

FORUM

Ethnography within consumer research – a critical case study of Consumer Film Festivals

Lorne McMillan

BRS Group

Brenda Ng

Microsoft Corporation

This paper describes an ethnographic research study conducted for Microsoft's Gaming Division across seven countries, among teens and young adults who play PC and console video games. Both the research methodology and the project deliverables relied on the heavy use of video film; in-home interviews in each country filmed, and respondents were given video cameras and asked to make their own short films to express their feelings about particular topics relevant to PC and video gaming. When all of this was done, respondents were invited to a central location and participated in a 'Consumer Film Festival' – essentially, a focus group where their films were shown among their peers and used as the basis for group discussion.

The paper outlines the complex nature of such research, and suggests that while the end findings were of considerable benefit to Microsoft, one aspect of the process – the Consumer Film Festival sessions themselves – was not the most useful methodological approach when it came to analysing and understanding the data that consumers provided. There are better ways of understanding consumer-generated content such as this than having consumers discuss their efforts in a focus group. The value of this last part of the methodology was that these sessions provided exceptional respondent and client engagement. The real learning from this consumer-generated material took place once fieldwork was completed.

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Introduction

The console video games market has developed in short generational bursts over the last 15 years or so. While the software (the games themselves) improves in both content and depth fairly constantly, the hardware used to play such games (the consoles, controllers and peripheral optional equipment) has settled into a generational pattern of development, with the leading companies that manufacture the hardware each introducing new and improved platforms every few years, often at much the same time.

In 2005 Microsoft's Gaming Division had a need to better understand the people who play PC and console video games and how this gaming activity fits into their lives. In particular, the company wished to understand the interplay between PC gaming (that is, playing games on a PC, using the keyboard to control the game) and console video gaming, which uses a proprietary box and hand controller such as Xbox (the Microsoft product) or PlayStation (the Sony product) to run the game, which is played through a TV.

The research task

As Microsoft makes both types of gaming formats (both PC games and its Xbox console games platform), it was particularly interested in understanding how these formats are regarded by gamers in different countries, and how their usage can intertwine in different cultural situations.

As part of the overall planning effort undertaken prior to the launch of the Xbox 360 (the second-generation Xbox, launched late in 2005), the company had a number of issues it wanted to understand across countries, namely:

- the interplay between console and PC gaming – why are some people enthusiastic about both types of gaming, while others can reject one or the other, and is there opportunity to draw the two gaming formats together using the internet?
- what are the dynamics that influence the purchasing process for the games themselves, and is this the same across console and PC games?
- what is the cultural context for electronic gaming across particular countries?
- does mobile gaming (the ability to game on small hand-held devices, ranging from cell phones to specific hand-held gaming devices such as

Nintendo's DS machine or Sony's PSP) have an influence on other types of electronic gaming?

- to better understand the casual and infrequent gamer in relation to the (better studied) heavy and regular gamer.

The company knew that each of these issues was complex and could warrant a research project in its own right. Microsoft also wanted the output of the research to be in the form of a series of short films, each under ten minutes, and each of which would address one or two particular topics of inquiry. In this way, it could disseminate findings to wide corporate audiences and be very specific in reporting findings.

The first step in designing an approach to this research was to recognise the heavy involvement of video film, not only in the usual ethnographic sense of filming all interviews but also in the sense of requiring the deliverables to be a series of short films.

Formulating a response to the research brief

This led us to wonder if we could bridge the gap between filmed in-home interviews and film-based reporting by adding another layer of film, this time in the form of film as an expressive consumer exercise. But would consumers themselves be willing to make short films for us? We also then asked ourselves if showing these consumer-made films in a semi-public forum such as a focus group would make a suitable basis for a meaningful research discussion.

The response to the brief for this project centred around the notion of the Consumer Film Festival, where we accepted the strong role of video in the research process as a recording and reporting medium, and built on this to include video as the means by which gamer respondents could express themselves to us. Consumers become film-makers.

The new methodological twist to the project was to have gamer respondents who have been through an in-home interview, and have then made a film for us on a specific topic relevant to gaming, come along to a local venue where their film would be shown to an audience of other gamers, hence the term 'Consumer Film Festivals'. The intention was that this would tie everything up and conclude the fieldwork, and that these sessions would become significant learning events in their own right.

