



A2 Sociology – Summer work

Second Life, Boellstorff (2008)

Millions of people around the world today spend large portions of their lives in online virtual worlds. Second Life is one of the largest of these virtual worlds. The residents of Second Life create communities, buy property and build homes, go to concerts, meet in bars, attend wedding and religious services, buy and sell virtual goods and services, find friendship, fall in love and all of these events are experienced through a computer screen.

Boellstorff, an anthropologist, conducted more than two years of fieldwork (from June 2004 to January 2007) in Second Life, living and observing its residents in exactly the same way anthropologists traditionally have done to learn about cultures and social groups in the so-called real world. His home and office in Second Life was called Ethnographia. He conducted his research as the avatar Tom Bukowski, and applied the rigorous methods of anthropology to study many aspects of this virtual world. He used participant observation and interviews all inside the virtual world. He explores a range of issues including gender, race, sex, money, conflict and anti-social behaviour, the construction of place and time, and identity. Boellstorff shows how virtual worlds can change ideas about identity and society.

However, there are some problems with this virtual world. What happens when participants commit actions which offline would be considered to be crimes? There is very little regulation of online behaviour, however, since 2007 Belgian police have begun 'patrolling' the virtual world of Second Life, after a user reported being raped within the game. Brussels police who investigated this case gave a statement to the press: 'It is our intention to find out if a crime has been committed.'

More recent reports have revealed that prostitution/pornography has been occurring on Second Life, raising more issues of consent and regulation. There have been controversial responses to the potential 'crimes' for example, it has been suggested that it is now possible to buy a 'rape add-on', which makes your Second Life avatar able to attach other characters. This raises serious questions about the moral regulation of online forms of communication, and thus far, laws and policies are a long way from being able to regulate and punish deviant behaviour.

Task

Pick a virtual online community, such as Second Life. Carry out some research into:

- The history of the community
- The scope of the community, including how it is similar and different to the offline world
- To what extent identity can be changed by the individual and in what ways?
- How the online community is represented in the media, are there any controversies linked to the community?
- How are boundaries maintained as part of the online community?

Write a 500 word report about your findings.