definitive categorizations of 'audience' leads us to also confront the multiple layers of interpretation present, as well as the unreachability of raw or pure social discourse. This confrontation seems to be central to using ethnographic methods in audience studies, emphasized to new extremes by the strong polysemic qualities of video games and this method.

6 Conclusions

Applying *multiverse ethnography* two separate times to the same artifact but doing so in different contexts gives me perspective into some variables that affect the process and possibly the results. Some of these effects are difficult to map out however, as there were multiple major differences in the application of the method in these studies outside of just contextual elements.

Chapter 3 details how the lack of an organized course context combined with the solitary research role provided challenges in finding participants and receiving the data. This corroborates a claim made in the original article about how the method is not designed for single researchers, and that the participants and their workload should be designed around the larger research context.

The differences between the two studies shine a light on the problem of replication. It is a challenge to define the damage done to the replication results by these contextual differences, exemplified by the variety of participants, their time of interaction, different preparations and instructions, and relationship to the research. Attempts were made to identify potential resulting differences in data, which led to implications of possible future applications for the method. These included comparing two groups of participants with controlled variables, like different servers or playstyles.

With the acknowledgment of the differences and their implications, the purpose of the replication was fulfilled. The boundaries of both the thematic clusters and the method itself were explored. Suggestions for how to apply the method to other research questions and themes also emerged during the process of criticism. Still, nothing seemed to directly contradict with the results of methods of the original study. Themes with less observations were still clearly identifiable and provided interesting insight into the potential effects of the differences between the original study and this replication.

Noticeable were the two smallest sub-themes, which represented numbers smaller than the explored “micro-theme” of *Social Manipulation*. This seems to contradict with the idea implied in the name of “micro-theme”. It being a non-dominant theme, presumably as small, or smaller than the sub-themes.

Reasons for the low results inside the sub-themes *Meta* and *Changes* were considered, and they seemed to emphasize how the research questions and thematic clusters should support the participants and instructions given to them. Contextual influence by participant play time and experience was hypothesized, as the same thematic cluster did not perfectly apply to this replication in terms of these two small sub-themes.

Video games often include a linear structure where certain types of experiences are only available after a certain amount of play time. Concentrating on anything but the start of the game requires participants to go through the earlier stages, or employing ones with existing expertise. Depending on the study artifact and the research team, it might be more productive to have fewer participants with longer fieldwork time, or the other way around. Regardless, *multiverse ethnography* can be more difficult to apply to studies concentrating on a specific moment available only after extensive play time.

As a possible side effect of the less organized nature of the participant group, there were documented experiences from different language servers. This provided a superficial look into some potential differences between separated groups inside one game, as the observations concerning the communication appeared different depending on which language the communication was done in. As such, it exemplifies the potential that controlled separate modes of interaction have in identifying how the same game can work differently in another context.

Meta and *Changes* appeared as the least common types of observations. This study hypothesizes that the occasionally lower play time as compared to the original study and lack of previous participant experience are factors in this. It seems that changes, like mods, updates, or customization, as well as meta-strategies emerging from the community play are elements that become more prevalent to players after more play hours.

Experiences of playing and interacting with other people, as well as considerations of the gameplay through mechanics and practices seemed primary for people with little to no previous experience with the game. This is reflected consequently by the dominance of the theme of *Actions* and sub-theme of *Communication*.

While the top sub-themes and bottom macro-themes had fairly even results, *Meta* and *Changes* were unique as the smallest bottom sub-themes, and *Multiplay* and *Actions* were unique in how they dominated the macro-themes. This is due to the even split of material

between the sub-themes of *Actions* and the leading role of the sub-theme *Communication* under *Multiplay*, which is significantly ahead of the shared second place for biggest sub-theme.

The unique theme of *Social Manipulation* that emerged in the original study was also observed and identified. The original article concludes that the studied objects include unsurfaced unique features, emphasizing the diversity of player experience both inside singular game worlds, and between separate games. (Karhulahti et al. 2022, 99)

Identifying consistent themes unique to the specifics of the studied artifact seems possible and fruitful depending on the considered research questions. Analysis of the *Social Manipulation* micro-theme is appropriate considering the nature of the gameplay and how central lying can be to it. Identifying something unique but central in the structure of the research object can direct the study or provide directions for future studies to take concerning said artifact.

This conclusion was reinforced by the process of replication. The ability to identify a *Social Manipulation*-micro theme verifies its existence as something the original study calls a "unique feature", though it appeared as relatively less "micro" in this study. It is worth acknowledging that certainly other games with themes of social manipulation exist, and in this context the term refers to its uniqueness in the original study, in that it is separate from other themes, a subject of particular interest, and unique when compared to possible other study artifacts like *Cyberpunk 2077* in the original text.

