

Review Essay

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Can the Avatar Speak?

Coming of Age in *Second Life*: An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human. *Boellstorff, Tom*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008. 328pp.

Other recent books discussed in this essay:

Communities of Play: Emergent Cultures in Online Games and Virtual Worlds.

Pearce, Celia and Artemesia. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009. 308pp.

Hanging Out, Messing Around, Geeking Out: Living and Learning with New Media.

Ito, Mizuko et al. Cambridge: MIT Press, Forthcoming.

Making Virtual Worlds: Linden Lab and Second Life. *Malaby, Thomas M*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009. 175pp.

Otaku: Japan's Database Animals. *Azuma, Hiroki*. Translated by Jonathan E. Abel and Shion Koro. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009. 173pp.

Phenomenology of a Puppet Theatre: Contemplations on the Art of Javanese *Wayang Kulit*. *Mrazek, Jan*. Leiden: KITLV Press, 2005. 587pp.

Play between Worlds: Exploring Online Game Culture. *Taylor, T. L*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006. 197pp.

I borrow the title of this review essay from a question asked along the way in Boellstorff's book, *Coming of Age in Second Life* (Boellstorff 149, with a nod of course to expanding the famous question associated with Gayatri Spivak, "can the subaltern speak?"), to draw attention to the ways that the ethnography of virtual worlds presented in this book and some of the other recent books discussed here point up a number of largely unexplored analytic and ethnographic potentialities for linguistic anthropology. As the explicit intertexts of the title and various chapters of Boellstorff's book suggest, the book's central conceit is to explore the use of ordinary empirical methods of ethnography and participant observation to an extraordinary topic: to use an absolutely ordinary, conventional genre (ethnography), in book form, no less, to study an online community (*Second Life*, henceforth SL) (Boellstorff 29–30). The author makes no secret of this and, indeed, makes intertexts with many of the central canonical ethnographies (Boellstorff 30–31), as well as with his own earlier work in Indonesia, to establish a continuity of method from actual to virtual life.

This alone has attracted a certain amount of controversy. I think much of this controversy relates little to the specific contents of this book, whose method and manner of exposition I find to be accessible and informative, representing a virtual world and its community in a way that I, as a gaming "addict" and confessed geek, find to be both sympathetic and illuminating. Rather, as Boellstorff suggests (27, 32, 240), it is illuminating about our own everyday ideologies about "technology," an

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ill-defined category that represents a kind of “shifter,” a referential-indexical term whose concrete referents change constantly as today’s future become tomorrow’s past.

Because technology is a shifter, defining its essence at least partly in terms of novelty (Boellstorff 32), what is true of technology in general is even more true of the latest wave, captured under terms like “virtual” and its quasi synonyms (Boellstorff 16–19, 25, chapter 2). As a result of such unexamined assumptions, the very exoticism and novelty of virtual communities, themselves founded on a number of such transformative technologies, appear to demand new methodologies, even new categories of humanity (such as the “posthuman,” which the author sees as being of limited usefulness in analyzing the sociality and subjectivity of virtual worlds (Boellstorff 27–9), and “cyborg,” which the author usefully points out refers to a completely different kind of nexus emphasizing the continuity of human and nonhuman (Boellstorff 138)). Boellstorff helpfully reminds us throughout that if we assume (following this narrative about technology as novelty) everything about virtual worlds is novel, we will never actually find out which things about them actually are novel, and which are not (Boellstorff 25). Therefore this book (like the books by Taylor and Pearce/Artemesia), instead of assuming a novel methodology for a novel technologically mediated form of community, instead seeks to explore the technologically mediated “gap” between actual and virtual life precisely by approaching these novel communities using the most traditional, time-honored method of anthropology, participant observation. Interestingly, this very method is precisely what most convincingly reveals those gaps that there are between the two kinds of community, actual and virtual, and shows that a sense of virtualness is constituted precisely by the meta-awareness of this gap between the actual and the virtual (and not, for example, by immersion in the virtual world as if it were another actual world (what Boellstorff calls the “immersive fallacy” (112–3))). It seems to me that this aspect of the book (“the gap”) is one which has a number of homologies in linguistic anthropological theory (in particular the reflexive metapragmatic awareness of mediation, the maximization or minimization of “intertextual gaps” that Bauman [2004], for example, shows to be constitutive of “mediational performances”) and which provides many interesting avenues for research for linguistic anthropological research. To paraphrase the modernist puppet theater theorist Meyerhold (discussed below), the purpose of the “techne” of avatar embodiment is not to erase the gap between the actual and the virtual, but to create it.

The book, then, takes on, and to my mind, banishes, several pervasive dystopian assumptions about virtual communities (Boellstorff 25–7). Other recent ethnographies of online communities (Taylor, Pearce/Artemesia, Ito et al., Malaby) also discuss this set of assumptions and other points covered by Boellstorff; rather than engage in an extensive separate discussion of these books, I will occasionally note here and there places where these other books make parallel or complementary points. One, of course, is the “moral panic” about the very idea of a virtual life, that life spent online is dangerous, addictive, escapist, diagnostic of social pathology or individual social death. Such a view is that found in popular Western media representations like the infamous *South Park* episode on the online game *World of Warcraft*.¹ Another is the argument that such online worlds, inasmuch as they are wholly owned by corporations, are pervaded and formed at their very roots by capitalism. Fair enough. But then, as Boellstorff points out, so is everything else in the actual world (Boellstorff 25): if anything, this suggests that such online worlds, far from being irrelevant sideshows to the “real” object of ethnographic description (whatever that is), might provide an interesting window on capitalism (the matter of “creationist capitalism” that Boellstorff discusses in chapter 8; here Malaby’s ethnography of the “technoliberalism” of the designers of SL should be read in tandem). Lastly, the pervasive tacit assumption that such communities, not being based on face-to-face interaction, are simply unreal (an idea that T.L. Taylor usefully problematizes in an earlier article on avatar embodiment and “presence” (Taylor 2002)). Many of the forms

