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Tom Boellstorff: Coming of Age in Second Life

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Chapter 1

THE SUBJECT AND SCOPE OF THIS INQUIRY

Arrivals and departures—Everyday Second Life—Terms of discussion—The emergence of virtual worlds—The posthuman and the human—What this, a book, does.



FIGURE 1.1. Arrival in Second Life (image by author).

ARRIVALS AND DEPARTURES.

Imagine yourself suddenly set down surrounded by all your gear, alone on a tropical beach close to a native village while the launch or dinghy which has brought you sails away out of sight (figure 1.1). You have nothing to do, but to start at once on your ethnographic work. Imagine further that you are a beginner, without previous experience, with nothing to guide you and no one to help you. This exactly describes my first initiation into field work in Second Life.

Many anthropologists will recognize the paragraph above as a famous passage, slightly altered, from Bronislaw Malinowski's *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, published in 1922, describing the culture of the inhabitants of the Trobriand Islands north of Australia.¹ Despite his shortcomings, it was Malinowski more than any other anthropologist, and *Argonauts* more than any of Malinowski's books, that established the conviction that anthropologists should have extended experience in close proximity among those about whose lives they wished to speak: "it would be easy to quote works of high repute . . . in which wholesale generalizations are laid down before us, and we are not informed at all by what *actual* experiences the writers have reached their conclusion" (Malinowski 1922:3, emphasis added): "Living in the village with no other business but to follow native life, one sees the customs, ceremonies and transactions over and over again, one has examples of their beliefs as they are *actually* lived through, and the full body and blood of *actual* native life fills out soon the skeleton of abstract constructions" (Malinowski 1922:18, emphasis added).²

Malinowski speaks of "actual" experience, "actual" belief, "actual" life. In this book I take the methods and theories of anthropology and apply them to a *virtual* world accessible only through a computer screen. Because virtual worlds are so new, I will spend quite a few pages introducing some general issues to keep in mind, before plunging into the details of Second Life. I am an anthropologist whose previous and continuing research focuses on sexuality in Indonesia (Boellstorff 2005, 2007). *Coming of Age in Second Life* is an anthropological study of Second Life (abbreviated "SL" or "sl").³ This is a virtual world owned and managed by a company, Linden Lab, where by the end of my fieldwork tens of thousands of persons who might live on separate continents spent part of their lives online.⁴ To explore how anthropology might contribute to understanding culture in virtual worlds, I have departed from many previous studies of Internet culture by conducting fieldwork entirely *inside* Second Life, using my avatar Tom Bukowski and my home and office in Second Life, Ethnographia.⁵ I went through standard human subjects protocols and engaged in normal anthropological methods including participant observation and interviews.

It might seem controversial to claim one can conduct research entirely inside a virtual world, since persons in them spend most of their time in the actual world and because virtual worlds reference and respond to the actual world in many ways. However, as I discuss in chapter 3, studying virtual worlds "in their own terms" is not only feasible but crucial to developing research methods that keep up with the realities of technological change. Most virtual worlds now have tens of thousands of participants, if not more, and

the vast majority interact only in the virtual world. The forms of social action and meaning-making that take place do so within the virtual world, and there is a dire need for methods and theories that take this into account.

Another foundational conceit concerns the possibility of descriptive analysis, rather than the prescriptive modes of argumentation that characterize most discussions of virtual worlds, often due to legitimate interests in social implications and design. When studying gay Indonesians, I do not ask “is it a good thing that gay identities have emerged in Indonesia?”; I take their emergence as given. Similarly in this book I do not ask “is it a good thing that virtual worlds have emerged” or “is Second Life headed in the right direction?” While such questions are important to many persons in Second Life and beyond, in this book I take Second Life’s emergence as given and work to analyze the cultural practices and beliefs taking form within it.

The idea of “virtually human” appearing in this book’s subtitle can be interpreted in two ways, indexing two lines of analysis I develop throughout. First, although some insightful research has claimed that online culture heralds the arrival of the “posthuman,” I show that Second Life culture is profoundly human. It is not only that virtual worlds borrow assumptions from real life; virtual worlds show us how, under our very noses, our “real” lives have been “virtual” all along. It is in being virtual that we are human: since it is human “nature” to experience life through the prism of culture, human being has always been virtual being. Culture is our “killer app”: we are virtually human.

Yet it is not true that nothing is new under the unblinking light of a virtual sun. My second line of analysis is that virtual worlds do have significant consequences for social life. Drawing upon the meaning of virtual as “almost,” a second interpretation of this book’s title is that in virtual worlds we are not quite human—our humanity is thrown off balance, considered anew, and reconfigured through transformed possibilities for place-making, subjectivity, and community. Anthropology, “a positive and definite study of the human knowledge of the human” (Wagner 2001:xvii), can help reveal the layers of contingency within the category of the virtually human, rather than exiling such contingency into a category of the posthuman and thereby retrenching the borders of the human itself. I approach these two lines of analysis by writing an “ethnography,” a text produced through fieldwork-based research, also known as ethnographic methods. Contemporary understandings of ethnographic method presume historical and comparative perspectives, and at various points I will discuss the history of virtual worlds as well as virtual worlds other than Second Life.

The online fieldsite of *Coming of Age in Second Life* might seem utterly different than Indonesia, but like my earlier work this book touches

on broad issues concerning selfhood and society, and like my earlier work this book is a methodological experiment. Building upon a significant body of prior research on virtual worlds, I argue that ethnography holds great promise for illuminating culture online, but not because it is traditional or old-fashioned. Ethnography has a special role to play in studying virtual worlds because it has *anticipated* them. Virtual before the Internet existed, ethnography has always produced a kind of virtual knowledge. Borrowing a phrase from Malinowski, Clifford Geertz argued that the goal of ethnographic understanding is to achieve the “native’s point of view” (Geertz 1983). The quotation from Malinowski that started this book asked you to “imagine yourself” in a new place (Malinowski 1922:4), to be virtually there. Representations of persons in virtual worlds are known as “avatars”; Malinowski’s injunction to “imagine yourself” in an unfamiliar place underscores how anthropology has always been about avatarizing the self, standing virtually in the shoes (or on the shores) of another culture.

I intentionally draw upon classic anthropology to demonstrate the promise of ethnographic methods for the study of virtual worlds. This book’s title is meant to recall *Coming of Age in Samoa*, the work that first established Margaret Mead’s reputation (Mead 1928). At the same time, it will be obvious that I draw upon contemporary anthropological critiques of ethnographic method—not least, the vociferous debate over Mead’s book. Anthropologists now recognize that the boundaries of “fieldsites” are contested and produced in part by ethnographers themselves (Gupta and Ferguson 1997). They also recognize that ethnographic research need not limit itself to a single fieldsite. Indeed there is a sense in which this study of Second Life is part of my own multisited project, an anthropology of modernity that treats gay Indonesians and Second Life residents as nodes of an emergent cultural formation that is at once transnational, national, and local, at once virtual and actual.

Many different kinds of books could be written about Second Life, each with certain audiences in mind. A challenge I face is that I wish *Coming of Age in Second Life* to be read and debated by several different groups of people. I hope the book will be useful to those with interests in anthropology, including graduate and undergraduate students. I also hope it will be read by scholars, students, and designers in fields like game studies, informatics, and science and technology studies. Another hoped-for readership includes persons who participate in virtual worlds or online games. Persons who spend time in Second Life fall into this category, including the many friends and acquaintances whose kindness, patience, and insight made this book possible. Then there are all the readers I cannot foresee who simply find the topic interesting.

