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Book review:

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

In *Coming of Age in Second Life: An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human*, Tom Boellstorff explores the online virtual world Second Life, owned and created by the company Linden Lab Ltd, from an anthropological perspective. Using the avatar "Tom Bukowski", Boellstorff undertook two years of research within Second Life using traditional ethnographic methods and elicitation methods, such as participant observation and interviews, in order to gain a holistic understanding of Second Life as a culture within its own right. This book is the first ethnography of Second Life and though other ethnographies have been produced of online worlds, such as Michael Rosenburg's "Virtual Reality: Reflections of Life, Dreams and Technology: An Ethnography of Computer Society"[1], Boellstorff manages to produce an original piece of work that not only explores 'the virtually human' online, but also claims that humans are already 'virtual' in everyday life. This book may be considered quite controversial considering the very nature of the topic; many consider 'virtual worlds' "just fake, a joke, not worth studying"[2], however this book manages to prove otherwise. The book seeks to prove that by studying virtual worlds we can gain a significant insight into the nature of human beings and human thought. By exploring the 'virtual human', Boellstorff paints a picture for us: virtual worlds are an extension of human life, a secondary environment in which to be creative. He deems this "The

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[1] Boellstorff, Tom. *Coming of Age in Second Life: An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human* (Oxfordshire: Princeton University Press, 2008), P. 294.

[2] Boellstorff, Tom. Personal Communication through 'Second Life': 09/01/10, 16:04-16:22 GMT. (See Appendix 1.)

Age of Techne"[3], the age of creation, in which the boundaries between the virtual and the actual are reinforced by the gap that is formed through the very act of creation. The distinction is between online and offline, the gap can never be closed completely. Finally, throughout his research within Second Life, by analysing all aspects of culture, ranging from gender, race to language, Boellstorff manages to represent a world in which emotions can be just as real as they are in the actual world.

Boellstorff writes in a clear and concise manner providing empirical and theoretical backing to his claims as well as providing counter arguments that he manages to challenge successfully. The book can be read by students and scholars alike that have a background in a range of different disciplines such as anthropology, information technology and gaming studies, as well as any one else interested in the topic. By stating his methodological limitations Boellstorff makes it completely clear from the very beginning what his research is capable of achieving; he does not intend to provide a complete analysis of Second Life, which is clearly impossible. However, his intensions are to provide the reader with "a good picture"[4] of the online virtual world at the given time of his study, whilst thinking about bigger questions and perspectives of human nature. Although Boellstorff acknowledges that Second Life has a variety of subcultures, he insists that Second Life can be taken as a culture on its own, and it is this culture that he provides in-depth insights about even though he aims to analyse these subcultures within Second Life in future publications. [5]

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[3] Boellstorff, Tom. (2008), P.203.

[4] Boellstorff, Tom. Personal Communication through 'Second Life': 09/01/10, 16:04-16:22 GMT.

[5] Ibid.

This book is Boellstorff's third publication following on from his ethnographic research on gay culture within Indonesia: *A Coincidence of Desires: Anthropology, Queer Studies, Indonesia* and *The Gay Archipelago: Sexuality* and *Nation in Indonesia.* Boellstorff claims that his experience of researching and writing up *Coming of Age in Second Life* had many similarities to his former ethnographies. This allows the reader to extensively question traditional ethnographic methods and how, in reality, they can be applied to virtual worlds. Boellstorff has conducted thorough research into the philosophical and methodological implications of his study, stating, "I don't think there's anything I would have done differently, I really did 100%, the best I could with it."[6] The amount of effort that has been put into the research of this book and ethnography comes out through the coherence of the chapters and the non-patronising manner in which Boellstorff writes. Trained as a linguist, Boellstorff's eloquence makes this ethnography a fascinating read. At the same time, by providing us with images, readers are allowed to imagine his experiences within Second Life.

Boellstorff's research spanned from June 3, 2004 to January 30, 2007. During this period, when Boellstorff first joined as "Tom Bukowski", there were only 5000 'residents'[7]; by the time he finished his research there were approximately 10 million residents. Many aspects of Second Life developed and changed throughout Boellstorff's fieldwork and he mentions these aspects throughout his ethnography. However, it should be noted, for the very reason that he was a participant observer; he

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[6] Boellstorff, Tom. Personal Communication through 'Second Life': 09/01/10, 16:04-16:22 GMT.

