



# Coming of Age in Second Life: An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human

*Tom Boellstorff*

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Millions of people around the world today spend portions of their lives in online virtual worlds. Second Life is one of the largest of these virtual worlds. The residents of Second Life create communities, buy property and build homes, go to concerts, meet in bars, attend weddings and religious services, buy and sell virtual goods and services, find friendship, fall in love--the possibilities are endless, and all encountered through a computer screen. *Coming of Age in Second Life* is the first book of anthropology to examine this thriving alternate universe.

Tom Boellstorff conducted more than two years of fieldwork in Second Life, living among and observing its residents in exactly the same way anthropologists traditionally have done to learn about cultures and social groups in the so-called real world. He conducted his research as the avatar "Tom Bukowski," and applied the rigorous methods of anthropology to study many facets of this new frontier of human life, including issues of gender, race, sex, money, conflict and antisocial behavior, the construction of place and time, and the interplay of self and group.

*Coming of Age in Second Life* shows how virtual worlds can change ideas about identity and society. Bringing anthropology into territory never before studied, this book demonstrates that in some ways humans have always been virtual, and that virtual worlds in all their rich complexity build upon a human capacity for culture that is as old as humanity itself.

## Coming of Age in Second Life: An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human Details

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## **From Reader Review Coming of Age in Second Life: An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human for online ebook**

**Avery Delany says**

RTC

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**Miles says**

Before I read Boellstorff, I registered for Second Life and spent a few hours in the last week just to see what it was about. I remain absolutely clueless. I'm trying to imagine what real life circumstances would attract me to spending any significant amount of time in this world, and I suppose I can think of a few. If I were confined to a bed, socially isolated, or stuck in a truly miserable job with plenty of free time at my desk, or if I wanted to have a virtual affair, I suppose Second Life would offer something. But my experience in a few hours (very limited, to be sure) is that it is possible to carry on mind-numbingly awkward "chats" with outlandishly curvaceous and lightly clad avatars. I have found these conversations to be just as awkward as I might find any conversation with a friendly random person who seems to have left some of her clothes at home or who is returning from a Renaissance fair in sparkling high heels. I have nothing to say after a few minutes, and neither in my experience do they. We share a virtual space and a few moments of mutual curiosity drifting off into boredom, until one of us blissfully teleports to another world.

Well I suppose THAT is an advantage of Second Life. When the conversation slows, you hit a button and the people you are talking to just vanish. But why spend time in a world whose most interesting characteristic is an easy escape from the vapid and boring conversations that it otherwise offers?

If you get serious about Second Life you can buy property and build objects and sell stuff and decorate your avatar with fancy skins... and then you can hang around in your fancy skin and still have boring conversations with people. But while wearing really cool virtual clothes! Am I not getting this? I am not getting this. Yes, I gather that virtual sex is a pretty big part of Second Life, and you can see the possibilities. Maybe that is what people are really doing in Second Life. I haven't gone there, so I can't say.

Boellstorff treats Second Life as its own culture. He gives it a serious anthropological once over and does a good job of it. If you care about Second Life, this could serve as a theoretical, but also practical, introduction to the norms and habits of the world. It seems to be a little dated however.

I've also heard that Second Life is not quite the hot property or hot world that it was a few years ago. But the best way to explore Second Life is just to sign up and poke around, and I don't regret doing so. I suppose I can imagine life circumstances where it would be a wonderful place to go. I'm just not in those circumstances.

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**Kerry ? says**

Trippy

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## Zhoel13 says

In his book *Coming of Age in Second Life*, Tom Boellstorff makes a statement that he wants to treat Second Life as a virtual world “in its own terms.” His rationale for this is that “there do exist distinct cultures in virtual worlds, even though they draw from actual-world cultures” (18). I find his approach towards virtual worlds not only provocative but also strategic. While it presents a fresh perspective in observing new media culture, it also aptly serves his purpose to map Second Life culture “as a whole” (29) and thus demonstrates how ethnographic study of virtual worlds is conceivable and perhaps necessary.

Treating Second Life not merely as techno-metaphorical place but as “a [real] form of place with political and economic consequences,” Boellstorff attempts to lay out various aspects that eventually highlight the richness and uniqueness of Second Life, such as the notion of place and time, personhood, and gender and race. In this regard, he focuses on what he regards as the “mundane” aspects of virtual worlds, such as lag, afk, and voice chat. This strategy is based on his argument that “culture is lived out in the mundane and the ordinary” (72). While doing this, he also introduces innovative concepts such as “homo cyber,” “age of techne,” and “creationist capitalism,” grounding on comprehensive list of works on virtuality and digital cultures. The use of these concepts then builds up his argument on the productive ramifications of “a gap between actual and virtual in the realm of the virtual” (58 original emphasis).