of moral panic associated with such communities seem to be related to the way that “unreal” online interaction can “leak” consequentially into “real life” (generating new technologically mediated hybrids of anonymity and intimacy discussed under the rubric of the “intimate stranger” in Tomita 2005). Any situation where virtual worlds have actual world consequences, whether virtual goods sold for real money, virtual friendships, flirtations, or even sexual dalliances or marriages that are subsequently consummated in the actual world, generate states of moral panic or analytic interest seemingly disproportionate to the stimulus. This fear of “avatars out of place,” the mixture of virtual and actual lives, is perhaps the most tenacious set of fears about the virtual life. But all of these caveats also seem linked to a primordialism which seeks to locate social reality only in the domain of an authentic world of “face-to-face” community or interaction, from which mediated and ludic forms of community and interaction appear to be excluded as being either pathological or inconsequential. In addition, these dystopian narratives of escapism, addiction, social or individual pathology are linked to a methodological codicil, that such virtual communities can only be studied in the “real world,” if they can be studied at all. From this perspective, the book might be faulted for not doing, at minimum, “multisited ethnography,” talking to the technicians, the code-writers, at Linden Lab (the producers of SL) as well as online. As the author points out, there is nothing wrong with that particular methodology, but it asks different questions than this one (Boellstorff 60–65, see Taylor and Pearce/Artemesia for ethnographies of virtual worlds that explore both actual and virtual world activities, and see Malaby for a complementary “offline” ethnography of the producers of SL). The book also complicates several utopian narratives of virtual life, showing that the virtual life is just as capable, for example, of replicating essentialism of actual world status attributes in virtual life as it is of erasing them, and that precisely here we find some of the most striking normative conflicts between members of virtual communities (for example, the discussion of in-world polemics about the introduction of voice chat into SL is particularly interesting for linguistic anthropologists (Boellstorff 112–116); on voice technology as producing a form of “ludic leakage,” see also Pearce/Artemesia 177–181).

As with any classic ethnography, particularly ones like the one from which it takes its title, this ethnography first situates us with respect to the virtual world, setting us down on an unfamiliar beach in an exotic locale. Of course, the exoticism here has to do with the fact that this is a virtual locale, and it is precisely defining this concept in an operationalizable way (in relation to the actual world), both qualifying in what ways this new form of sociality is continuous with those based on the actual world, and in what ways not, and also, in what ways virtuality has always been part of actual life, that occupies much of the first chapter. From there, the author gives a kind of orienting introduction to the Malinowskian “imponderabilia of everyday life” of this virtual world, much as one might give such an introduction to any field site. After a “walk through” of the virtual world, the author returns to definitional issues, locating the opposition between virtual/actual in relation to a series of other competing candidate characterizations and terms, and centering the discussion on precisely how the awareness of the gap between actual and virtual life, both the separation of these categories and the constant hybrid traffic or leakage across these boundaries, is a constitutive feature of the virtual (Boellstorff 23).

Perhaps one of the most striking features of this chapter is not, for example, the careful separation of virtuality (which is predicated on a techne-mediated gap between actual and virtual life) from other competing concepts like “cyborg” (predicated on a continuity between human and nonhuman) (Boellstorff 138), or the refreshing polemic with the all-too-rapid assumption of that virtuality involves a radical discontinuity with existing actual forms of human sociality, captured in the concept of the “post-human” (Boellstorff 27–9), but rather, a brief but telling linking of virtual life to Benedict Anderson’s notion of an “Imagined Community” (Anderson 1983; Boellstorff 24, also 36). Certainly the parallelisms with other kinds of non-face-to-face, imagined but consequential relationships such as are constitutive of

nations, publics, and other social imaginaries, reminds us that the virtual has long been consequentially part of the actual. The author also explores the concepts of “game” and “play” (drawing on Huizinga, Boellstorff 22–3), to show that while the concepts of game and play are relevant to online worlds (many of which explicitly or implicitly define themselves as gamelike), cybersociality is not inconsequential or trivial, as the game or play analogy would suggest (see also Pearce/Artemesia 2009). This should not be a novel observation to anthropologists, after all, the “play” analogy informs George Simmel’s classic discussion of “sociability” as the “play-form of association” (Simmel 1949: 255), for Simmel an omnivorous rekeying of each and every imaginable purposive form of social behavior as play. No one would suggest by now that the study of sociability, the “sociological play-form,” whose prototypical exemplar is idle conversation between peers (Simmel 1949: 259), is an idle or inconsequential topic, particularly in linguistic anthropology. In fact, Ito et al. usefully link the many practices related to new media ecologies, including virtual worlds and online gaming, to more complicated vernacular typologies of kinds of sociality and sociability, social networks and levels of involvement and participation, ranging between casual “hanging out” and “messaging around” to more involved “geeking out.”

Here Boellstorff’s discussion invites comparison with Barker (2008), who invokes Simmel’s concept of sociability in a fascinating discussion of virtual relationships mediated by rhizomatic neighborhood interkom networks in Indonesia. Like any virtual world like SL, the “hard-wired” rhizomatic interkom network shows a situation in which “online” (virtual) relationships are technically and normatively segregated from “on-land” (actual) ones. The fact that online interaction in interkom, like with SL, is interaction pursued for its own sake, a classic example of Simmel’s sociability, does not mean that such sociability is inconsequential or uninteresting. For example, I invite a comparison between Barker’s discussion of interkom personae and Boellstorff’s characterization of virtual selves, in particular the use of pseudonyms and even the vocal equivalent of avatars, what Barker calls “voice personae,” achieved by using technical effects to achieve an “on-air” voice distinct from one’s “on-land” voice (Barker 2008: 137):

