

## METHOD

*Virtual worlds in their own terms—Anthropology and ethnography—Participant observation—Interviews, focus groups, and beyond the platform—Ethics—Claims and reflexivity.*

## VIRTUAL WORLDS IN THEIR OWN TERMS.

On August 31, 1925, Margaret Mead arrived on the shores of Samoa “to investigate the particular problem” of whether youth always experience growing into adulthood in terms of stress and conflict (Mead 1928:9).<sup>1</sup> Opening by describing a Samoan dawn that “begins to fall among the soft brown roofs” while “the slender palm trees stand out against a colorless, gleaming sea” (Mead 1928:14), *Coming of Age in Samoa*—the book that resulted from her research—was an immediate international sensation. Translated into fifteen languages, it launched Mead’s lifelong career as the foremost popularizer of cultural anthropology.

Five years after her death in 1978, the anthropologist Derek Freeman published *Margaret Mead and Samoa: The Making and Unmaking of an Anthropological Myth* (Freeman 1983). Despite having never produced a book on his own research in Samoa, Freeman “generated unprecedented controversy over Margaret Mead’s fieldwork” (Brady 1983:908). His primary claim was that Mead had allowed herself to be misled by her young Samoan interlocutors, taking at face value their tales of adolescent sexual freedom. These charges have not weathered the test of time. Many anthropologists who conducted subsequent fieldwork in Samoa concluded that despite shortcomings in her work, Mead accurately captured many aspects of Samoan culture (e.g., Holmes 1987; Mago 1998; Orans 1996). Others noted how Freeman omitted scholarship supporting Mead’s conclusions (Holmes 1987; Shankman 1996; see also Feinberg 1988; Nardi 1984; Weiner 1983).

In titling this book *Coming of Age in Second Life*, I evoke both the path-breaking spirit of Mead’s first book and the late twentieth-century debate it engendered over methods. After all, Freeman’s accusation against Mead was that she made things up, and what are virtual worlds if not made up?

When I decided to conduct research in Second Life, I did not begin with any specific topic in mind—economics, for instance, or sexuality, or governance. Instead, my founding question was methodological: What can ethnography tell us about virtual worlds?

It may seem preposterous to contend one can study virtual worlds “in their own terms,” but condensed in this key phrase is my foundational methodological conceit, which like all such conceits is also a theoretical claim. For the research upon which this book is based I conducted my research entirely *within* Second Life, as the avatar Tom Bukowski. I made no attempt to visit the offices of Linden Lab, the San Francisco-based company that owns and manages Second Life, or to meet Linden Lab staff, though I would sometimes interact with them at conferences, or within Second Life. I also made no attempt to meet Second Life residents in the actual world or learn their actual-world identities, though both happened on occasion. I took their activities and words as legitimate data about culture in a virtual world. For instance, if during my research I was talking to a woman, I was not concerned to determine if she was “really” a man in the actual world, or even if two different people were taking turns controlling “her.” Most Second Life residents meeting this woman would not know the answers to such questions, so for my ethnographic purposes it was important that I not know either. Research on online communities that includes meeting residents in the actual world is perfectly legitimate, but addresses a different set of questions (e.g., Orgad 2005; Ruhleder 2000; Wakeford 1999).

To demand that ethnographic research always incorporate meeting residents in the actual world for “context” presumes that virtual worlds are not themselves contexts; it renders ethnographically inaccessible the fact that most residents of virtual worlds do not meet their fellow residents offline. If one wants to study collective meaning and virtual worlds as collectivities exist purely online, then studying them in their own terms is the appropriate methodology, one that goes against the grain of many assumptions concerning how virtual worlds work. Why is the punchline of so many studies of online culture the identification of continuity with the offline? Why does it feel like a discovery that the online bleeds through to the offline, and vice versa?

My decision to conduct research wholly within Second Life had enormous implications, putting into practice my assertion that virtual worlds are legitimate sites of culture. Many writings on virtual worlds emphasize the permeability between the virtual and actual—for instance, by highlighting the actual-world consequences of virtual commerce. In his study of gay male identity, John Campbell claimed that “online and offline experiences blend into a single, albeit multifaceted, narrative of life” (Campbell 2004:100). Yet

Campbell's own ethnographic data suggest many ways in which online and offline personas do not match up: for instance, an older gay man might claim to be younger, or "gay men" might not be gay (or even men) in the actual world. In *The Internet: An Ethnographic Approach*, Daniel Miller and Don Slater contended that their "ethnography of the Internet in Trinidad, or of Trinidad on the Internet" demonstrates "how Internet technologies are being understood and assimilated somewhere in particular (though a very complex 'somewhere,' because Trinidad stretches diasporically over much of the world)" (Miller and Slater 2000:1). This assumes that online cultures are ultimately predicated upon actual-world cultures, an assumption sometimes methodologically operationalized by efforts to meet residents of virtual worlds in the actual world, although researchers have long noted the difficulty of ascertaining actual-world identities (Curtis 1992:125). Some researchers have gone so far as to criticize treating any virtual world as "a completely separate, isolated social world" (Kendall 2002:9; see also Wittel 2001:62), or to claim that "one current limitation of the study of [virtual worlds] is that we know little about how online behaviors affect users' behavior offline" (Schroeder 2002:10). Such assumptions are often linked to the belief that "the number-one challenge is generalizability to the real world" (Giles 2007:20). This view presumes that research on virtual worlds must have the ultimate goal of addressing the actual world, which is taken to be the only "real" social world. It is a view predicated on skepticism toward the idea of conducting ethnography in virtual worlds in their own terms: Is there enough detail in them? What about the fact that you can't know who the people are offline?

One risk I run in saying that it is possible to study virtual worlds in their own terms is that like classical ethnographers, I could be seen to be leaving to one side the cross-cutting histories that condition the lives of these worlds and those who participate in them. My response is that since people find virtual worlds meaningful sites for social action, cultures in virtual worlds exist whether we like it or not; our task as ethnographers is to study them. To take virtual worlds in their own terms is not to claim, as some Artificial Life researchers have done, that their computational worlds are totally self-contained (see Helmreich 2004:285). Assuming that the significance of virtual worlds hinges on continuity with the actual world oversimplifies the referential relationships between actual and virtual, obscuring many of their most crucial consequences for culture and the human. It is a commonplace of technology studies that "technologies are developed and used within a particular social, economic, and political context" (Chee 2006:226; see also Franklin 1992:15-17). But with the emergence of virtual worlds, the virtual world itself becomes a particular social, economic, and political context.

Perspectives doubting the possibility of studying virtual worlds in their own terms miss how as virtual worlds grow in size, ethnographic research in them becomes more partial and situated, much like ethnographic research in the actual world. For instance, when Lynn Cherny conducted ethnographic research in *ElseMOO* in 1994, there were about 100 persons participating in the world, with around 20 online at any one time (Cherny 1999:39-40). In contrast, by the time I submitted the final manuscript for this book in November 2007, there were over ten million registered *Second Life* accounts, with over 1.5 million people logging on per month and sometimes over 50,000 persons inworld at once. While a few of these residents had met in the actual world before entering *Second Life*, or met in *Second Life* and then sought each other out in the actual world, it was no longer possible for the vast majority to do so, or even verify the identities of those they met online.

