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## Playing a Good Game: Ethical Issues in Researching MMOGs and Virtual Worlds

### ABSTRACT:

This paper examines ethical issues specific to conducting Internet research in MMOGs and virtual worlds and offers visual heuristics to help researchers negotiate ethical decision-making. Part 1 develops a theoretical framework — a rhetorical approach to ethical analysis that makes use of specific heuristic tools such as rhetorical diagrams, visual mapping techniques, and comparative case analysis. Part 2 of the paper presents qualitative data from interviews with five researchers who are principally involved in researching MMOGs and virtual worlds (specifically *City of Heroes*, *City of Villains*, *Lineage I & II*, and *Second Life*) and uses the theoretical framework to classify and organize their views regarding research ethics. The resulting visual heuristics can provide guidance to Internet researchers conducting studies on or in MMOGs and virtual worlds.

### INTRODUCTION

Massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs<sup>1</sup>) and virtual worlds engage millions of people and the avatars<sup>2</sup> they create in multimodal communications in real-time digital environments. Because of the large numbers of global participants, the immersive nature of gaming and virtual world environments, the elements of role-playing and collaboration, and the complex interactions of these multiple modes of communication, MMOGs and virtual worlds<sup>3</sup> have become important sites for Internet researchers.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Also known as MMORPGs (Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games).

<sup>2</sup> An avatar in a virtual world is a 3D representation of a person or creature. Some worlds, such as *Lineage*, provide users with a set of avatars with which to choose, but these stock characters have little or no customizable features. Then there are worlds such as *Second Life* that, in addition to the available template avatars, provide customizable options where users can choose from or create their own features, such as height, hair, skin color, clothing, accessories, gender, species, etc.

<sup>3</sup> As Mark Bell (2008) pointed out, there is no settled definition of “virtual world.” There is some debate about whether a distinction should be drawn between MMOGs (as game-based worlds) and more free-form virtual worlds not subject to precise gaming rules (like *Second Life*). We retain both terms because our research participants used both terms in describing the contexts for their work and because the ethical issues encountered when researching the various virtual world environments are often similar. For our understanding of virtual worlds we draw on two definitions. The first from *Virtually Blind* (Duranske, 2007) defined virtual worlds as “avatar-based simulations where user alterations of the physical or social environment of the world are persistent. In other words, a virtual world is any avatar-based simulation where what one user does can impact another user’s subsequent experiences, even after the initial user has logged off” (np). The second is from Mark John’s column in *The Journal of Virtual Worlds*: “A synchronous, persistent network of people, represented as avatars, facilitated by networked computers” (np) By this definition *Second Life* and *World of Warcraft* are both virtual worlds, but an online bridge game would not be as that environment does not have what *Virtually Blind* calls “persistent user-modifiable content” (np). Bell also sees “persistence” of content as the key criterion distinguishing a virtual world from an online game.

<sup>4</sup> See journals such as *Games & Culture* (<http://www.gamesandculture.com>) and *Game Studies* (<http://www.gamestudies.org>), blogs such as *Second Life Research* (<http://secondliferesearch.blogspot.com>) and *Terra*

Not surprisingly, as researchers move into digital worlds such as *Lineage*, *Second Life*, and *World of Warcraft*, they encounter distinctive, sometimes unusual, issues involving the ethics of conducting research in such spaces: Should these virtual worlds be considered “public”? What constitutes “privacy” in such places? What avatar interactions, communications, and audio-visuals may researchers study, record, and reproduce without informed consent or permissions? Should avatars be afforded the same protections as human subjects? What constitutes “informed consent” in an environment populated by thousands, hundreds of thousands, or even millions of users? And how should researchers juggle their own multiple roles of gamer or resident and researcher? Although many of these questions have antecedents in offline research and although many have been discussed in relation to Internet-based research in general (Bruckman, 2002a; Bruckman, 2002b; Buchanan, 2004; Cavanaugh, 1999; McKee & DeVoss, 2007; Ess, 2002; Ess & AoIR Ethics Working Committee, 2002; Eysenback & Till, 2001; Frankel & Siang, 1999; Johns, Chen, & Hall, 2003; Mann & Stewert, 2000; McKee & Porter, 2008; Stern, 2003; Waskul & Douglass, 1996), the research context for MMOGs and virtual worlds is distinctive insofar as the researcher must create an avatar, a bodily presence if you will, to enter such worlds. And, for many MMOGs, especially ones with player-versus-player formats, a researcher — at least one conducting qualitative research — cannot simply observe: she or he has to participate in the world to study the world. The participatory, interactive, and immersive nature of much MMOG and virtual world research raises ethical issues for researchers centered around issues of representation, privacy (and expectations thereof), and responsibilities to various stakeholders, not least of which are the members and community/ies being studied. Although there has been considerable discussion on Internet research ethics generally over the past ten years, there has not as yet been much published research on the distinctive ethical challenges of conducting research in MMOGs and virtual worlds.<sup>5</sup>

However, researchers are vigorously discussing these issues: at masters and thesis defenses (Alexander, 2007), at conferences such as the Internet 9.0 Conference (Vancouver, Canada, 2007), on blogs such as *Terra Nova* (Steinkuehler, 2004) and *Social Sim* (Krotoski, 2007; see also Wendt, 2007), and on professional discussion lists such as the listserv for the Association of Internet Researchers, AIR-L.<sup>6</sup>

In this paper we plan to contribute to these discussions by examining ethical issues involved in conducting research in MMOGs and virtual worlds and by offering frameworks aimed at helping researchers negotiate ethical decision-making. Our methodological approach is both humanistic and qualitative-empirical. We are using rhetoric theory in conjunction with qualitative research methods to develop procedures and analytic frameworks — called “heuristics” — for helping researchers identify and address thorny issues of

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Nova (<http://terranova.blogs.com>), projects and sites such as Nick Yee's *The Daedalus Project* (<http://www.nickyee.com/daedalus>), and research centers such as the University of Copenhagen's *Center for Computer Games Research* (<http://game.itu.dk>) and the *Palo Alto Research Center (PARC)* and its *PlayOn* project (<http://blogs.parc.com/playon>).

<sup>5</sup> There has been some discussion, however, of ethics for gamers, see Warner & Raiter, 2005.

<sup>6</sup> In fact, in early March 2008, researchers on AIR-L participated in a vigorous discussion titled “Online research ethics.” Between March 6 and March 11, 69 messages were posted to the list by 27 different researchers. The original thread generated a spin-off on “avatar research ethics,” where over a four-day period, 13 different contributors submitted 23 posts discussing questions such as “Should avatars be treated as humans?”

research ethics. In the first part of our paper we spend some time discussing our theoretical frame, fundamentally a rhetorical approach to ethical analysis that makes use of specific heuristic tools and procedures (e.g., rhetorical diagrams, visual mapping techniques, comparative case analysis).

In the second part of the paper, we report on a small subset of our larger research project<sup>7</sup>, drawing from published accounts of MMOG and virtual world research ethics and from five researchers we interviewed who are principally involved in researching MMOGs and virtual worlds, specifically *City of Heroes*, *City of Villains*, *Lineage I & II*, and *Second Life*. Their descriptive reflections on their experiences provide examples of ethical issues in virtual world research, and their views offer insights and guidance into how we can resolve such ethical issues.

Drawing from the researchers we interviewed and from published accounts of MMOG and virtual world research, we will discuss and present heuristics for a variety of issues, including identifying researcher premises and methodological assumptions, researcher credibility, the variability of roles, researcher-participant relations, informed consent, and anonymity. Our aim here is not to provide definitive answers, but neither is our aim simply to identify problematic issues. Our aim is to propose processes through which ethical issues may be systematically addressed and, additionally, to spur thinking and discussion about the process of ethical decision making.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: RHETORIC & HEURISTICS

In this article, our framework for analyzing ethical cases in Internet research draws on two different areas of study — rhetoric and heuristics (particularly visual heuristics) — to develop a systematic inquiry strategy to guide decisions involving research ethics. We believe that having such a framework helps avoid the problem of ethical relativism in research, the approach that sees every new research context as distinct and, thus, that leaves every researcher's own justifications (or every distinct discipline's practices) as unassailable. We believe that ethical decision making for research must be systematic, deliberative, collaborative, and multidisciplinary in order to be valid — IMHO is not a sufficient ethical argument, nor is “that's how we do it in discipline X” — and so we offer here a framework that seeks to meet those criteria.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> In our larger research project, we are analyzing published reports of Internet research, particularly studies where authors foreground ethical and/or legal issues. However, the limitation of using published material is that it does not typically reveal very much about the ethical struggles that researchers face as they design and conduct studies. Published work reports results, but it does not typically reveal the often difficult ethical decision-making processes that, in our experience at least, are present in every research project. Thus, to uncover the usually invisible aspects of research ethics we have also conducted interviews with Internet researchers from around the globe. To date we have interviewed 35 researchers from 11 different countries (Australia, Canada, Great Britain, India, Italy, Japan, Korea, New Zealand, Norway, Taiwan, and the United States) working in a variety of disciplines, including anthropology, communication, economics, education, gaming, gender, information technology, media, psychology, rhetoric and writing, sociology, and technical communication. We are compiling and categorizing their experiences and investing their views with considerable authority.

<sup>8</sup> In our larger study of Internet research ethics, casuistic ethics is also a key component of our theoretical framework. Casuistry is a case-based approach, a practical art of making ethical decisions, similar to legal case-based reasoning, based on four key qualities: (1) the acknowledgement and acceptance of general norms and universal moral codes (the

## Rhetoric

What can rhetoric, the art of persuasion, contribute to research ethics? First of all, by “rhetoric” we do not mean the popular notion of rhetoric as stylistic manipulation — the rhetoric of slick advertising and political bombast. Rather, we mean rhetoric as the 2400-year-old art of argument and persuasion, involving dialogic interaction between participants with differing views.<sup>9</sup> In fourth century BCE Athens, the art of rhetoric was developed as a tool helpful to the democratic process, a procedure for negotiating among competing points of view, opposed political positions, different value systems. It was a system for adjudicating difference through discourse/language and persuasion rather than by force (e.g., war). As Aristotle conceived of the art, it had close connections to politics and ethics: Rhetoric was the mechanism by which the Athenian *polis* settled its differences and arrived at a collective decision for the good of the state.<sup>10</sup>

Rhetoric in this conception is a means for negotiating differences among speakers and audiences through the use of communication strategies. As such, the art can be quite useful to Internet researchers, in conjunction with ethics, as a methodology for settling disagreements about research protocols (e.g., with regulatory agencies, like IRBs) or for negotiating differing cultural values and expectations among researchers and their participants. This framework for rhetoric begins with a stance of pluralism — a fundamental respect for differences among value systems — but then moves toward the application of practical judgment (*phronesis*, in Aristotelian terms) to negotiate among differences. This type of rhetoric requires engagement with stakeholders, or audiences, through dialogue, interaction, negotiation, and persuasion.