Users drew a sharp distinction between interkom life and regular life. . . . between an ‘on-air’ (*di udara*) world (sometimes ‘on-line’ or *di jalur*) and ‘on-land’ (*di darat*) world. Everyone who used interkom had both an on-land name (*nama darat*) and an on-air name (*nama udara*). . . . Some people had different on-air names for different lines, while others kept the same name regardless of which line they were on. People who were frequently on-air together eventually learned each other’s land names. But when invitations were sent out for social events like picnics and anniversary celebrations, they were addressed using people’s on-air names. Even in person people referred to each other by these names. One thing these on-air names did was to provide a space for people to construct a sense of self that was different from the one they had on-land. Rather than being based on one’s familial ties, the place one lives, or one’s looks, this sense of self was established largely on the basis of one’s discursive style and sound on-air. The types of adjectives people used to describe the voices they liked were gentle (*lembut*), sweet and melodious (*merdu*), exquisite (*bagus*), attractive (*menarik*), and easy on the ears (*enak didengar*). People were always experimenting with their voice modulation by speaking in different tones and trying different bass, treble, and reverb settings. Since they could not hear the output of their own speech as it sounded on-air, they relied on others to help them find the settings that generate the most attractive sound.

But here, too, there arises a kind of moral panic that results from the idea that these different personas, “on land” and “on line,” will leak into one another in consequential ways: as with SL, interkom online relationships seem to generate moral panic when they become consequential for “on-land” relationships, when the network is used for other than pure play forms of sociability. The hazards and disappointments here are the same as with avatars in an online community, the fear, for example (familiar, too, from personal ads, see for example Lemon 2008 and references there)

that the projected “on-line” persona will not match up to the embodied one, or that on-line relationships will compete with or complicate on-land ones (Barker 2008:138–9).

While both SL and interkom relations are technically mediated in very different ways, they both produce an analogous and problematic opposition between the actual and the virtual, as well as generating a set of very similar moral panics that result from mixtures of the two categories. Boellstorff suggests other places that one might look for the idea that technically mediate forms of presence might potentiate analogs of virtual cybersociality (which could, in turn, lead to actual sociability), for example, “Pen Pals” and other private relationships mediated entirely by the postal system as a form of virtual world (Boellstorff 36). More generally, Boellstorff notes that these novel phenomena should be situated within a “broader history of technologically mediated intimacy going back even to love letters” (Boellstorff 167). Here Boellstorff gives us the opportunity to see parallels not only with technologically mediated forms of stranger sociability, such as print and internet publics (what Ito et al. call “networked publics”), but also with technologically mediated forms of private intimacy, where technological mediation provides instead an asymptote of immediacy and presence, such as love letters (Ahearn 2003), and also the hybrid forms of sociality between stranger contemporary and intimate consociate that Tomita subsumes under the term *intimate stranger* (Tomita 2005).²

If the first chapter locates us in a virtual “place,” the second chapter locates this place in a history of the virtual, in particular a discussion both of virtual technology and concurrent, but independent, development of kinds of imagining of secondary worlds (particularly drawn from science fiction and fantasy literature and early paper-and-pencil gaming adaptations of these imagined worlds such as Dungeons & Dragons (D&D)). This observation recalls a major thesis of the book, that I find to be congenial as a participant as well as an observer, which is that the primary appeal of virtual worlds is that they involve alternate social worlds, and not, as Boellstorff notes is often assumed, alternate social selves (Boellstorff 17–8, 31, 91, this is something that Taylor (chapter 2) discusses under the rubric of “worldness,” also Pearce/Artemesia chapter 2). It strikes me that this theme (which Boellstorff develops with respect to SL in chapter 4, Place and Time), along with the co-constitution of actual and virtual, and the mediating role that techne has in constituting this opposition, forms one of the crucial observations of the book. As Boellstorff notes, Tolkien’s specific imagining of a fantasy world contained in *Lord of the Rings*, along with his specific theory of “subcreation,” played, via its reception in role playing games like D&D, the source and continued inspiration of many of these online universes (Boellstorff 37–8, see also Taylor 20–24, Pearce/Artemesia 9, Balfe 2004). When we study virtual online worlds, then, one context to place them in is an ongoing study of imaginative geographies that not only potentiated them, but continue to be ongoing parallel practices of popular geographical imagination, virtual or otherwise (see Pearce 2009 for a fascinating example of the production of the same “world” across different platforms by an exiled virtual community). As Balfe notes “the ways in which imaginative geographies are promulgated and consumed remain largely mysterious” (Balfe 2004:88). Except, of course, in virtual worlds, where, as authors like Boellstorff, Taylor and Pearce/Artemesia show us, we can actually watch these practices ethnographically online.

Part of the value of Boellstorff’s book, then, by thematizing precisely the way that much of the appeal of online worlds is precisely that they are worlds, is the way he indirectly draws attention to the way that such fantastic, fabulous, and imaginative geographies underlying these online worlds are in themselves worthy of more attention than they have been given (Pearce/Artemesia’s discussion of attempts by the Uru diaspora to re-create their lost world on other platforms is an exemplary study; for a fascinating broader intellectual history of these “third worlds” belonging neither to fact nor to belief but to imagination, see Nelson 2001). Certainly for linguistic anthropologists, there is a clear relevance in the related topic of the *imagined languages*, almost always with their own special arcane alphabet (an attribute of the exotic that