However, despite the resourcefulness of Boellstorff’s book, I personally find some of the elements of his book a little bit unsettling. For instance, I feel that there is a sense of reluctance in seeing the creative (mis-)uses of technology in Second Life as a form of techne. It seems that he only treats the instances of technological deviance (i.e. hacking) in the context of Second Life, such as the “grid attacks” and the hacker intrusion (131) only as side notes. It is a little bit strange considering the culture of hacking is perhaps one of the fittest examples of his concept of techne as creative force in cybersociality. I suspect, he somewhat submits with the general assumption on hacking as hazardous activity. Thus, he overlooks the possibilities to consider the scripting and building activities in Second Life as hacking.

Moreover, I feel that some of his analyses on the culture in Second Life a little bit pendent. The most obvious instance for me is in his discussion on gender and race (138-47). The end of that section was so dangling to me that it really put me into a state of disappointment. I did not find any concluding analysis that at least hints on the issue of the gap between the virtual and the actual that he deems significant. Also, he seems to ignore the possibility of relating to issues of “cybertyping” (I borrow this concept from Lisa Nakamura) in his observation about some of the resident’s tendency to “treat [people] according to [their] avatar” (130).

This kind of negligence is also made apparent in his discussion on voice and agency. It becomes a little bit annoying to me that he seems to forget to at least make a side note on the case of voice chat controversy (112-16) in his discussion on agency (147-50). This is problematic since on the issue of agency Boellstorff points out the possibility to expand Gayatri Spivak’s statement “can the subaltern speak?” into “can the avatar speak?” (149). I suspect this is related to his own position on the issue of voice chat capability itself (I notice he was sitting among the protesters on Figure 4.3.). I understand that since Boellstorff “aims for a more holistic perspective, [he provides] only a preliminary analysis” (165). Yet, I do not think that this stand should hinder him from providing prolific assertions on the complexity of culture in virtual worlds. All these exasperations leave me with a mixed feeling towards the book. It indeed provides one of the most comprehensive and original analyses on the culture in virtual worlds, however I wish this book could have presented a more complex view.

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## Rachel Goldman says

Tom Boellstorff takes a fascinating approach to researching culture in one of the largest virtual communities called Second Life. His primary goal in researching this virtual world is to gain insight into the culture that

exists there and further understand the norms that are shared by those who participate. In studying Second Life, Boellstorff took a research approach used by anthropologists studying culture called ethnography. He conducted research by interviewing participants and forming focus groups in Second Life. However, the majority of his research comes from simply observing users and their behaviors by interacting with them. During his time in Second Life, Boellstorff's avatar, which he made to be openly gay and biracial, bought clothes, interacted with other avatars, hosted events, constructed a house and office, participated in games and traveled the virtual landscape.

In conducting research on Second Life and the distinct cultures which take form there, Boellstorff chose to study the realm "in its own terms" by viewing it as its own entity rather than taking a common approach to that of many researchers who choose to study online interactions and how they correlate to interactions offline. This approach was especially appealing to me as it allowed me to think about my motivating question in a unique way. When choosing this book I hoped to understand why user's turn to Second Life as a place for self-expression and how this is similar or different to user's self-presentation in other social networks. Because Boellstorff studies Second Life as a distinct realm and chooses not to compare its qualities to other social networks, I was forced to infer deeply from the text in order to draw my own parallels between self-expression in Second Life and how it correlates to other networks.

Boellstorff was able to draw hundreds of conclusions about the culture in Second Life. In terms of self-expression, one of his first findings was that the avatar's appearance made a large impact on how other users perceive that avatar and interacted with it in Second Life. Boellstorff argues that "the link between avatar and sociality was widespread" and Second Life residents believe that "people treat you according to your avatar. It's a shame, but it's true" (p. 130). Another resident claimed, "I sort of judge people based on their avatar appearance; I don't tend to like the tall skinny blondes" (p. 130). It is fascinating that judgment based on appearance is still a prominent aspect of Second Life even though the avatar is not real and users never know who is controlling the avatar. In class we frequently discussed the concept of how Facebook users strive to present their best version of themselves, which often can be far from who they actually are in order to gain some confidence or attract a certain audience. To do this, Facebook users often go to great lengths to portray themselves in the best way, for example by un-tagging pictures that they perceive will be viewed as unfavorable. Users of Second Life also spend significant effort hoping to portray a certain outward image and to do this, the majority of users purchase, using real money converted to Linden dollars in Second Life, hairstyles, clothes, and jewelry. Fashion design is considered a competitive business in Second Life and those users who design the clothing actually make on average around a thousand dollars a year. The fact that there is an economic demand in Second Life with regards to purchasing products to enhance the avatar's image draws light on the extent to which appearance is crucial no matter how real or in what medium the self-presentation exists.