Because virtual worlds are quite new, it is to be expected that as persons have built and entered them they have imported and reconfigured everyday aspects of the actual world, from gravity and sunlight to embodiment and language. As Auden noted even for the case of literature, "a secondary world must draw its building materials from the primary world, but it can only take such material as its creator is capable of imaginatively recombining and transforming" (Auden 1968:94). Yet despite the fact that "discussions of these technologies [tend to treat] them as enhancements for already formed individuals to deploy to their advantage or disadvantage" (Poster 1996:184), virtual worlds are not just recreations or simulations of actual-world selfhoods and communities. Selfhood, community, even notions of human nature are being remade in them.

Actual-world sociality cannot explain virtual-world sociality. The sociality of virtual worlds develops on its own terms; it references the actual world but is not simply derivative of it. Events and identities in such worlds may reference ideas from the actual world (from landscape to gender) and may index actual-world issues (from economics to political campaigns), but this referencing and indexing takes place within the virtual world. The way persons from Korea participate in *Second Life* might differ from the way persons from Sweden do. But if Koreans and Swedes really do participate in *Second Life* differently, that difference will show up within *Second Life* itself; it will be amenable to ethnographic investigation inworld. This is a crucial difference between ethnography and methodologies that seek an outsider perspective on culture. A political rally for John Edwards in *Second Life* in 2007 may have referenced an actual-world campaign, but even if video from an actual-world meeting was streamed into the rally, the rally itself took place in the virtual world.

share many things—assumptions, practices, forms of social relations—as speakers of a language share grammar and vocabulary, even when they use that language to disagree. It is these shared elements that make it possible to speak of “English” or “Indonesian,” even as we recognize dialects, multilingualism, and fuzzy boundaries between languages. Similarly persons participate in Second Life in many ways, and there are fundamental disagreements over what Second Life is and should be, but these variations and disagreements are only intelligible because articulated against a set of grounding assumptions.

As an anthropologist I examine mundane social interaction in order to identify as many of these grounding assumptions as possible, assumptions whose taken-for-grantedness means they are not always the topic of explicit commentary. I work to show how these assumptions articulate with each other, the histories from which they draw their coherence, and the differing ways those in Second Life follow, transform, and resist them. I do not claim to know how everyone in Second Life thinks and feels (just as I do not claim to know how every Indonesian thinks and feels), only to provide some partial insight into Second Life culture. The ethnography of virtual worlds should not take the methodological form of “culture at a distance”—as when Ruth Benedict, in *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, studied Japanese culture during World War II without setting foot in Japan (Benedict 1946). The social sciences and humanities have only begun to acknowledge the speed with which virtual worlds are becoming taken for granted among all age groups and actual-world geographies. What promise do “traditional” anthropological methods hold for studying virtual worlds, which might appear so radically new as to render such methods irrelevant?

#### ANTHROPOLOGY AND ETHNOGRAPHY.

The task of this chapter is to explain how I gathered my data, and along the way to raise general points about methodologies for virtual anthropology (or “the ethnography of virtual worlds”). I prefer “virtual anthropology” to “virtual ethnography” because “to qualify the term *ethnography* with the term *virtual* is to suggest that online research remains less real (and ultimately less valuable) than research conducted offline” (Campbell 2004:52). Anthropologists typically do not speak of “legal ethnography,” “medical ethnography,” and so on: they speak of “legal *anthropology*,” “medical *anthropology*,” and now virtual *anthropology* as subdisciplines for which an unqualified “ethnography” is the modality.

Studying a virtual world in its own terms does not mean ignoring the myriad ways that ideas from the actual world impinge upon it; it means examining those interchanges as they manifest in the virtual world, for that is how residents experience them when they are inworld. Exploring these connections does not entail that every research project on virtual worlds must have an actual-world component. Second Life has trees, which reference trees in the actual world, but if I were to study trees in Second Life it would not always be necessary that I take bark samples from actual-world trees. When the American Cancer Society held a fundraiser in Second Life, I studied how that showed up in Second Life, without any methodological need to go to the headquarters of the American Cancer Society in Atlanta, Georgia (just as very few Second Life residents who participated in that fundraiser traveled to Atlanta).

I am fortunate that this book represented a second project alongside my research in Indonesia: this helped me see how many of the issues raised about ethnography in virtual worlds are common to ethnographic research anywhere. As a result, I will sometimes draw out parallels between my ethnographic work in Second Life and in Indonesia. I do this to illustrate as clearly as possible that not every challenge of researching online culture is unique to that online context. For instance, much of my research in Indonesia concerns gay Indonesians. Both I and these Indonesians are quite clear that the term “gay” comes from outside Indonesia, but when conducting ethnography in Indonesia I do not spend time in San Francisco; I study the term “gay” as it shows up in Indonesia itself. It is not true that every study of, say, Puerto Ricans in New York City is flawed if the researcher does not conduct research in Puerto Rico as well. Treating Second Life as a culture need not imply that it is mistakenly set apart; all ethnographic research has a limited scope, and speaking of the inhabitants of “Indonesia” or “New York City” does not mean one is failing to take forms of interconnection into account.

The goal of *Coming of Age in Second Life* is to demonstrate the existence of a relatively enduring cultural logic shared in some way by those who participate in Second Life, though their stances toward this cultural logic differ. There are many fascinating and distinct subcultures in Second Life, some of which I address in this book and others that I hope to address in future publications. But Second Life is more than the sum of its subcultures, and in this book my primary goal is to explore overarching cultural norms. The idea that culture is like a language has led many astray in the history of social thought.<sup>2</sup> However, one way in which the metaphor (or exemplification) is illuminating is that members of a culture

"Ethnography" is the method anthropologists and others use to study "culture," one of the discipline's originary concepts. In his famous 1871 definition Edward B. Tylor, a founding figure in anthropology, termed culture "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (Tylor 1871:1). More compelling definitions of culture have appeared since that time, but this early characterization provides a helpful starting point. Tylor refers to a "complex whole"—and what is a virtual world if not a complex whole, however networked?—defined in terms of "capabilities and habits" rather than knowledge and belief; that is, by *techné* rather than *epistémè*. Since approximately the 1980s, many in anthropology and elsewhere have critiqued the culture concept for eliding issues of difference, inequality, and materiality. Such critiques extend back to the early decades of anthropology, for instance, in British social anthropology, which tended to see "culture" as a German, romantic concept that obfuscated social dynamics (Radcliffe-Brown 1952 [1940]). Most contemporary ethnographers now use the concept in a more refined manner, harking back to Geertz's formulation that as humans we are "incomplete or unfinished animals who complete or finish ourselves through culture—and not through culture in general but through highly particular forms of it" (Geertz 1973a:49). I speak of "culture in virtual worlds" rather than "virtual culture" to underscore how cultures in virtual worlds are simply new, "highly particular" forms of culture.