dates back to John Mandeville), that, like maps of imagined geographies, seem to be crucial semiotic technologies of the imaginary world (Rosenberg 2009 and references there), just as Benedict Anderson's famous triad of "census, map, museum" is for imagined communities of the nation (Anderson 1983: chapter 10). Just as maps of imagined geographies recapitulate the crucial role that technologies like maps play in constructing nations, there is no question that many of these imaginary languages recapitulate the basic outlines of 19th century ideological preoccupations with language, including the basic romantic impulse to allocate to each imaginary ethnos its distinctive language, and perhaps territory or culture, inherited from romantic philology and continued into disciplinary linguistics. Such tendencies are well illustrated, after all, by Tolkien himself, the professional philologist and amateur constructor of languages, giving Elvish a respectable philological Stammbaum. Constructed worlds ("conworlds") seem to demand constructed languages ("conlangs"). The practice extends to virtually every kind of imaginary world: recently I was looking through a web site of a "guild" from the game Ryzom whose members are typically members of the "Tryker" race (see Figure 1 for a typical Tryker), and discovered that someone had decided to give the Trykers their own language, replete with typical phrases used in the game!³ Similarly, Pearce/Artemesia notes that refugees from the vanished world of Uru in part constitute their diasporic virtual ethnicity on other platforms by greetings from one of the languages of the lost Uru "home-world" (Pearce/Artemesia 98, 121). While linguistics departments seem to occasionally use problem sets derived from admitted conlangs like Klingon and Elvish alongside at least partially constructed languages like Modern Hebrew, Modern Welsh or Indonesian, there has seemingly been little interest in linguistic anthropology in "technologies of the imagination" (Ito 2007) such as conlangs which form part of the media mix associated with virtual worlds as well as a constitutive aspect of fan subcultures more generally (Pearce/Artemesia 156; Nelson 2001:121–3,180–1).⁴ This seems particularly odd given that much recent linguistic anthropological work on "language ideologies" has problematized the very naturalizing basis that would privilege "natural spoken languages" over "conlangs" like those associated with virtual communities, imaginary geographies, or *Star Trek* fans, in the first place (for a recent look at the history of some of these conlangs from a linguist's perspective, see Okrent 2009).

The third chapter, on method, is a central one for developing the idea that such virtual "secondary worlds" can be studied using many of the same ethnographic



Figure 1
Lonely Tryker in Darkmoor on the world of Atys (Courtesy of Ryzom)

techniques as we use for actual worlds, and that precisely the gap as well as continuity between the virtual and the actual emerges most clearly when we use the same methods for both. Boellstorff strikingly develops a methodological thesis that virtual worlds cannot be reduced to actual worlds, but have a kind of relative autonomy: "Actual-world sociality cannot explain virtual-world sociality. The sociality of virtual worlds develops on its own terms, it references the actual world but is not simply derivative of it" (Boellstorff 63). The remainder of the chapter shows how one would implement such an epistemic thesis in methodological terms, incidentally producing an excellent separable treatment of ethnographic methodology suitable for use in a methods course.

If Part 1 adduces the relevant presuppositions for the study of the virtual life, situating the virtual ethnography in virtual place, virtual history, and virtual ethnographic method in relationship to the actual, Part 2 represents the centerpiece of the ethnography, investigating the "culture" of SL, specifically organized around categories of place and time (chapter 4), personhood (chapter 5), individual social relationships (intimacy, chapter 6), and finally community (chapter 7). Part 3 in turn takes up the topic that has interested much of the existing literature, the virtual political economies in which it is possible to make actual "real-world" money (chapter 8), and finally a conclusion about the nature of the virtual (chapter 9). While there is much of interest in these other chapters, I assume the discussions of cybersex and cyber-economies (which the author manages to do without the usual sensationalism) will attract their own animated commentaries, but I will confine the remainder of my remarks to just parts of chapters 4 and 5 that seem to raise important questions for a linguistic or semiotic anthropology focusing on performance or interaction, the presentation of self in virtual life, so to speak.

This order of presentation, which privileges the categories of the virtual world (chapter 4) over the categories of the virtual self (chapter 5), and relations between virtual selves (chapters 6–8), reflects Boellstorff's thesis (shared by Taylor and Pearce/Artemesia) that a big part of the distinctive appeal of virtual worlds like SL is precisely that they are virtual alternate worlds, and not merely, as much of the literature has assumed, that they allow virtual expression of alternate forms of identity or self, for example (though this is obviously also important). It is possible to imagine online environments that allow the latter without really creating the former, for example other forms of networked public which share with virtual worlds both the use of pseudonyms and avatars, so this is an important point. At the same time, his argument is that the appeal of these worlds is not that they are alternate actual worlds (in which one loses awareness of the real world, what Boellstorff calls the "immersive fallacy" (Boellstorff 138)), but their appeal is partially in the meta-awareness of the gap between the actual and the virtual world, mediated by processes that he groups under the name of "techne" (Boellstorff 54–59).

Chapter 4 establishes the core categories of place and time of the virtual world, showing how the "virtuality" of the online world inheres in their properties as places (the visual field (visuality and land)), the properties of objects within the visual field (builds and objects), while the actual world intrudes into the virtual place especially in relation to the category of time (Boellstorff 102): "virtual worlds create a gap between the actual and the virtual not juts in terms of place, but in terms of time as well. . . . The gap with regard to space constitutes the binarism between virtual and actual; the gap with regard to time threatens it" (Boellstorff 105). Two particular, and entirely banal, kinds of disruption of the sense of immersion and presence fundamental to the virtual world are discussed in some detail. One of these is *lag* (Boellstorff 101–106), what Pearce/Artemesia calls "the 'weather' of cyberspace" (221), in which time delays relating to loss of synchronization between computer and server disrupt the sense of place (Boellstorff 103), but also while the universe is a shared place, this shared place is distributed across many time zones, interfering with the ability to share this space synchronously (Boellstorff 104–5). The other is his discussion of the category of AFK "away from keyboard," a state unique to virtual worlds

that “presuppose synchronic virtual sociability” (Boellstorff 107). AFK is a defining term for introducing the next two categories of the chapter, senses of immersion and presence (Boellstorff 112–117; also see Taylor 2002). An AFK state can be defined as “presence without immersion” (Boellstorff 112). Because one is present in the form of an avatar, one’s absence from the keyboard becomes a notable absence, an avatar that does not respond, or continues to walk in a straight line butting its head against a wall, are evident signs of presence (online) but absence (of immersion). This particular state is so diagnostic of the intrinsic defining place-time properties of the virtual world and interactional hazards there that Boellstorff proposes an “AFK test” for virtualness: “If you can go ‘afk’ from something, that something is a virtual world” (Boellstorff 112).

