

Ethical Standards in the Field of MMORPG Research

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Abstract

This paper discusses ethical considerations regarding ethnographic research in synthetic worlds.

The main question is what kind of ethical approaches do researchers apply when they investigate social artifacts and behavior of players and/or their avatars in so-called virtual or synthetic worlds.

This paper shows that, besides some mandatory ethical guidelines and professional codes, there is no specific ethical code for virtual ethnography in synthetic worlds. The results of a conducted survey among online researchers indicates the same results: ethics is an important topic, which is monitored by institutions, but without offering a clear set of fitting tools for virtual ethnography.

Therefore, this paper will be structured the following way: First, it gives a short overview over the fields of research regarding synthetic worlds as well as the use of ethnographical methods in synthetic worlds research.

Second, the actual status of ethical standards in science and research will be outlined, with a special focus on online ethnography. This will lead to the question, what ethical practices are used actually in virtual world research.

Finally, an ethical approach toward synthetic world ethnography will be presented.

Keywords

Research ethics, ethnography, synthetic world, avatar

Research Conducted in Synthetic Worlds

In this first section, this article will outline the current research that is conducted in synthetic worlds. As it shows, many of them are situated in the frame of socio-cultural sciences. The presented works does not include all works in this field, but are examples of research areas in synthetic worlds.

Psychology

Scholars of psychology were early interested in the media “internet” generally, in virtual worlds especially. The main question was how this media type affects the player. Several works deals with the identity of players (e.g. Turkle 1997; Duchenaut and Moore 2004; Nakamura 2000; Taylor 2003).

Nick Yee (2007) asked for effects of digital representations on the player’s behaviour (but see also Bailenson and Blascovich 2003).

Many other studies tried to find relations between video games of all sort (including massive multi-player online role playing games, or MMORPG) and some types of behavior (Anderson and Bushman 2001; Douse and McManus 1993; e.g.).

Cognitive Sciences

Learning, especially eLearning, is traditionally tied with internet and actually with synthetic worlds too. Steinkuehler (2004) discusses learning in a MMORPG environment, and Gee (2003) is interested in the same question, but for a wider area: video games.

Many others research the potential of MMORPGs as a new classroom (e.g. Delwiche 2006; Foreman 2001; Garris, Ahlers and Driskell 2002, Hofstede and Pedersen 1999).

Sociology

Sociology was always very interested in social activities in virtual worlds. One area of research are computer-mediated forms of teamwork (Axelsson and others 1999; Flanagin and others 2002; Jarvenpaa and Leidner 1998;) and gender-related issues (Postmes and Spears 2002).

Communication between people is also a sociological topic: how dating and sexuality issues changed in virtual worlds (Hancock, Toma and Ellison 2007; Consalvo 2003), how social identity is influenced by the avatar's appearance (Merola, Penas and Hancock 2006) and by the media itself (Taylor and Kolko 2003), as well as how norms are formed (Postmes, Spears and Lea 2000; Dibble 1998).

A central question is how online communities develop (Scott and Johnson 2005; Steinkuehler and Williams 2005; Rheingold 1993) and how gaming is a social act in synthetic worlds (Duchenaus and others 2006).

Avatar theory

There are also several works that try to describe and define what avatars are (Bailenson and Blascovich 2004), their characteristics as well as their social (e.g. Schroeder 2002), legal (Lastowka and Hunter 2003; Bradley and Froomkin 2003; Crawford 2003) and economical (Castranova 2003 and 2006; Malabi 2006; Ondrejka 2004; Maier 2003) implications.

Media / Video Games Theory

Another field of research is, generally spoken, media theory and media design. From a MMORPG perspective, questions like "Why are certain games successful and others not?" arise.

Vorderder and Bryant ask about the player's motives (Vorderder and Bryant 2006) as well as Jacobson (1999), Yee (2006); Chou and Ting (2003).

Hancock and Dunham (2001) research about impressions in computer-mediated communication, and Iyengar about experimental design effects for political communication (Iyengar 2002).

Ethnography in Synthetic Worlds

As shown in the first section, synthetic worlds offer a very actual and interesting research arena for socio-cultural sciences. In this sense, ethnography is one possibility to gather qualitative research data, as described by Geertz (1973): a socio-cultural fact must be embedded in a dense description of the scene to be understood by the observer, who will explain and interpret social forms of expression.

In this section, this paper will briefly give an overview about ethnographic methods used in synthetic worlds. These methods are based on what I would call "classic" ethnographic methods (participant observation, ethnographic interview, and the like) and which will not be discussed here in detail (more information can be found at: Agar 1996; Girtler 2001; Spradley 1979) Instead, the objective here is to inform the reader about the wide repertoire of ways to gather ethnographical data for the research of synthetic worlds as well as the resulting (potentially problematic) constellations regarding ethical issues. Other methods used in online research in general are not discussed here - Hine (2005) and Johns, Chen and Hall (2004) offer comprehensive information here.

