



# Virtual Environments and Cultures

Urte Undine Frömming (ed.)



PETER LANG

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# Virtual Environments and Cultures

A Collection of Social Anthropological Research  
in Virtual Cultures and Landscapes



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This book is the result of a virtual research experiment conducted in the virtual world Second Life over four semesters from the year 2009 to 2013 at Freie Universität Berlin, Germany. Over fifty students from the international M.A. Program in Visual and Media Anthropology at Freie Universität Berlin participated in the experiment, a class with the title "Social Anthropology in Virtual Wolrds". The aim of the class was to discuss classic and current Virtual Cultures Research theory, including Cyberanthropology and ethnographic audiovisual methods, as well as to conduct or "simulate" ethnographic research in virtual cultures, and environments. In addition to their independent research, students met together for regular classes, which were run by the editor together with the co-lecturer, Samantha Fox from Columbia University. All weekly classes took place via Avatars and voice-chat within Second Life in the 3D-classrooms of the Freie Universität Berlin on Edunation Island. This book presents a collection of the written research reports that resulted from the research described above, and can be seen as an attempt to discover the challenges and limits of social anthropological research with an avatar in virtual cultures and environments. The editor would like to thank Tom Boellstorff for all of his inspiration an his foreword to this book, Freie Universität Berlin for funding this course, and Heike Philip (EU-Project Avalon: Access to Virtual and Action Learning Live ONLine), and Dr. Randall Sadler from The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign for providing the facilities on Edunation Island. The editor is grateful to Samantha Fox and Jackie Peterseon for co-lecturing and editorial help.

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**Christina Voigt** (b. 1979, Germany) studied Media Design at the University of Applied Sciences in Augsburg/Germany, and is a graduate of Visual and Media Anthropology at Freie Universität Berlin (2011). She has worked as a freelance filmmaker, video editor, photographer and graphic designer since 2003. Her main focus is on producing her own documentaries in the field of music and topics that are related to poverty/minorities/violence. She has worked in Nepal since 2004 and produced three documentaries there, focusing on the Maoist insurgency that ravaged the country from 1996–2006. Since several years she works with Danish photographer Jacob Holdt, with whom she toured through the Southern States of the US to document the lives of the people that have been involved in Holdts »American Pictures«.

**Julia Zaremba** (b. 1985, Rome, Italy) graduated in Anthropology and Media (Goldsmiths College, London) in 2010. During her 6-year stay in London, she also took courses in Psychoanalysis at the Freudian Centre for Analysis and Research, and a foundation course in filmmaking at the London Film Academy. Since graduating, she has been working as a freelance translator, completed internships with Amnesty International in Rome and with FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations) in Vietnam. In 2011, she started her MA in Visual and Media Anthropology at the Freie Universität Berlin. She currently lives and travels between Berlin, Rome and Rotterdam.

## Foreword

### Virtual Worlds, Pedagogy, and Knowledge

*Tom Boellstorff*

*Virtual Environments and Cultures* is an experiment in collaborative writing, bridging pedagogy and research. One striking aspect of this volume is that it is the product of an extended class-based engagement within a single virtual world, Second Life. This permits an intertextual richness, as the component chapters link a range of student experiences and insights. The meeting of learning and theory makes for fascinating reading. The authors speak frankly about their successes but also challenges and even failures in their attempts to conduct ethnographic research in Second Life. This acknowledgement of difficulties encountered is in fact a vital aspect of good ethnographic practice, a tradition going back at least to Malinowski's "odyssey of blunders in field-work" in his classic monograph *Coral Gardens and Their Magic* (Malinowski 1935: 324–330).

I salute the contributors for their fascinating work, as well as Undine Frömming, whose pedagogical and editorial skills were clearly central to the book's publication. I hope to see more examples of this kind of work in the future—with the caveat that (as appears to have been the case here) ethical research practices and oversight are as important in a virtual-world context as anywhere else; in the United States and many other countries, students involved in research like this would need human subjects clearance from their university's Institutional Review Board. The rich contributions to *Virtual Environments and Cultures* speak to a range of conceptual and empirical questions that should be of interest to all of us as we encounter the rapid and continuing transformational effects of online technologies. In the remainder of this Foreword, I reflect on some themes and issues raised in this volume.