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paradigms or presumptions that are generally accepted); (2) the acknowledgement of gray areas, of human diversity, of exceptions, of the nuances of context, and of the particular circumstances of each new case; (3) the analysis, comparison, and taxonomizing of cases; and, (4) a collaborative process of deliberation with others. We find casuistry a particularly useful approach for two reasons. First, it has a strong conceptual connection to rhetoric; it explicitly acknowledges how communication practices, dialogic interaction and deliberation, and invention are vital to the art of making moral judgments. Second, it is an approach designed to address precisely the kind of difficult, borderline ethical questions facing Internet researchers. (For more on casuistry, see Jonsen & Toulmin, 1988; McKee & Porter, 2008; Miller, 1996.) We do not use casuistic analysis in this paper because we are focused here not so much on research cases as we are on researcher views.

<sup>9</sup> This description of rhetoric might seem to have more in common with what is known, particularly in philosophy, as “dialectic” — the intellectual interchange between more or less equal interlocutors, aimed at discovering truth through discursive interaction. But, as Perelman argued (1982, p. 7), even philosophical dialectic involves an audience and so represents a type of rhetoric, a point that Porter also emphasized (1998, pp. 42-47). Dialectic can be seen as the type of rhetoric that involves the audience in interaction, as opposed to other types of rhetoric that cast the audience in a more-or-less passive role.

<sup>10</sup> “There are frequent connections between Book 2 of the *Rhetoric* (1991) and *Nicomachean Ethics* (1976). The points of overlap have to do with the pursuit of the good (*agathon*) and the moral character of the speaker or citizen (*ethos*) ... In Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*, the common aim for both rhetor and audience was the good of the *polis*. Thus, the act of composing a speech was situated within a political as well as ethical framework. Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* leans heavily on his description of ‘the good’ in *Nicomachean Ethics*; because the rhetor must have ‘the good of the *polis*’ as the ultimate aim, determining what is good is involved in the rhetorical enterprise” (Porter, 1998, p. 37).

This type of rhetoric demands that we attend to audiences by seeking out their views and incorporating their viewpoints into our own constructions of knowledge and methodology.<sup>11</sup> As we argue in our article “The Ethics of Digital Writing Research: A Rhetorical Approach,” Internet researchers need to consult and engage with multiple audiences when making ethical decisions about research (see Figure 2, McKee & Porter, 2008, p. 728). A rhetorical approach to research ethics begins by viewing ethical decision making as involving rhetorical interaction with and deliberation among many different stakeholders, including the people being studied (aka research subjects or participants); colleagues, advisors, co-researchers, and editors; other researchers working in the same area as us; third parties represented in a research write-up, etc. (McKee & Porter, 2008, pp. 727-731). The vigorous interaction and discussion we observed on the AIR-L discussion list in March 2008 is a perfect example of the kind of rhetorical interaction and deliberation we are talking about, with the end result being an ethical choice about a research protocol, but a choice that has been tested through a deliberative process involving research colleagues. We see this kind of triangulation of ethical decision making with others as an essential component of the dialectical/rhetorical process.

Thus, a rhetorical perspective sees research on human subjects as fundamentally a dialogic *communication* situation, one that is highly attuned to audience and context. And, as we will show in the next section, through the use of heuristic techniques, rhetoric also provides researchers with a mechanism for analyzing contexts, including ethical contexts, and for generating decisions. Here is where rhetoric and ethics are complementary arts.

### Heuristics

Rhetoric as an art of persuasion and interaction involves more than simply *presenting* an argument or making a case to a largely passive audience. As conceived by Aristotle and as developed by Cicero, Quintilian, and other classical rhetoricians, rhetoric includes invention — that is, the process of discovering, developing, and building arguments and knowledge in the first place.<sup>12</sup> In classical Roman rhetoric, *inventio* was one of the five key canons of the art (along with arrangement, style, memory, and delivery). To promote invention classical rhetoricians developed “heuristics,” that is, procedures for prompting and developing ideas,

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<sup>11</sup> The American Anthropological Association (AAA) (1986) sees responsibilities to various audiences as fundamental to its approach to research ethics. The opening of its ethics statement on “personal responsibility” reads: “Anthropologists work in many parts of the world in close personal association with the peoples and situations they study. Their professional situation is, therefore, uniquely varied and complex. They are involved with their discipline, their colleagues, their students, their sponsors, their subjects, their own and host governments, the particular individuals and groups with whom they do their fieldwork, other populations and interest groups in the nations within which they work, and the study of processes and issues affecting general human welfare” (np).

<sup>12</sup> In Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* (1991) the canon of invention takes up most of the treatise, approximately 2/3 of it. His discussion of style and arrangement — what is commonly thought of as the content of rhetoric — occupies a relatively small section of Book 3.

arguments, and content for discourse.<sup>13</sup> A heuristic is a set of open-ended questions, prompts, categories, memory devices, or visual grids to aid thinking, discovery, and deliberation.

We see examples of heuristics — although they are not labeled as such — in several prominent discussions of Internet research ethics. For example, Hudson & Bruckman (2004) offer heuristic-like categories and questions in their guide to Internet research ethics. The short excerpt below identifies several general questions to be asked under the categories of “consent” and “harm”:

Consent: Is there reason to believe that obtaining consent will be difficult? Will the process of requesting consent itself cause harm? Is it possible to obtain consent in some other way (e.g., create a special chatroom explicitly for the study)? Harm: What are the potential harms in conducting the study? ...” (Hudson & Bruckman, 2004, p. 138)

Similarly, the ethical guidelines of the Association of Internet Researchers use a combination of topics and questions to guide researchers in making ethical decisions:

Questions to ask when undertaking Internet research:

A. Venue/environment — expectations, authors/subjects, informed consent

- Where does the interaction, communication, etc. under study take place?
- What ethical expectations are established by the venue?
- Who are the subjects posters / authors/ creators of the material and/or interactions under study?
- Informed consent — specific considerations
  - Timing
  - Medium
  - Addressees
  - How material is to be used?

(Ess & AoIR Ethics Working Committee, 2002)

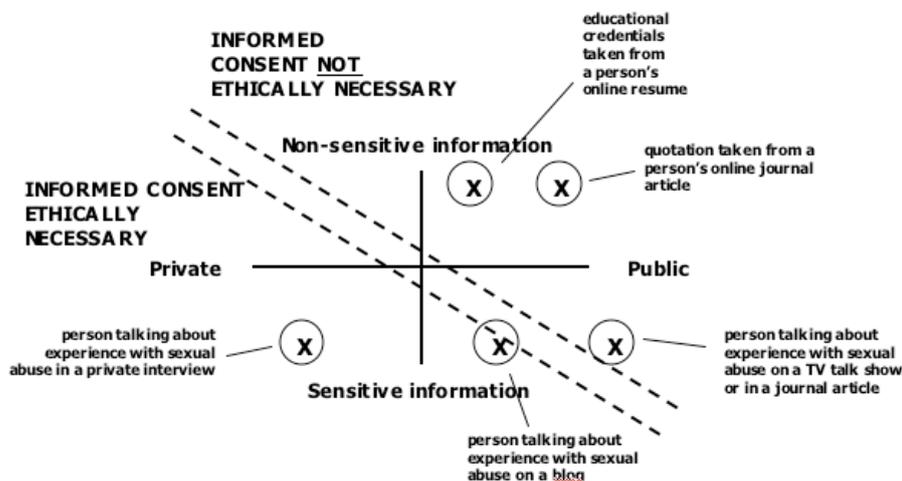
In short, heuristics are already commonly used in Internet research ethics. The characteristic of an effective heuristic is that it is general and flexible enough to be applied across different contexts (i.e., different research studies), and yet the prompts are specific enough to delineate the key issues and questions that researchers need to think about.

Heuristics can also be visual as well as verbal. In mapping researchers’ views on and experiences with ethical approaches for researching MMOGs and virtual worlds, we follow a visual heuristic technique similar to the approach proposed by Sullivan and Porter (1997) in *Opening Spaces: Writing Technologies and Critical Research Practices* (see also Sullivan & Porter, 1993). As with the art of rhetoric itself, visuals are not merely convenient tools for *representing* verbal or quantitative data. They can also be useful as heuristic strategies for *invention* — that is, for generating ideas, developing hypotheses, provoking insight. In other words, visuals have productive, generative capacity and can create knowledge as well as present it (Arnheim, 1969; Shin & Lemon, 2003).

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<sup>13</sup> According to Enos and Lauer (1992), “Heuristic originates in the Greek term *eurisko*, meaning ‘to find out or discover.’ The Latinized form of the term is *inventio*, which became a principal canon in the study of classical rhetoric. The term heuristic came to mean the *technai* or techniques within the *techné* of rhetoric that served to create effective discourse” (p. 204).

We see examples of visual heuristics in the realm of Internet research ethics as well. For instance, in her discussion of ethics and Internet ethnography, media and communications researcher Malin Sveningsson (2004) used a visual grid to highlight her point that the public-private dichotomy is not by itself adequate for making ethical judgments in the realm of the Internet. The researcher must also look at how “sensitive” that information is for the participants. Sveningsson created an X-Y axis diagram, charting private-public on the horizontal X axis and non-sensitive and sensitive on the Y axis (p. 56). In an article in *College Composition and Communication* (McKee & Porter, 2008), we extended Sveningsson’s grid by mapping different kinds of cases on it, to show that in some research contexts informed consent is clearly necessary, for other types less necessary (see Figure 1):



**FIGURE 1. Mapping types of interactions with research participants (adaptation of Sveningsson) (McKee & Porter, 2008, p. 732)**

In this adaptation of Sveningsson’s grid, we have divided it into two zones cutting diagonally through the chart: the zone where informed consent is definitely necessary (private-sensitive information) and the zone where it definitely isn’t (public-nonsensitive information). Second, we have plotted on the grid five different research activities for which a researcher would need to decide whether or not to seek informed consent from human subjects — e.g., information taken from an person writing about their experience of sexual abuse on a blog; information taken from an online journal article, etc. What this mapping strategy visualizes is Sveningsson’s point that neither the public-private continuum nor the sensitive-nonsensitive continuum by itself is a sufficient basis for deciding whether informed consent is necessary. A researcher must take both continua into account — and this mapping provides an example of how both perspectives can be applied simultaneously.

An important quality of visual heuristics is that, although they provide prompts and guidance, they are open ended, meaning that they do not generate definitive answers; they do not operate like algorithms, in other words. Different researchers could generate different conclusions using the same heuristic techniques. Such a heuristic is to be contrasted with other visual devices, such as decision charts, that do not prompt thinking so much as direct thinking down pre-established decision lines. An example of a non-heuristic visual is the decision charts developed by the Office of Human Research Protections (OHRP, 2004) to help

members of U.S. institutional review boards decide whether a particular project meets the criteria defining research on human subjects (see Figure 2). While such charts can be useful guides, they often do not acknowledge the complexities or nuances involved in Internet research (McKee & Porter, 2008, pp. 714-716). They are *not* what we mean by a visual heuristic.

