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Second Life, Ethnography and Virtual Culture

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Abstract

This research paper uses Boellstorff's book *Coming of Age in Second Life* (2008) and other relevant scholarship in order to facilitate an understanding of, and by extension deal with, the issues involved in conducting ethnographic research on virtual worlds. The argument that Boellstorff and many other scholars make, broadly speaking, is that people's identities and forms of behavior is to some extent modified in virtual worlds (Boellstorff, 2008).

Keywords: virtual world, *second life*, ethnography, virtual culture, identity

1. Introduction

Second Life (henceforth *SL*) provides the novelty of avatars and allows its users to select a representation that will 'stand in' for their identity. Moreover, *SL* situates and contextualizes everyday practices and forms of identity and identification within an identifiable and quite specific culture-as-context. The challenge for virtual ethnography, from this perspective, is not just in "Tracing the boundaries of the chosen social groups in the local cultures in cyberspace" (Guimaraes, 2005, p. 148), but in finding a way to bridge the gap between two distinctive but closely related cultures, the actual and the virtual. As Baym and Markam write: "Ethnographers of virtual worlds must share a commitment to making sense of the new by understanding their research processes' and objects' continuity with the past" (Baym & Markam, 2009, p. xv). Chalmers, for instance, refers to 'virtual reality' as 'an immersive', interactive, computer-generated environment. 'Virtual reality' ... can be considered a mass noun covering virtual reality environments and/or the technology that sustains them (Chalmers, n.d., p. 3). It is characterized by 'virtual immersion', which:

> Generates perceptual experience of the environment from a perspective within it, giving the user the sense of 'being there': that is, of really being present at that perspective. Typically this will involve at least a visual experience as of a three-dimensional environment, perhaps along with auditory and other sensory elements (Chalmers, n.d., p. 3).

Scholars tend to have quite different positions with regard to how, at a very basic level, virtual and actual, online and offline personas match up. By way of example, John Campbell, a theorist who studies gay male identity, claims that "online and offline experiences blend into a single, albeit multifaceted, narrative of life" (Campbell, 2004, p. 100, cited in Boellstorff, 2008, p. 61); online cultures are ultimately predicated upon actual-world cultures; and that "one current limitation of the study of (virtual worlds) is that we know little about how online behaviors affect users" behaviors offline (Boellstorff, 2008, p. 62). For Boellstorff:

> Actual-world sociality cannot explain virtual-world sociality. The sociality of virtual worlds develops on its own terms; it references the actual world but is not simply derivative of it. Events and identities in such worlds may reference ideas from the actual world (from landscape to gender) and may index actual-world issues (from economics to political campaigns), but this referencing and indexing takes place within the virtual world (Boellstorff, 2008, p. 63).

Previous studies of virtual worlds as specific forms of new media have been conducted by scholars from a variety of fields, including media studies, computer science, and sociology (Boellstorff, 2008, p. 66). Lister, Dovey, Giddings, Grant, and Kelly provide six concepts that that they put forward as being characteristic of the social and cultural effects of such new media: these are "'new textual experiences'; 'new ways of representing the world'; 'new relationships between subjects (users and consumers) and media technologies'; 'new

experiences of the relationship between embodiment, identity and community'; 'new conceptions of the biological body's relationship to technological media'; and 'new patterns of organization and production'" (Lister, Dovey, Giddings, Grant, & Kelly, 2003, p. 12). Chalmers, on the other hand, places an emphasis on two key aspects. Firstly, such environments are computer generated: that is to say when they are "grounded in a computational process such as a computer simulation, which generates the inputs that are processed by the user's sensory organs" (Chalmers, n.d., p. 3). Secondly, he privileges the notion of interactivity:

> An environment is interactive when actions by the user make a significant difference to what happens in the environment. In current VR, this interaction takes place through the use of input devices such as head- and body-tracking devices, handheld controllers, or even a computer keyboard (Chalmers, n.d., p. 3).

2. Doing Virtual Ethnography

An ethnography of the virtual presents a number of challenges, not the least of these being that the subjects and culture being researched, studied and analyzed has no specific location, in the conventional sense of the term. An ethnography of *SL*, for instance, studies users who interact with one another in real time, and within one virtual space or set of sites, but are 'located' across the globe. As Wittel writes:

> In order to take account of these global forces ethnographies should be conceptualised multi-locally or as multi-sited. Since both people and objects would be likely to become increasingly mobile, then ethnography has to get engaged with these movements (Wittel, 2000, para. 3).

