

The background of the cover is a digital landscape with a low-poly, faceted terrain. The ground is a mix of grey, blue, and green, with some areas appearing to be water or reflective surfaces. In the foreground, there are several stylized, crystalline structures that look like rocks or small buildings. The overall aesthetic is futuristic and digital.

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## **Method and the Virtual:** *Anecdote, Analogy, Culture*

By Tom Boellstorff, University of California

This is a brief essay, we call "think-pieces", designed to stimulate a discussion on a particular topic. For this series of essays we propose the following question:

"In thinking about the spaces of virtual worlds, and the practices we witness within them, how can we define what counts as culture? Can we see any common cultural trends emerging in different virtual worlds, or are practices as disparate as the worlds and groups we find within them?"

## **Abstract**

*The question of what counts as culture in the spaces of virtual worlds has emerged as a compelling topic for research and will likely remain so into the foreseeable future. This is a question not just of theory but also of method. In this formative period for an emerging research community on culture in virtual worlds, it is crucial to foster a wide range of approaches and to challenge forms of methodological partisanship that assert the superiority of any one approach.*

**Keywords:** culture; virtual worlds; quantitative methods; qualitative methods; ethnography.

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## **Method and the Virtual: *Anecdote, Analogy, Culture***

By Tom Boellstorff, University of California

The question of what counts as culture in the spaces of virtual worlds has emerged as a compelling topic for research and will likely remain so into the foreseeable future. It seems clear that we will continue to discover a range of subcultures or localized cultures, both within and between virtual worlds. We will also continue to discover broader cultural logics that span multiple virtual worlds, regarding everything from friendship as a dominant mode of sociality to avatar embodiment. Such cultural logics will be more abstract—in the sense that they will be shaped by the more localized contexts in which they are instantiated—but they will nonetheless certainly be significant and worthy of study.

I base this broad outline upon my knowledge of the existing scholarship on culture in virtual worlds from a wide range of quantitative and qualitative approaches, as well as my ethnographic research in *Second Life* (Boellstorff, 2008). Crucially, it is not unique to virtual worlds. For instance, it squares with my research in Indonesia, where I have shown that notions of being “gay” are informed by globalizing conceptions of homosexuality and also by nationally- and locally-specific cultures (Boellstorff, 2005 and 2007). Because research on culture in virtual worlds is relatively new (though with a longer history than often acknowledged), it is vital to broaden the conversation to include how culture in virtual worlds shares features with offline cultures, including cases where no explicit linkage exists.

Broadening the conversation includes addressing longstanding debates over the culture concept, debates to which work in virtual worlds can already contribute. The culture concept has been a key point of discussion for over 100 years. Culture has been construed in “functionalist” terms, as a tool for fulfilling needs, as a “structuralist” grammar of concepts shaping cognition, and in many other ways. These and other definitions of culture have come into fashion or been set aside, but what we now find is a range of understandings as to what culture might be. These understandings sometimes conflict but often, each provides synergistic insight into a larger problem.

From these various definitions of culture, one insight I find helpful is the recognition that culture is not simply the aggregate of individual personalities and dispositions. Just as German is not simply in the heads of individual German speakers (none know every word in the language), so culture more generally is a transindividual phenomenon that shapes and is shaped by those who participate in it in some fashion. Culture is not just what people do; it is also what they claim it is they do, what they believe, and the patterned yet contingent ways that social action is constituted in the context of such narrative and belief. All domains of sociality and selfhood—from gender to economics, religion to play, love to health—are emergent products of meaningful, intersectional experience. The eminent anthropologist Marilyn Strathern (1992) sums this up by noting that “culture consists in the way analogies are drawn between things, in the way certain thoughts are used to think others” (p. 33).

These debates over what counts as culture in virtual worlds are simultaneously debates over what counts as method for studying culture in virtual worlds. We are in a formative period for this emerging research community: it is imperative that we develop diverse methodological

paradigms for it. For instance, in my work on HIV/AIDS in Indonesia, I am accustomed to engaging with a range of qualitative and quantitative research (Boellstorff, 2009). Most HIV/AIDS researchers specialize in a particular method, but in conversation we gain a greater understanding of the cultural issues at hand. My work as editor-in-chief of *American Anthropologist*, the journal of the American Anthropological Association, has impressed upon me how most anthropologists participate in similarly diverse conversations.

Given this background, I have been disappointed to encounter, upon occasion, a methodological partisanship contenting that quantitative methods are the only scientific or rigorous approaches for studying culture in virtual worlds. One way this partisanship manifests itself is via the claim that qualitative methods are “anecdotal.” This profoundly mischaracterizes ethnographic research and fails to consider how quantitative methods using behavioral data and surveys are themselves “anecdotal” (not least because of the term’s etymological meaning of “not yet published”), distillations of complex and meaningful issues not always fully present to consciousness.