An actual economy exists in Second Life, which relies on skilled laborers who even sometimes make their actual world livings by serving as builders, fashion, furniture and textile designers, and even sex workers and strippers. Users of Second Life have the ability to make an incredibly unique avatar because of the huge selection of goods they can purchase and as a result, self-expression is a huge aspect of this virtual realm because of the endless possibilities to customize the avatar and insert personality into its appearance and behaviors. One resident argues, "Second Life is a chance to be someone else beside yourself which you can't really do in RL [real life] unless you want to lead a double life" (p. 120). Boellstorff found that many residents of Second Life say that their Second Life persona is more outgoing and assertive than they are in their actual life. For example, one resident told Boellstorff's avatar, "The SL me and the RL me are two totally different people. I may appear strong in my online presence, but in RL I'm so weak it's not even funny" (p. 120). In class discussion we have discussed how on more popular social networks such as Facebook and Twitter, people are cautious about being perceived as trying too hard to come off a certain way, which does not represent the real self. In contrast, in Second Life it is acceptable and normal to experiment with different personalities and even as a different gender than in actual life without anyone knowing that you are not being your self. This affords users to experiment with self-presentation to a far

greater extent than Facebook or Twitter allows for.

Boellstorff found that many users experience a confidence in Second Life or a revelation about the self that they were able to bring to their real life in order to make a life changing transition. This transition occurred in residents in distinct ways but in each case, Second Life served as a comfortable medium in order to try something new before adapting the change into one's real self. Boellstorff found that a large amount of Second Life residents have a different sexual orientation or gender than they do in real life. The following is from a conversation between Boellstorff's avatar and a female avatar named Pavia who disclosed the following:

Tom, I'm not the person you have gotten to know. But at the same time I am. I'm a man in real life, but about three weeks ago, I learned that I'm transsexual. I've pretty much known that I was different all my life... Here in Second Life I created something new in myself that I never realized was there before. At first it was just role playing, but then I grew to love Pavia. I kept infusing myself into her, but then something unexpected started to happen: Pavia started coming out in the real world. I became her, she became me (p. 138).

For many transsexuals and gays in Second Life, the medium serves as a "virtual closet" where they can experiment with their desires that they do not yet feel comfortable acting on in the actual world. Thus, Second Life affords residents struggling with their sexual or gender orientation to have the ability to become comfortable with their gay, lesbian or opposite gender orientation before choosing to come out in the real world. In addition to this transition in gays and trans-genders, Boellstorff observed a somewhat similar kind of gained confidence in Second Life that translated to the actual world for those with disabilities. Boellstorff learned in Second Life that "a strong survivor who has been in a wheelchair for a couple of years, found the strength to work toward walking again thanks to his involvement in Second Life" (p. 121). Although the Second Life resident struggling with their gender orientation and the disabled person undergo very different struggles and have different goals, they both were able to gain the confidence to act on their desire in the actual world by experimenting with their identity in Second Life. In class we discussed how Facebook does not always serve as a supportive network to disclose something very personal about the self due to user's often having a large network made up of weak ties. However, the ability in Second Life to naturally experiment with the self and befriend strangers who are not aware of one's real identity provides residents with a chance to be supported for who they are.

This book was not only fascinating and opened my eyes up to a world I had no previous knowledge about, but it was also beautifully written and engaging while still written in scholarly language. I chose this book to understand more about why users turn to Second Life as a medium for self-expression, and after completing this book, I fully understand how this virtual world allows users to not only express themselves but also experiment with their identities far beyond what any other social network affords. It is the ability in Second Life to construct a new self, through experimenting with appearances, new behaviors and even occupations that the medium affords users the ability to not only gain confidence but fall in love with a self that they are able to incorporate into their offline self. In thinking about how positive many Second Life residents experiences have been, I am left with the question of why these virtual worlds are not more prevalently used as a way to explore the self through computer mediation rather than using other social networks such as Facebook and Twitter.

