

## Chapter 28

# Participant–Observation as a Method for Analyzing Avatar Design in User– Generated Virtual Worlds

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This chapter explores the epistemological, and ethical boundaries of the application of a participant-observer methodology for analyzing avatar design in user-generated virtual worlds. We describe why Second Life was selected as the preferred platform for studying the fundamental design properties of avatars in a situated manner. We will situate the specific case study within the broader context of ethnographic qualitative research methodologies, particularly focusing on what it means to live – and role-play - within the context that one is studying, or to facilitate prolonged engagement in order to have the research results accepted as trustworthy or credible (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This chapter describes a case study where researchers can extract methods and techniques for studying “in-world” workshops and focus groups. Our speculations and research questions drawn from a close analysis of this case study will illuminate the possible limitations of applying similar hybrid iterations of participation-observation tactics and translations of disciplinary frameworks into the study of user-generated content for future virtual world communities. Finally, we will review the broader epistemological and ethical issues related to the role of the participant-observation researcher in the study of virtual worlds.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Established virtual world anthropologists have applied participant-observation in *Second Life* to examine “mundane social interaction in order to identify as many of those grounding assumptions as possible” (Boellstorff, 2008: 65). However, the extent to which the researcher may play an actively critical role in the context of collaborative user-generated content in these worlds is not well understood. According to Boellstorff (2008:8), “There is no illusion of detached objectivity to shatter in participant observation because it is not a methodology that views the researcher as a contaminant. It constantly confronts the differing forms of power and hierarchy produced through fieldwork, not all of which privilege the researcher [...]”

This embodied form of participant-observation is most appropriate within virtual worlds where the creative agency of the researcher is equivalent to that of the participants. This is especially true in participatory worlds such as *Second Life* where the avatar end-users directly contribute to both the general form of the world as well as its discrete contents<sup>1</sup>.

One of the motivations for participants to enter user-generated worlds such as *Second Life* is to play out diverse roles that test the ontological boundaries of identity and social positioning associated with “Real Life” (RL). In this sense, most qualitative researchers who choose to study *Second Life* and its inhabitants are encouraged by their participants to engage in indigenous community events as fellow avatar citizens rather than as aloof ethnographic observers (Ayiter, 2008).<sup>2</sup>

Agreeing with Ascott (2007) that *Second Life* is a “[...] rehearsal room for a future in which we endlessly create and distribute our many selves”, we conducted a case study focused on peer critique of avatar designs. Our participants had the opportunity to rehearse their assigned roles as “Modern Artists”, and we created a complementary participant-observer researcher role, the Modernist

Art Critic. Through their role-playing of “Modern Artists”, the participants determined the degree to which they would allow the “Modernist Art-Critic” (“Researcher”) to go beyond passive-observation and act as a “participant-influencer.” This attitude of willing inclusiveness from the participants towards the researcher exists primarily because the participant-observer is considered as another individual role-playing a “researcher” in a spirit of playful interaction. This raises a crucial question - whether the researcher’s adopted role drifts too far from being an equal participant amongst consenting subjects? In an extreme case, many conventional anthropological researchers from the “real” world would perceive a highly active researcher as a “contaminant”.<sup>3</sup> In order to address this question directly, we use this case study to illustrate and analyze the “researcher’s” playful exploration of the liminal spaces between passive observation, active criticism, and constructive persuasion.

Our case study focuses on the dynamics between the researcher and avatar participants who have been recruited from a self-consciously “artistic” community. “Odyssey Island” has been firmly established in *Second Life* since 2007.<sup>4</sup> The community forms a domain of embodied real-time learning where peer-reviewed participant-observation and collaborative content-creation among avatar residents is the accepted norm. These conventions for research as a form of embodied praxis (including role-playing) can be traced back to previous investigations with earlier chat-based virtual worlds such as: *Digitalspace Traveler*, *Blaxxun Cybertown*, *Active Worlds* and *There.com* (Damer 1997, Dickey, 1999 & Dipaola/Turner, 2008).

Unlike these worlds, however, *Second Life* offers a persistent community infrastructure, continuing academic discourse and capacity to maintain the participants’ customized avatar designs. Although the template avatars from earlier virtual worlds fostered the development of role-playing archetypes; *Second Life* has the

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