Virtual Environments and Cultures

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Entangled Realities in Virtuality[1]

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Second Life had its economic boom and strongest media presence during the years 2006-2008. From this point on, Second Life slowly developed into a shrinking world, leading many scholars, such as analyst Anthony Mullen (2012), to describe Second Life as a "sleeping giant" and prophesize that three dimensional worlds such as Second Life will definitely have a future because they continuously improve in harmony with processor performance and Internet speed. However, since 2008, many shops closed in Second Life and whole islands are up for sale. The economy sector in particular was influenced by these shrinking tendencies. But against great odds, art, culture and educational projects (Wang 2012) still found its niche in Second life, thereby demonstrating a strong resistance against this recession. 10 years after Second Life went online in June 2003, this book provides an insight into the diversity of virtual environments and cultures in Second Life during the years 2010-2013.

Back in 1991, Vilém Flusser presciently described our current sl-reality in his concept of "alternative worlds": "These worlds are colorful and they can make sounds and they can probably in the near future, also be touched, tasted and smelled. But this is not all. The soon-realizable technical bodies, as they dive up from the computations, will be equipped with artificial intelligence (…) so that we will be able to step into a dialogical relationship with them" (Flusser 1991: 147, *my translation*). At the same time, Flusser noted the enormous skepticism towards virtual worlds, which find themselves derided as merely illusive. He defends the "alternative worlds" by saying, "The table I am sitting in front of and on which I am writing this is not more than a swarm of points. We are facing the problem: either the alternative worlds are as real as the given one or the given one is as eerie as the alternatives" (Flusser 1991: 147, *my translation*). Along with Flusser, some other scientists had similar visions of alternative human-created worlds. Herbert W. Franke wrote in the same year, "There will be the possibility to experience imaginary spaces created by artists: artists, who have less similarity with the classical artist, but more with a film director" (Franke 1991: 290, *my translation*).

These enthusiastic, visionary descriptions of the virtual worlds that would eventually come into being at the beginning of the 21st century in the form of

1 Parts of this introduction are published in German language in Frömming (2009).

interactive, avatar-based platforms, stand in contrast with pessimistic and cautionary interpretations of media and "virtual reality". These warnings are most famous in science fiction literature, such as Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, published in 1932, Neal Stephenson's novel *Snowcrash* (1992) and Orwell's *1984*. Latest publications about "media cultures" (Hepp 2012) deliver a brilliant and bold utopia of "a future without us" (Meckel 2011) in which "the computer knows how we will decide before we know it" (ibid: 1). Others are dealing with a search for a new media-ethic and an understanding of our practices that are entangled with and dominated by media (Couldry 2012). Virtual reality is not virtual reality, instead we should accept that we live in many different and ambivalent media realities that are entangled with each other but not easily comparable. Above all, before judging the virtual world, anthropologists should consider that humans in the 21st century are becoming acclimated to navigating and interacting across on- and offline spaces, and with both artificial intelligence and artificial beings created by Internet users, an aspect that many researchers already stressed (e.g. Hine 2000, Markham 1998, Miller and Slater 2000, Mann and Stewart 2002, 2003, Kendall, 1999). A view back in history will take away the dramatic aspects of this only apparently new phenomenon of virtual reality that is not at all an entirely new phenomenon. Oliver Grau demonstrates in his article, "*Into the Belly of the Image. Historical Aspects of Virtual Reality*", that "the idea of transporting the audience into enclosed, illusionary visual spaces (...) is grounded in a tradition within art history. Its core idea, which reaches back to antiquity, has been reviewed and expanded in the Virtual Reality art of the current century" (Grau 1999: 365). Grau lists some impressive examples of the early creation of virtual reality, such as the *Sala delle Prospettive*, created between 1516 and 1518 by Baldassare Peruzzi on behalf of Agostino Chigi in the Villa Farnesina in Rome. The *Sala delle Prospettive* featured a fresco of a columned hall painted in a perspective that offered illusionistic views of Rome and its surrounding countryside (Grau 1999: 366). Another even older example, is the Villa Item, the so-called *Casa dei Misteri at Pompeii*, which dates from 60 BC. Its wall paintings virtually extended the room through representations of views into other spaces. In England at the time of the Industrial Revolution, a new image-machine, the *panorama*, achieved hitherto unknown dimensions of *illusionary* effect and was used for military strategies (Grau ibid.).