However, this raises the difficult question of how, or the extent to which, an ethnographer can venture outside the virtual communities he or she is studying. Because of the difficulties associated with researching virtual communities 'outside their own quite limited terms', some scholarly critics, Castronova and Bloomfield, for instance, "still criticize ethnographic research by claiming it is anecdotal or unscientific – even doomed to irrelevance and extinction" (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p. 6). In his study of *SL*, however, Boellstorff's fieldwork was conducted within and restricted to *SL*: he based his work on data collected about *SL* residents' activities and discourses, and he used this data to interpret and analyze the virtual world and culture of *SL*. He also used his own experiences and exchanges in *SL* as resource material. He explains that:

> If one wants to study collective meaning and virtual worlds as collectivities [which] exist purely online, then studying them in their own terms is the appropriate methodology, one that goes against the grain of many assumptions concerning how virtual worlds work (Boellstorff, 2008, p. 61).

One part of the methodology employed in this dissertation is that of cultural immersion, which means that the researcher enters into and participates in the culture that is being researched, and to some extent has to identify with, participate in, and become literate with regard to, the socio-cultural norms, rules, relationships and rituals of the place being studied. One issue that is at stake for the researcher, and which is studied through immersion, is the extent to which actual and online identity is continuous. Boellstorff explains that his:

> Ethnographical goal is not to seek a better typology but to investigate everyday sense of virtual personhood. What does it mean when residents say 'in Second Life I find I can truly be myself, my inner self?'; 'we wear our souls in here?' and 'I find it easy to be several selves here?' (Boellstorff, 2008, p. 119).

Boellstorff found that while some people present themselves differently in the virtual world, this is not the case with everyone. He points out that:

> For some, this sense of a permeable border between actual-world and virtual-world self was experienced in positive terms. Their online lives could make their actual-world self more "real," in that it could become closer to what they understood to be their true selfhood, unencumbered by social constraints or the particularities of physical embodiment (Boellstorff, 2008, p. 121).

In Boellstorff's book *Coming of Age in Second Life* (2008), one *SL* resident claims that "most people there put in more of their personality rather than they would like to admit" (Boellstorff, 2008, p. 121). Boellstorff puts in this way: "the virtual is shaped in powerful ways by referential and practical relationships to the actual world, but these relationships help constitute the virtual itself" (Boellstorff, 2008, p. 122). Boellstorff points out that environments shape or influence our identity and behavior. He also suggests that many people attempt to escape that environment in *SL*.A woman might marry so as to have access to a house, car, and career, and not because she loves the person. hu et al write that it is a relatively straightforward process "to construct a virtual identity to

fulfill wishes, aspirations, or hopes in online settings such as social network communities" (Hu et al, 2015, p. 467). What this means is that *SL* offers a kind of second chance to "make a different choice". It is interesting to note the extent to which a virtual world sexual relationship might interfere with an actual-world marriage (Boellstorff, 2008, p. 126). In the virtual world, participants can simply enjoy a sexual relationship without worrying about the consequences. However, when they return to the actual world, career, family, and income become important again; however at this point there may be a certain level of dissatisfaction in the actual relationship.

In Boellstorff's study, some residents noted that "how people treat you according to your avatar. It's shame, but it's true". Another person admitted that "I sort of judge people based on their avatar appearance; I don't tend to like the tall skinny blondes" (Boellstorff, 2008, p. 130). As another resident noted, "a lot of people have different avatars, but they have a main avatar they usually use, and their main avatar is usually designed by RL standards of beauty, or is a reflection of their RL self" (Boellstorff, 2008, p. 133). A resident named Pavia, who has a beautiful female avatar but is a man, confessed that:

> Tom, I'm not the person you have gotten to know. But at the same time I am. I'm a man in real time, but about three weeks ago I learned that I'm transsexual. I've pretty much known that I was different all my life. … Here in Second Life I created something new in myself that I never realized was there before. At first it was just role playing, but then I grew to live Pavia. I kept infusing myself into her, but then something unexpected started to happen: Pavia started coming out in the real world. I became her, she became me (Boellstorff, 2008, p. 138).

Another interesting and useful set of examples regarding what we can call the affective dimension of researching *SL* can be found in an unpublished honours' dissertation by Abi Beatson, who provides a more specific account of her time as a researcher in *SL*. Beatson's first experiences of being in *SL* were of feeling isolated and overwhelmed, and brought on a kind of identity crisis. To take part in activities in *SL* requires a computer with a higher speed graphic/display card: you cannot even move your arms without that card. Beatson did not have access to this card, so she was extremely limited in what she could do, and this meant that very few people took any notice of her. The author was treated as if she was 'a nobody' by 'everybody'.

