



Methods for Change

**Digitised  
Ethnography:  
Creating Interactive Stories**

Dr Andrea Pia, *London School of Economics*

Dr Amy Barron and Dr Laura Pottinger,  
*The University of Manchester*

*Corresponding author*

*Dr Andrea Pia*

*A.E.Pia@lse.ac.uk*



# Digitised Ethnography: Creating Interactive Stories

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*This guide looks at how to translate material generated through traditional ethnography into digital forms.* Digital Ethnography is usually used to describe research that is conducted solely online - through social platforms, websites and in chat forums - with people who we might not otherwise be able to meet in person. A traditional ethnographer might have to travel to another part of the world to carry out their research. Digital Ethnographers travel through the internet to their field site or to explore and immerse themselves within particular communities. Instead of relying on video cameras, tape recorders and their notepad, Digital Ethnographers rely on a virtual set of methods such as web archives, blogs and servers. To learn more about Digital Ethnography as it is traditionally used in the social sciences, the following may be of use: [The Drax Files: World Makers \[Episode 31: Tom Boellstorff\]](#) and [Digital Anthropology](#). Digital Ethnography is used in this guide to describe something slightly different to the above.

Digitised Ethnography describes the transformation of a piece of ethnographic research into a digital output. For example, instead of, or as well as, writing a book or article to share the findings of a traditional ethnographic study, a video game or interactive story might be created instead. While video games allow you to win, or to play against them or an opponent, interactive stories, which are the focus of this guide, are primarily about discovering. In Digitised Ethnography, the player is put in someone else's shoes. This person is usually a key interlocutor, and could be someone known by the author of the ethnography, or the ethnographer themselves.

Digitised Ethnographies are usually based on a multiple-choice mechanism, which transforms the traditional ethnographic narrative into an interactive text. By interacting with other characters through multiple-choice dialogue, the player experiences the challenges and contradictions of lives they have never lived or may never even have imagined to exist. The player makes choices throughout the game that will determine the places, people and ethnographic themes they will eventually encounter. Digitised Ethnographies can therefore be used to educate people about the experiences of marginalised groups, or to allow people to understand the world from the perspective of others through an interactive and immersive experience. Moving away from the written word by creating an interactive story means that the research conducted can be translated into different settings and will be able to reach a much wider audience. Digitised Ethnography is therefore motivated to engage different publics, such as students, scholars, civil society practitioners and concerned individuals who may be moved by hearing about the people ethnographers work with.

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## How does Digitised Ethnography create or contribute to change?

The outputs created by Digitising Ethnographies such as [Bury Me, My Love](#) or [Finding Home](#) can create change by exposing people to the perspectives of others. For example, if an interactive storyline is created (through open access software such as Twine, Quest or Google Forms), people who engage with it have the opportunity to navigate the lives of people who they might otherwise never encounter. For instance, [Bury Me, My Love](#) is a Text Messaging Adventure about Nour, a Syrian migrant trying to find her way to Europe. Putting the user in somebody else's shoes through the creation of a game or interactive story might cultivate feelings of empathy and sympathy, encouraging people to grapple with what it means to see the world from a different perspective. It exposes people to seeing the world in ways that they otherwise would not, letting them experience a different point of view, rather than just being told that this point of view exists. With Digitised Ethnography, change happens right in front of you as players vocalise their perspectives through the unfolding of their experience. This method can also be an effective teaching resource, used to educate people about different social experiences or about the ethnographic method itself.

## What ideas or concepts influence Digitised Ethnography?

Digitising Ethnography is motivated by the desire to engage different publics. This is shaped by a wider shift in the social sciences toward an extended definition of impact, which includes a reflection on how best to communicate one's finding to the general public and other stakeholders. It does this by creating research outputs that are meaningful to a range of different audiences, such as journalists, policy makers, civil society activists and students. This is shaped by a recognition that academic journal articles are often inaccessible to many and that there are better ways of communicating research which will resonate with different individuals and groups. Digitised Ethnography brings people closer to the experiences of others by fostering empathy and awareness of the realities of lived experience, rather than a more distanced theoretical understanding of social processes, phenomena, and experiences. The underlying ethos of Digitised Ethnographies is also influenced by game theory which suggests that interactivity, iteration, role-playing, risks and rewards are all good methods to retain attention from your audience. Engaging with a game often translates into the ability to challenge one's own default assumptions and enhances a more flexible and unorthodox appreciation of complex social phenomena. Games such as [Papers Please](#), [Phone Stories](#) or [Everything](#) demonstrate how these tools can successfully be used to teach people about a strange and unfamiliar experience. They could also be used to cultivate empathy by putting people in somebody else's shoes, rather than simply telling them about someone else's experience.

