A Whole New World

Navigating the Ethical Dilemmas as a Researcher in World of Warcraft

Rhen (Lauren) Hirsh

University of Denver

Introduction

        With no physical cultures left unexplored, the Margaret Meads of the world have

turned their gaze to research in virtual worlds such as World of Warcraft. The potential

research in the virtual worlds created by Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing

Games (MMORPGs) span many academic fields (Bainbridge 2007:472) and research

methods (e.g. , Deeble, 2008; Ducheneaut et al., 2006; Williams et al., 2006). The growth

in this research subject has lead to the questioning of what practices of research are

ethical online. Is it ethical for researchers to not ask their subjects permission when using

their posts? Do researchers have to declare themselves as researchers? Does privacy exist

online? What are the implications of publication in regards to individuals as well as the

community? What is the best way to conduct research in virtual worlds?

        There are numerous conflicting opinions on the answers to these questions so I

will condense what has been written on the issues of privacy in conducting research on

virtual worlds as well as provide insight on how to do research in a manner that is

respectful, effective, and does not hurt the gameplay environment you are trying to study.

Private vs. Public

Why does this matter?

        One potential research method for qualitative research is browsing through the

numerous forums on Blizzard and using those responses for analysis. However, despite

the fact that those people are posting online they may not want to have their responses

made public or used for research. This also is an issue when logging chats in the World of

Warcraft. Chatting is one of the main methods of communication. Although it is text

based do people mean for it to be recorded? It's important to determine what and is not

private because "Without proper and mutual understanding of a public space, researchers

may exceed their scope and participants may feel as if their privacy has been violated"

(Grimes, Fleischman, and Jaeger 2009:45).

Is the Internet Public or Private?

There are some authors who think everything that is posted by users online in a

game setting should be private and others, like Joseph Walther, who believe posting

online is public and any expectations of privacy are absurd. One issue of discord amongst

those who do think users should have some privacy is how much those users should have

and when do they have a right to this privacy? Much of the debate centers on the

definition of what is public and private. All the authors who believe that some aspects of

Internet postings constitute as private agree that even though it is necessary to protect

such privacies, it is often hard for researchers to distinguish between what is public and

what is private (Eysenbach and Till 2001:1105; Grimes, Fleischman, and Jaeger

2009:44). This is important because if the content is private, the author is not expecting

what they say to be used for research, and thus it is required that you obtain the subject's

permission to use their statements. If it has been published and is public then you are free

to use it as you like so long as it is correctly cited (American Sociological Association as

cited by Eysenbach and Till 2001:1104). In the real world, it is easy to distinguish when

you are in a public space like a shopping mall from when you are talking to someone in a

private conversation, but do these intimate private conversations exist in a similar fashion in the virtual world? Furthermore, when you are posting something online do you really view it as "publishing" your work for public use? "Although publication on the Internet may have parallels to publishing a letter in a newspaper or saying something in a public meeting, there are important psychological differences, and people participating in an online discussion group cannot always be assumed to be 'seeking public visibility'" (Eysenbach and Till 2001:1104). It is hard, as researchers, to determine what constitutes as public or private while online (Eysenbach and Till 2001:1105) or whether such a distinction even exists (Grimes, Fleischman, and Jaeger 2009:44; McKee and Porter 2008:6). Many users feel entitled to a certain level of privacy in MMORPGs, like World of Warcraft, because they have to subscribe to the game and pay a monthly fee in order to play (Eysenbach and Till 2001:1104). Other researchers are critical of the view that posters' expectations of privacy when they post something a group online should be respected (Walther 2002:206). Whether they were intended to be public or not, by publishing them online, the posts become part of the public ledger. "The Report makes frequent mentions of the notion of 'virtual' communities,' and suggests that message posting on Internet venues is experienced by users as an activity intended to be confined to a specific audience" (Walther 2002:206).

Privacy Does Not Exist Online

On the opposite side of the spectrum, Joseph Walther is critical of the view that posters' expectations of privacy when they post something a group online should be respected (2002:206). The author's intended audience, or lack thereof, is irrelevant. If

you were to record in game chats you would not need consent because online

communities are public spaces and in a public space there should be no such expectation

of privacy (Walther 2002:207). For example, in the real world if you were making

observations or recording public conversations in a park it would not constitute as a

violation of privacy because it is in a public space and although "people do not expect to

be recorded or observed although they understand that the potential to do so exists"

(Walther 2002:207).). He argues that using posting online for research is akin to doing

analysis on other publically accessible publications like using old newspaper articles or

news broad casts (Walther 2002:207). He says we must take the feelings of others into

consideration but in the end, "it is important to recognize that *any person who uses*

publicly-available communication systems on the Internet must be aware that these

systems are, at their foundation and by definition, mechanisms for the storage,

transmission, and retrieval of comments. While some participants have an expectation of

privacy, it is extremely misplaced" (Walther 2002:207).

