COMING OF AGE IN SECOND LIFE

An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human

Tom Boellstorff
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[RICHARD A. BARTLE, AUTHOR OF DESIGNING VIRTUAL WORLDS] Tom Boellstorff describes Second Life warmly and intelligently, highlighting its issues in a thought-provoking manner that is always backed up with evidence. There’s an almost tangible depth to his analysis that makes it really stand out. This is just the kind of portrait of a virtual world that I’ve been waiting to see for years: a full-blooded, book-length tour de force.

[DOUGLAS THOMAS, AUTHOR OF HACKER CULTURE] This is the first book to take a sustained look at an environment like Second Life from a purely anthropological perspective. It is sure to become the basis for a new conversation about how we study these spaces. It is impossible to read this book and not come away asking questions about how our lives are being transformed in very real ways by what is happening in the virtual.

[STEFAN HELMREICH, AUTHOR OF SILICON SECOND NATURE] Taking the bold step of conducting ethnographic fieldwork entirely “inside” Second Life, Tom Boellstorff invites readers to meditate on the old and new meanings of the virtual and the human. He presses the inventive and compelling claim that anthropologists would do well to imagine culture itself as already harboring the notion of the virtual. Boellstorff argues that being “virtually human” is what we have been all along.

Tom Bukowski was born on June 3, 2004, and has been conducting anthropological research in Second Life since that time. His home, Ethnographia, is located in the Dowden region of Second Life. He is a fan of the game Tringo and enjoys floating across the Second Life landscape in his hot air balloon.
COMMUNITY

The event—The group—Kindness—Griefing—Between virtual worlds—Beyond virtual worlds.

The event.
Eleven of us sit in a row on stone benches amidst a green sloped meadow. A forested hill rises into the distance; before us shimmers the endless expanse of the Second Life ocean. A twelfth resident stands in front, one hand extended as he builds in silence, prims taking form and changing shape before our eyes. The rest of us type out words:

body
person
man
woman
soldier
ghost
shade
spirit
no, that’s too easy . . .
spectre
afterlife
wraith
fig leaf
sheriff badge
gender
chaste
genitals
knob
chakra
thrush lol
chi

*** STOP!! *** WE HAVE A WINNER!
acupuncture
George gets CHAKRA!
:
wow.
wowie
holy moley
Nice one

This innocuous game of “primtionary” is only one of myriad possible examples of an “event.” In the previous chapters I discussed selfhood and intimacy in Second Life. But if what makes virtual worlds “worlds” is that they are places, what makes them sites of culture—and thus amenable to ethnographic investigation—is that people interact in them. Some scholars of the online have contended that the term “community” is of questionable utility because virtual worlds engender a “faceless community” that is less authentic and meaningful than actual-world sociality. In this view, a person will “reach out to the Internet to make connections while never really connecting with the other person in a meaningful, real-life way” (Young 1998:96; see also Guimarães 2005).

Such interpretations are not supported by the ethnographic evidence. It has long been noted that virtual worlds “do become true communities after a time” (Curtis 1992:137; see also Ducheneaut, Moore, and Nickell 2004). Often negative assessments of online community originate in misunderstandings of actual-world sociality: “pundits worry that virtual community may not truly be community. These worriers are confusing the pastoralist myth of community for the reality. Community ties are already geographically dispersed, sparsely knit, connected heavily by telecommunications . . . and specialized in content” (Wellman and Gulia 1999:187). These myths of physical proximity and cultural homogeneity resemble the stereotypes of classic anthropology that shaped the assumption that the “field” of ethnographic fieldwork must be a small-scale, “traditional” community (e.g., Redfield 1959). Many contemporary anthropologists have critiqued this assumption (Gupta and Ferguson 1997); for instance, in my research on sexuality I took “Indonesia” (rather than an ethnorolocalized group like “Javanese”) as the unit of ethnographic analysis (Boellstorff 2002). The anthropological critique of locality finds its analogue in game studies scholarship that questions Huizinga’s classic notion of the “magic circle” within which a gamespace is defined and its rules of play are efficacious (Huizinga 1950:57).

What these critiques share is an appreciation for how community has never been reducible to locality: “that communities do not presuppose that
members have to be spatially copresent or temporally simultaneous in their activities has been known for ages: already the early civic public sphere in the late eighteenth century revolved not only around bourgeois salons but also around press and book publishing" (Fornäs et al. 2002:35). This invocation of the public sphere recalls the work of Jürgen Habermas on the rise of the "lifeworld" in Western Europe, "the transcendental site where speaker and hearer meet" (Habermas 1989:171; see also Habermas 1970a), raising the possibility that virtual worlds could be "Third Places" (Oldenberg 1989; Steinkuehler and Williams 2006) that stand outside the dichotomy of public and private (Ducheneaut, Moore, and Nickell 2004). In this sense "all communities are virtual communities" (Silverstone 1999:104); for this reason, virtual worlds "compel conversations about the nature of community itself" (Turkle 1997:152). One reason these conversations are important is that, as discussed in the following chapter, debates over what counted as community and its place in governance were frequent in Second Life during my fieldwork. This was sometimes triggered by a Linden Lab claim that an alteration to the platform or Terms of Service reflected "community sentiment," without a clear explanation of who constituted or spoke for the community in question.

It might be possible in theory to have a virtual world with only one inhabitant, but most of those I met during my research would not term something a "virtual world" unless it had multiple residents. A few residents came to Second Life for solitude, but socializing with other residents was the most common activity inworld. Since the first days of MUDs, there has been a remarkable degree of consensus across a range of virtual worlds that social relationships are their most important aspect: as one Second Life resident put it, "people wouldn't be here without other people; they are here for social reasons. No matter how fancy the tool, it comes back to connecting with people." Things like "getting crazy with my friends" or "the life I've built with my al partner" were frequently highlighted by residents as what motivated them to spend time in Second Life.

