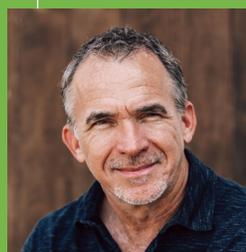# The Perception of Culture in the Virtual World

Interview with Tom BOELLSTORFF

prof. Tom Boellstorff, Ph.D.
*University of California
Department of Anthropology
Social Science Plaza 3151
92697-5100 Irvine, CA
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
tboellst@uci.edu*

Tom Boellstorff is an anthropologist based at the University of California, Irvine, known and respected for his research on the anthropology of sexuality, globalisation, linguistics and more. Tom Boellstorff chairs the Association for Queer Anthropology and is a Fellow of the American Council of Learned Societies. His research on LGBT includes a study that took place in the online virtual world Second Life. His work has won the Ruth Benedict Award, presented by the Society of Lesbian and Gay Anthropologists. He is a former editor-in-chief of the American Anthropologist and co-editor of a Princeton book series entitled Princeton Studies in Culture and Technology.

Mgr. Alexandra Rysuľová, PhD.
*University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius in Trnava
Faculty of Mass Media Communication
Námestie J. Herdu 2
917 01 Trnava
SLOVAK REPUBLIC
alexandra.rysulova@ucm.sk*

Alexandra Rysuľová is an assistant professor at the Faculty of Mass Media Communication at the University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius in Trnava, Slovakia. She is actively involved in innovations in the environment of digital games and virtual worlds with regard to education. As a lecturer, she was involved in the international project LoGaSET, which trained seniors in smartphones and mobile applications. She created a virtual version of the Faculty of Mass Media Communication in the virtual world Second Life, which she uses for teaching and presenting student achievements and activities. She actively participated in the creation of teaching materials for teachers as part of the V4: Increasing Digital Competencies – The Growth of Education in Society project. Currently, she is the communication coordinator of the Creative Centre Skladová. She is actively involved in 3D modelling, photo editing, virtual marketing, new technologies and is interested in the gaming industry.

Alexandra Rysuľová (A. R.): Professor Boellstorff, how would you define culture in the virtual world? How is it shaped and who influences it?

Tom Boellstorff: Virtual-world cultures are as vibrant as physical-world cultures. It is about human social interaction, and the core definition is no different. Even in the physical world there are many different cultures across place and time, and digital cultures extend that. Virtual cultures are influenced by cultures from all over the physical world, and are also influenced by different online cultures. And all of these, physical and online cultures, can be real or unreal in different ways. Nowadays it is very complicated, because you can have virtual-world cultures that are shaped by multiple physical-world cultures, just like you and I are in Europe and the United States right now. And there can be multiple online cultures shaping things. In most online virtual worlds nowadays, like *Second Life* or *Fortnite*, people might have set up a Discord channel, or they use Instagram or other communication channels, so there can be other online cultures that shape virtual cultures.

A. R.: What differences can you identify between the cultures of different virtual worlds such as Second Life or Animal Crossing?

Tom Boellstorff: In every virtual world there are a variety of subcultures and cultures, and there can also be differences and similarities between them that are shaped by the possibilities of the platform. In Second Life, for example, you can easily have 30 or 40 people on your piece of land, and if you make it a space where four different servers come together, up to 200 people can attend an event. In *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (ACNH), only 8 people can be on an island at a time, so you cannot run events for large groups in the same way. In ACNH there is no voice output, and you must use an iPhone or an external program to talk, which has an impact on interaction. Compared to Second Life, ACNH uses non-player character (NPC) villagers, who are not humans but automated bots with whom people can sometimes have very close relationships. Second Life does have some automated bots, but they do not have the functionality comparable to the NPC villagers in ACNH. The automated items in Second Life, such as scripted babies or pets, are not universal, whereas ACNH requires engagement with villagers as part of the game engine. Those kinds of technical affordances have an impact, just like the fact that one is accessed via a laptop or desktop computer, and the other on the Nintendo Switch, has an impact on the way you interact. It changes the way text chat works when you do not have a keyboard and must type more slowly. There are also cultural differences. For example, ACNH is part of a series; there have been Animal Crossing digital games for more than 10 years. Some people who come to ACNH have played those earlier games and are familiar with the story; others have not. In an open-ended virtual world like Second Life, that does not exist at all. And then there are virtual worlds like Minecraft, which are open ended but where a "story mode" has been added to create a kind of narrative that influences people's behaviour. So there can be three different kinds of influences: internal diversity within the virtual world, a diversity between virtual worlds and the way those virtual worlds interact with each other, and then diversity based on the possibilities of the platform and the ownership of the platform.

A. R.: In your monograph Coming of Age in Second Life, published in 2008, you object to the comparison of virtual worlds and simulations, such as the digital game The Sims. Fast forward to 2022, is there still no simulation in the virtual world?