How to conduct research in virtual worlds has long been a source of consternation. Some of the most significant analyses of virtual worlds have been produced by writers of fiction, and also by persons whose blogs and websites insightfully explore various aspects of cybersociality. Scholars and practitioners from a range of fields including media studies, computer science, informatics, psychology, sociology, literary studies, and cultural studies have also made significant contributions. Yet since the emergence of a scholarly literature on virtual worlds in the early 1990s, many have wondered about the role of a "postorganic anthropology" in understanding them (Tomas 1991:33). Where are the anthropologists? Anthropologists have shed their discipline's Malinowskian associations with the study of "primitive" and "isolated" societies. However, despite the growing enthusiasm for ethnography in virtual worlds, anthropologists—supposedly the experts in ethnographic methods—have been latecomers to the conversation. While a few anthropologists have been involved in online research, in general the discipline has been slow to recognize the foundationally cultural character of virtual worlds, and thus the promise of ethnographic methods for studying them.

Although now commonly identified as useful (e.g., Fornäs et al. 2002:4), some online researchers employ the term "ethnography" in unclear ways. Judith Donath, for instance, identifies it as "an interpretation of closely examined social discourse," but in equating ethnography with interpretation she is silent on what methods are to be used, as well as what constitutes close examination (Donath 1999:31). Most research published before my own investigated text-based formats, including IRC and MUDs, or graphical virtual worlds with a combat emphasis, like *Everquest* or *World of Warcraft*. It is possible to research these important virtual worlds ethnographically (e.g., Nardi and Harris 2006), but in terms of methodological experimentation they have limitations. Frank Schaap noted with reference to his research in the role-playing Cybersphere MOO that "I felt I couldn't play an anthropologist as a character, because I didn't know how to fit an anthropologist or a Researcher into the theme of the world" (2002:29). Researchers in text-based virtual worlds often made assumptions about visibility and embodiment that are simply not applicable to graphical contexts where three-dimensional visualization is fundamental to sociality. Only in the context of text-based virtual worlds could one claim that "by definition online ethnography describes places that are not spaces. Disembodied persons people these places" (Rutter and Smith 2005:84). The idea that online observation and interviewing "might be as legitimate for ethnography as is face-to-face-interaction" (Fornäs et al. 2002:38) assumes that what takes place via the Internet is not "face-to-face." While language is certainly important to the ethnography of virtual worlds, such ethnography is not "language-centered," as in the case of research on online archives (Fabian 2002).

Many analyses of online culture have used symbolic or semiotic frameworks that define culture in terms of knowledge of schemas, cognitive maps, and meaning (e.g., Salen and Zimmerman 2004). Such definitions reflect the mid-twentieth-century "cognitive" anthropological belief that "a society's culture consists of whatever it is one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members" (Goodenough 1964:36). Such a view of culture in terms of *epistémè* rather than *techné* may be attractive to some with backgrounds in game studies because it is congruent with an understanding of social relations in terms of rules. Rules are often identified as the foundational characteristic of anything to be termed a game (De Koven 1978:45; von Neumann and Morgenstern 1944:49); game design, programming, and even playing a game can be seen as crafting, coding, or implementing rules. This has led some researchers to speculate on the possibility that virtual worlds could be manipulated by researchers, providing "the opportunity to see large-scale social outcomes from a truly probabilistic,

experimental perspective as in a petri dish" (Castronova 2006:183). Nonetheless viewing culture in terms of rules—rather than in terms of Tylor's more prescient emphasis on capability and habit—has serious limitations. Geertz observed how viewing culture in terms of rules confuses a derived representation with lived social experience; it is like confusing the score of a Beethoven quartet "with the skills and knowledge needed to play it, with the understanding of it possessed by its performers and auditors" (Geertz 1983:11). As Malinowski noted at the outset of the anthropological enterprise, "the Ethnographer has in the field . . . the duty before him of drawing up all the rules and regularities. . . . But these things, though crystallized and set, are nowhere explicitly *formulated*" (Malinowski 1922:11).

This impoverished model of culture in terms of knowing rules has methodological implications. It implies that learning a culture is like learning the rules of a game. Since players cannot play a game unless they know they are playing a game and know the rules of that game, it further suggests that people can describe their culture when asked, implying one can learn how a culture works through elicitation methods. By "elicitation methods" I mean methods like interviews or surveys that involve asking questions and receiving answers. In contrast, participant observation is the central methodology for ethnography because it does not require that aspects of culture be available for conscious reflection. It allows the researcher to become involved in crafting events as they occur; participant observation is itself a form of techné. Elicitation methods assume people are able to articulate the various aspects of the cultures that shape their thinking. Yet even a simple example from language shows how this assumption limits our methodological reach. To try to understand virtual worlds based on elicitation methods is like trying to construct a grammar of English by asking speakers to describe how English works. Few English speakers would be able to explain, for instance, that the first "n" in "inconceivable" becomes "m" in words like "impossible" because the following sound ("p," in this case) is a bilabial plosive (that is, made with the lips) and as a result the "n" sound shifts to a bilabial articulation as well. Yet any English speaker "knows" this phonological rule even if they cannot describe it. Like language, many aspects of culture are only imperfectly available for conscious reflection. They take the form of "common sense": in culture "what is essential goes without saying because it comes without saying" (Bourdieu 1977:167). Research on virtual worlds can make effective use of elicitation methods, but must also move beyond them to develop methods based upon techné, not just episteme.

Some aspects of Malinowski's legacy help explain why anthropologists and nonanthropologists alike have been slow to acknowledge the usefulness

of ethnography for studying virtual worlds. Matti Bunzl has argued that Franz Boas (1858–1942), a founding figure in United States anthropology, might prove a better historical model. Bunzl notes that "in a Malinowskian framework, the production of anthropological knowledge was a function of mere observation, as long as it occurred across—and, thereby, reproduced—a cultural chasm between ethnographic Self and native Other" (Bunzl 2004:438). This supposed cultural chasm has led many to mistakenly conclude that ethnography will not be objective if researchers are similar to (or personally involved with) those they study, with the result that persons conducting ethnographic research in communities to which they somehow belong may see themselves as "virtual anthropologists" (Weston 1997). In contrast, "in Boas's fieldwork, a constitutive epistemological separation between ethnographer and native was absent" (Bunzl 2004:438). Thus, "Boasian anthropology did not produce 'native' anthropology as the *virtual* Other of 'real' anthropology" (Bunzl 2004:439, emphasis added). Franz Boas was Margaret Mead's teacher at Columbia and wrote the foreword to *Coming of Age in Samoa*. Like Mead, in this book I draw upon a Boasian framework that seeks equality and complicity rather than hierarchy and distance. To some, ethnographic research (including this book) may seem "anecdotal," but such an interpretation fails to recognize how ethnographic research connects seemingly isolated incidents of cultural interchange (Malaby 2006c). This is what Boas identified as a "cosmological" approach to knowledge, which "considers every phenomenon as worthy of being studied for its own sake. Its mere existence entitles it to a full share of our attention; and the knowledge of its existence and evolution in space and time fully satisfies the student" (Boas 1887:642). By holding at bay the scientific rush to comparison and generalization (often before the phenomena at hand are properly identified and understood), ethnographic analysis "can be crucial . . . for imagining the kinds of communities that human groups can create with the help of emerging technologies" (Escobar 1994; see also Jacobson 1996).

