

Suomela, T., Chee, F., Berendt, B., & Rockwell, G. (2017). GamerGate and Digital Humanities: Applying Ethics of Care to Internet Research. Presentation at the [CSDH 2017 conference at the HSSFC Congress](#) at Ryerson University, Toronto, Canada.

# GamerGate and Digital Humanities: Applying an Ethics of Care to Internet Research

By Todd Suomela, Florence Chee, Bettina Berendt and Geoffrey Rockwell

## Introduction

With more and more evidence of mass corporate and government digital surveillance, we in the digital humanities have to ask about the ethics of our work. Under what circumstances is it ethical to gather and archive data about people, living or dead? How is our work not a form of scholarly surveillance? In this paper we will discuss the ethics of datafication, by which we mean the whole process of gathering, enriching, analyzing and then archiving data, in the context of a particular project, Gamergate Reactions (Rockwell & Suomela 2015). We propose that an Ethics of Care (Held 2006) is more appropriate to negotiating humanities projects.

## Ethics of Care

We are not the first to discuss ethics and the digital humanities. Malte Rehbein (2015) presented a paper in 2015 at the Digital Humanities Summer Institute about the dual use problem where resources we develop can be used unethically. Todd Presner has also written about the “The Ethics of the Algorithm” and databases (2016). Although concerns about the datafication of digital humanities archives have been raised, the analysis so far in the digital humanities has been retrospective and provided limited guidance for other projects. Introducing an Ethics of Care will bolster the theoretical understanding of such issues in the digital humanities and assist with the proactive discussion of ethical issues across projects. Neither of these deal with the datafication side of digital humanities archives. Nor do they provide guidance, except retrospectively.

We propose the Ethics of Care (EoC) because it focuses attention on the features of ethical decision making relevant to project design, paramount among them being the prioritization research relationships. What are the relationships between the people involved in project? Who possesses the power or authority in a given situation? The EoC recognizes the differences in vulnerability and need among stakeholders from those studying to those studied. Using our case study we will outline the complicated relationships between researchers, subjects, communities, and discourses that need to be continually revisited.

## Ethics of Care and Internet Research Ethics

The Ethics of Care is an ethical theory that developed from feminist thought about the moral importance of the experiences of caring for children, old people and others. Others have used it

in the context of design and the digital humanities to draw attention to carework (Klein 2015, Jackson 2014). Unlike previous ethical theories that start from the position of an independent rational subject thinking about how to treat other equally rational subjects, the EoC starts with the real experience of being embedded in relationships with uneven power relations. We decided that we should be guided by the EoC after a first iteration of ethical reflection that was focused specifically on the research ethics of gathering and archiving Twitter data. The decision to switch from thinking the ethics had been solved to an iterative approach was partly due to the fact that a collaborative grant in which we are participating in (Re-Figuring Innovation in Games) adopted the EoC as their ethical stance. However, preceding that, the EoC struck us as an appropriate ethical framework for the context, especially given the sustained harassment of researchers (Chess & Shaw 2015). Indeed, the more we learn about the EoC (Held 2006, Wittkower 2016) and its relevant applications, the more it seems suited to such complex situations where people have been harassed and ethics itself is at stake. In the paper we will discuss three features of the EoC and how we applied them to our case:

- Ethics is about the relationships, more than about rights.
- A fundamental type of relationship for humanities research is dialogue.
- Caring is a practice, not a heroic gesture, or a set of rules for behavior; it is the ongoing activity of being sensitive to others (and oneself).

## Ethics of Care and Datafication: Archival Relationships

In the full paper, we will discuss how our consulting with stakeholders led to the deletion of materials that we felt would only serve to create a feedback loop in re-enacting and reinscribing harm by way of data toxic data to those further exposed to our collection or already archived in the collection. Scraping and depositing materials into well managed University digital archives puts us in a position of power where we can inscribe toxic materials with little research value. The work of gathering, editing and maintaining data is often treated as neutral carework of secondary importance compared to grant getting, grand theorizing, or original contributions. It is only recently that attention has been turned toward how the stewardship of archives, whether digital or not, is valuable. Lauren Klein in "The Carework and Codework of the Digital Humanities" (2015) asks how codework (or work using digital tools and code) can help recover the carework that often gets hidden by the grand gestures. We will end by building on Klein to argue that an EoC approach doesn't simply give us a way of thinking through the ethics of what we do, but is also a way of understanding what we care about in DH.

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