Balancing multiple identities in subcultural spaces online

Research and methods

My Ph.D research examines Russian online videogaming communities as spaces for identity construction and identity play amongst young people. I use a combination of different data collection methods: surveys, reading forums and comments to find trends, analysing coverage of different games and topics in the gaming media, and looking at how the mainstream media portrays videogames and the people who play them. Some of these methods are not particularly problematic in terms of ethics, for example, reading and analysing readily-available media sources.

However, ethical strategies need to change based on the research methods used. In some cases there is precedent for online methods. When I began my survey work, I drew upon a long social science history of using surveys in research as well as some newer guidelines from the Association of Internet Researchers. There were other research methods I used that did not have well-defined ethical guidelines, so I had to use my own knowledge of similar English-language communities whilst remaining honest with myself and my participants about the limits of my understanding in Russian gaming communities.

Wearing many hats

The biggest challenge during my data collection phase was acknowledging the different identities I hold and understanding how to reconcile them with the norms and values of the communities I was observing and engaging with. In many cases, parts of myself which I consider quite unremarkable became important because they could easily skew my data or cause conflict or harassment. Below I give a synopsis of three situations I encountered and outline how I resolved the ethical issues surrounding them.

Being open and honest vs. safeguarding the researcher

My gender was the first and most obvious issue to tackle. Gaming communities have been criticised for being hostile places towards women, and my own experiences have definitely supported that criticism. Early reading suggested to me that female gamers are rarer in Russia than in English-speaking circles, and so to reduce the likelihood that my survey results would be affected, and to avert any hostility towards me, I chose to gender pass. This essentially means I did not reveal my gender. I chose a gender-neutral username, an email address which could not be linked to my real name online, and I used grammatically masculine language in all user-facing content. To balance out this deception, the email address I used was a university account which included my initials. This gave my survey legitimacy – it was very clearly connected to a university and all of the communication I had with participants was conducted through, and saved to, the university servers. Additionally, the university contact I gave (my main supervisor, also a woman) used her surname and initials, again in an attempt to prevent any gender-based harassment.

The most important part of this strategy, for me, was keeping as close to reality as possible without actually overtly revealing my gender. It's possible that a smart person who spoke some English could have looked on the university website for researchers with my initials and narrowed it down to me. I considered that it was more important to maintain a persona which was limited but not actually dishonest than to totally eliminate all risk to myself by lying.

Showing community membership in a second language

I'm a native English speaker, and Russian is my second language. I am fairly proficient, which was a vital skill for my research, but there were times when I had to write in a way which challenged my language abilities and therefore potentially undermined my competence as a researcher. Often this

wasn't a problem because there were native speakers I could ask to check writing for me. However, the one area I found unexpectedly important was slang: not just the way that young people talk to each other on the internet, but also specific gaming slang.

I found very quickly that people were less concerned by my nationality than by my gaming credentials; the fact that I was British was seen as a faintly annoying quirk that meant my grammar was bad and I was probably an American being paid by the CIA, but the fact that I might not understand gaming and gamers was really important to my participants. They were keen to be accurately represented, and my gaming knowledge was seen as vital to my role as an effective and sympathetic researcher.

I faced the challenge of writing to gamers in the correct register (showing an informal but obvious level of respect and good grammar), while using gaming-specific slang to show my proficiency. Initially I had assessed this as a practical communication issue, but as my research developed I realised that there were ethical implications as well. This wasn't a participant observation project where my informants were getting to know me in person over time and hearing me make mistakes or use English game slang to describe a role or idea. As I wasn't communicating in real time, I could go away and look words up, rephrase posts or emails to better balance my researcher's formality with my gamer slang. I had to be very careful that I wasn't inadvertently being manipulative or leading participants with questions or studied, pre-determined responses.

Gathering information vs. respecting community norms

Finally, I always had to remind myself that just because I *could* access and save information, it didn't follow that I *should*. Different online forums can have different expectations of privacy and community safeguarding. Visiting the official community of a game or company is not at all the same as making an account just to view a more specific or personal forum. In general, this was the spectrum that I discovered:

Official forums are open to public reading, although they may require an account to post. While there are regular, popular users whose names are well known, very few people openly converse using real-life names or details, and when they post pictures or personal discussions they heavily edit the material to make sure it's hard to trace back to the real people behind their usernames. Topics of conversation are mostly about the game mechanics, strategies, story and so on. There is probably an 'off-topic' forum where players can discuss whatever they want, but official forums usually discourage very personal conversation or inflammatory content about politics and religion, so topics revolve around favourite books or films, other games and hobbies, etc. There is **very little** expectation of privacy.

Official-unofficial forums are what I call those communities that discuss one or more games in a structured and well-organised way. They are open to the public like official forums, and very often are actually sanctioned and encouraged by game companies because they are good advocates for the game and good sources of information about the game. Again, most discussion is about common interests and there is **little** expectation of privacy but often a more community-based feel than official outlets.

Semi-private forums are those which revolve around a guild, friendship group, a group of strategy enthusiasts, a geographical region or a special-interest group like gay gamers, gamers of a certain religion, etc. They are sometimes open to the public, and can almost always be read by creating an account. Forums like these have varying levels of security for account users; guild and friendship groups, for example, will require members to prove who they are before they can access most content. There is an expectation that most people signing up want to be community members and

not just tourists, and consequently users can be quite open about sharing personal details. The expectation of privacy is quite high in these cases, and sometimes very high.

Whenever I came across a forum or community that I thought would be interesting or useful, I assessed how much content was freely available and placed the site in one of the three categories. Generally, I looked at official forums as public, 'official-unofficial' forums as public but to be well-disguised in my work, and semi-private forums as off-limits. The latter was a strange adjustment to make; much of my own gaming life is conducted on such forums, and joining more private communities is a natural aspect of my online behaviour.

Why did I worry so much about using publicly-available content?

I consider myself an active, proficient gamer in English-speaking circles. I have played videogames for about ten years and been part of many internet communities in that time, in many cases meeting online friends in real life. I have learned to avoid, challenge or report hostile behaviour based on my gender in that time. The biggest single ethical challenge for me during this project has been reminding myself that despite so many years of experience and identification with gaming, when researching one has to be mindful of being in a position of power. As I write up my research, I keep in mind that my job is to represent these communities with accuracy and with understanding. Part of that understanding must be of my own relationship to the communities I'm studying. Gaming is a world I belong to personally, but a world I must engage with care professionally. Understanding when to be a gamer and when to be a researcher for optimum but ethical data has been the hardest element of this research project.