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## Why might I want to use Digitised Ethnography?

- Digitising Ethnography can be useful to visualise spaces, lives and experiences that might be unfamiliar by asking other people to experience them first-hand. Digitised Ethnographies can be played individually or in groups, and incorporated into different settings, from class teaching to seminars, workshops and in workforce training protocols. In group settings, Digitised Ethnographies can prompt critical discussions and help to change preconceptions and address cultural biases.
- Immersing people into the worlds and experiences of others can be a powerful method to teach people about lives they may not have otherwise encountered or considered. Digitised Ethnographies place players in a so called 'ethical gym' where seemingly ethical or un-ethical choices can be experienced as separated from their consequences. This might then influence the ways those who have played the game or interacted with the storyline think about a particular topic, such as migration. This is because role-playing reinscribes one's own default understanding and interpretation of other peoples' motives with the first-person perspective of those very others.
- Games and interactive storylines created by Digitising Ethnography can be a useful teaching resource as they enable students to actively participate in the lived realities of others. They also provide students with an alternative virtual experience that is rich in learning cues, which stimulates the curiosity of an active learner. Digitised Ethnography can function as an alternative way to tell a story by foregrounding the lives of marginalised and underrepresented groups, such as migrants, factory workers, prison inmates, and miners to quote a few characters included in recent interactive stories. Doing so puts the voices of marginalised groups at the centre as opposed to understanding their lives through the lens of policy makers or activists.
- Digitised Ethnography can be used to teach people about the principles of traditional ethnography by immersing those engaging with the output in a context that closely approximates the experience of in-depth participant observation. This might be particularly useful where travel is limited or where it might be difficult to conduct a traditional ethnography for political reasons.

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## Step by step guide to Digitising Ethnography:

### 1. Conduct a traditional ethnography

**to generate material.** A traditional ethnographic study involves spending a prolonged amount of time in a place to understand how it is lived and experienced by those who live there. The aim of ethnographic research is to produce rich and descriptive material from the ground up. Time spent in a place may involve taking photographs, keeping reflective diaries, and talking with people. The aim is to do these activities in an open and exploratory way and to use a combination of these different methods as a way to immerse yourself within the place, rather than to find out anything specific.

*You could also digitise a pre-existing piece of ethnographic research, by identifying the main protagonists and reorganising the main narrative around a choice-rich reading structure. This has been done in the following three examples: [Pine Point](#), [Journey at the End of Coal](#) and [iOtok](#).*

### 2. Work with someone who is good at taking photographs or creating film footage.

This is important because this material will be used to create the resulting game or interactive storyline. If you do not have the skills, you might want to recruit an artist. Another option could be to generate your own visual material through drawing. [Drawn to See](#) is a useful guide in this respect.

### 3. Make sure you have access to basic open-access software on the internet.

Examples of open-access software's include Twine, Quest and Google Forms. Google Slides for instance, requires very little training to make interactive hypertext narratives. To create an interactive story you need to write stories that follow multiple paths using hyperlinks, create variables to track your player's actions, add scripting like 'if' and 'else' to decide when discrete events should appear in your game, and use hooks to add fancy touches like text effects, pictures, and sound. Basic interactive mechanics that are easily implemented into an open-access software such as Twine include: an inventory for items collection, a wallet for money or a glossary for keywords. These articles can be indexed so that their possession will automatically unlock further content in the game as well as provide more detailed analysis of the ethnographic material. Alternative endings are also an option: they help players to retain interest and investment in the story.

*You can find useful open-access how to guides at [Inklewriter](#) and [DirectorNotes](#).*

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**4. Make sure the output is right for your intended audience.** A game might be more suitable when a win-lose mechanic can reinforce the acquisition of insights believed to be important for players. For example, the game [Balance of the Planet](#) focuses on environmental sustainability and the player wins when a steady-state extraction of natural resources is achieved by the player. An interactive storyline might be more suitable if the intended outcomes include raising awareness and the introduction of unfamiliar social settings.

*Digitised ethnographies work at their best when played in groups and facilitated by someone directly involved in their production. Games and interactive storylines are still strongly associated with a particular cohort of people (young, male, middle class) and you may encounter resistance when introduced as learning tools with underrepresented cohorts. It is advised that producers and players first familiarise themselves with emerging progressive voices in the digital industries, whose work revolves around changing the cultural demands for what can be consumed through gaming. See for instance the work of [Anna Anne Anthropy](#) or [Momo Pixel](#).*



Customers take a rest in the main plaza of Beijing SOHO mall. Image credit: Andrea Pia and Marco de Mutiis.