"Events" were one way Second Life residents interacted, and thus one way I engaged in participant observation. The range of events I attended represents a small fraction of the total number of events held in Second Life during my fieldwork, but is still so large and varied that a firm typology would be counterproductive. Events in which I participated included everything from teaching elementary school for a group of thirty residents living in Second Life as children, to a fashion show complete with models on a catwalk, to performances of live music (streamed onto a parcel of land, while the performer appeared as an avatar before the crowd), to philosophy.
discussions, to religious meetings at houses of worship, to different kinds of games and contests, including Tringo (which, as one resident noted, "is not just a game; it is a place to meet people"). Some events had a fairly clear distinction between performer and audience, while others were more egalitarian. As part of my participant observation, I also hosted a regular event, the "Digital Cultures" discussions, where groups of ten to forty residents would talk about current issues in Second Life; this allowed me to experience firsthand the process of posting and hosting events.

As noted in chapter 1, during my fieldwork the Second Life map showed the location of each online resident with a green dot. It was common to see pairs of dots—two residents talking or even having sex—and clusters of dots hinted at larger social interactions. Pavel Curtis termed this "social gravity": "If more than a couple of players are in the same room, the presumption is that an interesting conversation may be in progress there; players are thus more attracted to more populated areas" (Curtis 1999:132). Areas of the map without green dots, or views across the Second Life landscape without visible residents, remained part of Second Life sociality. On their own residents could do anything from shopping to visiting an art gallery or walking through a park. In general, however, the aspects of Second Life that were most important to residents were social places. As one Second Life resident put it, "an empty virtual world is a truly sad sight to see," recalling how in virtual worlds more generally, residents often say that "inworld locations devoid of avatars feel empty and abandoned" (Taylor 2002:47). The presence of other persons was key to a sense of place; no amount of dazzling graphics could compensate for the role of sociality in filling an otherwise "empty" virtual world. As one resident explained, "the people that inhabit this space are what make it real."

In general terms, an "event" in Second Life involved a conjunction of place, time, and sociality. Forms of asynchronic sociality, like several residents working at different times of the day on a single building, would not typically be seen as events, nor would two or more persons communicating by IM, but not in the same virtual location, typically be seen as participating in a single event. ² For instance, I once attended a "round-robin storytelling" event, where a group of residents got together in a circle and took turns contributing a paragraph to an evolving story. Such a story could have been constructed over instant messaging, or asynchronically, with one person writing a paragraph and leaving it in a note card for another person to find several hours later, but in neither case would such forms of social interaction have been considered an event by most residents. The concept of "event" was formalized from the beginning of my fieldwork, and by the end of my research
different kinds of events took place each day. When I first became a resident, the virtual world was small enough that Linden Lab staff would make hourly announcements of upcoming events: “Hey all, in the 4pm hour we have four events! An advertising opportunity, a discussion of aliens, an offer of free animations, and a new business!” Later, events were listed within the “Find” menu and also on the Second Life website and other websites. Some of these were little more than advertisements for stores, but many events were never officially listed, being announced by SLNs in a form of virtual word of mouth. Often events were not listed because they were not open to all residents—for instance, a wedding ceremony limited to invited guests.

During the period of my fieldwork, limitations of server and broadband technology meant that most events involved five to fifteen residents: events with 100,000, 1,000, or even 100 participants were technologically impossible. Most Sims could accommodate a maximum of forty avatars; as server technology improved, some Sims could accommodate seventy-five avatars or more, but no matter what the location, it was difficult to have more than about twenty-five avatars present without experiencing significant lag. Second Life’s culture, involving a vast landscape and tens of thousands of residents by the end of my research, was thus constituted through many relatively intimate instantiations of sociality. This is not unlike the everyday constitution of actual-world cultures.

THE GROUP.

The phrase “massively multiple” is misleading because it implies an atomized sociality where individuals aggregate into an undifferentiated whole. In contrast, collectivities or subcultures standing between the individual and society have been important to virtual worlds from their beginnings (Jakobsson and Taylor 2003), often under names like “guild” or “group,” the term most often used in Second Life. Events can be understood as groups temporarily formed in time and place. As less delimited collectivities, “groups” were important to how many residents understood selfhood and community online. In this book I focus on Second Life as a whole, but in this section I briefly turn to the place of groups in Second Life culture.

The notion of “group” had two primary meanings in Second Life during the period of my research: a formal sense, linked to the Second Life platform, and an informal sense of association. In formal terms, “groups” were named networks of residents; for instance, “Club Rama Fans,” “Nerds with Attitude,” or “Women’s Support Group.” Any resident could join a number of these groups (up to twenty-five by the end of my fieldwork). Groups could
be free to join, or could require an invitation and even the payment of a fee. Once a resident joined a group, the resident could, if they wished, have the title of that group appear above their screen name for others to see. Groups could be organized around almost anything, including places (a club, a store, a home); topics (helping newbies, scripting, architecture, poetry, Second Life history); and identity categories (disabled persons, educators, vampires, gay men, music lovers).

Although "groups" in this first sense were integrated into the Second Life platform, their formality varied greatly. Since it was possible to im an entire group at once, some functioned as little more than conduits for communication; for instance, used by clubs to announce upcoming events. Groups could also be highly formalized, including a range of official roles and leadership positions. Residents could even contribute "tier" (the right to own a certain amount of land, tied to a monthly payment), allowing members of a group to co-own large parcels they could not afford on their own. Linden Lab encouraged this by allowing groups to own 10 percent more land than individual residents; for instance, if four residents formed a group "Nice Girls" and each was allowed to own 250 square meters of land based upon their monthly payment, the "Nice Girls" group would have the right to purchase 1,100 square meters of land. Groups could develop complicated organizational structures, shaped by the changing possibilities afforded by the Second Life platform. Because groups were listed on each resident's profile, perusing them was an important way to learn about someone's sense of selfhood.