Recommendations of Privacy

It is due to this logic that I believe that postings on forums like the ones hosted by

Blizzard can be used for research without the expressed permission of the authors of the

posts. Even if they did not intend for their postings to be analyzed in a public fashion they

do not have the right to such privacy in a public forum. I also think conversations held in

a public space like in a large city chat are also fair-game to researchers, because the large

number of people in that one area make it a public space. However, more intimate

interactions such as guild chats, whispers, or other interviews should be collected only

with expressed consent from those being observed. Legally, there is not an obligation to

respect these boundaries, however I feel that in a virtual world these smaller intimate

interactions have more personal value to the users and deserve the entitlement of private

interactions. That being said, where you are collecting the data and whether that area is

public or private should not be the only thing you take into consideration when deciding

whether or not to use information. You also need to look at how sensitive the content of

the text is, whether or not you would be breaching trust by using it, and if the publication

could have negative effects for whom you are observing (Eysenbach and Till 2001:1104).

Keep this in mind but more importantly use your own judgment. If someone were to

share this information with you in the real world would it be appropriate or ethical to use

it for study?

Conducting In-Game Research

Breaking the Magic Circle

Another important area of concern is how your research is conducted. When

doing research in World of Warcraft, you must be very careful to respect the rules of the

game and not disrupt the magic circle with intrusive behavior for the sake of research.

The magic circle of a game are the agreed upon rules and standards that dictate what

behavior is acceptable within a game and enable the smooth continuation of the game.

(Grimes, Fleischman, and Jaeger 2009:42). By breaking the rules of the realm you make

the game less fun for gamers, for example in poker, "if a player is found to be cheating by

using hidden cards, the circle is broken and the game ceases to be fun" (Grimes,

Fleischman, and Jaeger 2009:42). This is akin to committing a social faux pas in the real

world, such as picking your nose in public or cutting to the front of the line when buying

your groceries.

Researchers at Play: L2p

Unlike other realms of study, in order to observe World of Warcraft you need to

participate in the virtual world by playing the game (McKee and Porter 2008:6) and

participate in role-play (Reynolds and de Zwart 2010:53). Although you do want to keep

the ethical concerns of research in mind, don't monitor yourself too extensively

(Constance Steinkuehler in a personal interview as cited by McKee and Porter 2008:20).

You have to go beyond gathering data and become a member of the community. Allow

yourself to *become* just another one of the players. For example, in a personal interview

Constance Steinkuehler describes the unconventional process of research in an

MMORPG:

> "When I was in-game playing, I was playing just like anyone else. I had play
>
> preferences–there were people I told to fuck off when I felt like telling them to
>
> fuck off. And I think as a researcher, straight researcher, I would never tell
>
> someone to fuck off, but there were lots of time in game when I did it. [. . .]Not
>
> self-monitoring too much while in game also built me a lot of trust" (McKee and
>
> Porter 2008:25).

This participant observation will provide valuable cultural context for understanding

your research (Constance Steinkuehler in a personal interview as cited by McKee and

Porter 2008:20) as well as gain trust. As a gamer who happens to also be a researcher you

will get more willing responses than as a researcher posing as a player (Phil Alexander as

cited by cited by McKee and Porter 2008:24).

Behave.

If you are a newbie, nubcake, or scrub (a person new to the game and/or does not

know how to properly play) be *humble* and admit you do not know the game. If you ask

an experienced player questions in a polite way because you want to better your

gameplay and understanding of a game, more often than not they will answer you. Some

users will be gracious enough to give you some of their time but do not expect all players

to have the same attitude. If you rudely pester people with research questions and do not

care about improving or do not respect the game you will be ignored, textually torn apart,

and get no answers. World of Warcraft players are paying to play WoW, not to deal with

your incessant questioning, so treat players with respect. If you are going to spam the

chats or message boards with your requests for interviews or the like, be aware that

players find that obnoxious and you will likely incur the wrath of the many agitated

players you are bothering (Wowiki "Etiquette). Use your judgment.