It is impossible to write a book that will please all of these audiences all of the time. Some may find my writing too laden with jargon; others, too informal. Some may find my extensive use of sources distracting; others may think of literatures they would have liked to see referenced. Some may be frustrated with my sympathetic stance toward virtual worlds; others will feel I underplay their importance. Those with little experience in virtual worlds may wish I had focused on why people find virtual worlds compelling, and their potentially negative effects; others with substantial experience in virtual worlds may wish I had written a book that went into more detail about subcultures and controversies specific to Second Life. I can only hope that all parties will meet this text halfway and find in it something useful or provocative.

This book provides an ethnographic portrait of the culture of Second Life during the period of fieldwork upon which the portrait is based (June 3, 2004 to January 30, 2007).⁶ Since Second Life first went online in June 2003, this book chronicles the formative years when the virtual world was “coming of age,” as the book’s title indicates. A problem of spatial scale appears at the outset: “Second Life” seems too big and too small.⁷ Too small, because most of those who resided in Second Life during my fieldwork participated in other virtual worlds or online games, as well as blogs, forums, and other websites. The engagement ethnographic research demands makes it impossible for me to conduct ethnographic research in Thailand while conducting such research in Indonesia; similarly I could not study other virtual worlds while engaging in ethnographic research in Second Life. For this reason, comparing Second Life to other virtual worlds in detail lies beyond the scope of this book. Without good ethnographic work in place there is nothing upon which to base comparison. Obviously all virtual worlds differ and Second Life was quite distinct from, say, combat-oriented virtual worlds that existed at the same time, like World of Warcraft (Koster 2006). Yet there are common aspects to virtual worlds, just as there are features shared by all human languages even when they are mutually unintelligible.

Too big, because as was the case for many virtual worlds during the time of my fieldwork, Second Life was already so large that there were many subcultures within it. At various points I discuss subcultures in Second Life and in future writings I hope to analyze such subcultures in greater detail, but the goal of this book is to explore what might be learned from Second Life taken as a single culture. Just as it is possible to study Indonesian national culture or more localized cultures like Javanese culture, so one viable approach to Second Life is to examine its general aspects. It is typically much easier to recognize subcultures than cultures: no one during my research

denied that there were subcultures in Second Life, but many questioned if there was a Second Life culture. Claims that a virtual world like Second Life is composed of nothing but subcultures mistake notions of subculture in terms of identity and style (Hebdige 1979) for anthropological notions of culture in terms of shared meanings and relations of power.

EVERYDAY SECOND LIFE.

A man spends his days as a tiny chipmunk, elf, or voluptuous woman. Another lives as a child and two other persons agree to be his virtual parents. Two “real”-life sisters living hundreds of miles apart meet every day to play games together or shop for new shoes for their avatars. The person making the shoes has quit his “real”-life job because he is making over five thousand U.S. dollars a month from the sale of virtual clothing. A group of Christians pray together at a church; nearby another group of persons engages in a virtual orgy, complete with ejaculating genitalia. Not far away a newsstand provides copies of a virtual newspaper with ten reporters on staff; it includes advertisements for a “real”-world car company, a virtual university offering classes, a fishing tournament, and a spaceflight museum with replicas of rockets and satellites.

This list of occurrences does not begin to scratch the surface of the myriad ways those who spent time in Second Life interacted with each other and the virtual world. During the time of my fieldwork, the level of “real”-world news coverage of Second Life increased dramatically, often focusing on aspects of the virtual world seen as sensational (for instance, that over US\$1,000,000 of economic activity was occurring daily, or that a “real”-world musician was performing inworld). But events seen as exceptional are of limited value; they take place in the context of broader norms that at first glance may seem uninteresting, but are the true key to understanding culture. For this reason it will prove helpful to introduce Second Life not by means of some infamous incident, but through a portrait of what an uneventful afternoon might have looked like during the time of my fieldwork.⁸ I do not intend this portrait to be representative of everyone’s experience, just one example of what life in Second Life could be like during my fieldwork. Readers with experience in virtual worlds may find the description obvious, but I would ask such readers to consider what kinds of cultural assumptions are encapsulated within these apparently banal details of everyday Second Life.

IMAGINE YOURSELF suddenly teleported into Second Life, alone in your home. You already have a Second Life account and thus an “avatar,” which we will call



FIGURE 1.2. Standing at home (image by author).

Sammy Jones. On a computer—at home, at an office, or on your laptop at a café—you start the Second Life program just as you would an email program, word processor, or web browser. After logging on with your avatar name and password, you see your avatar, who never needs to eat or sleep, standing in your home (figure 1.2). You built this house out of “primitives” (or “prims”), as objects in Second Life are known. You did so after practicing with Second Life’s building tools in an area known as a “sandbox,” where you can build for free but everything you build is deleted after a few hours (figure 1.3). The piece of land upon which your house sits is 1,024 square virtual meters in size; you paid a virtual real estate agent about thirty dollars for it, conducting the transaction in linden dollars or “lindens.” For the right to own land you paid Linden Lab, the company that owns Second Life, \$9.95 a month for a “premium account” and an additional \$5 a month for the ability to own up to 1,024 square meters of land: this is known as a “land use fee” or “tier fee.”

Using your mouse and keyboard you walk around your house, adorned with furniture, paintings, and rugs. You purchased some of these furnishings from stores in Second Life; others you made yourself. Deciding you are tired of the white rug in your living room, you open your “inventory,” which appears on your screen as a “window” filled with folders containing items within them (figure 1.4).⁹ You drag an icon named “green rug” from

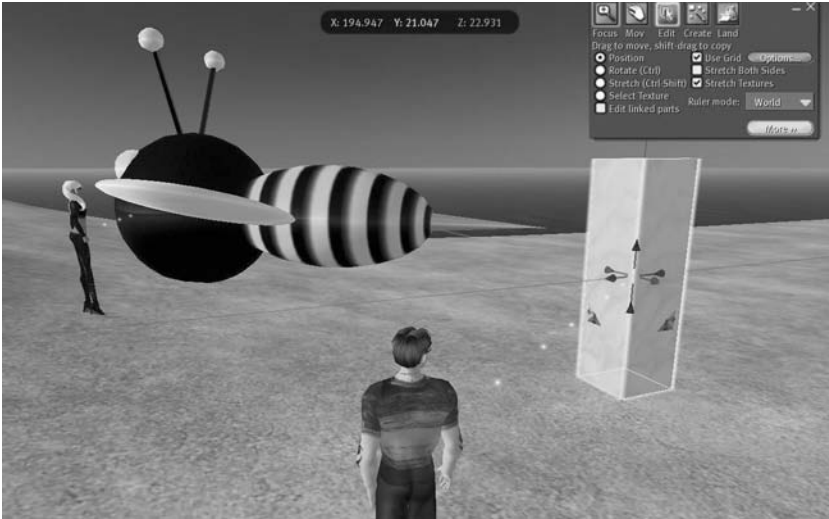


FIGURE 1.3. Building in a sandbox (image by author).



FIGURE 1.4. Perusing the “inventory” window (image by author).



FIGURE 1.5. Flying across the landscape (image by author).

your inventory window and as if by magic, it materializes in your living room. You then right-click on the white rug; a “pie menu” appears with commands arranged in a circle. You choose “take” and the white rug disappears from your home; at the same time an icon named “white rug” appears in your inventory.

