



Autoethnographic vignettes, a device for capturing the reflexivity of research-creation

I am co-investigator on a research-creation project funded by the Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) that aims to understand how reinforcement learning (RL) systems are transforming the creative process in three areas of the digital arts: robotic installation, audiovisual performance and virtual reality, and more specifically to assess the transferability of the use of RL between artistic fields and its impact on collaboration between artist-researchers.

Our methodological design combines an inside view through reflexivity with an outside view through ethnography applied to artistic practice. I'm responsible for developing the reflexivity component. While the ethnography of artistic practices is relatively documented and quite frequently practiced (Rutten 2016; Ferro and Poveda 2019), the same cannot be said for the autoethnography of one's own practice carried out by artists, which has recently appeared in the literature (Wiley 2019; Vionnet 2022). Yet autoethnography has been known since the 1970s (Adams et al. 2017), and despite the fact that its scientific value is disputed in postpositivist qualitative research circles, it is widely practiced except in art-making circles. At first glance, one might think that this is due to the fear that the mystery of creation as thought by the Romantics might be dispelled.

In the case of the present project, autoethnography is not so much about the life experience of artist-researchers, but about the exercise of their practice, and aims to bring out knowledge of a different kind from formal and procedural knowledge that is abstracted from its context of production - knowledge that is situated, experiential, sensitive and embodied. In the context of a research-creation project carried out in graduate studies at the Université du Québec à Montréal, where I teach, the written thesis, in addition to a contextualization of the creation, its problematization, a framing in relation to the sphere of concepts and that of related practices, and an explanation of the methodology used, must include a substantial section devoted to the explicitation of its practice (Paquin 2019), which is not the case for research-creation projects whose dissemination mostly consists of exhibitions and the publication of technical or scientific reports. In this context, the production of autoethnographies by the people involved in the research-creation project constitutes an original contribution that has been recognized by the funding organization.

The problem I encountered was as follows. The people involved in the project, both artist-researchers and assistants, are engaged in an exploratory process that requires them to appropriate and develop highly complex technologies, provided these are mobilized in an artistic creation process that involves realizing what has not already been realized, while pursuing a quest that is as expressive as it is aesthetic. They are totally in exploratory mode, discovering the artistic potential of technology as they learn how it



works. It's not so much a question of perfecting a practice already acquired as of discovering and developing it. All the more so as these generative technologies function on their own, and the artistic gesture consists in directing them rather than controlling them. The fact remains, however, that artist-researchers feel in their bodies, among other emotions, elation when what they envisage works and disappointment when it doesn't. In working with these people, I've come to realize that it would be unnatural, if not impossible, to ask them to develop a reflexivity about their practice over a long period of time, given the extent to which they are involved in a continuous and intense process of problem-solving, adapting to constraints that sometimes prove insurmountable and require resilience or even renunciation.

So I turned to a short form, the vignette, used in qualitative research to collect ethnographic data. Finch (1987:105) describes them as "short stories about hypothetical characters in specified circumstances, to whose situation the interviewee is invited to respond". For Hill (1997:177), they are "short scenarios in written or pictorial form, intended to elicit responses to typical scenarios". For Hazel (1995:2) they are "concrete examples of people and their behaviours on which participants can offer comment or opinion". Barter and Renold (1999:1) define the vignette technique as a "method that can elicit perceptions, opinions, beliefs and attitudes from responses or comments to stories depicting scenarios and situations." Then I discovered that the vignette is also used in an autoethnographic framework by Humphreys (2005:840) "as an alternative approach to representation and reflexivity in qualitative research." The latter is inspired by Erickson (1986:150), who suggests that vignettes should be "based on fieldnotes taken as the events happened".

The autoethnographic vignettes I propose to use as part of a research-creation project are designed to capture punctual moments of reflexivity and self-reflection throughout the practice of research-creation for a given project. These autoethnographic vignettes aim to capture the feelings and meanings given to the experience of each person involved in the research-creation project. Unlike a retrospective account of practice, a reflection on action as proposed by Schön, which inevitably smoothes out the remembered experience, autoethnographic vignettes enable us to preserve and document a series of presents considered to be significant.

Let's take a look at how these vignettes are composed. The vignette is situated in the course of the research by a spatio-temporal marker, mentioning the place and date. It then includes a visual or sound anchor that recalls the context. The story presented in the vignette is divided into three distinct sections, each of which lasts at least a paragraph. The first, which is factual, gives an account of what happened; the second is an expression of feelings, what was perceived, what affected us, the emotions we experienced; and the third, which involves distancing ourselves, the meaning we give to the experience that is the subject of the vignette.



In conclusion, autoethnographic vignettes aim to overcome the disconnect between the works and technical relationships resulting from the practice of research-creation and the subjective, embodied experience of artist-researchers, a phenomenon similar to that observed in qualitative research and described by Huber :

“ Qualitative research findings are often presented through discourses that remain abstracted and disembodied from the lived experience of the researcher. However, reflexivity without embodiment is problematic if we wish to move beyond treating the researcher’s own identity as a “taken-for-granted resource”. Furthermore, a researcher’s own sentience—their capacity to identify, make sense of, and subjectively relate facts to theory—is ontologically driven.”
(2022:1)

The pooling of all the vignettes produced by each of the people taking part in the research-creation project will produce experiential, sensitive and embodied knowledge that will enrich the formal and procedural knowledge produced by the ethnographic component of the methodological design deployed.

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