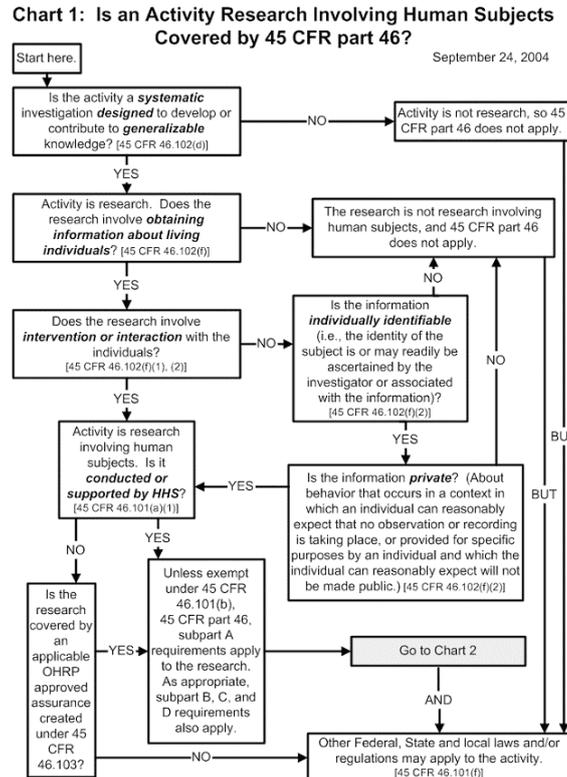


FIGURE 2: OHRP Decision Chart 1

Although some ethical research questions do lend themselves to clear-cut yes/no decisions (e.g., paradigmatic cases which are clearly unethical, such as the U.S. “Tuskegee Study of Untreated Syphilis in the Negro Male,” see <http://www.cdc.gov/tuskegee/timeline.htm>), most ethical decisions are not so clear-cut. Researchers need processes and prompts to help them discuss and negotiate, not only the specifics of their particular contexts, but also the underlying principles and issues that may be in play. We believe that rhetorical heuristics provide an approach to invention that can assist researchers’ ethical reasoning and help them arrive at a “probable judgment” about the ethics of a particular research project.

We use a visual heuristic approach in Part 2 of this paper. What we are doing methodologically in Part 2 is (1) classifying researchers' views according to key themes and issues in Internet research ethics; (2) building visual representations of those views; and then (3) using those visual representations as heuristic to help us understand ethical issues and to guide future decisions about research ethics.

## FINDINGS & ANALYSIS

Our findings about the ethics of MMOG and virtual world research are drawn from analysis of conference presentations, from published papers, and, most importantly, from our interviews with selected MMOG and virtual world researchers.

### Researchers Interviewed

#### Researchers Interviewed

The researchers we interviewed are working in diverse disciplines and studying virtual worlds from a range of perspectives. We chose these researchers because of their frequent contributions to gaming and virtual world blogs, discussion boards, and journals (both online and in-print), their extensive research experience in virtual worlds, and/or their commitment to helping others with their MMOG and virtual world research. Several of our interviewees have organized face-to-face and in-world conferences and workshops on research and virtual worlds, and many have created or contributed to in-world and out-of-world resources for virtual world researchers, including an in-world library in *Second Life* for anyone interested in learning more about the ethics and methods of virtual world research.<sup>14</sup> All participants granted permission for us to use their real names.

The MMOG and virtual world researchers we interviewed include the following<sup>15</sup>:

- Constance Steinkuehler is an Assistant Professor in the Educational Communication and Technology program in the Curriculum & Instruction Department at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, in the United States. For her dissertation study, the study she most discussed with us, she spent several years playing *Lineage I & II*, serving as a guild leader, and conducting ethnographic research of group game play and learning. Steinkuehler publishes extensively on issues of learning and cognition in games, as well as on research and ethical issues. (See <http://website.education.wisc.edu/steinkuehler> for a list of her publications.) She also organizes the annual Games, Learning, and Society Conference held each June at UW-Madison.
- Aleks Krotoski is a doctoral student in Social Psychology at the University of Surrey. In addition to doing academic research, she is a journalist who writes about and presents on technology and gaming in a column and podcast for *The Guardian* (see <http://mypages.surrey.ac.uk/psp1ak>). She is also a long-time resident and researcher in *Second Life*. As a social psychologist, her research focuses on the social dynamics of online worlds. She uses a sociometric approach for research, mapping *Second Life* social networks through the use of surveys, interviews, and observation. In *Second Life* she founded, created, and maintains a reference library of social science and online research resources (see the Social Simulation Research Lab on Hyperborea in *Second Life*).
- Lisa Galarnau is a doctoral student of Screen and Media Studies at the University of Waikato, New Zealand. She has extensive qualitative and quantitative game research experience. For her dissertation, she conducted a multi-year study of the MMOG *City of Heroes*, focusing on the learning and communication that occur in spontaneous group game

<sup>14</sup> The 60-90 minute interviews were conducted using Skype and consisted of open-ended responses and follow-up to questions about research methodology and ethics. Some of the questions included: What ethical and methodological issues have you faced in the processes of designing, implementing, and writing up your MMOG and virtual world research? What recommendations would you give to other researchers seeking to conduct MMOG/virtual world research?

<sup>15</sup> All institutional affiliations and professional identifications are given for each individual at the time of our interview.

play. (See <http://lisa.socialstudygames.com/pubs.htm> for a list of her publications.) In addition, at the time of the interview, she worked at Microsoft Game Studios as part of their Games User Research division, where she designed and ran usability tests, playtests, and ethnographic studies (both in the lab and in the field).

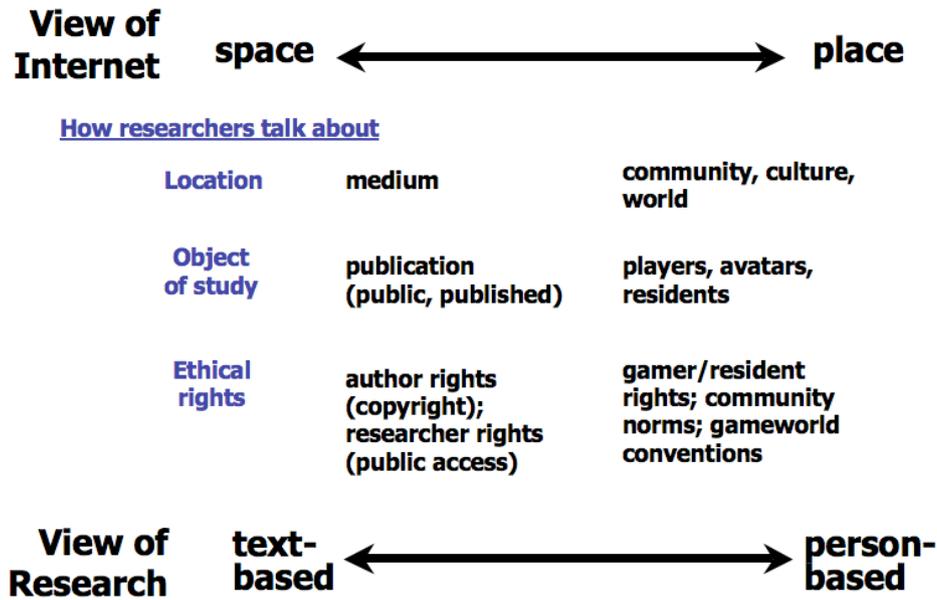
- Sarah Robbins (aka., Intellagirl <http://www.intellagirl.com>) is a doctoral student in Rhetoric and Composition at Ball State University in the U.S. She teaches and researches extensively in *Second Life*. Many of the courses she teaches occur entirely or mostly in *Second Life*, and her teacher-research focuses on her in-world experiences with her students. She is a frequent public speaker and educational consultant on *Second Life*, and she is the author of *Second Life for Dummies*.

- Thomas Malaby is a professor of anthropology at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee whose primary research interest is, as he describes on his web site, “in the relationships among modernity, unpredictability, and technology, particularly as they are realized through games and game-like processes” (<http://www.uwm.edu/~malaby>). When we interviewed him he had just finished conducting an extensive study of the ethics of online governance in virtual worlds. He worked closely with the administrators of *Second Life* at Linden Labs, studying how at the administrative-level ethical decisions and frameworks were created in an ongoing process of interaction with *Second Life* residents. As a cultural anthropologist, Malaby also has extensive experience with qualitative and ethnographic research; he frequently mentors graduate students who are conducting online ethnographies.

### Researcher Premises: Space-Medium-Text vs. Place-Community-Person

How researchers approach the study of a particular MMOG or virtual world depends on a number of issues, but most especially on the researcher’s disciplinary orientation, on their methodological preferences, and, of course, on the questions or issues forming the basis for their research. The five researchers we interviewed most often approached their research with premises shaped by the mostly qualitative methodologies they used. (We say “mostly” because a number of them worked with both quantitative and qualitative approaches, combining studies of large textual corpora with interviews, for example.) These premises, in term, correlate with particular views of “space” and “place” on the Internet.

As the *AoIR Guidelines* (Ess & AoIR Ethics Working Committee, 2002) have noted, whether one sees a particular Internet site as a medium for the exchange of published, public texts or as a series of communities where people hold conversations (whether public or private) carries with it very different assumptions that will shape all decisions that a researcher then makes (see also Cohen, 2007). Seeing a MMOG or virtual world as a *space* (or medium) where published texts circulate correlates with an emphasis on authorial rights (in terms of citation) and researchers’ rights for quotation and use. Seeing such a locale as a *place* where people gather to share conversations privileges community norms and expectations, which in turn correlates with an ethical emphasis on community norms and rights. Figure 3 represents these concepts: How views of the Internet correlate how researchers talk about their work — i.e., the emphasis of their vocabulary.