A second meaning of "group" during the time of my fieldwork was informal and expansive, often described as a "community" or "subculture." Most groups in this second sense (for the sake of clarity, I will term these "communities") usually had many formal groups within them. "Furries" are an example of a well-known community in Second Life during the time of my fieldwork. In overly simplistic terms, Furries are persons who identify as animals or animal-like, and often wish to be emulated as animals in some fashion. Furry culture, which for some but not all participants had sexual aspects, predates and exists outside of virtual worlds. In a sense it links up to forms of "totemic" identification with animals that date back to the earliest recorded cultures and have been a classic topic of anthropological interest (Durkheim and Mauss 1902; Lévi-Strauss 1962). Furry culture has long been incorporated into virtual worlds—even when they were solely textual, as in the case of the "FurryMUCK" MUD, which opened in 1990 (Koster 2003:452; Reid 1996:339, 1999:111) and Furcadia, a furry-based graphical virtual world, which opened in 1996. Furrie groups have often been a source of controversy, due to outsider discomfort with a sense such persons are "role-playing" (that is, exhibiting an inauthentic self in a virtual context
even the payment of a fee. If they wished, have the right to own a certain number of members of a group to own. Linden Lab encourages land than individual ownership "nice girls" and each one of their monthly pay to purchase 1,100 square organizational structures, the Second Life platform, perusing them was an idea of my fieldwork was incomming or "subculture." For clarity, I will refer to these within them. "Furries" are animals during the time of four persons who identify as animals as animals in some of the participants had sexual desires. In a sense it links up that date back to the earliest anthropological interest. Furries culture has a long history they were solely textual. It opened in 1990 (Koster, 2000, a furry-based graphical groups have often been associated with a sense such persons and self in a virtual context that expects authenticity) or with sexual aspects of Furries (Kendall 2002:45–46). Furries culture was widespread in Second Life, with some residents living entirely as animal-like creatures and others embodying themselves as Furries in more circumscribed contexts. Many formal groups existed for Furries, and there were a range of properties (including multiple islands) devoted to Furries culture, often with builds suggesting forests or other natural landscapes. Toward the end of my research it was estimated that at least 15,000 residents owned Furries avatars.

Religious groups are another example of communities or subcultures in Second Life, reflecting the associations between religion and technology harking back to the invention of writing and the Gutenberg Bible. Religion has been present since the early days of the Internet, and "the notion of cyberspace as some kind of Heaven runs rife through the literature" (Wertheim 1999:20; see also Apolito 2005; Dawson and Cowan 2004; Schroeder, Heather, and Lee 1998). However, the presence of religion was quite minimal in Second Life at the outset of my research, possibly due to the low religious participation of those who were its early adapters. I recall one resident asking "Has anyone noticed how God seems left out of SL?" Another answered, "God in SL seems like an absurdity. When you can fly, create objects out of thin air, etc., what meaning does a God have?"—an answer foreshadowing the ideology of "creationist capitalism" I discuss in the following chapter. Yet builds with a religious theme did exist from the beginning of my fieldwork, and by its end there were a range of religious communities, from Bible study groups to builds with Muslim, Jewish, or Buddhist themes (Au 2007d), to groups creating new religions within Second Life, such as "Avatars."

As Second Life grew throughout the period of my fieldwork, there were increasing debates as to whether or not groups were becoming the primary form of socialization, to the extent that an overarching sense of community was at risk (Llewelyn 2005). I take seriously the statements of some residents who felt that "there is most undoubtedly a balkanization of the "SL culture"—people logging onto SL to engross and involve themselves with a subculture." Yet just as it is possible to be "American" or "Indonesian" and also identify with a range of subcultures and localities, so the existence of communities did not prohibit a sense of simultaneously belonging to Second Life as a whole. As one resident noted, "people gain strength by being in groups. SL (like rl) is large and disorienting."

Kindness.

In the section following this one I discuss "grieving"—participation in a virtual world with the intent of disrupting the experience of others. Before doing
so, however, I wish to underscore the predominance of kindness and altruism in virtual worlds. While griefing was often a source of complaint (and even notoriety) during my fieldwork, it can be a source of disproportionate debate and complaint, making it appear more salient than is actually the case (Taylor 2006a:36). As one Second Life resident noted, “people are very vocal about ‘he shot me in the face,’ but aren’t so vocal about ‘he helped me get dressed.’” Many residents I met during my research insisted they had never been directly grieved, and I experienced little grieving during my fieldwork.

Without minimizing the emotional, social, and financial damage wrought by griefing, the ubiquity of virtual altruism demands explanation. Researchers have been struck by a strong ethic of kindness and mutual aid in virtual worlds, often without any possibility of financial compensation: “on social MUDs cooperation is encouraged by the opportunity to extend the virtual world, not by the necessities of survival in it” (Reid 1999:129; see also Nakamura 2002:52). Acts of kindness in Second Life could take many forms. It was common to give items away (clothing for avatars, healing spells, “how-to” texts, furniture for a virtual home, even weapons), known in some virtual worlds as “twinking” (Jakobsson and Taylor 2003; see also Nardi and Harris 2006). Residents were typically quick to invite others to events and generally to see that those around them felt welcome.

Aside from the issue of actual-world universities or other educational institutions holding classes in Second Life, there were many educational activities for the benefit of residents. Educators involved in such activities taught—for minimal pay or for free—courses on everything from building and scripting, to designing clothing, hosting an event, or learning the virtual real estate market. Since learning the full capabilities of the Second Life interface was relatively difficult, this educational work was important. Indeed, in many cases this education worked not to produce knowledge, episteme, but the capacity for techné that in the actual world is often denigrated as “vocational-technical” learning. Education could also be more informal, as in the case of residents who answered resident questions. At some points during my fieldwork, Linden Lab formally labeled some of these persons as “Greeters” or “Mentors,” but many residents helped others without receiving official recognition.

Entire groups took form on several occasions during the period of my fieldwork whose purpose was to provide a location and team of residents to help newcomers. I recall my experience teaching a class at an elementary school, mentioned in the previous chapter. Meeting in the school gym because there were too many students to fit in the regular schoolhouse, I taught the basics of the Indonesian language to about thirty virtual children.
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I was astounded that after an hour, these virtual children (adults in the actual world) were typing out basic sentences in Indonesian. It was a virtual environment of kids together in a gym, throwing virtual wads of paper at each other and laughing about recess, yet real learning was taking place. How did this virtual environment of carefree childhood facilitate a form of learning that could not really be termed “distance education?”