Tom Boellstorff: It depends on what people do with it, whether they try to simulate something or not. Nowadays, people often talk about digital twins when it comes to creating an

online version of a city or a university campus. In that sense, people are trying to simulate something by trying to create a very close connection between something in the physical world and something online. It really depends on what people are doing whether something is a simulation or not; it has nothing to do with the technology. The sense that you can only simulate as much as the current scripting capabilities in Second Life allow has implications. For example, scripted objects in the form of babies or pets can only do as much as the limits of script and mesh objects allow. It can be tricky because just because someone has a baby or a cat does not necessarily mean they are trying to simulate something in the physical world. It might happen that someone creates a scripted cat in Second Life that can talk because that is considered popular, but in the physical world cats cannot talk. Someone might build a house based on their physical home but not need stairs because Second Life offers the ability to fly, so in a sense the result can be more surreal in the virtual world. Simulation is more about people's intentions and goals than technological prescription. In education, for example, there is a debate about why we build tables and chairs in the classroom as we would in the physical world, when we could sit on a cloud or under the sea. Some people argue that it would be beneficial for education to recreate the physical environment, while others believe that this has no impact on the experience and educators should experiment with something else.

A. R.: Instead of using the term simulation, could we perceive role-playing as a form of participation that is common in virtual worlds?

Tom Boellstorff: Role-playing is an interesting aspect, because many of the biggest virtual worlds are online games where you have to play a role. In *No Man's Sky*, Fortnite or *World of Warcraft*, people role-play most of the time. In open-ended virtual worlds like Second Life, there are huge role-playing communities, but people do not necessarily role-play all the time. They might do it for a few hours and then go do something else, or they might go to a meeting. People do not have to choose one or the other. That is an interesting approach to thinking about who we are in the physical world, because even in the physical world we are constantly playing different identities in roles. You could say that in the physical world we do not necessarily only role-play when we are performing in Hollywood. You can be a professor, a parent or a teacher and the action that is the role is a form of role-playing or performance, depending on how you define it. It is a connection between online and offline about authenticity and social relations and how we think about identity and the idea of role-play in terms of something we normally do when we change who we are depending on the context. For example, I could be in a film or a play like *Romeo and Juliet* and pretend to kill someone with a knife, but in the physical world I am not really a murderer. These issues are raised in virtual worlds, but they can also come up on Facebook or a website, where people leave comments or log in and have different identities.

A. R.: Do virtual worlds create a platform for experiencing fandom or participatory culture?

Tom Boellstorff: Fandom role-playing of franchises like *Star Trek*, *Star Wars*, or *Harry Potter* are widespread in virtual worlds. In addition, there are thematic role-playing communities, such as the 1920s Berlin regions in Second Life, which are not based on a fandom but represent the role-playing of a particular period in history. There are many medieval role-playing communities in Second Life that are not directly linked to a film or a book, so that is not a fandom. Another form of role-playing is when people create a mutual connection with other people and create a bond in the form of a marriage or a virtual family.

A. R.: Are subcultures such as LGBT culture or disability culture prevalent, understood and accepted in the virtual world?

Tom Boellstorff: That depends on what people do, especially for LGBT cultures or for people who go into a virtual world and see it as a place where they can remain anonymous. There are cases of people who think they might be transgender and use an avatar in Second Life to explore their gender identity. These kinds of things can be particularly impactful for people living in more rural areas. Of course, just like elsewhere on the internet, there is anti-LGBT activity and hate speech in virtual worlds. One advantage of Second Life is that because it is not advertising-based like Facebook, it does not try to find out a lot of information about members, and that might be attractive to some people. Of course, there are many members of LGBT communities in Second Life who are very open in the physical world. They are in the virtual world because they see it as entertaining and a way to socialize. With regard to disability, some disabilities can become more invisible in virtual worlds and for some people that can be liberating. This does not necessarily mean people are hiding disability, but a matter of control regarding when to reveal disability.

A. R.: Is toxicity in the virtual world identified cross-culturally and can it be caused by people's anonymity?

Tom Boellstorff: This is something that people have been talking about for many years on the internet in general, particularly regarding anonymity. If I go online and my name is just "Tom334", I might be toxic; I might be mean. When this happens in Second Life it is sometimes called 'griefing', but it is a broader online phenomenon known as disinhibition. But this obviously does not always happen. One factor is that in some virtual worlds, including Second Life, there is a difference between anonymity and pseudonymity. People with a Second Life avatar may under that name have a clothing store, a circle of friends, and so on. A pseudonym in this case is a real identity. For example, as a researcher, I protect people in the physical world during my research by changing their names. I do the same in Second Life: it is necessary to change screen names because they are real names.

A. R.: What other attributes can we identify in virtual worlds across cultures?

Tom Boellstorff: The media often emphasize negative aspects of virtual worlds, and those are real, but what always impresses me about virtual worlds like Second Life is the kindness and hospitality. There is so much altruism and kindness online that is not always talked about in the media. I do not want to ignore the negative things, because it is important to talk about them and prevent them, but I also do not want to make it seem like that is all that is happening. We need to better understand why people are kind online. It is certainly the case that generosity, kindness, helpfulness and voluntarism are found in Second Life all the time. People offer help to newcomers; groups of enthusiasts offer courses to acquire skills in building or other aspects of the virtual world. What we can learn from this?