
Chapter IX

Conducting Ethical Research Online: Respect for Individuals, Identities and the Ownership of Words

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ABSTRACT

Online research introduces new ethical issues inherent to the medium. In this chapter we provide a case study of online research in action, focusing on the ethical issues of conducting qualitative research within virtual environments. The case study provides an example of how research can be conducted within virtual environments with the consent of research participants and their community, without compromising their confidentiality, violating their assumptions of privacy or infringing upon their copyright entitlements.

INTRODUCTION

Online research introduces new ethical issues inherent to the medium. As Jones (1994) noted, ethical dilemmas arise when attempts are made to translate existing ethical guidelines to online research. In this chapter we present a case study of online research, focusing on the ethical issues of conducting qualitative research within text-based virtual environments. The research described is a Grounded Theory study (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) of social interaction in multi-user dimensions, object oriented (MOOs), Internet-chat environments, with the researcher as participant observer. The focus is on the process, rather than the results of the research. Research findings from this study have been published and presented elsewhere (Roberts, Smith, & Pollock, 1996, 2000, 2002).

The chapter begins with a brief overview of the research conducted and the research setting. This is followed by an exploration of the ethical issues encountered during the research process. Issues addressed include the blurred distinction between public and private space in virtual environments, the identification of researchers within virtual communities, processes for obtaining informed consent, protecting the confidentiality of research participants and their online personae and maintaining the security of data collected. A further issue to be addressed is how to respond to research participants who indicate they are suffering from or exhibit psychological problems.

Researching ethically within virtual environments requires a familiarity with, and adherence to, the netiquette and social norms of the environments of interest. Through this case study, we highlight the conduct of ethical research within virtual environments with the consent of the individuals and their community, without compromising their confidentiality, violating their assumptions of privacy or infringing upon their copyright entitlements.

OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH

The case study presented here is based on a Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) study of social interaction in MOOs. This study was part of a larger research project examining how characteristics of the individual interact with characteristics of computer-mediated communication (CMC) to enable socio-emotional communication and behavior in text-based virtual environments (Roberts, 2001). A research proposal was submitted to Curtin University of Technology's Human Research Ethics Committee¹ prior to the research commencing².

THE RESEARCH SETTING

The study examined social interaction in MOOs, and was also conducted largely within them. MOOs are socially oriented text-based virtual environments. Individuals from disparate geographic locations can connect simultaneously to a social MOO to engage in synchronous ("real time") text-based (typed) communication with one another.

A MOO consists of a database of rooms, characters and objects (Curtis, 1992; Curtis & Nichols, 1993). All MOO users have access to object-oriented programming to create and modify the virtual environment. MOO users can create descriptions of buildings and

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