Altruism could shade off into friendship: often I encountered residents struck by the willingness of persons not just to explain how to fly or build a house, but also to listen to personal problems—from frustrations with an actual-world job to troubles with an inworld lover. One resident reflected on the ubiquity of this ethic of generosity by stating that “I don't think the way SL works is exactly like RL. Most of the people I've met here are very considerate and helpful. In RL, often we're so overloaded with what we have to accomplish just to get to the end of the day that we aren't as generous.”

Grieving.

It has long been noted that persons involved in virtual worlds (and other forms of online interaction, from email to blogs) can experience forms of “disinhibition.” Such disinhibition can have positive aspects, from the kindness and altruism discussed above to the friendships and relationships explored in the previous chapter. During the time of my fieldwork, it was also widely recognized that disinhibition could have negative effects; as one Second Life resident put it, “people think they can shoot and run.” A range of factors contributed to this disinhibition, including the ability to keep one’s actual-world identity secret (though not all virtual worlds use screen names, and screen names can become part of personal identity); the ability to create groups bringing together people with shared interests who might never meet in the actual world; the ability to save, edit, and forward the communications of others; and the difficulty in knowing the size of one’s audience (Carnevale and Probst 1997:238–40). However, “being disinhibited is not the same as being uninhibited. [Virtual world residents] experience a re-definition of social inhibitions; they do not experience the annihilation of them” (Reid 1999:112).

When residents acted to disrupt the experience of others, this was most often known as “grieving.” One resident defined grieving to a newbie as “deliberately doing something that interferes with other users’ Second Life experience.” In Second Life as in other virtual worlds, the question of when an act counted as “grieving” was debatable. One resident complained that: “Grieving' has become a useless umbrella term; it used to be reserved for the
people that filled sims with junk and bombed events and built giant dildos in the Welcome Area. Now a griever is anybody you disagree with. It's gone from someone who's threatened the stability of the grid to someone who says your shirt's a funny color.” One survey of respondents from five different virtual worlds (not including Second Life) found that “a perception that grieving has occurred” typically involved the resident verbalizing malicious intent, engaging in additional antisocial behavior, and repeating the act after being asked to stop (Poo 2004). A useful three-part definition of grieving is that "the griever's act is intentional; it causes other [residents] to enjoy the [virtual world] less; [and] the griever enjoys the act" (Poo 2004; see Mulligan and Patrovsky 2003). While some forms of grieving can have terrible consequences (including financial and emotional harm), grieving is not without social contexts of its own. For instance, some forms of grieving can represent a motivation for persons to participate in virtual worlds and a foundation for sociality with other griefers (Malaby 2006d; Yee 2006a). This recalls the long history of work in anthropology and beyond demonstrating how forms of conflict contribute to sociality, showing the limitations of theories of culture that presume it to depend upon consensus (Gluckman 1955).

While not being named as such, the concept of grieving dates back to the earliest virtual worlds, which as I define them in this book date to the telephone: “The first telephone operators of the Bell system were... telegraphic messenger boys... Within its very first year of operation, 1878, Bell's company learned a sharp lesson about combining teenage boys and telephone switchboards... The boys were openly rude to customers... And worst of all, they played clever tricks with the switchboard plugs: disconnecting calls, crossing lines so that customers found themselves talking to strangers, and so forth” (Sterling 1992:13). Another example of grieving in an early virtual world occurred in the mid-1970s, when the ComtmniTree computerized bulletin board “collapsed under the onslaught of messages, often obscene, posted by the first generation of adolescent school children with personal computers and modems” (Reid 1999:107; see also Stone 1995:112-17). Grieving was well-known in textual virtual worlds like LambdaMOO, in which:

[the] protective anonymity [of virtual worlds] also encourages some players to behave irresponsibly, rudely, or even obnoxiously. We have had instances of severe and repeated sexual harassment, crudity, and deliberate offensiveness. In general, such cruelty seems to be supported by two causes: the offenders believe (usually correctly) that they cannot be held accountable for their actions in the real world, and the very
same anonymity makes it easier for them to treat other players impersonally, as other than real people. (Curtis 1992:130)

Julian Dibbell’s essay “A Rape in Cyberspace,” originally published in 1993, describes a sexual and verbal assault in LambdaMOO (Dibbell 1998; Koster 2003:456; see also Ito 1997:97–98). Another early instance of griefing involved JennyMUSH, a MUD created for female survivors of sexual assault: a person hacked into the system as a male and sent sexually threatening messages to every user logged on at the time (Reid 1999:115).7 Similar kinds of incidents occurred in Second Life during my fieldwork; one resident recalled “someone coming to a support group meeting for people recovering from sexual abuse, and playing sex animations with his avatar.” Such acts of sexual violence led some Second Life residents to ponder questions of selfhood, as in the following interchange, debating the idea that an avatar could “feel raped”:

RHONDA: So rape is impossible in SL, great
ISAAC: No it’s not: use a freeze weapon and make lewd suggestions.
The avatar will feel raped
RHONDA: Just thought of that. Is that rape though?

While sexual assault provoked understandably strong reactions, other forms of griefing were more common and, I would argue, more consequential for Second Life sociality. Verbal harassment was a typical form of grieving: for instance, one or more residents surrounding someone and typing profanities at them. The Second Life program allowed residents to “mute” others, so that they could not see their typed chat, but by using alts a determined griefer could at least temporarily get around this capability. More serious forms of harassment involved sending multiple ills to a resident, or using the Second Life map to “stalk” someone across the virtual world.8

From the early days of graphical virtual worlds, forms of vandalism and inappropriate building have constituted another form of grieving (Damer 1998:130). Since visibility was so important to Second Life, unattractive builds constituted a widely recognized form of grieving. Extreme examples of this included gigantic sex organs or sexually explicit images on the sides of buildings, particularly when placed next to residential or commercial venues. Large prims with offensive images could be rezzed onto a property, for instance while a resident volunteer was trying to teach a class to a group of newbies. The controversy over Zazzy’s store described at the beginning of chapter 4 was seen by many residents as griefing even though no obscene images were involved. In such instances, what made a build inappropriate
Facies 7.1. The "Freedom-O-Matic" (image by author).

