Ethnography put to good use: researching the virtually human

Boellstorff, Tom. (2008) Coming of Age in Second Life. An Anthropologist Explores Second Life. Princeton University Press

Review

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Talk and debate about the Internet and virtual communities seem to be ubiquitous. If not a reflection of trends and fashions in social inquiry, comprising an "online dimension" in research designs equates with keeping up with wider cultural transformations. Challenging both the utopias of cyberhype and the bitter dystopias of cyperdismissal about technological development and humanity, Tom Boellstorff's book, *Coming of Age in Second Life* (CASL), is a particularly suited read for those in search of an invigorating approach to studying the online. Simultaneously, its peculiarity lies in being a comprehensive ethnographic portrait of virtual worlds.

A timely breakthrough, the book brings ethnography into the study of virtual worlds *"in their own terms"*. Controversially as it might sound, Boellstorff conducts fieldwork entirely in Second Life, complying with classical anthropology prerequisites of having extended experience among the people anthropologists write about. Thus, it employs participant observation to go beyond pinpointing the sensational of online activities, like cross-gendering, sexual debauchery, non-normative sexual encounters, or depictions of people making money and transferring it to the actual world. Tightly

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articulated with classical anthropological theory, Boellstorff engages with the everyday lives of residents in Second Life, aiming to understand the cultural logics of virtual worlds. He frames his inquiry with classical anthropological texts, opening the ethnographic *expose* in a Malinowski-like manner that transposes the reader to the "world" under focus.

Second Life is a platform based upon the idea of user-created content, owned by the IT company Linden Lab, which maintains its components (set of tools, means to control, modify and communicate) on their servers. Linden Lab retains information about landscapes, buildings and objects so that the virtual world persists when residents log off.

Boellstorff defines virtual worlds as "places of human culture realized by computer programs through the internet" (p.17)[2]. Downplaying a tendency to privilege the ontological status of reality, the book is woven around the distinction between the virtual and the actual, and not "the real". Virtual refers to potentiality, and conveys meanings of "as if" and/ or "almost". However, participants see virtual worlds "just as real, just as meaningful" as the actual world. Thus, the core thesis that Boellstorff puts forward is that virtual worlds are places and, therefore, constitute sites for cultural production. This idea has closely intertwined theoretical and methodological implications.

Theoretically, the book rehabilitates the concept of "virtual" by linking it to wider histories of technologies. These are consistently discussed in chapter 2 to highlight how *techne* is fundamental to understanding virtual worlds because it engrosses the idea of *crafting gaps* between the actual and the virtual. Boellstorff goes back to Greek mythology to point out the idea that the world can be changed by human craft. According to this understanding, *techne* implies intentional action that constitutes a gap between the world before the (creative) action and the new world it calls into being. Moreover, *techne* can obviate episteme: the human does not necessarily need to be knowing and can still bypass problems through craft, embracing external tools to extend minds. Expanding on this idea, one of the central claims of the book is that through the agency of SL residents *techne* can take place *inside virtual worlds*, producing a gap between actual and virtual in the realm of the virtual[3].

Focusing on the ways in which virtual worlds are *sites for novel ways of human interaction, social action and meaning-making*, the author employs ethnographic tools to support his idea that a classical approach (monograph) is suitable for researching virtual worlds. In contrast to other studies of the Internet that look at the continuities between actual and virtual (Miller and Slater, 2000), *CASL* examines *virtual worlds as contexts themselves*. It is a study of virtual through an exploration of overarching cultural norms in order to demonstrate the existence of a relatively enduring cultural logic (assumptions,

[2] Bell and Consalvo (2008) propose a combined definition of virtual worlds: synchronous, persistent, network of people, represented as avatars, facilitated by networked computers.

[3] Thus, *techne* represents the intentional crafting of world, self, and society (p.59), which is not to be equated with technological determinism because technological conditions of possibility are open to contingency.

practices, social relations), shared by residents/ participants in SL. To this aim, the author proceeds to an examination of mundane social interactions, precisely like traditional anthropological research. Participating to the virtual world of SL, Boellstorff created an avatar, Tom Buchowski, and created his home, called *Ethnographia*. Buchowski conducted focus groups at his house and held seminaries on Digital Cultures, which several residents actively attended. His participation suggests that elicitation methods, most frequently used in online research, are insufficient to capture the everyday. On the contrary, Boellstorff depicts the world of SL in its banality, centering on how the mundane is infused with creativity, conversation, intimacy, shopping, tedium, and entertainment.