The panorama was criticized mainly because of its psychological effects. It was argued, "the illusion could result in an inability to perceive reality" (Grau 1999: 367). Nevertheless the mass-media panorama spread successfully, with at least 100 million people visiting the 300–400 panoramic rotundas in Europe and America between 1870 and 1900 alone (Grau ibid.). In the early 19th century, the military leaders of France, England and Germany used the panorama for propa-

gandistic purposes. Almost 35% of all 18th and 19th century panoramas depict battle scenes, often from the colonial wars. The so-called Kaiser-Panorama allowed up to 25 people at a time to watch a stereoscopic image series that moved in a circle and showed the German Empire at the times of Kaiser Wilhelm I (Adler 1968). "Exotic" landscape panoramas can still be seen today in the Märkisches Museum in Berlin, and the Pergamon Panorama is the latest testament to the Panoroma's existence.

The essays in this book demonstrate that the development of "digital codes" has meanwhile gone so far that anthropologists have started to conduct fieldwork inside digital user-generated worlds, transported through high-speed fiber-optic cables. This volume investigates the challenges facing a reality that is strongly and maybe irrevocably entangled with virtual reality. This development holds disadvantages and dangers but advantages as well—such as freedom of expressions for minority groups, be it transgendered or queer communities (Corbett-Ashby and Quintarelli *in this volume*) or religious communities using virtual worlds for trans-local communication (John *in this volume*), rethinking the middle east conflict (Becker *in this volume*), or for the reduplication of sacred places in Cyberspace (Islam, Ali *in this volume*). All research is based on qualitative methods, with group and single interview situations, and participant observation over a period between three and six months.

The creation and use of virtual worlds is today an important part of transnational popular culture and research. Although some anthropologists and other social scientists have already tested the use of classical ethnographic research methods in virtual cultures (Bell and Kennedy 2000, Bräuchler 2005, Budka 2002, Correll 1995, Paccagnella 1997, Postill 2010, 2011, Markham 1998, Hine 2000, Boellstorff 2008, 2012, Knorr 2011, Heather et al. 2012), the varieties of virtual cultures that we can find online are still fairly unexplored research fields. Tom Boellstorff's book, *Coming of Age in Second Life. An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human* (2008), is one of the milestones of virtual worlds research in Second Life. Second Life is an internet-based, user-generated graphical program that allows each user to create an avatar, buy virtual land, build virtual landscapes, houses and objects, and communicate via text and voice chat with other avatars. Since Second Life went online in June 2003, the book by Boellstorff "chronicles," as he describes it, "the formative years when virtual worlds were coming of age" (Boellstorff 2008: 7). His research helped many of the authors in this volume to form their own virtual ethnographic research projects, and enabled them to start at an advanced point of view, without the need to question virtual worlds research itself.

One focus of the discourse surrounding virtual cultures was the question of their legitimacy and the meaning of technology for humans and cultures – the central question being: to what extent could virtual space created through tech-

nologies be of interest for anthropological research, and how it could be conceived methodologically? Boellstorff cites Ong in this context, saying, "Technologies are artificial, but (…) artificiality is natural to human beings" (Ong 1982: 82). Likewise Clark strengthens the thesis, with recourse to the Prometheus motive: technology is what makes humans human. The story of Prometheus describes the mythical moment when humans, receiving the gift of *techne*, became fully human the first time (Clark 2003). In accordance with Clark, Boellstorff comes to the following conclusion: "The virtual is the anthropological. This makes it possible to study virtual worlds with the same flexible, underdetermined ethnographic tools used to study human cultures in the actual world" (Boellstorff 2008: 237). It also means that we have the opportunity to adjust ethnographic methods for research in virtual cultures and to rethink the methodological parameters with regard to ethical questions. Tobias R. Becker's research in this volume is one example that shows how new methodological challenges can lead to unique ethical problems during a virtual research. Becker, a male anthropologist in "real life," conducted his research as a woman with a female Avatar in Second Life.

