

This Is Not Your Mother's Samoa

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

There are at least two things at stake in Tom Boellstorff's new book, *Coming of Age in Second Life*. One is that he wants you to take virtual worlds and their residents seriously, and the other is that he wants you to take cultural anthropology seriously. A third thing might be that he wants to convince you that these two are connected.

Second Life is an Internet-based, role-playing, graphical program in which users who log on interact via avatars with other users and their avatars. Second Lifers insist that it be called a "world" and that they be referred to as residents of that world (not "users," "players," "gamers," or any other term that emphasizes the computer-mediated aspect of it). Second Life is one of a new generation of such programs that emphasize "user-generated content" and as such allow residents to spend much time customizing, building things from "prims" ("primitive" digital components), buying such bespoke items, and displaying them on or about their homes or avatars.

Taking virtual worlds seriously should not be that hard. One only needs to hear a couple of stories of real-life murder over the theft of magical flaming swords or of in-world love affairs and marriages to realize that the whole virtual/real distinction no longer holds. But in the absence of signing up for such worlds and spending hours online, it is hard to grasp what has happened in anything but the abstract. Enter *Coming of Age in Second Life* (CASL). The book is absolutely invaluable for anyone who wants to understand what's happening with virtual worlds. Like the very best of ethnography, it transports; it is classically thick with descriptions of everything from the linguistic and the proxemic to the metaphysical and the erotic. Ever wonder how time and space differ in virtual worlds? CASL does an excellent job of explaining how space can be virtualized while time cannot. What does death mean in these places? Both the death of the player behind the avatar and the death (disappearance?) of an avatar from the social world are discussed. Ever wonder what the difference is between "chat" and "instant messaging"? Boellstorff expertly describes the subtle forms of code-switching that (quickly) develop as users learn to interact in this new medium. Gender, race, embodiment, presence, personhood, sex, family, community, addiction—CASL could just as well have been called *Argonauts of the Cupertino Server Farm*; it takes as much if not more inspiration from Malinowski as it does from Mead.

Taking cultural anthropology seriously means revisiting these forbearers and accepting that the methods and proposals of classic American anthropology are the right tools for this virtual world. Indeed, Boellstorff turns cultural anthropology into a game (or a virtual world, if you insist). Both the genius and the potential failure of CASL lay in the conceit of entering Second Life as Malinowski, Boas, and Mead entered their worlds: as far-off field sites requiring extended stays and participant observation. Boellstorff's anthropological role-playing game can produce a bit of vertigo, but the project is clearly structured. He enters the world as an anthropologist, reveals who he is to other residents, interviews them, participates in events and social situations, runs focus groups, and asks that real(?) consent forms be signed. He also explicitly limits his view or attempts to: he is not interested in Linden Labs (the company that runs Second Life), the heterogeneous blogosphere that mirrors and serves as a public sphere for the virtual world, or the garages and living rooms of the residents whose avatars he interacts with. All of these "outside" things impinge on the study, though, and will leave the reader asking whether the anthropological role-playing limits the analytical precision of his claims or enhances them.

Still, the decision to make a game of cultural anthropology is an effective way to capture the how and why of Second Life and repackage it in a form that is ideally suited for a different purpose: teaching classes and learning the craft of anthropology. Boellstorff argues that "culture has always been virtual," and this is an effective way to get students to think about the culture concept by giving them something (dare I say it) concrete to think with. Boellstorff lays out clearly how Boas, Mead, Geertz, and others characterized culture in terms that are immediately applicable to the forms of life that emerge within Second Life. So, take Second Life seriously because whatever it is, it is most certainly culture as we know it. Though we might rather prefer that students learned something about, for instance, Indonesia (the subject of Boellstorff's first two books), Second Life is an easy way to get students, American students at least, eager and curious about anthropological method.

Where the book falters is in the third part, which ostensibly steps back to the domain of social theory in order to theorize "creationist capitalism." Boellstorff claims that this is a development within contemporary global societies in which subjects are formed not only as consumers of goods produced elsewhere but also as creators of goods. It widens the scope too far, though, in an effort to generalize the insights from Second Life, and ends up lacking the specificity of the rest of the book. It might have been more compelling to keep the artificial field site experiment going and to try to disclose how capitalism functions within the virtual world—how are markets formed and sustained, and what role does "regulation" play? Boellstorff shies away from this approach, maybe in part because economist Edward Castronova has written a book on this topic. However, the level 70 Mage anthropologist must

never be defeated by the noob economist! Especially given Boellstorff's extensive knowledge of colonial and postcolonial society in Indonesia, an analysis of Second Life's "colonial" situation (e.g., the fact that it is run entirely by a single corporation that can make important decisions about the in-world economies) might have provided a nice counterpoint to Castronova's essentially conservative neoclassical analysis. Lest we reinscribe the disciplinary divisions of our world in

the virtual worlds of tomorrow, I think the challenge remains to reimagine the questions that need answering and the ways we might answer them. The danger lies in making virtual worlds a mere stage in which we replay the academic fights and stories of the twentieth century—rather than a potential doorway to another world of problems that transcend those of anthropology's (and economics') past.