The book provides a set of theoretical and methodological frameworks for understanding culture in virtual worlds. His analysis is based on the configurations, movements and co-constitution between virtual worlds and the actual world. The book's central argument is that *the gap between virtual and actual founds culture in online worlds.* Through looking at place and time, personhood, intimacy and community, Boellstorff builds upon the relations between the virtual and the actual in every chapter. He describes how virtual worlds borrow from actual world social practices, but, at the same time, depart from these logics in terms of creating novel meanings, reshaping personhood formation, redefining modes of being intimate with others or economic practices underpinned by novel understandings of production and consumption.

After delineating the theoretical and methodological framework of the book, the second part opens with the description of a conflict over a recently settled building. Most of the residents perceived it as being "out of place". Their complaints drew upon ideas of community to claim a loss of control over landscape, pointing to the idea that placemaking is foundational to virtual worlds (p.89-91). More precisely, land gained differential value in SL through the activities of residents. They created builds and objects that persisted when resident went offline. Therefore, building was not only at the basis of economy, but also acted as a craft. Through this form of *techne,* residents got a sense of personal virtual place in their homes, the virtual becoming real for residents.

In addition, phenomena like lag or afk denote that virtual worlds emerge as social fields from practices of place and time, contradicting the assumptions about the placelessness of virtual worlds. Firstly, time in SL in framed by logging on and logging off, one of the fundamental conditions on which virtual worlds are premised is the synchronicity of residents online. By the means of several telling examples, Boellstorff shows how lag and asynchronous sociality shape the resident experience.

Being talked about by residents just like people discuss weather in the actual world, *lag* is produced by immense amounts of information. It manifests in interruptions that cause delays for builds and objects to appear, creating a sense of disjuncture between the actual world time and virtual world time. As Boellstorff puts it, *lag* is a breakdown of time caused by the gap between virtual and actual, and not a "delay in time, but a delay of time". This shows that virtual worlds are "synchronic societies" in which high values are attributed to human engagement with time. It is not an issue of online versus offline. Rather, presence gains more complexity.

AFK (away from keyboard) is another banal aspect of cybersociality that has implications for place and time in virtual worlds. It conveys a variation of the presence of one's actual world self in the virtual world, the avatar being "away from virtual world, but with the virtual self still present", without logging off. Apart from the reasons related to actual world embodiment (domestic needs), *afk* was also used as motive when distracted to other instant messaging or was put to conscious use to escape uncomfortable situations. As a broad cultural understanding, there is tolerance for persons not responding immediately to greeting, based on the assumption that the resident might be temporarily away. *Afk* provides the possibility of presence without immersion, because it decouples presence from immersion, revealing how "configurations of place and time constitute virtual worlds" (p.112). It also encodes assumptions about virtual agency and selfhood, highlighting the gradation of presence in virtual life: there are multiple ways of *afk* and they convey shifts in presence in either actual or other virtual places. These two key elements of virtual world culture, *lag* and *afk*, show how, unlike space, time resists virtualization.

In chapter five, Boellstorff investigates the constitution of personhood online (p.147) through a discussion of the life course, embodiment, disability, gender and race. In SL, there is a broadly shared assumption that virtual selfhood is not identical to actual selfhood, and residents distinguish between them. However, there are certain continuities between the actual and the virtual that the author acknowledges in the study of selfhood. Similarly to how cultures construct selfhood, the virtual self is constituted in the trajectory of the life course (p.122) from when an account is created to the orientation of newbies on an island, and then to the first steps in creating the avatars, acquiring land as midbies or turning into community leaders as oldbies. The status changes depending on the amount of time spent inworld which is judged by the others in terms of apparent expertise with the workings of SL and social networks of the residents.