As discussed further below, the open-endedness of Second Life meant that I was able to subordinate interviews and surveys to participant observation, the centerpiece of any truly ethnographic approach. Not only did I create the avatar Tom Bukowski, I shopped for clothes for my avatar in the same stores as any Second Life resident. I bought land with the help of a real estate agent and learned how to use Second Life's building tools.<sup>3</sup> I then created a home and office for my research named "Ethnographia," purchasing items like textures, furniture, and artwork. I learned games created and played inside Second Life, like "Tiringo" (a combination of Tetris and Bingo) and "primitonary" (a variant of Pictionary). I wandered across the Second

overstated. For example, Jennifer Sundén's question "How then to start writing a culture that is already written?" is provocative (Sundén 2003:18), but the phrasing elides how actual-world cultures are also "written" in that they are the product of human artifice. I thus disagree with any claim that with regard to virtual worlds "there is no incontrovertible basis on which to decide whether an approach is or is not ethnographic" (Hine 2005:8). I would turn to Marilyn Strathern's thesis that "the nature of ethnography entailed in anthropology's version of fieldwork" involves "the deliberate attempt to generate more data than the investigator is aware of at the time of collection . . . Rather than devising research protocols that will purify the data in advance of analysis, the anthropologist embarks on a participatory exercise which yields materials for which analytical protocols are often devised after the fact" (Strathern 2004:5–6). Mead herself summed up this vision of the ethnographic project as an "open-mindedness with which one must look and listen, record in astonishment and wonder, that which one would not have been able to guess" (Mead 1950:xxvi).

#### PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION.

In line with its status as ethnography's signature method, this book is built around an analysis of social interaction gathered through participant observation. Some disciplines focus on the conscious products of culture: texts, dances, codes of law. Anthropologists examine these too, but prioritize the everyday contexts in which people live. A Second Life resident once commented on my participant observation methodology by noting that: "you're mixing up two agendas in Second Life. The research and presumably, just fun and games too. Don't you find that one affects your perceptions of the other?" My chat log reveals that I answered by saying "it's what anthropologists call 'participant observation,' and it does shatter the illusion, but anthropologists tend to believe that methods like surveys give the illusion of objectivity." I also noted that when conducting participant observation research in Indonesia, I also have "fun and games," spending time with friends or going to a movie.

There is no illusion of detached objectivity to shatter in participant observation because it is not a methodology that views the researcher as a contaminant. It constantly confronts the differing forms of power and hierarchy produced through fieldwork, not all of which privilege the researcher. The term "participant observation" is intentionally oxymoronic; you cannot fully participate and fully observe at the same time, but it is in this paradox that ethnographers conduct their best work. Unlike elicitation methods, participant observation implies a form of ethical yet critical engagement

Life landscape, flying, teleporting, or floating along in my hot air balloon, stopping to investigate events, buildings, or people I happened to encounter. I also used the "events" list and notices in Second Life publications to learn of interesting places to visit. In turn, many people stumbled upon my house, either during leisurely explorations of their own or to attend an event I was hosting. I joined many Second Life groups and participated in a range of activities, from impromptu relationship counseling to larger-scale events like a community fair. While I did not seek notoriety, on one occasion my activities garnered brief actual-world press—namely, my experiment of having a friend who was running for city council in my actual-world hometown of Long Beach, California acquire an avatar and hold a campaign event, the first case of an actual-world political candidate appearing in Second Life.

All this experience did not give me a totalizing understanding of Second Life. Ethnographic knowledge is situated and partial; just as most Indonesians have spent more time in Indonesia than I and know many things about Indonesia that I do not know, so many Second Life residents spent more time inworld than I, and every resident had some kind of knowledge about the virtual world that I lacked. One of the many things I did gain from my research was a network of acquaintances and friends, all of whom knew of my research, since my "profile" mentioned that I was an anthropologist. I was struck by how the idea of someone conducting ethnography made sense to residents. My interest tended to be slotted into the kind of reflexivity and curiosity that was common in Second Life, showing up in everything from blogs to the large number of journalists and educators active inworld. Residents often commented upon my seeming comfort with Second Life, particularly my skills at building (an unexpected benefit of my growing up as a video gamer). One resident noted "you seem so comfy in here—like you study it yet still live it." I also encountered residents already familiar with anthropology, as in the following exchange:

URMA: Do you conduct field research . . . participant observation?

ME: Yeah, participant observation, but also interviews and focus groups

URMA: Its an interesting topic, Virtual Lives. And its not like you have to go some exotic land. I mean . . . it's a far-off place, but it's not like you're studying the culture of the River Valley Dani [in Papua New Guinea] or anything lol

I found remarkable the degree to which the challenges and joys of my research in Second Life resembled the challenges and joys of my research in Indonesia. Claims of a methodological chasm between virtual and actual are

between researcher and researched, even when the researcher is clearly not a member of the community being studied. It is “a method of being at risk in the face of the practices and discourses into which one inquires . . . [a] serious nonidentity that challenges previous stabilities, convictions, or ways of being . . . a mode of practical and theoretical attention, a way of remaining mindful and accountable” (Haraway 1997:190–91). It has long been identified as a method based on vulnerability, even failure, on learning from mistakes: “over and over again, I committed breaches of etiquette, which the natives, familiar enough with me, were not slow in pointing out” (Malinowski 1922:8).

A common tactic in writing on virtual worlds is to emphasize the sensational: men participating as women; nonnormative sex practices like sadomasochism; persons earning large sums of actual-world money through online enterprises. Looking to the unusual to tell us about culture, however, is of limited use. If in the actual world we were to do nothing but read the headlines of our newspapers, magazines, and television reports, we would not have an accurate understanding of everyday life. Similarly extraordinary events in Second Life are fascinating, but paint a misleading picture of its culture. Ethnographers are not oblivious to the newsworthy or the extraordinary, but find that culture is lived out in the mundane and the ordinary. The goal is to find methods attuned to the banal dimensions of human life, what Pierre Bourdieu termed the “habitus”: “a subjective but not individual system of internalized structures, schemes of perception, conception, and action” (Bourdieu 1977:86).

To illustrate how participant observation works to discover culture through nonelicited, everyday interaction, consider the following scene, taken with only minor modifications directly from my fieldnotes. On the day in question it was 9:16 p.m. local time when, having logged onto Second Life a few minutes earlier, I took up my friend Kimmy’s invitation to come see her new house. I teleported to her location and found myself in the kitchen of a standard-looking two-story house standing on a small island; similar islands dotted the landscape nearby, fitted out with other homes. Kimmy was hanging out with her friend BettyAnne, and the three of us moved to Kimmy’s new living room to talk, watching palm trees sway outside the window. Fifteen minutes later, my chat log recorded that we were discussing going to play a game of golf when an unknown person, “Laura,” teleported into the kitchen:

ME: Hello Laura!