One day, I looked outside the window of my second-story home to discover that someone had purchased a tiny plot of land next to mine and erected a structure that looked like a Freedom-O-Matic. I could not believe it! Clicking upon it, I was immediately transported to a world where the Freedom-O-Matic was in operation.

The Freedom-O-Matic is a device designed to provide a constant stream of fresh air to the users. It is powered by a small wind turbine located on the rooftop. The device is capable of generating enough power to keep the Freedom-O-Matic running for several hours.

The Freedom-O-Matic is an important invention for those who live in areas with poor air quality. It is estimated that the Freedom-O-Matic has helped improve the air quality in the entire neighborhood.

The Freedom-O-Matic is not without its critics, however. Some people believe that the device is too noisy, while others complain about the cost of the installation. But overall, the Freedom-O-Matic is a revolutionary device that has made a significant impact on the lives of those who live in the neighborhood.

The Freedom-O-Matic is available for purchase at local dealerships. If you are interested in purchasing a Freedom-O-Matic, please contact your local dealer for more information.
a resident who, like the owners of the Freedom-O-Matic, purchased small plots of land and put up large boxes with political slogans on them. He then charged inflated prices for the plots (about ten times the normal price), leaving frustrated neighbors no choice but to pay in order to reclaim their view, or to construct walls around the boxes in an effort to hide them (figure 7.2). Neither the Freedom-O-Matic nor Jacey’s boxes technically went against the Terms of Service; property owners were free to build anything they wished on their land so long as they did not engage in openly derogatory behavior, block a neighbor’s access to their own land, or have explicit sexual content if in a PG sim. During the months in which controversy raged over Jacey’s boxes, it was clear that most residents saw Jacey as grieving the Second Life landscape: as one resident put it, “I would gander that not a second goes by that one of these boxes does not make someone somewhere feel like they have been grieved.”

Forms of fraud or misleading advertising would often be placed within the category of grieving during my fieldwork. This included scams in which a griefer would pose as an entrepreneur and ask for resident password accounts (so as to drain the money from those accounts, or to hijack the account to use for other forms of grieving). “Mafias” of residents sometimes
tried to extort protection payments from owners of clubs or whole islands, or threatened to reveal embarrassing information about them, a more organized form of group grieving. Another genre of griefing involved bumping, pushing, or shooting residents outside areas specifically designated as sites for combat. Just walking up to an avatar and pushing it with one's own avatar could be seen as grieving if done to intimidate or trap the resident in question. That a resident thus cornered could simply teleport away did not always lessen a sense that griefing was occurring. "Shooting" did not always involve the use of an object that looked like a gun, but did involve the use of scripts that could push an avatar so far into the Life stratosphere that it would take hours to fall back to ground level, forcing the resident to restart the Second Life program.

Other uses of scripts for griefing included creating scripts that would cause residents to see a false "you have been ejected from this land" message, which could be used to disrupt events. Some griefers would go to locations with large numbers of residents (like a club) and then rez scripted objects that produced high numbers of light particles or other effects; the processing power needed to manage these effects would produce high levels of lag. Such "lag bombs" (which have been seen in other virtual worlds; see A. Smith 1999:147) could occasionally crash a server, causing a region to become temporarily inaccessible. Scripts could also be used to animate avatars against the wishes of their owners, as in the case discussed in "A Rape in Cyberspace." One resident recalled how she "was talking with some people, and somehow one of them was able to animate my avatar. All of a sudden I'm walking toward him." A more serious use of scripts was to create self-replicating objects that would spread like a virus across the Second Life landscape. On more than one occasion this caused Second Life to crash for several hours. Such "grid attacks" had serious social and economic consequences, and have precedents in other virtual worlds (as when a griever rezzed over 85,000 objects, crashing the Active Worlds server [Hudson-Smith 2002:81]).

Why grief? This question was certainly discussed during my fieldwork, particularly in the wake of egregious or widespread attacks, as in this interchange between a group of residents:

FARLEY: There are so many interesting things to do here and so many really nice people, why would anyone waste the brain cells and time to be annoying?

SAL: Sometimes it's fun to be annoying

NORTON: Good question to ask the griever community, Farley! To some that is "fun"
SAL: I think it's fun to poke fun at people who take themselves too seriously.

NORTON: Fun for whom, Sal? Not the one being annoyed. There's a sense of power in annoyance.

FARLEY: I don't agree Sal. Any idiot can be annoying. There's no challenge and no pride in it.

ALIEVA: Well, Farley, that is one reason for those "attacks." Getting attention, being part of a group, showing off intellectual skills. The higher the risk, the bigger the adrenaline rush.

In this discussion, both Norton and Alieva emphasized how grieving is not solely an individual act, but linked to a "griefer community." Griefers sometimes spoke of this sense of community. Through my fieldwork I came to know several persons who saw themselves as griefers in some sense of the term, though they often preferred terms like "goon" and defined what they did as "messing around" with residents. As an anthropologist I worked to understand the cultural logics behind their actions, without in any way condoning them. Ethnography is often used to understand the lifeworlds of the "repugnant other" (Harding 1991); for instance, to explore how forms of racism or sexism are culturally reproduced over time in specific historical contexts.

One day, I noticed someone in combat fatigues, with a machine gun, walking down the slope toward my house. As he approached me, the resident, "Mack," said "Achtung. This is a robbery. Give me 1,000 dollars to live." After politely explaining to him that I would do no such thing, we fell into a conversation and I asked Mack why he was engaging in behavior that could lead to his being banned from Second Life. After joking that he "needed to work on my robbery skills," Mack complained "I wish you could do robberies and whatnot in SL... My group has a ton of weapons, uniforms, a destroyer, some landing craft. The group got banned by Linden Lab though; they didn't quite appreciate us."