**FIGURE 3. Views of Internet correlated with researcher vocabulary and views of research**

On the left side of the continuum is the ethical position emphasizing the public/published nature of most observable and/or archived communications on the Internet. That position views Internet-based communications as public (at least on non-password protected sites) and views Internet research as aligned more with public observation or public archive work. For example, Walthers (2002), a Communications professor at Michigan State University in the U.S., expressed such a view, “Since the analysis of Internet archives does not constitute an interaction with a human subject, and since it avails itself of existing records, then for IRB purposes, it may be no different than research using old newspaper stories, broadcasts, the Congressional Record, or other archival data, for research” (np). Another articulation of this perspective comes from Gordon Carlson (2008), a U.S. doctoral student in Communications at the University of Illinois-Chicago, who, in a post on AIR-L about “avatar research ethics,” reflected on possible ways of seeing avatars, arguing that avatars are most like artifacts:<sup>16</sup>

If they [avatars] are artifacts then you treat them like blogs or public texts and the determination is whether they are public and thus fair game or whether they are expecting some level of privacy. It becomes a content analysis of sorts. I personally argue that because Second Life is inherently interactive and visible, there cannot be a significant expectation of privacy or anonymity: I think it is mostly akin to walking around in the real life streets in daylight. So the data is fair game much like analyzing a book and knowing who the author is (much like a rhetorical criticism). (Carlson, 8 March 2008)

On the right side of the continuum is the position that views MMOGs and other virtual worlds primarily as community places, and thus espouses a different ethical approach, one more aligned with assumptions from

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<sup>16</sup> For further discussion of the various ways of conceptualizing online representations, see Michele White’s “Representations or People?” (2002).

participant-observer and ethnographic methodologies. Steinkuehler, when explaining her approach to studying interactions in *Lineage*, stated, “First of all, in games, as in a lot of these communities, you really don’t understand them unless you’re participating. So I spent a good long time investing significant time in trying to understand gaming culture, trying to become part of that culture.” Aleks Krotoski (2007) explained in a post to *Social Sim*:

The thing I worry most about in my research is that it will *negatively affect the community because I feel that it is the most important thing in Second Life and other virtual spaces*. When I first started in SL in 2004, knowing full well that I was going to be researching the social networks of the space, I knew I was entering *an already thriving community* (with only 24,000 accounts!) made up of *autonomous individuals with rights*. I knew as well that the community had previously been “burned” by researchers who had ignored *people’s rights to privacy* by posting analyses and transcripts of conversations - without changing the names of Residents - to public fora and to external blogs. (emphasis added, np <http://socialsim.wordpress.com/2007/01/31/virtual-research-ethics>)

We want to emphasize that this continuum is for mapping *views* of research and not necessarily individual researchers. Researchers do not exist exclusively and always in one place; rather, most researchers express views across the entire continuum depending on the research question, the methodology used, the data collected, etc. For example, probably all researchers believe in researcher rights to quote public text (with attribution), but the difference would be in how they determine what is “public.” When is a researcher in a space working with public texts and when is she in a community with differing expectations for privacy and use? Figure 3 expresses the space-place difference as a continuum rather than as a binary, and that visual distinction is important. When engaged in public debate with each other, researchers often begin by expressing views in binary form, by taking a firm stance on one end or the other of the continuum — as we observed in the AIR-L discussion. But, we have also noticed, when considering the nuances of a particular study (e.g., a researcher’s particular protocol, the particular context of the community being studied, the particular technological features of the game or community), the binary can become a more complicated continuum.<sup>17</sup> Most researchers we know readily acknowledge the complexity of these issues and the validity of competing ethical views. Thus, what we are mapping here are articulated ethical principles, the statements that researchers make to justify their methodological protocols.

Where Figure 3 can be helpful, we would argue, is in understanding the premises that researchers are bringing to the table when they discuss ethical issues. The figure also helps us see disciplinary and methodological preferences as well. From our experiences serving on our institutional IRBs, as well as from our research, we think that qualitative researchers using case study and ethnographic methods tend toward the right side of the map, whereas humanities scholars and quantitative researchers tend toward the left side.

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<sup>17</sup> A point that Hudson and Bruckman (2004) acknowledged: “In general, researchers work with dichotomies such as public versus private and published versus unpublished. Works on the Internet, however, turn these dichotomies into continua. [...] This introduces a new dimension into the ethics of doing Internet research” (p. 129).

## Harm & Risk

The position that sees MMOGs and virtual worlds as places — particularly as real places rather than as simulated places —views ethical issues of harm and risk differently from a view that sees them as spaces. First, researchers taking this perspective see the game or simulated world as a real place, and, thus, treat avatars and players in such worlds as also real. As a *Second Life* resident since 2003, Radhika Gajjala (2008), a communications professor at Bowling Green State University in the U.S. who studies and has published extensively on cyber communities, characterizes this view in a post to AIR-L:

The avatar is an identity unto itself - with a logic and history and social location in-world in secondlife. If you name the avatar – there are community formations that link the avatar to various social contexts - so naming the avatar might lead to tracing the avatar even [in]"RL" - but even if it does not, secondlifers are very particular about their avatar privacy as well. at least this is my perception - I have been in secondlife in various modes since 2003 - and have encountered many people (including myself) who identify quite strongly with their avatars in-world - we have lives there (ridiculous as this may sound) and really just as much as I would not like my living room to be broadcast online [ . . .]I would not like everything I do on secondlife revealed. But revealing my avatar name in someone's research will allow for connections to be made. (Gajjala, 2008)

For Gajjala, Krotoski, and Steinkuehler, as for many MMOG and virtual world researchers and participants, *virtual* does not mean “not real” (see also Giles, 2007). Participants in MMOGs and virtual worlds commit significant psychosocial investment in the avatars they create, viewing them often not as fictional, digital beings, but as extensions of themselves whose words, actions, and thoughts in-world interanimate with real-life words, actions, and thoughts. Because of the strong identification people feel for their avatars in MMOGs and virtual worlds, the researchers whom we interviewed all felt that avatars should be afforded the same respect and protections as persons, and as they planned and conducted their research they were concerned about the potential harm to participants and to the virtual world and game communities they studied.

In addition to being concerned about protecting and respecting the participants and the virtual world communities, the researchers we interviewed were also concerned with potential harms to their own and others’ research. As Krotoski explained to us, “From a personal perspective, I didn’t want to hurt anybody. I didn’t want to muck around with what I consider an important and exciting medium—i.e., the Internet, virtual communities—so I wanted to both maintain my own reputation in that community and also in some ways also maintain a positive working environment so that other researchers in the future could work with virtual communities” (Krotoski, interview, 2006). Krotoski’s views are similar to those of Steinkuehler.

I watched a lot of mistakes happen in the communities. So you come to realize that if you’re going into one of these worlds or communities and you screw it up as an ethnographer, you screw it up for everyone, not just your own research. You’re not only compromising your own research and research participants but it’s got ramifications elsewhere and for other researchers. (Steinkuehler, interview, 2007)

These comments and others like these led us to consider the many possible harms in research—not only in the product of research (what happens when the report is published) but also in the process of research,

the interactions and data collection that occurs. In Table 1 we identify several types of harm that are possible at various stages of research.

**TABLE 1. Possible harms at various stages of research (showing IRB focus of concern)**

Stage of Research (-> t ->)	Early — design of study, approval of research protocol	Middle — data collection	Late — write up and presentation of results
<b>Key Researcher Interactions</b>	Researcher with collaborators, colleagues, committees, IRBs, review boards	Researcher with subjects	Researcher with colleagues, committees, editors
<b>Possible Harms</b>	To research -> study not being approved	To subjects -> loss of privacy, harm of exposure, ridicule and embarrassment	To subjects -> loss of privacy, harm of exposure, ridicule and embarrassment
		To community -> disruption of community, loss of trust, harm from consent process	To community -> disruption of community, loss of trust, harm from consent process
		To research -> loss of access to subjects and/or community; loss of access for future research	To research -> loss of researcher credibility, reputation

**Focus of IRB concern**

As the table highlights, ethics review boards tend to focus, appropriately enough, on possible harm to subjects, with the key focus being on risks associated with the end of the research process — i.e., with identification through publication of results, and resulting loss of privacy, exposure to ridicule and embarrassment, etc. Thus, researchers who are using deidentified or aggregated data often believe that there is no risk to participants and that, therefore, review boards have no just cause to question the protocol for such studies. If the subjects aren't identified (or identifiable), what possible risks are there?

However, the MMOG and VW researchers we interviewed had a different focus of concern altogether. They were not unconcerned about harms resulting from publication and presentation, but in their interviews they talked mostly about possible harms during data collection — and they expressed just as much concern about harm to the community, the collective of individuals, as to individual subjects (see Table 2). Their main focus of concern was, first, to protect the entire community (as well as individuals in it) and, secondly, not to impair future research. Thus, their decisions about research ethics were guided by a slightly different set of priorities.

**TABLE 2. Possible harms at various stages of research (showing MMOG and VW researcher focus of concern)**

Stage of Research (→ t →)	Early — design of study, approval of research protocol	Middle — data collection	Late — write up and presentation of results
<b>Key Researcher Interactions</b>	Researcher with collaborators, colleagues, committees, IRBs, review boards	Researcher with subjects	Researcher with colleagues, committees, editors
<b>Possible Harms</b>	To research → study not being approved	To subjects → loss of privacy, harm of exposure, ridicule and embarrassment  To community → disruption of community, loss of trust, harm from consent process  To research → loss of access to subjects and/or community; loss of access for future research	To subjects → loss of privacy, harm of exposure, ridicule and embarrassment  To community → disruption of community, loss of trust, harm from consent process  To research → loss of researcher credibility, reputation

**Focus of MMOG researcher concern**

A community-based approach to researching MMOGs and virtual worlds (as well as other Internet venues such as discussion boards) emphasizes the need to ensure no harm not only in the presentation of results, but also in the collection of data to ensure that the community isn't disrupted or violated and to ensure that future researchers may also have access to those communities. The imperative "to not muck it up for others" (to use Krotoski' phrase) was a common sentiment expressed by the researchers whom we interviewed, all who advocated for what we are calling researcher credibility and researcher transparency.

**Researcher Credibility: Spending Time in World**

In virtual worlds, researcher credibility has less to do with one's academic credentials and prior publications and much more to do with one's standing in the communities—what level a player is, how well-known a resident is. All of the MMOG and virtual world researchers we interviewed emphasized the importance of being members of the communities being studied. Malaby connected online ethnographic work to face-to-face ethnography, describing his approaches for helping graduate student researchers think through projects:

When I talk to graduate students about conceptualizing research projects in these worlds—first of all, is there a stable and consistent community of an appropriate size that you are trying to understand that has developed a distinctive disposition that is something that could be an object of your study? Okay, if that's true, how are you going to get at it? How are you going to access it? In fact, more importantly than speaking with anyone and doing interviews, how are you going to learn about and acquire that disposition yourself because that's the hallmark of ethnography. Doing that is not impossible in virtual communities, but it's very challenging. (Malaby, interview, 2007)

One of the reasons it's so challenging, especially MMOGs, is because of the need to play to a certain level of proficiency, and acquiring playing proficiency and "leveling" can take a long, long time, as Steinkuehler explained to us in her interview.

Steinkuehler: In *Lineage*, if you're not at least level 48 [the highest level at the time was 52] no one above that level even wants to talk to you. So the hard-core of the hard-core, the core of the community, doesn't give you the time of day.

McKee/Porter: So you had to play for a long time to get up to 48?

