Agency and labour in Virtual worlds: The Anthropology of Doing culture

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Supervisor

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Declaration

I declare that this dissertation/thesis is my own unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Master of Arts in Digital Arts in the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination in any other university.

13 Jul 2022

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Abstract

This thesis provides a comparative analysis of the anthropology of virtual worlds and virtual world behaviour by providing a re-examination of the digital/real dichotomy and symbolic/interpretive anthropology. The thesis argues that virtual worlds are not found but created via the contingent relationship between virtual world designers and the agency and labour of users. Moreover, this thesis provides a rationale for the importance of studying virtual worlds from the ground up, that is, ethnographically, as the idea of what is real and what is not becomes muddled and unproductive when researchers observe the actuality of virtual world behaviour in virtual places within their own right. Lastly, this thesis suggests that future studies of virtual worlds should not rely on technologies that attempt to emulate a form of hyperrealism but should rather use cultures and the term *doing culture* in virtual worlds as the fundamental point of departure for understanding the project of being and becoming human.

Introduction

According to Shields and Shields (1996, p.7), the internet has created a "*crisis of boundaries* between the real and the virtual, between time zones and between spaces". More recently, Boellstorff (2016, p.387) proposes that "one of the most important theoretical and political issues haunting contemporary theories of technology" is that the 'digital' is seen in opposition to the 'real' and that this opposition stance "fundamentally misrepresents the relationship between the offline and the online". The idea that reality is a separate phenomenon confined to the physical or 'real world' implies that "technology makes life less real" (Boellstorff, 2015b, p.20).

"There is a need for rethinking the relationship of the real not just to technology but also to representation, social construction, and production."

Boellstorff, cited in Grimshaw, 2014, p.741

Chee (2015) highlights some critiques or disagreements in the space of digital ethnography, such as the drawing of boundaries between virtual/real worlds. Furthermore, Chee (2015, p.4) notes, "There is also the epistemological divide between what some regard as virtual and real, which has been a source of consternation beyond games, where the very project of embodied

ethnography is thrown into question". There is a tendency in game research and internet behaviour that focuses on the effects of 'Internet gaming disorder' (Liew et al., 2018) and what happens when individuals forego their offline responsibilities to game more. This is also paired with the common notion that games and their correlating spaces are anti-social, and stereotypes are perpetuated (Herodotou et al., 2014) of gamers as isolated, pale teenage boys or as those who are "low in social status and socially peripheral" (Kowert et al., 2012, p.471) or socio-emotionally dissatisfied (Caplan, 2005). Although useful, these types of studies rarely acknowledge the place of virtual worlds and game worlds as something to be studied in their own right. To consider them as actual places means that the original field site (i.e. the virtual world) needs to be understood first with all its particularities so that the divide between online commitment and offline behaviour could be understood better. Ideally, this would result in a move away from enquiries that implicitly separate the online and the offline.

Boellstorff et al. (2012, p.195) argue in favour of ethnographic research in this field (as opposed to only relying on effect studies) because it offers a unique perspective that allows for the demonstration of the overlapping elements of technology, culture and selfhood that have perpetual social consequences. To simply seek for correlations between 'time spent online' and 'causations offline' does not acknowledge a framework for how virtual worlds are ever-changing, how behaviour is mediated in them and struggles to see video games/virtual worlds as cultural objects of study. Lastly, in separating the online/offline one undermines the existence of a feedback loop between the two as interacting with a virtual world is not a unidirectional process.

The study of virtual worlds is by no means new and should be considered through the following premise: "they [virtual worlds] may simulate abstractions of reality; they may be operated as a service; creating them may be an art; people may visit them to play games. Ultimately, though, they're just a set of locations. Places" (Bartle, 2004, p.475). For the purpose of this thesis, virtual worlds can be thought of as a: "synchronous, persistent network of people, represented as avatars, facilitated by networked computers" (Bell, 2008, p.2).

Boellstorff (2015b) delineates the study of virtual worlds further by stating that it should be called 'cyber anthropology' as opposed to the slightly more general study of digital anthropology. This thesis will primarily concern itself with the study of virtual worlds and game worlds that have been studied through the ethnographic method in works such as

Coming of Age in Second Life: An anthropologist explores the virtually human (Boellstorff, 2015b) and *Play between worlds: Exploring online game culture* (Taylor, 2006). To assist these analyses, I will also be drawing from my own unpublished ethnographic research done inside a virtual world in 2020.

Thesis statement

How do people, as "more than self-interested agents concerned only with material gains," (Fischer, 2014, p.2) in virtual worlds, **engage** with a set of relations to (per)form their reality so as not to escape but to imbue their lives with meaningful webs in which they are suspended (Geertz, 1973)? What sort of transformational processes can be observed in the engagements mediated by the infrastructure of the digital environment?

Following this enquiry, the research objective is then: to elaborate on the dichotomy between the real and the virtual by analysing the particularities of performance in virtual world cultures, in other words, how people ***do culture***[1] in virtual worlds as a way of interacting with the set of relations underpinning the real(s). Similarly, Golub (2010, p.17) argues that "what makes games truly 'real' for players is the extent to which they create collective projects of action that people care about, not their imitation of sensorial qualia". The focus of this thesis will be on the contingency between users and virtual worlds and how these worlds ask us to re-evaluate our understanding of an objectively single ontological state of affairs where the thesis as a whole can be framed as an hermeneutic analysis centering upon comparative anthropology

The thesis statement will be tested mainly in the work produced by two prominent virtual world anthropologists[2]: Tom Boellstorff and T.L. Taylor. The thesis has three recursive questions that largely rely on what these scholars have written about the experiences of their study participants and their own. These questions will also be answered by looking at ontology and abstractions around worlds and reality(ies). They are:

- How do other virtual world academics posit the real and the virtual?

[1] This is my own term and is fleshed out as the thesis progresses
[2] Although they are known for much more

- How is culture postulated in virtual worlds by virtual world academics, philosophers, participants?
- When are virtual worlds real/unreal from the perspective of social anthropology?

To answer these questions, the thesis will establish a framework for my term *doing culture* by focusing on the shared vocabulary of performative enactment. To establish the framework for the term *doing culture*, I will call upon the work of Clifford Geertz as the foundation from which it will be built. Geertz was interested in what was "said" and using cultural theory to create an interpretation that makes the "saids" meaningful (Geertz, 1973, p.27). Conquergood (1998, p.131) argues against the 'textual turn' by stating, "Instead of endeavoring to rescue the *said* from the ***saying,*** a performance paradigm struggles to recuperate the ***saying*** from the ***said,*** to put mobility, action, and agency back into play". The point here is that even though searching for how meaning is constructed is an invaluable strategy in unravelling cultures, the term *doing culture* will attempt to reach in between the textual and performance paradigm. This is useful because it allows for some simplicity in the sense that everything that resembles an act, a movement towards or a performance can be put forth against its ability to produce meaning. If it does not produce meaning, does it establish worldness? Reality? This is the aim of employing the term *doing culture* to make better sense of virtual worlds. This thesis aims to provide a rationale for the re-examination of virtual world anthropology and the divide between the digital and the real.

Virtual worlds past and present[3]

The term "cyberspace" was originally coined by William Gibson (1984) in *Neuromancer* and other fantasy works such as those by J.R.R Tolkien. The emergence of tabletop pen-and-paper games like *Dungeons and Dragons* all had a prominent influence on the conception of virtual worlds past and present (Taylor, 2006; Boellstorff et al., 2012). The first virtual world that garnered a significant user base was *Adventure*, with the first version published in 1976 (Lastowka and Hunter, 2004). It had a strong influence on the future of virtual world design. The first **public** virtual world called *MUD1* (Multi-User Dungeon) was developed by Bartle (Bartle, 2004) and Trobshaw in 1979. It garnered plenty of its inspiration from tabletop games such as *Dungeons and Dragons.* This text-based fantasy world allowed players to direct their text-based avatar through commands such as "go" and "look around", which in

[3] For a full history of virtual worlds, see Bartle (2004)

turn allowed the world to be described to the player as they interacted with it (and others). Another prominent virtual world called *LambaMOO* (1999) was also text-based but allowed for user input in their surroundings (Kerschbaumer, 2016). This, in turn, allowed for the creation of personal spaces like gardens, houses and so on. The first graphic virtual world was called *Habitat*, which was published in 1986. *Habitat* was the first world to allow users to embody themselves through avatars, enabling them to see themselves moving about inside of the visual world (Boellstorff et al., 2012). Morningstar and Farmer, the developers of *Habitat*, noted that a virtual world "is defined more by the interactions among the actors within it than by the technology with which it is implemented" (Morningstar and Farmer, 2008, p.2). More recently, virtual worlds such as *Decentraland* [4] runs on a cryptocurrency called Ethereum, which allows for users to buy and sell digital real estate while leaving the option to partake in various other activities (play games, socialise etc.). In *Decentraland*, users vote for policy changes and updates and hold an 'actual' stake[5]. Boellstorff et al. (2012, p.122) explain that "the term 'world' is not just a metaphor… they have place and space, embodiment, and objects". I ask why scholars pose virtual worlds as something that need to resemble any physical fieldsite at all and question if this does not, in turn, fuel the digital/real dichotomy? Moreover, this thesis investigates the validity of 'reality' by questioning the idea that it is something that can be experienced in its totality by all; I suggest that much of what is real is mostly what is presented to us via various forms of media and self-interpretation.

Currently, most virtual worlds have followed a model that constitutes a few important elements: avatar creation and improvement, task repetition, and the proliferation of user/user and user/NPC[6] interactions. Many virtual worlds, such as *Second Life*, do not have overt tasks or clear goals, and much of the onus is on the player to essentially construct a meaningful experience. The most popular virtual worlds, however, are those that fall into the broad category of MMORPGs[7] such as *World of Warcraft*. These virtual worlds are often considered more as 'online games' than strictly virtual worlds given their design. In these game worlds, players repeat tasks, level their avatars and accumulate better equipment by completing complex tasks with and without others in the world. Even though the player base for each of these virtual worlds differs, what is undeniably true of all is that they allow for

[4] Launched in February 2020 by the Decentraland foundation
[5] *Decentraland* claims that the virtual world is owned by its users
[6] Non-player controlled characters
[7] Massive multi online role playing games

anyone with an able computer and a stable internet connection[8] to interact with the world and other respective users through socialisation, combat or roleplaying. This means that virtual worlds can be studied ethnographically given the complexities of social behaviour that is enabled by the infrastructure of the digital environment.

In late 2020, I spent a month conducting ethnographic research[9] within a virtual world primarily focused on roleplaying in a modified version of a game called *Grand Theft Auto 5*. The users primarily were situated in South Africa, and a good portion of the in-game modifications was coded in by the South African owners. In this roleplaying world, there are strict rules as to what constitutes appropriate behaviour and suggestions on how to become a better 'roleplayer'. One's avatar (or character) did not 'level up', and any accumulation of wealth was suggested only to be done if it fits the narrative of the character. One of my characters was a crude old mafia leader engaging in all sorts of 'illegal' activities. The accumulation of wealth was, therefore, appropriate given the overt roleplay goals of my character. The rules were strictly enforced as I partook in and witnessed many rule disputes resulting in frustration, anger and resolve. The reason I mention my research is twofold: I emphasise the fact that there is indeed virtual world behaviour that does not follow a typical arc that puts the player on a linear track towards 'success', and I pose myself in my own research as one who is somewhat familiar with the existence of player cultures inside a particular virtual world.

When Malabay (2007, p.96) states, "People may, in any specific context, imbue them [games] with deep, normatively charged meanings. The challenge, therefore, is to rethink games from the ground up, leaving these a priori associations behind" it becomes an almost obvious clue that ethnographic material, with an interpretive approach, assists this 'ground up' venture deeply. For the purpose of this thesis, I will refer to game worlds and MMORPGs synonymously as virtual worlds. Moreover, virtual worlds have particular qualities that delineate them from other seemingly virtual spaces like social media or online forums; this will be discussed later in this chapter and expanded upon in later chapters. In an aforementioned quote, Bartle (2004, p.475) posed virtual worlds as a "set of locations". Thought of differently, one can consider virtual worlds to be performative locations as

[8] And of course, the capital to do all these things (e.g. time, money)
[9] This was done in partial fulfilment for my Honours degree in Social Anthropology at the NWU and is available on request

opposed to the image of an open space that Bartle's statement might invoke. They are performative because inside them they contain the result of the labour of players and its own habitus (Bourdieu, 1990; 2007). It is not structured as a "complex whole" (Tylor, 1871, p.1) from which virtual world cultures simply emerge out of the ashes of the moulded complexities of virtual 'code' and conduct.

We can also start by conceptualising virtual worlds as "places of human culture realized by computer programs through the Internet" (Boellstorff, 2015b, p.17). With these concepts somewhat framed, we can start to place our social agents at the core of our interrogative framework. Taylor (2006, p.159) states that "players already are core actors in the maintenance and life of the game. There is no culture; there is no game[10], without the labour of the players". In chapter one, I will discuss my position on the importance of labour and agency in understanding culture(s) in virtual worlds. Boellstorff (2015b, p.62) ties virtual worlds and culture together by noting: "...since people find virtual worlds meaningful sites for social action, cultures in virtual worlds exist whether we like it or not". In light of this, it should be worth considering that, "In anthropology there is no such thing as pure human immediacy; interacting face-to-face is just as culturally inflected as digitally mediated communication" (Horst and Miller, 2012, p.12). Crawford et al. argue that even though our interactions with computers and other people are mediated, it is also the case that all interaction is mediated mostly through language and "the complex patterns of the presentation of self we utilize in our everyday lives, irrespective of whether we are online or not (see Goffman 1969)" (2013, p.11).

In a critique of the notion that games and their worlds are separable from the everyday I will take the position that our interactions are fundamentally[11] mediated through culture, irrespective of our position online/offline. This argument accounts for the fact that culture might be mediated *differently* in a digital environment but in no way means that culture is 'lost'[12] in 'ludicrous' gameplay or virtuality. Even though a wide variety of anthropological research into virtual worlds exists (Boellstorff, 2012; 2015b; Nardi and Harris, 2006; Nayar,

[10] Taylor here uses the word 'Game' in a colloquial sense. Her position is also that 'games' and 'play' may or may not carry into these virtual worlds and that 'game' is in in no way an accurate summation of persistent virtual worlds. Similarly, I often use the word 'Game' when referring to the virtual world, given the lack of current alternatives.

[11] Fundamentally here does not imply 'First order', the digital environment also plays a role in the mediation.

[12] The implication here is that culture cannot be owned in the first place. Culture is not bounded or static.

2004; Pearce, 2006; 2011; Taylor, 2002; 2006), the contestation of the dichotomy between the virtual and the real persists throughout. For example, Boellstorff proposes that "the sociality of virtual worlds develops on its own terms; it references the actual world but is not simply derivative of it" (2015b, p.63) and argues for the use of 'virtual' and 'actual' worlds instead of virtual and 'real' since all human existence is 'virtual' (culturally mediated). Boellstorff's position is that both worlds are equally real.

In chapters one and three, I will deliberate the positions of these aforementioned scholars on the digital real. For now, it is important to start with my own premise, informed by authors that are not necessarily speaking of virtual worlds. As a starting point, we can treat 'reals'[13] as "effects of contingent and heterogeneous enactments, performances or sets of relations" (Law, 2015, p.127) or as "an achievement, an arrangement of relations" (Boellstorff, 2016, p.398; Kockelman, 2013) where relations could be seen as those which are binding through agency and action. Reality is, therefore, relational, not only relative to alternative 'perspectives'. 'Binding' here does not imply continual and unbreakable; reality is that which is constantly under negotiation according to a set of relational understandings of reality. The paper will treat reality as an ontological issue and not one where people merely have different beliefs about one single reality. The methodological implication of this stance is that there will be a focus on literature that treats reality by observing transformational processes where meaning is co-produced to make and unmake worlds.

"Reality means simply relation to our emotional and active life…whatever excites and stimulates our interest is real."

James, 1950, p.295

The aim is to synthesise a curiously selected set of abstractions and case studies around reals/worlds/ontologies and virtual worlds to come up with an argument that posits the virtual world as part of the everyday, which might enable us to treat reals as "contingent, more or less local and practical engagements" (Law, 2015, p.128). To follow Boellstorff (2016, p.397), breaking down the opposition stance between the real and the virtual matters because "talking about reality as multiple depends [not on the metaphors] of perspective and construction, but rather those of intervention and performance. This suggests a reality that is

[13] reality

done and enacted rather than observed" (Mol, 1999, p.77, cited in Blaser 2013, p.554), "an interpretation that transforms the very thing it interprets" (Derrida, 2012, p.51). Notice here the shared vocabulary of performative enactment. The thesis itself will be highly contingent upon the idea that there is a sort of memetic dispersion of reals and the situated nature of said reals. The contestation of these terms within the context of virtual worlds happens because reality is treated as a zero-sum game, whereas it might be better to treat it as a category that actual and virtual worlds might or might not exhibit (Boellstorff, 2016).

Rationale

According to Clifford Geertz (1973, p.5), following Max Weber, "man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun". Geertz states that culture is these webs of significance. As we can see, both 'reals' and culture involve a sort of enactment or a labour of sorts. It should be noted that even though Geertz stresses agency in the construction of the webs, it is done in relation to concrete concerns of infrastructure and efficacy given his symbolic and interpretive approach. I follow Geertz's open-ended approach in this thesis, where things are rarely bottom-lined. It is more important (for this topic) to weave together various parts without obsessing over constructing an 'unmovable' hierarchy of arguments. Lastly, following an interpretive approach, the focus ultimately will rest on the agency and labour of participants and players in the works analysed as a process of meaning-making.

Gee (2014) argues that science, language, games and day to day life are relational and all are in a series of conversations. Furthermore, Gee poses discourse analysis as something that does not only concern language but how humans interact with the world, games and one another, while these interactions produce meaning. Gee (2014, p.1) states, "People have, of course, studied how language is used in games, but they have not used discourse analysis to study games themselves as communicational forms." Lastly, Gee proposes that "They [video games] can illuminate the nature of conversation itself and allow us to bridge between language and the real world as scientists study it and as we all live in it."

Gee's (2014) position on worlding and worlds can be somewhat confusing. On the one hand, he poses the real world, one that scientists merely observe as fact. On the other hand, Gee treats humans as complex worlds themselves and as being able to operate in a multitude of worlds. Where does the real world start and end? If scientists observe a virtual world with all

its corollaries as fact, does that make it real? How data is presented and manipulated certainly is something to consider for this thesis, in other words, how 'reality' or what is to be the final truth is posed and by whom it is posed and for what reasons.

Without delving into deeply abstract concepts, the problem at hand seems to be how different scholars from different 'fields' treat the same concept (if it can be understood as a single concept). Multiple chapters will explore how these different uses of the same concept can be better understood, perhaps illuminating why some scholars treat the concepts in the way they do while others choose to not define/refine them at all. The thesis will not seek for correlations between the physical and the virtual to show how 'real' the virtual is (rather, when), as this is a continuation of the real and virtual dichotomy. I will argue that more complex technology will not make virtual worlds or social game worlds more real, neither does the 'crudeness' of current (or past) tech imply that virtual worlds are in a state of 'becoming' or progression where the end goal is to assimilate entirely with the 'real' world. Currently, companies such as *Meta* (known as *Facebook)* are likely attempting to produce a sense of hyper-real fantasy with the help of virtual and augmented reality technology. This might make their virtual world more 'compelling' to some because of its novelty, yet as I will argue, our connections to these technological and cultural artefacts have always been mundane and more research is required to improve our understanding of grounded practises in these mundane performances.

Dibbel's (1994) famous piece, *A Rape in Cyberspace,* showed how text (or a database of text) could become a world. It came with the powerful implication that a world does not need to look like our own for it truly to be of importance to us. It is, therefore, not the aim of the thesis to double down on sensorial realism and immersion in virtual worlds as properties that constitute how users can have 'real' experiences. The approach will be an interpretive one that looks at symbols and processes of meaning-making with the help of Geertz while also noting his concerns on efficacy and structure. Liebenberg and Roefs (2001, p.6) suggest that "To understand behaviour, researchers must understand definitions and the process by which they are manufactured. People are actively engaged in creating their world, and understanding the intersection of biography and society is therefore essential to the researcher."

Gunkel and Gunkel (1997, p.123) ask, “If a new world were discovered today would its contours conform to our understanding of ‘world’ and ‘discovery?’ Would it take place as a taking of place?” This is a useful question to think through as we compare it to the creation of virtual worlds. Virtual worlds are not found but created; their rules and regulating code are all implemented by a set of people. In turn, another set of people ***do*** all sorts of things inside them; a world that is not discovered but made and made possible through the labour of players and designers.

Structure and strategy

The objective of this introduction chapter was to provide a brief scope of the topics at hand. One of the most prominent risks and limitations of this thesis is its ability to delve deeply into highly contested abstractions and, in doing so, drown any possibility of conclusively taking positions. Note that the constant contestation of terms allows some leeway in not having to worry, in this project, to define ‘reality’ as ontologically precisely as possible. Scholars even struggle to delineate what they mean precisely when discussing virtual worlds, not to mention the anthropological issue of defining culture, ‘locating’ it etc. Providing a brief scope of some of the content to be discussed implicitly provides the strategy going forward: why quote this and not that? They and not them? The answer is that each piece of evidence is used meticulously to further an unbeknownst argument, which is unbeknownst because it is informed by my own hidden biases as a researcher, student and person with particular interests. To pretend that my research can remain solely objective is equitable to pretend that any singular person can determine the exact scope of reality itself. This does not imply that all logic is lost in intersubjectivity, only to note the scope of this thesis and its (my) limitations.