Now you walk out your front door and pressing the “F” key on your keyboard, you begin to fly. Gaining altitude and speed, you see a landscape of green hills receding into the distance; as you move forward, buildings, trees, and other objects appear before you (figure 1.5). Persons in Second Life typically say objects are “rezzing” into existence, a verb that dates back to *Tron* (1982), one of the first movies to use computer-generated graphics and to represent a virtual world. The reason it takes a few seconds for objects to “rez” is that the Second Life program on your computer is a “thin client” providing only the basic interface (Kushner 2004:53): almost all of the data about the objects making up Second Life is transmitted to your computer over the Internet. In a sense, of course, the objects and the data about them are the same thing. Almost all of these objects are, like your house, not created by Linden Lab: Second Life is based upon the idea of user-created content (Ondrejka 2004a). Linden Lab maintains the basic platform for Second Life: a landscape with land, water, trees, and sky; a set of building tools; and a means to control, modify, and communicate

between avatars. Nearly everything else is the result of persons or groups of people spending millions of hours every month in acts of creation. Much of this creation is for personal or informal use, but since people in Second Life can earn “real” money in the virtual world and retain intellectual property rights over anything they create, individual entrepreneurs and even corporations create objects for sale.

Continuing to fly away from your home you see three people—more precisely, three avatars—rezzing into view. You knew they would be here because you pressed “control-M” to open a window with your “world map” and noticed three green dots on the square of land your avatar was about to enter (figure 1.6). This square of land, 264 meters on a side, is known as a “sim” (short for “simulator”). Four sims are typically stored on one actual-world computer server; as your avatar enters a sim your computer receives information about the sim via the Internet. These servers retain all of the information about the sim’s landscape as well as created objects or buildings, so that the virtual world persists when individuals turn their computers off.

The three avatars you now approach are being controlled by people who, like you, are currently logged onto Second Life: they could be next door to your physical location, a hundred miles away, or on another continent; there



FIGURE 1.6. Looking at the world map, local area (image by author).

could even be two people controlling a single avatar together as they sit in front of a shared computer. During the time of my fieldwork it was only possible to speak audibly using third-party software and this was rarely used. However, once you are within thirty virtual meters of these three avatars they will be able to “hear” what you “say”: if you type something into your chat window, the text you type will appear on their computer screens when you press the “return” key. By clicking on an avatar with your mouse you can obtain a “profile,” which tells you something about the person—a short paragraph they have written about themselves, a list of their favorite places in Second Life, the groups to which they belong. All of this information refers to a “screen name”; rarely do you discover someone’s “real” name. As you look through your computer screen at the back of your avatar’s head and these other avatars, the persons controlling them are looking at you through their own computer screens and can click on your profile.

“How are you doing?” you type to these three persons. “Good,” replies one of them, named Judy Fireside. “We are just thinking about going to the Cool Club for their 80s Dance Club Hour.” You continue talking for a few minutes before deciding that you want to say something specifically to Judy Fireside, so you click on her avatar and choose “send IM” from the pie menu that appears. This opens up a window that allows you to type an “instant message” or “IM” solely to Judy. For several minutes you carry on two conversations at once—you are part of a group of four people chatting with each other, and also one of two people carrying on an instant-message conversation, perhaps commenting on what one of the other two people is saying. It is like being able to talk and whisper at the same time. You realize you want to stay in touch with Judy Fireside, so you right-click on her once again and choose “add friend” from the pie menu. This causes a message to appear on Judy’s computer screen saying “Sammy Jones is offering friendship.” She chooses “yes.” Judy will no longer be an anonymous green dot on the world map or the “mini-map” that can be used to show your local area; you will be able to find her location and receive notification whenever she logs on or off.

Now you decide you want to go shopping for a shirt for your avatar. You say goodbye to Judy and the other two people to whom you were speaking. Opening the world map once again, you see the sim where your avatar is located and a couple others nearby. You zoom out on the map until you see Second Life in its entirety: over two thousand sims (at this point) laid out into a series of continents floating on a blue sea, known as the “mainland,” and thousands of additional sims separate from the continents, known as “islands” (figure 1.7). Over ten thousand green dots cover the mainland and islands, each representing the location of a person currently logged on to

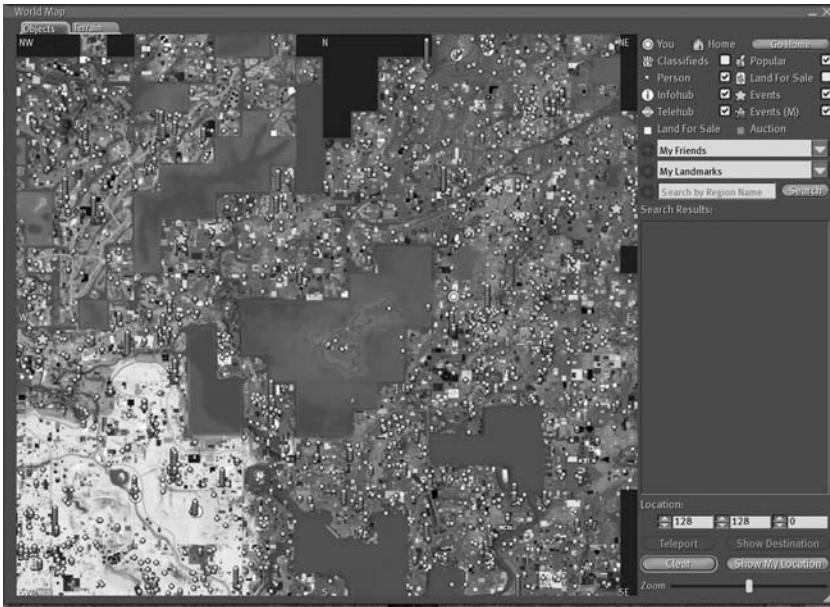


FIGURE 1.7. Looking at the world map, wider view (image by author).

Second Life. Some dots are isolated; perhaps someone is building a house, strolling through a mall, or just sitting in a forest. You see pairs of dots: two friends catching up with each other, perhaps, or a couple having sex, or a real estate agent showing a plot of land to someone. You also see clusters of as many as seventy dots: perhaps a popular dance club, a casino, even a philosophy discussion.

Where was that favorite shirt store again? You type “control-F” on your computer and a window called “Find” appears on your screen, with tabs for locating people, places, and events. Selecting the “Places” tab you type “shirt”: several hundred stores selling shirts appear in the window and you recognize one as the store you had in mind. You hit the button marked “teleport” on the Find window and after a few seconds of blackness you are half a continent away with a store rezzing around you. On the wall are squares with images of shirts and prices for each: 70 lindens, 150 lindens, 95 lindens. You see a shirt you like and right-click on the square with its image, choosing “buy” from the pie menu that appears. Seventy lindens (about twenty-five cents during the period of my fieldwork) is deducted from your Second Life account, and the shirt is moved into your inventory. You open your inventory window, find the shirt, and choose the command “wear”; after a few seconds your avatar is wearing the new shirt. Then you notice that a store

next to this one, designed to look like a medieval castle, is selling “textures,” which can be added to the surface of prims. You have been meaning to add a deck to your house and as you stroll through this second store one of its owners, his avatar sitting on a stone staircase, asks “can I help you?” You say that you are looking for a plank texture and the owner shows you a set of wood textures on sale for 300 lindens. They look great, so you purchase the textures like you purchased your shirt a few minutes ago.

