

Coming of Age in Digital Anthropology

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I wonder if this can be considered a coming of age year for Digital Anthropology. Of course there is a blowing of our own trumpet here with the launch of our new MA degree programme in the topic at the Dept. of Anthropology UCL, but the current publications coming out certainly seem to justify the initiative. There is the radical energy of *Two Bits* by Chris Kelty, with a very engaging narrative and clear agenda for the wider importance of open source thinking and practice, as a vanguard with potential for much wider application. There is Tom Boellstorff's *Coming of Age in Second Life* which convincingly demonstrates that it is possible to undertake a classic ethnography within a virtual world. Then there was also a wonderful conveying of participant observation in Julian Dibbell's highly readable *Play Money* from 2006. The trends are also seen in postings here, such as the recent one by Barbara Kirschenblatt Gimblett showing the degree to which digital practices are becoming central to Museum practice.

One book that perhaps may not garner as much attention as these but is perhaps particularly important in thinking about the issues involved for material culture studies is Thomas Malaby's book *Making Virtual Worlds: Linden Lab and Second Life*, published in 2009 by Cornell University Press. Although the topic clearly overlaps with Boellstorff in that both are about second life, the strength of Malaby's book is less from its ethnography, which in any case is more about the production than the usage of second life. Rather the book is much more an important complement to Kelty, because it is concerned not just with the libertarian ideals of technology and material, or if you prefer immaterial, culture more generally. As Dibbell had noticed in his earlier work there was something special about the way in which Linden Labs took on the ideological mantle of virtual worlds and tried to put their ideology into practice.

The starting point for the argument, from an anthropological perspective, comes from Malaby's last page and its discussion of the work of Sahlins on the relationship between history/structure and event/contingency. This takes on a more specifically material culture direction with the trajectory from Mauss to Bourdieu on habitus, which increasingly also focused upon structure, this time in the order of things or the order of practice, and disposition in its own tension with contingency. Malaby is fascinated by this tension, but his perspective, which in this case he shares more with Dibbell, rather than either Kelty or Boellstorff is coming from a very particular perspective, which is the theory of gaming. He sees gaming as the kind of antithesis of bureaucracy and modernist attempts at rational control. Since while they create structure in order to eliminate contingency, gaming creates structure in order to proliferate contingency. Which is why earlier theorists of gaming saw this as a kind of alternative history of modern life based on play as an imperative in its own right. Material culture theorists will find in Boellstorff and Dibbell a continuation of important debates about the nature of the material/immaterial and online/offline worlds. But what Malaby brings to the table is his specific study of Linden Labs and the way they conceptualized and realized the relationship between production and consumption in gaming. Linden Labs sought to cede more of the construction of the virtual world to users. Following from the ideals of liberation through

technology they envisaged a kind of co-construction between the game and the gamer. Respecting contingency as central to gaming they tried to eschew hierarchy or control by constantly learning from the unexpected appropriations of consumers. At least that was the theory. How it works out in practice is excellently analyzed in the course of this book.

This volume was written during the period when Second Life went from being relatively small to relatively large, but ended with expectations that were becoming huge. Second Life has certainly stimulated some incredibly useful anthropology. Yet it looks like it may have stalled with regard to public usage more generally. I admit to some curiosity as to what Boellstorff and Malaby would say about what didn't happen and why. But the larger point is how the combination of these new books and writings make this digital world of increasing interest to material culture studies, which ought to in turn provide precedents and ideas that can contribute to this field.

References

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