The thesis is divided into four chapters. The introduction aimed to place the main concepts centre stage by giving a brief overview and setting them in relation to the thesis statement and the enquiries forthcoming.

Chapter one will consist of the literature review and the methodology. The rationale for the conjoining of the two is that the literature review is, in a sense, my method, as I am not conducting any primary research whereby I collect ethnographic data through my own methods, qualitatively or quantitatively. That being said, I do touch on previous unpublished

ethnographic research conducted during 2020, moreover, the entirety of this thesis is framed as a hermeneutic analysis centering upon comparative anthropology and not solely a literature review. The literature review will focus on two ethnographies, Tom Boellstorff's (2015b) *Coming of Age in Second Life* and *Play between worlds: Exploring online game culture* (Taylor, 2006). Chapter one will review the two ethnographies by exploring how the aforementioned contested abstractions are employed by the scholars. Moreover, similitudes and differences in method and findings will be analysed thoroughly; this will assist in reaching the research objective and questions given the context of both ethnographies as studies of virtual worlds and game culture. This chapter will focus specifically on how we can think of users in virtual worlds as actively engaged in making and interpreting their worlds, be it their personal self-worlds or the virtual world.

In chapter two, I will argue for the existence of multiple/fractured worlds through an anthropological perspective. It is at this point that I will start presenting my own positions on the abstractions and ways in which other scholars have seemed to fail. Boellstorff enquires after a "Habeology" of the real with the help of Gabriel Tarde's notions of 'Having' as opposed to 'being' to "challenge the conflation of physical with real and digital with unreal" (Boellstorff, 2016, p.388). Boellstorff (2016) employs a 'Digital reality matrix' whereby he posits 'reality' as a category that can be possessed by the physical and the digital and as something that can be absent from both too. In this chapter, I ask if taking a mirrored perspective could assist in understanding where the virtual begins and ends; moreover, I argue for the limitations of mimicry in that virtual worlds can only mimic certain kinds of physical world features.

Chapter three will discuss Victor Geertz and anthropology amongst other 20th century scholars. It will be necessary to establish a solid basis for my anthropological approach, which will lean towards the processes of meaning-making. This chapter will go hither and thither between the interpretive approach[14] and how it can be used to better understand the study of virtual worlds. Geertz (1973, p.10) comments on culture by claiming "Though ideational, it does not exist in someone's head; though unphysical, it is not an occult entity." This thesis is concerned with cultures in virtual worlds as ideations, imagined and actual possibilities. I will do this by following Geertz's thesis (or 'model of man') in that he says

[14] Which is Geertz's approach

"And as (to follow Weber rather than Bentham) the imposition of meaning on life is the major end and primary condition of human existence, that access of significance more than compensates for the economic costs involved" (Geertz, 1973, p.434). This chapter serves to show how influential anthropology/sociology of the 20th century can still be relevant for new technologies, however progressive they may seem. It is also in this chapter that I will introduce a rationale for my term *doing culture* by drawing on a variety of scholars. Finally, as the research objective draws to an end, it will be important to establish to what end the findings can be used to incorporate into future virtual world ethnographies and the way we think of virtuality and our relational positions in the worlds we inhabit. Lastly, this chapter will discuss a popular saying on the internet: 'It's only a game' and the ontological/epistemic implications for those who say it, by drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's (1996) *Habitus* and my own auto-ethnographic experiences.

Chapter four will revolve around finding a definition for the term *doing culture*, a rationale for the conception of the term and how it can be used to better understand virtual worlds and virtual world behaviour anthropologically. This chapter aims to move away from treating virtual worlds as mere forms of media or just another way people can escape their 'real' lives.

Chapter one: Literature review and methodology

Boellstorff and ethnography: Virtual worlds in their own terms

Boellstorff's (2015b) book '*Coming of Age in Second Life'* is about the 'culture' of a 'place'. Moreover, "It is in being virtual that we are human: since it is human 'nature' to experience life through the prism of culture, human being has always been virtual being" (Boellstorff, 2015b, p.5). For Boellstorff, the virtual world itself is its own particular social, political and economic context. It is within these contexts that Boellstorff spent more than two years conducting rigorous participant observation work trying to shed light on the overarching cultural norms of *Second Life*. *Second Life* is an online persistent virtual world whereby users create avatars and engage in a myriad of activities in various visual places in the world. Users can also trade and purchase virtual property and create in-world objects.

Even though many of *Second Life's* users might disagree over what SL[15] is and should be, Boellstorff noted that they are aptly able to do so by referencing a set of grounded assumptions each user holds. These grounded assumptions are observable in text, embodiment, dialogue, media (inside the virtual world like an SL Newspaper), user creation and the subtle nuances in between. Many of these grounded assumptions must be witnessed in their emergence and cannot simply be observed by, say, a survey asking users what their experiences are. For example, Boellstorff observed the following: "Wendy, one of several virtual children I came to know during my fieldwork, would refer to me as 'Mr. Bukowski'[16] and ask me to take her out to play after she had asked permission from her parents" (p.174). It was through this experience of playing and establishing a repertoire that Wendy, an adult user who opted to use a child for an avatar and role-played being a child with virtual 'parents', broke character and opened up to Boellstorff about her experiences and fascination with the virtual world. Without participation and trust, the data would be superficial and lack the subtle processes that constitute human behaviour and culture. Boellstorff (2015b, p.75) notes that "Participant observation demonstrates the historically specific character of 'common sense,' revealing it to be not 'human nature' but culture, one valid yet particular way of living a human life". Since Boellstorff opted to conduct all of his research within *Second Life*, I note Snodgrass (2014, p.470), who argued that "Researchers need to be aware that no matter what

[15] *Second Life*
[16] Boellstorff's avatar in SL is named Tom Bukowski

choices they make, they will never exhaust the complex intersection of offline and online spaces that ground and shape respondents' experience".

Wendy explains to Boellstorff that one thing that fascinates her about this particular world is the way she is treated differently depending on her avatar. Ignoring for a moment the definite intricacies of kinship and the ritualised behaviour that Wendy and her SL 'kin' partook in, I focus for a moment on her fascination with how she is treated differently depending on her choice of avatar. Similarly, one of Taylor's (2006, p.12) interlocutors had the same experience. This thesis is not concerned with pointing out the stark similitude between Wendy's experience in the virtual world and how people are treated differently depending on what they look like in the 'real' world. It is interested in the digital mediation that enables Wendy both *to have* multiple avatars and *experience* social behaviour that is seen as divergent. Both are enabled by the virtual world, but what follows is enabled by *doing culture*. *Doing culture* here for Wendy is being sensitive to social interactions in SL, enabled almost strictly by the ability to create several avatars with various traits that might or might not correlate with 'real' world features. Functions such as positing multiple avatars influence the way grounded assumptions are formed in *Second Life* culture; that which is considered 'normal' or a baseline of behaviour is mediated by the digital infrastructure. In this case, having multiple avatars contributed to Wendy's understanding of what it means to be treated 'normally' and 'differently' depending on the context. To be clear, features in any virtual world that attempt to simulate 'real' life, such as haptic sensors and virtual reality headsets, are not a necessity for building grounded assumptions and establishing culture inside them; users in virtual worlds have been establishing grounded assumptions since the conception of even the crudest virtual worlds such as MUD1[17]. Each digital feature enables the user to spin more transformational webs of narratives, meaning and so forth. Focusing on the features of the virtual world that do not seek to remind us of the 'real', such as owning multiple avatars, highlights the thread of interconnectedness facilitated by the virtual world that runs deeper than just 'playing' a game. This is clear by Wendy's reflections on her social position in the world via these features.

Boellstorff (2015b) never sought to interview or spend time with his participants offline or verify what they had to say about their offline lives. For Boellstorff, it was important to study

[17] See introduction: Virtual Worlds Past and Present or Bartle (2004) for a complete history of virtual worlds

Second Life as a place, a set of locations in their own right. This is one typology of the ethnographic work anthropologists have set out doing regarding virtual worlds (Boellstorff, 2010). The upside of this strategy is that Boellstorff almost successfully breaks down the opposition stance between the virtual and the real by simply avoiding any reference to the 'real'. Boellstorff (2015b) instead referenced the physical space outside of *Second Life* as the 'actual'. The downside of his method is that it brackets out the possibility of intersecting lifeworlds and results in an overemphasis of pushing *Second Life* as a place of culture entirely in its own right; as Lehdonvirta (2010) notes, "The notion of 'virtual space' is useful, but also ambiguous and multi-faceted rather than a monolithic counterpart to physical space." The implication of this overemphasis is that culture in *Second Life* is not ultimately predicated upon actual-world cultures. I somewhat agree with Golub (2010) in that "The actual world really is the paramount reality for human beings, and our deaths in it have a finality and reality that the deaths of our avatars do not". I agree with this line of thought because it does not deny virtual worlds the possibility of exhibiting place and culture(s). It should be noted that for all of these abstractions to be understood best and analysed contextually, it would not be productive to attempt to produce a hierarchy of 'reals' or any hierarchy at all, where whatever is on top is allowed the authority to make positivist and universal law-like claims. To a certain degree, it does not truly matter to figure out exactly how real one world is over another. What seems more important at every juncture is that users and players in virtual worlds produce complicated webs of meaning that do not need to conform to one's understanding of what real 'should be' or 'should look like', as in the case of Wendy who reflects on her particular virtual existence.

"The term 'real life' is increasingly used in an ironic sense, referring only to experiences that occur offline, not to experiences that partake of more genuineness, actuality, significance, or reality than those that occur online. 'Real life' and 'virtual life' are not different in meaning, only in the location of events."

Castronova and Wagner, 2011, p.64 and pp.313-328

Boellstorff (2015b, p.249), borrowing from Bronislaw Malinowski, argues that the goal of ethnographic understanding is to achieve the "native's point of view, his relation to life, to realize *his* vision of *his* world" (Malinowski, 1922, p.25) and Malinowski asks to "Imagine yourself" in a new place (Malinowski, 1922, p.4). Boellstorff aimed towards this ideal in his book to understand a particular slice in time and in space that is intrinsically connected to

places and cultures elsewhere. It should be noted that ethnographically derived theories are valid, but "historically and spatially contingent" (Boellstorff, 2010, p.130); however, connecting theories between one located place and its peoples to another is "itself a contextual intellectual endeavour rather than the rote invocation of 'law'" (p.31). I would argue that this is by and large the reason that Boellstorff asserts SL as a 'place' in its own right because when it is asserted as a place, one can 'connect theories' from one place to another. For Boellstorff et al. (2012, p.7) virtual worlds have specific delineating qualities: first, they are places and possess a sense of *"worldness"*, meaning they offer an "object rich environment", allowing users to move about and over and interact with. Second, virtual worlds are "multi-user in nature; they exist as shared social environments with synchronous communication and interaction" (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p.7). Even though users might do things alone in them, it is through "co-inhabitation with others" that virtual worlds thrive. Third, they are 'persistent' as they continue to exist "in some form even as participants log off" (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p.7), meaning they are open to change in the absence of any user. Of course, one cannot ignore the power the creators have to change the world in an instant; this will be discussed in later chapters. Lastly, virtual worlds need to enable participants to *"*embody*"* (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p.7) themselves; this can be done by an avatar or a text-based avatar, whatever allows the user to participate and explore the world. Considering that both T.L Taylor and Tom Boellstorff contributed to this definition in Boellstorff et al. (2012), it would be safe to say that they generally are speaking through the same virtual world (conceptually) in both *Coming of Age in Second Life* (Boellstorff, 2015b) and *Play between worlds: Exploring online game culture* (Taylor, 2006). This is also the definition of virtual worlds that I find most relevant and productive for this thesis.

Following this refined definition, Boellstorff (2015a, p.4) states that "They [virtual worlds] are prime examples of placemaking online (and thus counterexamples to the overuse of 'media'). They are fertile contexts for exploring questions of embodiment and often for questions of building, crafting, and making." This is an aspect of virtual worlds that is undeniable for this thesis; it is a place, one to be traversed with an element of intractability that can resist and allow for socialisation. As I have touched on in the introduction, these 'places' are contingent upon the ability of the users in a virtual world to contest/accept/create it, an open space in a virtual world where no one is ever online and never will be lacking that which fundamentally is the core of virtual worlds: people. As one resident in Boellstorff's (2015b, p.182) ethnography claimed: "the people that inhabit this space are what make it

real". Boellstorff started his research by purchasing land in Second Life and learning the tools to build a house; moreover, he participated in as many events as possible and so built a network of acquaintances and friends (Boellstorff et al., 2012). One needs a place to build a house, to host an event and to make friends. It is likely *Second Life's* visual presentation that invokes this conceptual analysis of place. In a world such as *Eve: Online*[18], the definition might mean something different. Boellstorff (2016, p.396) eloquently returns our human agents in 'place' by stating, "avatar embodiment (like all embodiment) is always a form of emplacement; it emerges through the mutual possession of virtual bodies and virtual places". One cannot truly 'escape' your body but an avatar can enable one to "possess virtuality" (Boellstorff, 2016, p.396). Users in virtual worlds are, therefore, not compensating for a 'lack', somehow filling holes that weren't possible before. Rather, they are imbuing their lives with new and old possibilities through engagement, mimetic possession and labour. When Boellstorff claims, that we have always been virtual (2015b), it should be taken within this context of place and virtuality. Boellstorff (2015b, p.178) notes, "Culture in Second Life emerges as an interplay between forms of selfhood and community on the one hand, and place and time on the other, all meeting under the rubric of intimacy". Similarly, Pina-Cabral (2017, p.54) states

"There is no sociality without persons; we are pressed to avoid the twentieth-century proneness to consider sociality in an abstracted way, as something that exists beyond personhood (in terms of the species or of groupness). Furthermore, embodiment as persons is a condition for all sociality."

During Boellstorff's fieldwork, each online resident[19] was visible as a green dot on the map interface in SL. It was often the case that one could observe two green dots together or a cluster implying the convergence of many residents in the same space (Boellstorff, 2015b). Boellstorff draws from Pavel Curtis termed this phenomenon 'social gravity', which can be explained as follows: "If more than a couple of players are in the same room, the presumption is that an interesting conversation may be in progress there; players are thus more attracted to more populated areas" (Curtis, 1992, p.132). It is at this point in Boellstorff's ethnography where he asserts that "the aspects of Second Life that were most important to residents were

[18] A massive online open world game set mostly in outer space consisting of 7800 star systems that users can visit and engage in a myriad of activities

[19] A term for SL users at the time of writing for Boellstorff

social places" (Boellstorff, 2015b, p.182). The connection or contingency is then drawn between place and people by stating, "The presence of other persons was key to a sense of place; no amount of dazzling graphics could compensate for the role of sociality in filling an otherwise 'empty' virtual world". Keith Basso (1996, p.xiv) aptly conceptualises 'sense of place' as that which "partake(s) of cultures, of shared bodies of 'local knowledge'[20] with which persons and whole communities render their places meaningful and endow them with social importance". A sense of place, therefore, cannot be 'produced' by the digital environment, regardless of how refined the hyper-real graphical emulation might seem, it is first and foremost contingent upon the ability of humans to produce meaning, even if that 'meaning' might seem strictly related to ludic activities.

In Alex Golub's (2010) article *Being in the World (of Warcraft): Raiding, Realism, and Knowledge Production in a Massively Multiplayer Online Game*, it was the players' commitment to complex tasks such as killing a 'raid boss' that superseded any fascination with 'dazzling graphics'. Many players in Golub's research would turn down in-game graphic quality for peak efficiency, and this commitment then spilt out into online forums, work discussions etc. Immersion and commitment in *Second Life* were largely contingent upon the existence of place, sociality and other avatars, whereas in Golub's research, it was the commitment to overcome a complicated obstacle that both drew players together and traced their interests into other fieldsites. Both are equally valid, both happen in a virtual world, and both hinge on the goals and agendas of players/users/residents as co-collaborators in creating and suspending grounded assumptions and in-world culture. How is it then that one can find culture(s) in virtual worlds across fieldsites?

Locating cultures across fieldsites

Paul (2008) argues for games to be considered as platforms for cultural development rather than as cultures in their own right. Paul (2008) states, "Historically, culture has been shaped by common location, as location dictated with whom we could communicate" (p.4). For Paul, increases in the mobility of communication technologies have minimised the importance of geography and place for both culture and communication. Yet in the proliferation of virtual worlds, geography and place they have once more taken up space in the ether of cultural

[20] A phrase coined by Clifford Geertz

research, the risk of which is “capturing only part of what constitutes culture in virtual worlds and stand to miss insights that are tied to practices across worlds” (p.4). Paul (2008) is therefore advocating for a deeper curiosity into shared practises across platforms. Shared practises across platforms assist in understanding the culture(s) of small groups in virtual worlds that might often get taken for granted as opposed to looking at large virtual worlds and attempting to form a totalising view (Paul, 2008). The issue with a focus on large virtual worlds is that it might seem easier to locate its purviews, and so data can become ‘obvious’ with large groups conforming to a single identity. This can lead to totalising analyses, which isn’t inherently problematic. What is problematic is not being able to draw those grounded assumptions to smaller communities across platforms. For example, Pearce’s (2011) work on the *Uru* diaspora exemplified how shared practises are negotiated across multiple platforms where communities ‘travel’ to different worlds together. Pearce showed how, after the virtual world *Uru: Ages Beyond Myst* closed down permanently, communities of players would move to different virtual worlds as ‘refugees’, taking their cultures with them. While communities can sometimes ‘take their culture’ with them, it is also the case that the function of travel **within** virtual worlds can shed light on cultures in them.

While travelling can occur between worlds, it is also noteworthy that during both Boellstorff’s (2015b) and Taylors’ (2006) research periods, the in-world features of teleportation and travel changed drastically; for example, Taylor (2006, p.61) noted that a change in the teleportation system lead to an immediate impact as “Players who had formerly made a decent living as a kind of in-game taxi service found themselves practically out of work”. The change in how players moved about had a chain effect on where a player would group and socialise, which certainly transformed the way culture was understood and done. In Boellstorff’s (2015b, pp.93-95) case, the change in the way people moved from one location to another impacted notions around privacy, virtual property value and the general user experience. These changes, although not instigated by users, highlight cultures in the game worlds by changing them. Once something as fundamental as movement is altered, one can witness a negotiation and boundary shift of users' own localities and relationships with the world. McLuhan (1994, p.10) offers us insight into this transformational process by writing, “For the ‘message’ of any medium or technology is the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs” or “it is the medium that shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action” (p.11). To elaborate, the introduction of new forms of movement (changes to the way a user teleports across the world) in both *Second Life*

and *EverQuest* scaled how sociality and play were experienced by inadvertently forcing changes in habit and interface. It is possible to scale McLuhan's analysis to 'What is the message of virtual worlds?' but this would imply that a virtual world is simply a new medium or technology, for I argue that it's a fertile place for the contestation of grounded assumptions.

For now, it remains an avenue I draw upon to showcase how technologies can exist and change *inside* of virtual worlds and so, producing different paces and scales from which virtual world users orient themselves.

For Boellstorff (2015b), place was more than something that underscores the cultures of *Second Life*, it was "a place for forms of barter, donation, and communal ownership" (p.97). The implication thereof is that place is more than the ownership of it in this particular virtual world; similarly, if one would only focus on 'place' in SL as something that visually represents physical 'place', it can lead to an incomplete understanding. It is important to refuse a progressive stance on this matter; the world of *Second Life* is not attempting to assimilate with the actual world, be it by place, its cultures or its political economy. In many ways, these categories are being remade and challenged via the process of owning virtuality. I am wary of the use of 'place' as something that merely inhabits the background or, as Plumwood (1993, p.4) describes how 'nature' has been problematically defined historically as "a resource empty of its own purposes or meanings and hence available to be annexed for the purposes of those supposedly identified with reason or intellect". I believe it is a valid fear to compare the current trajectory of virtual world research to the way 'nature' was/is treated in the field of anthropology and elsewhere because no term can be 'neutral', for when one is neutral, others can enforce meanings on it without consensual basis.

Boellstorff (2015b, p.99) claimed, "Fundamental to *Second Life* culture during my fieldwork was that textures, scripts, prims[21], and even entire builds could be sold; *Second Life* was a commodity economy." Culture in *Second Life* certainly revolved around 'place', but unfortunately, that just seems to be used as another word for world[22]. Similarly, Carrithers et al. (2010) claims that ontology has become just another word for culture, and it is not unfounded to see someone equating ontology to 'world' or 'worldviews'. For Boellstorff

[21] Essentially the most basic building blocks for all of the objects in the world
[22] In the case of Boellstorff (2015b)

(2015b), many things were 'fundamental' to *Second Life* as a virtual *world*. When this is the case, one can find it hard not to equate place to world and so, world to culture.

