ETHNOGRAPHY AND VIRTUAL WORLDS

A Handbook of Method

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spike in play sessions at ten o'clock in the morning Pacific standard time in a certain game, but will not reveal why the spike is occurring. Participant observation and interview data make quantitative data more useful by making it more meaningful.

In this chapter we have discussed methods beyond participant observation and interviewing that may be useful to ethnographers of virtual worlds. The remarkably wide range of such methods reflects the open-ended and flexible character of ethnographic research. It indicates the importance of organizing a range of data collection strategies, carefully linked to our research questions and analytical goals. Including such a broad set of methods in a research project need not compromise its ethnographic character, so long as such approaches do not overwhelm or delegitimize the central methods of participant observation and interviewing.

This is even the case with regard to the quantitative methods we have just discussed. We noted in chapter 3 that when quantitative approaches are seen as more scientific, ethnographers may find others attempting to subordinate their research to such work, to the degree that ethnographies are sometimes seen to merely "confirm" what quantitative researchers discover. It is absolutely not the case that ethnographic research would be better in every case if it included a quantitative component. However, when not placed on a pedestal above participant observation and other qualitative approaches, quantitative methods can play a valuable role in some ethnographic research projects.

CHAPTER EIGHT

ETHICS

8.1 THE PRINCIPLE OF CARE

Ethnographic inquiry is as varied as human activity itself. No set of a priori rules of ethics can predict the range of situations to which ethnographers must be prepared to respond with tact, sensitivity, and caution. Ethnographic research may lead us to private, sensitive aspects of social life, as well as the routine activities we normally study. Whatever situations we encounter in ethnographic research, we approach them with the guiding principle of *care*. Care is a core value to be internalized and acted on through the vigilance and commitment of the researcher. Any sets of research ethics guidelines and dicta will be ineffective if researchers do not have embedded into their practice strong values establishing ethical behavior built on the principle of care.

While ethical considerations should be designed into an ethnographic study from the outset and have long been a concern for internet researchers (AoIR 2002; Buchanan 2004; Buchanan and Ess 2009), we chose to begin our discussion of ethics in chapter 8 of this handbook because ethical principles for any research arise directly from the specific practices and contingencies of that research. In other words, we realized that readers needed to understand what it is that ethnographers do before rationales for ethical practice would make sense. This chapter is perhaps one of the most important in the handbook. Its placement after discussion of other matters does not mean we consider ethics an afterthought; rather, it is an indispensable set of concerns issuing directly from the aims and activities of ethnographic investigation.

The principle of care arises in part from asymmetrical power relations and imbalance of benefit between investigator and investigated. The investigator generally gains far more than the informant, garnering benefits that translate to jobs, money, and professional recognition. While informants may enjoy talking about their lives and culture to a researcher, they are unlikely to attain benefits at the scale ethnographers do. A key consequence of this asymmetry is the imperative that the ethnographer "take good care" of informants. This notion goes beyond simply doing no harm; it means ensuring, to the greatest extent possible, that informants gain some reward from participating in research. There are many opportunities for doing good, and each fieldsite offers up unique possibilities to which we should remain alert.

Taking care is, of course, an ideal. In practice whatever good we do is inevitably spread unequally throughout the groups we study. Still, it has been our observation that the relations of trust and mutual respect that characterize sound ethnographic research generally leave a substantial positive residue of good feeling and the satisfaction of genuine human exchange.

While the principle of care applies to all ethnographic research, ethical practice within virtual worlds comes with its own nuances (McKee and Porter 2009). The ease with which inexperienced researchers can enter virtual worlds without having thought through ethical concerns (indeed, in some cases without even being aware of what the concerns are) makes ethics a particularly critical topic for virtual worlds research. It is quite possible to overlook the fact that avatars are under the agency of real people with feelings and rights. We have seen inexperienced researchers conducting research in virtual worlds without the permission of participants, publicly blogging research results using real avatar names, and conducting "experiments" through deceptive practices.

We want to note that while at least two virtual worlds, LambdaMOO and Second Life, have formally addressed the issue of research and provided guidelines for appropriate behavior, we believe frank conversations about these issues need to take place within the research community itself. We may not always agree with guidelines established by corporations and user communities—guidelines that might impose what we consider undue restrictions on our ability to investigate this important arena of human activity. For instance, corporations have in the past created guidelines that researchers may not conduct research without written permission, or that all data collected during fieldwork are the company's property. Whether or not we adhere to these guidelines represents an ethical (and perhaps legal) judgment to be decided by the individual researcher.

To place the principle of care in the context of specific issues that arise during ethnographic research, we identify eight fundamental areas in which ethnographers should consider the ethics of the impacts of their research on informants. These areas—informed consent, mitigation of institutional risk, anonymity, deception, sex and intimacy, compensation, taking leave, and accurate portrayal—are also pertinent to physical world ethnographic research. In the discussion that follows, we emphasize their application to fieldwork in virtual worlds.

8.2 INFORMED CONSENT

The notion of informed consent originated in the world of biomedical research in the context of laboratory- and clinic-based studies. The earliest concerns arose after World War II in outrage at Nazi medical experimentation (see Office of Human Subjects Research n.d.). The Nuremberg Code, pursuant to these concerns, specified that "voluntary consent" is "absolutely essential" in biomedical research, and that experimentation should yield results "for the good of society" (ibid.).

Despite the Nuremberg Code, the infamous Tuskegee experiments, which began in 1932 in Alabama, were carried out until 1973 when a class-action lawsuit was filed against the perpetrator, the U.S. Public Health Service. The Tuskegee Syphilis Study followed 399 low-income African American men with syphilis to determine how the disease spreads and affects the body. Even when penicillin became the standard cure for syphilis (in 1947), the men were not treated so the researchers could continue data collection. Finally public health workers leaked the story to the media and the lawsuit ensued (Reverby 2009). Unbelievably, it was not until 1997 that the government apologized and President Clinton declared the study "shameful"—as it most certainly was.