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## Shonell Bacon says

It's rare that someone takes what is deemed an academic book to bed as her nightly reading, but Boellstorff

has a voice and writing style that is fit for a number of readers--from the academic to the lay person wanting to know more about virtual worlds. It's the kind of voice and style that I'm interested in and that I hope to have in my own academic works. Anyone who is a fan of virtual worlds and Second Life specifically will enjoy the in-depth descriptions that are available in this work, from the historical aspect of virtual worlds to Boellstorff's discussion of various aspects of virtual worlds (using Second Life as his specific place of study), such as place, identity, communication, community, and consumerism. Having been a Second Life resident for the last two years, I held similar thoughts to Boellstorff regarding SL. With my research interests, I was particularly interested in his thoughts on identity and community and also on his discussion of virtual worlds and actual worlds (actual worlds is his framing of "real world"). Many scholars and lay people have always held these terms as binaries, but Boellstorff, through his fairly broad and deep research and own thoughts, illustrates how humans have always been virtual, an idea that once you understand it and decide to agree with it, makes the study of virtual worlds even that much more interesting to study. I was a little upset that more time wasn't spent on race and gender, but even Boellstorff mentions that at the time of his writing, there weren't many studies that focused on race in virtual worlds. That piqued my interest. I'm always fascinated by gaps of knowledge that need to be filled, and seeing that this is one of my research interests, I already foresee me doing a lit review of what works are out there on this subject and seeing where I can fit in.

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### **lilly says**

Argues that virtual worlds are not just representations or simulations of the "real" world, but have cultures in and of themselves. Moreover, these cultures have stratifications, patterns, and meanings that have been documented in by anthropologists since time immemorial -- complete with citations of books written in the late 1800s. All this is true, and the book is packed dense with references but it feels more like riffing than an argument. It makes gestures at topics like gender, class, etc, but gives it a cursory treatment in a self-aware way (with sentences like "I could devote a whole book on gender"). I felt like a lot of the claims made in the book weren't supported or explained in much detail -- I was left having to trust the author, with a lot of new conceptual memes at my disposal.

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### **Pia Margi? says**

It's quite an interesting read. The author provided conversations with people who invested themselves entirely into a second life, where they displayed an entirely different mentality than IRL, where those same people projected themselves as different ages, sexes even, and formed committed relationships, marriages - even though they had "real-life" ones to people they loved. They showed social awareness in a virtual environment, truly forming a world of their own.

A very interesting read indeed. Even if the book/research may seem a bit dated, Second Life is still quite real, and ever growing. I tries it out for a bit, even, and I can see the appeal, even if it's not my cup of tea :)

I highly recommend.

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### **Dagezi says**

This is a bizarre book, not for its subject matter but for the degree to which Boellstorff seems intent on

reproducing Margaret Mead's approach to Samoa--treating Second Life as a bounded cultural isolate, worthy of understanding in its own terms. Given that the man's partner, Bill Maurer has presided over the death of language, this sort of almost positivist unreconstructed Boasianism is not a little surprising--maybe they have a Jack Spratt and spouse thing going on when it comes to high-flown post-humanist theory. Anyway, this focus produces interesting "ethnographic detail" but precludes a focus on the interlinkages (and crossing of boundaries between field and non-field or virtual and non-virtual) that made Samoa and make Second life such messy, interesting phenomena. Ironic that a book that's going to be being read in anthro intros in 2064 is such a missed opportunity. But then, its prototype remains evergreen despite its elisions.

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### **Shannon says**

This is a really fascinating book because the topic is not something that you would expect to read an anthropological analysis of. I had to read it for my anthropology class Material Culture. The author did all of his fieldwork inside of Second Life, a virtual reality MMO where players can create virtual versions of themselves. I was really impressed by his discussion of the history of virtual worlds, which started long before computers. He expertly discusses different issues in virtual worlds, such as gender, intimacy, and balancing the "real world" with the virtual one. The only thing that I annoyed me with this book is that I felt that he spent a lot of time justifying why he was studying this, and explaining the mechanics of Second Life, which meant that there was a lot of information that you had to slough through before getting to any ethnography. Admittedly, the information would be very useful to people who are not very familiar with the inner workings of MMOs, but as a 19 year old, it was difficult to read through pages and pages describing what afk meant, how people can respond to different things in group chats, and how one person can hold a conversation in a group chat and a private chat. These are all things that are part of my daily life, so it was tedious to read about what can intuitively to me. Otherwise, I found the book very interesting and informative and it would make a good read for anyone interested in anthropology or virtual reality.