Virtual worlding

For Lefebvre (1992, p.70), "nature does not labour: it is even one of its defining characteristics that it *creates*" and "Humanity, which is to say social practise, creates work and produces things. In either case, labour is called for, but in the case of works the part played by labour (and by the creator qua labourer) seems secondary, whereas in the manufacture of products it predominates." Alternatively, materialists such as Bennett (2010, p.30), argue in favour of the need "to undo the conceit that humanity is the sole or ultimate well-spring of agency". What does place and space, labour and agency look like in virtual worlds? In an aforementioned quote Taylor (2006, p.159) states that "players already are core actors in the maintenance and life of the game. There is no culture; there is no game, without the labour of the players". Taylor here uses the word 'game' in a colloquial sense. Her position is also that 'games' and 'play' may or may not carry into these virtual worlds and that 'game' is in no way an accurate summation of persistent virtual worlds. Similarly, I often use the word 'game' when referring to the virtual world, given the lack of current alternatives. It is hard to group the labour of players, of people, all under the constituency of both culture and game (virtual world). Some, like Pina-Cabral (2017, p.62), state that "personhood— the fact that humans are propositionally thinking embodied creatures—is what holds together the complex dynamic between world and worlds". A few important elements here can be ported to our analysis of virtual worlds. First, Pina-Cabral is not specifically speaking towards virtual worlds; this does not mean that it cannot be relevant. Through this conception of 'world', one can start to diagnose the issue; a world to some degree dictates the norms and behaviour of its inhabitants[23], and its inhabitants are responsible for holding together their fractured existence (in multiple abstract/symbolic/actual worlds). More so, inhabitants of virtual worlds need to labour to *produce* culture and the game itself. Consider the following from Lefebvre (1992, p.73):

> *"(Social) space is not a thing among other things, nor a product among other products: - rather, it subsumes things produced, and encompasses their interrelationships in their coexistence and simultaneity - their (relative) order and/or (relative) disorder. It is the*

[23] Say, the way people behave in *Second life* versus *EverQuest* or *World of Warcraft*

outcome of a sequence and set of operations, and thus cannot be-reduced to the rank of a simple object."

As I have mentioned before, reality can also be conceived of as "an achievement, an arrangement of relations" (Boellstorff et al., 2016, p.398; Kockelman, 2013). It seems that all of these abstractions are contingent upon one another; each cannot be without the other. I am not trying to place humans at the centre of the ontological apex; rather, I allude to the fact that the redeeming quality that justifies the whole process of 'being' in any world relies crucially on our ability to propositionally and perhaps intuitively comprehend the webbed relationship in which we are spun. In fact, Taylor (2006) inadvertently asserts that the labour of players makes a cyber-world a life-world, a worldwide web into an actual and relational web of meaning.

Lehdonvirta (2010, p.7) identifies a series of warning signs relating to the dichotomous approach that seems to further complicate the issue in its attempt to solve it by stating

"So far, the typical strategy for dealing with this difficulty has been to treat the caveats as 'links' or 'interaction' between the real world and the virtual world. This strategy attempts to address the issues whilst still clinging on to the dichotomous model that distinguishes between real and virtual."

Many have tried to establish similitude and connections between worlds, yet it could be said that the very act of doing so also establishes new boundaries/differences or alterations. Lehdonvirta's (2010) suggestion is to consider all of the different 'worlds' and subset worlds through the framework of Strauss's 'Social worlds perspective' (1978; 1984), whereby social worlds can be seen as "universes of discourse" (Strauss, 1978, p.121). The boundaries of these social worlds are set "neither by territory nor formal membership but by the limits of effective *communication*" (Strauss, 1978, p.199). This then posits a social reality wherein multiple social worlds can exist as overlapping, intersecting and proliferating. However, thinking through worlds as multiple seems to pluralise the issue at hand. What is useful is to consider how communication as something we do as an act of agency can set the boundaries of worlds; that being said, Pina-Cabral (2017) questions if the word 'World' is still a useful category for anthropologists and argues that one cannot discuss 'World' without considering

"For Whom?" (Pina-Cabral, 2017, p.52). Similarly, Boellstorff titles his paper '*For Whom the Ontology Turns: Theorizing the digital real"* (2016).

As my paper will approach the research objectives from an anthropological perspective it would be useful to ask: What are 'Worlds'? Other than having a deeply ontological attachment, what do scholars mean when they speak of virtual worlds? With regards to the idea of a single ontology Pina-Cabral (2017, p.52) states

> *"Again, we must steer off our propensity to indulge in the all-or-nothing fallacy: humans are not only social, they are also persons who can appreciate that their own selves are part of the world—to that extent they are world-forming. Thus, for a minimalist realist, the relation between personhood and world is fundamental".*

I am not stating that our idea of worlds should rest on a minimalist realist relation, rather, that there exists a peculiar relationship between our sense of self in a world and our ability to create said world(s). Boellstorff (2015b, p.18) warns against the idea of 'World' by stating

> *"'World' is a dangerously naturalistic metaphor. It implies an entity that has come into being without human agency and that is self--contained, without boundaries: you can walk around a 'world' and end up back where you started"*

Regarding definitions, words and how we use them Gunkel and Gunkel (1997) conclude by stating, "naming is always an exercise of power... The future of cyberspace, therefore will be determined not only through the invention of new hardware and software, but also through the names we employ to describe it" (Gunkel and Gunkel, 1997, p. 133). In 1997 Gunkel and Gunkel wrote about the popular use of 'cyberspace' treated as a 'new world' and challenged this by investigating the seemingly colonial logic implied in the 'neutral' terminology. A new world implies the existence of an old world and in a new world one "discovers only what one, in advance, already desired to procure" (Gunkel and Gunkel, 1997, p.124). This matters going forward as we find scholars who predetermine what virtual worlds should be according to their grand theories, whereas this thesis is more concerned with highlighting the importance of the mundane behaviours of users in them.

Understanding human behaviour in virtual worlds rests in our ability to understand and apply abstractions such as world, real, place and space. In doing research for this thesis, it has become clear that academics do not seem to be interested in delineating exactly where a concept starts and ends. The tendency is often to focus on alteration and difference as in limitation or boundary. Take, for example, Boellstorff (2015a, p.2), who states, "What is so problematic is that in many discussions of virtual worlds (and other online phenomena), the term 'real' is never defined; it is simply assumed to be the same thing as 'physical' or 'offline'". Boellstorff (2015a) then fails to define 'real' or refer to an adequate definition in the same paper.

The theories I have posed above seem to further complicate how one can better understand virtual worlds. Not only do we now have 'social spaces' (which seem different to 'social places'), we have 'social worlds' and constant contestation over who gets to propositionally and authoritatively claim what 'worlds' are made of. Multiple ontologies can and do exist, and it is to a certain degree useful to refuse spatial unity, ordering and placing these concepts objectively into categories of power and control. Much of this thesis is about reflexively considering how people 'produce' meaning in virtual worlds while considering the implications of Lefebvre's (1992) notion of 'production' and 'things'. My approach to applying these various concepts to the case studies can be described as

> *"An ecological approach acknowledges that some domains of inquiry are best tackled by understanding them not solely as collections of discrete and autonomous objects interacting in clean, singular exchanges of causes and effects, but as fullfledged systems, within which influences are continuous and reciprocal, and within which the lines that distinguish objects from one another—and even objects from the observer—are not solely a matter of objective fact, but are rather—at least partially—**a function of the purposes of whoever describes the situation**. (emphasis added)"*
>
> *Sanders, 1999, p.126*

This approach somewhat lifts the rigid subject/object structure and allows us to consider human behaviour in the case studies in their own right (place) while involving the entangled relationship of the ethnographer/researcher. This approach is an alternative to the actor-network theory proposed by Latour (2005). One might consider the ecological approach closer to "activity theory" (Root, 2016, p.88), whereby the focus is not on material actors but

the "sociocultural contexts of actions and interactions". This theory rests on the interaction between object and subject, the affection that is produced between them and the contextually understood results. While defining activity theory, Kaptelinin and Nardi (2006, p.33) pose agency as "the ability to act in the sense of producing effects…the ability and the need to act". With this in mind, one can observe actionable artefacts in their environment that play a role rather than focusing on their materiality. It would then be productive to follow Malaby (2007, p.102) in his suggestion that we "must neither romanticize games nor dismiss them and instead must see them as socially created artifacts with certain common features and allow for the way they inhabit, reflect, and constitute the processes of everyday experience". For Boellstorff (2015b, p.91) it is "place" that makes *Second Life* what it is, yet, as has been discussed, a sense of place requires the agency of people (Basso, 1996, p. xiv). Moreover, virtual worlds could then be treated as cultural artefacts through which we can think and not simply as places in space and time. Thinking through virtual worlds as cultural artefacts themselves implies that one needs to consider what people *do* in them to make them meaningful.

For Boellstorff (2015b, p.206), *Second Life's* political economy is underscored by what he terms "creationist capitalism", which can be explained as a "mode of capitalism in which labor is understood in terms of creativity, so that production is understood as creation". It is in this system where "self-fulfillment becomes a means of production". This form of capitalism draws its structuring principles from the "individualistic ethos of contemporary capitalism" (Boellstorff, 2015b, p.207); specifically, those modes of production found in California where Linden Labs[24] and Silicon Valley resides. The act of labour is especially prudent in this model of production where people consume what they themselves produce. Boellstorff argues then that this "prosumer has become a kind of minor god" (Boellstorff, 2015b, p.208), whereby we do not find "predestination[25] but a performative notion of production". Boellstorff (2015b) maintains that creation happens by people and not a god in this mode of capitalism. Production and creation are therefore conflated with one another, whereby production is reinterpreted into creation. To conclude, 'creationist capitalism' regards the self as the creator (Boellstorff, 2015b) in *Second Life*. This once more highlights the importance of self-fulfilling labour in virtual worlds, which in turn assists the process of making a world meaningful by making it.

[24] The creators of *Second Life*
[25] Following Christian metaphysics

I reiterate Lefebvre's (1992, p.70) position that "nature does not labour: it is even one of its defining characteristics that it *creates*" and for a moment revise it in comparison to Boellstorff's (2015b, p.19) argument that "Humans make culture[26] in virtual and actual contexts; since humans are part of nature, and the virtual is a product of human intentionality, the virtual is as 'natural' as anything humans do in the actual world". The product of human intention, which has been the virtual, has itself been a creative endeavour that delegitimises a distinction between production and creation. One way to exemplify this is by observing the prominent role of culture in both the conceptualisation of virtual worlds and the labour practises undertaken by users. Users do not "shed culture when we go online and enter game worlds…" as ultimately culture is what "we are and what we do…" (Taylor, 2006, p.154). See, in *Second Life*, being creative meant one *could* make money from it, but that creativity **also** "served as a means to self-knowledge and social efficacy" (Boellstorff, 2015b, p.210). This is then to say that to a certain extent, the digital environment has mediated the cultural labour necessary for creativity, which in turn is contingent upon itself. Not only does the virtual world, in this case, highlight transformation, but it also highlights how labour is a necessary ingredient in *doing culture*. This, however, opens up an examination into agency and world-making.

Object, agency and process

Morris (2004, p.4) notes, "While the concept of 'participatory media' is familiar from research into television communities, I would argue that these games are 'co-creative media'; neither developers nor players can be solely responsible for producing the final assemblage regarded as 'the game,' it requires the input of both." Thomas and Brown (2007, p.168) argue that "Players in virtual worlds are neither authors nor readers, but they are, themselves, a new conceptual blend: both author and reader, both player and character, both virtual and physical." In a virtual world, with all its particular infrastructural boundaries, we are both characters and avatars interacting with other avatars, yet also players interacting with our own avatars.[27] Aarseth[28] (2001, p.1) writes, "Games are both object and process; they can't be read as texts or listened to as music, they must be played. Playing is integral, not coincidental, like the appreciative reader or listener. The creative involvement is a necessary ingredient in

[26] I would prefer my term *doing culture* as opposed to 'making it' which is often conflated with more traditional notions of production (See chapter four)
[27] And as Taylor (2006) shows, some people follow up their online connections to the offline
[28] Also see Aarseth (1997)

the uses of games"[29], and according to Parlett (1999, p.6), "How representational a game is depends on the level at which it is being played and the extent of the player's imagination." From this, we can deduce that players and designers in virtual worlds are in a high stake dishevelled relationship whereby the agency of players simultaneously consumes the narrative of the game and changes it at will. One still needs to recognise the limits of this agency, as all of the actions that a player may take are mostly coded in by the creators of the game; the player is essentially always constricted by the narration of the creator. Any action that leads to a result outside of the bounds of the code would then be considered a 'glitch' or a 'bug' in the game. Falcão (2012, pp.197-198) refers to agency in virtual worlds as a "relative process" that can be split into two branches; the first is action dependent on the specific rules of the game, and the second relates to action that is driven by the "narrative factor", otherwise called "*operational agency* and (2) *diegetic agency*". McGonigal (2011, p.21) claims that all 'games' share four defining traits: "a goal, rules, a feedback system, and voluntary participation". One can consider '*operational agency'* to be related to 'feedback system' and 'rules'. It is the sense of completing a task and receiving feedback, like hitting a button on a controller and seeing a response on the screen. *'Diegetic agency'* has to do with "the actions a player may perform concerning the advancement of the narrative aspects involved in the game". This I would relate to 'a goal' and 'voluntary participation' in McGonigal's (2011) traits of a game. McGonigal's traits are not limited to that of a typical game; as we can see, they can be understood through virtual world behaviour and agency. This is, therefore, a critique of the definition of what is to be considered a 'game' in favour of operational and diegetic agency.

Comparing notions of the 'game' to notions around agency matters because it enables us to surround the player with a structure of sociotechnical tools to enact upon in his/her own agency. We are, therefore, leaving the power of representation in the hands of the player even though the four defining traits might be coded structurally by the creator of the game/virtual world. I follow with an introduction into Taylor's (2006) ethnography whereby I aim to shed more light on labour and agency posited in a different virtual world.

[29] The term 'video games' as I have mentioned apply to virtual worlds

Taylor: Play(?) between worlds

In Taylor's (2006) ethnography, her aim was the process of becoming a player (like other players) in *EverQuest* by building up networks and guild relations over some time. *EverQuest* is a fantasy-like virtual world primarily understood as a massive multiplayer online roleplaying game. *EverQuest* differs from *Second Life* in that it is a lot more diegetic and structured around the idea of progression and the accumulation of better in-game equipment, whereas *Second Life* hinges on it being a 'place' to be explored and where socialisation can be mediated. In other words, there are no clear goals in *Second Life*, whereas the designers of *EverQuest* give players tasks to complete through the narration of the story.

Taylor, in contrast to Boellstorff (2015b)[30], starts her ethnography at a convention for *EQ*[31] offline, at which time Taylor had spent three years participating in the life of the game, interviewing users and playing alongside them. Taylor (2006) focuses on the social interactions both in the virtual and the actual, discusses gender portrayal, the production of identity and community, and sheds light on policy issues regarding ownership and copyright in the virtual and actual. During this event, players introduced themselves by their nametags bearing their in-game name and rarely did Taylor find it was a given to announce one's 'real' name. Players were also often segregated by server population; here, they joined one another at specific tables allocated to different servers in *EQ* and participated in various live events. Tables varied in sizes (as server populations do), and Taylor found herself at one of the smaller tables during the event. Some even performed "offline incarnations" of their online persona (Taylor, 2006, p.5). Taylor's ethnography invokes a strong sense of community, be it from the manageable scale of the player population or the commitment of players. Taylor asks, "Might there be ways—structural, economic, organizational—in which smaller game worlds are at an advantage in exploring participatory practices, innovative forms of government, or even radical design challenges more easily?" (Taylor, 2006, p.160). Once more, in contrast to Boellstorff's (2015b) *Second Life*, *EQ* is a much smaller sized MMORPG style game where characters accumulate experience and better in-game gear. For Taylor, the blurring of boundaries between 'game' and 'non-game' was as valuable to study as the virtual-real dichotomy that was likely more prevalent for Boellstorff (2015b). This is because

[30] Boellstorff (2015b) starts his ethnography by invoking virtual images of 'natives' and islands which is inspired by Malinowski, never does Boellstorff meet any of the residents in the offline
[31] *EverQuest*

EverQuest is structured in a way that emphasises player labour and the progression of characters as opposed to the more 'open' world of *Second Life.*

Similarly, Taylor (2006, pp.150-155) also calls for the non-segregation of 'game' and 'play'. It is clear that there is a variety of these dichotomies that have made their way into academia, regardless of the size of the virtual world or its inhabitants. The separation of these abstractions can be summed up as follows:

> *"What we must realize is that the older and still extant marginalization of games and its contemporary, almost utopian treatments are actually two sides of the same coin; they both follow from an exceptionalist position: that games are play and therefore set apart. This perspective allows some to hold games at arm's length from what matters, from where "real" things happen, whereas others cast them as potential utopias promising new transformative possibilities for society but ultimately just as removed from everyday experience."*
>
> *Malaby (2007, p.97)*

The point I am making here is that even when we consider that *EverQuest* is a **game** and *Second Life* as a social virtual world, it does not imply that the ludicrous abstraction of 'play' must be imported into the idea of a 'game'. It could even be said that a game can exist without 'play' depending on your definition of play. Malaby (2007, p.28) notes that "it is not the status of a game as a game that renders it set apart from everyday life; any game can have important consequences not only materially but also socially and culturally…". It is therefore imperative that we do not charge the idea of 'game' in the case of Taylor's (2006) ethnography with the normative idea of 'fun' and 'pleasure' just because it seems to fit into a ludicrous narrative of repetitive task completion. Virtual worlds are not games; Boellstorff (2015b, p.22) asserts that thinking of them as games risks a "conflation of online sociality with entertainment, obviating the consequential forms of intimacy, community, and political economy in virtual worlds". That being said, I certainly believe that rules and objectives are what makes many virtual worlds popular. I agree with Dibbel (2006, p.41) in that "all else being equal...people will choose the world that constrains them over the one that sets them free"[32]. I mention this because rules and objectives are concepts often used to underscore the

[32] Dibbel also writes on the importance of scarcity and grinding in virtual worlds

‘game’, to which I have to say, is all life, both actual and virtual, not also underscored by rules and objectives?

It is in the subjectivities of ‘play’, both in our notions of what ‘play’ is and how people ‘play’ differently, that underscores the argument that there is no single way of enjoying a game or how one would define ‘fun’. This begs the question, if people are not always having ‘fun’ in virtual worlds, what else is so compelling? The answer can have two legs: one presumes that people are aware of their own agency in that they know that ‘fun’ might not be the goal of the activity. The other leg rests on game designers, staff and so on, crafting an experience that attempts to balance out labour and achievement.

If not play, how else?

In chapter three, Taylor (2006) recounts an offline interaction with two high-level *EQ* players, Mitch and Josh. Taylor was put in unfamiliar territory as Mitch and Josh unveiled a way of playing *EverQuest* that Taylor was not used to. Mitch and Josh showcased knowledge of the game in precise quantitative numbers, spelling out their exact goals and their experiences in one of the highest-ranked guilds. To Taylor, Mitch and Josh literally “played a different *EverQuest* ” (Taylor, 2006, p.68). What interested Taylor was the stereotypes around the notion of a ‘casual gamer’ and that of a ‘power gamer’, the casual gamer being the one often considered with a ‘real life’ and the power gamer one who has little to no grounding activities in ‘real life’. Once more, as is the theme of this thesis, Taylor argues that **dialogue** regarding the **differences** between types (casual and power) is unproductive and that it does not explain the everyday experiences or actual forms of play. It is, therefore, not the existence of these categories that are unhelpful but narratives that divide them deeper into a dichotomy. It is also the case that players fall into different categories by “perverting a pure game-space by distorting some aspect of play” (Taylor, 2006, p.70).

To some, power gamers seem explicitly interested in winning, achieving and being goal-orientated, leading them to the conclusion that power gamers are not having ‘fun’, but rather playing to win. Taylor highlights power gamers as a way to shed light on the “diverse orientations people can bring to the exact same game” (Taylor, 2006, p.71). As I have mentioned before, the relationship between player agency and game designers have a lot in common with ‘fun’. It is in the interest of the game designer to enable a pleasurable

experience (as one factor), and it is often in the interest of the player to diverge completely from the expectations from the designer to produce an entirely different practice. Giddings and Kennedy (2008), in their micro-ethnographic exploration of cooperative *Star Wars Lego* play, hypothesise that "Games configure their players, allowing progression through the game only if the players recognize what they are being prompted to do, and comply with these coded instructions" (Kennedy and Giddings, 2008, p.14). By cultivating and compelling players towards those decisions that would lead to progression (or winning), players are 'configured'; they are acted upon by game mechanics, NPC's and particular game design. Virtual worlds are often devoid of the same type of configurations; indeed, it is often the case that in virtual worlds, there is "no notion of success" (Curtis, 1992, p.122) or as Taylor (2006, p.75) notes, "As many *EQ* players comment, the game never ends, so players must be self-directed in how they progress." Even in a more linear and structured game world such as *EverQuest*, players do not necessarily aim to complete the game and then leave. A much more nuanced approach to the intricacies of virtual world behaviour is necessary to understand why and how players engage within the virtual world. That being said, one of Taylor's (2006, p.74) interlocutors, Chris, noted that "knowing the best, most efficient way to play was central to success, especially at the high-end game. For players like Chris, the game is seen as a problem to be broken apart and solved". This is not to be ignored in light of Curtis' statement. For Chris, 'succeeding' and the finality of 'success' are two different sides of the same coin where efficiency and problem solving is in question, not completing the game.