In her introduction, Frömming reminds us that some observers have referred to Second Life as "a shrink-ing world" (p. 19). While at the time I write this Foreword (December 2012) Second Life is a medium-sized virtual world with around a million active users, its precise size is less important than the rhetorical terms in which that evaluation is cast. In particular, the study of virtual worlds (and



of online phenomena more generally) remains dangerously shaped by the “hype cycle” of the internet industry. We cannot allow our research agendas to become unduly influenced by a profit-driven emphasis on the “next big thing” and the concomitant tendency to lose interest in online socialities more than a few years old. If we do this, we lose the ability to ask important questions at the precise point that a research community has come into being:

Many are drawn to the internet as a research topic because its self-replenishing novelty always holds out the promise for unique intellectual spaces. Research in this area tends to chase new technologies and related, more current or cutting edge research is often valued more highly than what are seen as the out-of-date, old fashioned counterparts... How can we move beyond documenting the new to saying things of lasting value about phenomena that change so rapidly? (Baym and Markham 2009: xiii)

Thus, while it is clearly the case that online sociality “creates some novel challenges for scholarly research” (Karpf 2012: 639), to truly address these challenges we need to evaluate these cultural contexts with both a clear appreciation for their historicity, and also for the possibility they may no longer exist in the same form by the time our work is published.

In regard to this issue of researchers fearing their analyses are dated before publication, and with regard to so many other aspects of online research, perhaps the greatest barrier to a truly informed analysis is the tendency to treat virtual environments as fundamentally different from actual-world social environments. Of course, in some cases, depending on the research question, we might treat virtual environments “in their own terms” because, say, the residents in question rarely or never meet in the physical world. But even in such cases, we are talking about human social interaction and there are often more parallels than we first realize. For instance, I have often encountered persons entering Second Life for the purposes of research experiencing the kinds of disorientation that Emily Smith describes, the sense that “the path towards producing effective research seems long and lonely” (p. 34). I once had someone say they gave up trying to do ethnographic research in Second Life after two weeks because they could not find things to do. In such cases I often remind my interlocutor of my other major fieldsite, Indonesia (e.g., Boellstorff 2005). Imagine the disorientation you would feel, particularly if you did not speak Indonesian or any other language of the archipelago: would you give up after two weeks and decide it was impossible to study? Too often we assume that online environments will “spoon feed” us valuable data and insights, forgetting the labor involved in any rigorous ethnographic research project: “this flexibility [of ethnography] is not unlimited. Simply stating ‘this is ethnography’ does not make it so” (Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, and Taylor 2012: 4).

Virtual environments require as much in-depth scholarly attention as physical-world contexts because they are places of human culture, and because it is dif-

ficult to tell ahead of time how they reconfigure preexisting social logics. For instance, Josefine Borrmann, Christina Voigt, and Julie Zaremba note that notions of nature, place, body, and gender can take on new meanings in Second Life that reveal the constructedness of nature in the actual world. Issues of faith and religious community can also be reworked in virtual contexts (Manizhe Ali, Ranty Islam, Thomas John, Mike Terry). Even aspects of human life like gender, romance, and pregnancy can take on new meanings (Emma Corbett-Ashby, Katharina Frucht, Elena Quintarelli, and Alina Trebbin). Like the internet more generally, virtual environments can represent important sites for artistic production and social activism—by, for instance, providing “great potential for alternative ways of communication,” as noted by Tobias Becker (p. 204), and also by Fidel Devkota, Jordana Goldmann, and Lidia Rossner. As Sara Ferrari and Tiina Kivelä note, this can include forms of activism keyed toward raising awareness about conflict and human rights in the physical world. Samantha Fox’s discussion of the work of the well-known Second Life artist AM Radio shows how virtual worlds can make possible forms of art that draw upon art movements and practices in the physical world, yet have their own emergent and unique aspects—for instance, through the creation of a whole physical environment with a narrative structure contained within it: “AM creates discrete worlds that can only be experienced in Second Life” (p. 228).

Overall, I find the work of these student contributors to *Virtual Environments and Cultures* to be rich and fascinating, and will use their discoveries in my continuing research and teaching. We see the beginnings of a rich and dynamic research community that will help us understand these vital new frontiers of virtual cultures.

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## **Introduction**