In addition to risky biomedical research, psychological experiments have also been the site of arguably unethical behavior. Experiments that involve deception (and thus lack informed consent) may leave subjects feeling angry, betrayed, foolish, or even traumatized. Milgram (1974), for example, asked subjects to administer electric shocks to others and urged the subjects to continue the shocks even when those being shocked cried out. The shocks were in fact a ruse, but the subjects did not know that during the experiment. Milgram's experimental design appears highly dubious to many, yet psychologists still debate its ethical implications. Some psychologists argue that deceptive practice is acceptable if it does not cause "significant harm," and that the Milgram experiments are morally justifiable because of the scientific knowledge gained (Bortolotti and Mameli 2006:263). Bortolotti and Mameli note that assessing the harm from any particular experiment requires post hoc empirical research. We question, however, whether we have the means by which to assess what will cause "significant harm" in experiments that stretch the bounds of what would appear, prima facie, to hold potential for harm. If we cannot know in advance if harm will occur because determination of harm is "an empirical question" (ibid. 264), then acceptability is unknown. How can informed consent be "informed" when the nature of potential harm is not assessed until after the fact? For experiments as questionable as those conducted by Milgram, many researchers (including us) find deceptive practice unacceptable.

In response to the Tuskegee experiments and other violations, protocols were established to ensure, to the greatest degree possible, that human subjects are aware of the risks they take by participating in an experiment (Schrag 2009a). Such awareness remains a major concern of administrators, supervisors, and funding agencies. The notion of informed consent follows directly from the Nuremberg Code in which "voluntary consent" prescribes that a subject "should have sufficient knowledge and comprehension of the elements of the subject matter involved as to enable him to make an . . . enlightened decision" regarding whether to participate (Nuremberg 1949). Participation in biomedical research is now attained when subjects read and sign consent forms demonstrating that they have received pertinent information about the research.

However, translating notions of informed consent derived from biomedical research to the very different arena of ethnographic research presents difficulties. We cannot straightforwardly map the notion of being informed about the nature of a biomedical experiment to being informed about an ethnographic study—the two are very different.

A key consideration when evaluating differences is that we must be honest with ourselves that informants are less likely to understand the nature of ethnographic research than to understand a biomedical experiment. Typically, informants (even educated ones) do not apprehend the broader outcomes of social scientific work—especially at the beginning of a study—and know little about ethnography. People often agree to participate in ethnographic research because it seems harmless, and because they like the ethnographer and want to be helpful. They may also be curious. By contrast, in biomedical research, while participants generally do not meet the researchers carrying out the study (i.e., the principal investigators), they typically do grasp that a new treatment is under investigation and sign consent forms showing they understand that their participation can yield valuable (even lifesaving) information about how and whether a treatment works. It is unclear if informed consent—in the Nuremberg Code sense—is generally achieved in the context of ethnographic research. The filling out of forms demanding consent and the

obtaining of signatures may merely be ritualized activity that mimics biomedical practice but does not end in subject comprehension.

This situation may at first appear alarming. But returning to the fundamental principles of the Nuremberg Code, we perceive that its raison d'être lies in the existence of the very real risks to subjects of biomedical experimentation. Ethnographic research almost never carries such risks. Ethnography results in neither bodily harm nor psychological distress: it typically carries what is termed "informational risk," the risk that private information could be made public. Ethnographers' objects of study are human culture and society; we need not tinker with the human body to learn what we want to know. Ethnographic research is centered on long-term field study in which trust and rapport with informants are essential; psychological distress is not part of this scenario. We do not, for example, deliberately make informants feel uncomfortable to see what happens, as may occur in psychological experiments—such an act would obviate the very possibility of ethnographic study.

Having said this, it is important to emphasize that as ethnographers we are obligated to do as much as possible to reveal to our informants the nature and purpose of our studies. Providing information regarding aims and methods is necessary to establish and sustain good relations. It is up to the ethnographer to explain the research to informants, and, at the inception of a study, to clearly identify oneself as an ethnographer. In one of T.L.'s studies she used, for example, the ability to attach the phrase "Avatar Research" and a URL to her avatar so that when people in the world clicked on her (as everyone did to see each other's details), they could then visit the website for the project to read additional information about it, as well as see the consent form. Similarly, the first sentence of Tom's Second Life avatar profile stated he was an anthropologist conducting research. Bonnie placed a halo over her avatar head (chosen by study participants!) for research she conducted on business uses of Second Life to mark her role as ethnographer. It is not of course always necessary to change one's avatar, but this may be convenient and useful in some settings.

Keeping participants informed about the research is an ongoing imperative. This obligation does not end with a signed consent form. As the American Anthropological Association's Statement on Ethics indicates: "The informed consent process is necessarily dynamic and continuous; the process should be initiated as part of project design and continue through implementation as an ongoing dialogue and negotiation with those studied" (AAA 1986). During the lengthy life cycle of an ethnographic study, we have many opportunities to converse with informants about why we are conducting the research. Some informants may, over time, develop broader interests in the ethnographer's goals, and we can nurture dialogue about these topics.

Depending on the group structure, obtaining initial informed consent can be accomplished in a variety of ways. It is a benefit that online communities usually provide a variety of channels of communication. In her University of There research, for instance, Celia first approached university staff inworld seeking their "blessing" for the project. The consent form was then posted on the group's forum and to their email list. The posts described the research and linked to the online consent form. At the start of each university class, the instructor would give the researcher the opportunity to verify that those in attendance were consenting to participate and had signed the form. In only two cases did participants opt out of signing the form, and in each case the research team avoided collecting their data.