Methods of virtual ethnography

This type of methods is partly related to the interview and participant observation, but mainly focuses on the analysis of media, media content, ego-documents and other forms of written or multi-media sources (see also Williams 2007). The main difference to all other ethnographic methods is the explicit relationship toward digital media or virtual objects such synthetic worlds, avatars, websites, and others (see also Dominguez and others 2007). As such artifacts have a cultural meaning, there are valuable to the ethnographer. But because of the nature of these cultures and their environment, some established methods (as the ethnographic interview and participant observation) must be considered and applied under new circumstances (Hine 2000). One example is the analysis of media content. Websites maybe changed continuously, by many co-authors, they can tell stories spread through many different websites and connect a network of distant people and organizations. Another problematic aspect of virtual ethnography is the authenticity of interview partners, the reliability of collected data and so on. Virtual ethnography is not only useful to understand modern societies, but also to discover new forms of culture – like the synthetic worlds.

Ethnography in synthetic worlds as a scientific topic

Matthew Williams (2007) provides a good overview about the debate regarding participant observation in virtual worlds. As these virtual spaces are claimed to have created their own culture, a new form of ethnography was adapted: virtual ethnography. The basic idea behind “virtual ethnography” is that it is a collection of classic ethnographic methods adapted to the synthetic world environment. However theses adaptations may look like and be different from one MMORPG to another, they will alter the way ethnographers collect, analyze and present their data (Markham 2005).

Where ethnographic methods still cause question marks regarding authenticity, this is even more valid for synthetic worlds. Ethnographers must take into account their own cultural background, their language, norms and values before they recount the observations and stories seen and watched in their language. In virtual settings, this is even more complicated because each setting will be different (many sub-cultures, different MMORPGs, ...). But MMORPGs offer some opportunities too: the presence felt by the players through their avatars provides a more immersed interaction than in text-only environments (Williams 2007: 12). Depending on the design and code of a synthetic world, avatar gestures, movements, objects and so on can be an important factor and information source through participating observation.

Specific ethnographic aspects in synthetic worlds

One aspect, which is very valuable for any kind of participant observation, is visual appearance of avatars. In contrast to text-based virtual settings (live discussion boards, chats, instant messengers, MUDs, and others), the appearance in 3D worlds is based on visual aspects like clothing, hairstyle and avatar body as well as many other factors. This means, from a technical point of view, that the ethnographer can collect data from the observation of avatars only, even without getting in touch with them (“lurking”). This is partly impossible in text-based environments, because we can only observe contributors, but not listeners.

Gestures and style of movement are other sources for an ethnographic account of a synthetic world, distinguishing so-called avatar tourists from real synthetic world citizens.

Language is a very important aspect of culture, either in text-based settings or 3D synthetic worlds. Emoticons and acronyms are sometimes general (“lol – laugh out loud”), but sometimes very game or group specific. More than in field settings, the presence of the researcher cannot be

achieved only by his/her body, but mainly through his/her actions and speech (Markham 1998).

This means, the ethnographer must immerse deeply into a new culture to be “in”.

Another aspect of ethnographic participant observation is the possibility to wander through the synthetic world. The freedom to walk is bigger than in real world, for several reasons. First, avatars can be moved independently of the researchers own physical conditions. Second, avatars may use other transportation and mobility techniques like flying from house to house, or teleporting from island to island. Third, the observation tools enable to overview a complete scene from a bird-angle, or from a first-person-perspective. The researcher can shift its focus depending on his/her intentions to observe.

Space may play a role in synthetic worlds where public and private space exists. Conversations held within private space may be considered private and need a signed informed consent to be included in an analysis.

A very special aspect of participant observation is to try to follow specific users not only within a single synthetic world (Leander and McKim 2003), but also during their visits to other virtual settings. Moving from one world to another, from one service to an alternative discussion board and so on is a widely observed behavior of users. Simultaneous following is difficult, because the observer don't have the tools to know where the user actually went, even if he/she is still present in one world, but active in another.

Research tools in virtual settings

Additionally to the described aspects of participant observation, interviewing others or conducting observations needs always – at a certain time – to take field notes. These field notes are the base of the following analysis and conclusion and are therefore very important. In offline settings, taking notes is somewhat critical when, where and how they are taken because they can

influence the scene. In virtual settings, this problem can be neglected because the observed or interviewed person can't look at the researcher's desk or the desktop.

Cheap and easily available audio and video recording software enables the researcher to record scenes almost automatically and without any big effort. By the way, this method doesn't disturb the daily life of the observed avatars at all. Nevertheless, an informed consent should be sought.

Interviewing key informants may also be conducted not only by using chats, instant messenger or email software, but also synchronous voice-over-IP (VoIP) tools. The first set of tools (chats, instant messenger, email) is often available within a synthetic world, and is a vital communication channel for all citizens of these environments. The history of a chat can be copied and stored as valuable data, a process, which enables to avoid error-prone and time-consuming transcriptions.