Beatson tried to perform as a male in *SL*, but found that this was not an easy thing to do. She felt so inadequate that she had no choice but to confess to her virtual friends about her actual gender. She writes that:

> I tried to be a male avatar … I also had difficulty producing a convincing performance of masculinity. Even as Butler argues that masculine attributes are themselves performances, I came to realize that my socialization as a female was very much embedded within my habitus to the point where an alternative performance was uncomfortable and almost impossible (Beatson, 2007).

What this account shows is that the way we behave is derived from social history, contexts and experiences; in other words, it is derived from and commensurate with the habitus. People may argue that we care too much about how we are viewed by others. The fact is that even when we are on our own, we are unconsciously adjusting the social body in order to fit into normative templates and categories. It is interesting, for instance, that the majority of female avatars are associated with or derived from Hollywood celebrities: and as the author points out, many female avatars are based on the notion that Hollywood celebrities set the standards as to what constitutes the beautiful and the sexually attractive. Something similar can be found with regard to male avatars.

3. Researching Virtual Reality

It would be a mistake, of course, to think that there is a single or homogeneous culture to *SL*: there are always subcultures which are not necessarily continuous or commensurate with regard to that official discourse and culture, and *SL* is no different in this regard. However, there are two sets of discourses that enable us to read *SL* as an example of a cultural and discursive continuity: firstly, there is the set of (more or less) official discourses that *SL* produces 'about itself', for instance in the form of promotional material; and secondly there are the discourses, arguments, opinions, worldviews and evaluations, often derived (unsurprisingly) from those official statements, that *SL* residents utilize to describe their own experiences in *SL*. There are also what we might refer to as counter-discourses: that is to say, accounts that residents' produce which are either not in keeping with, critical of or disaffected regarding the gap between the claims that *SL* makes about itself, and the reality that those residents have experienced.

According to Castranova, virtual worlds are "any computer-generated physical space … that can be experienced by many people at once"' (Castraonova, 2005, p. 22). These worlds must be considered as a part of the actual: at

the same time there are features of virtual worlds that are quite distinctive, and which have various appeals and forms of attraction.

The change from actual to virtual worlds doubtlessly has a significant influence on how subjects experience reality. This leads to the question: "What status can we assign to the reality of the virtual"? As Chalmers writes:

> Is perception in virtual reality illusory? If virtual objects are not real, then perception of them is a sort of hallucination, akin to perceiving a pink elephant. Even if virtual objects are real, however, perception of them might still be illusory, because we perceive virtual objects as having non-virtual properties that they do not really have (Chalmers, n.d., p. 13).

And he continues:

> Just as virtual experience alters for an experienced user of mirrors, I think visual experience may alter for experienced users of VR. When the sophisticated user of mirrors knows they are looking into a mirror, they have a distinctive mirror phenomenology. When the sophisticated user of VR knows they are looking at virtual objects, they have a distinctive phenomenology of virtuality (Chalmers, n.d., p. 17).

4. Virtual Identity

This 'phenomenological change' informs virtual identity. As Nagy & Koles write:

> Virtual identity construction can be described as a cyclical and continuously iterative process, simultaneously influenced by a variety of individual and global or community-based factors within certain environment-specific realities. In this sense, virtual identity is best considered as a continually evolving incremental system within a synthetic virtual environment (Nagy & Koles, 2014, p. 280).

According to Sherry Turkle, 'life on the screen' is a new mode of life: she points out that "a rapidly expanding system of networks, collectively known as the Internet, links millions of people in new spaces that are changing the way we think, the nature of our sexuality, the form of our communities, our very identities" (Turkle, 1995, p. 1). Turkle describes the computer as a kind of "a second self" (Turkle, 1995, p. 9) prior to the time that *SL* was introduced to the world in 2003. Turkle contextualizes the computer-as-second life phenomenon this way: "People explicitly turn to computers for experiences that they hope will change their ways of thinking or will affect their social and emotional lives" (Turkle, 1995, p. 26). For Turkle "the computer is a tool. It helps us write, keep track of our accounts, and communicate with others. Beyond this, the computer offers us both new models of mind and a new medium on which to project our ideas and fantasies" (Turkle, 1995, p. 1). Turkle argues that contemporary identity is strongly informed by "difference, multiplicity, heterogeneity, and fragmentation, which are those direct results of how our identities are presented under the new media technology" (Turkle, 1995, p. 185). These descriptions are opposed to homogeneity and normality, which are what our social identities used to be associated with. However, it is also apparent that no matter to what extent subjects can move through and across different identities online, those identity categories are still defined by and subject to regimes of normativity.