While we encourage finding creative ways to obtain consent forms from all participants, not all situations provide a structured setting in which to do so. In many contexts it can be impractical or disruptive to ask informants to sign consent forms. As a result, awareness of a researcher's identity in the online fieldsite will vary—from those who know us well, to those who only occasionally interact with us and thus regard us as just another online participant, to those with whom we have only the most fleeting of encounters. In some settings, such as battlegrounds or arenas in World of Warcraft, Bonnie could not explain that she was an ethnographer because the interactions were short and composed of players randomly teamed together across servers only for the short duration of a match. Most people in Second Life who knew Tom during his research were aware that he was an ethnographer, but if he was visiting a place for the first time not everyone would know this right away, and indeed many people never learned this information.

In such contexts researchers must consider possible risks to those observed. Bonnie felt there was no risk in reporting anonymous comments she recorded from battlegrounds and arenas, and she has done so in her publications. T.L. has also used material from hubs in game worlds, such as the main area outside the bank in Orgrimmar (a major city), in World of Warcraft. Similarly, Tom has reported anonymous comments overheard in Second Life shopping malls. In our view it is legitimate to see subscription-based virtual worlds as having public areas where it is not necessary to have every person in an interaction sign an informed consent form—just as there is nothing inherently unethical about taking a picture of a tourist in an open, general area at an amusement park, which is a public place although an admission fee is charged.

At the same time, virtual world ethnographers have long noted that we must be diligent about how the people we study define the distinction between "private" and "public" with reference to particular communities and activities (Reid 1996; Waskul and Douglass 1996; Elm 2009). For instance, in Second Life it is possible to overhear text chat conversations meant as private through a wall, or to use visual controls to peer into a space that could not otherwise be seen. In World of Warcraft, players in less-used voice chat channels may be carrying on "private" conversations and, depending on their software settings, may not immediately notice when someone new joins the channel. There may also be times when we can ascertain that the participants speaking have a certain expectation of privacy, or a notion that it would be inappropriate to record their words for publication. We must use our best judgment, operating from the core principle of care, as to not only what is public versus private from an etic perspective, but also what the people we study emically perceive as public or private. Such notions will vary from one culture to the next.

In summary, then, informed consent in ethnographic research is constituted differently from how it is managed in biomedical research. Informed consent predicated on the kinds of risks present in biomedical or psychological research is not ethically consonant with ethnographic research, since those risks are not present. We may be required for bureaucratic reasons to obtain signed consent forms (as discussed in the next chapter), but they are not our principal means of ensuring informed consent. What is necessary is that we make clear our presence as ethnographers and maintain ongoing dialogue about our purposes.

8.3 MITIGATING INSTITUTIONAL AND LEGAL RISK

Occasionally ethnographers become involved in legal and contractual matters. We must be aware of relevant laws that govern judicial access to fieldnotes, and cognizant of the possibility that we may be obligated to provide testimony in a deposition or court of law concerning what we have observed or heard in the field. We must also understand the nature of contracts such as Terms of Service (ToS) and End User Licensing Agreements (EULAs) that govern commercial virtual worlds.

Although the legal landscape is complicated, ethnographers should recognize that in the United States (and possibly other countries), it is possible to subpoena an ethnographer's fieldnotes in a process of legal discovery, and to subpoena an ethnographer to testify in a deposition or court of law (Monette, Sullivan, and DeJong 2010). Such events occur rarely, but ethnographers should assess how to mitigate risks to informants when studying legally sensitive areas that might eventuate in a subpoena. In the United States informants accused of legal impropriety cannot be fully protected by ethnographers unless the researchers are willing to go to jail to protect fieldnotes (ibid.). While the probability of being served a subpoena is low, the potential risk to informants is high. If we have collected data that we believe may incriminate an informant, we may want to destroy fieldnotes as soon as it is reasonable to do so. We may still, however, be required to testify truthfully on informants' activities in court (or accept jail time).

On a lesser scale, ethnographers may encounter informants in virtual worlds who violate ToS or EULAs. While it is unlikely we would become entangled in account closure or suspension, caring for informants means developing a sound understanding of the nature of pertinent contracts. Informants might ask ethnographers about the possible penalties for violations of ToS or EULAs, and we should do our best to help them think about any critical issues if asked.

8.4 ANONYMITY

A key potential risk of ethnographic research is inappropriately revealing informant identities or confidential information. A properly administered study avoids this risk; in practice, ethnographers are typically remarkably diligent in this regard. As ethnographers, we must learn how to provide these protections while conducting fieldwork and within our publications. Sensitive information must be recognized as such and treated with utmost care. An informant might, for example, utter disparaging comments about a community leader, spouse, or boss. Attributing such a comment to the informant could lead to social awkwardness or loss of social status, or even endanger a job or marriage. Ethnographers may find themselves participating in secret ceremonies, observing illegal or questionable activity, or learning of politically sensitive or even perilous issues. Within a given informant's social group, it is also important to remember that disclosure of questionable activities such as hacking or gold buying might embarrass an informant or even result in community rejection. Each bit of data must be carefully examined and handled

appropriately according to circumstances. Ethnographers strive to avoid negative outcomes by paying special attention to the potential consequences and risks of what we see and hear, and remembering that not everything is grist for the data mill, no matter how interesting it may be.