VoIP tools can be used to interact more personally and faster with informants, as well as to learn more about the personality of a user. Such applications are mostly known (by the name, at least), but not always available to the other side (user). That is, that such communication depends on the technical possibilities of an informant.

What might go wrong

As described, virtual ethnography and their main methods are useful to collect data. But there are some potential ethical traps too. One of them is the anonymity of the interview partner or observed user. Due to the fact that in these worlds most of the users play a role and use a fictive (avatar) name and a fictive representation (avatar), we cannot prove their age, their identity and even their existence. This is significant because a researcher could unintentionally conduct

interviews or other data collection methods with groups that enjoy special protection like kids.

This scenario is not uncommon as kids are one of the main target groups of diverse MMORPGs.

On the other side, how do researchers prove their status in a synthetic world to their informants?

It is not possible to show an ID card, and providing an email or a link to a personal and professional website is not a credential, but only information who the researcher says to be.

Building a transparent relationship between researcher and informants is critical to every ethnographic study, but also difficult to achieve in a virtual setting.

Another aspect of a potential ethical dilemma is the possibility to observe a scene without informing others about your role. The technical feasibility of an all-mighty researcher, recording everything from voice to image, but without even being spotted, is real and seductive. In offline settings, ethnographers couldn't walk into an Indian village and remain invisible for the rest of their observation period. Online, the Indian village wouldn't even know that it is the focus of a study.

The leakage of data is another threat to the online ethnographer. The tools to search, filter and combine data from online studies that involves real persons (even when they are hidden behind avatar names) can be used to reveal the true nature and personal information of informants by third parties. Then, this unintended disclosure may be the base for commercial annoyance, personal harassment or even legal persecution.

Other technical traps include network software and data sniffing. Network analysis tools could compromise researcher's data: it could be possible to find out informants through social graphs, and then analyzing their social networks. During interviews, private information could be listen to by bystanders or others within a certain range. This can be difficult to avoid if there are no private places to go.

Ethical Issues of Virtual Ethnography

This section wants to summarize some typical issues concerning ethic problems during an ethnographic research in general. As discussed previously, the main tool set of ethnography are participative observation and ethnographic interviews, supplemented by various other methods, which reveal very personal information of our informants and research objects.

Research projects and data

The intentions of the researcher may be honestly good and in a scientific sense right, as well as helpful to the people involved in general. But the way and the outcome – I mean the data generated in a study – may be harmful to them too. During an ethnographic investigation we can discover unpleasant facts of our informants, which could bring them into troubles – with the law, the community, or the informant’s friends and families. In this situation, the researcher is in an ethical dilemma to decide what is more important or “right” to do: to protect the informant and to weaken the study (see Bar-On 1996), to prevent a potential crime and to risk the entire study, and so on. Due to the density of private and intimate data provided by these qualitative research methods, ethnography is always on a very thin red line to be in trouble itself (Cropley 2005:84)

Discussion in the scientific community

The ethnographic literature itself knows about and deals with these ethical issues. Clark and Sharf (2007) recently published a paper addressing the undesirable outcomes and effects of ethnographic studies, and many others did so years ago (Brettell 1993; Josselson 1996; Lieblich

1996; Mauthner 2000; Plummer 2001). The main message is: ethnographic studies will bring up ethical issues, and there is no standard way to deal with them.

The cases mentioned in the early discussions range from bad feelings within a family (Lieblich 1996; Mauthner 2000), the difficulty to maintain confidentiality and anonymity of the informants, or the reveal of unwanted, intimate information by an informant to the researcher (Kirsch, 1999).

The common sense is that there is a need for a research community wide exchange to address this problem and to discuss solutions (Plummer 2001).

General ethical advices

Ethnographers formulated ethical advices for their practical work and research projects, mostly generated from their own field experience. Cropley (2005) notes that an ethical mindset is one of the key characteristics of a field researcher. As many other authors point out, ethnographical approaches and ethical behavior must suit to the researcher's personality, project and the research environment (Girtler 2001).

The most plausible advices are (collected from Girtler 2001; Agar 1996):

- to see key informants as human beings and not data suppliers
- to inform the affected group or informant about the researcher itself and its matter
- to be confidential with intimate data and to make the names of informants anonymous
- to treat informants as equivalent partners
- not to betray informants about objectives and use of research data
- not to try to influence informants to change their behavior / norms
- to evaluate the political impact of the researcher's participation in a research project

An additional and interesting point is made by Shaughnessy and Zechmeister (1997) regarding the risk and gain of a qualitative study. The authors stress the argument that every study involving informants includes some potential risk for them and should only be conducted if the possible outcome justifies the potential harm to others. That is, every ethnographic study needs a measurable and defined outcome to be pre-assessed.

National aspects of research ethics

As a potential answer to the question of ethical issue solving, national organizations of ethnographic associations created ethics working groups or committees and presented ethical codes or behavior guidelines for ethnographic research projects. In the next paragraphs, I will highlight some of these national ethical recommendations from Europe and North America.