If AFKness is presence without immersion (the avatar is there but reduced to its status as a puppet without the puppeteer), straddling “the border between online and offline . . . a kind of ghostly absent presence” (Boellstorff 117), then embodied actual world can undermine the sense of immersion by too much presence of embodied actual world categories, such as voice. The debate about bringing voice into SL (that is, using third-party technologies to allow voice chat alongside text chat) is for linguistic anthropologists of great interest (Boellstorff 112–116). As Mrazek puts it in discussing the “montage” of voice with image and motion in Indonesian puppetry, human voice is “special” within the montage of elements that are juxtaposed to construct a singular performance in puppet theater too, because unlike the puppet and its motions, the voice is associated with an identity (that of the flesh-and-blood puppeteer) separate from that of the puppet (hence voice acting abilities are among the most important for a puppeteer (see also Gross 2001)): “Human voice is associated with its source, with humans, and thus in complex ways implicated in what humans are, in human presence, in human identity” (Mrazek 270). As with Indonesian puppet theater and interkom alike, the debate in SL about voice is deeply revealing about our own ideologies about voice as imparting distinctive, individual characteristics, thus potentially allowing greater intimacy by revealing an embodied aspect of one’s unique, actual self, but also being essentially revelatory of embodied status features (gender, race, ethnicity, age, education, language ability, disabilities; see Taylor 2009 for a fascinating parallel discussion with regard to the introduction of sound movies), thus negating the sense of immersion and undermining the ability of participants to represent their virtual selves in a manner unencumbered by their actual life embodied status features (Boellstorff 112–116, see Pearce/Artemesia for an in-depth ethnography of the conflicts and emergent normativities associated with voice technology and avatar representation in one online community). The result can be, in my experience, an almost jarring disjuncture between the persona embodied by the avatar and that embodied in the voice, leading to a complete collapse of immersion as the actual world discredits the virtual one.

The same contradiction in voice in puppet theater was noted early on as “Zich’s contradiction” (originally articulated by Otakar Zich in 1923 (Bogatyrev 1983:48)).⁵ On the one hand, the synthesis or organic blending of the independent figure and movements of the anthropomorphic puppet and the human voice produces a naturalizing animation or vivification of the puppet. On the other hand, the often-radical mismatch between the (either technically or theatrically) unmodified voice of the adult human puppeteer and the tiny, childlike body, and clumsy mechanical movements, of the puppet could lead to a jarring contradiction, which increases as the human voice and the puppet body become ever more distant (Bogatyrev 1983:60–1). As the Russian semiotician Bogatyrev notes, in comments about the aesthetic problems presented by modernist puppets that could easily apply to avatars in online worlds:

With contemporary puppets whose shape differs striking from humans, the contradiction between the puppet’s shape and movement and the puppeteer’s ordinary voice naturally increases. It is difficult to imagine how a puppet made of cutlery (knives, forks, spoons) or

figures made from laboratory equipment (the Martian musical comedians) could talk and sing in ordinary human voices. Consequently, contemporary puppeteers look for various means to distort the human voice to eliminate (or at least to lessen) the contradiction between the puppeteer's voice and the distorted puppet. (Bogatyrev 1983:61)

As Bogatyrev notes, just as interesting for linguistic anthropologists as masking the original (the puppeteer's voice) is the question of what new modified voice the puppet will be given, and how.⁶ As Miyako Inoue shows in a brief but fascinating example, the question of what kind of ventriloquized voices will be given to a doll is instructive, in her case, a Barbie-like doll called "Licca-Chan" who has everything that her owner does not "a sofa, piano, stylish clothes, a sports car . . ." and lastly a special register of speech associated with "women on TV" (Inoue 2003:6).

Categories like AFK and voice are as much categories of the online self as properties of the online world, which brings us to the chapter that raises the most interesting questions, SL considered as a performance of self, the topic of chapter 5. The debate held in SL (and in the Uru community discussed by Pearce/Artemesia) about voice is not only revelatory of our own complex and fraught actual world semiotic ideologies about the category of voice, so often a proxy for notions of authentic self (Mrazek chapter 5, Taylor 2009), but is also of the risky and contingent nature of virtual embodiment, centering in the avatar. The debate about voice in SL can be seen as a rehearsal of the basic antinomies of the avatar embodiment, between cultural logics stressing "augmentation" (the view of an avatar as being in a sense a "cyborg" prosthetic extension of the actual self on one of possibly many virtual platforms) and "immersion" (stressing instead the "gap" between, and relative autonomy of, the actual and virtual worlds) (Boellstorff 115–6, 121). The avatar, like one's voice and one's pseudonym, is seen as revealing or concealing one's authentic self, revealing it because the mode of embodiment is truly an example of conscious self-fashioning (Taylor 2002), concealing it because, like the pseudonym one chooses as a condition of participating in the online world, it also erases or replaces one's real world embodiment and embodied status features of race, class, gender, even as it creates new asymmetries specific to the virtual world (as the avatars of new players ("newbies," "newbs," "noobs") are frequently identifiable by how they look or move).

The avatar inherits all of the dualisms that afflict all performing objects, "Zich's contradiction" (Bogatyrev 1983:60), namely that avatars, like puppets and other performing objects, "may be perceived either as living people or as lifeless dolls" (Zich, cited in Bogatyrev 1983:48). Earlier I adduced the two examples that Boellstorff discusses that in one way or another illustrate Zich's contradiction, AFK and voice. An avatar that is AFK is an avatar reduced to a lifeless doll. An avatar that is attended by a discordant human voice, too, cannot be a living person, and must become, by contrast with its all-too-present puppeteer, a lifeless puppet. But equally interesting is the question of when avatars do not become Zichian "lifeless dolls," but "living people," raising the question raised at the beginning: "can the avatar speak?" One of the most interesting, and suggestive, aspects of Boellstorff's book, is a brief discussion of an instance of a player attributing agency and an autonomous persona to an avatar, linking it productively not only with issues of performance theory (including metaphoric comparisons with performing objects like masks) but also with treatment of nonhumans as agents in anthropology of technology (Boellstorff 149). Avatars exist on a continuum with more tangible performance objects and nonhuman actors, a heterogeneous collection of masks, costumes, dolls, puppets, animations, automations, machines, and robots. What avatars share with other performing objects, as a kind of *techne*, is their capacity to produce a "gap," to divide or distribute a unitary human agent across multiple roles of a single performance (for example, a flesh-and-blood actor becomes a puppeteer and a puppet, or sometimes multiple puppets, just as a single person might have several alternative avatars (usually called "alts"), etc.) (Boellstorff 150). This "analytic" aspect of performing objects as a *techne* or mediating technology is what Veltrusky calls "breaking down and building up of human looks and behavior" (1983:98), a process which decomposes the organic unity of the human