The definition of the term "virtuality" is a kind of semantic labyrinth. I want to sum up only some of the most common uses in this introduction; the essays in this book and the empirical data will shed more light on the issue. In 1993, Stephenson introduced the term "Metaverse"; Castranova speaks of "synthetic worlds"; Rheingold (2000), Wilson & Peterson (2002) use the terms "virtual" and "Online Communities;" Villem Flusser (1991) talks about "alternative worlds;" Boellstorff (2008: 17 f.) favors the terms "virtual" and "actual." The authors in this book use different terms as well. The most important change during the last few years of virtual cultures research is the development away from a dichotomy between the "virtual" and the "real" to an entangled perspective of "online" and "offline" aspects of cultures. One of this book's aims is to take a closer look at established social anthropologic perspectives on user-generated virtual cultures and illustrate these theories' range of possibilities as well as their limits.

Virtual cultures have recently shifted from a two-dimensional, mostly text-based interface, to a multi-dimensional, audio-visual interface where user-generated content and user interactions have replaced the mere consumption of online content. This shift provides the opportunity to participate in the design of digital culture and to take part in cultural activities in a particular (cyber-)space. As the real and virtual worlds become further intertwined, new questions emerge in the fields of Visual Anthropology, Media Anthropology, Picture Theory and Communication Studies.

Furthermore, the use of avatars and built virtual environments such as Second Life has initiated a change in a viewer's relationship to a digital image. Virtual worlds are more than just icons or images. They are designed by the user, ex-

perienced differently by each individual, and invite roaming around. They are landscapes and space, which the user may modify to his or her taste, or create entirely from scratch. By these means, three-dimensional pictures fulfill the anthropological dream of being able to visit any landscapes or city and, with just a click, to leave them again. Furthermore, the user can travel there—whether by flying or by foot—as a virtual double or as anyone else. Virtual worlds embody the ancient human longing to be immortal, to overcome the body, to switch with a click from female to male as often and whenever one desires. These new virtual worlds enable us to enter the absent space and the absence body and they are the consequential further development of telecommunication (Greek: τῆλε têle = fare away + φονή phonē = voice) to teleporting, as one can find in Perry Rhodan's novels or in the Star Trek universe.

The dream of duplicating the world—including humans and their culture—is a cultural constant and can be found throughout history: in mummification, wax figures, statues, and Pygmalion myths. Mythology, in fact, with its world of rich, poetic images has always been important to humans because its process of mirroring makes the unseen structures of cultures visible. As we create our own modern myths in the digital world, computer programmers and casual users alike face the question of what they want to impart to their constructed space. Do these people create a parallel universe or do they arrange an alternative reality? The primary ethnographic data in this volume all seem to affirm that fundementally virtual worlds embody what all other media have in common: they are cultural transmitters, they create a symbolic world, they express underlying cultural structures and values, they represent distant or imagined places. Virtual worlds are today as what they were at their origin, i.e. at the Casa dei Misteri; they are an expression of culture through art and performance (see Fox and Rossner *in this volume*). In these simulated picture-worlds, old human dreams come alive again: one can play God and influence the diurnal rhythm or the weather, then clone oneself, observe the self-designed landscapes, the pictures, and oneself.

Journalists liked to depict Second Life as a sexually excessive, depraved virtual space where people engaged in orgies—and orgies in Second Life do exist. Yet one does not only find the hideouts and shrouded secrecy of modern everyday life. Virtual sexuality (Waskul and Martin 2010, Brookey and Cannon 2009), virtual homosexuality (Corbett-Ashby *in this volume*) and several forms of gender switching (Robert and Parks 2001) or gender-crossing (Quintarelli *in this volume*) have become a new field of research in social sciences. Like the picture slides of the panorama, showing exotic landscapes and cruel battles, virtual worlds such as Second Life allow us to represent landscapes, space, and everyday situations, while at the same time providing a forum in which dark or suppressed societal aspects can come to the surface.

But does the avatar really find what he is searching for in his "second life" which promises to compensate for a deficiency of human contact and communication, to compensate for the loss of nature and religion in our modern culture, to overcome the isolation of modern subjectivity and individualization? Can a person escape from him or herself by forming a double or turning into an entirely new character? One cannot evaluate virtuality without understanding why and when we became virtual. Some origins of our 21st century virtual identity can be found in "modernity and its malcontents" (Cormaroff 1993) with the isolation of the urban modern subject, with the growth of transnational connections and the loss of a defined social group. The believe in natural sciences instead of religion may have contributed to the development of virtual landscapes and artificial bodies (see Voigt *in this volume*), but it started long before the invention of the Internet and its origins are much deeper in history, as the example of the Casa dei Misteri in Pompeii demonstrates.