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### **Dragos says**

Boellstorff does not tread untrod ground in what is probably his best and most famous book but he does it better and with greater style than your garden variety academic. Borrowing title and theory from classical anthropology the author gives us a complex ethnography in the digital medium in perhaps one of the 'digital worlds', to paraphrase the book, most suited for classical anthropological pursuits. Not messing about with unsightly MUDs, websites and forums or with the quintessentially gamified 'Worlds' of MMORPGs, Boellstorff sets himself up as a virtual Malinowski, stepping on a virgin virtual beach, notepad in hand. And much like Malinowski Boellstorff is a very good ethnographer, integrating into the 'other world', translating it and giving us a wonderful portrayal of the social lives and environment of Second Life's denizens back when the site was in its prime. Yet much like Malinowski, the author is a bit superficial in his interpretation of the field data, allows very little time to discussions of gender and sexuality and adopts a holistic but almost Mead-like isolationist in regards to outside factors reflecting on the 'virtual world'. It is hard to create a truly inclusive study in a digital environment that reflects the hear infinite complexity of the cultural strands that constitute the internet but even in the time of Mead, who Boellstorff seems to channel at times diffusionism was en vogue, so at least a chapter should have been dedicated to the interplay between the culture of second life and other 'cultures', especially as the topic of other boards and digital environments comes up quite often in his interviews.

Tom Boellstorff might have not discovered fire with his enjoyable foray into Second Life and his analysis leaves a lot to be desired but the book still stands as a thoroughly enjoyable read for academics and non-

academics alike as well as a perfect facile introduction to the immense potential of digital anthropology.

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### **William Crosby says**

An ethnography on the Second Life virtual world. The author provides context by discussing concepts and history such as "virtual" (ancient: e.g. language, memory palaces), "cyber" (ancient Greek: control, governor), teche, gaming, and others.

His discussion includes many different aspects of SL including relationships, love, avatars, money, gender/race, sex, ethics, addiction, etcetera. He points out that culture and the particular rules we follow in a society are no less artificial than those in a virtual world and that the relationships in SL are real because there is communication and emotion.

This book provided me with a good background and better understanding of virtual worlds and several aspects of the internet and its relationship to our society.

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### **Mikhaela says**

Tom Boellstorff's *Coming of Age in Second Life* intrigued me the very moment I picked up the text. Boellstorff's uses a clear and informative tone to describe and explore the virtual human. The text is easily digestible for anyone interested in learning more about virtual life. Through his knowledge and charismatic voice, he takes the reader with him on his journey from the beginning in a true *Coming of Age* fashion.

While he claims multiple times to be unbiased and an anthropologist observing the culture, the further into the book I went, the more he seems to be in favor of virtual reality. He is not a purely unbiased observer because he creates for himself a virtual identity and realm. And while he shares stories of the events and places of Second Life, his language seems to agree with the reality rather than stay impartial.

I feel like while he didn't stay impartial, he did impart a lot of wisdom into the psyche and the culture of the virtual world. I did learn a lot about how the virtual reality operates on its own and how it interacts with the "real" world.

This quote adequately sums up the one of the focuses of the novel: "I (Boellstorff) show that Second Life culture is profoundly human. It is not only that virtual worlds borrow assumptions from real life; virtual worlds show us how, under our very noses, our "real" lives have been "virtual" all along. It is in being virtual that we are human: since it is human "nature" to experience life through the prism of culture, human being has always been virtual being" (Boellstorff 5).

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### **Laurel says**

I continue to broaden my reading in internet studies. This is an ethnography by a Professor of Anthropology who spent two years in second life during its early years. He uses traditional ethnographic tools as he explores this "thriving alternative universe" which is as meaningful to its natives as the "real world".

I know from my own experiences with early online community (Lambda Moo) that Boellstorff does not

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deeply delve into the social life of participants. He notes many times in his prose that an entire book could be written on this (or that) aspect of life online. I hope that future research efforts take a closer look at common social behaviors and how they manifest in online community.

I was introduced to a new concept, "creationist capitalism" which I will use when I teach my Living Life Online class in the future. I wish I could ask my students to read this book, but I think that most of the ideas would be too advanced for the traditional undergraduate to understand.

He notes, "In this book I have examined one such virtual world for what it can teach us about what it means to be virtually human" (p. 248). Boellstorff does not stray from the traditional ethnographic research design, which makes this an insightful, and appreciated look at virtual community.

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### **Beth O'Connell says**

Excellent look at the overall culture of Second Life. I'd like to find something similar where the fieldwork was done after 2009, when SL's numbers started to drop.

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