A simple, long-standing principle is to refrain from revealing informant identities in published work. This act of restraint removes a good deal of risk to informants because if they cannot be identified, actions for which they might be held accountable become irrelevant. As ethnographers, one way we avoid revealing informant identities is by using pseudonyms. Coming up with appropriate names may take a little planning. For instance, in his Indonesia research Tom had to come up with different pseudonyms for Muslim and Hindu informants; to refer to a Hindu Balinese informant as "Muhammad" would have been jarring. In virtual worlds, residents often have strikingly creative names, and it is useful (though sometimes surprisingly time-consuming) to come up with roughly equivalent pseudonyms that capture this creativity while protecting identities. In some cases we will want to anonymize collective identities (for instance, groups, guilds, and community organizations). Particularly if leaders of these organizations seek publicity, this decision can be difficult. In general we recommend anonymizing collective identities since being able to identify a group often makes it easy to identify individuals in the group (and leaders may overestimate the publicity our published work would provide).

While altering informant names is not particularly difficult, it is less easy to consistently maintain anonymity *within* a particular group with whom we interact. We must tread with care in discussing sensitive events or harsh comments in the community contexts in which they occurred. It is generally best to avoid taking sides in local disputes, and to stay out of conflicts. Doing so will enable us to continue the work without burning bridges. After all, we want to talk to both sides, or all sides. If we have acquired privileged information in interviews or conversations, it should not be discussed as the conflict unfolds, or even in its aftermath, unless we are certain it will not cause harm.

The reach of what is "local" expands to a wide purview among literate informants who might read our publications. Even when informant names are anonymized in written work, those who were on the scene may readily decode the cast of characters in activities in which they participated or that they observed, resulting in "deductive disclosure" beyond the control of the ethnographer. It is normal for informants, if they read our publications, to make guesses about the identities of those being discussed. As Kendall recounts regarding her use of pseudonyms in her work on a MUD:

> One difficulty that arose with the pseudonyms involved respondents themselves defeating the protections I extended to them. . . . For instance, on several occasions Jet issued roll calls on the topic of "your name in Copperhead's [Kendall's] thesis." As soon as they received copies of the dissertation, Jet and Carets created an object on BlueSky that provided a key to almost all the pseudonyms I used. (I objected to this, pointing out that it could potentially reveal identities to outsiders as well as regulars, and after much discussion, the object was removed.) (2002:243)

T.L. actually recalls encountering this deciphered pseudonym list recreated on a subsequent MUD a number of the participants came to inhabit, highlighting the ways ethnographic accounts, and participant investment in them, can have real longevity and even travel across worlds. In Celia's Uru research, because of the social structure of the community and its tie to the original game, pseudonyms were relatively transparent within the community itself. This means that we need to think about internal anonymity *between members* as well, keeping in mind that they continue to be in relation with each other long after we have left the field. The specific, identity-revealing details of a spousal conflict, a guild dispute, or a breakdown between collaborators, as well as personal information not relevant to the study, may best be concealed or altered to avoid repercussions within the group.

Sometimes the guarantee of full anonymity is impossible. It falls to us to render careful judgments to avoid causing risk to informants, up to and including forgoing the publication of potentially harmful materials. How long should we maintain informants' anonymity? The answer is forever. Even if we chose to write a memoir of our work (e.g., Powdermaker 1966; Rabinow 1977; Behar 1996), we should maintain pseudonyms to protect the identity of our informants. While we hesitate to argue that some events and revelations should never be discussed or published, we do strongly encourage that the fundamental values of care and prevention of harm guide our choices. Upholding the confidentiality and anonymity of our participants is central. Keeping in mind the unanticipated consequences if people's identities and activities were revealed should promote reflectivity on our part when deciding what is important to include in the written work.

We can, of course, never prevent astute readers from trying to piece together data. We should thus be reflective about how we use our material, carefully weighing the principle of care with the overall arguments and story we are trying to tell. We may want to avoid specific quotes in particularly loaded scenarios, pulling back to a more abstract or observational level of analysis. Sometimes informant activity may additionally carry criminal implications or be punishable by corporate purveyors of virtual worlds (such as gold farming or hacking); here a high level of informant protection is required. We may want to take extra steps to obscure the identity of people in these situations. Our ethnography may at times deal with quite difficult domains (socially stigmatized activities, internal disputes within the community, perhaps even rule or lawbreaking). We have to carefully manage our raw data and reportage in these moments.

Details for publication can be carefully selected without compromising a rich ethnography. For example, Bonnie once studied a conflict in a small working group in a hospital where everyone knew everyone else. She had to be extremely careful how she reported the data, but she was still able to present a robust account of the working group. During her study of the University of There, Celia encountered a rift between two instructors, resulting in the formation of a second university. After consulting with the dean, she determined that it was permissible to include in published reports the fact of the rift, which was well-known within the community. But she omitted details to protect all involved (Pearce 2009b).

Ethnographers accord informants anonymity by changing not only individual and group names, but also altering details in regard to the place and time of events. For instance, if during participant observation in New York City an ethnographer witnessed a heated discussion between John and Sam at the Red Dog Bar on 17th Street, he could describe how he witnessed the discussion between Steven and George at the White Lightning Bar on 19th Street without compromising vivid local flavor. Anonymizing does not require sucking the life out of an evocative vignette; the changes need not sacrifice ethnographic richness or research validity.

When virtual worlds are studied, anonymizing extends to screen names and online locations since these can be important aspects of identity and social life (Paccagnella 1997). For instance, Bonnie did not reveal the server she played on when conducting her World of Warcraft research, nor the names of her character or those in her guild. When the research was complete she changed her character's name and moved to another server. This was probably overkill, but she felt more secure using the capacities of the gaming system to obscure traces of the research. Tom changed the names and details of all persons and places he encountered in Second Life, and he paraphrased quotations from informants to make them difficult to identify using a search engine. A key point here is that in many cases persons may be pseudonymous in an online context (because they are known by a screen name), but not anonymous, because "even if other users may not know much about the offline identities of other users, they recognize their online names" (Sveningsson 2004:52).