Avatars enliven virtual worlds and residents create these avatars according to one's own self-representation, little being left to chance. In SL, one's virtual self is open to greater self-fashioning through building, consumption, and online trade. The avatar is an embodiment intentionally crafted through which residents experienced virtual selfhood. Moreover, avatars are zones of relationality, linking sociality, subjectivity and embodiment. The relationship between self and avatar is complicated because multiple persons can control an avatar or a single self can have multiple avatars to embody alternative avatars across gender, race, species. Sometimes, people create escape alts as a means to insulate themselves from inworlds social networks or to embody alternative selfhoods.

Virtual worlds also provide opportunities to discover interests and desires expressed through acts of creativity. Such an example is residents' experimentation with gender and race. Manhood and womanhood were embodied in new ways through gender swaps that transgress normative sexuality. The transformative possibilities of SL also emerge in the novel experiences of people with both physical and psychological disabilities in the actual world. SL was seen as an environment that allows people to

bring out something from the inside that leads to greater self-confidence. Moreover, residents thought that the avatar appearance influenced their behavior, feeling that they were fitting a part.

In chapter six, Boellstorff describes how intimacy gains novel understandings in virtual worlds and friendships are foundations of online sociality. Participants practice and enact subjectivities as children, explore alternate life experiences and differences in interactions, adding creativity to their sexual encounters. In addition, love in SL gains a slightly peculiar understanding, because it does not necessarily imply knowing people, but crafting a relationship within the virtual world (p.166). Although relationships are formed through networks, virtual worlds are places in which lives and relationships are lived. Compared to social networking or dating sites, what is novel about virtual worlds is the location for the love relationship. Residents forge shared interests that enhance their personalities and ability to change. Couples build homes, move in together, formalize their relationships in weddings, experiencing these relationships as more real than the actual world one. For some participants, having a family in SL was almost essential to their subjectivities. This kin play created the possibilities to explore new forms of intimacy that looped back to transform relationships in the actual world. For instance, every night, a resident embodying a child only went to sleep after she was said a bedtime story by her SL mother, confessing that the actual world represented the avatar's dream.

In chapter seven, called *Community*, the author challenges the idea that virtual worlds are less meaningful or alienating. On the contrary, he shows how places in SL represent sites of culture in which human interaction is enacted. Residents were attracted to populated areas, which suggested a sense of people being there and making the places real. Attributing most importance to events denotes that socializing is the most common activity of residents, setting place, time and sociality in conjunction. However, being technologically impossible to hold a significant number of residents at the same event, SL's culture was thus constituted through many relatively intimate instantiations of sociality (p.183). Kindness and altruism, predominant in virtual worlds, were expressed in giving items away, inviting others to events, a certain preoccupation with making those around feel welcome, helping newcomers and the willingness of people to listen to personal problems. On the other hand, grief was common too, including verbal harass, vandalism, inappropriately located buildings, scripts that produced "lag bombs" or animated avatars against their wish. Even if participants generally ignored grief acts, these practices and reactions to them account for the shared norms and codes of conduct of the world.

In the third part of the book, Boellstorff discusses the political economy of SL, coining a key concept, "creationist capitalism", to characterize the Age of Techne. Creationist capitalism is a mode of capitalism in which labor means creativity and production is understood as creation. It implies a novel constellation between creation, *techne*, value, which is forged in the dynamics of SL's participatory culture. Producers and consumers interact differently: because consumption is turned into a form of production, capitalist subjects produce what they consume, in a system that Boellstorff called *prosumption*. Labour is turned into value: one's creative self is embedded into (virtual)

objects, and the residents/avatar becomes the creator uniting production and consumption. T*echne* becomes a mode of production, reinterpreted as creation. Thus, residents become renown through displaying the products of their imagination (p.209), and, even further, creation becomes a primary mode of self-making, production, and governance (p.210).

Real estate activities, like selling land, represented a key source of income in SL, making it a property-based economy. Earning money through laboring in SL has to be understood as part of the broader political economic reconfiguration shaped by creationist capitalism. Money makes the "realness" of virtual worlds because some residents make the actual world living from working in SL. The convertibility of linden dollars into dollars made residents engage in various forms of economic activity, like object design, banking, finance, real estate. In this sense, creativity in SL becomes a form of exchange value, alongside use value, pinpointing to the logic of creationist capitalism as a form of self-fulfillment. Labor becomes a form of leisure because residents make objects and buildings to sell them. Additionally, jobs like fashion designers, scripters, service labor, DJs, sex workers are listed inside SL.