Award-winning programmer, game designer and producer of several well-known strategy and simulation video games, Sid Meier once stated at a conference: "One of the responsibilities I think we have as designers is to protect the player from themselves" (Meier, 2010). Contextually, Meier is not speaking directly to virtual worlds or their participants but rather to the psychology of game design and players in general. If Meier's advice is followed too strictly, divergent behaviour in game worlds might cease to exist. What makes participation compelling in both game-like virtual worlds such as *EverQuest* and virtual social worlds such as *Second Life* is not 'fun' but an active engagement and laborious process of interacting with the world and other players. I use the word laborious for a moment to highlight the distinction between those who partake in virtual worlds and those who have not; for a casual gamer might think that a power gamer is spending time far too much time and

overcomplicating business, it is often the case that for a non-gamer[33], all virtual world participation seems laborious and frivolous.

In the emergence of distinctive categories of divergent and normative gameplay, players form communities and boundaries. Both within and in the activity of pushing these boundaries, *doing culture* happens. It is, therefore, variety, similitude and alteration that allow for a myriad of different 'play' styles that do not conform to traditional notions of play at all. Nardi (2010, p.102) summarises that play can be characterised as:

> *"1. A subjective experience of freedom*
> *2. An absence of social obligation and physical necessity*
> *3. A subjective experience that is absorbing, compelling, or pleasurable*
> *4. Occurrence in a separate realm sometimes referred to as the magic Circle[34]"*

Nardi also notes that "Play happens when the imagination is stimulated, when there is an alertness to the surroundings and sometimes an engagement with physical activity" (Nardi, 2010, p.102). Clearly, Nardi's notion of play does not neatly conform to the different play styles of the power gamer and the casual gamer, as outlined by Taylor (2006). It is also the case that if game worlds have tedious, repetitive tasks and a lack of teaching/introduction that players, regardless of playstyle, take it up amongst themselves to produce new ways to complete tasks and help others. Wherever there is an obstacle (which one cannot possibly foresee truly), players in the virtual world try to overcome it or, as Suits (2005, p.55) proposes, "Playing a game is the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles." As an example, a subsection of players in the virtual game world *Foxhole*[35] has issued an ultimatum to the developers of the game and consequently gone on a virtual world strike (Plunkett, 2022). This group has formed a 'union' consisting of players from both factions in the world (which historically do not get along) and has well over 1800 members participating in the in-world strike. This 'union' demands that the developers of the game respond to their suggestions on how their in-world lives can be bettered. At the time of writing this thesis, this has likely been the first virtual world strike historically. The subsection of players that went on strike were all self-issued *logistics* players. *Logistic* players are in charge of gathering

[33] For lack of a better term, this also encompasses those who don't engage with social virtual worlds such as *Second Life*
[34] See Huizinga (1955)
[35] A persistent online war game where two factions fight over control of a large map

materials, processing them and making sure supplies are issued to the front line where the vast majority of the player base is actively engaged in top-down shooter style persistent warfare consisting of armour, artillery etc. Every item (guns, tanks, ammunition, bandages, artillery, building supplies) that players in *Foxhole* use need to be made first. This task is not one assigned by the developers of the game, as any player with the know-how can do *logistics.* Not only do players in *Foxhole* assign themselves the role of *logistics* (which is arguably extremely tedious and laborious), but they have given themselves a new role as a union that demands certain actions from the developers of the game. At the time of writing this paper, the developers have yet to issue an official response to the *logistic* players on strike[36]. That being said, when I was presented with this bit of sensationalism, I had to go and see for myself; after spending a few hours in-world and having informal conversations with a variety of players, it was clear that the strike had not affected the tight inner workings of the systems set up by large groups of players. In other words, nothing much has changed.

Where roles aren't signed institutionally, players literally invent new styles of 'play'[37]. To conclude, separating 'play' from the everyday as an activity that takes place free from consequence and construct, denies the possibility of virtual world culture(s). When players 'play' in virtual worlds, it is not simply the completion of repetitive tasks or participation in an institutional[38] event nor is it the following of rules. As Taylor (2006. p.157) notes, "Despite the common notion that computer games lock down modes of play via the system, rules and norms can be, especially in the case of MMOGs, incredibly contextual, socially negotiated, heterogeneous, ambiguous, and quite often contradictory between players". I would argue that it is in the process of negotiation and the transgression of rules where grounded assumptions are formed, where work and play merge and so becoming something entirely ambivalent (Yee, 2014). Dibbel (2006, p.299) remarks that it is no more required to "find a way out of the grind, an escape from modernity's productive regime"; for "the grind [i]s already escaping from itself", doing so in the amalgamation of work, play and even 'fun'. Virtual worlds exhibit the category of reality quite overtly when our very notions of these abstractions change within them and so leak out to and from the actual world. A simple example of this would be to refer to the impact virtual world labour can have on actual world

[36] See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MUnggpy1jpY for a summary of this event
[37] As is shown, this can even be striking
[38] Hosted and created by designers and owners

economics[39]; however, this is a topic that has been covered exhaustively with the rise of crypto-currencies, NFT's[40] and virtual real estate. I do not even consider it a 'prediction' to comment on the rising interconnectedness between virtual and actual economics. What I find more intriguing and relevant to this thesis is the idea that the digital environment is facilitating transformational processes to the extent where one can observe both the influence of actual-world cultures into virtual ones and even cultures in virtual worlds being ported into the actual world as in the case of Taylor's (2006) introduction in the previous sub-chapter. The focus here is that players are not passive consumers of the game world, especially in virtual worlds. Players co-construct what a meaningful experience is and do so collaboratively. This is not to say that all users work together towards a goal, but that the existence of the distinction between, say, the power gamer and the casual gamer, enables a friction that affirms and denies grounding assumptions in virtual world culture.

In this chapter, there are many frictions, some between theories and others between scholars. Friction is an important part of shifting boundaries and understanding dichotomies. What follows is my reading of a more traditional friction: *critique*, specifically, critique of the ethnography most of this thesis hinges on, to conclude this chapter.

Critique of Coming of Age in Second Life

Kendall (2010, p.317) critiques Boellstorff's (2015b) ethnography by concluding that, "*Coming of Age in Second Life* fails to make the case for virtual worlds as independent realities with the potential to transform human being." This likely is a response to Boellstorff's (2015b, p.62) initial engagement with Kendall whereby he posits: "Some researchers have gone so far as to criticize treating any virtual world as 'a completely separate, isolated social world'" (Kendall 2002, p.9). Kendall (2010, p.316) reasserts her position in critique to Boellstorff's emphasis of the equality of the virtual world in comparison to the 'real' by stating, "But as I argued 10 years ago, 'nobody lives only in cyberspace'". Notice how Kendall's more recent critique relies on '*independent realities'* as opposed to her earlier assessment that no virtual world can be treated as an isolated *social world*. It has not clear why Kendall believes that Boellstorff was arguing for the existence of

[39] See Castronova (2002; 2008)
[40] Non fungible tokens

entirely independent realities that transform the nature of being human[41]. This is certainly not the case in Boellstorff's ethnography nor does Boellstorff assert that one can exclusively live in cyberspace yet, for many, 'living' in cyberspace is as fundamental to their existence as going to the bar is with one's friends[42] and just as one cannot live only in a bar, one cannot live only in SL. It is a given in the field of socio/cultural anthropology that it is in the mundane and the banal from which one can draw deeper cultural fabrications, artefacts, and meaning-making processes. Spending time in SL, even when forced to consider it a place in its own right, still means that activities are ritualised and, as such, become mundane and banal. Nothing about the existence of complex technologies can reinvigorate human culture to the extent that it suddenly becomes something entirely new and exotic. Just as going to the pub has become 'normalised', so too is spending time in a virtual world.

Kendall's (2010) critique varies, and all of it is certainly not baseless. Above, I have only mentioned those parts that seem to be contradictory and failing. For example, Kendall (2010) argues, "Boellstorff asks '[w]hat theory of intimacy is in play when a resident logs in two alts to have sex with herself?' (p. 150), but gives us no information with which to answer this question. Is this a transformation of the self? Doll play? Masturbation? Contrary to Boellstorff's intimations, it is not clear that such a scenario at all calls into question existing notions of agency or intimacy" (p.317). In this case, the only answer Boellstorff might have is by calling upon the limitations of his methodology as no further information is given about the observed behaviour. Although this is only one example, it is often the case that Boellstorff's (2015b) observations seem to only capture an honest question rather than a holistic answer or deeper enquiry.

Kendall (2010) also critiques Boellstorff in his apparent inconsistent stance on offline and online identities, arguing that even though Boellstorff makes a case for the irrelevance of offline identities in his analysis of *Second Life* culture, he simultaneously draws on the reflections of these users regarding their offline lives to assert the benefits and drawbacks of *Second Life* for people of colour and those with disabilities. While I agree that Boellstorff (2015b) has somewhat overemphasised the unimportance of respondents' offline lives, I do not entirely rest easy in Kendall's critique. Boellstorff (2015b) had a 'follow the people'

[41] Boellstorff (2015b) asserted that our 'notions' of being human are being made and unmade, not the very 'nature' of the human.

[42] See: Kendall, L., 2002. *Hanging out in the virtual pub: Masculinities and relationships online*. Univ of California Press.

approach while acknowledging that the vast majority of interactions in *Second Life* happen inside it and that people rarely follow up on offline identity. Residents, therefore, did not seek to meet each other offline in *Second Life* and Boellstorff found it an apt anthropological approach to do the same. This is entirely different from reflecting on respondents' *claims* regarding their offline identities, especially if a respondent found it meaningful to speak about issues that bleed both in and out of the virtual and the actual. The point here is if one follows a methodology that keeps in line with the culture of the virtual world, one should not be forced to part ways with any mention of the offline. The ethnographer needs to understand how everyday activities fit in with the larger cultural narrative[43] of a place. Consider, for example, the term bleed which Bowman (2022) defines as "a phenomenon in which psychological contents spill over from the player to the character (bleed-in) and vice versa (bleed-out) in games. These contents can include emotions, thoughts, relationship dynamics, physical states, ideologies and personality traits, among others". The term bleed is neutral and some games intentionally produce more bleed than others (Bowman, 2022). My interest, however, cannot be contained by observing psychological contents, rather, broader patterns of intersectionality between culture and virtual worlds and the behavioural and ontological implications thereof. This definition assists in moving into the next chapter, which will analyse the digital-real dichotomy and propose a new way forward.

[43] And psychological

Chapter two: The digital real

Boellstorff (2016) uses three short examples to start to dispel the digital-real dichotomy: if you learn a language online, you can speak it in a country where others speak it, if you lose money in online gambling, you have lost money from your bank account; moreover, many aspects of the 'real' world come in forms of fantasy and play which are unreal (Bateson, 1972). Take GTA RP[44] worlds where people can roleplay and not-roleplay in these worlds. People can also roleplay and not-roleplay in the physical world (acting, tabletop roleplaying games, LARP[45], societal roles).

> *"The category of the real is not a point of distinction between the digital and the physical: as indicated by my digital reality matrix, either can possess it."*
> *Boellstorff, 2016, p.397*

Questions surrounding what is real and what is not is why this debate falls under the ontological turn; however, it is not my priority to review specific points in the ontological turn but rather use Boellstorff (2016) as a contact point from which I can base my own arguments and support those who argue that the digital is not in opposition to the real. Boellstorff (2016, p.388) uses a "synoptic table" which he calls the "digital reality matrix" to move from the "false opposition of the digital and real", accounting specifically for two aspects in the table: "Physical and real" and "Digital and unreal". His conclusion is not a claim but a move towards better incorporating "grids of similitude and difference (rather than in difference, in isolation)" into re-imagining the digital. Boellstorff proposes that preconditions for fieldwork for a long time was that of 'difference' and that this helped shape the ontological turn (Boellstorff, 2016, p.390). 'Difference', according to Boellstorff, is also seen as "the pivot around which all sides turn", implying that the pivot itself is rarely under question; rather, 'difference' in ontological positions is discussed epistemologically. Boellstorff's focus is how difference is "framed and deployed" (Boellstorff, 2016, p.391). Drawing on Gabriel Tarde's notions of 'Having', Boellstorff (2016) proposes that the alternative to the alterity pivot could be "possession and imitation" (Boellstorff, 2016, p.396) or "habeology" (Boellstorff, 2016, p.397) thereby exploring gaps of difference **and** similitude (Boellstorff, 2016). Tarde motioned that difference is not ontologically prior to similitude;

[44] Grand Theft Auto roleplay
[45] Live action roleplay

moreover, Tarde proposed to think of "the social man as a veritable somnambulist" (Tarde, 1903, p.76) and argued that

"The social like the hypnotic state is only a form of dream, a dream of command and a dream of action. Both the somnambulist and the social man are possessed by the illusion that their ideas, all of which have been suggested to them, are spontaneous."
Tarde, 1903, p. 77

Boellstorff believes that Tarde's notions of spirit possession (as opposed to 'possessive individualism') can help us rethink being in a reality focused on difference. While I could not find notions of spirit possession very productive, I opted in reading Tarde while observing the virtual through his theories of imitation and repetition. In this case, one can consider the similarities and differences between the mimicking virtual and the divergent qualities of the virtual broadly. The virtual world, in many ways, imitates the physical by drawing on many of the merits that constitute 'being' and 'having' in the physical. Virtual worlds, for example, operate through the premise of avatar embodiment[46], which is a necessity for socialisation and an avenue for kinship, politics and economics and so on. Yet even though the premise is simple, that is to say, operating as the indexical 'I' in the virtual world, it does not lead to socialisation in the same magnetised way as it would be in the actual world. The designers of virtual worlds can only mimic a form of embodiment; whatever bourgeons from that point on is of a divergent nature as it pushes boundaries, and I would argue, operates largely through alteration. Some of Boellstorff's more assertive claims are statements such as "Reality is not an exclusive property of the online or offline" (Boellstorff, 2016, p.395) and "It is not that virtual worlds are potentially real, but that they are additional realities" (Boellstorff, 2016, p.395). Positing virtual worlds as 'additional realities' comes with an implication that things in the virtual world are virtually real, not entirely in relation to the physical but entangled to the nuances of the virtual environment. Carr et al. (2006) argue that in online persistent worlds, it is often the notion that players are operating through a new and different identity, a (re)presentation of themselves, whereas this can be better understood as an *extension* of their personas. Crawford et al. (2013, p.11) state, "Put simply, video gaming and internet use are not separate domains or worlds, but rather a (frequently, relatively small) part of peoples' everyday lives, social patterns and interactions…." This is plausible, they argue, because it is

[46] Just as we need bodies to engage with the physical world

the player who makes the choices, their own mistakes etc., not a different persona, rather, an extended self (Cogburn and Silcox, 2009). Belk (1988) contends we have always had an "extended self" whereby the isolated self, cut off from the world, is posited as an illusion.

In this thesis, I illuminate the relationship (not the split) between the offline and the online in that it is a space of "connection and alteration" by focusing on the virtual world a serious place of enquiry, a space of "mutual possession" (Boellstorff, 2016, p.395) whereby not a 'different' reality exists but one that can add to the experience of being human. Prensky (2009) argues that three-dimensional virtual simulations (amongst other technologies) are to be considered as a digital cognitive enhancement and that we are already becoming (if not already) dependent upon these enhancements. Prensky (2009, p.2) continues to build on this by citing the philosophers Andy Clark and David Chalmers (1998), "extended cognition is a core cognitive process, not an add-on extra". Even though Prensky (2009) is referring mostly to digital enhancements in a professional field that enables us to do more and better (work), I still believe that the case could be made for these digital enhancements in various (non-work) contexts. As the virtual becomes a larger hinge to hang on for our imminent future, it would not be useful to consider these digital realities as 'add-on extras' as the word 'extra' can be problematic because of the implication that it can be discarded. Whereas extended and additional accounts for how we come to take our external worlds and make them part of our individual selves. I follow with how the idea of an extended self as an avatar might change how one might think of virtual sociality.

The dispersion of reals

Moore et al. (2007) argue that generally, virtual worlds attempt to find the balance between the fantastic and realism in their design, keeping what's familiar to recreate a sense of reality but adding the fantastic to keep it from being mundane. Moore et al. (2007, p.267) examine the social interaction systems in massive multiplayer virtual worlds and comment, "Despite their ever-increasing visual realism, today's virtual game worlds are much less advanced in terms of their interactional sophistication." Furthermore, they state that "Avatars are currently rather crude in terms of the level of information they communicate to others about a player's current state" (Moore et al., 2007, p.267). What is worth investigating here is the split between avatar and player; the avatar is limited if the goal is to exactly mimic physical human to human social interaction. Say an avatar is able to convert the current state of the

player into the virtual world fluently but with the fantastic elements added; an avatar that is shaped like a mythical dragon who is twitching his/her eye to another dragon avatar and with each twitch, a small amount of virtual fire is exhaled through its mouth. To what end can we use ethnomethodology and conversational analysis (Goodwin, 1979; Schegloff, 1998) to make sense of this face-to-face interaction? Are the dragons winking, or are they twitching? The point here is to consider the relationship between the attempts of virtual world designers in recreating 'reality' while creating their own world and the player-avatar social interaction. If a different world is being created, one that can be inhabited by humans fully projected as dragons or even perfectly mimicked human bodies, does that somehow change our framework for studying humans and the way in which they take turns in conversation, gesture, communicate through body language? Despite Moore et al. publishing in 2007, the systems in place to mimic physical, social interaction are still somewhat crude, even considering more recent full-body virtual reality suits and their virtual worlds such as VRChat[47].

When speaking of virtual worlds and how reality intersects through them, one cannot avoid human agency. Virtual worlds are particularly interesting to study because they have creators who are more than likely visible, who communicate with participants in their worlds and at times change the world to better fit their needs. Virtual worlds possess a very specific infrastructure; it could be said that they are made for a purpose. Moreover, they are made by people who have their own biases and ideas for what the world should look like and what it should be used for.

If I burn my hands, I experience very **immediate** and visceral sensations, my entire biology is shocked to its core, and my body reacts in a myriad of different ways. There is no labour that can recreate this exact sensation (yet) in virtual worlds, nor do creators of virtual worlds seem to be particularly interested in recreating suffering, poverty, the aftermath of war and death and all the things that people who have the privilege of enjoying in virtual worlds, do not (usually) experience in the physical world. Yet virtual worlds are not games; Boellstorff (2015b, p.22) asserts that thinking of them as games risks a "conflation of online sociality with entertainment, obviating the consequential forms of intimacy, community, and political economy in virtual worlds". Scholars who study virtual worlds assert that pure entertainment

[47] A virtual world where users embody themselves through a variety of avatars whereby the medium of engagement is by in large virtual reality technology

or ‘fun’ is not the crux of virtual worlds; instead, it rests somewhere in, for example, “intimacy, community and its political economy” (Boellstorff, 2015b, p.22). Even though these categories do not make an immediate connotation to pleasure, entertainment and ‘fun’, they still do not exhibit the full spectrum of suffering that comes with being human. This is not to say we cannot suffer in a virtual world or that we **should**. It would be more productive to ask how it can be that a virtual world exists not as a place of refuge that is free from suffering but as an additional reality (not escaping) where users are engaging with a different set of ontological substrata. During my anthropological research in a virtual world[48], I found that some users experience stress when playing. One might think how antithetical? Yet, after a while, it became clear that stress was not simply the end result of virtual world participation. One user, for example, found that this particular social virtual world assisted with his/her introversion and social skills. For this user, stress was not to be located in isolation, for it came with a myriad of other emotive responses. Some experienced stress due to the immediate happenings of the virtual world, such as in-world conflict or even high-octane situations, others, however, experienced stress due to the interconnectedness of their willingness to engage with personal growth or even as a coping mechanism to cope with mental health-related issues. The point I am making here is that virtual worlds cannot be thought of simply as a place where things happen; they facilitate and change users' understanding of culture and reality by serving as an additional reality. The response of stress might be experienced regardless of the world a user inhabits, but how it is constituted, thought of, and reshaped as an abstraction, can change given the non-temporal and social nature of virtual worlds.

Some scholars are even arguing that “digital technologies are **now** [emphasis added] creating and shaping physical reality” (Baskerville et al., 2019, p.2), calling it the “ontological reversal”. For how long have military drone operators been flying drones from another side of the world, and why are drone operators suffering from PTSD[49] symptoms in similar ways as ground soldiers? (Pinchevski, 2016, p.65). I mention this to cover the spectrum of stress and the virtual, for if we cannot accept that virtual reality and virtual worlds are not void of suffering and stress etc., we cannot hope to analyse the project of becoming human in them.

[48] A *Grand Theft Auto: V* roleplay world with primarily South African users

[49] “Clinically speaking, drone operators’ stress is arguably closest to what has recently been termed ‘perpetration-induced traumatic stress’ (PITS): a form of PTSD caused not by being a victim of trauma but by being an active participant in producing trauma” (MacNair, 2002, cited in Pinchevski, 2016).