To concretize my concerns, it will prove helpful to consider the example of some recent work of the economist Edward Castronova, whose influential research I often cite with great approval in my own. In his article “On the Research Value of Large Games: Natural Experiments in Norrath and Camelot,” Castronova (2006) draws upon large datasets from two online games on develop fascinating insights about interpersonal coordination. Castronova rightly sees in this approach possibilities that have “never before existed in the long history of social thinking” and are “of incredible power and value” (p. 183).

As the title of his article indicates, Castronova explains this power and value by asserting that online games allow us to conduct “natural experiments,” explaining 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 . . . Now however [ . . . ] it is indeed possible to replicate entire societies and allow them to operate in parallel” (p. 163). Online games (and by extension, virtual worlds more generally) can thus represent:

[T]he social science equivalent of a petri dish, or a supercollider: an expensive machine that provides the only way to directly study certain interesting atomic phenomena. 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 (Castronova, 2006, pp.170-171).

Unfortunately, Castronova predicates this claim of methodological value on methodological partisanship. Contrasting his method “with the methods currently available to social scientists” means, among other things, that “the results are not based on the researcher’s impression after having spent 12 months living with a small subset of one of the populations” (Castronova, 2006, p. 184). He then states that “it should be apparent from the tone” of his argument that he feels his “mode of study is at least as reliable, and quite probably more so, than those that precede it . . . . That being the case, a major realignment of social science research methods would seem to be in order” (p. 184).

Tone, indeed! It is extremely important that we interrupt such utterly unnecessary methodological partisanship, which is furthermore at odds with Castronova’s earlier work

(Castronova, 2005). That work typically had a recognizably ethnographic component: at the very least, it did not falsely reduce ethnographic research to the gathering of “impressions.” Nor did it construe its methodological palette in a zero-sum fashion, placing methods on a timeline such that one method can “precede” another. Yet, this placing of differing methods on a timeline is wholly consonant with the implicit narrative of progress that structures Castronova’s partisanship. Given Castronova’s claim to methodological superiority, while asserting that he is discussing culture, it is instructive to recall Strathern’s insight that “culture consists in the way analogies are drawn between things, in the way certain thoughts are used to think others.”

How does culture, to which Castronova claims privileged access, shape his own claims?

These claims are founded in an analogy between natural and social science, such that petri dishes, supercolliders, labs, and nature itself structure the analysis. This is not a colorful or superfluous metaphor: it is absolutely foundational to the theorization, reflecting the well-known significance of analogy and metaphor to cognition (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). This metaphor, like any, can stimulate insight but also occlude investigation. For instance, the construal of persons as bacteria in a petri dish or atoms in a supercollider masks how, as noted earlier, culture is not simply the aggregate of individual personalities and dispositions that, in Castronova’s analogy, “bang together” and can be understood through “direct observation.” To extend this very metaphor, as anthropologists have done since the early twentieth century, consider that just as direct observation of hydrogen and oxygen will tell you little about the properties of water, so not all aspects of culture can be understood by looking at individuals “atomistically.” This metaphor also absolves the researcher from asking questions of meaning: what does “coordination” mean to these players? Do they think in terms of “coordination” at all in these contexts? Not all researchers need ask questions of meaning, of course, but they are far from irrelevant. It is therefore useful to place Castronova’s work here in conversation with other work on equal footing, rather than in terms of precedent and antecedent.

The rhetorical slight-of-hand performed by this analogy between nature and culture is known as positivism, and its critique is so well rehearsed that I need not recount it here. The irony is that despite Castronova’s methodological partisanship in this particular article, the research itself is valuable and this value need not hinge upon denigrating other methods. There is no reason why what Castronova terms “direct observation” must conflict with the “participant observation” of the ethnographer, or with the methods of experimenters, historians, and philosophers toward which he is equally dismissive (Castronova, 2006, p. 184). They can all provide synergistic insight into a larger problem. Counting is a method, but it is not the only thing that counts as method.

It is, I believe, most productive to interpret Castronova’s “tone” diagnostically, as exemplifying the dangers of methodological partisanship in this formative period of research on culture in virtual worlds. What is needed at this juncture is to broaden the conversation—not constrict it. Placing methods on a unilinear timeline and claiming there must should be a “realignment” that values one method over others that ostensibly “precede” it is more than a claim about research techniques: it is an implicit claim about the object of method. Different methods for researching culture produce different theorizations of culture, and it is vital that we not foreclose our range of understandings as to what culture in virtual worlds might be and might become.

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