The new textures safely in your inventory, you teleport home, walk outside your house, and choose the “create” command. A box appears in front of you on the ground. You choose “edit” and turn the box into a square ten meters wide, long, and tall—normally the maximum allowable size for a single prim—then flatten it to half a meter thick. The number of prims you have to work with depends on the size of your land: you have about 450 prims available on your plot, with only 300 currently used, so there is no harm in adding a bit more to your deck. You move the square flat prim just created up against the back of your house, and then create two more prims in the shape of poles to hold up the deck. In this virtual world a deck would stay up without poles, but like most people you create structures that accord visually with the laws of physics, more or less. Now you open your inventory and select one of the recently purchased wooden plank textures, dragging it onto your newly created deck and poles.

You are moving your deck a bit to the right so that it lines up with your home’s back door when the instant message window pops up on your screen. It is Judy Fireside, asking “whatcha doing?” You tell Judy to come see the new deck and she teleports over with a friend, George Walker. Before long you are all deep in conversation and George is telling you and Judy about how his “real” mother has been ill lately. “But enough about that,” George says: “a friend of mine is having a wedding. I just im-ed her and she said that you and Judy can come!” You and Judy both say you would be happy to attend.

Looking in your inventory you find a tuxedo you bought a couple months ago, but have not had an opportunity to wear. You put it on your avatar as Judy and George find formal clothing for their own avatars. Judy chooses a gorgeous red and black gown, made from “flexible prims” that give the appearance of silk flowing in the Second Life breeze: it was made by a well-known designer who earns over three thousand U.S. dollars a month from her creations. Once everyone is ready, the three of you teleport to a steepled church on a virtual mountainside. Pools with fountains and schools of fish bracket the church’s front door; inside there are garlands of flowers on the pews and soft piano music in the air. There are already twenty people inside the church, sitting on pews, with a best man, maid of honor, and officiant at the altar. You, Judy, and George take seats on a pew and send instant

messages to each other so as not to disturb the solemnity of the occasion: “I’ve never been to this church before—it’s stunning!” After a few minutes, the bride and groom prepare to walk down the aisle. They have been lovers for over a year in Second Life but have never met in the “real” world. In fact, they have not shared any information about their real-world lives—the bride might be a man, the groom a woman, either might already be married in the “real” world—but you feel genuinely happy as they exchange vows. Finally each types “I do” to the other. On your screen you see the officiant say “the bride and groom may now kiss,” and each opens their inventory window to click on an icon for what is known as an “animation,” a program that causes avatars to move. The avatars embrace as the audience in the pews types “yay!” “congratulations!” “I’m so happy for you!”

After the ceremony there is a party in a large club next door to the church. You click on a ball hanging from the ceiling of the club and it animates your avatar so that you dance together with the other guests, all the while chatting about the ceremony and congratulating the bride and groom. After a few songs, you glance up at the top of your computer screen and realize that you have been online for two hours; your “real” body is hungry and it is time to eat dinner. So you take your leave of the bride and groom, tell Judy and George that you will see them again soon, and quit the Second Life program as you would quit any program on your computer. Second Life disappears from your computer screen, but as you go to your kitchen to chop vegetables, you think about all those people still dancing away in a club with a bride and groom, watching a virtual sun set over a virtual sea.

TERMS OF DISCUSSION.

This composite vignette recalls a *Robinson Crusoe*-type of narrative, predicated on the use of “technical mastery” as a way to control one’s surroundings (Redfield 2000:8). It describes a mere fraction of the thousands of ways people spent time in Second Life during the period of my fieldwork. Some were loners; others were members of groups with hundreds of members. Some had intense emotional and sexual relationships; others came to Second Life to sail a boat across a virtual lake, dance at a club, or play a board game, without intimacy beyond the casual acquaintance. Virtual worlds provide the opportunity for many forms of social interaction, and this can include anthropological research. Just as I can attend a wedding or build a house in Second Life, so I can interview those in Second Life about their experiences and also engage in “participant observation,” following people

around in their daily lives as a member of the community. To begin grappling with what is at stake in the emergence of virtual worlds, however, basic terms of discussion are sorely needed. There are important histories to virtual worlds, but many aspects of them are novel. Forging a terminology thus presents challenges, particularly because virtual worlds change so swiftly and conceptual imprecision is far from unknown (Lange 2008). For instance, notions of a “metaverse” combining virtual worlds, simulations, virtual reality technology, and lifelogging often confuse the distinctiveness of each (Cascio, Paffendorf, and Smart 2007). Keeping in mind the impossibility of perfectly representing this complex and unstable situation, I wish to set out the clearest terms possible, knowing they are open to revision.¹⁰

This book explores the phenomenon of *virtual worlds*, places of human culture realized by computer programs through the Internet. Another good definition for “virtual world” is “any computer-generated physical space . . . that can be experienced by many people at once” (Castronova 2005:22).¹¹ My definition and Castronova’s both presume three fundamental elements to be present in all virtual worlds: they are (1) places, (2) inhabited by persons, and (3) enabled by online technologies.¹² In something as long as a book, synonyms are helpful to avoid repetition. For this reason I treat “virtual,” “cyber,” and “online” as equivalent, although others have developed vocabularies in which their meanings differ. Terms like “cybersociality” and “online culture” are thus to be taken as roughly interchangeable with “virtual world.” To limit my inventory of synonyms I will not use “synthetic world” (Castronova 2005), “persistent world” (Kushner 2003), “artificial world” (Çapin et al. 1999; Schroeder 2002), “digital world” (Helmreich 1998), “mirror world” (Gelernter 1991), “possible world” (Ryan 1991; Schroeder 1996), “virtual community” (Rheingold 2000), “virtual environment” (Blascovich 2002; Schroeder 2006), or “metaverse” (Stephenson 1993). I particularly wish to avoid “synthetic” and “artificial”: for some researchers these terms have value, but for my purposes they obscure how the most distinctive feature of the worlds under discussion is not that they are fabricated, but that they are virtual. The “real world” of human social life is also synthesized through human artifice.¹³ Virtual worlds are self-evidently social constructions, but they are far from unique in this regard.

The term “world” appears with great frequency in the phrases above, but remains far less theorized than the words with which it is paired. “World” tends to refer to large-scale social contexts with visual and interactive components, somewhat like “environment” and “space.” This differs from the more abstract notion of “community” or the more individualistic notion of “life,” as in “Second Life” (not “Second World,” despite the fact that most

residents saw it as a virtual world). “World” is a dangerously naturalistic metaphor. It implies an entity that has come into being without human agency and that is self-contained, without boundaries: you can walk around a “world” and end up back where you started. It is for these reasons that anthropologists of globalization have found it productive to speak not of “worlds” but the “worlding” of cultural domains (e.g., Zhan 2001); it may prove useful to ask after the “virtual worlding” of human sociality online. In this regard, the philosopher Karl Popper’s notion of World 3, “objective, real, and public structures” that can take the form of “social organization” or “patterns of communication,” may provide one way to theorize virtual worlds (Benedikt 1991:3–4; see Popper 1979).

Many researchers speak of digital cultures or digital media. It seems “digital” came into use as a neutral synonym for terms like “electronic,” “tele-,” “cyber-,” and even “virtual,” though it is occasionally opposed to the virtual (Massumi 2002). I have difficulty identifying the analytical work “digital” is supposed to accomplish. Since these uses of “digital” imply electronic technology (not binary counting using stones or human digits, for instance), “digital” is a conceptual Klein bottle, incorporating every aspect of contemporary human life under its purview. What, nowadays, is not digital in some way? Additionally I doubt those who currently study the “digital” would recuse themselves from studying online analog technologies.