Property over objects constituted the conditions of permanence of built objects. Residents could retain intellectual property over what their creations: lands, builds and commodities represent forms of property in SL. They could be circulated: modified, copied, resold/given, but only one copy could be in circulation, thus sustaining creationist capitalism. When actual-world corporations joined SL and created islands to market actual world products residents perceived it as fearful because, the author argues, it threatened a key tenet of creationist capitalism: producing self and consuming self should be the same person (p.219).

This third part of CASL has been less discusses in reviews, critique[4] arguing that it does not get sufficiently in-depth to construct a convincing argument about the workings of creationist capitalism in the everyday activities of residents. However, its purchase is useful not because it can account for radical cultural changes (claim that Boellstorff does not make in the book), but rather to understand the logics underpinning a virtual world. Its richness lies in how the author thinks about and critically approaches understandings of creativity in Second Life, that circulate from Californian everyday life philosophies into the practices of web developers and residents alike, both content creators.

Contrary to depictions of virtual worlds as sites of untrammeled freedom (p.225), their rise involves an augmentation of techniques for controlling populations. The sharpest distinction is that virtual worlds can be owned. In the case of SL, Linden Lab codified the platform and managed aspects of social interaction. These platforms can guide behavior and shape social form through providing extensive possibilities for social control. The program encodes aspects of culture, like private property, place, building, embodiments, friendship, partners, groups, tools for social control. In the everyday life of SL, residents encounter governance when they fill abuse reports and when they experience changes to the platform. Controversies related to the total control over the

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[4] John Postill (2009) and Christopher Kelty (2009)

platform that Linden Lab had were mitigated through an emphasis on resident creativity, alongside setting norms and refraining from the management of everyday interaction. In turn, residents reworked available tools to make objects or engage in activities other than those presupposed by the platform. Even if computer language designs and modifies virtual worlds, they are sites of culture because their cultural logics are not programmed to come into being. Rather, the everyday interaction between residents shapes virtual worlds.

Employing an ethnographic approach, the book explored the continuities and ramifications between the virtual and the actual world. Virtual worlds are indeed approximations of objects, actions, and ideas that apparently refer back to the actual world. Yet at the level of experience, they are signs that referred to signifieds internal to the virtual world (p.243). Boellstorff's descriptions show how these ramifications play on the gap between them, making the actual and the virtual mutually constitutive.

Residents typically understood Second Life as a discrete virtual world and at the same time as having porous borders in several ways. The actual – virtual links were sometimes experienced by residents as "blurring" or "bleeding-through" in situations in which Second Life manifested itself in the actual world. However, Boellstorff argues, crossing boundaries can rather strengthen distinctiveness between virtual worlds and the actual, rather than blur it, as the various experiences of SL residents denote. Throughout the chapters, Boellstorff underscores the ways in which the movement between the actual and the virtual reinforces the boundaries between the two. The dialectic of logging on and logging off is the originary boundary maker between the virtual and the actual. (p.243). However, they are connected in a continuous movement between them, ultimately remaining two distinct domains of human being.

Virtual worlds provide the possibility to craft new locations for human sociality, which are not different in terms of significance, but are endowed with unique characteristics. *Techne* enables novel ways of human imagining and aspects of selfhood are seen as being produced through creativity. In this sense, the book is a convincing piece on the need in favor of a closer focus on the place of the human. Challenging theories of the post-human, *CASL* shows that the emergence of virtual worlds is related to changing notions of personhood. These reconfigure understandings of the human. "Virtual worlds produce new ways to live a human life" (p.248) conveying meanings of humanity that refer to creating, rather than knowing. In *CASL*, Tom Boellstorff does a great job in foregrounding the potential of ethnographic methods for researching virtual worlds. Subsequently, it (re)captures humanity and the online as a germane topic for anthropology.

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