KIMMY: Hi Laura . . . can I help you?

LAURA: Hi, I’m new. Just arrived.

KIMMY: Ahh, she’s a noob [newbie]

LAURA: Is it possible to change my clothes now?

ME: Yes, right click on yourself and choose “appearance”

KIMMY: Here are some clothes. If you go to inventory at the bottom right, they should be in your clothing folder

LAURA: ty [thank you]

KIMMY: If you right click the clothing and pick “wear,” you should be able to wear it

LAURA: How about my hair? It’s a mess.

KIMMY: Hmm. I wish I had some prim hair to give you, but I can’t transfer any of it. You’ll have to go into “appearance” and play with the sliders.

KIMMY: I can give you some landmarks for some great clothing stores though

KIMMY: I got my hair at that place I just gave you a landmark for

LAURA: I’d love some

KIMMY: Check the upper right hand corner. How much money do you have?

LAURA: Zero so far. how can I earn some?

KIMMY: Ah. do you have a freebie account?

LAURA: Yeah, I didn’t know which one to choose

ME: The easiest way to “earn” money is to convert dollars into linden dollars using a credit card

KIMMY: Alright, if you had a pay account they would give you money every Tuesday

LAURA: Ty. I will look into it

ME: You can also earn money in a zillion ways but they aren’t always easy lol—selling things, stuff like that

KIMMY: The only way you can earn money other than that is dancing at a club, being a stripper or an escort lol . . . or find some other job that has a boss that pays you to do a service of some sort.

LAURA: I might go for a look around. Nice talking to you.

KIMMY: Nice to meet you, Laura, keep in touch

LAURA: Alright Kimmy and BettyAnne and Tom, bye :)

[Laura’s avatar disappears]

BETTYANNE: Aww, she looks just like I did

KIMMY: lol

KIMMY: We’re all born like that

(six dollars a month if paid yearly). This premium account, which Kimmy termed a “pay account,” paid back about \$1.50 in Linden dollars each week at the time, and also allowed one to own land. I mentioned to Laura that she could sell things in Second Life and Kimmy added that she could also make money for service work, including being a stripper or escort. Having received advice and free clothing, Laura thanked Kimmy, BettyAnne, and myself for our help and teleported away to explore some other part of Second Life. After Laura left, BettyAnne said “aww, she looks just like I did,” referring to the unadorned and generic look of Laura’s brand-new avatar. “We’re all born like that,” Kimmy replied.

This unassuming excerpt from my thousands of pages of fieldnotes reveals how ethnographic methods draw upon participant observation to find social meanings as they are implicitly forged and sustained in everyday interaction. From this excerpt we gain insight into a range of cultural domains, from gender (discussions about clothing, hair, and work as a stripper involved female-gendered avatars, though the persons involved might be male or transgendered in the actual world), to economics, to ideas about an avatar life course (in which people are “born” as “newbies” and then mature), to language (such as the use of “lol” for “laugh out loud,” or the use of emoticons like “;)” for a smiley face). Crucially through such participant observation data we can see links between these cultural domains: rather than an interview or survey that asks about gender, then about economics, and so on, through participant observation we can see which cultural domains crop up together and how they are interconnected. Participant observation demonstrates the historically specific character of “common sense,” revealing it to be not “human nature” but culture, one valid yet particular way of living a human life.

When conducting ethnography in virtual worlds, the ability to do things like save chat logs and record audio or video is a great boon in comparison to actual-world environments where audio recording can be disruptive and one is often forced to rely on memory or hastily handwritten notes. However, the ease of obtaining data in virtual worlds can also be a curse, because those very processes of memory and handwriting force ethnographers to focus on what seem to be the most consequential incidents encountered during participant observation. Ethnographers of virtual worlds often face the challenge of filtering through large amounts of data. My own data set constituted over ten thousand pages of fieldnotes from participant observation, interviewing, and focus groups, plus approximately ten thousand additional pages of blogs, newsletters, and other websites.

This innocuous scene began when Laura teleported into Kimmy’s house as Kimmy, BettyAnne, and myself were talking. Laura probably saw green dots on the world map indicating that three persons were at this location, and came to investigate. We saw her wandering around in the kitchen, looking lost, but she could have been someone bent on “grieving” (harassing or mistreating others, see chapter 7) so we were cautious. Kimmy, BettyAnne, and I clicked on “Laura” to obtain her profile, which informed us that the avatar had been created that very day, meaning she could be an additional avatar (or “alt”) of a longtime resident, or the primary avatar of someone entering Second Life for the first time.

It quickly became clear that the latter was the case; Laura was, as Kimmy put it, a “noob” or “newbie” (or doing a convincing job of appearing to be a newbie). When Laura asked how to change her clothes, Kimmy, who had some free-to-copy women’s clothes in her inventory, gave some to Laura and explained how to access them. Such generosity was common in Second Life during my fieldwork. Laura’s appearance changed as she put on the clothes Kimmy had given her: a pair of faded jeans, a tank top showing off her virtual shoulders. Laura then asked about hair and Kimmy said she wished she had “prim hair” to give her, but “can’t transfer” it. “Prim hair” was hair constructed from prims, the objects used to make everything from vehicles to buildings, and was typically better-looking than the default hair that came with one’s avatar. However, all of the prim hair Kimmy had was “no transfer”—copies of it could not be given away. This was because prim hair was a relatively valuable commodity and those who sold it usually made their creations “no transfer.” Although Kimmy could not give Laura any of the prim hair she had previously purchased, she could give Laura “landmarks” that contained information about the location of stores that sold prim hair.

It was through this commodity that the conversation turned to economic matters. Kimmy told Laura to check the upper-right hand corner of her screen and see how much money she had. Laura replied “zero,” which refers to Linden dollars (one U.S. dollar was trading for about 280 Linden dollars at the time). Laura asked “how can I earn some [money].” Kimmy did not answer directly but inquired after what kind of account Laura had. At this point in Second Life’s existence there were three levels of membership: a free account with no verification of payment method (like the successful use of a credit card), a free account where a payment method had been verified, which implied the person’s actual-world identity was known to Linden Lab; and a “premium” account that cost \$9.95 a month

## INTERVIEWS, FOCUS GROUPS, AND BEYOND THE PLATFORM.

Research is most effective when each component method is keyed to a specific set of questions. Participant observation is useful for gaining a conceptual handle on cultural assumptions that may not be overtly discussed. In comparison to the more isolated contexts of surveys and interviews, it is useful for seeing what kinds of practices and beliefs emerge as members of a particular culture interact with each other. Participant observation can illuminate debates and issues of which the researcher was unaware prior to the research, and so could not have thought to include on a list of interview questions or a survey form. For these reasons, participant observation must be the fundamental method of any full-fledged ethnography. However, anthropologists have always used many methods in addition to participant observation (Ortner 2006:81). In my earlier fieldwork in Indonesia I complemented participant observation with interviews, archival research, the analysis of texts, and focus groups. I found all of these ancillary methods helpful for my research in Second Life as well.

