# Research in a Virtual World

The IRB must make the final decision if a project fits the criteria of human subjects research. Please review the guidelines below and submit your project via email prior to submitting your protocol for review.

* An avatar name is a personal identifier like any other and should be kept confidential.
* Get permission from participants to use their Avatar names, email addresses, or other personal identifiers in research publications.  
  **Best practice**: Anonymize avatar names just as you would participant real names.
* Treat an email address as a personal identifier; keep confidential.
* Know your population or the specific culture you are researching so you are aware of the appropriate method of interaction.
* To avoid having minors participate in a research project that should not include minors; ask age-related questions in multiple ways (e.g., date of birth, age, and age range).
* When reporting results, consider not linking real user names with specific websites.

## Observational Research – No Collection of Identifiers or Interaction

* Observation of an active Virtual World environment (e.g., a busy, well-populated virtual world “city,” that does not include interaction with other avatars or collecting personal identifiers – including avatar names) would be considered public observation and not be considered human subjects research.  
  **Suggestion**: When tracking public conversation, it may be impossible to avoid recording avatar names; delete or replace these with codes before analysis.

## Observation Research with Interaction/Intervention and/or the Collection of Identifiers

* Interaction by the researcher as a member, or visitor, of the virtual world, whether it is normal interaction or an intervention for the research, would be considered human subjects research.  
  **Examples**: Joining a guild or party in an MMO; joining a group or community in Second Life.
* To interact in a Virtual World environment, consent from the other players/residents will need to be addressed. Minors should also be addressed. Permission from the creators/owners of the virtual world may also be required.

## Ethnography in Virtual Worlds (observing and writing about encounters with people)

* Interviews – obtain verbal consent prior to data collection.
* General Observations without Interaction – ask the group leader for a waiver of consent; record data anonymously.  
  This applies when you are present (e.g., your avatar is part of a group in the virtual world) but you do not plan to talk to participants.
* Participant Observation – inform the group/setting that you are joining that you are a researcher; ask for permission to join and record interactions and keep data anonymous.
* Ensure that all members of the community or group have access to information about you as a researcher and have the opportunity to learn you are collecting data.  
  **Suggestion**: Post a note on your profile/player description that you are a researcher.