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VIRTUAL WORLDS AND FUTURES OF ANTHROPOLOGY

by Tom Boellstorff



Welcome to Second Life

Imagine yourself suddenly set down alone on a tropical beach close to an island village. Spread out before you on a gorgeous blue sea is an archipelago of islands and continents. While the boat that has brought you to this place sails away, you realize you are alone and have nothing to do but begin your ethnographic journey. You have no previous experience in conducting fieldwork in this environment; there is little to guide you and no one to help you. Thus began my two-year field study in Second Life.¹

Having made eight different trips to Indonesia, totaling almost three years of fieldwork, in June 2004 I began my new field study by logging onto my computer. I entered Second Life as an “avatar,” a virtual person named Tom Bukowski.² What I found was a stunning vista of green hills, sandy beaches and lands dotted with homes, streets, even whole cities, a new world populated by people appearing as humanlike “avatars,” each having entered this virtual world by logging on from an actual location around the globe.

Since childhood, I have always been fascinated by technology. Born in 1969, I am a member of the first generation in the United States for whom video games were a part of everyday life. I was an avid player as well as a voracious reader of J.R.R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*.

In graduate school I discovered Sim City, a popular simulation released in the late 1990s. But also around this time, computer engineers were pioneering a new technology that could generate a three-dimensional virtual world that could be experienced by many people at the same time, people who could communicate with one another through text (and eventually through voice).

In June 2003 Linden Labs invited the public to join Second Life; by November 2007, when the final manuscript for my ethnography was submitted, there were over 10 million registered Second Life accounts, with over 1.5 million people logging on per month, and tens of thousands of persons “inworld” at one time. About a year later, just over 15 million accounts were registered, with residents spending over 28 million hours “inworld” each month, with, on average, over 50,000 residents logged in at any particular moment. Second Life is not a small phenomenon, and there are many virtual worlds much larger than Second Life (including those designed for children, like Club Penguin, and those designed as games, like World of Warcraft).

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How Can an Anthropologist Study Virtual Worlds?

After some preliminary searching among various “virtual worlds,” I settled on Second Life for my particular study.

Inside: *Obesity and Culture, Iraqi Ethnic Groups, Applied Readers, Discounted Text*



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I began my fieldwork by logging into my computer and joining Second Life through my avatar Tom “Bukowski.” I spent two years conducting this research using, to the greatest degree possible, the same methods I had used in Indonesia. At the end, rather than publish my research findings in the form of a blog or webpage, I decided to create the “traditional” product of anthropological research: a book, published on real paper and ink in the physical world, which I titled *Coming of Age in Second Life*, with its obvious reference to Margaret Mead’s classic study of Samoa.

I decided quite consciously to structure my research around the idea of “old method, new topic.” However, this is an oversimplification, since the methods anthropologists use are never “traditional”—they are constantly being revised and updated to fit the incredibly varied fieldsites in which anthropologists conduct research.

Thus, I set out upon my Second Life research as a kind of ethnographic experiment. I did not know if it would even be possible to conduct anthropological research in virtual worlds. Was there really “culture” there?

Are people spending time in Second Life nothing more than people who “need to get a first life”—geeks, losers, the socially isolated and misfit? What is happening in virtual worlds? What kinds of culture and subcultures are appearing there? In what ways do virtual cultures differ from those in the actual physical world? What are the promises and the perils of this new venue for human societies? What can anthropologists learn from a study of virtual worlds?

It soon became clear to me that what was happening inside Second Life was absolutely worthy of anthropological attention. In fact, I came to believe that ethnography may be particularly well-suited for the study of virtual worlds. After all, from its beginnings anthropology has worked to place the reader “virtually” in the culture of another through the ethnographer’s central methodology of participant observation.

The open-endedness of Second Life meant that I was able to subordinate interviews and surveys to participant observation, the centerpiece of any truly ethnographic approach. Not only did I create the avatar Tom Bukowski,



Author Tom Boellstorff in Second Life.

I shopped for clothes for my avatar in the same stores as any Second Life resident. I bought land with the help of a Second Life real estate agent and learned how to use Second Life's building tools. I created a home and office for my research named "Ethnographia." I learned games created and played inside Second Life, like "primitinary" (a variant of Pictionary). I wandered across the Second Life landscape, flying, teleporting, or floating along in my hot air balloon, stopping to investigate events, buildings, or people I happened to encounter. I also used the "events" list and notices in Second Life publications to learn of interesting spaces to visit. I joined many Second Life groups and participated in a range of activities.