United Kingdom

Scientific research in UK shows a lot of ethical considerations, but standards and quantity of ethical regulations vary a lot from one scientific discipline to another. Traditionally, medical and pharmaceutical research as well as psychological studies has the longest historical record of ethical guidelines among scientific research in UK. The most visible representations of this policy are so-called human subject forms, ethical guidelines and ethical statements of institutions. The National Patient Safety Agency with their sub-page on ethics at <http://www.nres.npsa.nhs.uk/useful-links> gives some very good examples for this type of inclusion of ethical thinking in research.

Although ethnography is widely used and historically almost a traditional research method in UK, the distribution and enforcement of ethical standards like in the field of medicine is not commonplace. Nevertheless, the Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK (ASA) and

Commonwealth published a position paper (ASA, 2005) about this issue. Additionally, ethical guidelines were released on their website, but the ASA stresses the fact, that these are only the basics for further ethical considerations of everyone involved in ethnographic research.

The very informative and comprehensive ethical guidelines point out the following issues (shortened):

- Protecting research participants and honoring trust
- Anticipating harm
- Avoiding undue intrusion
- Negotiating informed consent
- Rights to confidentiality and anonymity
- Fair return for assistance
- Participants' intellectual property rights
- Participants' involvement in research
- Clarifying roles, rights and obligations (toward sponsors, financiers and employers)
- Responsibilities towards colleagues and the discipline
- Relations with own and host governments
- Responsibilities to the wider society

Another similar project to build an ethical fundament of ethnographic research is initialized by the Universities of York and Oxford Brookes. Their framework for social science research ethics (ESRC, 2005) is published and mandatory for all research projects funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). (<http://www.york.ac.uk/res/ref/kb.htm>).

Europe

On a European level, the European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA, <http://www.easaonline.org/>) states in their constitution, among others, the objective „to promote best practice among social anthropologists“. This includes ethical practices, which are consequently picked up by an internal team („network“) of researchers for ethical questions.

United States of America

In the United States, the discussion about ethical standards is very much colored by the implementation of Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) at universities and other research-relevant institutions. IRBs are boards which – generally spoken – decides about the approval and funding of a research project. One aspect of a funding hearing are also ethical considerations, made by the applicant and the IRB. The controversy begins when both sides have different views about what ‘ethical’ means and what standards are appropriate. In such a scenario of different point of views, IRBs can reject an application for research funds and can exercise a strong force how and what will be researched (see the AAA statement on this issue, 2004).

Beside this US-specific problem of institutional (means local) definition of research ethics, the American Anthropological Association (AAA, <http://www.aaanet.org/>) declared their own professional ethics including a statement (AAA, 1971), a committee and a resource for working with IRBs. Additionally, the AAA published a handbook on ethical issues in Anthropology (Cassell and Jacobs 1996). The handbook includes excellent articles about the history of ethical dilemmas, case studies and English-centric literature to the topic.

Applied Ethical Standards in Modern MMORPG Research

The previous section addressed ethical dilemmas and their (individual, institutional and national) suggestions to solve them. As there are many ideas and recommendations to solve ethical dilemmas in ethnography generally (and even there exist only guidelines, but no true solutions), the researcher must act ethically wisely in all phases of his/her project.

This section will ask about the ethical standards applied in MMORPG research.

As outlined, virtual ethnography is a widely used method to gather qualitative data from different online areas for different scientific purposes. Email, chat, discussion boards and websites are popular research areas (see Hine 2005:4), whereas MMORPGs are gaining popularity from the scientific community since mid 2003-4. This said, most of the scientific debate about methods in online research is still about the classic research fields. Additionally, there are no tailored ethical standards especially for MMORPGs.

As a consequence, the author was interested in the application of ethical standards in MMORPG research of practicing researchers and asked them about their use of virtual ethnography, their consideration of ethics in MMORPG research and about established guidelines.

Survey method and response

The base for the survey itself was a list of researchers compiled after reading through literature, websites, weblogs and discussion boards. The list of collected names was far from complete, but includes as much names and addresses as possible that are somehow connected to online research in general.

The author's email itself provided a short introduction of his person, his scientific interests, a description of the survey, his request to participate as well as the five survey questions (four of them were open-ended questions).

The survey emails were sent in three waves: a first set of six mails to check for potential questions, misleading sentences or missing information. The second set of 66 mails was sent with minor changes to the introduction. After two weeks and a low response rate, the author decided to address another 28 researchers. This time he included a full informed consent.

The email-based survey received a response rate of 16,0%. In absolute numbers, 16 researchers sent their answered questions back, another 15 (15,0%) denied participation for the following reasons:

- "no time"
- "no experience with virtual ethnography"
- "on maternity leave"

Of the sixteen researchers, twelve are professors or lecturers at universities, four are PhD candidates. The geographical distribution is as follows: USA (6), UK (5), AUS (2), DK (1), CAN (1), SE (1).