The analytic work “digital” performs appears to be one of identifying continuities. Just as one can take a social phenomenon and examine it from the perspective of gender, law, or religion (since gender, law, and religion permeate all aspects of human life, not just marriage, trials, and worship), so one can examine a social phenomenon or context from the perspective of technology (for which “digital” appears to be a placeholder). “Digital,” however, is less useful for analyzing cultural logics that do *not* cross what I will term the gap between the virtual and the actual. The virtual and the actual are not reducible to each other, even in their mutual constitution (indeed, precisely because of their mutual constitution). I am aware that for many “virtual” is troubling, even dated: hopelessly linked to notions of “virtual reality” and presuming intersections of nonphysicality and computation that elide questions of materiality and political economy. However, one goal of this book’s analysis is to argue for a rehabilitation and refinement of “virtual.” There do exist distinct cultures in virtual worlds, even though they draw from actual-world cultures. This is why researching them “in their own terms” is now one viable methodological strategy.

As a result, the pivotal terms for my analysis are “virtual” and “actual.” “Virtual” comes from the Latin *virtus*, which refers to manliness and is ety-

mologically linked to notions of virtue, virtuosity, and virility (Fornäs et al. 2002:29; Wilbur 1997:9; see chapter 5). Notions of the virtual draw from longstanding oppositions of mind versus body, object versus essence, and structure versus agency, among others. In colloquial contemporary English, a prominent meaning of “virtual” is “almost,” as when someone says “she’s virtually my sister” to refer to a close friend (Lévy 2001:56). The Oxford English Dictionary phrases this meaning of “virtual” as referencing something “that is so in essence or effect, although not formally or actually.”¹⁴ Virtuality can thus be understood in terms of potentiality (Massumi 2002:30); it can be said to exist whenever there is a perceived gap between experience and “the actual.” This is now the most important meaning of “virtual” with regard to virtual worlds; “virtual” connotes approaching the actual *without arriving there*. This gap between virtual and actual is critical: were it to be filled in, there would be no virtual worlds, and in a sense no actual world either. This is ultimately a reconfiguration of the binarism between nature and culture, and its boundary-marker is the distinction between “online” and “offline.”

A great risk in setting forth “virtual” and “actual” as central terms is that I will be seen to be creating or reifying a rigid binarism. I set them forth in an ethnographic sense, not an ontological one. The binarism of virtual/actual is an experientially salient aspect of online culture, not just a terminological nicety (Zhai 1998). Like all binarisms, it persists in spite of attempts to deconstruct it by adding a third term or conflating the two into one. I thus ask the reader to play along with my deployment of the virtual/actual binarism, for what it reveals about the role of a distinction between virtual and actual.

Because I was originally trained as a linguist, I have learned to overcome my intellectual hostility to binarisms and appreciate their ubiquity in cognition and culture, though the importance ascribed to them varies. Yes/no, up/down, on/off—all human languages are strongly shaped by binarisms, even at the phonological level (voiced versus unvoiced consonants, for instance). The binarisms are reinterpreted and transformed, but rarely do they disappear. For instance, a range of scholars have worked to problematize the nature/culture binarism while underscoring its enduring presence in human life (e.g., Haraway 1997; Latour 2005; Ortner 1974, 1996). It is incorrect to associate virtual with culture and actual with nature. Humans make culture in virtual and actual contexts; since humans are part of nature, and the virtual is a product of human intentionality, the virtual is as “natural” as anything humans do in the actual world.

Almost as ubiquitous as the term “virtual” is the prefix “cyber,” which originates in William Gibson’s notion of cyberspace (Gibson 1984). This

term draws upon notions of cybernetics that date to mid-twentieth-century work in computer science and engineering, above all the work of Norbert Wiener, who coined the term “cybernetics” in 1947. As indicated by the use of the Greek prefix *cyber-* (“to steer,” as in the steersman of a boat), as well as the full title of Wiener’s book (*Cybernetics: or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine*, 1948), ideas of governance and control were central to the development of cybernetics from its origins, a point often lost when the original meaning of *cyber-* is forgotten and the prefix assumed to mean “Internet-related” or simply “virtual.” It now also connotes the human/machine interface due to the term “cyborg,” a combination of “cybernetic” and “organism” originally coined in 1964 and used in reference to blurrings of human and machine (Haraway 1991; Tomas 1995:33–40).¹⁵

The term “virtual reality” (or VR) has typically implied a environment enabled by interface technologies like data gloves and goggles.¹⁶ It assumes that a sense of immersion “comes from devices that isolate the senses sufficiently to make a person feel transported to another place” (Heim 1998:6; see also Balsamo 1996:117, 124; Biocca, Kim, and Levy 1995; Coyne 1994; Hillis 1999; Poster 1996:189; Ropolyi 2001; Schroeder 1996; Steuer 1992; Vasseleu 1997; Woolley 1992). However, virtual reality technologies are distinct from virtual worlds: “virtual reality is primarily concerned with the mechanisms by which human beings can interact with computer simulations; it is not especially bothered by the nature of the simulations themselves” (Bartle 2004:3; see also Castronova 2005:5, 285–94; Damer 1998:298–99; Shah and Romine 1995:3). There is no reason that virtual worlds cannot employ virtual reality interfaces, but during the time of my fieldwork it was overwhelmingly the desktop computer—keyboard, mouse, and screen—by which persons interfaced with Second Life and other virtual worlds.

During my fieldwork, those in Second Life often referred to “real life,” “first life,” “the physical world,” or “the real world.”¹⁷ Such terms are imprecise antonyms for “virtual world” because they imply that technology makes life less real: “In Net discourse, ‘virtual’ sometimes just denotes ‘computer-based’ or ‘online.’ This is . . . [problematic] because if it is combined with some kind of contrast with ‘real’ that reality becomes computer-free” (Fornäs et al. 2002:30; see also Heim 1993:60). As Annette Markham noted in her ethnographic study of a virtual world, a phrase like “in real life” often “demarcates ‘those experiences that occur offline’” (Markham 1998:115). In other words, “real” often acts simply as a synonym for “offline,” and does not imply a privileged ontological status: “online worlds are [not] spaces in which we simply work out offline issues and once sorted, happily leave. . . .

What happens in virtual worlds often is just as real, just as meaningful, to participants” (Taylor 2006a:19). Virtual worlds increasingly have “real” ramifications—a business, an educational course, an online partner becoming a “real” spouse. As one person in Second Life put it, “our virtual relationships are just as real as our rl [real life] ones.” Such ramifications take advantage of the gap between virtual and actual. They do not blur or close that gap, for their existence depends upon the gap itself.

In short, “the virtual is opposed not to the real but to the actual. The virtual is fully real in so far as it is virtual . . . the virtual must be defined as strictly a part of the real object” (Deleuze 2004:260; see also Friedberg 2006; Lévy 1998; Massumi 2002; Virilio 1994). As a result, I do not oppose “virtual” and “real”; I refer to places of human culture not realized by computer programs through the Internet as parts of the “actual world.” “Actual” is also imperfect, but I find it the best provisional term and additionally one used fairly often by those in Second Life. As discussed in the final chapter, I could speak of “actual worlds” in the plural, since human experience offline is shaped by cultural specificity, but for simplicity’s sake I will refer to a singular “actual world.” The limitation of “actual” is that synthesis, artifice, and fabrication are constitutive of all human sociality, from language to kinship, from agriculture to desire, from governance to ritual. They are not distinguishing features of virtual worlds but a key point of continuity between them and the actual world. The Oxford English Dictionary notes that “actual” comes etymologically from “act”; as indicated by the term “actor,” it can refer to something “exhibited in deeds.”¹⁸ Virtual and actual are both the place of *homo faber*, the human as maker (Bergson 1911; Tilgher 1930).