Steinkuehler: Yeah, 8-10 hours a day at first. And level 48 to 49 would be a month of work playing every night. It was an incredible amount of work. When I say *Lineage* is a cruel game, that's what I mean. It starts off where you're making progress quickly, but then it becomes where making 5% or 10% of a level in an eight-hour day would be considered, "Wow, I did really well!" And if you die you actually lose 5 to 10 % of your level. (Steinkuehler, interview, 2007)

But the hours (and days, months, and years) spent playing are important for establishing gamer credibility. Steinkuehler summed up well the perspective of many gamer-researchers when she advised:

The one piece of advice I would give people: If you're going to study these games, you damn well better be playing them. If you can't spend what's considered for the community a standard amount of time in them—for *World of Warcraft* at least 20 hours a week is just standard maintenance and a hard-core player would be about 40 hours a week—and if you're not willing to invest that in some way then I can't write about *World of Warcraft* unless I'm actually willing to play *World of Warcraft*. That's not to say that if you're going to study scientists you've got to be a scientist, but at least being literate in the community. Especially with these ethics issues. (Steinkuehler, interview, 2007)

Sarah Robbins also felt it essential for researchers to spend time in-world before researching virtual worlds. When asked what recommendations she would give to other researchers seeking to study *Second Life*, she advised:

First of all, be in the space—understand it. Be a native to the space. You simply cannot underestimate the way the mechanics of the environment will mitigate what you can do and what you can gather. [ . . . ] You've got to understand how the environment works. So that's one thing. Another thing is to be in the space long enough to feel comfortable in your own avatar—in your own skin . To understand the mores of the community because SL does have its own social mores and traditions. There are inside jokes that folks who have been there for a long time that they understand. You want to be there long enough to be a respectful of those things and to not stick out like a source thumb. Race doesn't matter in SL. Gender doesn't matter. What people will discriminate against is birth date . They'll look at your profile and say, "You've only been here a week. I'm not talking to you—you don't know what's going on." Unless that's what you want to research, you don't want to have a brand-new avatar because people will not want to talk to you.<sup>18</sup> (Robbins, personal interview, 2007)

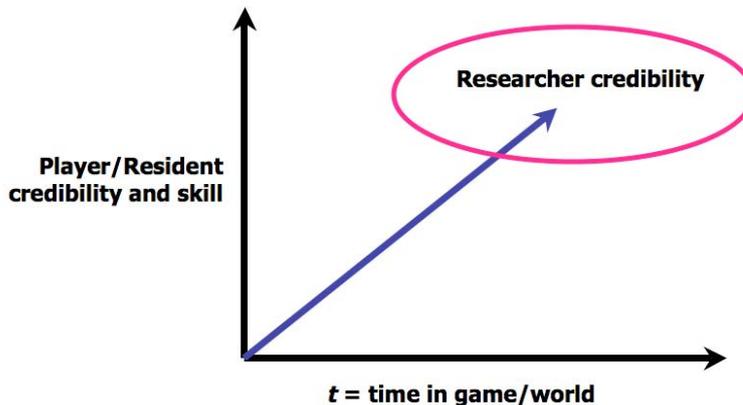
As researchers build player (or resident) credibility they also build researcher credibility which may in turn lead to more ethical approaches for research, as Steinkuehler explained:

[In-game] you're constantly negotiating trust and for me, one thing that really helped me out a lot in retrospect is that I was a member of this community. They trusted me. But it also meant

<sup>18</sup> Robbins also recommended that researchers new to *Second Life* "establish yourself in the community of researchers [ . . . ] I run the SL researchers list—the SLRL mailing list—and there are folks on that list who have tried methods of research in second life, and you simply cannot overestimate the value of that community to help you formulate your methods. These people have been there, done that, failed at that, tried again. They're an incredible community to draw from. ... In other environments we've got years and years of journal articles and established precedents for how to do it, but this is so new so really you've just got to become part of the community and learn all you can from the other folks who are out there doing it."

that I was very culpable to them [. . .] I went back to that community every day, so if I messed something up I got to be bitched at for it, and I went back and fixed it. There's a real sense of culpability. (Steinkuehler, interview, 2007)

By taking the time to be active in world, researchers establish game or virtual world credibility which in turn leads to researcher credibility, in what our research participants framed as a directly proportional relationship, as illustrated in Figure 4:



**FIGURE 4. Relationship between player/resident credibility and researcher credibility**

To the extent that researchers spend time in world, become proficient players or active participants, and acquire an appropriate level of competence and skill, they earn trust — and residents/players are more likely to consent to participating in research. “Time in world” by itself is an important variable of researcher credibility.

### 3.5. Researcher Credibility: Being Transparent in World

Given their views of place and of character/person, it is also not surprising that all of the researchers we interviewed argued for being as transparent and as explicit as possible about one's role as a researcher in a virtual world. (However, none was conducting research that necessitated or called for deception.) When asked what recommendations she would make for other MMOG researchers, Steinkuehler remarked, “I had a couple policies that for me have worked very, very well. I'm not sure they work for everyone, but one of them was I had real transparency about who I was.” Krotoski felt the same way, recommending that *Second Life* researchers:

Be as explicit as possible. Tell everybody absolutely everything. Make sure you have so much documentation that it's overwhelming. So people know straight up you're not being a nefarious character, that there are no second reasons for what you're doing. Make sure you go through—these are all the things that I was thankful I heard about that I did—Make sure you go through the formal channels. Make sure that you go through moderators. Never do it without people's knowledge because if they find out it's going to ruin it for other people and other people aren't going to be able to gain from the knowledge. (Krotoski, personal interview, 2006)

Krotoski made sure that *Second Life* administrators at Linden Labs knew about her research — at the time Linden Labs had researchers sign a research agreement form, a procedure they have since discontinued — and when she was in-world she made sure that others in-worlders knew she was a researcher.

There's a couple of ways people know I'm a researcher . First of all I have it on my profile which is accessibly to everybody in the virtual world. They right click on my avatar, they see my profile, and I have immediately straight up, "I am a researcher, I am not watching you all the time, I'll let you know, my researcher involves this, if you're interested in taking part then instant message me and we can proceed from there." As a researcher, you can also join a formal group—a researcher's group—which means that when you are actively researching, say if you're doing participant observation, then you have the word "Researcher" over your avatar's head which tells people that there is surveillance and their behaviors might be formally recorded if that's what you're doing. And then the other ways you can do it [inform people of your research] is if you call formal focus groups . You simply say "I am currently in the process of researching if you don't want to participate then please leave now." That kind of thing. [...] There are more surreptitious ways of doing it, and I have mucked around with them initially to see how they'd work to see if they would be something that's a feasible alternative, but I felt a bit dirty. I didn't want to collect information and data without people's knowledge. (Krotoski, personal interview, 2006)

Another *Second Life* researcher, Robbins, also made sure to be explicit when researching:

I'm always clear about it when I'm conducting research in *Second Life*, to be as open and honest as you can, because I think it benefits the researcher frankly. You've got two choices when you go into *Second Life*, you can either be you in a digital form or you can be somebody else. If you're you in a digital form, then you should have the researcher tag above your head. Now my avatar is me. I've been Intellagirl [her avatar's name] 10 or 11 years now, she looks like me [see Figure 5-3], everybody knows it's me, so I can't pretend to not be doing research, so I should put the tag above my head. (Robbins, personal interview, 2007)

### Sarah "Intellagirl" Robbins



**FIGURE 5-3: Screenshot of Sarah Robbins' web page showing a photo of Robbins (on left) and her *Second Life* avatar Intellagirl (on right)**

Figuring out when and how to disclose oneself as a researcher is tricky for virtual world researchers, especially when so many have to negotiate conflicting advice on how to proceed. Lisa Galarnau was a gamer in *City of Heroes* for a year before she decided to conduct research. As she described to us, when she planned her research, she received conflicting advice about whether to be transparent about her role as a researcher:

Very early on [when getting IRB approval], Thomas Malaby and I had a talk when I was putting together my original ethics application. He had said, "Absolutely. You should disclose

in your profile that you're a researcher," whereas my supervisors [at my university] were saying, "No, you shouldn't." They were coming from this paradigm that thinks people disclose *less* when they know you're a researcher. But what I've found is that people disclose *more* when they know you're a researcher. (Galarneau, personal interview, 2007)

Steinkuehler also found people eager to talk with her as a researcher, noting that the "the majority of the people I work with [in *Lineage I & II*], they're so delighted to talk with someone who cares about their gaming." Krotoski in her work with *Second Life* found, however, that residents were not quite as open to research, in part because of concerns about intentions and about the types of data Krotoski sought to collect for her social networking research. As she explained:

I find that people are a lot more—they second guess you a lot more in virtual environments in terms of what your intentions are. Now that may be because I'm doing social network research and people think I'm doing marketing research and I'm going to start forcing people to read spam and all this kind of stuff. I've really noticed that people are much more frightened of the intentions of the researcher and are much less willing to participate it seems unless you're a formal member of the group, which is one of the reasons why I went into SL for a full year before I started collecting any data. [. . .] Individuals that I've contacted [about participating in research], they either ignore me completely, or they challenge me. Instant message and ask for more information. Or they're perfectly happy to contribute, no questions to ask and they move on. It's really, hugely a challenge to convince people that your intentions are what you say they are. [. . .] I've even had to write documents and make them available about the ethics of online research and the ethics of social networking research, so that people can see that I am who I say I am. I have made those freely and fully available on my web site. (Krotoski, personal interview, 2006)

Krotoski's approach to link her in-world profile to her out-of-world web sites was also a central approach for Steinkuehler:

The first thing I did, I really did not have a web presence before I started this work [researching MMOGs], and one thing I did was I immediately created a web site with real-life pictures. It was a little bit outside my comfort zone, but I did it because I felt like I can't ask people to sit around and tell me about their private life if I can't even share with them some of my own or at least enough to put a face on me . So there were really some huge issues around that, but that tended to help a lot because I feel like it kept me morally culpable to them and I feel like it kept the playing field a bit more even. (Steinkuehler, personal interview, 2007)

But MMOGs and virtual worlds are also huge spaces with thousands and even millions of participants so it's not always possible to be transparent with every person, instead there are levels of transparency depending on whether the emphasis for a gamer-researcher is falling on playing as gamer or playing as researcher. Depending on the context it may not be possible for a researcher to be "out" to all members in world . Researchers need to determine when they are researching and when they are gaming and what role(s) they are occupying at any given moment.