actor into separable parts (voice, puppet, gesture, movement) and then recomposes them as a new aesthetic unity (what Mrazek calls “montage”) (Mrazek 17–29).⁷ In this sense performing objects (virtual or actual) provide an analytical vocabulary for the human in the same way that Goffman’s dramaturgical metaphors do for unstaged social life, especially his influential division of the unitary role of speaker into principal (the one responsible for the text or performance or in whose interests it is performed), author (the one who composes the actual form of the text or performance), animator (the one who actually animates the text or performance, including, for example, a performing object, puppet, or voicebox), and lastly, figure (1974:496–559).

As Boellstorff notes, apropos here is Latour’s discussion of the various kinds of nonhuman actants which substitute for, or are delegates of, human agency: Avatars not only remind us of performing objects like puppets, but also remind of all those objects that serve as proxies for human agencies, actants who are placed on a continuum with the humans who might have been required to perform the same task: “characters, delegates, representatives, lieutenants . . . —some figurative [in the sense of having iconic anthropomorphic form], others non-figurative; some human, others nonhuman; some competent, others incompetent” (Latour 1992:162). The comparison reveals a larger class of “performing object” or “nonhuman actor,” the histrionic objects that fascinated Praguean semioticians like Bogatyrev, who “perform” or “act” in the dramaturgic sense, and the nonhuman actants that fascinate Latour, who “perform” or “act” in the sense of performing delegated human tasks or labor (see Shershow 1995 for a historical and etymological discussion connecting kinds of “performing objects”). Just as the puppet breaks down the unity of the human into a bundle of fragmentary qualisigns of the human (voice, image, gesture, motion) and rebuilds it as a montage (Veltrusky 1983, Mrazek, also Taylor 2009 for a parallel process in motion pictures), Latour here defines actants, human or nonhuman, initially in terms of being substituted for, or having servile human activities of “labor” delegated to them, but they are often also semiotically anthropomorphized (gaining iconic figural human properties, which Latour here subsumes under the feature of being “figural”).⁸

Therefore, avatars seem to be on a continuum between humans and nonhumans, subjects and objects, actors and nonactors, selves and nonselves (also Taylor (2002) and Pearce/Artemesia (chapter 7, 14)). First of all, as performing objects, avatars are located squarely in the antinomic world of Zich’s contradiction between human and thing, as dramaturgic proxies for the self, they reenact all the central oppositions in the performance of self that are developed in the typology of “figures” in Goffman’s *Frame Analysis* (1974:523–534). The avatar embodiment by itself, as a kind of performing object like a costume or mask (to which they are sometimes compared explicitly, e.g., Boellstorff 130, 133), or a puppet (see above), automatically produces a sense of a gap between the actual and the virtual self, an intrinsically dramaturgic opposition, and players approach this gap dramaturgically in a number of ways (here I am also influenced by Gagne’s (2008) insightful discussion of a “cosplay continuum” of kinds of performance). On the one hand (taking my inspiration from Bauman’s (2004) discussion of intertextual gaps in mediational performances), they may seek to minimize the gap, trying as much as possible to overcome the gap between the principal and the animator, the person and the avatar, turning the avatar, as much as is possible, into Goffman’s “natural figures” “live, physical, flesh and blood bodies—animal or human—each with an ongoing personal identity” (Goffman, 1974, p. 524), a kind of figure typified by a situation when a performance is felt to be a performance of one’s authentic self, as no performance at all. Alternately, the avatar can be not a figure of identity, but of alterity, analogous to Goffman’s “staged figures” (Goffman 1974:523–4). As Boellstorff notes, the use of explicitly dramaturgical metalanguages presenting avatars as “staged figures,” as performing objects (“costumes,” “masks”), seems to occur especially when the character is felt to be an “alt” (alternate avatar incarnation, often with specific delegated functions) rather than a “main” avatar (the avatar most strongly identified with as one’s proxy or surrogate self): “This frequent imbrication

between the primary avatar and what was understood to be actual-world selfhood explains why it was that when residents referred to alts as ‘costumes’ or ‘masks’ or emphasized that they created alts that did not sound or look ‘like themselves’, the implication was that the avatar in question was ‘alternative’ to their primary avatar as much as their actual-world self” (Boellstorff 133).⁹ Sometimes, Boellstorff suggests, the roles can be reversed, not only do players come to take on the personas of their avatars (the “proteus effect”) (see also Taylor 2002, Pearce/Artemesia, chapter 7, 14), but some alts are given “real-life” personas in such a way that the alt could be said, in effect, to have a “real-world” avatar (Boellstorff 133). As Boellstorff, citing Latour, suggests we should not assume that the agency is all with actual world human flesh and blood figures, that the avatar has no agency (see also Silvio 2008 for parallel agencies attributed to dolls and character figures): “Avatars were not just placeholders for selfhood, but sites of self-making in their own right. . . . Yet the dynamic was more complicated than the residents controlling agentless avatars. Many felt the avatar appearance affected their behavior” (Boellstorff 149). Through the “proteus effect,” avatars can reciprocally affect the person who controls them, allowing that person to become more outgoing, for example (Boellstorff 149).