[7] A term used to refer to users of Second Life.

was not taking part in every possible aspect of Second Life but taking part in events as any other resident would do. Several 20th century anthropologists such as Bronisław Malinowski and Margaret Mead have influenced Boellstorff's research methods and theories, which can be seen from the title of his book as well as certain chapters and paraphrases throughout. *Coming of Age in Second Life* is a reference to Mead's *Coming of Age in Samoa[8],* an ethnographic research based on the development of adulthood in Samoan teenagers. Furthermore, Boellstorff boldly starts his ethnography paraphrasing the beginning paragraph of Malinowski's *Argonauts of the Western Pacific,* the ethnographic research based on Malinowski's fieldwork of four years in the Trobriand Islands. His mention of classic anthropology throughout his book is to "demonstrate the promise of ethnographic methods for the study of virtual worlds".[9] Indeed, this he manages to demonstrate in a variety of ways. Boellstorff deems it important to capture the essence of everyday life within Second Life without placing a value judgement on whether virtual worlds are socially detrimental or whether they are 'dystopic or 'utopic'. [10] As any other ethnography would focus on the minute details of everyday life, Boellstorff makes it clear that this is also significant for understanding virtual worlds.

The ethnography is divided into three parts and respective chapters. The first part, "Setting the Virtual Stage", focuses on Boellstorff's reasons and justifications for writing this book, theories and practical implications of traditional anthropological

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[8] Boellstorff, Tom. (2008), P.6.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Boellstorff, Tom. (2008), P.26

methods, linguistic terms used within and surrounding the study of virtual worlds, as well as histories of virtual worlds and technology. The chapters are divided into 'The Subject and Scope of This Inquiry', 'History' and 'Method' respectively. The second part of the book, "Culture in a Virtual World" explores the fruits of Boellstorff's fieldwork; thus he specifically focuses on 'Place and Time', 'Personhood', 'Intimacy' and 'Community' as the topic of each chapter. It is throughout this section that Boellstorff allows the reader to enter the world of Second Life and gain an insight into the lives of the residents from building houses, creating and changing avatars, to friendships and sexual relationships, to buying clothes with 'lindens'[11] and addiction. The final part of the book, "The Age of Techne" focuses on 'Political Economy' and 'The Virtual' respectively. In these chapters Boellstorff explores the idea of creationist capitalism and views of Second Life as a commodity economy. Additionally he returns to and adds to initial goal of arguing that all of us essentially, "online and offline, are virtually human".[12]

The idea of humans being 'virtually human' comes from Boellstorff's argument of humans being 'homo cyber', "the human online, the virtual human"[13]. He contrasts the concept of 'homo cyber' to 'homo faber' ("man the maker") and 'homo cyber' ("man the player").[14] These concepts arise through Boellstorff's desire to bring out the philosophical distinction between episteme (knowledge) and techne

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[11] The currency used in Second Life that in reality has value against currency such as the dollar. This is used to buy Second Life property or objects.

[12] Boellstorff, Tom. (2008), P.249.

[13] Ibid. P.25.

[14] Ibid.

(technology/art).[15] Boellstorff argues, drawing on ideas of philosophers such as

Martin Heidegger and Plato, and anthropologists such as Malinowski, that culture is a

secondary environment artificially created as oppose to nature. Thus, whatever we

partake in everyday life is within culture, is essentially a 'virtual world' just like

Second Life. Second Life is just another means in which to explore techne and

"intentional creativity…[where] people can craft their livelihoods".[16] Foucault claims

that techne works as an "art of existence".[17] The livelihoods that are created on

Second Life must not be deemed 'unreal', they are just as real as within the actual

world; they are merely another form of existence. The distinction is between actual

and virtual, not virtual and real; Boellstorff makes sure to state that this is an

ethnographic binarism as oppose to an ontological one, thus veering away from

metaphysical problems that could arise from such a statement. There are different

ways humans can manifest their environment they are in; one way is through creating

an avatar and exploring the realms of a virtual world. An imperative point that

Boellstorff tries to get across with this book, is that virtual relationships can be just as

meaningful as actual relationships; he makes this claim with a basis of much

empirical evidence through discussions with many Second Life residents who often

claimed that virtual worlds are places that one can explore their inner self.[18]

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[15] Ibid.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Boellstorff, Tom. (2008), P.159.

Boellstorff basis his definition of a virtual world based on Castronova's research: they are "(1) places, (2) inhabited by persons and (3) enabled by online technologies". [19] Certainly it seems valid that Boellstorff argues for Second Life to be researched as a distinct culture. It is distinct from the actual world and thus has a unique means of communication and as a result creates its own meanings. Boellstorff further takes time to distinguish between important terms such as 'virtual knowledge', 'virtual reality' and 'cybersociality'. In addition to explaining significant terms, which make it clear why a 'virtual world' is different to other forms of online interaction, Boellstorff makes a clear distinction between multiple online games and interactions within a virtual world. Virtual worlds, as oppose to games, do not have an end goal. They are places for social interaction and creation (techne). Furhthermore, Boellstroff provides the reader with a history of virtual worlds. He presents an insight into Multi-User Domain's (MUDs), and online Multiple Player games such as World of Warcraft that have influenced the development of multiple spaces of interaction.