There are two potential scenarios where the principle of anonymity may involve exceptions. One standard exception involves individuals who are historical or public figures. Both T.L. and Bonnie have interviewed founders of early World of Warcraft modding groups. Neither anonymized them in publications because they would be recognizable to many modders, who would consider them, in essence, historical figures. We would not anonymize a U.S. president, or Mother Teresa, or a movie star (nor could we, even if we tried) because their contributions to culture are so distinctive. Bonnie's modding research uncovered Chinese developers whose efforts provided leadership in establishing modding in China, as well as a Blizzard employee who single-handedly forged connections between modders and Blizzard in the early days of World of Warcraft. These individuals were named with either real or screen names. Ethnography is also history, and cultural logics emerge from the activities of people who imagine and enact new futures. It is, of course, critical to ensure that such informants give permission for the ethnographer to use an identifying name, or that they are a public figure whose name is known in public forums (as in the case of the Blizzard employee).

The second scenario in which anonymity may need to be reconsidered involves creative production. When Celia asked informants to annotate her research results, for instance, one of her informants failed to read the introduction specifying that pseudonyms were used throughout and was upset when he thought she had misattributed a poem he had written. The mistake was clarified in the commenting section of the research blog by another study participant, and the participant agreed that the pseudonym was preferable. On the other hand, in cases where designers or content creators have achieved a certain measure of fame or perhaps have a stake (professional or otherwise) in having their work attributed, participants may wish to have their names revealed. T.L., for example, made a point of clearly citing work created by a participant which was published in a web-based newspaper that covered the particular

virtual world. She has also retained participants' proper names in several cases (such as with Brad McQuaid, producer and lead designer for EverQuest) where, given their singular role or status as a public figure, anonymizing would have been quite difficult. To address issues of credit and attribution, Bruckman (2002) suggested a tiered approach with various levels of anonymity depending on the situation. In most cases, however, informants' physical world identities or screen names should remain anonymous. Any deviation from this policy should be rigorously thought through.

Sometimes anonymity should be maintained even when informants request to be identified. There are two reasons for this. First, we never fully know who will see the outcome of our work, and there may be unforeseen consequences (LeCompte and Schensul 1999). For example, if we describe a player conducting an activity that is explicitly against a virtual world's terms of service, and an employee of that company happens to read our work, we could risk termination of the player's account. Second, individuals do not exist in isolation—we are all members of various communities. In ethnographic research, identifying a person potentially identifies their social networks. As a result, it is unethical to indirectly compromise the anonymity of an informant's friends, relatives, groups, fellow guild members, or colleagues since some of them may not wish to be identified. In rare cases informants may not be aware of the risk to themselves of revealing their identities. Celia experienced a case where a player self-identified as being transgender in the physical world and wished to be identified in a study by her real avatar name. While the transgender status was general knowledge among the informant's inner circle, Celia felt the social consequences to the player within the larger community were too risky to divulge this information.

The collection of visual material like screenshots and video is often a vital part of ethnographic research, but such materials can easily reveal identities. While some virtual worlds provide a minimal range of customization, and thus limited possibilities for the avatar being uniquely identifiable, others allow for rich and distinct forms of avatar design. When we plan on using video or screenshots in publications or presentations, issues around anonymity may arise that are not dissimilar to those faced by visual anthropologists in the physical world. The researcher can seek written permission from everyone who appears in the video. But it can be difficult in practice to track down every last signature, and it does not resolve the issue of indirectly violating anonymity for those in the informants' social networks.

If we receive permission we can obscure faces or other identifying parts of avatar bodies, but these techniques reduce the impact of the video or images and are aesthetically unsatisfactory. Many virtual worlds allow participants to change settings to hide names and other identifying information in the user interface. Hiding names is a simple, effective solution to ensure anonymity in visual materials, or nametags can be obscured when images are prepared for publication or presentation. However, we should be sure to look around—names may still be visible in chat windows or elsewhere and need to be blurred or moved out of view. In some virtual worlds we must anonymize not just faces and screen names, but places. Allowing the name of a well-known dance club in a virtual world to appear in an image, for instance, would identify the owners and managers of the club, and even possibly persons known to frequent the club.

8.5 DECEPTION

Historically ethnographers have rejected deceptive practice as a basis on which to construct an ethnographic study. Deceiving informants remains firmly outside the bounds of ethical ethnographic research. Often fledgling ethnographers imagine that deception is a good idea, or at least a possibility, and virtual worlds might seem to offer a particularly tempting set of possibilities for deception without harm. This appearance is false, and it is important to know that deception, while practiced in other scientific disciplines, is not ethical within ethnographic investigation.

To which deceptive practices should ethnographers be alert? Deception in field research takes two forms: "undercover" observation in which the researcher attempts to blend in to observe surreptitiously, or assuming a false identity in which some characteristic such as gender or disabled status is of interest. We occasionally receive inquiries from researchers just learning about ethnography asking whether it is acceptable to conduct ethnographic research in a virtual world as a "fly on the wall," or to pose as, say, a disabled person in Second Life to find out how disabled people experience the virtual world.

Such subterfuge runs counter to the heart and soul of ethnography. As we have discussed, ethnographic research depends on cultivating social relationships created and nurtured for months or years. Ethnographers cannot simply observe because, by definition, we must *participate* in the fieldsite. Building sustainable human relationships on a foundation of deception is antithetical to participant observation, which presupposes trust and rapport, both predicated on openness and honesty. Deceptive practices such as undisclosed video or audio recording that might support a covert approach are outside ethical ethnographic practice.