From one perspective it could be argued that the information age has, under our noses, become the gaming age, and thus that gaming and its associated notion of play could become master metaphors for a range of human social relations (Boellstorff 2006). I now argue that the information age has become what I will term the Age of Techne. I do not mean to create a rigid timeline; at issue is not a history but a historicity, a way of thinking about change through time. It is even possible to play off this book’s title and refer to “coming of Age” to the Age of Techne. Gaming must still be taken seriously; game studies is sometimes called *ludology* in reference to the Latin term *ludus*, but the topic is not *ludicrous*, whose origin in the same Latin term shows how deeply games are denigrated in the Western tradition.¹⁹ Many virtual worlds are seen by those participating in them as games, or as having gaming as their predominant mode of sociality (Taylor 2006a:28); as a result, game studies will remain highly relevant to the analysis of many virtual worlds into the future.

Debates as to whether or not Second Life was a game were common and sometimes heated during my fieldwork. One Second Life resident offered this analysis: “Stadiums and Casinos. Venues for games? Yes. Games? No. Canvas and paint? Artistic medium? Yes. Game? No. A neighborhood bar? Social scene? Yes. Game? No . . . Don’t confuse the container with the contents. SL is no more a game than a box of crayons.” As this resident noted, virtual worlds are not in and of themselves games, and assuming that theories about games and play are necessary foundations to understanding virtual worlds leads to serious misinterpretations. This includes a conflation of online sociality with entertainment, obviating the consequential forms of intimacy, community, and political economy in virtual worlds. Scholars have long noted how a virtual world “is not goal-oriented; it has no beginning or end, no ‘score,’ and no notion of ‘winning’ or ‘success.’ . . . [Such a world] isn’t really a game at all” (Curtis 1992:122).²⁰ As a result, “virtual worlds are not games. Even the ones written to *be* games aren’t games. People can play games *in* them, sure, and they can be set up to that end, but this merely makes them venues. The Pasadena Rose Bowl is a stadium, not a game” (Bartle 2004:475).

Efforts to define what counts as a game have continued for some time (Callois 1961; De Koven 1978; Suits 1978); indeed it is the persistence of the debate itself, rather than any particular stance with regard to it, that is of the greatest import. The false analogy “game is to everyday life as virtual is to actual” has led many to conflate “virtual” with “game.” There is no way to claim virtual worlds are games without trapping oneself in a definition of “game” so vague as to include most of our actual lives. For some, spending time in virtual worlds like Second Life means spending less time gaming. On those occasions during my fieldwork when persons termed Second Life a game, what they really meant was that it was a place of play, reflecting the centrality of creativity to understandings of the virtual world. For these reasons I will refer to someone logged into Second Life as a “resident” (a term used within Second Life) rather than “user,” “player,” or “gamer.”²¹

The distinction between “games” and “play” is often unclear, since in many languages these are the same term or are derived from the same term (e.g., Indonesian *main*, German *spiel*, Dutch *spel*). In John Huizinga’s *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, a founding text of game studies first published in Dutch in 1938, Huizinga claimed to identify three primary characteristics of play. First, “all play is a voluntary activity . . . it is free, is in fact freedom” (Huizinga 1950:7–8). Second, play is “a stepping out of ‘real’ life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own” (Huizinga 1950:8). Third, play is “‘played out’ within certain limits of

time and place” (Huizinga 1950:8). In these second and third characteristics lie the origin of Huizinga’s famous metaphor of the “magic circle” of play (Huizinga 1950:57).²²

This has led to some confusion in the study of virtual worlds. Residents and researchers in virtual worlds are often fascinated by blurring between virtual worlds and the actual world, what T. L. Taylor terms “boundary work” or what one Second Life resident termed “bleed-through”—for instance, residents of a virtual world meeting in “real life” (Taylor 2006a) or “real life” money showing up in a virtual world (Castronova 2005). It is striking that the notion of the “magic circle” is invoked almost exclusively to indicate ways in which that circle is broken, and thus to deconstruct the virtual/actual binarism. While I share this interest in forms of interchange between the virtual and actual, what I find more significant and less debated is why we find the question of traffic between virtual worlds and the “real world” so compelling. Much research on virtual worlds is predicated on a cultural assumption that if a boundary is transgressed it is thereby blurred or weakened. However, a large body of anthropological work—on topics from gender to ethnicity to nationalism—demonstrates that crossing a boundary can *strengthen* the distinctiveness of the two domains it demarcates.

If virtual worlds are not games, then they are not video games either. Although the histories of virtual worlds and video games overlap, scholars and designers have long noted that they are not the same thing (e.g., Reid 1999:113). Many early video games from Pong onward were played in pairs or with a two-player option in which players alternated to see who could get the highest score; Gauntlet, a popular video game in the 1980s, allowed up to four simultaneous players. In chapter 2 I recount how beginning in the early 1990s, the social aspect of video gaming took on a new form with the first “massively multiple online games” (MMOGs), also known as “massively multiple online role-playing games” (MMORPGs) because so many had a fantasy or role-playing aspect to them. At the same time there emerged the first “massively multiple online worlds” (MMOWs), another synonym for virtual worlds. These terms—MMOG, MMORPG, MMOW, even MMORT (for “massively multiple online real-time strategy”)—all link up to an earlier set of terms also based on the concept of multiplicity, including MUD (multi-user domain, dimension, or dungeon), MUSH (multi-user shared habitat), MUG (multi-user game), MOO (MUD Object Oriented), and MUCK (multi-user chat kingdom). None of these acronyms are commonly used in Second Life.

As massively multiple online games have become more complex, more aspects of them have become oriented toward socialization. For instance, by

the early 2000s it was possible in many fantasy-themed massively multiple online games to do things like rest in a village between battles, socializing with other players. Virtual worlds and video games still cannot be reduced to each other, but many aspects of my analysis of Second Life culture will prove pertinent for those with interests in massively multiple online games.²³ In insisting that virtual worlds are distinct from video games, I argue that while the theories and methods used in game studies continue to provide extremely important insights for video games (e.g., Bogost 2007; Consalvo 2007; Wark 2007), they cannot explain virtual worlds in their entirety. Anthropology does not hold all the answers, but its theories and methods give it an important role to play in charting emergent forms of cybersociality.

THE EMERGENCE OF VIRTUAL WORLDS.

One goal of this book is substantive: to provide an ethnographic portrait of Second Life. Another is methodological: to demonstrate the potential of ethnography for studying virtual worlds. A third goal is theoretical: to contribute toward a better understanding of virtual worlds in all their constantly transforming complexity.

Second Life culture does not exist in a cyberspatial vacuum. It draws from an emerging constellation of assumptions and practices about human life—a kind of “virtual worldview” for virtual worlds. What might the set of assumptions and practices that make up Second Life culture teach us about such a virtual worldview? It is this virtual worldview that makes it possible for so many persons to “learn the ropes” of virtual worlds even as they change so quickly. For instance, while learning the intricacies of Second Life could be time-consuming, many residents told me they found it easy to participate at a basic level even if they had never entered a virtual world before. When I once asked a middle-aged woman how she was rapidly able to become skilled in Second Life despite never having played video games before, she replied “what is there to learn?” To adapt to such rapid technological change, these persons must be building upon some shared knowledge. Much is changing, but since millions of people continue to enter virtual worlds without total confusion, something must be staying the same. It is a lack of familiarity with this virtual worldview that can make virtual worlds baffling, threatening, or uninteresting to persons who did not grow up with computers as sources of pleasure and sociality as much as tools for work.