I conducted about thirty formal interviews and thirty informal interviews during my fieldwork. By “formal interview” I mean an interview where I explicitly asked a resident “may I interview you about your experiences in Second Life” and the resident consented. I used a consent form for these interviews, as I did in Indonesia (see figure 3.1). The form was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board at my university (as was my research overall); it would be signed by the resident typing “I agree to participate in your study.” As in most ethnographic projects I selected interviewees through a procedure where those already interviewed would recommend acquaintances, or I would discover such persons through my own participant observation. Such a “snowball sampling” method is inappropriate for statistical research, but is a desirable approach for ethnographers, who typically acknowledge their partiality and seek to trace social networks rather than artificially isolate members of a culture through randomization.

Interviews can be highly effective when placed in the context of participant observation. Culture can be implicit and even subconscious, but much of it is part of everyday awareness; members of a culture can sometimes be its most eloquent interpreters. In the case of my research, interviews allowed residents to reflect upon their virtual lives and discuss what they saw as significant or interesting aspects of Second Life. Their insights then fed back into my participant observation, in that I learned about new topics or social groups to investigate. While there is a clear hierarchy in any interview context, Second Life residents typically found being interviewed to be a re-

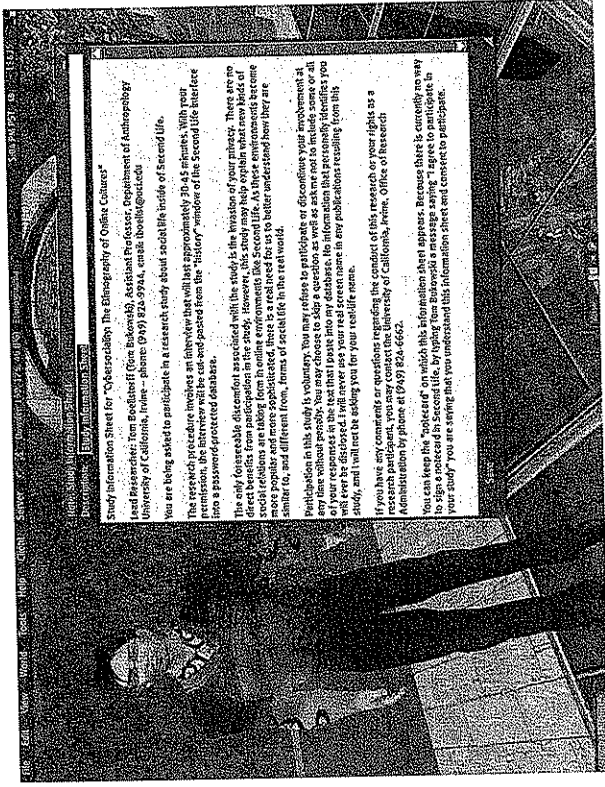


FIGURE 3.1. The consent form used for interviews inside of Second Life (image by author).

warding experience. They appreciated the chance to talk through issues they had often been pondering for some time; interviews were often two-way affairs, with the “interviewee” asking questions to which I would respond. I did not have any problem getting people to agree to an interview. I faced having a list of people wishing to be interviewed; after being interviewed, many residents asked to be interviewed again, or became friends with whom I would socialize on a regular basis. I purposely worked to interview a spectrum of residents, including residents I met in shopping malls, clubs, and other informal contexts, even persons who randomly happened to fly past my house. On a few occasions I conducted group interviews with up to four residents at once. Sometimes this was because a friend of a resident dropped in while the resident was being interviewed and wished to join in. In other cases I interviewed couples in an intimate relationship, or even three people in a polyamorous relationship, as well as persons who were kin in the actual world (a husband and wife, or siblings, or a parent and child).

In addition to these formal interviews, I conducted about the same number of informal interviews that grew out of participant observation. For instance, it often happened that I would be participating in some activity with

Second Life culture. Because focus groups were advertised on the Second Life "events" database, they tended to draw residents with an interest in intellectual debate. This makes the over 1,000 pages of chat text I gathered from focus groups more specific than that I gathered from participant observation or even interviews, but "specific" does not mean "biased." The persons who participated in focus groups participated in a wide range of activities and were far from homogenous in their understandings of Second Life culture.

While there were residents whose experience was limited to the virtual world itself, often known as "the grid,"<sup>4</sup> for many residents websites, blogs, and even full-fledged periodicals (with staff and advertising) were important, and so I drew upon these as well. Through these media residents offered analysis and commentary on many aspects of the virtual world. As an individual researcher, I could not familiarize myself with every subculture or region of Second Life (just I have not been to many parts of Indonesia). Resident-produced media provided valuable information about parts of Second Life I did not personally research on an intensive basis.<sup>5</sup>

#### ETHICS.

Any form of inquiry raises the question of power relationships between the researcher and those studied. The details vary depending upon the personal history of the investigator, the status of the communities examined, and the methodology used, but concerns regarding ethics persist. For some time, anthropologists have examined the implications of the fact that their discipline, like all social scientific and humanistic disciplines, was first formalized in nineteenth-century contexts of colonial encounter (Asad 1973). Questions of power, complicity, and accountability remain part of any ethnographic project—not uncomfortable realities to be broached then set aside, but important sources of insight and collaboration. Such issues are widely seen as pressing with regard to virtual worlds: "online research is marked as a special category in which the institutionalized understandings of the ethics of research must be re-examined" (Hine 2005:5; see also Kendall 2002:241–43). My research was thus not just an experiment in methodology, but an experiment in the ethics of virtual anthropology.

During my research I worked to avoid being identified with any particular subset of residents, although I could only join a limited number of groups and spent more time with some residents than others. My avatar took on different fashions, genders, and even species during my research, but my default embodiment was both white and male, in line with my actual-world embodiment, and I was also openly gay. When debates or conflict broke

three or four residents and fall into a conversation about our experiences in Second Life. Then over a period of time, all of the residents would log off save one, and my conversation with that one remaining resident would begin to feel like an interview. In such cases it was usually not appropriate to stop the conversation and ask the resident to sign a consent form; instead, I simply followed the normal ethical procedures I would follow when conducting participant observation in Indonesia (see below).