Assuming a false identity, perpetuating deceptions required to pose as someone we are not, may become increasingly untenable as we attempt to manage a web of lies that introduce contradictions and falseness to our presentation of self. Ethnography presents sufficient challenge without adding the need to keep track of a series of falsehoods. The moment of revelation of our true identity—and there will always be one—is almost certain to provoke bad feeling, whether we unmask ourselves in the field or an informant reads an account in which she recognizes the research. The very basis of the data gathering activity of ethnography is compromised, if not destroyed, through deception.

Deceptive practice may also lead to a more widespread "poisoning of the well" for the research community. If informants learn that we have lied about our identity, they may refuse to participate in the future studies with us, other ethnographers, or researchers from other disciplines. The offended parties may spread the word to those in their social groups. Deceptive practice thus bears potential consequences not only for individual ethnographers, but for colleagues as well. Community integrity is at stake.

Methodologically, "experimentation" under the false pretenses of an assumed identity is a sort of Frankenstein's monster that ends, ultimately, in unethical practice. If faking an identity, we are ostensibly immersed in the authentic cultures taking place around us yet seek to control one variable—identity. Given the complexity and dynamism of human culture, it is impossible to make claims under such a pseudo-experimental regime on the order of "I know what it's like to be a woman because I had a female avatar." In the absence of extensive trials in multiple conditions controlling for changes in a multitude of possible variables in a virtual world (which could include, for example, technological, legal, social, and regulatory variables), the researcher cannot say with confidence that being a woman "caused" an observed behavior. Behaviors might just as easily have arisen in response to the variables mentioned above, or others including the ethnographer's age, gender, social class, and so on. Lacking a fully worked out experimental design, the researcher cannot formulate a principled logic for meaningful analysis.

In addition to inadequate study design for proper experimentation, such ethnographic poseurs are unlikely to do a good job of simulating the identity they seek to study. Ethnography is a social enterprise in which ethnographers speak and act. If we are not who we say we are, our words and actions will fail to reflect the sensibilities and accumulated life experience of the type of person we claim to be. The presentation of self will be inauthentic, eliminating our possibility for discovering, say, "how a woman is treated in a virtual world."

Such varied and serious methodological problems originating in bad field experiments constitute a clear violation of research ethics. Claims made are almost certain to be wrong, misrepresenting the persons and communities studied. We discuss the dangers of inaccurate portrayals of our informants' lives below, but for the moment we note that misrepresentation betrays the most fundamental principles of ethnographic research. For several reasons—methodological, logistical, ethical—field experiments remain "an uncommon method of social science research" (Pager 2009:39).

In short, ethical ethnographic investigation avoids deception. Ethnographic work is grounded in sustaining relations of honesty, openness, respect, and consideration: this is a source of methodological strength. These dispositions enable us to care for informants and, by extension, the larger scientific communities in which we participate.

8.6 SEX AND INTIMACY

As we have indicated, ethnographic research relies on the embodied researcher (including one's virtual embodiment) devoting significant time and energy, including emotional energy, to the communities and activities under study. By definition, participant observation entails a certain level of intimacy with informants, in the sense of closeness and deep rapport. Such closeness naturally has the potential, under certain circumstances, to eventuate in sexual activity. Historically, sex between researchers and informants has been informally acknowledged but rarely discussed. In the last few decades, the topic has received more attention (Kulick and Willson 1995; Markowitz and Ashkenazi 1999). Our goal is not to offer strict rules of comportment, because every case is different, but to suggest that as a general heuristic (construed in the broadest sense), sexual activity with informants is best avoided. This has been the traditional advice given to ethnographers (even if it is not always followed).

We make this suggestion for two reasons. First, we often do not know the meanings our informants attach to sex. Particularly given the asymmetric power dynamics between researcher and informant, there is significant potential to generate misunderstandings, unrealistic expectations, and broken hearts (on either side)—none of which are conducive to getting the job of ethnography done. Second, since sexual activity (especially when first initiated) is by nature unpredictable, it may be difficult to anticipate possible consequences to our research or careers, and to our informants' feelings and lives. Sexual or romantic encounters, if revealed, can compromise our status, or that of our informants, in the social group with which we interact.

Sex with informants may introduce deception in relation to others, as ethnographer and informant attempt to conceal the activity. A degree of subterfuge can emerge, placing both ethnographer and informant outside the bounds of the openness and honesty that constitute good ethnographic practice. And though it may seem far-fetched, journalists are always looking for sensationalist stories about virtual worlds. We do not want to see our names in a headline reading "Virtual World Researcher Has Sex with Subjects." The ethnographer and informant may become caught up in complicated machinations, and so might our institution and funding agencies, if journalists reveal activities others judge to be inappropriate.

We started with the issue of sex, but intimacy is an ethical issue that arises far more frequently. Sex is pretty easily avoided if we so choose, but intimacy in some form is central to the very practice of ethnography. The "participation" component of participant observation often involves emotionally charged exchanges of words and deeds. Interviews may move toward highly personal topics. Informants may invite us to participate in special activities not generally shared with outsiders. Intimacy may thus give ethnographies potency and explanatory power through the data capture they permit, distinguishing them from the products of other research paradigms.

The question is how to best prepare for and respond ethically to intimacies (Kendall 2009). As we have discussed, protecting informant anonymity is important, and issues seen as intimate are clearly cases in which we should ensure confidentiality. Writing up the material gained through encounters seen to be intimate in some fashion requires extreme sensitivity and tact. Each case is different; there are no cookbook rules we can propose. In general, if we feel hesitation or pangs of guilt or concern as we write, it is probably wise to move to other topics. It is never worth failing to care for informants, no matter how compelling the data. Care may require withholding information. Ethnography in certain circumstances demands restraint, and judgments regarding the release of information are sometimes best rendered conservatively.