Survey questions and results

Question 1

- Question: "Do you think ethics is an issue with virtual ethnography?"
- Hypothesis: Online researchers are well aware of ethical issues and consider them as important.
- Result: All of the 16 responses agreed that ethics is an issue with virtual ethnography.

- Interpretation: Ethical behavior and comprehension are culture-dependent. Therefore, the result suggests that there is a common sense about the importance of ethics during virtual ethnography projects in North America, Northern Europe and Australia, at this time. With the installation of general ethical guidelines, IRBs and other institutions propagating the importance of ethical standards in these countries, the result is no surprise.

Question 2

- Question: “What kind of typical ethical dilemmas do you can imagine can occur during virtual ethnography?”
- Hypothesis: Online researchers with a sense for ethical issues will be able to list many and unique ethical issues that can occur.
- Results: In total, the author learned about twelve potential fields of ethical issues. Eight issues of total twelve were named by a maximum three of the sixteen respondents (uniqueness), and two issues by more than 50% (“confidentiality” and “identifying as a researcher”). Only two respondents (12,5%) named just one potential ethical issue, four respondents (25%) named two potential issues, and ten respondents (67,5%) named three or up to seven potential ethical issues within virtual ethnography. The total distribution of the answers can be seen in the diagram:

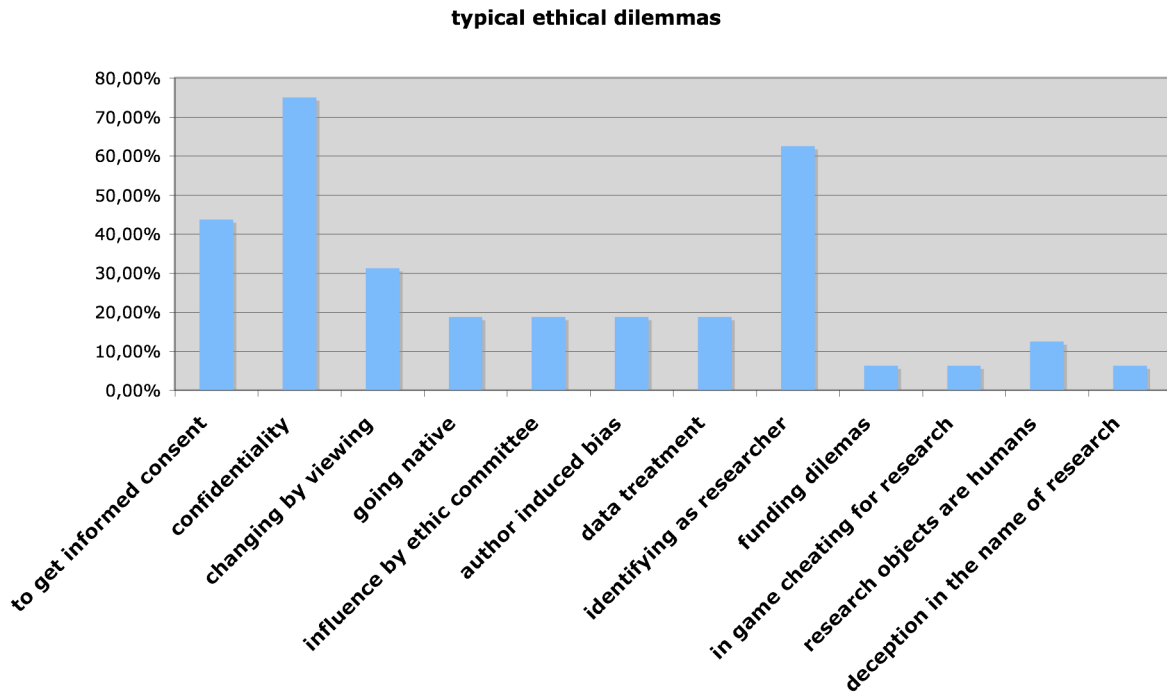


Table 1: results of question 2: “What kind of typical ethical dilemmas do you can imagine can occur during virtual ethnography?”

- Interpretation: The results reflect the experience of the respondents in virtual ethnography (and other online research methods) as well as their “ethical conscience” (in the sense of “what can be considered to be an ethical issue?”). There is a variety of understanding what can constitute an ethical issue: named issues with a high percentage (like “to get informed consent”, “confidentiality” and “identifying as researcher”) can also be found in the professional guidelines of the AAA and ASA and are part of many ethical codes (university HS forms e.g.). Very unique responses like “funding dilemmas”, “deception in the name of research”, “in game cheating for research” are minor points in the above mentioned guidelines or even not mentioned. Some issues (with 20% response or 3 identical mentions) like “going native”, “author induced bias”, “research objects are

humans, not objects” or “recorded data treatment” are indirectly a part of the mentioned ethical guidelines. As these issues can’t be checked off in a formal way (like “to provide an informed consent”, “to ensure confidentiality” and “to identify oneself as a researcher”), I would call them the “soft ethical issues of virtual ethnography”. “Soft” means here difficult to grasp and to deal with. In contrary, I would call “getting informed consent”, “confidentiality” and “identifying as researcher” “formal ethical issues”.