From Mapping, Virtual Pregnancy to Art Production in Second Life: The Essays in this Book

In *[Dis]orientation. Mapping in Second Life*, **Emily Smith** describes her sense of disorientation during her auto-ethnographic fieldwork in Second Life. During her self-reflective processes, Smith experiences "the feeling that something is happening to you when it is not." Within "confusion" she finds "beauty and poetry" and feels herself transported into "psychological, social and physical worlds that are impossible to reach in the real world." She discovers herself "released from real world constraints, open to play with identity, gravity and movement. I can move through, around, over, and past the edges of deterministic social structures. Oh, the possibilities! Why walk when you can fly? Why fly when you can teleport?" Besides that her contribution gives a humorous insight into the meanwhile chaotic technical situations of the class "Social Anthropology in Virtual Worlds": "We have just begun class at Edunation. We stumble with the interface, dressing, our avatars, figuring out how to activate the voice chat and hear each -other properly. We all react differently to the unsettling experience. A warning comes into our chat window…"

In her essay, *From Wilderness to Virtuality: Virtual Nature and Landscapes in Second Life*, **Christina Voigt** describes her ethnographic fieldwork experiences in different virtual environments in Second Life. She raises the questions, "Are we looking for virtual nature, a 'virtual Paradise' because 'real nature' and physical paradise have been lost? What is natural and what is artificial? If we are a part

of nature are the things created by our hands and minds also a part of nature? And as we perceive nature as an image through our eyes and minds, how do we deal with our image of nature?" **Josefine Borrmann** analyzes *Place and Non-Place in Second Life* using the theory of Marc Augé in order to exemplify how meaning can be perceived differently within Second Life, specifically through the construction of space and place as well as the existence of non-place. After her first reservations towards the virtual world of Second Life, Josefine Borrmann surprised herself with her analysis as she came to realize that people can create something quite meaningful for themselves within Second Life. **Alina Trebbin** describes the processes of reproduction in Second Life in her essay, *Waiting for Zowie: Notes from the Digital Uterus*, as well as her own experiences with her avatar, Ziggi Juneberry, through research and virtual pregnancy. Trebbin classifies her research in the field of cyber-ecology, defined as "the science of plastic interaction between artificial and natural organisms" (Dyens 1994: 327), the artificial organism being the baby, the natural one, the human user. In between is a third organism, the semi-artificial/semi-natural avatar that represents the human user and works as a bridge between her and the baby. Besides interviews and participant observation in various places that offer cyber pregnancy products and procedures, Trebbin raised the question: "Having a child in Second Life: how does that work?" She bought a pregnancy package and went with her avatar through the process of being "virtually" pregnant.

In her paper, *Crossing Boundaries or Reinforcing Norms? Gender Performances in Second Life*, **Sarah Kiani** aims to question how gender functions in virtual culture and raises the question: "Is it a means of empowerment, or are the norms and power structures found in real life reinforced?" In *The Amazon of Aquarius: an Ethnographic Journey Through Gender Issues in Second Life*, **Elena Quintarelli** describes her experiences during her ethnographic fieldwork among a group of Italian speaking women and transgendered avatars called The Amazons of Aquarius. In addition to her interviews and participation in the group's daily rituals, Quintarelli was invited to participate in the Second Life wedding ceremony of two women from the Amazons of Aquarius group. She describes the month of preparation for the ceremony, as well as the ceremony itself, which included the Italian tradition of keeping the bride's dress hidden from her fiancée until the ceremony starts.

Through her essay, *Queer and Trans Experiences in Second Life: An Experimental Dialogue*, **Emma Corbett-Ashby** gives insight into the experiences of queer and transgender people in Second Life. Nearly all her informants told her that their motivation for joining Second Life "hinged on a sense of searching for something, of wanting something more than Real Life offered." Corbett-Ashby describes Second Life as a "social testing ground for different genders" and dem-

onstrates with her interview data that virtual sexual role play enables people to experience homosexuality or transgendered sexuality that might be not accepted in their own "actual" culture.

In her contribution, **Katharina Frucht** examines *Virtual Romance and Love Relationships in Second Life*. She interviewed many couples in Second Life who told her about their "real feelings" for their virtual partner. Some avatars are married in Second Life and even virtually pregnant by their partner. In this virtual world, a relationship is possible without "cleaning up after somebody", a relationship without everyday stress, with endless journeys as a couple to faraway countries without spending any money, but sometimes also with strict rules concerning negotiations with RL-relationships.