Since most persons participating in virtual worlds are comfortable with technology, as researchers we should consider in advance what kinds of online boundaries we wish to set with those we study. For example, it is likely we will want to "friend" people we meet within the virtual world, but what if we receive a friend invitation to a social network site like Facebook, or a request to follow our private Twitter feed? What if the groups we are studying are using a social network site themselves in an important way? To be consistent with our informants, we suggest deciding on a policy before beginning fieldwork, and if changing our policy at some point, to do so across the board.

It is important to think through the implications of social network sites. Informants may feel slighted if they find we have friended someone they know in a guild or other social group and not them. Friending may inappropriately expose our social network or those of our informants. Because many social networking sites allow for the possibility of "friends of friends" accessing comments on others' posts, we should consider the forms of privacy protections such systems afford and how they align with our broader ethical standards.

However, once the research is complete, if we have become friends with informants and are willing to expose our networks, social network sites can be a convenient way to stay in touch. In many cases, a blog, Facebook page, or Twitter feed for our research project might provide a way to show we care about our informants while keeping our private lives, and the private lives of informants, reasonably separate.

In all matters pertaining to sex and intimacy, as in every aspect of ethnography, the principle of care should be our touchstone. We must take into consideration possible harm or embarrassment that can be brought about through romantic, sexual, and intimate activities, just as when conducting ethnographic research in the physical world. We should think such activities through—very carefully—before setting forth on potentially troublesome adventures or revealing information acquired in close encounters.

8.7 DOING GOOD AND COMPENSATION

At a minimum ethnographers should seek to have a neutral impact on the communities we study, but we should go beyond neutral effect to strive for positive impact. "Doing good" creates a favorable impression of researchers in general and ethnographers in particular, paving the way for future research by ourselves and others, as well as giving back to those who make our work possible.

It is important to be realistic about appropriate involvement. For instance, in Second Life Tom has advised or participated in the activities of several groups, but without taking a leadership role. Celia was given a community service award by Uru refugees in There.com for her role as an ambassador in telling their story to the outside world through the many public lectures and writings she has presented on the Uru diaspora.

A host of informal opportunities for doing good may arise during research, and we should take advantage of them. Bonnie sometimes listened (in whispers or a private voice channel) when guildmates experienced hurt feelings or were upset at something that happened during the course of World of Warcraft play. She was able to provide a sympathetic ear as well as a bit of advice (her subject position as an older person with life experience was useful). Celia's interviews with Uru refugees often had a benefit to informants, many of whom felt traumatized by the closure of Uru. Listening provided a sense of empowerment for a community that felt ignored or forgotten. Some persons Tom interviewed in Second Life used the opportunity to talk through problems ranging from romantic difficulties to gender identity.

These forms of doing good are ways to provide at least some recompense for the invaluable contributions of informants' time and thoughts. But what about more tangible benefits? Should we give gifts to compensate informants; can this be a way to do good? Beginning ethnographers often feel the need to provide informants with something, hoping a gift will stimulate interest and ensure cooperation. In our experience giving gifts does neither. The best informants have a genuine desire to talk to ethnographers, and those just turning up for the free virtual t-shirt are likely to be lackadaisical and unmotivated. However, gift giving may be a normal part of the life of the community in which the ethnographer operates. In Bonnie's experiences in Papua New Guinea and Western Samoa, frequent gifting (of food, small household items, and inexpensive clothing) was part of ordinary existence, not a special marker of the research relationship. In gaming guilds people often share virtual items just as New Guineans share yams. Bonnie did the same, in both contexts, as part of participant observation.

Some ethnographers give gifts after an interview to signal appreciation. Such gifts are a gracious way to offer thanks; they are usually small tokens, though it depends on the situation. Gifts can sometimes be given that benefit the whole community. Celia made donations to the Uru community island in There.com, aware that its real estate fees and the purchase of decor (all costs paid in U.S. dollars) were being carried at considerable personal expense to the group's leaders. When working with high-status informants (such as Bonnie's research with brain surgeons in a hospital study), there is no gift that is not a token, though such tokens may be appreciated.

Despite these scenarios in which some form of compensation may be appropriate, in many cases the best gift is simply thanks and appreciation. Informants want to know their words meant something. They light up when they see that we have learned from them, found our conversations with them significant and useful, and paid close attention to the details and nuances of their lives and experiences.

8.8 TAKING LEAVE

An inequality between ethnographer and informant is that fieldwork is never a lifelong endeavor. Even in cases where we return to a fieldsite many times over decades, each individual period of research has a beginning and an end. However, with only a few exceptions (like migration), informants do not leave. Even in virtual worlds, where movement is more common and entire virtual worlds can go out of existence (as documented in Celia's work on diasporic communities), informants usually have a greater investment in their virtual world than do the researchers who study them. Ethnographers rightly seek to embed themselves into communities via significant investments of time and energy, but participants may feel confused, betrayed, or abandoned if we simply disappear one day, never to log on again.

As a result, it is helpful during the final month or so of research to prepare informants for our departure, letting them know that the primary data collection phase is drawing to a close. Unless we do a full-fledged follow-up or longitudinal study at a later date, we must accept the fact that save perhaps for correspondence with a few informants who have become friends, an intensive relationship to any particular fieldsite will come to an end. Of course, online research does afford the freedom to not entirely terminate our relationships with informants; this can allow us access to new phenomena we may wish to study, as well as maintaining valued friendships. Tom has made presentations about his research on multiple occasions in Second Life, which has provided opportunities to reconnect with informants. There may also be cases where maintaining ongoing connections can become an entrée into future studies, as was the case with Celia's University of There research.

