Ethical Approach to Gathering Survey Data Online

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INTRODUCTION

Using the Internet to conduct online surveys is not a new form of data collection. A large proportion of marketing analysis or customer surveys are now done online (Burns & Bush, 2006). However the uptake in tertiary education and research has proven to be slower. This could be attributed to the fact that high-visibility institutions such as universities are subject to stringent codes of ethics (Kizza, 2003). This article discusses techniques university researchers may use when implementing an online survey, premised on McNiff, Lomax, and Whitehead's (2003) action research checklist of ethical considerations. These techniques abide by both the institution's code of ethics and national standards to ensure the participants' privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity. In addition, the benefits of conducting online research are discussed, particularly when the cohort under consideration is moving into majority status within society such as the *Generation Y* of this study. Generation Y participants under consideration in this chapter are university students studying Games and Development at Deakin University, Australia.

The games students are prodigious consumers of online entertainment, information, and specifically from the researchers' previous experience, learning material online. These defining characteristics of Generation Y were harnessed and used to very good effect in the development of the research tool (an on-line survey) used in this article. The research process for obtaining ethical approval to conduct surveys and collect and evaluate data for this particular participant cohort thus must incorporate contemporary methods of ethically obtaining data. Ethically, the issues with collecting data in traditional methodological modes such as privacy, confidentiality, anonymity, and coercion remain similar, however in this study there is the additional complexity of conducting a survey online. The ethical guidelines of this study are premised on those published by the Australian Government (1999) and are the current guidelines used by Deakin University. This article explores the issues related to obtaining ethical clearance for conducting an online survey with Generation Y participants.

BACKGROUND

The Games Design and Development students are from Deakin University in Victoria, Australia. By virtue of their age, the majority between 18 and 25, these students are demographically considered to be Generation Y (generally those born between 1979 and 1994) (McCrindle, 2006). This identification as Generation Y is important to acknowledge in relation to the games geeks, not as a definitive "labeling" of them, but rather because of the basic characteristics the label encompasses. While clearly each games geek is defined by his or her individuality, as a cohort they possess characteristics that delineate them as Generation Y. Such identifiable traits include: flexibility, adaptability, spontaneity, and an increased disposition towards participative behaviors. Most notable however has been Generation Y's willing and enthusiastic uptake of technology such as the Internet, and using it to design, create, participate, and support online communities (Sheahan, 2005). Communication among Generation Y is continually shifting between online and off-line modes, and culturally specific languages such as Leet Speak (Blashki & Nichol, 2005) have evolved as part of these slippery social negotiations and hierarchies. This chapter specifically highlights how the games geeks from our research are particularly receptive to online communication as a part of their social negotiations, and thus we chose an online survey as the best method of data collection with them. The survey tool used in

this study is best described as a Web resource that has the sole purpose of the creation and management of online surveys. The tool allows each participant to go to a specific Web location to complete the survey. Once the survey is completed, the data is stored in a database. To access the data the researchers use the Web interface. This tool was created at Deakin University.

The purpose of the online survey was to gather data concerned with social collaboration and technological factors that contribute to the environment of each games student at Deakin University. In this study, environment is defined as physical elements (computers, resources, information) as well as social (family, friends, peers, teachers, mentors). The purpose of the survey is to attempt to elicit the 'creative' skills of games students, to ensure that the learning environment in which they study can be enhanced to support these creative skills (Isaksen, Lauer, Ekvall, & Britz, 2001; Nichol & Blashki, 2005, 2006).

The manner in which the researchers designed and conducted the online survey with the games geeks is of primary significance in this article. In addition to formal ethical guidelines provided by the Australian Government (1999), the methodological approach of action research also influenced procedures and data collection and evaluation. Action research is the methodology loosely guiding the research process in this study. However it needs to be highlighted that the online survey presented in this study is a subset of a much larger 'cyclic' action research project conducted by the researchers. The larger study involves many other forms of data collection, such as interviews and observations, as well as participation of the researchers in the community of the games students. As in action research, the researchers are directly involved in the study with the participants, not as observers but rather as active participants (Levin & Greenwood, 2001). Action research is renowned as a methodology that attempts to influence the practices of a community of people. In this study the community may be defined as the games students. As McNiff et al. (2003) note, action research is concerned with the exercise of influence, and it is often assumed that the resulting influence is both negative and/or sinister (McNiff et al., 2003). To mediate and mitigate any influence the researchers may have upon the participants, every research project must have a solid ethical foundation, regularly scrutinized by the researchers themselves and other outside observers. McNiff et al. (2003) define ethics principles of action research processes in six stages and refer to it as the "Checklist of Ethics Considerations":

1. Draw Up Documentation
   a. Ethics statement (plain language statement at Deakin University)
   b. Letters of permission (consent form at Deakin University)
2. Negotiate Access
   a. With authorities
   b. With participants
   c. With parents/guardian/supervisors
3. Promise Confidentiality
   a. Confidentiality of information
   b. Confidentiality of identity
   c. Confidentiality of data
4. Ensure Participants' Rights to Withdraw from the Research
5. Ensure Good Professional and Academic Conduct
6. Keep Good Faith

These six steps from McNiff et al. (2003) were adhered to during the application process for ethics clearance to survey the games geeks, however the distinctive requirements for the successful implementation of online surveys resulted in the modification and adaptation of the steps to focus on providing a solid ethical framework in an online environment. The following section identifies the difficulties inherent in the implementation of a survey 'online' specifically for games geeks, and in addition explores the ethical considerations undertaken by the researchers to ensure that these complications were overcome.

HOW TO ETHICALLY AND EFFICIENTLY SURVEY GAMES GEEKS

"Trust is integral to a successful virtual community and it is a core ingredient of social capital" (Heath, 2006, p. 46). McNiff et al.'s (2003) six steps assisted in the provision of a reliable ethical framework to facilitate the 'trust' that is required when undertaking a survey, in particular online. Some of the ethical techniques used by the researchers to build trust with the games students included:

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