During my research in Indonesia I held a series of focus groups, but found them unhelpful given the amount of work it took to organize them. In Second Life the logistical barriers to convening a group of people were less significant, but despite this fact focus groups were not a core methodology. I created my own group, "Digital Cultures," and held about forty meetings of the group at my home or the homes of other group members throughout my research. These focus groups were organized around a "blurb," or topic that I wrote based on issues of current interest identified through my participant observation work and suggestions by Second Life residents (figure 3.2). The meetings lasted an hour and drew up to forty residents (the maximum number of avatars that most sims could contain during my fieldwork). Unlike interviews, focus groups allowed residents collectively discuss issues about Second Life. Side conversations and digressions provided their own data, revealing connections residents were drawing between different domains of

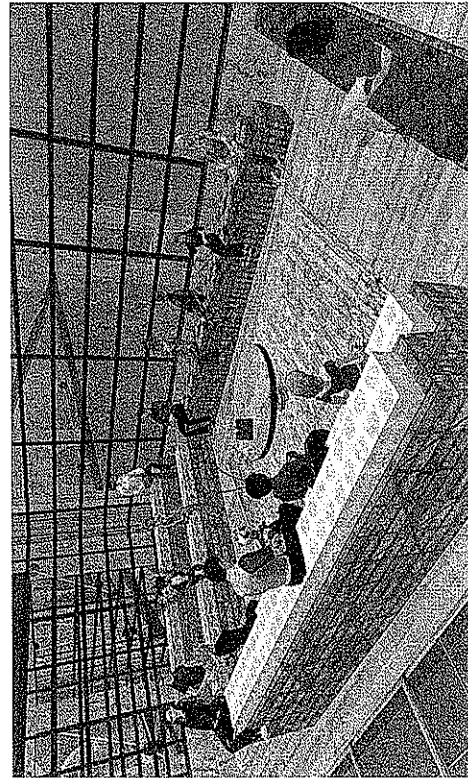


FIGURE 3.2. A focus group at my home in Second Life, Ethnographia (image by author).

onlookers. In one case, a colleague sat with me in my actual-world office while I was online with Kiancha, a Second Life acquaintance:

ME: Hey Kiancha, can't talk long but I have a friend here in my office interested in sl, say hello!

KIANCHA: I'd love to meet your friend.

ME: My friend is really impressed—hasn't been in a virtual world before

KIANCHA: Hello, friend of Tom. Where are you?

ME: She's here with me in California, lol

KIANCHA: Ha, she doesn't have an avatar yet, eh?

YOU: No, not yet, but who knows?

KIANCHA: Tom is really super at adding content to this game, friend.

Note how in this exchange, Kiancha tried to reach beyond the screen and address my friend, asking "where are you?" Since my friend did not have an avatar, I was forced to respond on her behalf. The friend could have typed a response on my computer's keyboard, but the response would have come from my avatar, only adding to the confusion. Despite these barriers, Kiancha still moved between addressing me ("she doesn't have an avatar yet, eh?") and the virtually absent friend ("Tom is really super at adding content," a reference to my discussion groups).

On three occasions I gave conference presentations where I had twenty or thirty people looking over my virtual shoulder in this way. These experiences were even more disconcerting: unlike the example with Kiancha above, there was no way for a Second Life resident to respond to a multitude of virtually disembodied persons. Since they did not have avatars, participants in these conferences also found it hard to relate to me as an avatars self (Tom Bukowski), and in two instances asked me to exit Second Life in order to address them in the actual world. After these experiences I decided to forbid actual-world persons to observe me online without having avatars of their own, so that they could participate in the virtual world like any other resident.

It is ethically preferable to use a consent form for interviews or any elicitation method; this is because unlike participant observation, elicitation methods create a social situation that would not exist otherwise. For my Second Life research, I had residents sign this consent form using only their screen names. I did this because another aspect to my ethical and methodological practice was that I did not try to verify any aspect of residents' actual-world lives. Residents did not typically offer such information or find it relevant. On those occasions where a resident would provide such

out in my presence, I did not feign neutrality (I would, for instance, file an "Abuse Report" if I saw someone mistreating another resident), and gave my own opinions in informal conversations, interviews, and focus groups. However, I did work to interact with residents whose political and personal views might not reflect my own.

There is often a misunderstanding of "cultural relativism" that portrays anthropologists as believing there is no way to judge cultures or decide between right and wrong: as if in culture X they believe in killing every third-born child, then we would have no right to say that should not happen. In fact, anthropologists make prescriptive judgments all the time and even work to change cultures, as in the case of my HIV prevention work in Indonesia. Anthropologists know that claims like "in culture X they believe in killing every third-born child" mistakenly assume that cultures are homogenous, without dissent or debate, and do not change over time. The point is not to avoid prescription but to keep description and prescription distinct. For instance, if there were a culture in which some members believed in killing every third-born child, there would be utility in working to understand the cultural logics by which this made sense, without thereby condoning the practice.

In addition to a primary account (like my Tom Bukowski avatar), many Second Life residents also had one or more alternative avatars or "alts"—entirely different avatars with different screen names. The two accounts were indistinguishable from avatars held by two separate persons. I briefly tried experimenting with an alt, but soon decided it was ethically and methodologically inadequate for ethnographic research. I never hid the fact that I was conducting research, going so far as to include this information in my profile. Any resident could read this profile and see that Tom Bukowski was an anthropologist. With an alt, such information would not be available unless I listed it on the alt's profile as well, negating the purpose of an alt in the first place. It might seem that alts could allow an anthropologist to observe an undisturbed culture in action, where people spoke freely without realizing there was a researcher in their midst. What this perspective misses is that ethnography is predicated on *participant* observation, not abstracted observation. Conducting research with an alt would not allow the tension between participating and observing to produce the kinds of complicity and failure that are necessary for ethnographic knowledge.<sup>6</sup>

Aside from the issue of alts, ethical questions can arise due to the possibility that persons could be sitting with the researcher in the actual world. Seeing only the researcher's avatar, residents of the virtual world would not know that additional people were watching the computer screen. I became aware of this issue when, on a handful of occasions, I had such actual-world

A twist to this principle is that I have also used pseudonyms for the virtual-world identities or "screen names" of Second Life residents.<sup>6</sup> As discussed later, the screen name is the one unchangeable aspect of a Second Life account (as in many virtual worlds), and significant meaning is attached to it. I have also changed details about residents' virtual-world lives that could be used to identify them. I have paraphrased quotations from my residents to make them difficult to identify using a search engine. In some cases I combine quotations from more than one person, or change details of a location or incident, so that the original event cannot be discerned from the narrative. Some may think they can determine the identities of those I discuss in this book, but it will be impossible to know for sure.

The importance of using confidentiality to protect privacy was illustrated by a controversy that broke out in Second Life in October 2004. A professor was teaching a freshman English course focusing on how technology affects communication. Students in the course were given an assignment to spend time in Second Life and write about their experiences. Unfortunately some of these students began posting derisive online commentaries, complete with chat excerpts that included the screen names of Second Life residents. Several discussions were held in Second Life to defuse the controversy, which could have been avoided had the students been trained in ethnographic methods. There are also theoretical reasons for maintaining confidentiality. Confidentiality deemphasizes individual personalities, allowing for a focus on broader cultural logics. In virtual worlds there is often a tendency to emphasize controversies and celebrities; ethnography's real promise lies in showing how banal, unassuming aspects of everyday life have profound consequences for how we think and act.