In his contribution, *Cyberspace and the Sacred*, **Ranty R. Islam** addresses whether and to what extent virtual spaces such as Cyberspace may be considered by individuals not only as 'real' space but also as 'sacred' space.

Julia Zaremba examines the furry community in Second Life. Furries are avatars that are one part human and one part animal. Zaremba conducted participant observation in this community over a period of three months, and figured out that that these half animal/half human creations often suffered discrimination and abuse inside the virtual world of Second Life.

Thomas John, in his contribution, investigates *Religiosity in a Virtual World: Reasons and Motivations*. John questions why and how religiosity is acted out in virtuality. He conducted ethnographic research at the *Anglican Cathedral* and the *Buddha Center* in Second Life and in several other sites of virtual religious communities. His research describes a variety of reasons for "e-religiosity" that relate to users' individual personalities and the circumstances of their real life communities. Members of the *Anglican Cathedral* in Second Life talked about negative experiences with their local offline church communities, and many have come to substitute all real life church activities with the virtual church.

Manizhe Ali investigates Muslims and the virtual with the question of how Muslims in Second Life might be different from those in real life. Her hypothesis is that in virtuality Muslims could potentially be freer to debate religious issues. Would they be open to these discussions, or would they—and maybe the researcher herself—bring real-world prejudices and practices into the virtual world?

In his contribution, *Virtual Representations of the Middle East Conflict*, **Tobias R. Becker** describes his experiences during his research with his female avatar Jazmin Orfan. Becker participated in several virtual Koran lessons and observed different Muslim groups in virtual places such as the Arab space "Ummah of Noor," Saudi Arabia, the Kingdom of Jordan and virtual Israel. He met Muslim people on their way to pray in virtual Mecca and chatted with Israelis

on the skyscrapers of virtual Tel Aviv. Becker founds that "the impossibility for Israelis to visit Palestine and for Palestinians to visit Israel in the actual world can be overcome by the platform of Second Life by not having physical borders." In so far as virtual environments are meaningful political spaces, they can provide the first steps towards overcoming global conflicts by providing a space in which to communicate about and reflect upon them.

In his article *Tabernacle in the Wilderness: Hierophany in Virtual Space*, **Mike Terry** examines the activities of religious groups or cultures which have created platforms, spaces or applications for religious purposes online. He also discusses other virtual simulations and transmissions, such as live webcams of holy or sacred sites, and live transmissions of religious events. Terry suggests that we should employ the goal of inverting the question of legitimacy to a question of what the ritual and users gain while in a virtual environment.

In her research, *Becoming an Activist in Virtual Worlds – Experiences of Social Activism in Second Life*, **Sara Ferrari** and **Tiina Kivelä** demonstrate that the Internet has become a powerful tool for social activism. Both anthropologists investigate the possibilities of social activism in virtuality. They interviewed "virtual" activists in Second Life and observed human rights organization sites, such as Amnesty International's virtual dependence.

Another important field of research is art production and perception in virtual worlds. **Samantha Fox** explored in her research the virtual *sims* of the Second Life artist AM Radio. In her essay, *Listen to the Radio: AM Radio, Second Life, and Innovations in an Emerging Medium*, Fox gives insight into her interviews with the artist who states that "art in virtual worlds is social" and aims with his art to create a dialogue between viewers and his created spaces. He is not creating (or recreating) art to be viewed in a virtual space; he is creating art that is a virtual space.

Lidia Rossner explores in *Art Production and its Conceptual Systems in Second Life*, the potential of a virtual space to facilitate creative processes. She examined 80 of the over-900 places in the category Art and Culture in Second Life and raises the question: "Does art in SL have the characteristics to create new modes of viewer participation and experience?" Rossner explores how Second Life provides a space with the potential for new forms of creative output, self-expression, interaction and collaboration and realized "that the avatar could be viewed as an art object, a designed social persona. It is through the avatar that concepts of self-representation, constructed identities and social relations are explored. Avatars assume the role of bridging the gap between the virtual and the real, as they are driven by humans navigating a virtual space" (Rossner *in this volume*).

In her contribution, *Second Life: Exploring Virtual Space and its Creative Possibilities*, **Jordana Goldmann** examines the potential that space carries when