

## Single Reviews

## Ethnography and Virtual Worlds: A Handbook of Method

Tom Boellstorff, Bonnie Nardi, Celia Pearce, and T. L. Taylor. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012. 264 pp.

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Tom Boellstorff, Bonnie Nardi, Celia Pearce, and T. L. Taylor have composed an exceedingly practical guide to conducting ethnographic research in persistent online networked social spaces, which, in their sensorial richness and social complexity, come to resemble places and even "virtual worlds." Although not claiming exhaustiveness, this compact methods handbook touches on the important topics. Its opening chapters (1–3) justify the need for a lightweight methods text "to be stashed in a backpack," followed by three short histories (of ethnographic methods, virtual worlds, and research in virtual worlds) and a sure-to-please busting of myths about ethnography (that it is unscientific, simply anecdotal, soon to be obsolete, etc.). In chapters 4–7, the authors delve into research design and data collection, with a special emphasis on participant-observations and interviews, although also profiling more supplementary techniques such as capturing chatlogs, screenshots, and video. In chapters 8–12, they discuss research ethics, IRBs, data analysis, and writing up and presenting data before releasing their book into the hands of future researchers.

Candidly presenting ethnographic research methods in lucid prose, the authors perform a service to the discipline, illuminating a subject more often mystified and too rarely emphasized in cultural anthropological training. Although focusing on life online, the authors adjust standard anthropological perspectives to the unique technologically mediated nature of the Internet. In doing so, they clarify the original methods themselves, making their book useful even in offline contexts. The authors nimbly evoke their own research in virtual worlds—having each authored a monograph unfolding in networked spaces such as *World of Warcraft*, *There.com*, *Everquest*, and *Second Life*—to ground and infuse interest into their practical advice. Their profiled research is diverse enough to suggest more general principles about ethnography of life online. Still, the relatively tight emphasis on often game-like online spaces, combined with skillful collaboration utilizing some of the very technologies about which they write, lends the collectively authored volume a compellingly coherent vision and almost singular voice.

The book provides a particularly welcome account of qualitative field-based methods, such as participant-

observation involving long-term immersion in naturalistic settings, that lie at the heart of ethnography. It offers less on how ethnography, as a case-study account of a particular group's practices and points of view, can be enhanced by incorporating structured data collection methods, systematic analytical strategies, and more standard scientific reasoning. For example, the authors argue that experiments, and also any forms of active deception (as in nonparticipating observation), are antithetical to ethnography, which by contrast requires total honesty with study participants. However, this prescription is at odds with ethnographic studies showing that behavioral experiments, if properly contextualized and handled, can reveal important dimensions of local culture, complementing phases of research involving interviews and more fully immersive participant-observation (e.g., Auger 2004; Henrich et al. 2005; Luhmann 2012; Luhmann and Morgain 2012; Roepstorff and Frith 2012; Ross and Medin 2005; Snodgrass forthcoming).

I appreciate the authors' sentiments here: they wish to identify something distinctive, thus protecting the ethnography brand from interlopers who might compromise it with second-rate imitations. However, such ethnographic exceptionalism also renders more difficult certain mixed methodological innovations, collaboration with scholars using more structured experimental and quantifiable approaches to studying online virtual worlds (like Yee and Bailenson 2007), and thus also fuller integration with the social sciences more broadly. In any case, Boellstorff and his coauthors articulate a coherent and even classic vision of ethnography, which many will find appealing (and noncontroversial). Readers will need to weigh this handbook's advice against their own research aims, analytical orientations, and presumed audiences, perhaps complementing this book's proposed methods with others.

This book will appeal to ethnographers in anthropology and other disciplines, especially those interested in human-computer interactions, digital media, and new communications technologies. It would make an excellent teaching text in advanced undergraduate or graduate classes on research methods or virtual worlds (I plan to use it in mine). But it will also help even advanced ethnographers hone their craft, as well as better articulate it to outsiders and critics. The text is best when promoting a flexible vision of ethnography and a big-tent vision of cultural anthropology.

# Ethnography And Virtual Worlds A Handbook Of Method

**M Tight**



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