His brief background into virtual worlds, as well as his own personal background, is relevant because it allows the reader to see how text-based domains such as 'Whole Earth Lectronic Link' (WELL)[20] evolved into 3D virtual worlds which came into existence in the 1990s and early 2000s[21]. Similar to The Sims Online, Second Life was one of the first 3D virtual worlds, which added a whole new way of experiencing the 'virtually human', through sensory perception: seeing through the 'eye'.

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[19] Ibid. P.17.

[20] Boellstorff, Tom. (2008), P.50.

[21] Ibid. P.54.

Boellstorff explores how seeing through 'eye' changes the experience of virtual worlds; they give the world a "sense of place"[22] where a 'resident' can live. The connotations of sensory experience within a virtual world may seem ridiculous, however, it is made possible through a person's ability to alter and change their environment and avatar as freely as possible. During Boellstorff's study there were several issues that were debated online. For example, there was a protest against an option of voice being embedded into Second Life software because it would take away from the essence of Second Life being alternative to actual life. Voice recognition was not available at the time of Boellstorff's study; however, it is available today for participants who wish to use it.[23] Moreover, there was a protest of the construction of a new building in a quiet and beautiful environment[24], which shows how much importance some people placed on this virtual world. This allows one to question the concept of selfhood, personality and environment; these are issues that Boellstorff explores in some detail with relation to the use of language used, the concept of time and available presences and statuses[25] within Second Life.

An issue that Boellstorff also deems important is ethical issues regarding his research and methodology. This is a significant anthropological issue because a researcher is given the option of being an "overt versus covert"[26] researcher. Boellstorff makes a

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[22] Ibid. P.91.

[23] 'Second Life', Accessed on 29/12/09.

[24] Boellstorff, Tom. (2008), P.95.

[25] One can set their status to "Away" or "Busy". Thus one is immersed in Second Life whilst perhaps being away from their keyboard ('afk').

[26] Bryman, Alan. *Social research methods.* (Oxford: 2001), P.294

point of being an overt researcher, making his stance as a researcher obvious in his Second Life profile (See Appendix 2) as well as going to lengths to protect the identities of the participants of Second Life that he interacted with. Furthermore throughout his research he chooses to refer to the people he interviewed as not "informants' but colleagues and interlocutors"[27], something many anthropologists may not consider.

Boellstorff's fieldwork and his interaction with his colleagues within Second Life are explored in great detail in this book; It is thoroughly researched piece of work that can be beneficiary to anyone interested in the evolution of cultures through online technologies, as it questions the very foundations of ethnographic methodologies as well as the basis of theoretical frameworks of identity and reality. The idea that one can choose to become anyone, any gender, even a 'furrie'[28] as well as choose the space in which they interact and join any virtual group of different natures, offers a unique challenge to notions of selfhood. If one can become anything they choose, the limits of the human interactions seem limitless. It is these interactions that Boellstorff manages to explore in Second Life in ways that are "not just an experiment in methodology, but also an experiment in the ethics of virtual anthropology"[29], a way of perhaps seeing ethnography as a form of techne.[30] This ethnography is indeed an experiment, and one which finds us delving beyond the rigid notions of a 'self' to a

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[27] Boellstorff, Tom. (2008), P.XI.

[28] An avatar in the shape of an animal or a supernatural creature such as a vampire.

[29] Boellstorff, Tom. (2008), P.79.

[30] Ibid. P.59.

more flexible approach to human interaction. It is rare to be able to experience the same interactions as the anthropologist did during his research, however at present this is indeed possible. With the click of a button one can enter the world of Second Life. Thus, by surpassing boundaries such as transportation, time and financial availability, one can find themselves immersed in a new virtual culture, a world of limitless possibilities left only to be explored.

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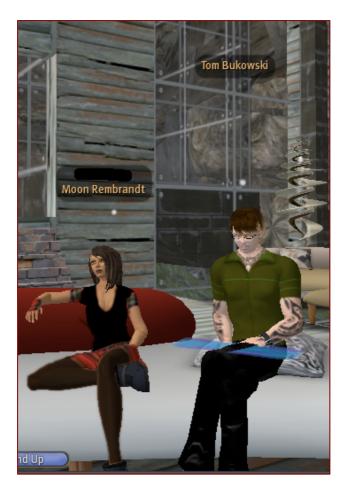Boellstorff, Tom. Personal Communication through 'Second Life': 09/01/10,

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APPENDIX:

1. *A snapshot of Second Life with my character, Moon Rembrandt, talking to Tom Boellstorff's character, Tom Bukowski in his virtual home (09/01/10, 16:04-16:22 GMT)*:

2. *The information provided in 'Tom Bukowski's' profile:*

I'm an anthropologist studying the cultures of SL[31] (Tom Boellstorff irl[32]). My book "Coming of Age in Second Life: An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human" is now out! You can get the first chapter as a free pdf at: http://press.princeton.edu/titles/8647.html. If you need to reach me, the best way is via email at tboellst@uci.edu (I get lots of ims[33]).

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[31] SL- Second Life

[32] irl- In real life

[33] ims- instant Messages