Question 3

- Question: “What kind of ethical dilemmas did you experience during one of your virtual ethnography projects?”
- Hypothesis: In contrary to question 2, where the focus lies on the knowledge about potential ethical traps, question 3 addresses the actual ethical experience. The hypothesis here is that researchers are ethically aware even if they actually didn’t experience any ethical issues during their virtual ethnography studies.
- Results: Four of the sixteen respondents didn’t have conducted any research using virtual ethnography, so they are taken out at this question. In total, eight different clusters of experienced ethical dilemmas have been named:

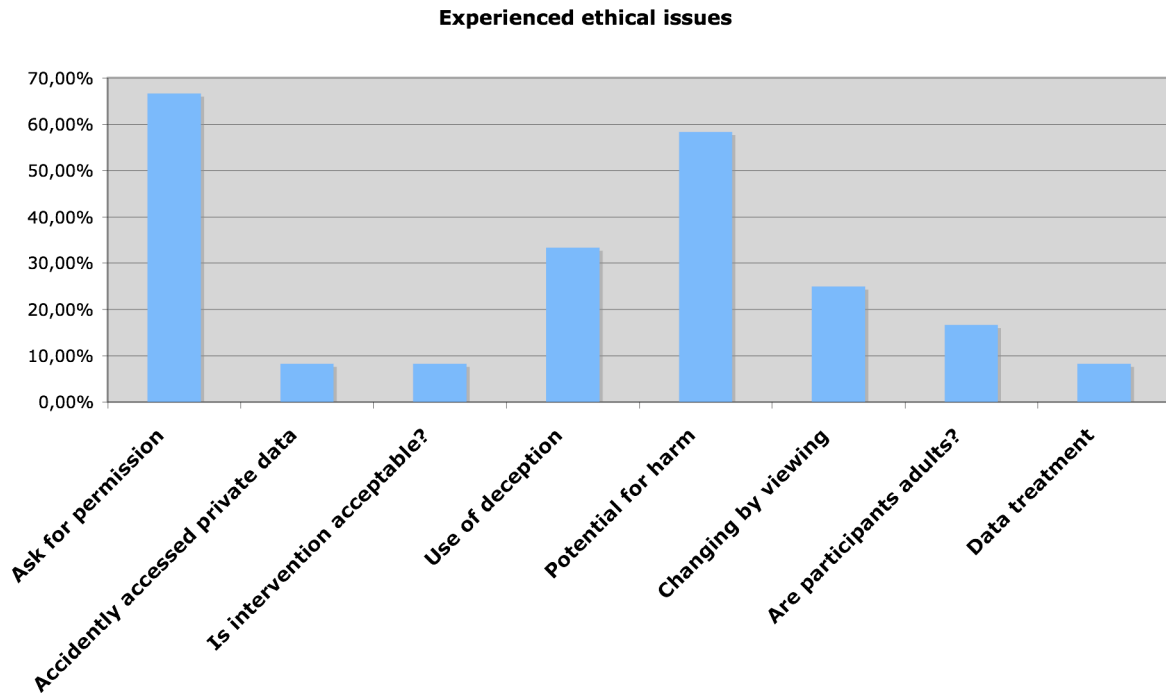


Table 2: results of question 3: “What kind of ethical dilemmas did you experience during one of your virtual ethnography projects?”

- Interpretation: The remaining twelve respondents show an interesting pattern: respondents gave almost the same number of issues in question 2 (potential ethical issues) as in question 3 (experienced ethical issues). The only differences were one respondent (Q2: three issues; Q3: two issues) and the amount of issues in the group of three and more (Question 2). These respondents showed a broad understanding for potential ethical traps, but experienced only 50% of them in their own research.

Two-third of the respondents said to have had problems to get an informed consent. The high percentage is partly a consequence of the type of ethical issue here: as informed consent is a “formal ethical issue” (according to question 2), there is no way to neglect this. On the other hand, the online media makes it difficult to obtain such permission from

everyone affected in the field. The same is true for the other two “formal ethical issues” like “to identify as a researcher” (and not to be deceptive) and “to assure confidentiality” (to avoid any link between real and virtual identities). They show a 33,3% and 58,3% respond rate, which is lower, but also constitutes some problems for researchers.

Question 4

- Question: “Do you research with the help / under the guidance of an ethical code / standard, and if yes, what kind of?”
- Hypothesis: With the availability of ethical guides and institutionalized bodies, the author supposed that researchers generally follow them.
- Results: All but two respondents follow one or several ethical codes proposed by some institution(s). 50% of the respondents follow university ethic standards (which involves also IRBs), slightly more (56%) professional standards (like the code from AoIR, AAA and similar institutions). A total of four respondents follow, additionally, their personal ethic code.