Väliaho explains in his paper *Affectivity, biopolitics and the virtual reality of war* (2012, p.75):

> *"The neurologist Rodolfo Llina (2002, p.7) asserts that the brain operates as a closed, self-referential system and 'does not depend on continuous input from the external world to generate perceptions... but only to modulate them contextually' In this sense, the brain 'emulates' reality instead of acting as a simple translator".*

Väliaho then goes on to discuss our ancestral neurological roots and how images (as found in virtual reality) have a certain "modular nature" (Väliaho, 2012, p.81) in that they "animate(s) the reptilian cinema of basic affectivity." Väliaho makes these arguments by observing the use and effects of virtual reality as an experimental therapy tool for post-Iraqi war veterans who have PTSD. Väliaho asserts that "Images are, in short, to function as involuntary sensorimotor evocations of the traumatic past" (Väliaho, 2012, p.70) and implies that the use of virtual reality and repetitive images (in a controlled and therapeutic environment) can serve to habitualise the more primal parts of our brain that invoke physical stress responses to create an effect of "Pavlovian conditioning" (Väliaho, 2012, p.70). It might seem as if I have run off-topic at this point; nevertheless, it remains important to try and explore the scope of the 'virtual'. In this case, it is virtual realities, not virtual worlds being explored. Boellstorff (2020, p.20) helps diffuse the confusion between virtual worlds and virtual realities by stating, "Virtual worlds are about digital place, while virtual reality is about interface, which as we have seen can constitute a site of ableism" and it is in place, where people can embody, interact and even discriminate. The fact that virtual realities are about interface does not deny their continued existence and proliferation into the place of virtual worlds, and Väliaho's statement on the modular nature of images certainly assists in our analysis of the virtual and the real. It is also noteworthy to mention that recent research in *The Journal of Virtual World Research* seems to be primarily concerned with technologies such as augmented reality, virtual reality (Cox et al., 2019) and mobile games (Xiong and Yu, 2020) as opposed to its earlier focus on culture and practises of meaning-making in a more refined and definitive virtual world (Boellstorff, 2015a). I find this particularly concerning given the apparent success of studying virtual worlds anthropologically or from the ground up, whereas looking at the end result of progressive technologies only really speaks to how we *use* technology, not how we can *make* it (meaningful).

According to Barlow (1996, p.24), "Reality, is an edit". This implies that our understanding of reality influences the experience of it. The question then remains, do virtual worlds change how we interpret reality? Take, for example, the act of creating a character or avatar, phenomena found in both virtual worlds and many other game spaces. In doing so, players have to draw from their own particular understanding of both reality and fantasy, where the line is completely muddled. This is to say then that the act of operating a character/avatar is mediated by our understanding of what is 'real' and what is not. Doing so in a virtual world requires the user to be aware of their particular infrastructural/social/economic/political boundaries, be it their internet connection, social capital, computer hardware or the actual encoded boundaries set in place by the creator(s) of the virtual world. In this analysis, there is no concrete reality to which we can hold ourselves up to. Reality is that which is constituted by our understanding of both the physicality and the fantasy/abstractions of the world(s) we found ourselves in, it is *relational*, as I posited in the introduction of this thesis. In other words, dying in a virtual world is as real as dying in a virtual world. Posed differently, "experientially these things as signs referred to signifies internal to the virtual world" (Boellstorff, 2015b, p.243) or "virtual objects are real as virtual objects" (Brey, 2014, p.45). There shouldn't be a need to attempt to find similitudes between dying in the virtual and dying in the physical world to prove the concrete reality, only those who seek to demand authority over reality, to presume its use for blanket claims are interested in demanding similitude or even difference between phenomena in virtual worlds and the actual world. For example, Castronova (2006, p.163) claims that, "Until now, it has not been possible to take all of society as a research object; such a thing is too big to fit in a lab", implying that online games (and more broadly virtual worlds) allow us to conduct 'natural experiments'. Here we find Castronova's (2016, p.170) dream for the study of virtual worlds: "If you want to study the properties of atoms as they bang together, you must either do it indirectly or build a big machine that can bang atoms together under controlled conditions."

The implication of Castronova's claims is that large scale experiments can be done in virtual worlds, which can assist those in the actual world since we can create apparent controlled environments in digital spaces. For Castronova, it is indeed of absolute importance to find out where 'real' world economics fit into 'virtual world economics' or what 'virtual world' behaviour can teach us about 'real world' behaviour. I doubt that this type of research will lead to anything productive, given my approach and positions on the topic. My position on both reality and the dichotomy between the virtual and the real can be thought of in

comparison to Strathern's (1992) conception of culture in that it "consists in the way analogies are drawn between things, in the way certain thoughts are used to think others" (Strathern, 1992, p.33). Conducting experiments in virtual worlds is certainly not the way forward. This is what realists want for the future of virtual world studies; however, "The more realistic the realist is, the more blinkered he becomes" (Lefebvre, 2014, p.488).

Virtually human

Boellstorff (2015b, p.5) argues that the virtual world can show us how "our 'real' lives have been 'virtual' all along" and so uses this as a position against the idea that virtual worlds borrow assumptions exclusively from the 'real' world. Boellstorff draws upon Malinowski (1922, p.4) in that anthropology asks to "imagine yourself" in an unfamiliar place which can be equated to the idea that anthropology has always been a process of "avatarizing the self, standing virtually in the shoes (or on the shores) of another culture" (Boellstorff, 2015b, p.6). Here, Boellstorff is using the word 'virtual' as 'almost'; for example, one might say, "I am virtually done with my thesis!" even though it is not finished. In Lefebvre's (2014, p.489) words, "The actual and the virtual[50] have a dialectical relation…where a consciousness of what is possible always intervenes". Analysing the term 'virtual' in virtual worlds, by its mere definition, would be a bit futile; however, considering the interventional role of 'possibility' can shed some light on what it means to be virtually human. Virtual worlds do not merely provide us with access to new possibilities but intervene by engaging upon our agency to imagine possibility and consequently perform it. This implies that "Without possibility there can be no activity, no reality…" (Lefebvre, 2014, p.489). Just as Latour argued that social scientists should not pre-emptively resolve what 'society' or 'nature' means and instead carry on as if those definitions are the outcomes (not the starting points) of webbed negotiations between people and objects (Latour, 1987; 2005; 1991), it would be productive to consider that the actual and the virtual cannot be determined before observing the transformational interactions between people and virtual worlds. It is, therefore, in reflexivity and probability that we are able to understand the ontological status of virtual worlds.

[50] Lefebvre is not speaking about virtual worlds specifically

It could be argued that even though, for much of our lives, we are underscored by a process of possibility and becoming (always becoming something) for it is in the virtual world that we become aware of our own ontological status given the nature of the environment which can seem absurd at times. Operating an avatar in a highly theatrical and fictional world (or even one that mimics the physical world) while also following the virtual social etiquette is itself a contrasting experience that deeply highlights this process of becoming. For example, in my ethnographic research, I was struck by how quickly I internalised many of the taken for granted norms that new users in the world often struggle with in the beginning, because of my 'insider' position. Consider the following regarding how anthropologists are advised to deal with ontological 'difference':

"Rather than using our own analytical concepts to make sense of a given ethnography (explanation, interpretation), we use the ethnography to rethink our analytical concepts. Rather than asking why the Nuer[51] should think that twins are birds, we should be asking how we need to think of twins and birds (and all their relevant corollaries, such as humanity, siblinghood, animality, flight or what have you) in order to arrive at a position from which the claim that twins are birds no longer registers as an absurdity."

Carrithers et al., 2010, p.184

When virtual world behaviour is observed by those with no experience in these behaviours, the idea that an avatar (or multiple avatars) is representing a virtual self or extended self might seem absurd too. It should then be useful to find a way to present virtual world phenomena in their own right and not simply as derivatives of the actual world. It is often the case that anything new and fantastical might seem unreal or void of actuality for the outsider, yet as I have shown, demanding a reflexive position or a 'virtual'[52] one can help break down ontological barriers. Placing oneself virtually in the mind and body of another makes sense because we are not able to entirely witness the reality of another from their particular perspective. Thinking virtually is, therefore, the act of coming as close as possible and yet retaining the indexical position of the self. This is, of course, a very idealistic position but can matter for future research in virtual worlds. Following this line of enquiry, I ask, how do people see themselves and virtual objects in virtual worlds? Is it a mere matter of

[51] The **Nuer people** are a Nilotic ethnic group mostly situated in the Greater Upper Nile region of South Sudan.
[52] As in almost

interpretation or a matter of what is actual? I follow with an attempt at answering these questions.

Mirrored reals

Boellstorff (2015b) recalls a visit to the *Second Life* home of 'Tandy', where he was struck by a circular mirror in the hallway. The mirror reflected the room behind them but without their avatars present. At that time, it was not possible to create a 'real' mirror in *Second Life*; that being said, behind the mirror was a ball apparatus that sensed the proximity of an avatar and rotated the mirror's reflection accordingly. The mirror still did not produce a reflection of the avatar but changed in perspective. Boellstorff noted, "I was struck by a culture that did not prioritize simulating or 'mirroring' reality, but assumed human creativity produced its own realities" (Boellstorff, 2015b, p.255). The idea of mirroring and simulation in virtual worlds leads to a few interesting points. While residents in *Second Life* would often have homes filled with objects such as stoves and dry cleaners that had no 'real' functionality (Boellstorff, 2015b), it was also the case (as in the mirror) that these objects would be imbued with a different purpose or at the very least be modified to reflect *a part of* the actual. Even in a virtual world that graphically mirrors every aspect of the actual world, it would not be called a simulation for it is still virtual, as in the objects can only be interacted with by avatars controlled by players. Take Taylor's (2006, p.129) comment, "Game worlds do not lie outside of our ongoing cultural battles, anxieties, or innovations, but very often mirror them quite well." Notice how cultural battles are thought to be mirrored where culture is distinctly human. The *way* in which cultural battles happen is mirrored and not the actual cultural battles themselves; similarly, the way in which one would conceive of objects to work in the actual, transforms the way in which we use them in the virtual. A mirror in the actual reflects, yet a mirror in *Second Life* cannot be operated in the same way, opening up new creative possibilities that can change how we literally 'see ourselves'.

Chalmers' (2017) *virtual realism* can be summed up as follows: virtual objects exist as digital objects; things and events that happen in virtual worlds are digital events; that which is experienced in virtual reality is constituted by a veridical perception, and lastly, these experiences can be as meaningful as experiences in the actual world. The implication of Chalmers' position is that people operating in virtual reality (unfortunately, 'virtual reality' has become a simile for virtual worlds) see objects in the virtual world **as** virtual with their

own virtual properties. To assist this position, Chalmers (2017, pp.330-331) asks the reader to consider the rear-view mirror inside a typical vehicle explaining that, when he looks into the mirror, the cars look to be behind him even though the mirror is in front of him. This means we typically understand that the mirror is projecting an image that is not the mirror itself; it is showing us the cars behind our car. Therefore, objects in virtual worlds might look like actual-world objects, but with knowledge comes the realisation that the object is, in fact, virtual. Chalmers (2017) makes it clear then that the absence of physicality or direct sign-signifier relation does not make virtual objects less real. Beisbart (2019), however, argues against Chalmers (2017) in that objects in 'simulations' (it is still unclear to me how all these terms can denote the same abstraction) are at best fictitious presentations of real objects. Moreover, Beisbart argues that experienced users in virtual reality do not possess enough knowledge about virtual reality to understand objects as virtual (as in the way we typically understand how mirrors work). Similarly, Silcox (2019) critiques Chalmers' (2017) positions around the value and experience of virtual world objects. Silcox argues that players who generally find virtual worlds the most engaging also experience them as real and nonvirtual. I would argue that Silcox (2019) is conflating immersion and engagement with 'reality' as the experience of reality cannot be contingent upon time spent in a world or quantitatively the amount of labour that players engage with.

In Jean Baudrillard's (1994, p.1) iconic piece *Simulacra and Simulation* he writes, "Today abstraction is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror, or the concept. Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal." Baudrillard is therefore pointing to a 'final' reality of sorts, one that is invented by us that disposes itself from traditional notions of reality. Nunes (1995, p.2) wrote, "For Baudrillard, the shift from the real to the hyperreal occurs when representation gives way to simulation. One could argue that we are standing at the brink of such a moment, marked primarily by the emerging presence of a virtual world." I would argue against the notion that we are or were standing on the brink of the age of hyperreality; our techne is certainly changing the way we perceive reality or, as Boellstorff (2015b, p.117) states, "…we have always been virtually human". I certainly reject any notions of post-human or even post-hyperreality; these ideals often rest on the ability of technology to somehow make us more than what we are. I argue technologies can only be mediated and conceived through culture, and culture is what makes us human.

"*The ultimate lesson of the 'virtual reality' is the virtualization of the very 'true' reality: by the mirage of 'virtual reality,' the 'true' reality itself is posited as a semblance of itself, as a pure symbolic construct."*

Žižek, 1992, p.135

As I have mentioned, the virtual is best to be taken first and foremost within the context of itself, just as Boellstorff (2015b) would like virtual worlds to be studied within their own right. This might seem as if we are advocating for the study of virtual worlds as discreet and isolated places; on the contrary, I believe this position has emanated because of the rise of the virtual/real dichotomy. The virtual needs to be understood in its own right because any attempt to draw similitudes between the virtual and the actual *seems* like one is trying to desperately prove how real virtual worlds are. We do not need to find superficial similitudes between the actual and virtual to understand how culture facilitates virtual world behaviour. While similitudes certainly do exist, some of which can help inform policy changes and better economic futures, these mirroring relations are not the pivot on which virtual worlds turn.

A concern I have raised in this thesis is that the study of virtual worlds seems to include virtual reality, mobile games, simulations, augmented reality, and so on. These technologies do exist and should be studied thoroughly, as their relationships with virtual worlds are particularly revealing and simply interesting. It is, however, unproductive to assume that virtual reality is in the slightest a necessary technology to experience virtual worlds and virtuality. It is truly illusionary to believe that complex technologies enable virtuality while initial virtual world scholars such as Dibbell[53] and Bartle, who "theorized computer-mediated communication did so in a world without sensorially realistic virtual worlds. These thinkers realized very quickly the imaginative power of non-representational media and pondered the fate of human subjectivities lodged in spaces made of text" (Golub, 2010, p.14). When VR is seen as 'that which constitutes virtuality' and so placed on the ontological apex, it dilutes human agency and adds fuel to the virtual/real dichotomy. A hyper-focus on VR can lead many to believe that much of our ability in producing meaningful experiences and negotiating reality is contingent upon *progressive* technologies and visual realism, while I would argue that it is in a sense of place where we determine what matters (quite literally

[53] See Dibbell (1994); Bartle (2004)

what constitutes 'matter' in some cases) and what does not. It is also the case that culture and the labour involved in *doing culture* is a far more vital aspect in studying when virtual worlds are real and to simply be curious about human behaviour in virtual worlds. This thesis is always concerned with the idea that what people do matters more than what others posit the 'real' world to be. While the actual world will certainly continue to exist and perhaps flourish without humans, our debates surrounding what exactly constitutes our world(s) is contingent upon our very ability to attach symbolic meaning to the aforementioned debates. We cannot position ourselves objectively as separate from 'real' facts, void of the complex relations undertaken as the *de facto* means to an end. In other words, being curious about the techniques people use to produce meaningful experiences in virtual worlds is a lot more productive than being curious about the immersive qualities of the environment or technologies that beg for realism.

Conclusion

This chapter could very well be its own thesis, yet as Ingold (2008, p.90) reminds us: "We can be our own philosophers, but we can do it better thanks to its embedding in our observational engagements with the world and in our collaboration and correspondence with its inhabitants. Let us call this philosophy of ours anthropology." The paper would be severely limited if I were to call it 'anthropology'[54] because there is no direct participant observation data to support any of the claims. Nonetheless, this does not mean that it would not be useful to use anthropological work to try and better understand virtual worlds and human behaviour. The challenge has been to stay theoretically grounded, to consider that one cannot know without being (Ingold, 2008, p.83). One can truly produce a never-ending conversation about reality and ontology, but it is in the interests of this thesis to answer an open-ended research question without drowning it in itself. The following chapter will make use of the work from the iconic anthropologists Clifford Geertz and his particular symbolic approach in understanding the nuances of cultures. Symbolic anthropology is useful because it is concerned mostly with the individual interpretations[55] of the happenings around him/her. In earlier chapters, while not always focusing on the individual, I have shown the importance of interpretation and reflexivity in virtual world cultures. What follows is an extension of these abstractions so as to merge virtual worlds and 'classic' social anthropology.

[54] It would also be incorrect as anthropology hinges fundamentally on participant observation
[55] This is why symbolic and interpretive anthropology is very similar if not the same

Chapter three: Anthropology and virtual worlds

Introduction

"The thing to ask about a burlesqued wink or a mock sheep raid is not what their ontological status is. It is the same as that of rocks on the one hand and dreams on the other-they are things of this world. The thing to ask is what their import is: what it is, ridicule or challenge, irony or anger, snobbery or pride, that, in their occurrence and through their agency, is getting said"
Geertz, 1973, p.10

According to Alexander and Smith (2011, p.5), Clifford Geertz "legitimized that very project of an interpretive human science itself". This, of course, did not come without its rise and falls, however powerful Geertz's propositions were. Although "Geertz's methodological suspicions about structuralism are not entirely groundless" (Alexander and Smith, 2011, p.20), it is also the case, for Alexander and Smith, that many have taken issue with Geertz, usually taking the battlefield to Geertz's (1973) famous essay titled: *Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight*[56]. Some found that in reading Geertz pre-1973, they were left with "the distinct impression that Geertz's rejection of generalizing theories about politics and development and turn to aestheticism was partly the result of his inability to come to terms with the dark side of America's interventions in the post-colonial world" (Geertz et al., 2010, p.788). In the field of anthropology, Geertz's intellectual influence lost much of its driving force after the 1980s (Geertz et al., 2011). According to Geertz et al. (2011), the most sustained critique on Geertz proliferated from Roger Keesing; however, he did not differ that much from Geertz in his approach if he is read closely, albeit he clearly provides reasoning for structuralism and even positivism. For example, Keesing (1981, p.129) writes, "It is the essence of our humanity to pursue symbolically defined goals in our seemingly practical moments (in working and eating), as well as our more ethereal moments (in painting designs or performing rituals)." Keesing also concerns himself deeply with the power of ecological constraints, which is likely why in his critique of Geertz, he disembarks from Geertz's idea of cultures as collective creations. That being said, if the essence of humanity for Keesing is to

[56] As opposed to his work on the state, Islam, on development, nationalism and abstractions of culture

pursue symbolically defined goals, so too is the project of anthropology and writing with cultures.

Keesing et al., 1987, p.161) notes that cultures "do not simply constitute webs of significance [As Geertz and his colleagues suggest], systems of meanings that orient humans to one another and their world. They constitute *ideologies* disguising human political and economic realities as cosmically ordained…Cultures are webs of mystification as well as signification." Keesing here seems to be speaking of the influence of power and ideology over the agency of the everyday lived experience. It is not in the interest of this thesis to determine which came first (ideology or cultures), rather, to gather broader evidence of the relationship between the two via the aforementioned scholars. This is one of the flaws in Geertz's conception of culture, as he attempted to scope the definition[57] down by widening it. Alexander and Smith (2011, p.2) make the case for power by interpreting Geertzian culture as "something more mysterious, fluid, and deeply contradictory that could affect the entire repertoire of actions." It is not clear whether Keesing truly differed with the interpretive approach as it seems that when scholars are pushed into corners regarding their critique on an approach (interpretive, symbolic, structural etc.), the response is often that all approaches are fair and should be used contextually and co-operatively. This is, of course, likely more of a diplomatic response than an actual position. Renner (1984) claimed that few people actually spin the webs of meaning in which they themselves are caught, for most are simply caught in the webs. I argue that this denies the very premise of Geertz's implication of agency as the webs are spun by humans; therefore, everyone is caught in the complications of culture(s). One might then consider the question of who is spinning and who is getting caught in the webs, similar to the virtual/real dichotomy as in: are people subject to the real as predetermined or do they co-constitute both the virtual and the real as constructions?

Wolf (2002, p.224) argues, "we must move beyond Geertz's 'experience-near' understandings to analytical concepts that allow us to set what we know about X against what we know about Y, in pursuit of explanation". This exemplifies one of the reasons Geertz's work would be productive in better understanding virtuality and virtual worlds, for it is often the case that the 'X' becomes a precursor for the existence of the 'Y', similarly what is 'real' is in many cases seen as something that needs to be defined to the exact metric just to oppose

[57] See page 10 in this thesis

the realness of the virtual. While I agree that the pursuit of explanation is something to strive to, as I am striving to better *explain* virtual worlds in this thesis, it is also the case that our initial engagements with virtual worlds, both hyper-'real' and visually stimulating, should keep the 'experience-near' as in, near to the actual doings of those participating in virtual worlds[58]. For Geertz, the importance of distinctions between class and power were not as prominent throughout his writing (White, 2007), and this, of course, raised many concerns for scholars who had power and class at the centre of their ontology. For Wolf (2002) power is that which enables *meaning* to rise and fall, for it is often the work of 'specialists' such as shamans and academics to inscribe meaning to an act. Power, however, is still constantly contested regardless of whether it happens in the sphere of shamanism or academia. Power can therefore be contested overtly without conforming to the sphere of 'specialists'. Think of the contestation between designer and user in virtual worlds, while users do not always possess the know-how to re-code the world, they still find ways to subvert control by enacting upon what they find meaningful.