In answer to Boellstorff’s question “can the avatar speak?” we might append the Russian director Meyerhold’s much earlier observations on the puppet theater, which Meyerhold approaches both from the perspective of “what the puppeteer wants,” and the “what the puppet wants.” Meyerhold creates two imaginary puppeteers or puppet theater directors, each of which embodies one aspect of the Zichian perspective on puppets, or alternatively, two approaches to the “immersive fallacy,” one based on the idea that the virtual world should be a naturalistic “other” actual world, the other that asserts the autonomy of the virtual world. The first director embraces naturalism, and wants his puppets to imitate real people, until finally he realizes, with some regret, that the simplest solution is to replace his realistic puppets with real human actors.

. . . [Like the first director], the other director wanted to make his puppets imitate real people, too, but he quickly realized that as soon as he tried to improve the puppet’s mechanism it lost part of its charm. It was as though the puppet were resisting such barbarous improvements with all its being. The director came to his senses when he realized that there was a limit beyond which there is no alternative but to replace a puppet with a man. But how could he part with the puppet which had created a world of enchantment with its incomparable movements, its expressive gestures achieved by some magic known to it alone, its angularity which reaches the heights of true plasticity? (Meyerhold 1969:128)

The second director encounters in the puppet, as the SL resident in their avatar, a Peircean secondness, an alterity, an otherness, a set of dispositions, needs, desires, alien to themselves. Like the avatar, the puppet is not just a realism manqué, and the world it creates is not just a slightly unrealistic version of the actual world. The gap between virtual and actual is not a flaw, a lack of naturalism that, following the impetus of Meyerhold’s “first director,” will be eventually erased by techne in the form of better CGI, graphics engine and interface (though certainly many animators, computer game players, and designers are like Meyerhold’s first director). The techne of the puppet or avatar is not trying to erase the gap between the actual and the virtual world, but to create it (Boellstorff 150):

The puppet did not want to become an exact replica of man, because the world of the puppet is a wonderland of make-believe, and the man which it impersonates is a make-believe man. The stage of the puppet theatre is a sounding board for the strings of the puppet’s art. On this stage things are not as they are because nature is like that but because that is how the puppet wishes it—and wishes not to copy but to create. (Meyerhold 1969:129)

All of which brings us back to the matter of worlds and what Taylor calls “worldness” (Chapter 2). As Boellstorff has shown us, virtual worlds can be profitably studied using some of the same categories we have used in the past to study actual worlds, and all the while, what we learn about technically mediated virtual worlds and

performances shed new light on things in the actual world (the debate about voice, for example). But, virtual worlds are, indeed, worlds with a difference, too, because they virtually complete autocracies, owned by corporations at whose whim they could be closed at any point, and at whose whim avatars can be erased without notice (Pearce/Artemesia 34, 40–42; see Malaby for a sensitive discussion of the political ideologies of “technoliberalism” held by the designers of SL). But the sense of reality they have is that conferred by the liveliness and commitment of the population of the avatars who frequent them and who may, without warning, log off and never return for whatever reason, including precisely because of the changes in the world made by the owning corporation, or sometimes, they simply die in the actual world (Boellstorff 126–8). As Taylor’s work in particular emphasizes, the sense of “presence,” of “worldness,” in online environments is in large part a product of avatar embodiment (Taylor 117). This sense of worldness includes the presence of other avatars, as Taylor (2002:47) notes, nothing is more lonely, more haunting, than a virtual place that is empty of other avatars (see also Boellstorff 182, Pearce/Artemesia 114, 217–220). Such avatar-less virtual landscapes can produce the same melancholy sense of loneliness as famous scenes of empty public urban spaces from apocalyptic films like *On the Beach* or *28 Days Later* (see Figure 1 and Figure 2).



Figure 2
Sunset on Atys (Courtesy of Ryzom)

But such contingencies produce new possibilities as well. Virtual worlds have been around long enough now that some have disappeared and taken their communities with them. Indeed, Pearce/Artemesia gives us a rich ethnography of such a community and its attempts to sustain itself as a virtual diaspora on multiple platforms. Another such world, the virtual world of Atys of the science-fantasy game *Ryzom* for a time passed from one bankrupt owner to another, with progressively worse server support (so that the final period of the last owner was called “the Time of the Great Lag”). When I joined the game a couple of years back it was *in extremis*, and yet the few avatars who were present were unusually enthusiastic in greeting me and showing me around a world that seemed almost empty and very laggy. Later, I attempted to log on, and found the game no longer was online. Inquiring into the background, I found that the game had not only a lively community of refugees, but that this game had also been the focus of a concerted attempt by ex-designers and players to assert community control over a gaming world.¹⁰ On this level, the vanishing world of *Ryzom* (see Figure 1 and Figure 2), became briefly an opportunity to

turn a virtual world into a utopia enacting a new virtual social contract, with models of property and governance that deserve comparison with Boellstorff's discussion of "creationist capitalism" in SL (chapter 8), Malaby's discussion of "technoliberalism" of the designers of SL, and especially Pearce/Artemesia's discussion of the Uru diaspora. These actions were closely monitored by player refugee groups who reconstituted themselves at independent websites and forums, as well as exile communities on other games such as Eve Online. But for most of the players the end of Ryzom was not an opportunity to build a freeware utopia, a new kind of virtual world at the abstract level of code, but a tragedy of the loss of the concrete experienceable world of Atys.¹¹ Like the Uru community discussed by Pearce/Artemesia (for example, chapter 6), these communities of "homins" constituted themselves as communities of exile, of mourning for the landscape of a lost world, of "yearning . . . to dig with the threat of death by failure to careplan, yet with a relaxing serenity I've found nowhere else as all around the animals go about their business, fellow homins dart by, insects flit, fog and luminous spores drift from the ground, the trees and grasses sway, the weather changes." (Katriell 2008).¹²

While the Virtual Citizenship Association was not able to realize their goal of resurrecting Ryzom both as Atys and as a free software utopia, the game did, suddenly and without warning, reappear under new ownership, and the existing player base was invited this year to return to Atys and play for free. (By now it has been revealed that the new owners are, in fact, mostly the original designers.) It was a strange homecoming, a resurrection of a world, a sudden reefflorescence of an exiled virtual community. This strikes me as the sort of thing we couldn't possibly make up, and probably merits our attention. As Pearce/Artemesia exclaims in her ethnographic memoir that forms an addendum to the book: "Why aren't semioticians studying this?" I think she means us.