Ethnographic knowledge is situated and partial. Just as most Indonesians have spent more time in Indonesia than I and know many things about Indonesia that I do not know, so many Second Life residents spent more time inworld than I, and every resident had some kind of knowledge about the virtual world that I lacked. But I was struck by how the idea of someone conducting ethnography (as stated in my profile) made sense to residents. In fact, residents often commented upon my seeming comfort with Second Life, particularly my skills at building (an unexpected benefit of my growing up as a video gamer). One resident noted, "You seem so comfy in here—like you study it yet still live it." I found it remarkable the degree to which the challenges and joys of my research in Second Life resembled the challenges and joys of my research in Indonesia. Perhaps the most surprising and significant finding from my research was that I needed to make only minor changes to my "traditional" methods to conduct research in Second Life.

In my earlier fieldwork in Indonesia, I complemented participant observation with interviews, archival research, text analysis, and focus groups. I found all of these ancillary methods helpful for my research in Second Life. For example, I conducted about 30 formal interviews, each one preceded by the signing of a consent form. Ethnographers often face the challenge of filtering huge amounts of data. In my case, my data set constituted over 10,000 pages of fieldnotes, plus approximately 10,000 additional pages of blogs, newsletters, and other websites.³

What Can Anthropology Tell Us about Virtual Worlds?

Anthropological inquiry has long demonstrated that there are many forms of human being—many ways to live a human life. In a sense, there are many actual worlds and now many virtual worlds as well. I examined one of them for what it could teach us about what it means to be virtually human. It is in the effort to bring together everyday detail and broad pattern that anthropology has a special contribution to make to the study of virtual worlds.

Unlike the network of relationships created on MySpace and Facebook, virtual worlds are places existing online where social relationships abound. In this virtual culture, I could study the concepts of place and time; self, gender, and race; social relationships including family, friendships and community; material culture; economics and politics — all helping to contribute to a holistic anthropology of virtual worlds.

My research was not just an experiment in methodology but an experiment in the ethics of virtual anthropology. I worked to avoid being identified with any particular subset of residents. My avatar took on different fashions and genders during my research as these were options open to all residents, but my default embodiment—as Tom Bukowski—was both white and male, in line with my actual-world embodiment, and I was also openly gay. When debates or conflict broke out in my presence, I did not feign neutrality. I would, for instance, file an "Abuse Report" if I saw someone mistreating another resident, as others would likely have done. I gave my own opinions in informal conversations, interviews, and focus groups, but I did work to interact with residents whose political and personal views might not reflect my own.⁴

A common tactic in writing on virtual worlds is to emphasize the sensational: men participating as women and vice versa, humans participating as animals and so on. Looking to the unusual to tell us about cultures, however, is of limited use. If in the actual world we were to do nothing but read the headlines of our newspapers and television reports, we would not have an accurate understanding of everyday life. Ethnographers are not oblivious to the extraordinary but find that culture is lived out in the mundane and the ordinary.

Thus it was also with sexual activity that existed in Second Life during my fieldwork—people using their avatars to do everything from live as loving spouses to engaging in non-monogamous sexual behaviors. Since sexuality is an important part of human life in the physical world, the existence of sex in Second Life is hardly surprising. Nor should it be surprising that crass commercialism, fraud and deceit, and even sexism, racism, and other forms of discrimination can be found in Second Life and other virtual worlds. But if this was all that was happening in Second Life, or even the predominant things happening in Second Life, why would so many people spend so much time there?

What soon became clear as I conducted my research was that an overly exclusive focus on these unusual aspects of virtual world societies missed the more prevalent (and, I would argue, more significant) forms of community, kindness, and creativity that made these worlds attractive in the first place.