The following exchange with "Ralph," a griever, took place over email because he feared the conversation would be discovered by Linden Lab.

I witnessed it first hand. It happened on land owned by a short-lived goon group... Ozzy, one member of this group, was scripting objects called griefspheres, which were basically spheres that scanned for an
avatar and moved to that position, causing people to get pushed around by them. Someone then told him about self-replication and showed him how to do it, claiming that it would be a lot funnier if they replicated. The griefspheres weren't meant for a large-scale grid attack, they were just meant for screwing with some of our neighbors on that land we owned at the time, and they contained a mechanism to quickly kill them all off if things got out of control. So the first test of the griefspheres happens. Everyone thinks it's hilarious, and a few goons take it upon themselves to start shooting the griefspheres. Once the griefspheres escaped the sim they were in, the shit hit the fan. At this point Ozzy is frantically yelling the magic word to kill the griefspheres, and they are gone, and things settle down. A minute or two later, we get an im from someone in the goon group chat who is asking Ozzy what the hell is going on. I mapstalk this person, and they are on the other side of the grid. This is when we realize that things are going to get really, really bad. Ozzy starts getting hundreds of ins, from private islands too. It turns out because of the large scale replication, the griefspheres were warping across the grid and hitting places that wouldn't normally be affected. The grid then went down, and a lot of people in this small goon group were banned from SL.

I have no way of verifying this narrative's accuracy, but it is useful for what it reveals about griefing as a social phenomenon. In particular, in some cases at least griefers link their actions to notions of "play" that within game studies are cited as a major motivation for participating in virtual worlds like Second Life. It is clear that there are a range of motivations for griefing—from boredom, reputation, or a sense of power, to testing the limits of the platform in question—and that griefing links up to actual-world forms of "dark play" like teasing and bullying (Schechner 1988:12; see Foo and Koivisto 2004). Ralph's narrative pairs a sense of pranksterism with a claim that the griefing in question was partially unintentional. Both themes resurface in a discussion of how a corporate event (the opening of a "Big Brother" reality contest within Second Life) was attacked by several "griefer groups." In the excerpt below, a reporter from an independent Second Life newspaper anonymously interviewed a member of a "griefer crew" about what transpired:

INTERVIEWER: So why did you want to grief this event?
ANONYMOUS: I didn't go there to grief it just all kind of happened
INTERVIEWER: I see. Well, would you classify yourself as a griefer?
de to get pushed around replication and showed at funnier if they repli-
ge-scale grid attack, they neighbors on that land mechanism to quickly kill the first test of the grief-
rs, and a few goons take spheres. Once the grief-
hit the fan. At this point kill the griefspheres, and ate or two later, we get an o asking Ozzy what the they are on the other side of get really, im's, from private islands, the griefspheres that wouldn't normally lot of people in this small accuracy, but it is useful for phenomenon. In particular, in notions of "play" that within for participating in virtual: a range of motivations for of power, to testing the lim-
ring links up to actual-world Schechner 1988:12; see Foo sense of pranksterism with a 'unintentional. Both themes event (the opening of a "Big is attacked by several "griever an independent Second Life ber of a "grief crew" about rief this event? just all kind of happened ssify yourself as a griever?

Anonymous: I have an alter ego, yes. But I'm not a full griever in that sense. I do have some respect for this world.11

This linkage between grieving and "respect for this world" recalls how "grieving," as a form of deviant behavior, only makes sense in the context of a code of conduct (Talin 2003:348). This includes formal codes of conduct—all virtual worlds to my knowledge have some kind of Terms of Ser-
vice (ToS) or end-user license agreement (EULA). It also includes informal norms for social interaction, and both could serve as resources for responding to grieving, including making the grieving impossible from a technical standpoint, disincentives, deterrence, ostracism, vigilantism, and even incorporating the grieving behavior into the virtual world (Talin 2003:357–59). Formal responses to grieving involved action by Linden Lab against the offending griever, and are thus linked to the questions of governance that I examine in chapter 8. The Second Life program allowed residents to file "Abuse Reports." It testifies to the often unacknowledged prevalence of kindness over grieving that during the time of my fieldwork, only about 6.5 percent of residents who regularly logged into Second Life filed one or more Abuse Reports per month, a percentage that apparently remained stable even as the population grew.12 Filing a frivolous Abuse Report could constitute a form of grieving, since it could damage a resident's reputation or have economic repercussions if their account was suspended.

While not ubiquitous, grieving (and the forms of conflict and mis-
understanding into which grieving shaded) were too numerous to be addressed in every case by Linden Lab, a source of frustration to many residents. Residents thus found other ways to respond to grieving. Since grieving took place in a virtual world, one could not be physically harmed (but could suffer economic damage if involved in business activities that were disrupted due to grieving). It was always possible to teleport away from a griever or log off of Second Life entirely, depriving the griever of an audience and placing oneself beyond the griever's reach. For some, the fact that grieving was a virtual phenomenon helped them ignore it. As one resident said, "it's easier to laugh at someone cursing you out in type than it is when they're RL shouting at you." Laughing at or ignoring griefers was often an effective response, as in the following example from a resident: "There was this one time I and my partner were in a building, testing out some new [sex] animations and such, wink wink, and in the middle of it, we saw like five guys hovering right outside, and they started jeering and everything. So my friend and I got the idea and we rezzed a bunch of cubes for them to sit on and gave them all prim popcorn. They all left though. It
was funny that once they didn't get the reaction they wanted, they just up and went."

When a resident felt grieving could not be ignored, there were ways to respond to it short of filing an Abuse Report. Residents could “mute” other residents, which meant that they would not see chat typed by them. Those who owned land could ban particular avatars from entering their land, but the banned person could still shout abuses from outside the land's border, or could use an alt to gain entry. “Ban lists” began to circulate during my fieldwork without any clear method for appealing being placed on them, recalling a “frontier ethic of taking the law into one’s own hands” that emerged in several virtual worlds (A. Smith 1999:147).