In terms of unearthing unique features not yet identified, this study acknowledged observations that imply interesting potential future applications of the method. These include the few observations about the effects of the game on the participants' daily lives or the different social experience had on the Portuguese-speaking server.

If research questions, participant instructions and the coding process were designed around studying these specific areas, interesting thematic clusters and research data might emerge. The original study recommends to not use the method for open exploratory studies, but to specify research questions. (Karhulahti et al. 2022, 98)

With the research questions of this study being methodological and replicative, the exploratory nature of the study remained. As such it was incapable of deeper analysis of these

potential new themes or research directions which remained minor in size, potentially conflicting with participant instructions, and unsupported by the applied thematic structures.

Approaching the issue from another perspective, the reported data is diverse. *Too* diverse according to the original study (Karhulahti et al. 2022, 98), which posits this as the reason for excluding the subjective observations. While the thematic structures exclude potentially interesting and valuable themes, the specific research questions and emerging structures outline and constrain the overwhelming and multifaceted data into something that can be managed and interpreted.

While the primary function of the thematic clusters is to categorize observations, in doing so it can naturally be used to separate certain categories. As the diversity of data can appear as a problem for clarity or very specific research questions, using the themes to identify and separate data irrelevant for that particular study has potential to be useful. That is how *Subjective* was used in the original study, though this replication considered that theme as well, as it seems relevant to audience studies.

The view into the method offered by audience studies revealed how *multiverse ethnography* can be applied to consider the active audience and contextual issues. As an active audience, video game players create their own meanings and use games for their own ends. Seen often as a challenge to more structuralist and narratological analysis of games, multiverse ethnography uses these separate, contextually built experiences to develop a collection of data that reflects the differences and patterns in many individual fieldwork journals.

The preplanning, research questions and synergetic participant instructions are essential in confronting the radical contextualist questions. If we accept audience experiences as characterized by an indefinite multiplicity of contexts, we have to acknowledge our role in taking a position when writing. The ethnographer cannot be ubiquitous in the same way as the context of the media experience, so the writing must happen from “somewhere”. (Ang 1996, 74-75) This position must be transparent in the study, with reflexivity regarding the ethnographer’s position appearing throughout the research process as further interpretations are made.

As a method for acknowledging the plurality of game experiences and their fluid interaction with the play context and emerging participatory actions, it seems adaptable for documenting many of these complex relationships between players and the research artifacts. Still, using

prepared systems of coding and analysis to support the research process is encouraged; not only as tools for consistent data processing, but also for acknowledging and considering more theoretical questions of methodology, like those concerning audience studies or contextualism in this study.

The essential role of preplanning, research questions and designing participant instructions around the study was exemplified by the attempt to reframe the method within audience studies. While the method could be subjected to theoretical analysis and consideration, the replicated process was not in perfect synergy with the audience studies perspective. Analysing aspects of the active audience and contextual questions would have benefitted from emphasizing the subjective observations more, as these questions are relevant to said field. The subjective category was undermined by the structure of the study. In depth analysis of subjective observations would have been clearly important for contextual questions, which are of interest in audience studies.

As a replication of an exploratory introduction of a new method, this study only had the original text as a primary source for both theory and practice. This study sources many studies from the broader fields of game studies, ethnography, and new media studies. While subjects like participatory culture might seem only tangentially related, they still offer strong contextual support in considering how we define and identify the research objects and our methods. They are also increasingly difficult to ignore in their ubiquity inside the study of media audiences.

While no emerging participatory culture was explored in this study per say, the entire concept of participation is inseparable from the study of game audiences. This is emphasized especially when their role as active and resistant players is acknowledged. As such, observing the replicated method benefits from understanding the relevant contextual concerns present in media studies and how we understand interactions between audience and media.

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8 Appendix 1: Uncoded journal

I played the game for around twenty hours and all the gameplays were both on North American and Europe servers for Portuguese speakers. I played on a desktop and on my phone. It was my first time playing in a while and I noticed right away that the game changed, for example now we can play until fifteen people. It's also possible to make my own profile and send friend requests which makes everything a lot easier when playing with friends or meeting someone I want to play again with. The game also has now XP so the player can reach different levels and it made the game a lot more competitive because it gives the possibility to see other player's profiles and try to be better than them. This last update made me a lot more excited to play this game again.