Geertz also did not subscribe to a 'puritan' state of symbolic anthropology as this could "run the danger...of locking cultural analysis away from its proper object, the informal logic of factual life" (Geertz, 1973, p.17). Furthermore, White (2007, p.1200) explains that "Geertz came perilously close to arguing that the best interpretations of culture and social life are simply the best-*written* ones", and as many would revere Geertz for his literary skills and engaging storytelling, I would argue that it became a rather easy target for his critics. A lot of ethnography has to do with placing oneself virtually in the shoes of another; given that our lives are full of myths and stories, never-ending narratives and lots of theatre, it, therefore, seems like an apt approach to attempt to synthesise that in one's own writing. It is also the case that the best-written interpretations include exactly what 'the best' should be. In other words, if we are not writing 'the best' that we possibly can (in explaining cultures and worlds that are seemingly different), what exactly are we doing? Who are we appeasing? I highlight all these scholars and their displacements to show "how different forms of discourse come to be materially produced and maintained as authoritative systems" (Asad, 1979b, p.619)[59], for it is in this discourse that I am able to both show an understanding of Geertz and his writing,

[58] Even if that means that offline happenings bleed into the online virtual world, the distinction between what is offline and what is online is, for the moment, clear. The distinction between what is real and what is virtual is not

[59] This quote originated as a critique to Geertz's work; I am using it to show how that very critique helps us understand the history of Geertz and his work

while also highlighting some of his shortcomings and faded influence. William Sewell, a social historian, summarises the relationship between Geertz and his anthropological colleagues as follows:

"The positivists criticize Geertz for abandoning ... scientific values in favour of the more 'glamourous' or 'alluring' qualities of interpretive method. The post-modernists, by contrast, reproach him for not pushing his interpretive method far enough — in particular, for failing to subject his own interpretive ethnographic practice to critical interpretation. The materialists, finally, criticize him for his neglect of history, power, and social conflict."
Sewell, 1997, pp.35-6

Virtual fiction

The rationale for invoking Geertz is not to provide an argument for the ingeniousness of the interpretive approach or to defend his work from critics. In Geertz's 'alluring' writing of the interpretive method, one is drawn betwixt and between symbol, fantasy and the actuality of grounded practise. It follows then that Geertz would, at the very least, certainly appreciate the complexity of virtual world cultures and how additional realities emerge. Most 20th century anthropologists might scoff at this thesis, especially ones who have done extensive ethnographic work on quite 'serious matters' such as kinship, rituals and power structures in the culture(s) of peoples. Yet as Geertz (1973, p.15) states, "anthropological writings are...fictions, in the sense that they are 'something made', 'something fashioned'—the original meaning of *fictio*—not that they are false, unfactual, or merely 'as if' thought experiments."

Witnessing death and display as an anthropologist before the 21st century likely used to be a prerequisite for exciting fieldwork and data. Take, for example, the famous 20th-century anthropologist Margaret Mead, who was accused of falsifying her reports and glamourising her work with sensational data (Freeman, 1983). Was it that Mead did not experience the novel at all, or could it be that there was literary greed at play? The point I am making here is that virtual worlds might seem void of consequence as anthropologists know it; they might seem empty of concrete human agency all because of the 'wondrous' ways in which they take form. Does it mean that they will always stay novel? A fringe activity only for those with dreams of escapism? Or will it become so mundane that anthropologists start returning

nostalgically backwards to our time where technology and virtuality are seen as exciting, hated by some and revered by others? I suggest a process orientated episteme going forward into the study of virtual worlds, one that is not concerned by marketed outcomes but by the processes that users go through to finally produce their own ontological and additional realities.

Twenty-first-century social anthropology took a turn inward, studying culture(s) close to home to alienate them and, by doing so, normalising them in the cultural web of absurdity and meaning. For it was the case that any culture outside of the euro-western perspective was deemed as absurd and barbarous by many of anthropology's founders (Asad, 1973). Geertz (1973, p.43) wrote that, "the notion that the essence of what it means to be human is most clearly revealed in those features of human culture that are universal rather than in those that are distinctive to this people or that is a prejudice we are not necessarily obliged to share." Turning inward to virtual worlds and their cultures could be the practice to level the cultural playing field. Even though virtual worlds are largely dominated by the global north, it is not inconceivable to think that they can become places that diverge from post-colonial attitudes and neoliberal ideals. Unfortunately, this is both in the hands of those who create virtual worlds and what those who partake in them decide to do with that freedom. The global south, too, has a lot to offer as it "has a powerful impact on the ways media is created, circulated and used worldwide" (Penix-Tadsen, 2019, p.13) while it is also important to note that technology "is not simply transmitted from center to periphery in a unilateral manner, but rather it is shaped and transformed by a continual process of mutual exchange between multiple actors in a global network."

The emergence of the virtual/real dichotomy assisted scholars by showing how people might superficially perceive the world as a place of 'concrete reals' where it is easy to delineate one space from another. It is also the case that Geertz's critics often took issue with his 'lax' writing style. For example, Renner (1984) motioned that Geertz renders the idea of the 'symbol' useless because Geertz (1973) relates and compares it to anything that signs and signifies. What I would argue is that the task of writing about culture(s) is not a matter of simply reducing subjectivity, hence, producing descriptions with quantitative and repeatable properties. For it is this approach that led to the authoritative and demanding nature of the virtual/real dichotomy and many others before it. One might consider Geertz's writing style

and approach itself void of structure and universal properties and therefore, 'easy'[60], but is it not 'easy' to place the world and its peoples in rigid categories after these categories have been meticulously defined as to who and what may exist in them?

Boellstorff (2015b, p.27) wrote that "It is true that some persons spend time in virtual worlds to be something different: women becoming men or men becoming women, adults becoming children, disabled persons walking, humans becoming animals, and so on. However, many who participate in virtual worlds do not seek to escape from their actual lives. Such negative views of virtual worlds fail to consider forms of escapism in the actual world...". Boellstorff(2015b), however, does not seem to think that in virtual worlds we can become *human*, not because of the digital environment but as a result of the cultures that thrive in them. How is it then that we can become human? I invoke Geertz to explain:

"It is in a systematic review and analysis of these—of the Plains Indian's bravura, the Hindu's obsessiveness, the Frenchman's rationalism, the Berber's anarchism, the American's optimism (to list a series of tags I should not like to have to defend as such)—that we shall find out what it is, or can be, to be a man."

Geertz, 1973, p.53

One can then conclude, perhaps not as potently, what it means to be and become human in the virtual by the same principle, not that what is deduced should be drawn to all other humans. Understanding the particular happenings of those who *do culture* in the virtual world should provide perspective on the "informal logic of actual life" (Geertz, 1973, p.17). For Geertz, becoming human "is becoming individual, and we become individual under the guidance of cultural patterns, historically created systems of meaning in terms of which we give form, order, point, and direction to our lives" (Geertz, 1973, p.52). The question then remains, where do we find this project of *becoming human* in virtual worlds?

[60] See Alexander and Smith, 2011, p.5

The ballpark and the bridge; the cockfight and the virtual arena

"So it is no longer possible to regard technology as simply a background or framework on which society rests. It is integrated into the interpretive structure of reality and is not just regarded as an instrument or a tool but as an actor in society."
Geertz (2002) cited in Panourgiá, 2002, p.430.

Geertz thinks of humans as "incomplete or unfinished animals who complete or finish ourselves through culture—and not through culture in general but through *highly particular forms of it*" (emphasis added, Geertz, 1973, p.49). This is why Boellstorff (2015b, p.66) refers to "culture in virtual worlds" as opposed to "'virtual culture' to underscore how cultures in virtual worlds are simply new, 'highly particular' forms of culture". Following the essence of Geertz's (1973) essay *Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight*, it seems logical to try and find the particularities of culture(s) in virtual worlds where a piece of culture can be treated as a text, furthermore, thinking through the cockfight essay demonstrates "how to take a piece of culture — a ritual, a tall tale, a performance, a symbol, or an event — and treat it as 'text'...Liberated from the rigours of explanation and able to take as a focal text any piece of the social world, great or small, historians..., literary critics...and even policy analysts...were freed to put culture centre-stage" (Swidler, 1996, p.300). We can also find inspiration from Gluckman (1940) in his famous 'bridge paper', whereby he leads the paper with a thick description of a social event in Zululand[61] instead of leading with his own understanding of Zulu cultures and structures as a presupposition. The bridge paper "offers certain social categories for analysis. Gluckman takes the categories of people who gather together at the bridge, and the juxtapositions of their behaviours, as threads to follow into the wider society…He, thereby, exposes how these threads ravel and unravel in weaving a social fabric" (Handelman, 2005, p.38). It would therefore be useful to study 'up and outwards' as Gluckman would have it, to follow the weave or the webs of meaning through space and time. For this thesis, we are confronted with quite the particular space in time as virtual worlds somewhat exist outside of our traditional notions of them. It should be noted that the 'particularity' of cultures in virtual worlds does not exclude the 'global', for it is in the local that we can often find elements of the global. It would also be quite ironic to think

[61] The opening of a new bridge in modern Zululand

of cultures in virtual worlds as something particularly local given the fact that virtual worlds, as they have been described, are highly contingent upon global networking structures.

Before I attempt to draw upon social events, symbols and performances in some virtual world case studies to make a case for the postulation of cultures in them, it is first necessary to synthesise Geertz's cockfight essay while specifically considering Geertz's use of abstractions around play, meaning and culture. Handelman (2005, p.36) argues that in the cockfight essay, Geertz is "obsessed with the reductionism of explaining the cultural provenance of every symbolic element that may be remotely relevant". Regardless if this is a mere oversight by Geertz, I would argue that virtual worlds allow for a certain productive obsessiveness over the provenance of their symbolic elements, given how hard it is to practically trace each user within their own offline cultures. Most virtual world anthropology relies on the world itself as the central hub of connection; even though they might follow up on individual offline history and so on, it seems to have a lot more promise by undertaking grounded studies that produce local-global accounts within virtual worlds. Handelman (2005) argued that the grounded and practical results from Geertz could not lead to anything as it simply got subsumed by culture; therefore, Handelman wanted interwoven linkages of accounts like the ones found in Gluckman's (1940) bridge essay to produce 'better' historical accounts that can be easily traced from one to another. My point is, while confronted with modern Zululand or with cockfighting in Bali, there is a lot of incentive to produce work that is careful to note both the macrohistory and microhistory of such places and their peoples. Virtual worlds do not offer us such rich grounds to explore their macrohistory, only virtual worlds in general, which vary and will keep on varying in their scope. This is arguably a good thing because if one is to follow an interpretive approach and gather insight from Geertz to study cultures in virtual worlds, one does not need to compensate for the failings of hermeneutics. Virtual worlds are near perfect places for the hermeneutic approach because being 'obsessive' about each symbol and its 'cultural provenance' matters because one is able to observe and explain the contextual relevance of these symbols as they pertain to their places of conception: a particular virtual world with its own particular cultures. There is also something to say about the usefulness of an interpretive approach in studying virtual worlds as one has relatively easy access to the interpretations of many inhabitants' at any given time and a lot of 'data' that one could use qualitatively, like being able to record almost any interaction. What follows is an intermittent analysis of the cockfight essay to redraw the

attention back towards the general theme of the thesis, which serves to provide a re-analysis of virtual worlds and cultures in them.

In Geertz's cockfight essay, he does not simply explore the meanings of the Balinese cockfight, he also asks what makes particular cultural performances and experiences more engaging and revealing than others. Stated differently, "Geertz explores how tension, uncertainty about the outcome, balanced opponents, and the ability to symbolize (and sublimate) significant social tensions make some cockfights deeper, more exciting, and more satisfying than others" (Swidler, 1996, p.302). Geertz (1973) starts the essay by telling the story of a cockfight held in the town square of a Balinese village, at which time cockfights were deemed illegal in Bali. As Geertz and his wife decided to attend the cockfight, a police raid took place, causing all of the participants to flee and scatter in various directions. Geertz and his wife decided to quite literally "follow the people" (Marcus 1995, p.106) and ran with them. This eventually led to a situation where one of the locals sporadically vouched for their innocence, catching Geertz completely off guard and saving him and his wife from potential imprisonment. Before this event, Geertz and his wife were treated with indifference, perhaps even disdain, by the locals. After hearing about his valiant attempt at running away, however, the general mood swung in Geertz's favour (as an anthropologist) as many of the locals wanted to hear the story from Geertz time and time again. What was most striking to them, according to Geertz, was the fact that he could have "pulled out our papers" (Geertz, 1973, p.416) but decided to show solidarity with the villagers as someone who is not above the law or the societal code and conduct. At this point, Geertz stated that they were "quite literally in", meaning that he transitioned from an outsider to an insider. As a result of this series of events, Geertz (1973, p.417) stated that "By the time I left I had spent about as much time looking into cockfights as into witchcraft, irrigation, caste, or marriage."

So, what exactly do cockfights in Bali have to do with cultures in virtual worlds? As I have mentioned, invoking Geertz and his essay has a particular use: to highlight the promise of the interpretive approach in studying virtual worlds and cultures in them. An interpretive approach does not demand that one should risk prison time or that one should force your way into a risky situation to prove yourself. An interpretive approach allows for the reading of a social situation as text, often in the format of a story of some kind. It is not simply observational as happenings are accounted for, but interpretations of "transient examples of shaped behaviour" (Geertz, 1973, p.10). As Geertz stated in an interview, "textualization of

others goes on all the time. We create texts with one another; the text is never created by one person, that is the intersubjective part, it is always created in the context of other people" (Panourgiá, 2002, p.427). People impose meaning on objects, signs and symbols when they are removed from their actuality, that is, if they could ever exist just like an 'actual' thing free from tied meaning in the first place. Performances, happenings, bets, discussions, objects etc., in virtual worlds function through the same premise. For example, one might find the idea of 'trust' to be universal in its definition, but the way trust is performed in, say, *EverQuest* is particular to the happenings of the labour undertaken by its virtual inhabitants and the mechanics coded in by the developers that might signify to players that something as abstract as 'trust' can be exhibited via the virtual world. Taylor (2006, p.46) explains that "Trusting group mates is a common theme throughout the game and it becomes even more pronounced at the high-end where venturing into dangerous zones brings heightened risk of death and potential loss of corpse (and all the hard-earned items carried on it)." The concept of 'trust' is, therefore, removed from its actuality by its attachment to the virtual world of *EverQuest* as a place. Similarly, Goffman (1961, p.71) argues that "An encounter[62] provides a world for its participants, but the character and stability of this world are intimately related to its selective relationship to the wider one", and I would add, inversely towards the origins of the world as coded in by the designers.

Just as Geertz (1973) shows why and how some performances seem to be more engaging and revealing culturally in Bali, we might say that in *EverQuest*, the idea of trust is more prevalent amongst those who mostly play in guilds and depend on groupmates, therefore, making gameplay in 'dangerous zones' more engaging and revealing. It is not simply that trust is thought of 'differently' in 'different' places. 'Difference' is an unproductive denominator as opposed to reading 'trust' contextually in *EverQuest.* Doing so reveals how players interpret one another and the world around them. One could then go deeper and ask: What is implied when a player in *EverQuest* is asked to trust another group member? Unfortunately, this is a question I cannot answer because I lack primary fieldwork data in *EverQuest*, and it would be somewhat confusing to use Taylor (2006) as evidence for my claims. I pose this question to provoke a different perspective on the way one can view cultures in virtual worlds.

[62] Here he is referring to a 'Social encounter', also, Goffman saw *encounters* as something contingent upon the physical presence of participants; I still feel it is relevant here.

After Geertz (1973) proclaimed himself 'in', he continues by describing the metaphorical and physical relationships between cocks and men, often making Freudian-like commentary and observations while also noting the obvious relations between cocks and masculine ideals in Bali. Furthermore, Geertz explains how cockfights work practically and offers an analysis of one of the core aspects of the cockfight: betting and gambling. I choose not to go over each particular sociotechnical aspect of the game of the cockfight itself because my interest in Geertz is broader. Geertz (1973, p.431) states that, "The Balinese attempt to create an interesting, if you will, 'deep,' match by making the center bet as large as possible so that the cocks matched will be as equal and as fine as possible, and the outcome, thus, as unpredictable as possible." Geertz (1973, p.432) borrows the term "deep play" from Jeremy Bentham by which is meant: "play in which the stakes are so high that it is, from his[63] utilitarian standpoint, irrational for men to engage in it at all." Geertz denies the idea that Balinese people do not value money[64], for it is often status that is at stake the higher the central bet is. Furthermore, Geertz (1973, p.433) argues that "the cockfight is not roulette." It is here where one can witness the elegance of Geertz's method, for the cockfight is not simply a game to be played without consequence, while Geertz acknowledges that the outcome of a cockfight rarely changes the status of any participant overtly[65]; what matters is that status is weighed heavily and openly for all to see the 'deeper' the cockfight runs. Geertz does not ignore the 'systems' that regulate the cockfight but actively seeks for the meaning that is produced as the chaotic outcome of an often high stakes situation. As Geertz (1973, p.436) put it, "What makes Balinese cockfighting deep is thus not money in itself, but what, the more of it that is involved the more so, money causes to happen: the migration of the Balinese status hierarchy into the body of the cockfight" and finally, "the cockfight is… a simulation of the social matrix, the involved system of cross-cutting, overlapping, highly corporate groups-villages, kingroups, irrigation societies, temple congregations, 'castes' —in which its devotees live."

I would argue that it is the somewhat controlled historical locality of cockfighting in Bali, specifically the village where Geertz collected his data, which enabled Geertz to fully spread out the wings of the interpretive approach. This is because the lore, regulations and code of conduct of cockfighting are largely controlled and conceived through the local inhabitants. If

[63] Bentham
[64] In fact, Geertz believes they operate in a highly materialistic society
[65] Rather, status is affirmed, denied and teased upon more symbolically

I were to lay bare a similar loaded event inside a virtual world, I would be foolish not to consider the gap between the creator and the user. The relationship between the designers of the virtual world and its users is similar to a feedback loop of sorts; the designer is forced to create a world that users will find engaging and compelling enough to revisit time and time again, yet the users are constrained in their agency to do whatever they please by the same creator. In Geertz's essay, it is easier[66] to trace cockfighting to the effort and labour undertaken by those who imbue it with deep meaning because we can say: 'Look, they have spent many years refining this activity, it has ties to local mythology, morality, religion and the very status of men and women in Bali.' If I were to pose, say, a ritualised event from a virtual world, I would not be able to say exactly the same. When I refer to meaningful activities in virtual worlds, I am mostly referring to people engaging in activities that the creators have taken the effort to facilitate. I have, however, purposefully made an effort to showcase accounts that draw from more individually interpreted experiences in earlier chapters that diverge from this fairly confusing and constrained relationship. Just as cockfighting exemplifies many of the hierarchies of power and status in Bali, the very structure of virtual worlds (as in, who is allowed to do what and why) speaks volumes on the expectations of both creators and users. One might ask, for example, why would Linden Labs, the creators of *Second Life*, purposefully make it rather difficult for residents to monetise their virtual labour? Or one can ask how is it that *Everquest* enables ritualised behaviour that is divergent from the expectations from the designers?

While I cannot directly apply Geertz's approach to an analysis of cultures in virtual worlds and virtual worlds more broadly, I am still able to follow the essence of Geertz, which often pushes me into a corner of curiosity instead of underlined answers. The cockfight puts Balinese culture on display for Geertz; it does not alter the status of any one individual in any significant way, for it is 'real' in "an ideational sense" (Geertz, 1973, p.444). To the fact that Geertz believed in the inability of the cockfight to change the status of those who partook in it, one scholar asks: "Would Geertz wish for social scientists also to accept such a meditative, aestheticist stance? If culture is purely aesthetic, does it simply provide form without having effect?" (Alexander and Smith, 2011, p.62). I tend to agree with this sort of interrogation, especially when faced with the task of importing Geertz's ideas into virtual worlds. While I have motioned that virtual worlds put on a display of those cultures that surround them, it is

[66] As opposed to doing this in a virtual world

also the case that the agency of users should be considered thoroughly, for what is put on display needs to be crafted meticulously first; this is the basic rationale behind my term *doing culture* which will be extended upon in the following chapter. It is not that I am advocating for a more profound historical account of culture in virtual worlds, as in, how a player base of a particular virtual world has changed and morphed its structure over a span of time. It is that I am advocating for an approach that ties the practice of meaning-making and labour together; if that means observing one particular event and extrapolating from it the nuances of cultures in virtual worlds, so be it.

Similarly, this thesis is concerned with what is displayed in virtual worlds as means to produce meaning and cultures. What is displayed can take the form of ludic play, monetary gain, engaging labour, tedious labour, the representation of identity or highly staked forms of socialisation. Geertz (1973, p.417) poses that "As much of America surfaces in a ball park, on a golf links, at a race track, or around a poker table, much of Bali surfaces in a cock ring." Who then surfaces in a virtual world where users differ geographically? Apter (2011, p.184) stated that, "At a time when most anthropologists still studied 'tribes,' Geertz looked at towns and villages", and now I and many others are trying to study virtual **worlds**. The transition from 'tribes' to village to world is stark. In some cases, games can only be played with other users that reside in the same region; for example, one might compare North American and South American servers in *World of Warcraft* (Penix-Tedsen, 2019), or one might study the "*Dota 2*[67] South African community as a product of the close connection between gaming and colonialism" to show "how a virtual environment in which actions have no consequences has become a space where racism, perverse historical nostalgia, and aggressive masculinity are allowed to fester amid widespread national attempts to rid the country of such colonial legacies" (Skotnes-Brown, 2019, p.143). These types of regional studies are hard to port into the general study of virtual worlds; even though one might find clusters of the same nationality of people conglomerating in teams and communities, it is still the case that their interactions with others are often on a global scale. Moreover, Skotnes-Brown studied a specific community in a game called *Dota 2*, which is almost the furthest thing one can get from the definition of virtual worlds, as I have described them.