In general, griefing could be a highly emotional issue for residents, and if anything its frequency and severity increased during the period of my fieldwork. It was seen to be a form of behavior threatening Second Life’s social fabric and with the potential for serious emotional and financial consequences, which could on occasion even extend into actual-world harassment. Without wishing to understate or overestimate its significance, it is clear that griefing could be seen as diagnostic of many challenges faced by residents of emerging virtual worlds. In my research in Indonesia, I examined cases of “political homophobia,” where violent attacks against gay men, while reprehensible, were still important to understand because they provided important information about how masculinity was linked to national belonging (Boellstorff 2007). In an analogous manner, griefing reveals how cultures in virtual worlds often contain within them suppositions about selfhood and society that are vulnerable to antagonistic reinterpretation, but nevertheless intelligible.

**BETWEEN VIRTUAL WORLDS.**

While attending the bachelor party of a friend who was about to get married in Second Life, I recall chatting with Tallis, the best man, and two women who had come to the party, Gari and Cailyn. We were exchanging pleasantries when Gari turned to Tallis and said:

**GARI:** Tallis, you didn't happen to play The Sims Online before did you?

**TALLIS:** In [the city of] Interhogan, yes

**GARI:** I knew someone named Tallis

**TALLIS:** Yes, that was me

**CAILYN:** I know you too from The Sims Online, Tallis. You remember Sabina?
TALLIS: Name rings a bell, yes
CAILYN: Hehe, that's me hun

While some Second Life residents participated in only one virtual world at a time, this moment of mutual recognition exemplifies how it was probably more common for residents to move between virtual worlds. This replicated at the level of community the phenomenon of alts discussed in chapter 5. One could have multiple selfhoods within a single virtual world, and one could also have selfhoods in multiple virtual worlds. Just as most Second Life residents had a "primary" avatar and then one or more alts, so most residents of virtual worlds had a primary virtual world and additional virtual worlds they visited in more circumscribed contexts. Temporality became a major issue in relationship to alts in Second Life—many residents found setting aside the time to maintain multiple avatars to be challenging. Similarly finding the time to participate in multiple virtual worlds could become a major issue. Both alts and multiple virtual worlds raised questions of fractal or individuated selfhood (see chapter 5), of a plural self forged through the same practices of techne that sustained the gap between actual and virtual.

The ability to move between multiple virtual worlds dates back to MUDs (Turkle 1995:12). During the time of my research, many residents had relatively stable levels of participation in online worlds other than Second Life. For instance, many residents also spent time in World of Warcraft, a virtual world oriented around role-playing and combat. Second Life residents who were friends or romantic partners would often travel to other virtual worlds together, maintaining their relationship across platforms. "Megaguilds" and groups of friends represented larger-scale examples of such conjoint movement between virtual worlds. During my fieldwork I also encountered several examples of residents who had lost touch with a friend they had come to know in an early MUD or graphical virtual world, only to stumble upon the friend many years later in Second Life. As in the narrative above, one factor facilitating such reunions was the tendency for residents to choose similar screen names in multiple virtual worlds.

A special kind of movement between virtual worlds is virtual diaspora, which occurs when a virtual world goes out of existence and some of its residents flee to other virtual worlds. One of the best-documented cases of this involved Uru, the first of the series of Myst games designed with a virtual world component. When discontinued by the company that owned it, former residents of Uru moved to several other virtual worlds, particularly Second Life and There, working to recreate visual and social aspects of the virtual world they had lost (Pearce 2006a, 2007). Lesser forms of virtual
diaspora can take place when a virtual world becomes less popular. For instance, one Second Life resident talked about how he “pretty much brought all my friends over from The Sims Online.”

Experiences in other virtual worlds often led residents to reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of Second Life. For instance, residents might comment that The Sims Online allowed residents to see a “friendship network” map that did not exist in Second Life, note that Worlds of Warcraft had less lag, or observe that Second Life residents were gregarious. This recalls the classic anthropological conceit of “making strange” one’s own culture by encountering other cultures. Moving between virtual worlds made Second Life residents into their own virtual anthropologists, traveling to the shores of strange new cybercultures and challenging their own beliefs about self-hood and community online.

**BEYOND VIRTUAL WORLDS.**

Wishing to understand Second Life’s culture in its own right, and recognizing the impracticality of conducting ethnographic research in multiple virtual worlds within one time frame (just as I could not conduct ethnographic research in, say, Indonesia and Thailand within one time frame), my fundamental methodological conceit was to conduct research entirely inside Second Life, using the avatar Tom Bukowski. However, I soon recognized that for many residents, “entirely inside Second Life” included participation in a range of websites external to the Second Life program. To my knowledge no one would think of themselves as a resident if they only used a web browser to visit websites associated with Second Life, never logging into the virtual world itself. The platform was the primary social form and thus the location of my participant observation research. Nonetheless external websites were not inconsequential to Second Life; analyzing them thus constituted an additional research strategy.

All virtual worlds during the time of my fieldwork had official websites associated with them. Linden Lab maintained a website that, among other features, allowed residents to freely download the (frequently updated) Second Life platform, obtain basic information about Second Life, link to media coverage, and see which of their friends were currently inworld. At the beginning of my fieldwork, the official website also contained a forum to which residents and Linden Lab staff could post messages. This forum was divided into over forty sections (including some for languages other than English), covering topics ranging from “announcements and news” to “land management” and “resident answers.” Not all Second Life residents
comes less popular. For instance, residents might conduct ethnographic research in multiple worlds made Second Life. Despite such support, the end of my research Linden Lab had largely replaced the forums with a collective blog which only Linden Lab staff could post; residents were limited to commentary and could be banned if staff felt that grieving was taking place.