8.9 ACCURATE PORTRAYAL

It is imperative that we work to create the fairest and most accurate portrayal of informants' lifeworlds. Most ethnographers would agree with Malinowski's classic conclusion that the goal of an ethnographic study is "to grasp the native's point of view, his relation to life, to realize *his* vision of *his* world" (1922:25; emphasis in original). The general principle is to forge a sympathetic depiction of informants' lives, even when discussing aspects of informants' lives that some might find troubling—for instance, the existence of discrimination or violence. This approach does not entail agreeing with all the beliefs and actions of our informants, but it does mean laboring to grasp informants' own visions of their worlds.

We are aware of critiques of ethnography that point to its potential for inaccurate portrayal (Clifford and Marcus 1986), but in our view the resolution of these debates is not particularly vexing, as summed up some time ago in Geertz's dictum that ethnography is "not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning" (1973:5). As anthropologist Franz Boas noted over a century ago during the origins of ethnography, the ethnographic approach "considers every phenomenon as worthy of being studied for its own sake" (Boas 1887:642). An ethnography is an interpretation; it is neither God's truth nor the final word. Yet this does not cast us into a postmodern morass in which all interpretations are equal. Like field sciences from astronomy to zoology, the fact that the value of ethnographic research is not predicated on replication does not mean there are no standards for assessment. It is up to us, ethically, as scholars to create, seek out, propagate, and defend adequate standards.

There is significant value, then, in accurate portrayals of the cultures and peoples we study; they result from the investments of time and energy the ethnographic method demands. What other practitioners tread so diligently, carefully, and respectfully in their human encounters? The work of ethnography pushes us far from familiar modes of being, as we "remain in close and continuing relations with the natural social order" (Blumer 1954:10). While ethnographers of virtual worlds are spared some of the disease and discomfort of our physical world colleagues, accurate portrayal of virtual worlds may require a commitment to very long hours at the computer and the disruption of other activities. Family members may not understand the need to log on to a virtual world immediately after dinner, spend many hours on a weekend in raid sessions, or stay up until three a.m. doing fieldwork. But if we are to find out how raiders really behave, or what happens in the wee hours in that dance club in Second Life, we must commit, ethically, to whatever it takes to experience the activities where the data we require are generated.

A final issue in terms of accurate portrayal concerns accessibility of writing, which we discuss further in chapter 11. In general, we argue for writing in the most accessible manner possible and see no conflict between clarity and incisiveness or theoretical power. There certainly have been ethnographies written so that they are difficult to understand without being part of a small group of researchers sharing a particular technical vocabulary. We discourage this approach. However, we emphasize as well the existence of genre. There are genres of ethnographic writing (journal articles, for instance) where, owing to the need for concision or a desire to advance a specific theoretical conversation, researchers may write in a manner that is not immediately accessible to everyone. The point is not that everything we write should be readable by the communities studied, or by any and all academic communities; it is that we should write in the clearest manner possible that is appropriate for a particular genre. Additionally, ethnographers should be able to write in a range of genres, including some that are accessible to at least some people in the communities from which we have drawn data, insight, and inspiration, as well as multiple interdisciplinary communities who may find the work interesting and productive.

Overall, then, the ethnographic enterprise hinges on engaging others in ethical conversation and preparing careful, accurate accounts that do not compromise informants. As indicated at the beginning of this chapter, the ability to do this rests on the foundational principle of care. Ethnographers must be expert at creating human encounters that give back to informants through the agency of satisfying human contact, in a spirit of respect and regard. Most of our informants will never read what we write about them, and few will have even an inkling of the academic contestations with regard to which we toil. Informants will, however, remember us, the ethnographers. They will recall our gifts of listening, the deep interest displayed in the smallest details of their lives, and the way we took care to discern and follow the complexities and enigmas of their everyday pursuits and dreams.

CHAPTER NINE

HUMAN SUBJECTS CLEARANCE AND INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARDS

9.1 INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARDS (IRBs)

Institutional Review Boards, often known as "IRBs" or "Human Subjects Offices," are administrative bodies that monitor research ethics. They can be part of a university, corporation, nonprofit organization, or government entity that conducts or sponsors human subjects research. They are prevalent throughout the United States, where IRB approval is typically mandatory for all research involving human subjects (whether biological or behavioral). In other countries ethical guidelines may not be governed by an internal IRB, but operate via a mix of institutional and national regulations, professional association guidelines, and national data protection offices (Respect Project 2004; CESSDA 2011).

IRBs arose out of abuses in experimental research that occurred between the 1930s and 1970s, as discussed in section 8.2 (see Schrag 2009a). The Declaration of Helsinki, which builds on the Nuremberg Code, was adopted in 1964 by the World Medical Association and constitutes a set of standards for biomedical research ethics (WMA 1964). This document established protection for "human subjects," namely, any human person in a biomedical experiment, as well as consideration of special risks to vulnerable populations such as children, prisoners, and persons with mental illness.

While concerns regarding experimentation with human subjects are well founded and essential to ethical biomedical research practice, the biomedical model on which IRB procedures are built is largely inappropriate for social scientific field-based research. The two research paradigms have little in common. IRB protocols and procedures reflect the particular ways in which biomedical experimentation is conducted. Biomedical research is typically organized in controlled experiments structured to test a series of hypotheses. Experiments are carried out in a sampled population whose size and characteristics are known at the outset. Contact between study subjects and researchers (principal investigators) rarely occurs; generally