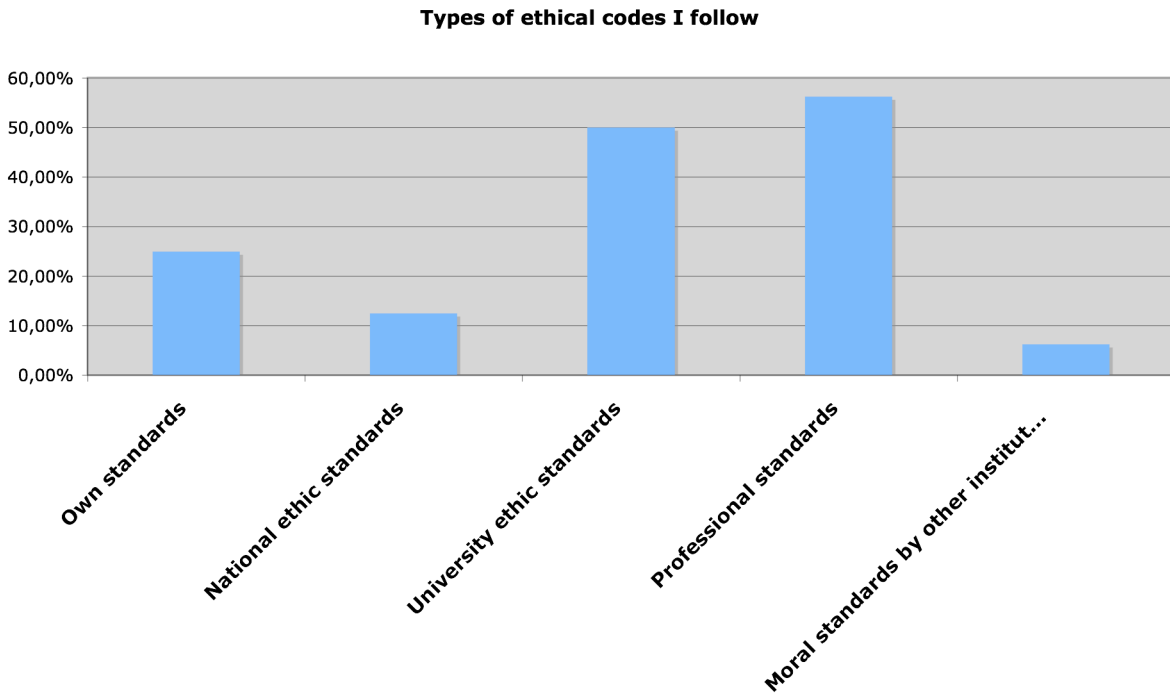


Table 3: results of question 4: “Do you research with the help / under the guidance of an ethical code / standard, and if yes, what kind of?”

- Interpretation: Thirteen respondents follow national, university or professional ethic codes. All of these codes include formal ethical issues as described above. Interestingly, all sixteen respondents name at least one formal ethical issue in question 2. This suggests that ethical thinking and minimal ethical standards exist also where researchers conduct virtual ethnography without national, university or professional ethic codes.

The results not only show the actual distribution of ethical guidelines (in the field, not on paper), but also the high level of confidence in professional standards (which are voluntary, in contrary to mandatory national or academic ethic codes). The reason for this phenomenon is the fact that professional associations are better aware of the

methodological complexity and needs than an national or university board of scientist that are not familiar enough with new methods like virtual ethnography.

Question 5

- Question: “How do you solve ethical issues during your online research?”
- Hypothesis: With the rise of national and university ethic codes and committees, researchers tend to stick to them.
- Results: 75% of the respondents will stick to their guidelines or contact their ethics board in case of an ethical issue. But 50% will reflect oneself to solve such a situation. 37,5% will also consult their colleagues for an alternative opinion. Singular strategies involve planning ahead to avoid any ethical conflicts (37,5%) as well as to involve the researched population into the plans and solutions (12,5%). Two respondents suggest following the rule “people first, research second”. Six respondents list at least three different ways how they solve ethical issues, in contrary to the other twelve with two or one path(s) to solve these issues.