While some Second Life residents would find that their time “inworld” got in the way of time with their physical-world families, occasionally, to the extent they would reduce their time in Second Life or leave it altogether, what was far more common was for Second Life to simply replace television. If you consider the average hours a week that Americans (indeed, people around the

world) watch television, replacing that time with far more active engagement in virtual worlds is not necessarily a bad thing. Contrary to the idea that Second Life and other virtual worlds, online games, and networking sites lead to isolation, I was surprised to find many examples of families participating in Second Life together, a state of affairs that in some cases helped families stay actively involved in the lives of family members living at a distance. Disabled persons often found Second Life a liberating environment in which they could be as “abled” as anyone else, or explore aspects of their disabilities and build community. Linden Lab, the company that owns and manages Second Life, built it around the idea that residents could optionally sell things for “real-world” money, and there are persons who make thousands of dollars a month from commerce in everything from clothing for avatars to virtual real estate. However, many residents create things that they sell for pennies or even give away for free, finding in the virtual world the chance to unleash creative energies that find no outlet in the physical world.

When I followed the precepts of anthropological research and tried to understand Second Life without rushing to judgment, I found a space that for many was a powerful space of creativity, community, and self-exploration. There are important differences between virtual worlds and the actual world—for instance, the fact



that persons can usually change their embodiment at will, so that things like race and gender become alterable choices, while still imbued with meaning. Yet many aspects of virtual-world sociality are quite similar to those in the physical world. Researchers always like to find something new, emphasizing (and occasionally overemphasizing) the novel. Continuities, however, can be as informative and significant as differences.

There are, in fact, three things these continuities between virtual worlds and the physical world can teach us. First, these continuities show us how online environments import (and transform) social norms from the physical world. They import differing norms, depending on aspects of the virtual world in question, and if people enter it globally or mostly from certain regions (China versus Europe, the United States versus Korea, and so on). But in every case we do not become electronic robots when we are online—we remain human. This is one meaning of the phrase “virtually human” that appears as part of the title of my book *Coming of Age in Second Life: An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human*.

A second thing the continuities between the physical world and virtual worlds show us is that one reason so many people can find virtual worlds meaningful is that being “virtual” is not unique to virtual worlds. Forms of virtuality shape our physical-world lives. In a sense, culture itself is “virtual” to the degree that it is not only made up of behaviors and material objects, but also shared symbolic meanings and beliefs. Human societies have long been shaped by technology—in fact, many would argue that our tool-making capacity is what makes us distinctively human, *homo faber*. This is a second meaning of being “virtually human”: virtual worlds can help us understand how, in a sense, we have always been virtual.

A third thing the continuities between the physical world and virtual worlds demonstrate to us is that anthropology has, in a sense, anticipated the emergence of virtual worlds. Ethnographic methods of participant observation have always worked to create a sense of “being there” in another culture, to see things from the point of view of persons who at first glance live lives utterly different from our own. A good ethnography always allows us to feel we are “avatars,” so to speak, in a reality not our own, but that we can learn to understand on some level. And though it is difficult to convey the sense of beauty and joy and won-

der of a virtual world, it is important to note that one reason many people participate in virtual worlds is because it is fun to live in a world that is so much a product of the human imagination.

It is with a hope of further understanding these emerging relationships between the actual and virtual that I will continue to conduct research in virtual worlds, for Internet technologies are certainly here to stay and will shape human societies in ways we can scarcely imagine today. Virtual worlds are quite new, despite the fact that their antecedents can be found in early computer games, the telephone, or even cave paintings. There is often great interest in trying to predict the future, in discovering trends and working to anticipate that which will come. Unfortunately, there is no way to research the future. It is only through careful ethnographic research in the present, coupled with careful historical research, that we can gain a better understanding of virtual worlds. And it is only through such an understanding that we can move beyond the hype and dismissal to arrive at a more robust and nuanced appreciation for the unfolding importance of these new virtual frontiers in the human journey.

Endnotes

¹ This paragraph is adapted from Boellstorff 2008, p. 3.

² With a few exceptions, Linden Lab, the company that owns and manages Second Life, allows you to choose any first name you want for your avatar, but requires you choose a last name from a predefined list. It is, of course, not a requirement of virtual worlds that avatar names differ from actual-world names.

³ This paragraph is adapted from Boellstorff 2008, p. 70.

⁴ This paragraph is adapted from Boellstorff 2008, pp. 79-80.

[Note: In order to fill out further details for this article, *AnthroNotes* editors adapted, with permission from the author, selected passages from his work, *Coming of Age in Second Life: An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human*, Princeton University Press, 2008. See Endnotes.]

Tom Boellstorff is Associate Professor in the Department of Anthropology at the University of California, Irvine, and Editor-in-Chief of American Anthropologist, the flagship journal of the American Anthropological Association.