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**Tom Boellstorff. 2008. *Coming of Age in Second Life: An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press. 336pp. ISBN 978-0-691-13528-1**

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*Coming of Age* is written by Tom Boellstorff, Professor of Anthropology at the University of California, Irvine. He is the author of a *Coincidence of Desires: Anthropology and Queer Studies* (Princeton University Press). The subject matter details key considerations regarding the application of traditional ethnographic practices to virtual environments, with specific focus on the virtual realm and 'post-humanism'. Ordered in three sections the book covers a diverse range of topics including: Setting the Virtual Stage, Culture in a Virtual World and The Age of Techne. There are nine chapters spanning the three sections covering varied technological, sociological and philosophical topics, such as, place and time, personhood, community, and political economy. Scholarly considerations are given to a range of thinkers as diverse as Martin Heidegger, Gilles Deleuze, Pierre Bourdieu, Jean Baudrillard and Jacques Derrida in Boellstorff's attempt to construct: 'an anthropology of the virtual'.

Creativity is only constrained by the limits of one's own imagination, enabling one's consciousness to be relocated not necessarily through writing (Ong 1982) but through engaging creatively with a medium (Benton 1995). This engagement is achieved in the virtual world of *Second Life*, a world where participants can defy gravity, embarking on flights to exotic locales (sans technological assistance), discovering and experimenting with sexuality and gender, cultivating friendships unconstrained by physical limitations in *real life* and disregarding boundaries of time and geographical distance. These practices, as fantastic as they sound, can be accomplished through ethnographic immersion. Boellstorff's choice of an ethnographic methodology raises many pertinent questions regarding insights into the study of virtual worlds for the graduate student. The following review is a critical account of the strengths and limitations of the application of ethnography to virtual worlds.

Following the tradition of other authors, Boellstorff engineers a lucid account of the utopian and dystopian nature of interactions within Virtual Worlds (c.f. Dibbell 1998; Gibson 1984; Poster 2001). The introductory chapter is framed to appeal to the neophyte, where Boellstorff emphasises his initiation into fieldwork within the virtual realm of Second Life. The customs, ceremonies and transactions that the graduate student will come across in realms such as Second Life will be inculcated into their working practices, enabling a detailed explication of the environment under investigation.

Through engaging with the ideas presented, the reader can cultivate an appreciation of how to apply the methods and theoretical practices of anthropology in the actual world, to the study of similar phenomena in the supra-sensible realm of the virtual. Traditionally speaking, all methodologies and theories have pros and cons coded within their internal meta-theoretical frameworks. Thus, the following sections seek to explicate these dimensions in order for the graduate student to make an informed choice regarding the uses of ethnography and anthropology to the application of virtual world fieldwork.

A key feature of ethnography is that it is labour intensive and always involves prolonged direct contact with group members in an effort to

look for rounded, holistic explanations. (Goulding 2005, 299)

By drawing upon Boellstorff's experiences as an anthropologist in actual life, the reader can appreciate the nature of just how the 'rounded, holistic explanations' asserted by Goulding can become accessible in these types of environments. As Boellstorff argues, 'tens of thousands of persons [*sic*] who might live on separate continents spent part of their lives online.' (p. 4). It is the question of accessibility which can assist the user in gathering data. This data possesses the attributes of 'thick description' (Geertz 1973). Participant observation, a key variable of traditional offline ethnography, is mirrored in the on-line world as contributing to the processes of data collection. Boellstorff notes an important factor regarding established and emerging virtual worlds: 'they have the capacity to change swiftly' (p. 17). In relation to methodology, Boellstorff cites the aim of his book is 'to demonstrate the potential of ethnography for studying virtual worlds' (p. 24)

Like other methodologies, ethnography has been criticised for its limitations. These limitations enable the researcher to frame their research politics in such a way, as to eschew any potential limitations raised. This can be something as simple as ensuring that procedures are in place to cover any ethical issues which may arise. Boellstorff does this by electronically gaining

the informed consent of his research participants. This allows the graduate student to avoid the pitfalls of this method for collecting and analysing data. Participant observation and interviews are cited as two main methods of data collection. For the graduate student, these methods can cause issues. Mann's claims regarding the limitations of web-based, virtual, ethnographic studies, highlights several areas for the graduate student to consider.

The potential for [the] Hawthorne effect, wherein the presence of the researcher alters the online events, familiarity among the participants ... [the] reporting [of] multiple realities (which may contradict ... a burgeoning ideology or principle) and safeguarding ensuring the integrity of the data from malicious tampering. (Mann 2006, 442)

Boellstorff also utilises participant observation in *Second Life*, yet a key limitation of this methodology for collecting data is its 'generalisability' within other environments, such as IMVU, Twinity, The Sims or Habbo Hotel (Markham & Baym 2009; Kozinets 2009). Strictly-speaking, these are more chat rooms or PC games than virtual worlds, but the methodology would still be practicable in relation to these environments.

Boellstorff displays resolve in his ambitious project to operationalise what he terms 'providing a tool-kit for the virtual, by enacting the con-

cept of *techne*' (p. 59) as a methodological tool in order to understand the creative processes associated with the concept (Heidegger 1977; Hansen, 2000). He asks, what can ethnography tell us about virtual worlds? (2008, 61). It should be noted that Boellstorff displays a disregard in relation to whether or not in-world participants represent themselves truthfully, thus, one should be highly suspicious of in-world interlocutors' motives.

The practices of constructing the ideal representation of oneself are not historically unique, as one could say that statues of the Greeks and Romans were nothing but hyperbolic symbolism. After all, if narratives are constructed through subterfuge, of what value culturally are the results? The breadth, depth and topicality of the examples chosen, highlights the ever-evolving nature of online interactions and serves as a marker to emphasize the complexity of anthropology, and its associated methodologies of ethnography.

Anthropology is an intellectually challenging, theoretically ambitious subject which tries to achieve an understanding of culture, society and humanity through detailed studies of local life, supplemented by comparison. (Eriksen 2004, 7)

In closing, graduate students should be aware of a paper by Jeffrey and Troman 2004, which states that whichever option is chosen, utilising ethnography as a method for data collection and analysis is

purely dependent on the functions and context of the research:

[T]he selection of the appropriate form is dependent on the contingent circumstances of the research and the main purpose of the research, and [they] suggest strategies for developing this work in contemporary circumstances. (Jeffrey and Troman 2004, 535)

They go on to assert that if graduate students follow an academic career route, they will unlikely be afforded the time to conduct a similar study again. Hence, for Masters and Doctoral postgraduate students, the advice would be (despite obvious limitations) to consider inserting the question into the framework posed by Neil Postman in a 1995 telecast: to what problem is ethnography the solution?

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