Before joining a public game, I tried to host a game to remember a bit of how it worked. When it comes to custom settings hosting a game, there is not a big variety of maps but there is a big variety of settings that can make the gameplay a lot more fun. For example:

1. Putting just one emergency meeting so people do not keep pushing the emergency button just to write useless stuff for the game (like saying their names or asking where people live; this happened many times)
2. Changing the voting and discussion time is also important because the time on recommended settings (the game starts with the recommended settings if I don't change anything) is too long. Making it quicker for people to vote helps avoiding useless conversations that I had to go through many times while playing. People love to talk about their own lives.
3. I prefer to not change the player speed because the recommended one is enough. In a lot of games I played, people would put the player speed faster than 1.0x and it just makes me dizzy.
4. The kill cooldown and kill distance are also important to change because they can make the gameplay better. For instance, if the kill cooldown is less than 30.0s the game tends to be faster, but I noticed something different: when I put the kill cooldown faster, as an impostor, it made me insecure to kill the crewmates too fast because it calls the attention to me and quickly people start suspecting that I am the impostor.
5. Another setting I must change every time is "Confirm Ejects". I prefer to not confirm the ejects because it means not knowing if the person you vote to eject is the impostor and if you might win the game or not. Is also good to combine this with having more than one impostor because we cannot know how many impostors are left after ejecting someone.

The first game started with someone already pressing the emergency button in the first minute of the game just to say hi and talk People always want to communicate a lot in this game, and it would be a lot better if there was a voice chat.

This same day I played for almost five hours and in most of the games (if not all), the players pressed the emergency button at the start of the match just to talk about a random subject or just pressed it without saying anything. Another way the players would press the button is every time someone is following them so they would let the rest of the crew know who is following who and a whole new conversation would start. Communication is a big part of this game but still makes me so frustrated when someone presses the emergency button and I have to restart my task.

Just in the third game, I realized that there are new roles such as shapeshifter, which made things a lot easier for the impostor but really confusing for the crew. For example, a common thing that happened in a lot of the following games throughout the first day, is when the match starts some players press the emergency button to tell their roles but a lot of times the impostors pretend to be engineers just to vent without the rest of the crew suspecting.

One of the most frustrating things that kept happening is either player quitting all the time or starting the game with five people or fewer even. The host should be unable to start the game without at least eight people, otherwise the game is not fun. Is either too easy to find out who the impostor is, or the crew only has one or two chances before the impostor kills everyone; plus, when the game starts, people should not be able to quit before at least one minute of gameplay or when a player quits, they should not be able to join any game for the next five minutes or so.

Being the impostor makes me nervous because is too easy to get caught, either getting out of the vent, killing someone, shapeshifting or faking tasks. During these hours playing, I got caught twice faking a download task because they accused me of taking too long to do it. I also got caught trying to shapeshift and vent after killing a player, but venting is too difficult in this game.

As an impostor, I had different experiences trying to manipulate the other players. I tried to report a body that I killed and lied about being someone else that the crew already suspects, or I would say I did not see who killed it. It is anxiety trigging because they can either believe me or turn against me when they eject someone that was not the impostor.

A lot of players take too long to finish their tasks because they are too busy watching the cameras or camping next to vents. These same players tend to either do their tasks too slowly because they want to catch the impostor on camera and run to press the emergency button or they do their tasks too fast because they cannot wait to stalk all the players till they caught the impostor in the act. The camera room is a great idea in the game but a dangerous one. Staring into the cameras can be addicting and it's easy to forget about what is happening around you. For example, what happened to me a lot of times:

1. I spent too much time watching the cameras and when the impostor killed me, I got so surprised that I could not pay enough attention to the color or anything about the impostor.
2. Another situation is when the impostor kills someone next to you, but you are so concentrated on watching the cameras, that another crew member sees the body before you (and next to you) that they accuse you of being the impostor.
3. And the last thing that made me give up trying to camp in the camera room is when the impostor kills someone next to me while I am watching the cameras and suddenly, I have to report a body that I did not see who killed and when they killed, which can result on a big discussion that I am self-reporting a body that I killed myself.

But yes, the game can be really fun when you learn how to communicate and to defend yourself of wrong accusations. Manipulation is the key in the game and if I do not manipulate someone it means that I am being manipulated.

9 Appendix 2: Coded journal

I played the game for around twenty hours and all the gameplays were both on North American and Europe servers for Portuguese speakers. (Other) I played on a desktop and on my phone. (Other) It was my first time playing in a while and I noticed right away that the game changed, for example now we can play until fifteen people. (Changes) It's also possible to make my own profile and send friend requests which makes everything a lot easier when playing with friends or meeting someone I want to play again with. (Social/Communication) The game also has now XP so the player can reach different levels and it made the game a lot more competitive because it gives the possibility to see other player's profiles and try to be better than them. (Mechanics) This last update made me a lot more excited to play this game again. (Changes)

Before joining a public game, I tried to host a game to remember a bit of how it worked. (Mechanics) When it comes to custom settings hosting a game, there is not a big variety of maps but there is a big variety of settings that can make the gameplay a lot more fun. (Mechanics) For example:

