

## Book Reviews

### **Coming of Age in Second Life: An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human** Tom Boellstorff, 2008, Princeton University Press

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Coming of Age in Second Life: An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human takes a fresh look at anthropological approaches and the pertinence of such to the study of on-line communication, entertainment and socialization. It is also an attempt and challenge for the field to develop new methods and theory, encounters and explorations in the digital age, similar to the original works of Malinowski and Margaret Mead, upon which he draws parallels. Boellstorff's methodological discipline and examination of second life serves to fashion an ethnography which captures the imagination and makes virtual worlds accessible for the lay reader as well as provide foundational work for internet ethnography in terms of theoretical challenges of the virtual human, presence, agency, social organization and community. He sets forth the argument of the relevance and importance of such a study for the cultural anthropologist to consider the new worlds created and occupied by humans as locations for study. Boellstorff explores the "virtually human" through two levels of analysis, first through the "post-human" which he argues is essentially human and the "almost human" as on-line worlds provide a new place for altered sociality, agency and identity.

Part one of the book "Setting the Virtual" (3-86) concentrates on the importance of studying the virtual, including the growing use of gaming, internet mediated communication, networking and socialization. Additionally the author incorporates the necessity of anthropological approaches to internet ethnography, the ways in which this approach is useful for understanding virtual worlds and their relation to modern globalized culture. Boellstorff, delineates his object of study, the particularities of gaming in respect to virtual communities and their place in relation to the creation of "worlds" of which participants are "residents." In the sense of progression of gaming over time from text-based single player games to massively multi-player on-line role playing games, he provides an excellent summary of the history of the technology and illustrates the ways in which it has been incorporated into his own daily life and the everyday lives of on-line residents. As well, he incorporates the ways in which this history has impacted the development of the "virtual human" through the use of computer technology in daily contexts. For the author, the integration of new media outlets and computer technologies as part of culture contributes to aspects of being human, similar to culture as typically understood as being created by humans. Boellstorff makes a compelling argument for the position that in experiencing the virtual we are human.

Section two "Culture of Virtual worlds" (87-179) explores the daily processes of Second Life. The triviality and the exotic, including the ambiguous aspects of virtual place juxtaposed against the concreteness of time for residents in actuality, which is of importance for many actual and virtual anthropologists is of particular concern for Boellstorff. He tackles personhood, the

creation of individual identity and alternative identities through the formation of the avatar as well as the agency of such creativity in terms of the abilities of individuals to be social actors as a means to fulfill psychological needs. In order to understand the agency of the avatar as a competent social actor, he draws on the abilities of individuals who have psychological impairments (e.g. autism) to socialize and establish relationships in virtual worlds, the function of text-based communication as opposed to vocal capabilities and the on-going debates of differing kinds of communication within Second Life, the importance of visualization in experiencing and encountering virtual worlds and its economy in terms of creativity.

In section three “The Age of Techne” (203-237), the idea of “creationist capital” is introduced. Boellstorff explores the underlying cultural logic of the need to create through Western worldviews and forwards his argument that “...creationist capitalism unites production and consumption.” The social actors within Second Life are framed as the creators and inhabitants of the world in which they reside, not simply inhabitants of a virtual world created by a capitalist enterprise. Boellstorff pays particular attention to the ownership residents feel towards the world, through their concern with changes to the program by Linden Labs and struggles for power and control over programming.

This well-written book is an intriguing look at the impact of on-line gaming and industry in a globalized modern world. Boellstorff’s focus on the potential of ethnography for the exploration and understanding of on-line worlds in general and the world of gaming in particular is well argued and problematized, which challenges readers at many levels, methodologically and theoretically. His goals for this book are to provide an encounter with virtual worlds and communities in an ethnographic format as to move forward theoretical understandings of virtual communities, which can be challenging due to their complexity and conceptual limitations of time and place as well as presence and agency. While Boellstorff fully acknowledges the corporate nature of Second Life as created by Linden Labs, he downplays this aspect as well as the difficulty in separating the actual from the virtual in conceptual terms. For a perspective that goes beyond the corporate nature of on-line gaming and recognizes Second Life as a world in its own right, with resident creators, Boellstorff seeks and is fairly successful in gaining the point of view of the avatar, the communities which they create and develop as well as their presence, and the theoretical problems this can create within the virtual world. Boellstorff’s methodological discipline in this regard is rarely compromised; however, without fail, the actual often creeps into the world of the virtual, particularly in his analysis of presence and intimacy, in which he explores the gap between actual and virtual humans.

I would recommend this book to both undergraduate and graduate level students. For the undergraduate, I think it provides an opportunity to see the relevance of anthropological method and theory in the conceptualization and impact of new media and technology on human practices. As well, for the graduate student, this book provides conceptual challenges in both method and theory.