### **The Variability of Roles: Gamer-Researcher vs. RL Person**

All researchers, especially those working with ethnographic and participant-observation methodologies, have to navigate multiple roles, and this can be quite difficult at times for gamer-researchers (or researcher-

gamers). When discussing her work in *City of Heroes*, Galarneau discussed her dual roles as researcher and gamer:

If you know Constance Steinkuehler's work, she makes the point around ethics and participant-observation. In these environments, you know "we're gamers first and researchers second." I think that's a really important distinction in the way we think about our participation in these environments, but there is a lot of blurriness around what we would do as a player and what we do as a researcher. As shown by the fact that some of our most important research epiphanies come from moments when we're not even aware that we're researchers at that moment—in the best sort of ethnographic tradition. (Galarneau, interview, 2007)

To explain, Galarneau provided an example of how she would move from gamer-to-researcher within a gaming context:

I'd just be playing and leveling characters and going about my business and then an opportunity would arise where something interesting would be said or a particular player would emerge who would be quite interesting. There was, for example, one girl we had been playing with for about three hours, and I noticed that she hadn't been chatting. When I clicked on her profile I noticed that she was Japanese and it said in her profile that she didn't speak English. So I chatted to her and sure enough she didn't actually speak any English. This has been an example I've used in presentations I've done, how amazing it is to me how you cannot share a common language in this environment, yet she functioned perfectly well in the group by understanding semiotic clues. None of us knew that she wasn't engaged in the conversation—I just noticed after three hours playing with her that she hadn't said anything. I immediately started trying to talk with her and told her I was a researcher. So it was that sort of thing—at certain points I'd reveal myself as a researcher and ask if be okay to contact them later. (Galarneau, interview, 2007)

In his masters study of *City of Heroes*, Phill Alexander (2007), a gaming resesarcher and a Rhetoric and Writing doctoral student at Michigan State University, interviewed fellow gamers in three ways: (1) in-character in-world (toon talking to toon using in-world communciations); (2) out-of-character but in-world (Phill talking with "Sarah" but using in-world communications); and (3) out-of-character, out-of-world (Phill using email or chat to talk with "Sarah"). In the process, he and his research participants were continually shifting roles. As Phill explained in his thesis:

My next interview session—with Sarah [pseudonym]—started entirely in character, though we broke character mid-mission to talk for a bit then wove our out-of-character interview questions into our in-character gaming. This mix of gaming and interviewing pleased me; my major concern going into my research was that I wanted this to be a gamer talking to other gamers. I was afraid that since the first impression I created was that of the scholar with his consent forms and demographic survey I might never cultivate my gaming ethos. Each of my participants was eager to engage with me as a gamer first, however, giving respect to my research but never behaving as if the only reason we were playing was so that I could watch them then ask questions. The dynamic of the game itself, and the way I framed my interactions with my participants, maintained the sense that we were "playing" even when I shifted from playing to working. (Alexander, 2007, pp. 50-51)

Robbins approached the variability of roles by creating different avatars in *Second Life*. In addition to her primary avatar Intellagirl (see Figure 5-3 above), she has an .alt account:

I have an .alt , a second account, that I use for the areas of *Second Life* where frankly I don't want my avatar [Intellagirl] to be seen because I'm too notable . So if I want to go to an event, and I don't want to be bothered basically, I go in my .alt. But I can't not be a researcher. It's

still me at a keyboard. I may not officially be collecting results, but I'm still looking at everything with a researcher's eye. I can't turn it off. In the same sense—if I'm using the intellgirl avatar, I can't not be an educator and an academic because that's how I'm known. I could no more be Intellagirl at a beach party and think no one's going to ask me about writing *Second Life for Dummies* than I could go as my other avatar and not have other people ask me about other things. So it depends upon what identity you go in as. (Robbins, personal interview, 2007)

The multiple, overlapping roles of being gamer and research was something Steinkuehler also experienced in the years she studied and played in *Lineage*:

There were lots of things I did in game that would have been considered scandalous by a non-digital native. 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.<sup>19</sup> [ . . . ] Not self-monitoring too much while in game also built me a lot of trust. When I'm in there playing, doing player-versus-player game play and playing just as the hard as the rest of them, I think that people started to realize that she's not just here to observe. But when was I in each role—that's really tough to say. (Steinkuehler, interview 2007)

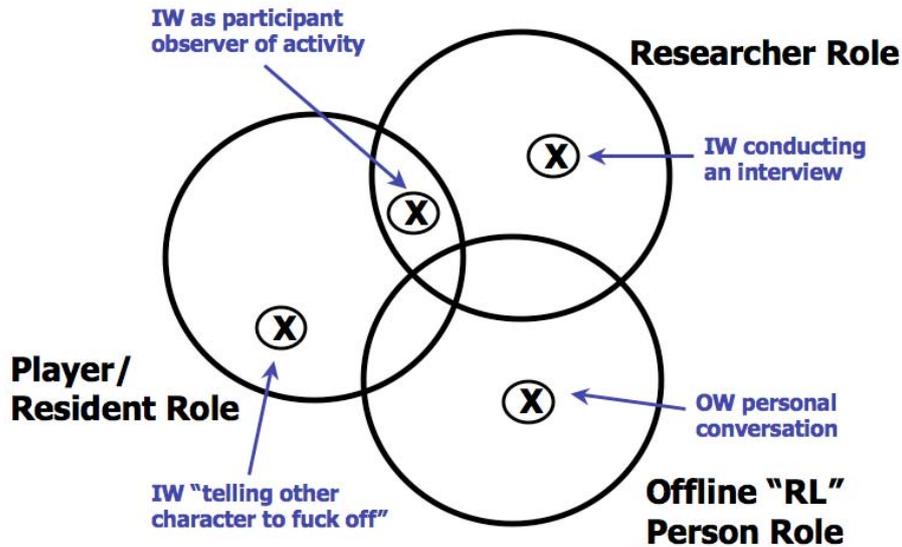
And sometimes its tough for others—either academics or gamers—to negotiate the various roles as well, as Steinkuehler (2004) explained in a post in *Terra Nova*.

However, I have occasionally had what I see as an uncomfortable bad boundary mix-up. For example, I've had academic colleagues I've never met before log onto the game and asking to join my clan for research purposes. I've also had (though far rarer) a gamer mistake my in-game role as clan leader for some sort of beyond-game role as counselor (I'm trained as a cognitive psychologist, not counseling psychologist) calling me at home at 2:00 am in the throes of a personal domestic crisis (my personal information is as easy to find on the web as anyone else's). Clearly the way I navigate the research vs. play issue is idiosyncratic, built to fit my own needs and what I'm ethically and personally comfortable with. And both instances had a happy enough ending. But surely there are alternative ways to negotiate the sticky issues involved with being both a gamer and a games researcher that might, in the long run, avoid the occasional SNAFU in the first place. If so, I'd love to hear them. Learning the hard way is er... the hard way. (Steinkuehler, 2004).

Figure 5 highlights the multiple roles that researchers occupy: gamer/resident, researcher, off-line, “real life” person.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> In many virtual worlds, particularly MMOGs such as *Lineage* which Steinkuehler participated in, it is common for players to swear and to tell someone who annoys them to STFU, so her use of such language as a player is an important part of being a player and, as she noted, to do so helped build her credibility in the game.

<sup>20</sup> In the Venn diagram of Figure 5 we represent each role by one circle, but within each role there are, of course, many roles. For example, as a gamer, a person might simultaneously be a combatant with character X and a mission member with person Y or a guild leader talking with other guild leaders in one communication channel and a team member in another.



**FIGURE 5. Multiplicity of roles for researcher**

Sometimes they are clearly in the player or resident role — e.g., when Steinkuehler-as-player tells another player to “fuck off.” Other times they are clearly researchers — e.g., when conducting a formal interview in-world. There are also times when the researcher is in the off-line, “real life” self, as Steinkuehler presumably was at 2 am before she was literally called into her other role as guild leader. But oftentimes researchers occupy the ambiguous spaces between roles, or they fluctuate rapidly back and forth between multiple roles — e.g., when Alexander moves back and forth between player and researcher in his interactions with Sarah. Because of the fluidity and movement among roles, when gamer-researchers are in-world interacting or observing, on a case-by-case basis they need to decide whether the communications they are participating on or witnessing are game-play or research data and too whether it is data for which they might just quote or if informed consent is needed. In short, the ethical principles and priorities can shift depending on the relational role the researcher has vis-à-vis other players and research participants. One ethic cannot govern all rhetorical interactions. This point has implications for several issues of research ethics, including informed consent, privacy, and representation of identity.

### **Factors Influencing Informed Consent: Methodological Interaction, Private vs. Public Contexts, & Topic Sensitivity**

Our findings and discussion in Section 2.6 highlight the complexity and variability of the researcher role: when collecting data in virtual or game worlds, the researcher has multiple roles — in a sense, multiple rhetorical interactions — with virtual world participants/residents. In MMOGs and virtual worlds, just as in real-world settings, individuals (as avatars and “real-world” persons) interact in different, contextually-based ways, some more personal and private, others more distant and public. Virtual worlds are comprised of diverse spaces and places within which there are many locations and many communities (e.g., guilds, mission teams, club

members, land owners etc.) that operate according to different social and cultural norms. And, we would argue, each of those places or communities is subject to a distinct ethic .

Here is where rhetoric's emphasis on understanding context and audience is helpful and important for researchers seeking to and examine what kinds of spaces and places people have created and are using in MMOGs and virtual worlds. The researchers we interviewed all carefully charted the various environments in which they sought to collect data so as to learn the community norms and expectations — what are acceptable ethical practices in one place (a nightclub or other public meeting place, for example) may not be acceptable in another (someone's personal land-holding or in a guild meeting).

But the type of space/place is only one factor guiding ethical decisions. Another key factor is the method(s) researchers use to collect data, and the degree of interaction with participants involved in that method. Given various levels of interaction and data collection, and given a context-based understanding of public and private places, the researchers we interviewed did not just have a one-size-fits-all understanding of informed consent for their studies. As Steinkuehler explained about her work with *Lineage*:

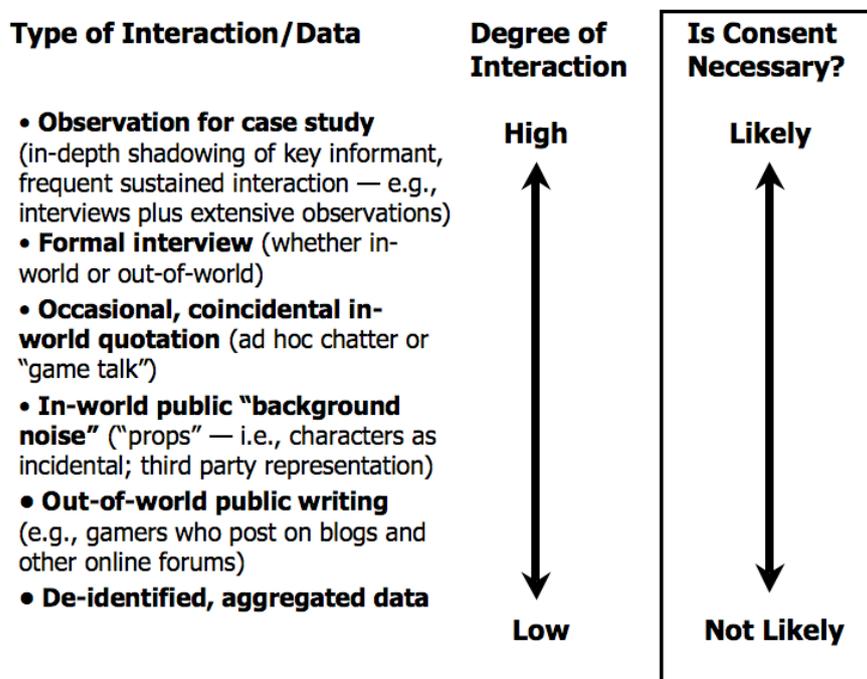
I had core participants that I talked with on the phone a lot that I interviewed both formally and informally. I did a lot of interaction with [them], not all of which was reported as data. They were my core informants. Then I had participants who were people that I interviewed who I might talk to maybe only once and I interviewed them in game. And all those people I got permission from. And on top of that I had people who posted to forums or people who are in the background of interactions, and what do you do with those people? Depending on the context—if it was in game and it's public talk then I treated it like chattering in a coffee shop, it's fair game. Keeping in mind that I wouldn't use data that was scandalous in any way. So there was a lot of variation in who I considered participants and needed consent from and who I considered—and I was about to say background noise, but they're not noise— more part of the environment, not full blown participants. (Steinkuehler, interview, 2007)

