Conducting empirical research in virtual worlds

Shailey Minocha, The Open University, UK
Shailey Garfield (Second Life)

Collaborators: Christopher Hardy, Ahmad Reeves, Derek Richardson and Minh Tran, The Open University, UK

Aims of the tutorial

• Share experiences of conducting research in 3D virtual worlds
  – three research projects since 2008
  – two domains: e-learning and business-to-consumer (B2C) e-business
  – http://oro.open.ac.uk/view/person/sm577.html

• Researcher’s toolbox
  – data collection and analysis techniques
  – ethical considerations
  – guidance notes for the research process
  – resources related to this tutorial
Techniques that we have employed

• Semi-structured or structured interviews
• User-observations and post-observation discussions
• Focus groups with and without images
• Panel discussions with images and prompts
• Tours followed by group discussions
• Longitudinal studies involving a combination of focus groups, email interviews, individual semi-structured interviews
• Heuristic evaluations or guideline inspections
  – exploratory walkthroughs
  – task-based walkthroughs

How have we recruited participants?

• Students, educators and designers in virtual worlds
  – interactions in ISTE tours, events
  – messages in in-world groups
  – via the SLED or SLRL list
  – emails, if real-world identities are known
  – recruitment of students via educators
• Shoppers and designers of stores
  – approaching them in stores, shopping malls
Our communication modes

• Conversations in text: text in IM; or group chat in IM; *output* is a transcript

• Giving a notecard with prompts and asking them to write their thoughts in the notecard

• User-observations where the user carries out a series of tasks which are listed on a notecard
  – think-aloud protocols when the user talks (to himself) while performing the tasks

• Voice: in Second Life or over Skype and recording the audio; requires transcription

• Questions and options in text: response to images or discussion points
Techniques that we have employed for data analysis

• Descriptive phenomenology for narrative accounts
• Thematic or inductive analysis
• Using frameworks such as definitions of concepts, e.g. usability and its constituents, efficiency, effectiveness and satisfaction
• Recording (counting) the options that the participants suggested
Ethical considerations

- Recruiting participants
- The consent process
  - project summary sheet
  - consent form
  - contact details of the project leader (including real-world information)
- Data collection and storage
- Retaining anonymity
- Approval of the research by the University’s ethics committee
- Second Life images (snapshots)

Challenges

- international nature of the online medium
- anonymity of the medium demands greater investment of time to establish a mutually beneficial trust relationship
- the research process in a virtual world is influenced by codes of practice, etiquette, logistics, and ethical guidelines of conducting research in
  - real-world (offline) and online
- a virtual world researcher requires the skills and training of conducting both offline and online research
The Research Process

Pre-study aspects

Before a session → During a session → Post-session

Post-study aspects

Research design

- Research design
  - choice of data collection and analysis techniques
  - strategies for recruitment of participants
  - pre-study information from participants
    - do you need to know their real-life identities?
    - do you need their real-life demographic information?
  - ethical implications
    - which ethical guidelines will be followed?
    - guidelines which are virtual world specific
    - keeping aside sufficient time for the committee to review
      and approve the study
    - taking the initiative of explaining to the committee about a
      3D virtual world environment
Preparations for in-world interactions

• Developing communication and other in-world skills
  – creating notecards with landmarks
  – taking snapshots without the clicking sound
  – how to send inventory items to participants
  – choosing between instant messaging, voice

• Creating a researcher’s identity
  – customising avatar: clothes, appearance
  – profile with real-world identity, research project
  – maintaining the same avatar throughout the study

• Participating in the community
  – learning about the in-world etiquette, norms

• Audio recording devices and familiarity using them

Recruitment strategy

• Target participants: where to find them?
  – venues, events; restrictions by land owners; gatekeepers
  – in-world groups
  – mailing lists
  – recruiting them via a survey

• Profiles of the participants
  – their background and interests
  – whether they would like to participate
  – alternative ways of contacting them

• Incentives for participation
  – guidelines of the ethics committee
  – nature of the study
  – what is acceptable (L$ or real-world book tokens, for example?)
Data and handling

- Components of the data?
  - transcript, audio-recording, pre-interview questionnaire, images
- Who will have access to the data?
- How will you anonymise the data?
- How will the data be stored?
  - password protected folders on the network drive
  - secure and encrypted USB drives; and taking backups
- For how long do you require the data?
- Any data analysis software that is required?
- Does the analysed data require validation by the participant?
- Are you expecting any follow-ups with the participants?

Logistics ahead of the session

- Consent form and a project summary sheet
  - by notecard or via email
- Pre-interview questionnaire
  - background information about skills, experience, interests, choice of the viewer
- Arranging a time, location and mode of communication
- Choice of a location
  - permission to use the space
  - investigating access restrictions to a location
  - matching the design of the space with the nature of the session
- Interview templates or other research materials
  - hard and soft copies
  - text file for copying and pasting as an instant message (IM)
Checks before the session

• Prepare a pre-session checklist
  – checking the recorder
  – choosing the viewer that matches with the participant’s
  – checking the Skype connection
  – checking the location of the session
  – as per the stages of the session: a script for every stage

• Planning about data collection and storage
  – file of the transcript

• Planning the movement between locations if more than one venue is involved

• Arranging to speak to a colleague about your reflections
  – verbalising helps to view the session in 'hindsight'

The actual session

• Welcome/induction
  – reiterating the purpose of the session
  – mentioning the recording, images and re-seeking consent

• Going over to the meeting location (having a backup)

• Voice check or a Skype connection or an IM session

• In IM
  – Typing in 'End' to signify the end of an answer
  – using ‘…’ to indicate that more thoughts are coming through

• Time: an hour at the most
  – 40-45 minutes main session
  – 10-15 minutes for de-briefing, reflection about the research as well as the process
Keeping the flow

• Maintaining the flow of the dialogue
  – by using short prompts, such as ‘interesting’, ‘I get it’, ‘can you tell me more’.
  – or using gestures such as nodding
  – avoid interrupting the participant while they are typing and giving participants time to think
  – whether or not to mimic the language and expression of the participant

• Making notes of what could be asked in the end to clarify

• Thanking the participant for their contribution
  – informing them what will happen next

• Reflecting on what should be changed in the next session

After the session

• Data consolidation and storage
  – transcript (text) file, audio recording, notes during and after the session, snapshots
  – password protected folders on the network drive
  – secure and encrypted USB drives; and taking backups

• Thanking the participant in an IM or in an email
For the entire data

• Planning the data analysis
  – working with the copy of the transcript or transcribed notes
  – choice of a data analysis software
  – highlighting or colour coding for thematic analysis (in Excel)
  – relating the images with the data

• Dissemination
  – does the analysis have to be validated by the participants?
  – format and nature of the feedback, if the participant has requested for it

Some key messages

• recruiting with care
• operating in an ethical and scholarly way
• following the codes of conduct
• realising that there is a person behind the avatar
• conducting pilot sessions
• trade-offs between using software for data analysis and delving in raw data and hand-coding it

“The internet or the virtual world does not inherently transform the accepted protocols.

The technology connects people to people via a network, and therefore we must be sensitive to the rights of the participants behind the connections”
Resources that might be useful

- notecard examples (in-world research materials)
- sample consent form
- sample project summary sheet
- researcher checklist for a user-based session
- online resources related to ethics
- annotated bibliography
- our paper that appeared in Journal of Virtual Worlds Research

Contributions are from colleagues Christopher Hardy, Ahmad Reeves and Minh Tran