[67] A real time action strategy game, players usually connect to their closest region to reduce internet lag, which is how this scholar is able to study the South African community more closely

The question then remains: do we care for finding fixed nationalities in virtual world spaces? Perhaps to showcase how video games "have been received, created and even played differently in different regions, because cultural and national context impact the circulation and meaning of games in myriad ways" (Penix-Tadsen, 2019, p.6). Finding these regional biases are not unproductive, but I would argue that for the purpose of studying virtual worlds, it remains prudent to study them as places in their own right, a cultural arena where old and new possibilities are made and unmade. Treating them as places of social contestation means we can observe how ballparks and cockfights reside in them; moreover, by observing these activities and places, we can draw upon their actuality without worrying so much about considering their historicity, for they are conceived in the virtual and acted out virtually. For example, Boellstorff (2015b, p.111) notes that "The phenomenon of afk[68] revealed how in *Second Life* and virtual worlds more generally, people were not expected to always be 'present'; they could be 'away'. Afk is not the same thing as walking out of a room in the actual world, because with afk one's avatar remains and contributes to the social situation." Moreover, Boellstorff (2015b, p.110) argues that "Afk is so fundamental to cybersociality that ways to regularize it are often woven into virtual worlds." Taking the phenomena of 'afk' as something particular to virtual worlds while observing actual engagements with it would be much more productive than, say, asking how different people belonging to different nationalities experience the phenomena of 'afk'. To ask of the historical or regional import of 'afk' does not explain how people use it at any given point in time in a virtual world and so denies them the agency to attach their own particular cultural meaning to it. For example, in Boellstorff's case, it was not unfound to play pranks on other avatars when they were 'afk' (Boellstorff, 2015b, p.111). This had a teasing effect, and while Boellstorff does not make remarks on the correlation between teasing and community, I would suggest that playing these pranks imports a sense of friendship and the affirmation of community formation. While not entirely relevant, I find it noteworthy that in Bali, Geertz (1973) found that to be teased is to be accepted. This is to show the tease, or the prank has a cultural import of its own, meaning when one observes pranking and 'afk' in virtual worlds, one is left to find their import **in** the world itself.

This sub-chapter took the cockfight essay not as a battleground for critique but rather as an arena of emersion. What I mean by this is that by highlighting pivotal moments in the essay,

[68] AFK: Away from keyboard

new enquiries into the study of virtual worlds emerged. Questions of geographic locality, labour and place, and the imports of human behaviour emerged from observing Geertz's work, which in turn assisted in answering the research questions. This sub-chapter and those before it also offered suggestions on future studies of virtual worlds, specifically to those who are interested in studying it anthropologically, that is, by the method of rigorous participant observation.

I conclude this sub-chapter by finishing the aforementioned quote I used from Geertz (1973) at the start of this chapter:

> *"Once human behavior is seen as (most of the time; there are true twitches) symbolic action—action which like phonation in speech, pigment in painting, line in writing, or sonance in music, signifies—the question as to whether culture is patterned conduct or a frame of mind, or even the two somehow mixed together, loses sense."*
>
> *Geertz, 1973, p.10*

I use this prolonged quote to conclude, showing once more the importance of the sign and signifier. However, I also take this opportunity to somewhat diverge from Geertz in his focus on that which is being signified (the message). I reiterate Geertz, who, following Weber, wrote that "man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun" (Geertz, 1973, p.5) while Geertz argues that culture is, in fact, these webs of significance. Although Geertz is often concerned with observing/explaining these webs, regularly seeing them as forms of art, I would argue them to also be forms of labour and technique, which could be argued are two sides of the same coin of art. The web of meaning needs to be spun; be it unconsciously as mere *habitus*[69] or consciously to make sense of worlds, this can be called *doing culture*. This term is particularly useful in virtual worlds because of the constricting relationship between the designers and the users of these worlds. In other words, the constant negotiation between what users want and what designers can offer leads to a process of socialised behaviour that is not simply mediated by the virtual environment but requires the active agency of all of those involved. I follow with a sub-chapter that attempts to tie up the loose ends before arguing for the use of *doing culture* in virtual worlds. These loose ends will delineate some of the more refined and untouched elements of virtual worlds, such as the idea

[69] See Bourdieu (1990, pp.66-67)

of *habitus* and maxims that offer insight into how people see themselves in virtual spaces and how virtual worlds somewhat change the way one can think of stress. The following sub-chapter, like those before it, takes a point of departure from more traditional sociology/anthropology which can show how we can normalise or habitualise virtual world behaviour.

It's only a game

The term *habitus* was largely coined by Bourdieu (1996, p.17), which he explained as "structured structures, generative principles of distinct and distinctive principles – what the worker eats, and especially the way he eats it, the sport he practices and the way he practices it, his political opinions and the way he expresses them are systematically different from the industrial proprietor's corresponding activities/habitus are also structured structures, different classifying schemes classification principles, different principles of vision and division, different tastes." It is through this approach that Bourdieu (1996, p.9) argues against other, more shallow readings: "the substantialist or realistic reading stops short at the practices (for instance, the practice of playing golf) or at the patterns of consumption (for instance, Chinese food) which the model tries to explain and that such a reading conceives of the correspondence between, on the one hand, social positions and classes, considered as substantial sets, and, on the other, tastes or practices, as a mechanical and direct relation." *Habitus*, therefore, requires a closer reading into the nuance of cultural performance as opposed to the structural process of observing them and reducing their subjectivities by enforcing them into a grand structure. This is why, throughout this thesis, I have made an effort to not simply showcase a myriad of sorts of virtual world behaviours to conclude that these behaviours and symbols are part of the larger whole of virtual world cultures. Instead, I have attempted to frame[70] symbols, events and happenings contextually while also noting the interpretations of those involved in their own lives. Of course, I am limited by the fact that I am reiterating observations and data from other scholars. That being said, our readings thereof can still be shaped through this idea of *habitus*.

As an example, I pose the following account from Gibbs et al. (2013) where they discuss the controversy that emanated from a video that was posted countless times online in 2006

[70] Frames are ".rendering what would otherwise be a meaningless aspect of the scene into something that is meaningful" (Goffman, 1974, p.21).

showing a group of players in *World of Warcraft* slaughtering another group of enemy players as they were conducting an in-world funeral for a woman who had recently passed away[71]. The feedback from this event varied and was centred mostly on what is 'tasteful and distasteful' amongst scholars and players. Gibbs et al. (2013, p.3) write, "…competing expressions of taste (Bourdieu, 1984) provides an opportunity to perform identities by celebrating and/or lamenting aspects of the incident." Furthermore, Heidbrink et al. (2011) argue that the controversy emanated from this event originates from the differences in perspectives of the 'reality' of online games and spaces which questions their suitability for ritualised practices. If we were to concern ourselves with the *habitus* of players in these two different groups, or perhaps with as many players as possible in *WoW*, it might not come as a shock that players engage in raids where the stakes are often high in terms of status and power and so on. Similar to that of the cockfight, it is not that these types of activities always change the status of the players involved[72]; rather, it is in these activities that we are allowed a glance at the end result of *habitus* and cultures in these worlds. It is not a question of 'if' the raid on the memorial service should have been done, for it is already ingrained into the social fabric of the virtual world itself. It has been done and similar questionable events likely will have occurred since then. What is relevant for this thesis is the fact that this event **did** spur controversy and debate and that it happened in a particular manner, that is, by the choice and destitute positions of those involved.

Finally, Bourdieu (1996, p.10) writes, "Thus, at every moment of each society, one has to deal with a set of social positions which is bound by a relation of homology to a set of activities (the practice of playing golf or the piano) or of goods (a second home or a master painting) that are also characterized relationally." This, understood through virtual worlds, can be read by analysing the relations between social positions, dispositions and choices made by users in these worlds. In the case of Gibbs et al. (2013), we might then be interested in the positions of these two groups[73] relative to one another and the rest of the virtual world, the specific way they undertake tasks (where they are dispositional or similar) and finally the choices made given these skills and dispositions in both physical and social spaces. Moreover, these relationships to certain groups can change when controversy happens or goals start to misalign.

[71] In the actual

[72] Although in this case, given the mass controversy, many participating players were deemed infamous and given labels of all sorts

[73] The one group was slaughtered, the other did the slaughtering

Lastly, I want to note a maxim that one often hears when something controversial or imbued with many emotions takes place in game worlds and virtual worlds. The ominous saying goes: 'It's only a game'. Gibbs et al. (2013, p.2) also noted similar responses to the controversial raid as one respondent stated, "some of you guys are getting far too worked up over something that happened on the Internet" or as Van de Mosselaer (2019, p.192) states, "in most game situations, if their emotions become truly unpleasant, the player can always simply remind themselves of the fact that it's only a game, effectively revoking their fictional or lusory attitude and subduing emotions connected to it."[74] This is relevant because of the ontological implication of the statement, and any reductionist statement starting with 'It's only…' usually lacks sustenance and actuality, which begs for deeper examination. The saying has implications that spread out across the field, be it virtual taxation laws (Seto, 2008), questions around the ontological status of 'the game' (Aarseth and Calleja, 2015), and agency and placemaking in virtual worlds (Boellstorff, 2015b) to name only a few. While the statement refers to 'game' it is not limited to more traditional online video games. Consider how some people argue and debate on forums and comment sections on social media platforms and websites that allow for user-to-user interaction. When something arguably distasteful happens, it is all too common to find a response that desperately attempts to reduce the event to something fantastically isolated and in a world of its own or to directly equate virtual actions to actual deeds. This might happen for a myriad of reasons, be it to deflect responsibility, to project feelings of comfort and safety, to re-establish escapism ideals or to simply upset someone else. This statement matters because it could be seen as one of the precursors to the virtual/real dichotomy where the 'realness' of one's own actions in a cybernetic space is called into question. One can even find elements of this in the age-old proverb: *Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me.* In this sense, speech is seen as unreal and equitable to the way the virtual is often perceived as unreal and without consequence. Yet, be it speech hanging in the air or fantasy worlds presented to us on our screens, it has profound impacts on the way we constitute our lives.

When someone loses a battle/match/event in a competitive game and is overwhelmed with disappointment and/or anger, one can chant, 'It's only a game, I (we) don't have to be mad, I (we) am allowed to lose, there is nothing 'really' at stake'. It is mostly the case that nothing really changes be it a loss or a win, similar to that of the cockfight mentioned earlier. This

[74] Notice how Van de Mosselaer posits 'the game' as a 'fact' but how is it that we can exactly locate the fact of the game?

changes when the stakes are high: consider a match between two competitive teams in an online game where the winners are rewarded with millions of dollars, the reality of the maxim becomes pertinent as something mostly used to stifle feelings of inferiority. If a player would break the rules or lose in this setting, they would not defend themselves by saying 'It's only a game', for there are strict rules that mediate this high stakes activity which are enforced by third parties and so on.

"[P]lay is an uncertain activity. The doubt that remains until the end of the game is replaced by the assurance of winning, or something close to it, when cheating occurs. This is incompatible with the nature of play. Not only is its form violated, but also its spirit."
Wertz, 1981, p. 21

It is, of course, not only the prize money that is at stake, for these players often spend thousands upon thousands of hours to refine their skills and find teams and sponsorships. Moreover, the use of this statement is often invoked to provide deflection for high stake activities in virtual worlds where money is not at stake, but time, labour and often the ethical foundations from which many users orientate their behaviour. I would argue that players in these virtual/game worlds are often starkly reminded of the intertwined relationship between the offline and the online when something as tangible and visible as money is on the line, whereas if the stakes are of a more nuanced status such as ethics, culture and agency, users likely find it easier to delineate one world falsely from another, as in 'ethics do not matter here, it is only a game'. Similarly, virtual worlds that exhibit immersive graphical simulations make it easier to imagine them, compared to places in the offline, but as I have argued, nothing about graphical simulations or the ephemeral reminder of capital gain can separate us from the virtual by reminding us of the offline.

This maxim is also, from my experience, used to provoke others or to belittle them in game worlds and virtual ones. Some games require users to spend many hours laboriously gathering resources while under the constant threat of losing it all, this is the way the game has been designed. When these users are eliminated by other users, their resources more often than not get taken from them. In *Second Life*, it is almost impossible to steal from another user unless one is committed to a scam or social engineering of some sort – the point is the designers of the world make it very clear that taking from others is not a premise through which the world operates. Other game worlds, while not exactly virtual worlds, operate

primarily through the premise of player versus player action and survival such as *Rust*[75] In game worlds like *Rust*, large groups of players can dominate an entire server, raiding and stealing as they please while getting all the more powerful in the process, it is often the case that when a smaller group cries out in fury after losing hours of work, a more powerful group would respond with this maxim. I would argue that it could be read better than 'It's only a game', rather, 'It's only *this* game'; what I mean by this is that the maxim has come to mean many things given its use over time and in different cyberspaces. While it is hard to say that all groups reiterate the maxim to belittle or provoke others, what we can say is that the message being communicated through it differs given the contextual place and space of the virtual world. In *Rust,* you can lose all of your hard work in seconds; this is the way the game has been designed for the most part. It is not that designers advocate for toxic attitudes, it is that designers are saying 'This is the game/world, do with it as you see fit'. Therefore, it is only 'a game' in the sense that players are taking what designers are giving them and creating 'a game' of their own, that is, stealing and looting from others or living peacefully and hoarding resources, roleplaying and so on. This is not a matter exclusive to *Rust*, as any person familiar with open-world type games would attest to the variety of *habitus* amongst its users. While it is also true that the game mechanics in *Rust* by in large push users towards behaviour that incentivises stealing and raiding other players as opposed to living peacefully amongst one another, this is evidential by the game's particular implementation of a wide variety of weapons and tools of destruction and fortification. Aarseth and Calleja (2015, p.8) write that "for the object or system to become a game a player needs to think of it as such. That is, she needs to actively interpret the activity as a game for it to be considered a game at all. The set of practices she deploys in doing so are always considered in relation to the social and cultural contexts of the player". In other words, people perceive the idea of 'game', while in a game, differently. Some might see the raid on the memorial service mentioned earlier as part of the game or 'only a game', some might not perceive the activity as a game whatsoever given the lack of game-like ludic rules during that particular event. This is not a retreat into relativism, for we are still able to conclude what some define as the 'game' without defining 'game' itself, or as Aarseth and Calleja (2015, p.8) states, "Whether that phenomenon "really is a game", is not something we can determine, any more than whether the feeling someone purports to have is 'real love', 'real guilt', etc".

[75] *Rust* is an online open world action survival game where you are pitted against others in a constant state of survival for resources; it was published in 2013 by *Facepunch studios*.

"They are not games simply because no one labels them as games, and only as long as no one does."

Aarseth and Calleja, 2015, p.8

So, what then is meant when we are reminded that 'it is only a game'? It could be a moment of escapism, given the perceived lack of stakes involved in the moment of play, or it could be an utterance of the ontological status of the player. It could very well be all of these things; however, what matters for this thesis and the research objectives is to determine the import of this utterance and how scholars can read it when it is uttered in virtual worlds and so on. Take for a brief moment the neurologist Sapolsky's vision on play and fun or what he calls "good stress" whereas stress more widely can be thought of as "the loss of control and predictability" (Sapolsky, 2017, p.127). For Sapolsky, to have fun is to experience environmental novelty; however, this does not mean that we cannot have fun in familiar environments. Furthermore, Sapolsky (2017, pp.127-128) states: "The complete absence of stress is aversively boring. Moderate, transient stress is wonderful – various aspects of brain function are enhanced; glucocorticoid levels in that range enhance dopamine release…And as stress becomes more severe and prolonged, those good effects disappear (with…dramatic individual differences…one person's nightmare is another's hobby)." Consider the possibility that players in virtual worlds and game worlds are experiencing stress to the degree that a maxim such as 'it's only a game' needs to be invoked to produce a sense of grounded disillusionment. As Sapolsky has posited, moderate stress can be 'good', especially when experienced in novel environments. The virtual environment is almost always novel. Each game might have a predictable outcome, that is, winning or losing[76], but the process of achieving those results are almost always uniquely based on the particular players involved, their choices, and the digital environment itself. When a player overcomes a particularly tough obstacle in a game, he/she is unlikely to say: 'It's only a game, I do not care for my achievement' but when something stressful might happen, it seems 'easy' to separate oneself from the weighted labour by chanting the maxim. This posits virtual worlds and the games in them in quite the particular position, for what needs to be determined is if it's 'the virtual' that is enabling this sort of escapist/reductionist behaviour or if it is something to do with our proclivity to deal with stress and failure as humans. While I cannot exactly answer these questions, they reveal a great deal about how we engage with the worlds around us. Even if

[76] Even though this sort of analysis does not hold true for all game/play activities

the maxim holds true, if it is only a game, it holds in itself a glimpse into how we make sense of the virtual as something betwixt and between what is serious, weighted, rejoiced and ephemeral, in a world of its own. While making light of negative experiences isn't something unique to games or virtual worlds, the fact that we also do them in these worlds shows us how deeply they have become intertwined in the human project. We cannot hope to reduce the 'game' or the virtual to a world that "must be perfectly identical to itself" (Evens, 2012, p.5) for I would argue that users in virtual worlds are in a way consciences of the fact that virtual worlds serve as additional realities, where 'real' things can happen, and cannot happen (Boellstorff, 2016). This means that the maxim can be utilised to switch between these additional realities because of the ontologically ambiguous position of humans in virtual worlds.

Van de Mosselaer posits that players can experience "actual misery" that "cannot easily be subdued by the thought that 'it's only a game'" (Van de Mosselaer, 2019, p.192). This can happen because there are elements in a game, while intentionally made by the creators, which players do not perceive as part of the game, like when the creators of the game trick the user into believing a falsehood. For example, some single-player games 'pretend' to crash or glitch at pivotal moments, confusing that which is represented with what is expected. Other times, users are made to believe that their choices matter, while being starkly reminded by the game that they do not, by addressing the player and not the character being controlled (Van de Mosselaer, 2019). These cases are somewhat unique and speak to game elements mostly found in single-player games. Moreover, Van de Mosselaer (2019, p.199) argues, "the frustration caused by failing in a game is bracketed from the player's real-life: players temporarily convince themselves that winning or losing in the game is important. But, unless there is some kind of connected effect on the player's life outside of the game, like a monetary prize attached to the player's successes, this is simply not true." I would argue against the idea that there requires an overt connected effect on the player's life outside of the game for winning or losing to be important. This is especially misconstrued if, as in Van de Mosselaer's case, the attachment that is required is monetary gain. This is like saying that players are only allowed to be swept up in emotions if they have the ability to gain something from it, which is easily disproved by witnessing the myriad of ways in which people socialise, form communities and produce meaningful experiences in virtual worlds, which I have showcased throughout this thesis. It is certainly the case that all of these activities (including winning and losing) can shape players' understanding of them, the experience

gained from losing in a competitive game countless times is not bracketed to only 'the game', similarly, the way in which *Second Life* users make friends or enemies (Boellstorff, 2015b) are important for those users regardless of the virtuality of the relationship (Kolotkin et al., 2012). Moreover, Van de Mosselaer doesn't attempt to explain what is meant by 'important' which leads to an ocean of confusion as anything with even the slightest symbolic or emotional value attached to it can be seen as 'important'. To reiterate my counter-argument; just because failing in a game/world can lead to "emotions that are relevant to a specific game-context and attitude" (Van de Mosselaer, 2019, p.198) does not mean that these emotions are only bound to the fantasy or ludic aspects of the game and therefore, are not *true* emotions or *real* responses. This is a simple fallacy, the idea that players are somehow trying to 'trick' themselves when dealing with a loss by saying 'it's only a game', reduces their agency to simple made-up cause and effect. There is no way to even start to prove the 'realness' of their emotional responses, whatever that means.

To conclude, while the debates around what is virtual and what is real seem to be centred on virtual worlds, the dichotomy can be found across almost all uses of cyberspace and digital media. What makes studying virtual worlds interesting and somewhat intimidating is that they offer us more than games and more than just winning and losing. The virtual has been proliferating for more than 20 years, enough time for one to be able to produce a reason for the existence of cultures in them. Envisioning a world without games or play is hard; envisioning a virtual one without them is even harder. That has been the challenge of this thesis, in trying to centre human agents as those who do simply participate in virtual worlds to win, or to make money (as in the way Geertz posed the cockfight as something more than just 'gambling' but less than an active attempt at changing the sociocultural status of its participants). While it is rather obvious that participation in virtual worlds is usually not a charitable endeavour, as everyone comes and stays for different reasons, these reasons are often staked in the virtual world itself and become part of both the culture(s) in the world and the culture(s) of the players. I follow with the final chapter which encompasses my propositions going forward with virtual world studies by establishing utility for the term *doing culture* as a means to explain how people physically produce lasting meaning in virtual worlds to raise the stakes of their own participation.

Chapter four: Doing culture: Moving away from escapism

The prospect of being human largely includes the way we produce meaning, yet, this endeavour does not only rest on our ability to interpret the world(s) around us but also actively engage in creating them. Some do more interpreting, others more creating. A simple example would be to consider the relationship between the designer and the user in any given virtual world broadly; from a hierarchal perspective, it seems as if the designer is creating the world and the user simply enjoys their time in it by following the rules set out by the designer and so on. From a more grounded perspective, we are allowed to forego the more traditional definition of 'world' in favour of a more particular and individualised one. When one considers how the user might engage with each subset of virtual law[77] and each line of code represented to them on their screens or headsets, it becomes clear that worlds are being made in worlds. For it is in each decisive decision the user takes that a different outcome becomes possible. Similarly, Deleuze (1994) argued that no event, action or object is ever the same twice. These outcomes also can't be foreseen because of the non-temporal nature of virtual worlds. For example, the designer might incentivise socialisation by setting up the digital environment in a way that centralises avatar to avatar contact by bottlenecking their movements to a certain location. However, this centralisation or conglomeration of avatars cannot justify the *way* in which the users choose to socialise and form communities amongst one another. Furthermore, the designer might offer a guild system of some sort where users can easily connect with close friends or gather in groups to complete tasks, but this once more cannot account for the creative actions undertaken by those in the group or guild (such as the case of the *World of Warcraft* memorial raid described in the previous chapter). Instead of making this chapter an epistemic debate about ontological status, I hope to provide some theoretical substance for the future of virtual world studies. The words 'theoretical' and 'substance' placed next to each other might seem paradoxical, yet as I have shown, these two are quite inseparable in their application to virtual worlds and the idea of 'reality'.