When working with key informants and interviewees, the need to quote with informed consent is clear, but the background talk—the chatter and noise (and, as we discuss below, visuals) of the virtual world are less clear. In his study of *City of Heroes*, Alexander (2007) found that:

One of the first dilemmas I had to address is the fact that *City of Heroes* has a “broadcast” function in chat. This input chat text so that it is sent to everyone on the server. There is also “local” chat text which appears any time a toon is close to the toon chatting. Combining the facts that one cannot escape broadcast text or local text, there were many comments in my transcripts that were not actually part of my interviews/gaming interactions. This was complicated a step further when I coded transcripts of occasions where one of my participants invited me into a larger team including people who were not part of my research, since the people not involved in my research were not always aware that I was logging what was being said. There was, as a result, a volume of text in my data that was only questionably “mine” to work with. (Alexander, 2007, p. 52).

Drawing from the views of Alexander, Steinkuehler and other researchers, in Figure 6 we list some of the main levels of research interaction for MMOG and virtual world research, noting whether the interaction level

between researcher and participant is high or low and thus, according to our participants, whether informed consent is likely warranted.<sup>21</sup>



**FIGURE 6. Relationship between type/degree of research interaction and consent**

When a researcher conducts an in-depth case study of a person or avatar, that is a high level of interaction that typically indicates a high need for informed consent, as does a formal interview (whether conducted in-world or out-of-world). But the other types of interactions are not as clear and that is when considerations of the public or private nature of the communications must be considered as well as the sensitivity of the topics being discussed.

In her research on *City of Heroes*, Galarneau private communications to be off-limits for her research unless she obtained informed consent:

If it's a private conversation—“tells” or “whispers” versus conversation in a group— it's a *private* conversation. Given the literature around spaces and public conversations etc., I pretty much decided that any conversation I had with anybody where it was very clear it was a private conversation, I would not use even anonymized without explicit consent. (Galarneau, interview, 2007)

But, whether working with texts, images (or increasingly, video and sound), the researchers whom we interviewed all recognized, as did Galarneau, that some communications in world were public and open to research without informed consent. Malaby felt that in virtual worlds (just as in off-line worlds), it's important for researchers to be able to research public actions and utterances that they observe:

<sup>21</sup> In the United States, *interaction* between researcher and participant is one of several key determinants for whether a research activity involves human subjects and thus whether informed consent is needed. See Section 46.102 “Definitions” of the Code of Federal Regulations <http://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/humansubjects/guidance/45cfr46.htm>.

If someone says something publicly with no expectation of privacy, then I think that utterance itself is fair game for some kind of research. Now attribution is another question. I do think there is a responsibility ethically on whether you can safely attribute that action or that quote, but that's a different thing than the notion of whatever I do, even in public, is mine and not available to researchers. I don't think that works as a fair logic for policy as regards to social science research in general. (Malaby, interview, 2007)

Because the boundaries between public and private are so blurred in virtual worlds, it not only takes "good ethical training" (to use Malaby's phrase), but also deep immersion within the world being studied.<sup>22</sup> Although, as we have noted throughout this article, there are commonalities across virtual worlds, each virtual world (and specific areas within each world) are unique. What Steinkuehler found as she prepared for and then conducted her own research is that it's difficult to draw standards across virtual worlds because:

It seems like every qualitative researcher who has studied these virtual worlds has their own understanding of what's public and private. And the ones I know and have worked with have all have decided so based on being a participant and not just an observer. They understand how the community views public and private. But the problem with that is that it doesn't leave much consensus across virtual worlds. So it's really hard to know, "Am I doing the right thing for sure?" because there's no model that says, "Here's where you can't go and here's where you can." So you feel vulnerable and you feel like you have to triple-check everything because you're worried that in some way you might do harm. (Steinkuehler, interview, 2007)

In Steinkuehler's response we see a perspective highly attuned to rhetorical context and audience: What type of place (community) is it? What are the views of the people (audiences) resident in that place? What are the communication conventions and expectations of that place? Her ethical decisions are guided by universal principles (such as, Do no harm to the community) but in applying those principles she uses a context-specific lens.

One way, of course, that the researchers we interviewed sought to reduce harm was by deidentifying quotations (and being selective of in-world screen captures<sup>23</sup>). As Galarneau explained:

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<sup>22</sup> What participants of MMOGs and virtual worlds expect in relation to privacy is an important matter. James Hudson and Amy Bruckman (2004) conducted an empirical study of chatroom participants' perceived expectations for privacy and their attitudes toward having their communications researched. They found out that even in publicly accessible forums, many participants did expect privacy and were not comfortable with their communications being researched. Hudson & Bruckman are careful to point out that their findings will likely generalize to other types of online environments to the extent that they are similar to chat environments. Although many aspects of communication in MMOGs and virtual worlds are similar to chat environments, we would hesitate to draw a direct parallel. Clearly, a study such as Hudson & Bruckman's is needed for specific worlds (and the diverse spaces/places within each world) because researchers need more empirical evidence of participants' differing expectations for privacy in various MMOGs and virtual worlds.

<sup>23</sup> MMOG and virtual world researchers don't only have to consider verbal representations, but also visual as well when taking screen shots or video screen capture of in-world events. For Steinkuehler, working in *Lineage I*, this was not an issue because the avatar selection is limited to a set of similar characters so avatar representation is not unique or traceable to individuals. But in MMOGs and virtual worlds such *City of Heroes* some customization that is possible and in *Second Life* avatar representation has the potential (for those with the digital know-how) to be as unique as "real world" representation. Alexander (2007), working in *City of Heroes*, proceeded as follows:

While I decided that it was ethically sound to display screen captures of my participants, since I asked each of them for permission and because their appearance isn't unique, there were also concerns with "collateral damage" while taking screenshots. In highly public places it was difficult to frame shots that didn't include other toons, and from time to time a toon would walk into the frame just as I captured. I have cropped out these other

If it was a conversation that happened in a public space, even if it was a conversation that happened within the context of a team in *City of Heroes*, I'm going to consider that a public space.<sup>24</sup> But it would be doubly anonymized, if you will. By *doubly anonymized*, I mean that person would have had a handle and I would also change that and give them a fictional handle. The analog in the physical world, which is why I've more or less decided this [quoting chats logged in public places] is okay, is if I were standing at Times Square in New York City and someone walked by and said something in passing that was interesting. I'd feel free to write that into my description of Times Square as a conversation I overheard between two anonymous people.

The other thing about it is—and this is where sensibility comes into play—my understanding of the community and whether I feel it would be personally defensible to have done that[quoted the conversation]. If at any time I thought any of those people would be upset about me using that snippet of conversation, then I wouldn't do it. I would not use anything contentious; it would be purely illustrative. I would use something simply to illustrate an interaction between two characters around knowledge sharing, "Look at how player A told player B how to find the thing he wanted to find." (Galarneau, interview, 2007)

Steinkuehler's approach for determining what was public text or communications for study, also involved considerations of sensitivity, and her processes were as follows:

I refuse to use any of the data that would show anyone in a poor light or raise any issues about their own integrity. For example, I have complete permission to use things off forums that are game-related, so I have a waiver against having to get consent but that waiver applies only under certain conditions—one of those conditions is that there's nothing, that it's complete mundane, innocuous data. There's nothing that I'm pulling that could possibly jeopardize anyone's reputation, their job, their family. There's nothing in it that could be scandalous in anyway. [. . .] So when a conflict comes up, I'll talk about it in general terms, but I don't write about or use those data points at all. I think that's probably because it is so messy to me, that I feel like at that point I have to use judgment as someone who is a member of that community. (Steinkuehler, interview, 2007)

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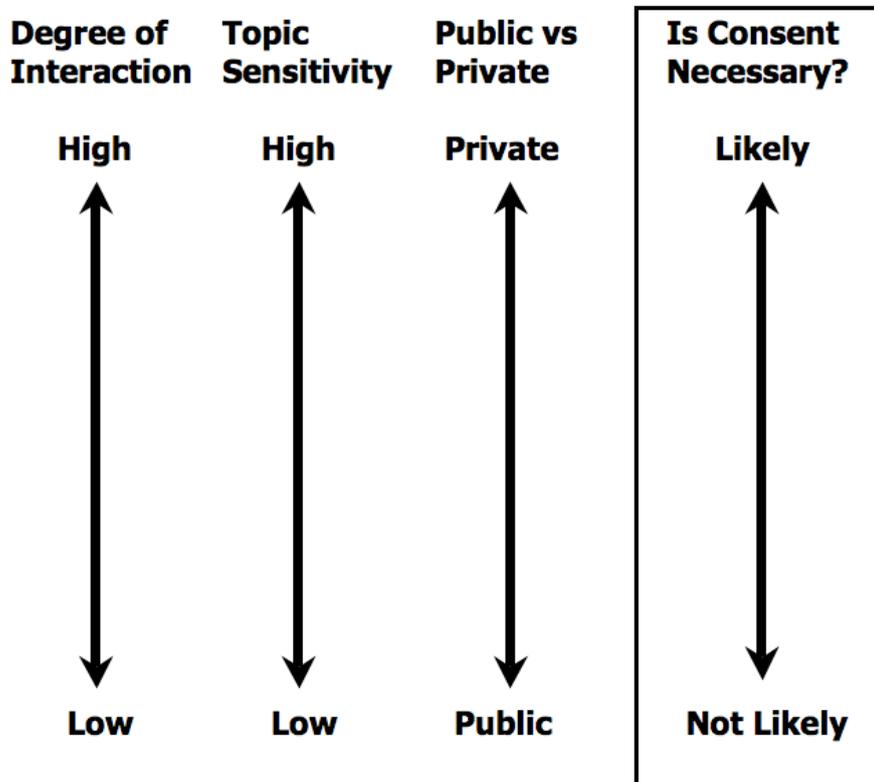
toons where possible. When I couldn't crop a toon out of the photo, I have utilized the Photoshop "smear" tool to transform these accidental targets into unidentified blobs of color. (Alexander, 2007, p. 53)

Krotoski when working in *Second Life* used screen captures in her reporting, but, as she explained, she did not screen capture any other avatars:

But they [the screen captures] are always of me. I never use any other avatars unless I've asked them specifically. What's interesting I that *Second Life* has a snapshot facility. You literally push a button on the GUI [graphical-user interface] and it takes a snapshot. There are a lot of snapshots that happen at public events and if people are blogging, they'll take the snapshot and blog about them. I think that's for personal consumption as it were, but when it's something that's formal and deals with research then that's different. I think the crux is the analyzing—it's putting your own thoughts on something. It's picking apart something without necessarily the participants' involvement, except as data points. I think that's why I am quite insistent upon anonymizing and only taking snapshots of myself. (Krotoski, interview, 2006)

<sup>24</sup> Galarneau felt that because "Chatlogging is native to *City of Heroes* [. . .] people know it's part of the environment that anyone can turn on, and that a lot of people do log chats," it was acceptable ethical practice for her to log the chats. She chose to research *City of Heroes* in part because logging chats was native to the interface and gaming world, whereas in *World of Warcraft* (at least at the time of her study), chat logging could only be done with a third-party plug-in and she felt that "because the logging function isn't native to that piece of software then there'd be more of a surveillance kind of thing versus *City of Heroes*" (Galarneau, interview, 2007).