In his classic book *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson showed how the invention of the newspaper made it possible, for the first time, for persons to imagine themselves as members of modern nation-states bound

by “deep, horizontal comradeship” (Anderson 1983:7). Without wishing to engage in hyperbole, we may be on the verge of another massive transformation linked to technology, the creation of societies on the Internet: “for the first time, humanity has not one but many worlds in which to live” (Castronova 2005:70). This could involve new forms of culture and selfhood, ones shaped in unpredictable ways by actual-world sociality: “We do not really understand how to live in cyberspace yet” (Sterling 1992:xiii). I am not interested in questions like “is humanity going virtual” or “will we all live our lives online?”; such phrasing invites hype and casts the debate in polarizing terms. At issue is the simple fact that not so long ago, the percentage of human social life spent in virtual worlds was zero, that percentage is increasing, and social inquiry must follow this movement online. Drawing upon the work of a range of scholars of technology and society, I will develop a theory of this virtual worldview as *techne*,²⁴ and of the person who engages in *techne* not just as *homo faber* (“man the maker”) or *homo ludens* (“man the player”), but above all as *homo cyber*. The human online, the virtual human. In using the term “*techne*,” I will draw upon a philosophical distinction between knowledge (episteme) and technology or art (*techne*), examining how virtual selfhood is becoming predicated on the idea that people can craft their lifeworlds through intentional creativity.

During the writing of this book, I returned to Indonesia to study HIV/AIDS prevention, research that was intentionally distinct from my work in Second Life. Yet I continued to think about Second Life while doing this research; many sentences in this book, including this one, were written on a laptop in the city of Makassar on the island of Sulawesi. I found that maintaining a program of research in an actual-world context while conducting virtual anthropology was helpful in indicating what aspects of cultures in virtual worlds are truly unprecedented, and which are not. Through my ethnography of Second Life I work to pinpoint what is distinctive about virtual worlds. Not everything connected to virtual worlds is novel; it is imperative that we ascertain precisely what elements are new and in what ways they are new.²⁵ For instance, unlike books, newspapers, radio, and television, the existence of separate classes of people to produce and consume content does not always predominate in virtual worlds: it is much easier for “user” and “creator” to be the same person. Yet old forms of social inequality persist and new ones may appear.

While never under the illusion that I can (or should) aim for a value-free account, I have worked to avoid presenting Second Life in idyllic or pessimistic terms. Like many residents I enjoy Second Life and find this enthusiasm to be a great aid to fieldwork, just as my interests in Indonesian

culture have facilitated my research there. Some may see me as a promoter or “fanboy” of Second Life, just as I could be seen as a promoter of gay and lesbian Indonesians. Yet passing judgment on Second Life is not my purpose.²⁶ There is a well-established history of interpreting virtual worlds in either utopic or dystopic terms (Wertheim 1999:285), and much of what others wrote about Second Life during my fieldwork was concerned to evaluate its significance and suggest improvements. Particularly toward the end of my fieldwork there was an increasing amount of press touting Second Life as revolutionary, and other press dismissing its importance and expressing frustration over technical problems.²⁷ I find much of this writing helpful, but for purposes of this book seek to craft neither an apologia for, nor an indictment of, Second Life. I am uninterested in being either a booster or a doomsayer. My analysis, written in the language of “is” not “ought,” concerned with description not prescription, seeks to understand emergent aspects of Second Life culture.

When presenting my research to audiences with limited experience in virtual worlds, I have found two negative assumptions to be particularly common. The first is that virtual worlds are hopelessly contaminated by capitalism. Such a response is often triggered by the reality that many virtual worlds are owned by for-profit companies, and also by the fact that some allow residents to earn actual-world money. This impression is exacerbated by the fact that many writings on virtual worlds focus on economic issues (e.g., Castronova 2005; Dibbell 2006). Questions of labor, consumption, and class are important in any discussion of virtual worlds. However, allowing such questions to consolidate a negative impression overestimates their influence and elides the degree to which such questions are no less important with regard to actual-world cultures. Indonesia, for instance, is highly capitalist, but no one has ever told me to stop studying it for that reason.

A second common negative interpretation I have encountered from those with limited experience in virtual worlds is that they are just a form of escapism from the actual world: “the gratifications involved in being a member of [a virtual] community aren’t the same, I would suggest, as being involved in a real community. . . . We may have created the instruments of our own enslavement—psychological and otherwise” (Berger 2002:110–11).²⁸ Such naïve realists “see computer systems as alien intruders on the terrain of unmediated experience. . . . Reality, they assert, is the physical world we perceive with our bodily senses [and] . . . the computer is . . . a subordinate device that can distract us from the primary world” (Heim 1998:37).

Those familiar with virtual worlds sometimes bring their own negative assumptions, three of which I have encountered with particular frequency.

The first is that virtual worlds do not exist as such, because the things termed “virtual worlds” are too varied to be grouped together. A second assumption, mentioned earlier, is that virtual worlds are composed solely of subcultures and it is not possible to generalize at the level of a virtual world. This participates in the historical equation of culture with locality in anthropological thought, reflecting the relatively recent appreciation for how culture exists at multiple spatial scales (Brenner 2001). A third assumption, also discussed previously, is that the division between virtual and actual is unsustainable because so much of what takes place in virtual worlds draws from the actual world. This assumption obscures how referential and substantive relationships do not erase the boundary between virtual and actual; they constitute forms of social action sustaining that boundary.

These negative assumptions fail to appreciate how human experience is always culturally mediated. Several Second Life residents cited the poet W. H. Auden (1907–73) and his anthropological notion of a secondary world or second nature mediating the human: “man is a history and culture making creature, who by his own efforts has been able to change himself after his biological evolution was complete. Each of us, therefore, has acquired what we call a ‘second nature,’ created by the particular society and culture into which we happen to have been born” (Auden 1968:119).²⁹ It is true that some persons spend time in virtual worlds to be something different: women becoming men or men becoming women, adults becoming children, disabled persons walking, humans becoming animals, and so on. However, many who participate in virtual worlds do not seek to escape from their actual lives. Such negative views of virtual worlds fail to consider forms of escapism in the actual world, from rituals to amusement parks to daydreaming: the degree to which an activity is “escapist” is independent of whether it is virtual or actual. Avoiding narratives of dystopia or utopia in discussing virtual worlds is a challenge, one rooted in a history of technology which, as many have noted, has been characterized by wild optimism and wild pessimism (Balsamo 1996:132; Beniger 1986:59; Bleecker 1994:192; Graham 2002:6; Haraway 1991).

THE POSTHUMAN AND THE HUMAN.

On January 16, 2006, I—more precisely, my Second Life avatar, Tom Bukowski—was sitting at home, enjoying the view across the water channel that lies below the steep slope on which I built my house, when Dara, a recent acquaintance, stopped by to say hello. I invited her to have a seat on my front porch and we started talking (chatting via text, of course). Soon

Dara said “by the way, I read your profile and I think what you’re doing is really interesting. I like intellectual activities too, not just shopping all day long.” I responded by telling her about some discussion groups:

ME: There is the Thinkers group, and also my group Digital Cultures—join those groups.

DARA: From what I saw in your group meeting, I found it very interesting

ME: Oh, you’re already a member of Digital Cultures

DARA: You already made me a member, don’t you remember?

