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Meadows, Mark S. 2008. *I, Avatar: The Culture and Consequences of Having a Second Life.* **New Riders: Berkeley. 144pp.**

Unlike conventional academic books, this is a lavishly illustrated colourful book, reflecting the author's background as an artist who has worked with interactive technologies for many years. Written without academic pretensions, the book is highly accessible to the general public. Although the book does not engage explicitly in methodological discussions of studying Second Life (SL), it nevertheless presents an ethnographic account of the virtual world, written from the author's experience of living in SL. The book provides yet another example of how ethnography can be a viable method in studying virtual worlds such as SL. Ethnography is arguably the most natural way to gain an insight into life online from the perspective of the world's residents and providing rich contextual information for the interpretation of the data collected.

The book has no clear division of chapters. Instead, the contents can be roughly categorized into seven main sections, beginning with a definition of the word 'avatar' and its development. This is followed by an introduction to SL, including its subcultures, rituals and archetypes. Meadows engages readers through his journey from novice to becoming a reputable builder 'in-world', participating in virtual parties, experiencing crushes on other avatars, and problems of 'griefing' (violent attacks by other avatars). The book also includes a discussion of the public concern on the negative effects of addiction to virtual worlds, as well as its counter-arguments. Following this, he engages in a discussion of the real world consequences of online participation at the macro and micro-level. Meadows also predicts the future development of avatars, their applications, and potential in our everyday life. Finally, the last section deals with the forthcoming problems likely to engulf SL in the near future.

In the opening pages, Meadows equates SL to Los Angeles in the 1920s; a promised land that attracted immigrants from all over the world, 'the dreams of Los Angeles and Second Life are similar; both say

you can be someone else by simply setting foot there' (p.8). By treating SL as a bounded place with distinct cultures, it renders the ethnographic approach relevant: 'Second Life is more like a continent or city than a game. It is a landscape, one that is populated by avatar cultures as distinct as human cultures'(p.26). Contrary to most game worlds, such as World of Warcraft with predefined story plots, rules and roles, SL is a socially oriented world in which residents enjoy greater freedom and flexibility. They collectively influence the narratives and in-world rituals as the landscape of SL unfolds itself with emergent rules and roles. As pointed out by Slater (2002, 541), using ethnography to study new media presumes the existence of 'a social space that could be examined in its own right, as internally meaningful and understandable in its own terms'. This is precisely the position taken by Boellstorff (2008) in his study of SL. His research was conducted entirely within SL and he made no attempt to meet other residents' offline or visit Linden Lab, the company behind SL. For Boellstorff, virtual worlds are legitimate sites of culture and as such, they are a site of research.

Meadows' ethnographic study relies on participant observation, informal interviews with other residents in-world, and analysis of other publications about SL. In the book, Meadows does not mention any face-to-face meetings with other SL residents. Slater (2002) argues that whether or not offline information is needed when studying virtual worlds depend ultimately on the research questions. Similarly, Mann and Stewart (2000) contended that it is both accurate to perceive virtual worlds as domains in themselves and as an extension of actual everyday life, depending on the researcher's interests. Meadows, like Boellstorff, is interested in studying the underlying cultural logics of SL and, as such, it is not necessary for him to go beyond the virtual world. However, as Meadows' second objective is to study the consequences of having a SL, it becomes crucial to contextualize participants' online communicative practices within their everyday life. Meadows' failure to do so could be due to limited resources to follow residents offline. Instead, he draws primarily on his personal experiences, reflections and exchanges with psychologists and third party accounts, to present the consequences of participating in SL. In other words, the limitation of Meadows' book lies in its oversight of the importance of bridging the online and offline world in the discussion of SL's impact on residents' everyday life.

The book focuses predominantly on avatars, documenting the history of avatars from the initial string of texts to sophisticated 3D phantasmagoric creatures, and the roles, rituals and subcultures of SL. Meadows defines avatars as repre-

sentations of participants in online social environments which allow participants to interact with others. In brief, sociability and interactivity are the two defining features of an avatar; the virtual embodiment of participants. After providing a brief introduction to other virtual worlds, Meadows chooses to concentrate on avatars in SL because of its metaphor free structure that allows residents maximum levels of control and customization, not only of their avatars, but also the in-world narratives. Due to the social architecture of SL, studying in-world avatars may shed more light on the motivations, identities and the meanings people ascribe to their second life and the impact of SL on their 'first life'.

Perhaps aware of the warning that one cannot fully participate and observe simultaneously (Boellstorff, 2008), Meadows seems to prioritize participation above observation, arguing that 'in order to enter any society, one must have a role. You must know something about the rituals and archetypes. You must have something to do there' (p. 48). Playing a role in-world facilitates the understanding of the culture and of the social interaction with others. In SL, Meadows builds houses, furnishings, skins, body shapes, clothes, jewelry and more. The Linden dollars he earns in-world can be converted into real cash. The income generated from this intangible form of labour online has a profound impact, changing the nature of the

interaction as it highlights the permeability of the border between the online and offline world. Other forms of participation, such as talking about real world concerns and emotions, organizing offline events in-world, visiting offline business corporations and institutions' SL premises, not only alter what is being observed in-world, but also highlight the blurry boundary between residents' first and second lives. Put differently, SL may seem like a distinct independent sphere with its unique cultures and subcultures, however, the line between the two worlds is permeable and mutually penetrable.

The book also focuses on the meanings and significance of avatars to their drivers, and on the consequences of excessive identification with avatars. This discussion, again, puts the issue of the distinction between the online and offline at the centre of attention. Just as participants' actual everyday life conditions have a direct bearing on their avatars and level of participation in SL, avatars and life online can also affect participants, mentally and physically, due to the amount of time spent in-world. On the macro-level, SL avatars have ramifications on the real world's politics, finance, education, religion, research, family institutions and environment. For example the author cites real life politicians making appearances as avatars online to interact with their constituents during elections,

university professors conducting classes in SL, and a report claiming online infidelity leads to an increase in divorce rates. Furthermore, what renders the virtual real is the collective construction of reality that takes place when residents collectively share a narrative, suspending disbelief to create the grounds of belief. 'So a virtual glass of wine above a virtual ocean shared with an avatar is as important to us, psychologically and socially, as a real glass of wine on a real cliff with a real friend' (p.51). This idea of the reality of virtual encounters supports the argument that a virtual world can be studied entirely in its own terms.

Ethnography in virtual worlds faces greater ethical challenges than ethnography in physical fields. Data may be easily available online, but to what extent a researcher can 'harvest' this open data is a contentious issue (Sharf, 1999). Whether or not to disclose researcher identity and intention when participating in virtual worlds, is yet another subject of debate. A lack of clear guidelines means that researchers, especially novices, can easily cross the line and risk offending others, infringing their copyrights or compromising their anonymity without awareness. The discussion of ethical issues is absent in the book. Therefore, it is unclear whether permission was sought before Meadows published chat logs with other residents in the book. Putting aside the two methodological limitations, this book is useful because of its readability and the thought provoking arguments that problematize the simple division between the fictional and the real, and boundary between the online and the offline.

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