

Book review

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Book Review

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

“Virtual world” is a term appearing in the media every once in a while, and a slight but steady increase of commonness is noticeable – especially online news about virtual worlds are seen more and more frequently. While the media hype of Second Life, the most popular virtual world, finally phased out after having reached its peak in 2007/2008, virtual worlds are heading for the Plateau of Productivity (as researchers put it, applying the well-known Gartner Hype Cycle to the field of social virtual worlds). Tom Boellstorff has invested more than two years for conducting ethnographic fieldwork within Second Life, and has compiled his findings and implications in this book.

Boellstorff is associate professor of anthropology at the University of California, Irvine. He has written several books including *A Coincidence of Desires: Anthropology, Queer Studies, Indonesia*, and *The Gay Archipelago: Sexuality and Nation in Indonesia*. After his exhaustive work in Indonesia, he decided to make a new start on the realm of virtual worlds – and apparently made the right choice at the right time, because he was able to witness the genesis of a new culture, namely of the one in the virtual world

Second Life (SL), which had just been launched when he joined. Moreover, he managed to finish his primary research in SL just before the media hype started. Thus, Boellstorff’s fieldwork in that particular period of time was not biased by any external influences; which is crucial, especially for participant observation, the methodology the author used.

This book addresses readers interested in (social) virtual worlds, in “online” cultures, and especially everybody wanting to know what this fascination with Second Life is all about; it is written comprehensible for both SL “newbies” and SL “oldbies” (these terms express states of expertise of SL users). The book gives an ethnographic portrait of Second Life, and in doing so the author demonstrates the potential of ethnography as a methodology for studying social virtual worlds. Furthermore, the book contributes toward a better understanding of virtual worlds in general.

With a “Robinson-Crusoe-like” narrative about everyday virtual life the author introduces the reader into SL, demonstrates the diverse possibilities of a virtual world and gives a feel of the wealth of culture in Second Life. Referring to a multitude of related work, Boellstorff then discusses and defines central terms like “virtual,” “world,” “virtual world,” and “actual”

(which denotes the physical world and objects better than the term “real,” the author argues, since also the virtual can be real). After mentioning and dealing with common negative assumptions about virtual worlds he closes the first part of the book with an exhaustive discussion of the origins and the history of virtual worlds, where he even draws from Greek myths and ancient techniques.

In the second and longest part of the book, Boellstorff presents and discusses the findings of his fieldwork. First, he discusses features introduced by three-dimensional virtual worlds, what he subsumes as place and time. From these notions he proceeds to a discourse of the more abstract topic of personhood, discussing how a second “self” can be developed – and lived – in a virtual world and how it affects the people’s behavior in real life. As a prominent example he mentions the positive effect of openness towards strangers which people transfer from the virtual to the actual world. A following discussion of the notions of language and friendship over sexuality and love through family he subsumes under intimacy. Part two of the book concludes with a chapter about different notions of community, ranging from groups over events through kindness and disturbing behavior (which he calls “griefing”). The author in addition briefly looks beyond Second Life and opens up the scope to include behavior between virtual worlds, and also reports that other forms of online media (blogs, websites, etc.) belong to the whole Second Life experience and virtual world culture.

In the third and last part of the book, the author steps back from his ethnographic materials in order to develop hypotheses about culture in virtual worlds, bringing it into relation with changes in our (real-life) modern culture. A central point Boellstorff makes here is that with virtual cultures it is possible for the first time to entirely control a culture, since culture follows design, and since worlds can be owned and functionalities in them can be turned off at any time by the owners or others that are empowered. A concluding chapter summarizes the findings and discusses future directions of anthropology for virtual worlds.

With an abundance of references to and many citations from a very diverse selection of literature in some parts of the book and a number of illustrating examples from within Second Life in other parts, the format is diverse, but appealing to both theoreticians and practitioners. While the language of writing is kept constant at a very high level, some parts of the book are fairly easy to read – however, other passages require both high concentration and proficiency of the English language. Providing interesting findings in the very diverse aspects of “virtual culture,” the book is a must in every readings list about virtual worlds.

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