Boellstorff writes that socio-cultural categories of identity such as "race and ethnicity have received less attention than gender in the study of virtual worlds" (Boellstorff, 2008, p. 144). However, this does not mean that these areas are not important research issues. Nakamura points out that "people of color were functionally absent from the Internet at precisely that time when its discourse was acquiring its distinctive contours" (Nakamura, 2002, p. xii). Dyer stresses that:

> Throughout the history of virtual worlds and continuing during my research in Second Life, the most basic way race shaped was the assumption that residents were white unless stated otherwise. That Second Life's default embodiment was white reflected how 'the power value of whiteness resides above all in its instabilities and apparent neutrality' (Dyer, 1997, p. 70, cited in Boellstorff, 2008, p. 144).

The default setting for an avatar is Caucasian: so we can suggest that skin color plays an important role in *SL*. Boellstorff explains that "many residents who designed skins for sale worked to create a range of skin tones, but white or near white skins predominated and persons seeking darker skins complained of the difficulty in finding them" (Boellstorff, 2008, p. 145). While racial discrimination is a common phenomenon in the actual world, it also matters in the virtual world. The situation is even more serious than what happens in actual world. As Nakamura writes:

> Though there was a sense in which one chose to appear African, Asian, or any other race, whiteness acted as a kind of default, so that as in other virtual worlds 'non white identity positions (became) part of a costume or masquerade' (Nakamura, 2002, p. 47).

Boellstorff claims that *SL* plays an important role in producing new forms of identity through the embodiment of avatars. As Taylor puts it "avatars were not just placeholders for selfhood, but sites of self-making in their own right: 'through avatars, users embody themselves and make real their engagement with a virtual world'" (Taylor, 2002, p. 40). When Boellstorff conducted his fieldwork in *SL*, there was no voice service for the residents. Most virtual worlds at that time were text-based. Language, according to Boellstorff, "has always been virtual; it is thus a key element of the techne that both constitutes and bridges the gap between virtual and actual" (Boellstorff, 2008, p. 151). 'Chat', 'instant messages', and the dominance of American English are three major aspects of language use that Boellstorff analyzes in *SL*. Boellstorff also specifically addresses the function of IM (instant message) and IMs (instant messages):

> Residents also often found themselves receiving large numbers of im greetings immediately after they logged on. While this was an important way to stay in touch, it could also be overwhelming, and many residents spoke of being 'stuck in ims' or even in 'im hell' (Boellstorff, 2008, p. 154).

5. Conclusion

It was pointed out that the virtual is not something that is entirely new to human culture: human interactions and forms of communication, have always been mediated by technology, and this mediation has produced an artificial modification (that is to say, a layer of mediation that both extends and transforms human biology-as-mediation) of how the world is experienced. The question that follows is how is this 'artificial modification', in the form of contemporary virtual technology, tied in with human identity and practices.

The scholars we have referred to earlier in this chapter all place an emphasis on the cultural role of technology, and the study of how culture develops and functions in virtual worlds is one of the main points of focus of this dissertation. For Edward B. Tylor culture is understood as "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society"' (Tylor, 1871, p. 1). Other scholars place an even greater emphasis on the relation between culture and epistemology. Salen and Zimmerman, for instance, define culture as "knowledge of schemas, cognitive maps, and meaning" (cited in Boellstorff, 2006, p. 30). For Geertz, culture cannot be reduced to a series of rules or instructions that more or less mechanically reproduce themselves in the everyday practices of subjects. Cultures are always first and foremost a set of potentialities that interact with (pre)dispositions, and which are always negotiated by subjects with very different levels of cultural literacy. For Boellstorff et al., 'culture, as shared systems of meaning and practice, shape our hoped and beliefs; our ideas about family, identity, and society; our deepest assumptions about being a person in this world' (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p. 1). They argue that, generally speaking, cultural features:

> Do not yield congenial terms for hypothetical statements because such elements do not primarily concern outcomes. Cultural elements shape and underpin the meanings that form our conscious and unconscious lives. They emerge in relational ways as we act. They are often habitual, routine, mundane, and repeated, scaffolding the structures of everyday living (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p. 31 – 32).

The job of the researcher is to find the ways and means of researching these developments and processes in a manner that does not take the discursive claims made by *SL* "Your World. Your Imagination" ("Your World," 2018), but rather understands practices as being at least partly derived from the logics and characteristics of *SL*'s culture. The following chapter will provide an account of the issues and problems that arose in conducting a participant observer, immersion based ethnographic study of *SL*.

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