DARA: Or are there a few other people running your av [avatar] too

ME: Yes, I made you a member of Digital Cultures, I just forgot lol
[laugh out loud]

ME: It’s just me lol, me forgetting things

DARA: Good, hate to get to know one and a new attitude appears

This innocuous exchange reveals a social error—I had forgotten that Dara had attended a meeting of Digital Cultures, a discussion group in Second Life that I moderated during my fieldwork, and that I already had made her a member of the group. Learning from moments of failure has a long history in anthropology.³⁰ Yet there is something distinct to this innocuous exchange: confronted with my lapse in memory, one possible conclusion Dara draws is that “I” have not been forgetful at all. Instead, different actual-world people might be inhabiting the avatar Tom Bukowski at different times, so that what is at issue is a disjuncture between avatar and actual-world person. Dara knows that the avatar Tom Bukowski is always being controlled by a computer in some actual-world location, and that someone other than Tom Boellstorff might be sitting in front of that computer. Dara indicates that she has experienced such a situation before; she “hates to get to know” someone and then a “new attitude appears” because the person controlling a particular avatar has changed.

Throughout this book I investigate changing notions of personhood linked to the emergence of virtual worlds, with a particular interest in debates over the “posthuman.” This term usually refers to ways in which “technology can enable us to overcome the limits of human form” (Nayar 2004:71; see also *ibid.*, 11; Foster 2005:xi). My discomfort with the notion of the posthuman is partially a disciplinary effect: anthropology defines its object of study as *anthropos*, the human (Rabinow 2003). It might be possible to define “posthuman” in such a way as to make it theoretically productive, but in my view the term is misleading and based upon “implicit desires, anxieties and interests that are fuelling humanity’s continuing relationship

with its tools and technologies” (Graham 2002:1). I wish to “contest what the posthuman means . . . before the trains of thought it embodies have been laid down so firmly that it would take dynamite to change them” (Hayles 1999:291; see also Hayles 2005). The notion of the posthuman conflates the human with the subject of liberal humanism, and thus with disciplinary debates in the humanities. It is an overly narrow and ethnocentric definition that effaces the variability of human lifeways.

While some see virtual worlds as marking the emergence of the post-human, through terms like *homo cyber* I argue that the forms of selfhood and sociality characterizing virtual worlds are profoundly human. But while the emergence of virtual worlds “does not necessarily mean the end of the human . . . we need to see the human as re-configured and organized differently” (Nayar 2004:21). This is one meaning of the phrase “virtually human”—in virtual worlds, we are not quite human. The relationship between the virtual and the human is not a “post” relationship where one term displaces another; it is a relationship of coconstitution. Far from it being the case that virtual worlds herald the emergence of the posthuman, in this book I argue that *it is in being virtual that we are human*. Virtual worlds reconfigure selfhood and sociality, but this is only possible because they rework the virtuality that characterizes human being in the actual world.

WHAT THIS, A BOOK, DOES.

A perfectly appropriate question to ask is: Why write a book at all? Given that my topic is a virtual world, why not a website, blog, or some other electronic form? A book will certainly be accessible to those who do not like reading long texts on a computer screen. However, my main reasons for writing a book are conceptual in nature. Just as I am interested in what happens when we use “traditional” anthropological methods to study virtual worlds, so I am interested in using the “traditional” product of those methods—the book-length ethnography. Just as the actual is reconfigured, not displaced, by the virtual, so “books are not going the way of the dinosaur but the way of the human, changing as we change” (Hayles 2002:33). Given that some readers will have had no experience with Second Life or any other virtual world, the book form offers me the opportunity to describe some everyday experiences of Second Life. Even with something as long as a book, I am forced to make difficult decisions as to what to include. I could write a whole book about any number of topics in Second Life, from gender, race, and love to economics and governance. However, the book form does permit me to focus on Second Life culture as a whole: as Malinowski noted,

“an Ethnographer who sets out to study only religion, or only technology, or only social organization cuts out an artificial field for inquiry, and he will be seriously handicapped in his work” (Malinowski 1922:11).

There is a parallel between my methods and their product, reflecting the particular if often unacknowledged effects of the book form: “Any printed book is, as a matter of fact, both the product of one complex set of social and technological processes and also the starting point for another” (Johns 1998:3). In participant observation, the researcher cannot be everywhere at once—unlike a survey, it is not possible to gather data from thousands of people in multiple locations. Similarly ethnographies cannot be everywhere at once; their claims are specific to the contexts in which they are written. I find these “limitations” to force a helpful structure upon my analysis. Without the benefit of hyperlinks, and without the ability to update the text once published, the book form forces me to present my argument in a linear order and make it specific to the period of time during which the research was conducted.

As a result I write about Second Life in the past tense; this book explores a period when Second Life was “coming of age.” I see it as a strength that this text will be dated by the time it appears in print, over a year after the research upon which it is based came to an end: this compels me to look beyond the controversies and celebrities of the day that take up so much attention in writing on virtual worlds. With its limited ability to reproduce graphics, the book form allows me to craft a conceptual narrative; it compels me to step back from the visuality that is central to the experience of many virtual worlds. Since I cannot say everything at once in a book, I am forced to put off some of the most important topics until later chapters, so that I can first address preliminary issues. Given that virtual anthropology remains a new enterprise, I am forced to engage in a good deal of conceptual ground-clearing so as to set the stage for my discussions about Second Life. I introduce terms and concepts in earlier chapters that I use in later chapters, assuming the reader is aware of them. These chapters are not designed to be read in any order: they constitute a cumulative argument.

In their titles and headings, this book’s chapters evoke classic ethnographies such as Mead’s *Coming of Age in Samoa*, Evans-Pritchard’s *The Nuer* (1940) or Malinowski’s *Argonauts of the Pacific* (from which this introductory chapter’s title is taken). Chapter 2, “History,” tells five different histories relevant to this study. It also opens a theoretical discussion concerning the concept of *techne*. Chapter 3, “Method,” explores how I conducted my research, as well as broader questions concerning ethnography in virtual worlds. It continues the argument, introduced in this chapter, that

ethnography may be particularly well-suited for the study of virtual worlds because from its beginnings it has worked to place the reader “virtually” in the culture of another.

Chapters 1 through 3 constitute Part 1 of this book, “Setting the Virtual Stage”; they provide a theoretical and methodological agenda for the anthropological study of virtual worlds. With this foundation in mind, chapter 4, “Place and Time,” opens Part 2, “Culture in a Virtual World,” by moving into a more detailed analysis of Second Life itself. My research has convinced me that the pivotal issue with regard to virtual worlds is their character as social *worlds*. It is for this reason that I begin by exploring place and time. Chapter 5 looks specifically at personhood, including gender, race, and embodiment. Chapter 6 explores the friendships and relationships that for many residents are the most significant aspect of Second Life. Chapter 7 examines community in Second Life, as well as “griefing” or antisocial behavior.

Part 3, “The Age of Techne,” opens with chapter 8, which examines questions of economics, politics, governance, and inequality. Economic issues are often at the forefront of popular and academic discussions of virtual worlds (e.g., Castronova 2005), not least because they raise fundamental questions about referential relationships between the actual and the virtual. These topics were particularly common in press coverage about Second Life during my fieldwork because it was possible to earn “real” money inworld. By holding off on a discussion of economics until this chapter, I do not mean to ignore its importance—rather, the opposite. By waiting until this point, I can draw upon earlier chapters to investigate how what I term “creationist capitalism” shapes Second Life’s culture. In chapter 9, I ask what *Coming of Age in Second Life* tells us about virtual worlds, and consider what place “the virtual” might hold in human existence into the future.