#### CLAIMS AND REFLEXIVITY.

Like all ethnographies, this book is a form of situated knowledge (Haraway 1988), one story of Second Life during a particular period of time. As one person in Second Life put it in a note to those new to the virtual world, "the fundamental rule of Second Life is that everything changes constantly": a different person emphasized "leave Second Life for a week and it's like you've left the country for a decade." I began conducting fieldwork in Indonesia in 1992, since that time Indonesia has witnessed many social and political changes and its population grew from 190 million to about 225 million. In comparison, by the time I completed the manuscript for this book the number of registered accounts grew from 5,000 to over ten million, a 2,000-fold increase.

information (for instance, that they were disabled, living in Germany, or a forty-eight-year-old housewife with two children). I did not try to confirm these statements. What was important were the contexts in which such information came up and what such information was supposed to accomplish: for instance, did other residents interpret it as a sign of trust or intimacy?

This question of the actual-world lives of residents of virtual worlds extends to the most fundamental questions of selfhood, with important methodological consequences. One could imagine a situation where an actual-world person "Sam" had two avatars, "Jenny" and "Rick," and invested the time so that each avatar had its own social network. One could then imagine an ethnographer like myself interviewing Jenny and Rick on different days without realizing that I was interviewing "Sam" twice. I do not think such a thing happened during my research, but the methodological and theoretical point is that in an important sense it would not matter: Jenny and Rick would be distinct social actors in Second Life, and this would be sufficient warrant to interview each of them. The reverse situation could also take place, for example where "George" and "Donna," a married couple in the actual world, take turns controlling the single avatar "Jenny" in Second Life. I might then interact with Jenny on two different days without realizing that on the first day I was "actually" talking to George, and on the second day "actually" talking to Donna. Since Jenny would be a single social actor and other residents might well know nothing of George and Donna, it would be appropriate to treat my ethnographic data about "Jenny" as coming from a single person.

In my research (as in any ethnographic project), questions of ethics extend from research to writing: it is in its published form that my research has the greatest potential to have positive or negative effects upon Second Life's residents.<sup>7</sup> The most fundamental ethical decision—one I made with regard to my Indonesia research as well—was to maintain confidentiality with regard to resident identities, to protect privacy with regard to their virtual and actual lives. Even when residents said I could name them, I have employed pseudonyms so as not to inadvertently identify their friends. This devotion to confidentiality may seem quaint, since in the context of the Internet there appears to be little remaining expectation of privacy. Typically residents knew that anything they said could be recorded by Linden Lab, by residents nearby, or by a scripted object hidden on a piece of land, and that such recorded information could then be disseminated via a blog or other form of website. Nonetheless attempts to respect privacy were common in Second Life during the time of my research; for instance, residents normally asked permission to quote other residents if writing something for public consumption.

researchers go so far as to place such excerpts in a Courier or Arial font that metaphorically stands in for a computer screen by working to “recall and reproduce the hyperbolic regularity of Machine Age typewriting” (Bukatman 1994:80; see, e.g., Baty 1999; Campbell 2004; Dibbell 2006; Kendall 2002; Kivits 2005; Markham 1998; Rheingold 2000; Schaap 2002). Such excerpts often appear as follows:

You are logged into ExampleMOO. You are in a small room with Sam and Joe.

Sam: hello there :)

Joe: how r u? whats going on?

You: Im fine!

These graphical and narrative devices lie squarely in the tradition of establishing ethnographic authority by having one’s materials take on the appearance of “raw data.” Such devices appear egalitarian but in fact create a more hierarchy, because they imply that to disagree with a researcher’s conclusions is to insinuate that the “voices” of those studied are themselves wrong. Must ethnographic authority depend upon a claim that the reader has access to the unmediated voices of those being studied? Or can ethnography work to illuminate culture through the imbrication of data and analysis, a rhetorical analogue to the paradox of “participant observation?”

Excerpts from fieldnotes are nothing new to anthropology, and I will provide such excerpts throughout this book, but I do not try to give them the appearance of raw data. I use the same fonts that I use elsewhere. Given the speed at which people typed and the large number of residents for whom English was not a first language, there was a high tolerance for typographical errors when chatting in Second Life. I have edited out most typographical errors for the sake of readability; this recalls how I translated excerpts from my Indonesia fieldwork into colloquial English. The only “naturalistic” elements I retain are a few emoticons (like :) for a smiley face) and common slang terms or contractions like “im” for “instant message” (such terms are referenced in the glossary).

An interesting aspect of doing research in virtual worlds is that no one is a true “native.” Some residents began participating in Second Life earlier than others, but no one was born there. It has been a commonplace that anthropologists are never truly members of the cultures they study. Even for those who are in some way members of the societies in which they conduct research, the fact of being a researcher alters their relationship to the field-site. My self-identification as a researcher was meant to replicate this sense

The purpose of any method is that it allows one to make claims. Statistical methods make claims based on the premise that the community studied has been sampled at random: a researcher might claim that one-third of Californians wish they ate more fruit, with a particular margin of error. Leaving aside all the ways we could debate the meaningfulness of such a claim, and acknowledging the power of quantitative methods to answer certain kinds of questions (e.g., Ducheneaut et al. 2006), it is clear that ethnographic claims work differently. For instance, during my Indonesia research I interviewed and conducted participant observation research with approximately as many persons as I did during my research in Second Life, but Indonesia is a populous nation spread over more than three thousand inhabited islands. In my book *The Gay Archipelago*, which focused on gay and lesbian Indonesians, I emphasized that by saying gay men and lesbian women were found *throughout* Indonesia I was not saying they were found *everywhere* in Indonesia (Boellstorff 2005:23); I also emphasized that I was not claiming I knew how every gay and lesbian Indonesian thought, only some insight into cultural assumptions shared by many such Indonesians. After spending a year with a group of ten or twenty Spaniards, most researchers would gain some fluency in the Spanish language. The language skills acquired could be used to converse with hundreds of millions of people worldwide, though one would not learn every vocabulary item or regional dialect. In an analogous manner, ethnography provides insight beyond the sample of persons with whom the ethnographer directly interacts. The mode of explication in ethnography is rarely the categorical claim or positivist law: “Everyone does X.” Instead, ethnographers look for tendencies, habits, assumptions, things that are usually true: “In X society, women are usually ranked over children”; “In Y society, persons typically marry before they are thirty.” In other words, ethnography seeks to know what is *virtually* true. Once again, ethnography comes to the virtual with the “virtual” already in hand.

While quantitative researchers use devices like margins of error and sample size to vouch for their claims, ethnographers rely on what James Clifford identified as “ethnographic authority” (Clifford 1983)—a researcher’s claim that “I was there” and so can represent, even partially, the culture in question. In ethnographic writing, vignettes, italicized foreign terms, and long quotations often serve the problematic function of attempting to render the researcher transparent, so that the “real voices” of those studied can be “heard.” In this regard it is instructive to note how some virtual-world researchers provide extensive excerpts from chat logs. Typographical errors are often retained to give these excerpts a “naturalistic” feel; some

of distinction. Yet given that I entered Second Life when it had only 5,000 registered accounts, by the time my research ended I was approximately in the top 0.1 percent of oldest avatars. We were all members of an emergent cultural location for which not only dated terms like “native,” but also their contemporary stand-ins, like “indigenous,” were inapplicable.