6. Putting just one emergency meeting so people do not keep pushing the emergency button just to write useless stuff for the game (like saying their names or asking where people live; this happened many times); (Practices)
7. Changing the voting and discussion time is also important because the time on recommended settings (the game starts with the recommended settings if I don't change anything) is too long. (voting) Making it quicker for people to vote helps avoiding useless conversations that I had to go through many times while playing. (Social/Communication) People love to talk about their own lives. (Social/Communication)
8. I prefer to not change the player speed because the recommended one is enough. (Mechanics) In a lot of games I played, people would put the player speed faster than 1.0x and it just makes me dizzy. (Changes)
9. The kill cooldown and kill distance are also important to change because they can make the gameplay better. (Changes) For instance, if the kill cooldown is less than 30.0s the game tends to be faster, (Mechanics) but I noticed something different: when I put the kill cooldown faster, as an impostor, it made me insecure to kill the crewmates too fast because it calls the attention to me and quickly people start suspecting that I am the impostor. (Being the impostor)
10. Another setting I must change every time is "Confirm Ejects". (Changes) I prefer to not confirm the ejects because it means not knowing if the person you vote to eject is the impostor and if you might win the game or not. (Voting) Is also good to combine this with having more than one impostor because we cannot know how many impostors are left after ejecting someone. (Mechanics)

The first game started with someone already pressing the emergency button in the first minute of the game just to say hi and talk. (Social/Communication) People always want to communicate a lot in this game, and it would be a lot better if there was a voice chat. (Social/Communication)

This same day I played for almost five hours and in most of the games (if not all), the players pressed the emergency button at the start of the match just to talk about a random subject or just pressed it without saying anything. (Practices) Another way the players would press the button is every time someone is following them so they would let the rest of the crew know who is following who and a whole new conversation would start. (Meta) Communication is a big part of this game but still makes me so frustrated when someone presses the emergency button and I have to restart my task. (Social/Communication)

Just in the third game, I realized that there are new roles such as shapeshifter, which made things a lot easier for the impostor but really confusing for the crew. (Changes) For example, a common thing that happened in a lot of the following games throughout the first day, is when the match starts some players press the emergency button to tell their roles but a lot of times the impostors pretend to be engineers just to vent without the rest of the crew suspecting. (Social Manipulation)

One of the most frustrating things that kept happening is either player quitting all the time or starting the game with five people or fewer even. (Practices) The host should be unable to start the game without at least eight people, otherwise the game is not fun. (Practices) Is either too easy to find out who the impostor is, or the crew only has one or two chances before the impostor kills everyone (Mechanics); plus, when the game starts, people should not be able to quit before at least one minute of gameplay or when a player quits, they should not be able to join any game for the next five minutes or so. (Practices)

Being the impostor makes me nervous because is too easy to get caught, either getting out of the vent, killing someone, shapeshifting or faking tasks. (Being an impostor) During these hours playing, I got caught twice faking a download task because they accused me of taking

too long to do it. (Being an impostor) I also got caught trying to shapeshift and vent after killing a player, but venting is too difficult in this game. (Being an impostor) As an impostor, I had different experiences trying to manipulate the other players. (Social manipulation) I tried to report a body that I killed and lied about being someone else that the crew already suspects, or I would say I did not see who killed it. (Social Manipulation) It is anxiety trigging because they can either believe me or turn against me when they eject someone that was not the impostor. (Being an impostor)

A lot of players take too long to finish their tasks because they are too busy watching the cameras or camping next to vents. (Other people) These same players tend to either do their tasks too slowly because they want to catch the impostor on camera and run to press the emergency button or they do their tasks too fast because they cannot wait to stalk all the players till they caught the impostor in the act. (Other people) The camera room is a great idea in the game but a dangerous one. (Mechanics) Staring into the cameras can be addicting and it's easy to forget about what is happening around you. (Mechanics) For example, what happened to me a lot of times:

4. I spent too much time watching the cameras and when the impostor killed me, I got so surprised that I could not pay enough attention to the color or anything about the impostor. (Dying)
5. Another situation is when the impostor kills someone next to you, but you are so concentrated on watching the cameras, that another crew member sees the body before you (and next to you) that they accuse you of being the impostor. (Practices)
6. And the last thing that made me give up trying to camp in the camera room is when the impostor kills someone next to me while I am watching the cameras and suddenly, I have to report a body that I did not see who killed and when they killed, which can result on a big discussion that I am self-reporting a body that I killed myself. (Practices)

But yes, the game can be really fun when you learn how to communicate and to defend yourself of wrong accusations. (Social/Communication) Manipulation is the key in the game and if I do not manipulate someone it means that I am being manipulated. (Social Manipulation)

Actions (Practices/Mechanics)

Mechanics 8

Practices 7

Being an impostor 5

Dying 1

Voting 2

Multiplay (Communication/Meta)

Social/Communication 7

Other Players 2

Strategies (Personal/Meta)

Metagame 1

Design (Aesthetics/Changes)

Changes 6

Subjective

Other 2

Social manipulation 4