Follow the Rules

As a culture in its own right, there are unique rules and behavioral expectations in

the virtual world. The advantage of becoming a game player as well as a research is that

it familiarizes you with the etiquette rules of the game. It's important that you are aware

of gameplay expectations so you do not upset other players (Grimes, Fleischman, and

Jaeger 2009:47) by accidentally "trolling" or doing something that causes great distress

like "griefing" other players such as harassing them ("Griefing", WoWWiki). If you are

not an invested gamer there is ethical concern about "the potential for researchers to

circumvent the 'law' [rules of the game] and avoid punishment... A researcher may agree

to the social contract, then directly violate it to conduct research. A research, once the

questionable research is done, would not fear any punishment that the virtual world could

provide, including the most severe punishment, banning" (Grimes, Fleischman, and

Jaeger 2009:48). It may be tempting to study the effects of trolling by trolling other

players and recording their reactions, you might even think it's funny, however the

avatars you are harassing are *people*. To you it may just be a game, but to many players

their avatars are extensions of themselves (McKee and Porter 2008:17) and they

experience real distress when their virtual selves are distressed (Grimes, Fleischman, and

Jaeger 2009:43) and to purposely cause harm while conducting research is a violation of

your subjects' rights (The National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of

Biomedical and Behavioral Research 1979:np.). Furthermore, according to *Code of

Ethics of the American Anthropological Association* you have an ethical obligation to not

harm the "safety, dignity, or privacy" (AAA Guidelines 2009:2-3) of the people you are

working with while conducting research. Keep this in mind and be considerate and

respectful throughout your research.

Conclusion

        Although I addressed the opinions expressed in multiple studies, I did not explore

the ideas of World of Warcraft community members themselves. Many times in

anthropology, anthropologists make the mistake of assuming how the group they are

studying feels without conferring with those they are studying. Although I address the

varying academic opinions, further research should be done gathering the opinions of

MMORPG players such as a large qualitative survey on the issues of privacy and

conducting research in virtual worlds. This, in combination with the research I have

presented would provide a complete roadmap to researchers navigating the World of

Warcraft.

References

American Anthropological Association. (1998, June). Code of Ethics of the American Anthropological Association. Retrieved from www.aaanet.org

Deeble, L. (2008). Problematic Internet use and the "World of Warcraft"--addiction linked to a quest for meaning. (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Database. (AAT 3305382)

Ducheneaut, N., Moore, R. J., Nickell, E., & Yee, N. (2006, October). Building an MMO With Mass Appeal: A Look at Gameplay in World of Warcraft. *Games and Culture*, *1*(4), 281-317. doi:10.1177/1555412006292613

Etiquette. (n.d.). In *WoWWiki*. Retrieved from www.wowwiki.com

Eysenbach, G., & Till, J. E. (2001, November 10). Ethical issues in qualitative research on internet communities. *BMJ*, *323*, 1103-1105. doi:10.1136/bmj.323.7321.1103

Griefing. (n.d.). In WoWWiki. Retrieved from www.wowwiki.com

Grimes, J. M., Fleischman, K. R., & Jaeger, P. T. (2009, February). Virtual Guinea Pigs: Ethical Implications of Human Subjects Research in Virtual Worlds. *International Journal of Internet Research Ethics*, *2*(1), 38-56. Retrieved from www.ijire.net

Lastowka , G. (2009, October). Rules of Play. *Games and Culture*, *4*(4), 379-395. doi:10.1177/1555412009343573

McKee, H. A., & Porter, J. E. (2009, February). Playing a Good Game: Ethical Issues in Researching MMOGs and Virtual Worlds. *International Journal of Internet Research Ethics*, *2*(1), 5-37. Retrieved from www.ijire.com

The National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and
    Behavioral Research. (1979, April 18). Ethical Principles and Guidelines for the
    Protection of Human Subjects of Research. Retrieved from www.hhs.gov

Reynold, R., & de Zwart, M. (2010, December). The Duty to 'Play': Ethics, EULAs and
    MMOs. *International Journal of Internet Research Ethics*, *3*(1), 48-68. Retrieved from
    www.ijire.net

Walther, J. B. (2002). Research Ethics in Internet-Enabled Research: Human Subject
    Issues and Methodological Myopia. *Ethics and Information Technology*, *4*(3), 205-216.
    Retrieved from www.springer.com

Williams, D., Ducheneaut, N., Xiong, L., Zhang, Y., Yee, N., & Nickell, E. (2006,
    October). From Tree House to Barracks: The Social Life of Guilds in World of
    Warcraft. Games and Culture, 1(4), 338-361. doi:10.1177/1555412006292616