From the beginning of my fieldwork, the presence of Second Life "beyond the platform" was not limited to this official website. Second Life residents created and maintained thousands of websites that formed a "blogosphere" around Second Life (some residents termed this the "SLogosphere"). These included diary-like blogs in which residents chronicled their experiences in Second Life (often without revealing their actual-world identity). Some of these blogs included reflective and even theoretical writings on Second Life culture and technology (compare Reed 2005). During the time of my fieldwork there were also many periodicals that could be accessed without logging into Second Life. Another common kind of website was the commercial website, which might advertise products by a single entrepreneur or a number of content creators. Such sites were popular because they allowed residents to shop without logging onto Second Life, and because they often had more user-friendly search functions. There were also a range of more iconoclastic websites, ranging from sharing snapshots and movies produced within Second Life, to producing physical versions of virtual items, to websites associated with Second Life groups, including a "nature preserve," local governments, and supporters of live music events.

Collectively these forums and other websites constituted a kind of virtual Second Life, a virtual virtual world. Indeed, when the Second Life grid was down for an update or due to a crash, many residents would go to the forums or other websites to feel like they were in Second Life and to exchange messages with their friends. This could even represent a means for overcoming griefing: as one resident noted, "I had to laugh in talking with many of my friends yesterday, to note how many of us, during the grid attack, edited our personal webpages, or posted to the forums. It was like 'I'll find other ways to be in my virtual world.' We were not going to let a moron hacker do us in." Even when the grid was operative, some residents found visited "the forums," as they were known, but thousands certainly did, many on a regular basis. During my fieldwork, Linden Lab began phasing out the forums. The decision was controversial because, as one resident noted: "the forums are a thriving part of the SL culture. Who here hasn't found out about a benefit event for RL issues? Who here hasn't learned a way to fix settings for avies, computers, networks, or SL functions, to better enjoy their time in SL? Who here hasn't been spurred to action, debate, or thought by the posted thoughts of others?"
the forums an important aspect of their sociality; one resident noted how
"I’m mostly a hermit inworld, but I lurk a lot on the forums."

In addition to these linkages between Second Life and other Internet
technologies, in every chapter of this book I have charted how the virtual
and actual interpenetrate, from notions of place and selfhood to ask and
lag. For instance, the forms of virtual altruism discussed earlier could have
ramifications in the actual world. From the beginning of my fieldwork,
there were activities held within Second Life to raise awareness and money
for actual-world nonprofit activities (for instance, for cancer research or
the crisis in the Darfur region of Sudan). In the wake of Hurricane Katrina,
which struck during my fieldwork, parts of New Orleans’s French Quar-
ter were recreated within Second Life, allowing a few of those affected by
the hurricane to meet online, as well as a venue to memorialize damaged
landmarks and hold fundraising events. Many places were designed by resi-
dents to have tight referential relationships with the actual world, from a
spaceflight museum to an Iraqi War Memorial and recreations of the Twin
Towers destroyed in the 9/11 attacks. Such forms of imbrication have been
a source of confusion in the literature on virtual worlds because of the as-
sumption that such traffic blurs or even erases the gap between the virtual
and actual, rather than working to define and sustain that gap.

Another way residents could build community beyond the virtual world
was by meeting in the actual world. This was not a major social form dur-
ing my fieldwork. Many residents did not wish to meet other residents in
the actual world because it would “shatter the illusions.” In addition, even
when I began by fieldwork (and certainly by the time I ended it) it was clear
that there were so many residents in Second Life, from so many parts of the
actual world, that meeting more than a handful of them was impossible.
For some residents, however, the possibility of meeting a few Second Life
acquaintances in the actual world was a source of fascination (or fear), as it
has been from their earliest days of virtual worlds: “there is a tradition within
Internet communities for online friends and gaming partners to get together
for face-to-face meetings” (Taylor 2006a; see Van Gelder 1991). I attended
one such an event, the 2006 Second Life Community Convention (held in
San Francisco), and Second Life residents sometimes told me of occasions
when they would meet an online friend or lover (there were cases of actual-
world weddings resulting from Second Life romances). Toward the end of
my fieldwork, a handful of “alternate reality games” appeared in Second Life,
combining inworld and actual-world events.20

These forms of movement between virtual and actual are less conse-
quential than they might first seem. As virtual worlds grow in size to the
point that they have it becomes infeasible tiny percentage of the
virtual world. Even so had, during the time cally possible for men
worlds will continue: the actual world, but concern with actual
- cybersocialities are in their own right. Vi actual world. They rec
draw upon many ele residents reconfigure
one resident noted how forums.
Life and other Internet chat sites allowed individuals and society to ask and answer questions that were not possible earlier, could have meaningful implications for cancer research or the recovery efforts following Hurricane Katrina, which affected Orleans's French Quarter. Those affected by the disaster were able to share their stories and memories through the Twin imbrication of online and physical worlds, bridging the gap between the virtual and the physical.

Beyond the virtual world, major social forms and events in the physical world that are not available online. In addition, even if I ended it, it was clear that many parts of the actual world were impossible. Taking a few Second Life conventions (or fear), as it were, is a tradition within the virtual world to get together (Giddens 1991). I attended a few Second Life conventions (held in a few popular virtual spaces) and these events were cases of actual-world social events. Toward the end of the year, events similar to these grew in size to the point that they have tens of thousands of residents from across the globe, it becomes infeasible for actual-world socializing to constitute more than a tiny percentage of the overall interpersonal interactions in any particular virtual world. Even social networking websites like MySpace and Facebook had, during the time of my fieldwork, become so large that it was not practically possible for members to meet all of their online friends offline. Virtual worlds will continue to draw cultural assumptions and social norms from the actual world, but this influence is primarily indirect. An exaggerated concern with actual-world meetups reflects an unfounded suspicion that cybersocialities are not legitimate or sustainable places of human culture in their own right. Virtual worlds are not secondary representations of the actual world. They require actual-world computers and bodies to exist, and they draw upon many elements of actual-world sociality, but through the actual worlds, residents reconfigure these elements in unforeseen ways.