## Examples of Digitised Ethnography in social science research

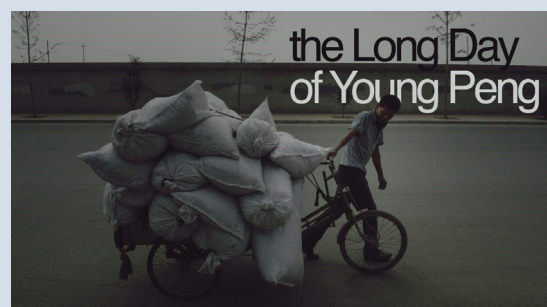
### The Long Day of Young Peng

Researcher: Dr Andrea Pia, London School of Economics

*The Long Day of Young Peng* is an interactive story that uses original ethnographic material including fieldnotes, excerpts from interviews, pictures and videos to chronicle one day in the life of Peng, a young Chinese migrant. In this Digitised Ethnography, the player is put in Peng's shoes on his journey from his native village to Beijing in search of employment. The game is based on a multiple-choice mechanic. Through interacting with other characters, the player relives Peng's first day in Beijing as well as familiarising themselves with topics in the study of contemporary Chinese society. The game has been developed using Twine - a free, open source software which allows you to write interactive fiction in the form of web pages without requiring knowledge of any programming language.

The player makes choices throughout the game that will determine the places, people and ethnographic themes Peng will eventually encounter. Throughout the game, the player collects items, money, and keywords that could be used to unlock further content in the game. The game also includes a bibliography, as some of the topics the game touches upon are revealed through ethnographic examples taken from the anthropological literature on China and scripted into the storyline. The game can end in different ways – none of which reflects what really happened to the real person named Peng, but which nonetheless reproduce some of the most likely outcomes of second-generation migratory projects in China – depending on the cumulative effects of the choices made throughout it.

*The development of the Peng Game was supported by a 2016-17 LSE IGNITE! Grant*



*The Long Day of Young Peng Logo*

The Peng game has been used as a teaching activity within LSE's MSc Programme '*China in Comparative Perspective*'. Peng was played during seminars in groups of three to four students on iPad devices during five consecutive weekly seminars. The implementation of the game during seminars enabled students to pattern their growing understanding of migration as a social phenomenon with their own sensibility and attentiveness. By making choices for Peng, the player is made to reflect on the analytical opportunity to study migration outside the usual economic framing of push and pull factors, and within the ethnographically more accurate register of instability, incompleteness and serendipity - qualities that ordinarily beset any migratory choice in real life. The Peng game interrogates not just players' comprehension but their very own ethical agency and interpretative capacities. How would a Chinese male migrant behave in this situation? Should I send remittances home or keep them to myself? In so doing, the game enables sympathy and a more intimate understanding of the challenges involved in migrant lives.

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## Where else could Digitised Ethnography be used?

### Migration

Digitised Ethnography could be used to tell the story of migration from the perspective of migrants themselves. It can be produced collaboratively, as with the game *Survival*, which was produced by refugee activists and migrants in Gibraltar. It can be used to help diverse audiences to better understand the reasons behind migratory projects as well as their unintended outcomes.

### Education

Digitised Ethnography could be used to create educational games on a variety of different topics. A multimodal ethnographic teaching session can be structured around a collective gaming session as a class activity. Material for a digitised ethnography can help put more flesh on the bones of an abstract theoretical piece. This can help students familiarise with unfamiliar contexts and help overcome stereotypes and biases.

### Welfare

Digitised Ethnography can be used in training for people who work in welfare support or other services. A game could be created to highlight the lives of benefit recipients, for example. This method could help welfare offices garner a better sense of their clients' motivations, needs, and struggles.

## Top tips

1. People learn more if they are having fun. Participating in an interactive story or game is one way of encouraging interaction and enjoyment.
2. The traditional ethnography component of this method can be a large time investment, but remember that you can easily turn existing ethnographies and investigative reportages into interactive stories.
3. Digitising Ethnographies can be labour intensive. It requires a sense of multiple connections, as well as the use of either/or logic functions to achieve pre-identified outcomes. For stories involving the use of multiple media, including videos and sound, it may require the input of a creative coder. Please see the further reading below for suggestions on how you can learn these skills independently or for who you could work with collaboratively.



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## Further reading

- Writing Hypertext
- A quick dive into immigration themed video games
- Persuasive Games
- Mollenindustria
- Edutopia: Interactive fiction in the classroom
- Twine 2.0 – Introduction

*List of people who you might be able to approach to work with:*

- Random quark
- Marco de Mutiis

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