It was decided to proceed on this basis, and the research was conducted in seven countries, two English-speaking (the US and the UK), and five others (France and Germany in Europe, and China, Japan and South Korea in East Asia).

The sample

A sample was drawn up that focused on teen and young adult gamers, and the adults that support them in this endeavor – their parents, retailers and local ‘experts’ in electronic gaming.

In each country, a total of 26 people were interviewed across 18 in-home or at-work interview sessions. The gamer sample varied by country to best reflect the dominant gaming format in that country (see Tables 1 and 2).

Table 1 16 gamers, aged 17–30 years old, interviewed at home

Gamer friendship pair	Each pair recruited to reflect particular gamer demographics in each country, and each pair makes a film	One Consumer Film Festival session, some two weeks after the interview
Gamer friendship pair		
Gamer friendship pair		
Gamer friendship pair		
Gamer friendship pair	Each pair recruited to reflect particular gamer demographics in each country, and each pair makes a film	A second Consumer Film Festival session
Gamer friendship pair		
Gamer friendship pair		
Gamer friendship pair		

Table 2 Ten individual interviews, varies slightly by country

Gaming ‘expert’	Typically an academic seeking a focused perspective on each country	Viewed the Film Festivals, very valuable
Parents of gamers (major source of funding for gamers)	Interviewed at home, often after a gamer pair interview	Very good opportunity to cross-reference opinions within a family
Retailers	Interviewed at work, often extended to informally interviewing customers	More in Europe and the US
Internet gaming café managers	Interviewed at work, again extended naturally to interviewing customers	Mostly in Asia
Pre-teen gamers and their moms	Interviewed at home	Gaining insight from formative years

All of this together meant that we interviewed more than 180 people across the seven countries, which in turn produced over 250 hours of video film in six different languages.

How well did this work in practice?

For the conventional process of conducting filmed interviews with respondents, either in their homes or places of work, we used a three-person team in non-English-speaking countries: two local researchers, one of whom would conduct the actual interview, a second local person also fluent in English who would act as note taker, and the third person, the US-based researcher, who would do the filming.

Here's an example of an insight from an ethnographic standpoint that came directly from observation during the conventional interviews.

South Korean gamers love playing each against other online using PC's in gaming internet cafés, and although they are online, and in theory could play anyone else in the world that was online and with the same game, they often choose to play among themselves, and they will typically play their friends sitting next to them.

We noticed that the dynamics of this social interaction were almost identical to the kind of interaction of gamers in the UK or the US when playing a console game together in someone's home. Here, we typically have four young men in heavy competition with one other, there is a lot of shouting and game play is fast.

The young men in each country are in the same physical space: in the UK or US they are typically playing each other using a video games console, all watching the game on the same TV and each has a separate hand controller, while in Korea the four young men each have their own PC, and are sitting next to each other in a gaming café. South Korea has for a long time been at the forefront of online PC gaming, and video console sales have been relatively small, and now we can start to explain why this is the case: young gamers can get the same high competitive satisfaction from the same social dynamics using completely different gaming systems in different surroundings.

When it came to briefing respondents on making their own films for us, we had pre-selected pairs of gamers to try to focus on different aspects of gaming, and this was fine-tuned in different countries as we tried to concentrate on particular issues.

For example, we asked some gamers in every country to make films about what it feels like when they purchase games, and asked others to

make films about the differences for them between online and offline gaming. But we also wanted some gamers to concentrate on quite specific things, like the interaction between mobile gaming using hand-held devices vs fixed-point gaming using a PC or console.

We found more continuity in specific subject matter across countries than we did across subjects within the same country. We had hoped that during the Consumer Film Festivals some strands of insight would appear – watching eight films made by French gamers, we reasoned, should give us some insight into the minds of French gamers, but it proved to be more valuable to compare films on the same subject across countries rather than contrasting all the French consumer films with all the Chinese ones.

By way of an example, we asked at least one pair of gamers in every country to make a film for us showing gaming deprivation – what they would do for two weeks if they could not play games. These films are often wistful, starting off showing extreme (feigned) boredom that then develops into a record of alternative pursuits that fill in the time otherwise taken by gaming. These pursuits can be highly social (going out with friends) or solitary, and they can at times relate directly to electronic gaming (playing board games as a substitute activity) or be completely divorced from it. The thread here is that gamers tend to develop other activities (at least over fairly short periods of deprivation) that mirror their initial preference for either social or solitary gaming, and this is basically the same across each of the countries.