[77] The virtual world version of the 'laws of nature' such as gravity and so on

Towards a definition of *doing culture*

Graeber (2015, p.89) states that "The ultimate, hidden truth of the world is that it is something that we make, and could just as easily make differently." Posited differently, he also laments, "the hidden reality of human life is the fact that the world doesn't just happen. It isn't a natural fact, even though we tend to treat it as if it is—it exists because we all collectively produce it". 'Culture' is not necessarily equitable to 'world' but without it, we would certainly not be able to make and maintain these worlds, some even claim that 'world' has just become another word for culture in academia (Carrithers et al., 2010). We can also find inspiration from Webber (2018, p.4) as he wrote, "A person does not have an inbuilt set of values that they are inherently structured to pursue. Rather, the values that shape a person's behavior result from the choices they have made." The term *doing culture* is, therefore, informed by the fundamental existentialist idea that "one's identity is constituted neither by nature nor by culture, since to 'exist' is precisely to constitute such an identity" (Crowell, 2020). The matter of choice and agency is fundamental to *doing culture* which is informed by Jean-Paul Sartre's slogan: "existence precedes essence" (2007, p.20) for "man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world – and defines himself afterwards" (p.22). It is through what existentialists call 'projects' that the world is revealed because "projects are who I *am* in the mode of engaged agency (unlike plans that I merely represent to myself in reflective deliberation)" (Crowell, 2020)[78]. *Doing culture* follows the essence of creative practise, a creativity that does not need to present originality or 'value'[79] in culture – in this case, cultures in virtual worlds. Stated a bit more saliently, Crowell (2020) writes, "Practices can allow things to show up as meaningful—as hammers, dollar bills, or artworks—because practices involve aims that carry with them norms, satisfaction conditions, for what shows up in them." Therefore, there are three axioms on which *doing culture* rests: agency (choices and possibility), labour (the practice of carrying out choices to produce meaning), and cultural creativity (the meaning that is attached to projects differently by different people). Before I discuss the three axioms, I should note that *doing culture* isn't simply another definition of 'culture' nor does it try to define culture globally or even specifically. I follow with a rationale for *doing culture* and its three axioms.

[78] These citations do not have page numbers because I am not a member of the 'Friends of the SEP society' and am therefore unable to view these entries in a readable *pdf* format

[79] See Runco and Jaeger (2012) for an unfortunate 'traditional' definition of creativity

Doing culture emerged after witnessing how social/cultural anthropology as a field has failed in defining culture; this is not to say that I would want it to be defined, only that they have aimed to do so over some time. With the various 'turns' in anthropology (Bachmann-Medick, 2016) 'culture' has been cut down to size and rebuilt many times over. The recent post-modernist positions on 'culture' have done the noble thing and retreated to a sense of relativism by arguing that no culture can be objectively experienced by another. Postmodernism can be thought of as: "…splitting the truth, the standards, and the ideal into what has been deconstructed and into what is about to be deconstructed, and denying in advance the right of any new doctrine, theory, or revelation to take the place of the discarded rules of the past" (Cooke, 2005, p.1914). Postmodernism, in terms of social anthropology, relies heavily on individual agency or what can be called "agency theory"[80] and how individual agents make and unmake culture. Moreover, 'meaning', as posed by Geertz (1973) seemed to be something that is almost already attached to an event (like the cockfight) without really delving into how individual agency might have collectively constructed these meanings. The solution is then to think that "we can understand the object of interpretation to be not categories and meanings *per se* but rather the very capacity for agency that they mediate" (Keane, 2003, p.230). To summarise, *doing culture* is a term used to think about the relationship between the moment of decisiveness and the moment of attaching meaning. For instance, when one enters *Second Life*, one is confronted with many spectacles, if one decides to continue it is inevitable to learn *some* features of the world and what it has to offer; in this process, there is a moment where sufficient learning takes place that the individual can decide to take an action, a move towards something, a choice that is acted upon. In virtual worlds, culture(s) is not an obvious luminescent light hovering around you like a tooltip bar or a map in the corner of your screen, nor is it easy to expect what sort of cultures might exist in any given virtual world, even for the most experienced 'gamer' or virtual world connoisseur. For any new user, the stakes are often muddled in virtual worlds; to operate in them (especially when they demand a form of sociality), one needs to pseudo roleplay as an anthropologist by observing the various codes of conduct and habits of other users, then the act of *doing culture* emerges. What the user chooses to do, or is perhaps even enforced to do by the choices of others, with their *particular* understanding of the cultures in the world and their own is where *doing culture* happens. Even if one were to decide to log off after spending ten seconds in a virtual world, it could be said that one has acted upon a choice that was informed by one's

[80] See Shapiro (2005) for an amusing account on why the term 'agency theory' isn't seen as particularly productive for sociologists

particular understanding of oneself and the vision of the cultures briefly experienced in the world. Cultures in the virtual world exist throughout in each visual spectacle, in each utterance of an avatar read as text or audio, and even in the more complicated ways such as how its economy might function. I argue that creativity is not novel in culture; it is inherent to it because of individual agency and the infinite possibility of outcomes mediated by action and labour. The meanings attached to the world are not predetermined as blank slates waiting for users to come and mould them into their 'fantastical' desires, for the designer has moulded the world already, the agency of users revolve around their ability in *doing culture* which is choosing to make/unmake these moulds.

Agency, labour and cultural creativity

As I have mentioned, *doing culture* rests on three axioms. The idea that it 'rests' on these three axioms simply means that the term is collectively defined between the three, in which they produce *doing culture* as a term. Keane (2003, pp.240-241) argues, "It is when we imagine that agency is naturally located within pre-existing individuals, rather than, say, forged among them, that other formations, families, institutions, societies, and so forth seem most determinist", and as I have mentioned earlier in the thesis, "Without possibility there can be no activity, no reality…" (Lefebvre, 2014, p.489). So how do these two statements correlate? Since human action is defined by choices (Lefebvre, 2014), we might say that action follows choice, while choice can also be an action, it becomes pragmatic when it is acted out. Possibility matters because virtual worlds are quite full of them, not in the fantastical sense as in 'you can live out a different self! Become a dragon!', but rather in the fact that players are generally offered choices that designers are not specifically enforcing, such as joining a community or playing alone, deciding how much time should be invested, choosing to play casually or competitively and so on. It is when we imagine these choices made up out of individual agents (even if the end result seems collective), forged as a negotiation of possible outcomes, that we are able to see the virtual world not as a determined escapist paradise but as a grounded additional reality. Therefore, by agency, I do not mean how users respond to the choices presented to them by game designers, such as choosing to put a hat on your dragon avatar instead of a beanie. By agency, I mean the willingness to absorb what the world is presenting itself to be, positing oneself in it (or out) and acting upon these postulations. This is not a philosophical matter, everyone in virtual worlds have agency, some see it as the customisation of avatars or choosing a green sword over a red sword. I see

it in relation to *doing culture* as a necessity for *producing* meaning. To produce this meaning, however, a human agent needs to act on their agency, which is where labour comes in.

Taylor (2006, p.159) states that "players already are core actors in the maintenance and life of the game. There is no culture; there is no game, without the labour of the players". For Taylor and for me, virtual worlds are contingent upon both the persistent existence and labour of players. Some might equate 'labour' to 'performance' in virtual worlds. This is problematic because performance theory rests on the idea that culture ought to be analysed as a large stage on which agents perform their roles by enacting meaning (Schechner, 1988). Schechner co-founded what one can call 'performance theory' and while I would argue that it isn't a suitable foundation for understanding the labour done by agents in virtual worlds, there are a few productive points that Schechner raises which I will briefly go over. The first is that, as Schechner argues, we essentially roleplay in our day to day lives to the extent where the lines between what is acting and what is not often become blurred (Schechner, 1988). This is useful to dispel the idea that we become a different self in a virtual world or that we can somehow escape ourselves for we are almost always in a state of performing one or another role (as I have stated, this does not fully encompass 'labour'). The second, as argued by Schechner (1988, p.6), is that "Sometimes rituals, games, sports, and the aesthetic genres (theatre, dance, music) are merged so that it is impossible to call the activity by any one limiting name. That English usage urges us to do so anyway is an ethnocentric bias, not an argument." This is merely to say that what seems logical, according to the way we name and define things shouldn't be a marker for what is the actual or not[81]. What makes labour different from performance is that the way we 'perform' is just one of the ways we 'labour', for we might say that a virtual world can exist without performance but not without the labour of players. Referring back to Taylor's (2002, p.159) statement, it is important to examine what is meant by "the labour of players". Labour is not only tasks and projects that players make their avatars do, for Taylor (2002, p.160) explains labour "can range from volunteer game 'guide' programs to the creation of much-needed technical interventions (such as UI plug-ins). Some speak of all this work as part of the gift economy, while others (often former volunteers) feel it falls more along the lines of employment." Therefore, labour can often be 'work' done outside of the virtual world, for the virtual world. All of these projects greatly impact the actual workings of the world and the experience of players, which

[81] For example, when *Second Life* users refer to the actual world as RL or real life they are still mostly well aware of the 'realness' of their actions and so on (Boellstorff, 2015b)

is to say, is an active attempt at *doing culture*. As culture, following Geertz, is seen as the webs of significance that humans spin amongst themselves, the labour undertaken to not only spin these webs, but make them meaningful is integral to *doing culture*. It is possible, following Taylor (2006) to think of virtual worlds as 'boundary objects', which can be explained as "those objects that both inhabit several communities of practice and satisfy the informational requirements of each of them. Boundary objects are thus both plastic enough to adapt to local needs and constraints of the several parties employing them, yet robust enough to main a common identity across sites" (Bowker and Star, 2000, p.297). Who, then, is really responsible for maintaining these common identities across sites? My answer is, of course, quite simply, the users that inhabit them. As an example, we cannot hope that the same culture(s) that flourish in one virtual world will flourish in the next, even if they had the *same* creators and designers. By this logic, the labour of the creators is secondary to the labour of players. This can be true even if it is required first to create the world that players can inhabit, for what is under investigation here is the process of *doing culture*.

"Labor is prior to, and independent of, capital. Capital is only the fruit of labor, and could never have existed if labor had not first existed. Labor is the superior of capital, and deserves much the higher consideration."

Abraham Lincoln[82]

Because it is rare for virtual world participation to produce monetary capital (although this is changing rapidly in the face of the *metaverse*), we can replace *capital* with *culture* in Lincoln's quote to argue for the necessity of labour in culture. 'Production' might be defined more traditionally as "'the processes by which a commodity is created'. Production has the following components: (a) capital or money, (b) the processes by which capital, technology, raw material and labour are harnessed to the production process, and (c) the skilled labour involved in the actual production" (Nayar, 2004, pp.166-167). I argue that in the face of virtual worlds and *doing culture* these terms need to be drastically reworked for they simply do not account for the process of producing meaning by doing 'labourious' things in virtual worlds.

[82] Basler, R.P., 1953. *The collected works of Abraham Lincoln* (Vol. 2).

To conclude, the idea of ‘labour’ might seem obvious, as in, it is obvious that people have to ‘do’ things to make other things happen and come into being. For many, however, often the idea that virtual world inhabitants ‘labour’ seems fictitious and out of place as the expectation is that all of those who participate in virtual worlds are covering themselves in a special time in space where the stakes are meaningless and the fruits of their labour non-existent or rotten through stereotypes of addiction or deviant sexual behaviour (Boellstorff, 2015b) and so on. The emphasis on labour is to re-emphasise the very intelligible effort that users in virtual worlds take to produce a meaningful experience. Think of the collective amount of hours spent by users in virtual worlds; do scholars really want to simply write it off as a mere form of escapism or just another game people play to distract from their possibly mundane lives? If we were to take their labour as something fictitious, we would have to do the same with any activity in the actual world that does not immediately provide capital value, which means we would likely have to classify something like owning a dog as a mere escapist dream. *Doing culture* in virtual worlds is to be treated as a means to provide a rationale in moving beyond escapism. As I have argued with others throughout this thesis, playing a game or participating in a virtual world cannot be simplified to the idea that the user simply consumes a product, it is not the same as reading a book or listening to music, for it can include the act of writing a book or making music. Having the ability to be creative in these ventures is a part of *doing culture*. I would argue that creativity exists even in the smallest and most benign of tasks, for as long as we find it meaningful, it becomes individualised in the process. This is the reasoning behind the final axiom, cultural creativity.

According to Graeber (2001, p.39), “Marxists imply that individuals who produce objects should have the right to determine their meaning.” Following this apparent Marxist approach, I postulate that creativity is inherent in *doing culture*. This might seem strange as culture is often acted out and reproduced without significant reflection or change by the general populace, so where does this creativity exist and why does it matter? It is not that culture(s) is an object; it is that it is made up of objects, symbols and signs, and the shared meaning between them. Creativity just becomes a bit more visual in virtual worlds because of the wide variety of tools users have to make the worlds their own. Liep (2001, p.2) argues that “Creativity involves the acceptance of the novel in a social environment.” This returns to the idea of agency and choice I posited earlier, just as one has to decide to participate in a virtual world by engaging in its features and pushing its boundaries to *do* culture in it, one is confronted with the same choices in the act of creating or being creative. To contradict Liep

(2001) somewhat, I argue that creativity itself does not always need to provide novelty, only that it is often sparked by novelty (like the way a virtual world is presented).

"Cultural creativity is a feature of a dynamic world in which social position is derived from the position of signs rather than the reverse."
Hastrup, 2001, p.40

Creativity in culture need not make something 'new' for "Nothing today, likely nothing since we tamed fire, is genuinely new: Culture, like science and technology, grows by accretion, each new creator building on the works of those who came before. Overprotection stifles the very creative forces it's supposed to nurture" (Tushnet, 1997, p.9). In *doing culture*, even the most benign of tasks, such as choosing to build a house in *Second Life* or going on a raid in *EverQuest*, demands creativity. This is because the outcomes of these tasks are subject to endless possibilities even if they might seem replicable on the surface. One might see many houses or plots of land in *Second Life* that look the same but the process of creating these objects are subject to the *habitus* of each particular user and the way they have posited themselves in the virtual world. These objects and symbols then form part of the webs of meaning spun in them.

To conclude, *doing culture* is a term specific to virtual worlds and the relationship between their creators and users. It is not a 'theory' for it is to be used as a way of rethinking virtual worlds and the actual labour of those who make it meaningful. The fact that it 'rests' on labour, agency and creativity is because scholars need to look closely at these three aspects in virtual worlds to further both its legitimacy and to deny purists who claim them to be exclusively escapist. All of those who participate in virtual worlds *do culture* because virtual worlds allow for socialisation, performance, the negotiation of ethics and boundaries etc. I argue that we cannot truly escape from our 'real' lives in virtual worlds, for our participation in them demands some form of creative labour and agency. Because users find some tasks enjoyable, tedious, reflexive or outright miserable, they cannot escape from the 'real', for we are forced to negotiate the terms of our existence in these worlds. When one studies virtual worlds on the ground level (as Taylor and Boellstorff did), it becomes clear that participation is process and not simply passive consumption. *Doing culture* is, therefore, an engagement with the relationship between existence and place where existence is contingent upon

participation in a virtual world, and place is how the world is being presented to the user. It is in this process that culture is being made and unmade in virtual worlds.

Conclusions

In previous chapters, I have provided a re-examination of virtual worlds, which was motivated by existing literature on the digital/real dichotomy and virtual world anthropology. This was done by asking: How do people, as "more than self-interested agents concerned only with material gains" (Fischer, 2014, p.2) in virtual worlds, **engage** with the set of relations as to (per)form their reality to not escape, but imbue their lives with meaningful webs in which they are suspended (Geertz, 1973)? What sort of transformational processes can be observed in the engagements mediated by the infrastructure of the digital environment? This has been answered (within its limitations) by drawing from scholars from a variety of fields, primarily that of social anthropology. It was first necessary to argue that we are more than self-interested agents, not only in terms of material gains but in terms of 'pleasure' in virtual worlds. This counter-argument was first posited by highlighting the importance of 'place' in virtual worlds and how users construe a 'sense of place' which "partake of cultures, of shared bodies of 'local knowledge'[83] with which persons and whole communities render their places meaningful and endow them with social importance" (Basso, 1996, p.xiv). Moreover, culture(s) was posited as something that exists almost entirely in its own right in virtual worlds; this was done by showing how users adapt to change and make changes to the digital infrastructure.

Much of the argument posed in chapter one rests on the idea that because users think and use objects, symbols and their avatars for different reasons means that 'place' is contingent upon agency and labour. This makes it possible for virtual worlds to exhibit 'realness' through *doing culture*. To be clear, I am not, and have not argued that virtual worlds *are* 'real', if anything, the concept of what is 'real' is so deeply contested that it became a philosophical abstraction rather than an evidential space in time. Before chapter two, other dichotomies such as play and work were posited as merging in virtual worlds; play was also contested as an activity not separable from the actual and often loaded with seriousness and labour. The relationship between designers of virtual worlds and their users was also shown to be at first glance hierarchical, but with further investigation into rules, game/non-game and narratives, it was argued that users do not simply consume the 'product' of virtual worlds, rather, they employ their own meanings to it when they are offered choices. The research done by

[83] A phrase coined by Clifford Geertz

Boellstorff and Taylor shows how virtual worlds are places where real things can happen, and reveals how people in those worlds think of themselves and their particular ontological positions in these worlds. This thesis then took a position in between them, by highlighting similitudes, critique and differences. What arose from this analysis is the argument that people are more than 'self-interested' agents who engage with their given worlds, be it in the actual or the virtual, by attaching meaning to an extremely wide variety of practices such as socialisation, playing, labouring, self-reflection and so on. What makes this thesis substantial is that it does not stop at the practice of attaching meaning, but demands that we observe these practices under an anthropological microscope by working from the ground up.

In chapter two, with the help of Gabriel Tarde and Boellstorff, I asked if possession could be a better alternative to 'difference' when trying to incorporate additional worlds into our understanding of ontological differences. Instead of the notion of 'habeology', it became more productive to consider Tarde's notions around magnetised behaviour and mimicry which in turn questioned how virtual worlds mimic notions of the actual, such as embodiment. While we often find virtual worlds that graphically simulate the actual world, we cannot hope to expect that the actions of users in these mimetic environments should replicate actual ones, nor do I want to argue that virtual world behaviour is the 'same' or radically different to actual-world behaviour. Following this line of thought, I argue, with Boellstorff, that culture is what makes us particularly human and not a sense of 'reality'. Lastly, in chapter two, I argued how "experientially these things as signs referred to signifieds internal to the virtual world" (Boellstorff, 2015b, p.243), therefore, arguing that things in virtual worlds are to be treated within their virtual contexts and not as mirrors to the actual world.

The general theme of this thesis is anthropologically motivated, as in, what people do matters more than what people say they do. What social anthropologists 'do' is try and figure out where what is said and done overlap with one another. As shown in chapter three, approaches in understanding and locating 'culture' is contested amongst different 'isms' (structuralism, postmodernism etc.) yet, through these contestations and with a specific eye on virtual worlds, I reiterate the importance of meaning and how any ritual or performance has a specific epistemic consequence regardless if it's a cockfight or socialising in *Second Life*. With the help of Geertz, Gluckman and others who take a 'ground up' approach, I argue that future studies should take activities and events in virtual worlds as a "social matrix" (Geertz,

1973, p.473) whereby deeper grounded assumptions can be located in the performances of these activities. It is also important to note that cultures do not simply emerge because virtual worlds are structured in a way that enables performance and socialisation, for it is creatively constituted through the reactivity of players in response to these structural 'facts'. It is in the feedback loop between users, their avatars and themselves, and the visions of designers that culture is made meaningful. While I have not defined 'meaning' in this thesis, I have argued for its substance, for to only define the term does not make it final or actual, but showing ways in which actual people engage with it makes it an anthropological fact.

Finally, I suggest that the future of virtual world anthropology and virtual world studies should move past the virtual/real dichotomy by ignoring the fad of hyperrealism. Meaning is not produced because worlds are sensorially immersive or because worlds allow us to make money in them. Meaning is produced through collective labour aimed at any ludicrous goal because its motivation lies in the complex web of cultures. This helps us move towards a better definition of culture as well, for it does not demand only physicality, touch and so on. I believe that, for example, *Meta* will ultimately fail in its cybernetic colonisation of all virtual spaces because virtual worlds cannot be more than a place; while advertising it as a fantastical escapist getaway might hold true in the beginning, it will, as anything does, lose its novelty by the sheer force of actuality. Because anthropology often tries to show how the mundane can be fantastical and the novel mundane, I argue that virtual worlds should be treated not as another novel technology but a place that allows us to possess virtuality and be human. Not because it is new or because it allows for difference, but because it allows for culture(s).

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