Notes

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1. Episode 1008 "Make love, not Warcraft" (originally aired Oct 4 2006). By contrast, the popular Japanese "meta-anime" series Lucky*Star, whose main character is an *otaku* (geek) girl named Konata Izumi (Kona-chan), presents a much more sympathetic and convincing insider view of online gaming subcultures. In different episodes, Konata is shown teaming with her homeroom teacher (Nanako Kuroi) as a deadly tank and mage combo online, and then having the teacher break frame in ingame chat with "real-life" concerns about the negative effects of her gaming on her study habits. In other episodes we see the difficulty one of her real-life friends (Tsukasa Hiiragi) has, as a newbie, in controlling her avatar, or the impromptu online celebration Konata throws with her online friends, including buying them online "gifts," when she acquires an ultra-rare sword as a "drop." For similar sympathetic "intimate" insider views of Western online gaming communities, see for example, the online series *The Guild* (<http://www.watchtheguild.com/>).

2. I thank Alejandro Paz for this observation.

3. http://www.aedenartisans.com/documents/tryker_lexicon.pdf

4. While more casual forms of participation in virtual worlds (what Ito et al. might categorize as "hanging out" or "messaging around") do not necessarily involve multitasking involving the use of online databases related to the game, the more involved forms of participation ("geeking out"), particularly in combat-oriented games, often involve reference to online databases that facilitate what Ito et al. call "augmented play," which can include both what Taylor discusses under the rubric of "instrumental play" (Taylor chapter 3), and creative fan productions like machinima (a blend of "machine" and "cinema," animated films based on game footage, often shared through sites like You Tube). See also Azuma on these derivative works. Within the game, too, forms of "geeky" expertise can be displayed based on expert knowledge not of the visible virtual world shared with other players but of this invisible virtual world of underlying game mechanics, what Azuma (2009) calls the hidden "grand non-narrative" revealed by usually fan-constructed online databases. Here Ito et al.'s discussion of degrees of participation

combine with Taylor's discussion of "power gamers" to allow us to distinguish between different modalities of consumption of the virtual, including what Azuma calls, with respect to otaku subcultures, "database consumption" (diagnostic of "geeking out") alongside "narrative consumption" (shared by even the most casual forms of participation).

5. It is interesting to compare "Zich's contradiction" (see also Veltrusky 1983: 108–9), to the early observations about dolls and automata made by the German psychologist Ernst Jentsch's "On the psychology of the uncanny" (2009[1906]). Taking as his primary example dolls and automata, Jentsch defines the uncanny as "doubt as to whether an apparently living being really is animate and, conversely, doubt as to whether a lifeless object may not in fact be animate."

6. For a study of the technical devices used by puppeteers to confer distinct "puppet voices" on their puppets, see Proshan 1981; for a fascinating linguistic anthropological ethnography of a puppet theater, see Gross 2001.

7. See Lemon 2009 for a fascinating example of the reverse process, instead of objects performing the human, in which human actors serve to "perform objects," incidentally giving objects emotional lives through the qualisigns of the human.

8. On the Peircean semiotic category of the qualisign, essentially a quality (quali-) which represents a semiotic affordance or potentiality (-sign), and the "bundling" of qualisigns (with which Mrazek's concept of "montage" could be compared, see Keane 2003, Meneley 2008, Manning and Meneley 2008).

9. "Alts" often perform servile roles with respect to "main" avatars, performing delegated and boring functions that allow the "main" to pursue more interesting ones. In many combat-oriented games, a common species of alt is a "healer alt," a semiautomated alt (verging on a fully automated "bot," so sometimes called "healer bot") who heals the main avatar using automated commands. In the science fiction space warfare game *Eve Online*, risky, even suicidal, functions are also delegated to purpose-built alts. Such servile alts extend the master-slave relation implied in all performing objects one step further, conflating the two senses of "performing object."

10. The Free Ryzom campaign (which solicited donations during the liquidation of the bankrupt previous owner's assets) formed one important campaign of the Virtual Citizenship Association, whose goal was not only to restore Ryzom, but to make it a free MMORPG, in line with a virtual "social contract" that would commit the Association, among other things, to (1) turn Ryzom into free software, (2) "give back to the community," (5) make the avatars into "the property of their respective players," and finally (9) base their decision process on "participative democracy" (www.ryzom.org/page/project_socialcontract).

11. Here again Azuma's distinction between the invisible "grand nonnarrative" of the database and the visible "small narratives" of the visible virtual world would appear to find a homology in defining different political objects and programs as well as distinct objects of consumption. From a certain technically and legally sophisticated but frankly technically essentialist and reductive "geek" perspective, virtual worlds are not really worlds at all, this is an illusion of what Azuma calls "narrative consumption," the almost Platonic real reality is the "grand nonnarrative" of "platforms" or "code." Certainly many useful recent articles (Kelty 2005, Coleman 2009) have made fascinating contributions to describing a certain kind of "geek" perspective that defines its expertise and politics in terms of the hidden nonnarrative of code in this way, and it is worth comparing this hegemonic "geek" perspective to other vernacular forms of geekdom, including those that, like the otakus discussed by Azuma, oscillate between apparently contradictory modes of engagement with and consumption of both code and narrative, or narrative alone. The Free Ryzom campaign illustrates the tensions between these different "geek" perspectives, as Ryzom alternates between being a code awaiting liberation or a world (Atys) awaiting rebirth.

12. Ryzom is also the only MMO I am aware of that has in-world animal rights activists, specifically to prevent cruelty to Yubos, which are small, cute herbivores that are the object of newbie hunting missions.

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