When they were recruited, respondents were screened for willingness to make a film for us, but not screened for their experience in making home movies. The output from respondents was radically different in quality, ranging from some people who had film-making experience and made mini-epics with a strong narrative, to people who did little more than film themselves gaming for five minutes. Of course, the cultural assumptions of the researchers viewing these films have to be taken into account as well, and while we may initially judge such work by conventional cinematic standards (care taken with lighting and composition, is there a narrative drive, what each film was telling us on a literal level), there is much more valuable analysis to be done when we suppress our own cinematic expectations and start viewing these films instead as cultural artifacts. When we include this perspective, some of the more obviously clever or polished films actually told us less about the film-makers than some of the more amateur and disjointed works.

But this brings us to the heart of the matter: how valuable are the consumer-made films, and how is it best to analyse them? While asking

respondents to concentrate their activities on specific tasks provides continuity across different countries, we wonder if this is partially self-fulfilling: we can see continuity because we essentially asked for it. On reflection, it might have been better to *not* prescribe film subject matter for respondents, and just give them a general direction to make us a film on how they feel about gaming. From a client perspective, the company could not take the chance that respondents might not address issues of specific interest, as this would almost certainly have led to a messier outcome. But would it have also led to greater insight?

The real learning here is that consumer-made material such as this is not best analysed from a comparative and literal level, and it is on this level that the Consumer Film Festivals operated. While the festivals were useful for getting the fieldwork completed, they did not begin to break the material into analytic pieces, and were not good situations to critically question respondents about their motives in making the films they did. It may be better to meet with respondents again individually, watch their film with them and ask them what was going on and what they meant by it.

Is it worth going to the trouble of eliciting consumer-made material like this? Yes it is, as long as we appreciate that its ultimate value is as stepping-stones: the consumer films mostly don't contain insights that are pre-packaged and ready for discovery, but they do often bear considerable fruit when they lead us to new thoughts and connections – it is up to us as researchers to make those connections. The weakness of the Consumer Film Festivals approach was the assumption that insights would tumble directly from respondents talking about what they made. Occasionally this did happen, but not as consistently as anticipated.

Perhaps the best part of the Consumer Film Festivals was that we did have a filmed continuity of issues at times, and were able once or twice in each country to edit sections of film together to make powerful points that started with observations from consumers in interviews, were carried into examples through their own films, and ended up being recapped by having the person discussing this in a focus group. This sort of continuity is rare in commercial research where there is only one round of fieldwork.

Critical conclusions

We feel that we pushed at the boundaries of using video on large-scale international ethnography work with this project, and introduced several logistical innovations that work well (for example, using video cameras and film from the same country to help the continuity of film format, using

three-person research teams made up of local and American researchers and doing pre-editing by flagging good parts of interviews ‘on the fly’ as we were filming, rather than having to hunt for these in translations weeks later, back in the US).

However, the part of the methodology that did not work so well was the Film Festivals themselves. We now know there are better ways of framing the collection of consumer-made material that can lead to deeper analysis more quickly.

Certainly, most respondents seemed to enjoy the process of making their film and then coming along and showing it to a small audience, but the learning value for us as a research team (we viewed all the Film Festival sessions as they happened) was not the same from these sessions as it was from the in-home interviews and the subsequent analyses done on the consumer films.

For the finished report films delivered to Microsoft, the vast majority of the footage was drawn from direct interviews in-home or at-work with respondents, mixed with footage drawn from consumer-generated films and drawn together with an overall voiceover in English, rather than clips drawn from the Consumer Film Festival focus groups themselves.

Of the 56 films made for us by gamer respondents, the client felt that three consumer films were complete examples of very strong learning in their own right, and these films have been used by the company continuously since.

About the authors

Lorne McMillan is managing partner of the BRS Group, which he joined in 1996 from Research International in the UK, where he was worldwide director of automotive research. He has over 20 years of hands-on project experience, and has worked in Europe and the US during his career, undertaking quantitative and qualitative projects in categories including the automotive sector, alcoholic beverages, packaged goods and software entertainment.

Brenda Ng is director of the Worldwide Consumer Insights, Entertainment and Devices Division of Microsoft Corporation.

Address correspondence to: Lorne McMillan, BRS Group, 901 E Street, Suite 300, San Rafael, CA 94901, USA.

Email: lmcmillan@brsgroup.com