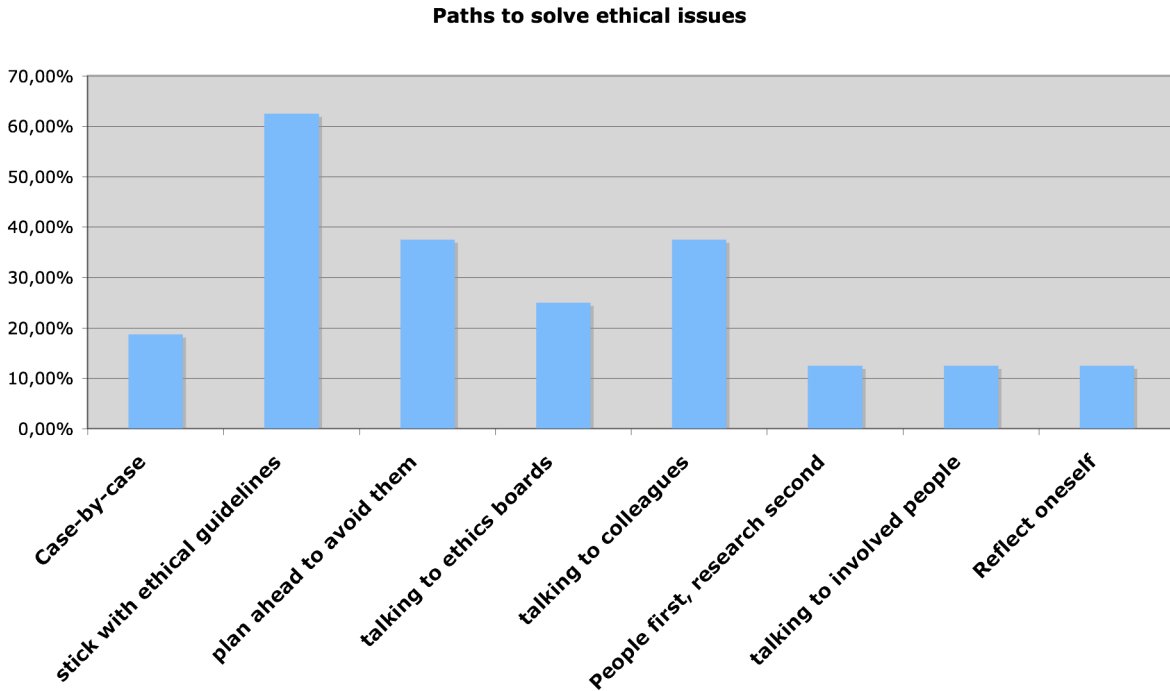


Table 4: results of question 5: “How do you solve ethical issues during your online research?”

- Interpretation: the result suggests that ethical guidelines are an important tool for ethically conducted research in general: over 60% use them in case of an ethical issue. This supports the hypothesis that ethical guidelines are not only “paperwork”, but actually used tools. In contrary, 31,25% decide on a case-by-case basis (including self-reflection).

Conclusion and ethical approach for MMORPG research

In theory and in practice, ethical issues in virtual ethnography are real and widely considered (see previous section). They can be addressed in different ways as the study showed, and there is a

common sense of formal ethical issues that must be met to comply with national and university standards.

Professional standards additionally name some of the more difficult and complex “soft ethical issues” that are hard to match and easy to circumnavigate during virtual ethnography (in the sense of neglecting them). Many of them have been named by the participants of the study as well as by Agar (1996) and Girtler (2001) in their books.

Ethical approach for MMORPG research

Based on the facts of the literature review, the ethical standards of universities, standards of associations (AAA, AoIR) and colleagues (see also the survey results), and as consequence of the non-existence of an ethical guideline for virtual ethnography of synthetic worlds, the author suggests an ethical approach specified for MMORPG research:

1. **Equality:** I will treat all players as players. They are not data suppliers in a technical sense, but they are individuals passing time in their world based on individual motives.
2. **Immersion:** I will act as a player first, and as a researcher second. There are two reasons to do so – one ethical, one methodological: first, this is the best way not to disturb the social life of a group or the individual perception of their world. Second, the researcher will learn the culture of a group / cultural scene deeper as she participates in their actions and become a member of the group. Participative observation and informant interviews are valid methods but have their limitations in MMORPGs.
3. **Transparency:** I will disclose my role, my identity and my research to my key informants, but also to all other players who wish to know. This will be done “verbally” (in-game chat) or by linking to a research site. (Online) Informed consent will be sought

with key informants, as these individuals will be interviewed at length (and collection of their individual data will arise considerably).

4. **Protection, confidentiality and anonymity:** I will try to anticipate and avoid any harm to the involved players and store all recorded data (text, images, videos) in a secure digital place. The group names as well as the individual avatar names will be coded (replaced by fictive avatar names) in the original documents. The coding list will be stored offline in a locked folder. Key informants will have the right to choose their alias to be named in a future publication.
5. **Participation:** I will let participate involved key informants in reviewing my findings and analysis. This is not intended to influence informants to change their behavior, norms, values or other cultural aspects, but to give them the possibility to express their view of the cultural scene they belong to.
6. **Responsibility:** As a researcher, I will act in a professional manner to secure the image of my research colleagues, my university and my discipline. As a player, I will act according to the End User License Agreement (EULA) of the specific synthetic world.

These six points could serve as a fundament of MMORPG research. As different experts reported (see Hine, 2005), guidelines like these can never cover all potential ethical issues during a month or year long virtual ethnographic study. Therefore, every researcher has to adapt these rules on a single-case basis.

7. References

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