These comments reflect that issues beyond simply whether a site is public or private guide researchers' decision making. In addition to type of research method (and the degree of interaction involved in that method), "topic sensitivity" is also a variable that researchers take into consideration, as Figure 7 visualizes:



**FIGURE 7. Key variables influencing decision about informed consent**

Of course, Figure 7 begs an important question: What is a "sensitive topic," and in whose opinion? What was considered sensitive by researchers we interviewed generally fell into one of two general categories:

*Sensitive based on nature of information:*

Personal information or individual views

--that would expose a person to ridicule, embarrassment, or negative public exposure;

--that pertain to illegal activity, personal health, sexual activity, religious beliefs, sexual preferences, family background, traumatic or emotionally distressing life experiences (death, injury, abuse), bodily functions, idiosyncratic behaviors

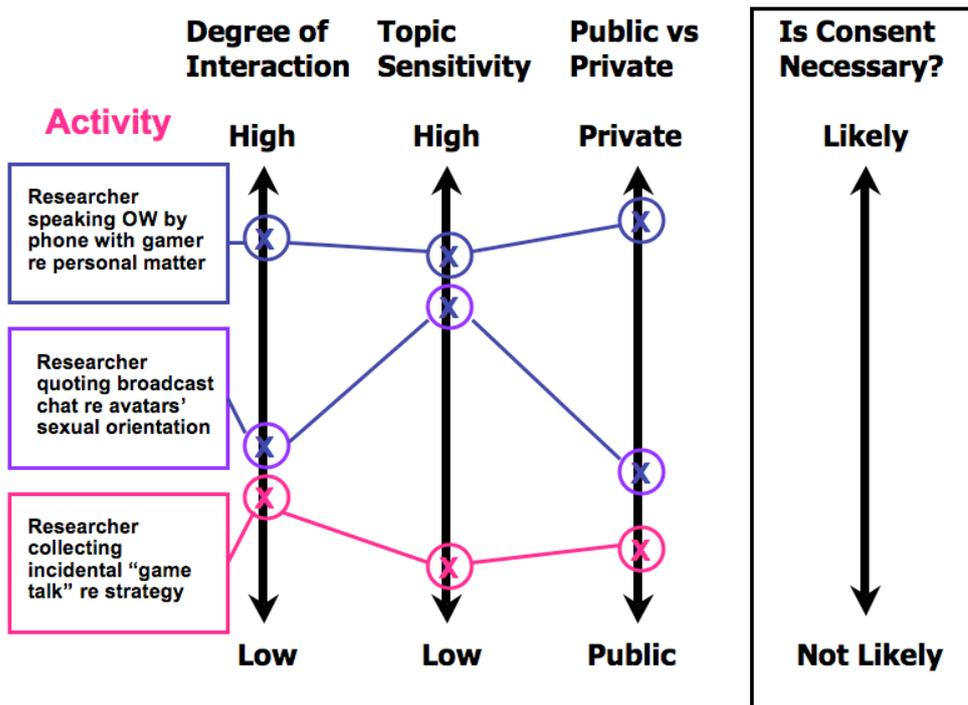
*Sensitive based on views of individual or community:*

Personal information or individual views *that the person or community regards as sensitive and wants to keep confidential*

Thus, the researcher should regard certain topics as inherently sensitive, (e.g., those regarding an individual's personal health or sexual practices). (Even for such topics, of course, one can distinguish between a person sharing information about their cancer treatments versus mentioning that they have a headache.) However, the researchers that we interviewed invested with considerable authority the views of the individual and/or community regarding what was sensitive. In some community contexts, members might be quite comfortable talking publicly about their sexual orientation — in other words, in some contexts sexual

orientation would not be a “sensitive topic.” In other communities — ones where there is a much stronger expectation of privacy or trust — it would be.

The question of whether to seek informed consent is thus complicated by a number of contextual variables. It is by no means a simple determination that if the site is public, informed consent is not necessary, period, end of discussion. Rather, the researchers we interviewed made their decision about informed consent based on multiple variables and using a complex process that weighed these variables contextually. Figure 8 is our representation of this process.



**FIGURE 8. Key variables influencing decision about informed consent, with different research projects mapped on to the grid**

We offer Figure 8, as with the other figures in this article, as a visual heuristic: It is a type of decision chart, but not like the OHRP decision charts that lay out clear yes/no paths to a definite conclusion. Rather this chart works as a method of taxonomizing cases (in this example, the “cases” are different kinds of research activities) and of comparing cases according to key variables. In Figure 8 we have taken three different samples research activities (on the left side of the chart) and rates each according to three key variables: degree of methodological interaction, topic sensitivity, and private or public nature of the activity. The first activity — “Researcher speaking out-of world by phone with gamer regarding a personal matter” (an example from Steinkuehler’s research) — is clearly an activity requiring a high degree of individual interaction about a sensitive topic in a private context. Not much debate here, this is a paradigm case where consent is absolutely required. Similarly, the third activity — “Researcher collecting incidental game talk about a game strategy” (taken from Galarneau’s research) — is a paradigm case clearly showing an instance in which informed consent is not necessary.

The middle case is the more complicated one. The researcher is picking up background chat that is nonetheless about a sensitive topic (an avatar's sexual orientation). Is this usable data without informed consent? Here is where the particular "sensibility" (Galarneau) and "judgement" (Steinkuehler) of the researcher are required to make a decision across multiple variables. Here is a research situation requiring, first, recognition of the rhetorical complexity of the interaction, followed by analysis of the context and deliberation with others (both in the world, in the research community). Figure 8, by operating with the rhetorical topos of analogy, highlights the complexity of the middle activity vis -à-vis the other types of research activity, where the decision about informed consent is much clearer.

Yet, it is important to note that the chart does not generate a single definite answer. Rather it leads to probable conclusions. Used heuristically, it is possible for researchers to chart other types of research activities on the grid (in the left column). It is also possible to add new variables or to assign them variable weights. (For example, "topic sensitivity" might be weighted more heavily in a virtual world like *Second Life* than in a game world like *World of Warcraft*.)

## CONCLUSION

Collectively, the researchers we interviewed emphasized that those seeking to conduct research in virtual worlds consider the following approaches:

- Recognize that research in virtual worlds cannot be conducted exactly as off-line, "real-world" spaces and places;
- Recognize that no given location in virtual worlds can be clearly and unproblematically labeled simply as "public" or "private";
- Respect privacy of individuals (persons and avatars), particularly with (a) high level of interaction, or (b) sensitive topic;
- Earn credibility through time in world;
- Treat the game/virtual world as "real" — or at least insofar as the gamers/residents do;
- Respect norms of the community/ies, especially when considering what data to collect and whether to obtain informed consent or not;
- Strive for transparency by identifying themselves as researcher when in researcher role.

These researchers all invoked general principles of research ethics, but they assigned considerable authority to local conditions (e.g., the norms and expectations for a given world or game) and their ethical decision making was highly context sensitive — or, as we would put it, highly rhetorical.

By rhetorical here we mean that researchers attend to the complexities and particularities of context, of place, of situation, of players and residents, and of methodological type. And yes, this is a messy proposition. Such a decision-making process is complex, involving weighing multiple variables as well the specifics of context. And yet rhetoric provides some tools and procedures for making this messiness manageable. Through the use of heuristics — and also, we would argue, through other rhetorical mechanisms such as audience analysis, situational analysis, analogic reasoning (comparison/contrast), etc. — researchers can

systematically and pragmatically address their research contexts and make ethical decisions regarding how to conduct research in those contexts. In McKee & Porter (2008), we offered visual heuristics for doing complex audience analysis and for doing topical analysis of research issues. (Figure 12 in this article is an example of such an analysis). In this article, we extend these heuristic techniques and apply them to research in MMOGs and virtual worlds.

Researchers can benefit from doing what in rhetoric terminology would be called “situational analysis,” a technique for analyzing the “rhetorical situation” (Bitzer, 1968) for which one is developing an argument or, as the case may be, designing a research study. In fact, the researchers we interviewed are already doing such a situational analysis: thoroughly examining the particular circumstances of their research context, taking into careful account the particular constraints and exigencies at play in that research scene and, most importantly, the needs of audiences (avatars, players) in those scenes. They are also doing comparative and analogic analysis, comparing different kinds of research settings, methodologies, and types of data — within the same study and across different studies — to arrive at their decisions.

This approach views ethical decision making as a process of inquiry rather than as an answer to a question (a product). This approach sees research ethics as a continuous process of inquiry, interaction, and critique throughout an entire research study, one involving regular checking and critique; interaction and communication with various communities; and heuristic, self-introspective challenging of one's assumptions, theories, designs, and practices. The art of doing research well requires building this form of rhetorical-ethical process into one's entire research practice. We believe that, with its emphasis on process and production, this rhetorical perspective has much to contribute, of procedural and productive value, to ethical decision making for researchers studying MMOGs and virtual worlds.

In short, we believe that ethical decision making must be systematic in order to be valid—IMHO is not a sufficient ethical argument. One of the moves we are making in our approach is to argue for a systematic, taxonomic, *and rhetorical* procedure for addressing ethical issues that emphasizes two things: (a) that researchers recognize the particular circumstances of each new case at the same time (b) that they situate their case in relation to other parallel cases, precedents, procedural guidelines, and, importantly, community expectations — both the expectations of the community/ies they are researching as well as the expectations of their own disciplinary community/ies.

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