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**Ursula Plesner and Louise Philips:
*Researching virtual worlds:
Methodologies for studying emergent practices.*
New York: Routledge. 2013.**

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Engagement in various practices via networked digital technology has increasingly become an everyday experience in Western society. People go about their daily routines, online and offline, acting in the here-and-now regardless of its different guises. An ongoing question today for media research within the humanities, then, is how we can study these entanglements of signifying systems, (often) distant human beings, technologies and institutions – in particular, the ways in which these ensembles emerge and become knowable through our study of them. The anthology, *Researching Virtual Worlds*, sets out to explore these questions in eight very different and yet related chapters. Prospective readers may be tempted to think that virtual worlds are somewhat insignificant niches in the digital media landscape. However, even if this *were* the case, the reflections presented in the various contributions are relevant for research on online media use in general.

What binds the anthology's various contributions together is an insistence on the emergent nature of the virtual worlds under study, which are offered not as ready-made places but rather as fluid and ever-developing assemblages. Thus, the editors, although they discuss the different available definitions of virtual worlds in the first chapter, decline to offer a shared definition, rejecting the neatness of envisioning a given object of study "out there". This insistence lends strength to the whole volume because it allows the individual contributors to reflect in detail on how the object of study takes form in their research as a product of particular theoretical questions, explorations and interactions. A strong attention to practice is, likewise, a common thread running through most of the anthology,

shifting the focus from identity work based on conscious consumption of key media texts within audience studies (Couldry, 2004; Hermes, 2009) to the performance of self and the production of demarcations in everyday media-infused routines.

Apart from the introductory chapter, the various contributions are all centred on an empirical case that anchors theoretical and methodological discussions. This allows the authors to reflect in detail on the methodological issues of researching partially intangible, multi-sited and difficult-to-locate phenomena while retaining a clear application-oriented focus. Although it falls outside of the anthology's central topic, it would have been interesting to have a summary chapter discussing the relevance of virtual worlds in the wider media landscape with suggestions of how the anthology's valuable methodological and theoretical insights could be extrapolated to online media practices in general.

After a general introduction in the first chapter, the second chapter (by Ulla Plesner) considers via Actor-Network Theory how a geographically as well as offline/online dispersed, multi-actor phenomenon of *virtual worlds architecture* emerges and is continually reshaped in the research process of "following the actors" (p. 17, 19). Explicating the analytical steps, she demonstrates ways in which the researcher, instead of constructing a plausible image, via interviews, participant observation and available discourses may investigate the ways in which the actors involved assemble a coherent world for themselves (p. 22). Chapter three (by Dixi Louise Stand) tackles presence within virtual worlds, emphasising that this is not something inherent in the technology. Instead, she argues on the basis of a post-ANT analytical lens applied to material constructed via participant observation, qualitative interviews and available texts produced by participants, that presence for the users appears as an assemblage of material objects, social practice and imagination. The fourth chapter (by Ulrike Schultze) analyses the performance of identity in Second Life, detailing how a photo-diary interview method can be used to gain insight into the users' ongoing meaning-production when the "physically embodied senses are extended through technology" (p. 69). Here, photo-diaries, giving access to extremely private and intimate moments that the researcher would otherwise be unlikely to encounter, are used as primers for subsequent qualitative interviews. Minna Ruckenstein in the fifth chapter explores the ways in which commercial interests "shape the social and spatial affiliations of childhood in relation to virtual worlds" (p. 76) – in this case, Habbo Hotel. Taking a multi-sited ethnographic approach in which she encounters her informants both offline and online, she includes the producers behind Habbo Hotel as well as its users in order to understand how the site motivates children's productive engagement. The sixth chapter (by Sisse Siggaard Jensen) deals with the worldliness of Second Life, seeking ways in which to gain insight into the fleeting experience of "being there", which is "hard to explore through retrospective methods such as qualitative interviews or to capture in video observational studies" (p. 96) as long as these are applied separately. The solution presented here is to combine these methods, recording situated video interviews. This method, when applied with care, appears to be capable of capturing some of the smaller nuances of situated practices. Carrie

Lynn Reinhard and Brenda Dervin in chapter seven discuss in great detail how novice users' sense-making in "the negotiation between users' actions and the media product's structures" (p. 121) may be investigated *in situ* through a highly focused interview methodology developed by Dervin. This sense-making methodology has been created to enable a direct comparison between cases, thanks to its strict structuring of foci during the interview process. The final and eighth chapter (by Zeynep Yetis, Robin Teighland and Paul Di Gangi) takes a multi-method approach to the investigation of the stakeholders involved in open source virtual worlds in order to gain insight into the workings of these relatively new ways of organising "economic activity" (p. 145). Applying stakeholder, content and social network analysis, the authors map the relatively uncharted community formed around open source virtual worlds, demonstrating how this meticulous process allows them to create new knowledge about the various participants involved in this area.

Due to the variety of the contributions as well as the detailed reflections on methodological practice, *Virtual Worlds* is highly recommendable as a textbook for courses with a focus on networked digital media use and/or (qualitative and mixed methods) methodology – particularly, because topics such as multi-sitedness, identity, the body, online activity, virtuality and reality are generally tackled in theoretically well-founded ways that shed the dualist debris of early cyberculture theorising that still prevails today both within everyday talk and in some research. The anthology would also be a good starting point for anyone who is about to set out on their own research journey with a focus on the uses of networked digital media. In fact, *Virtual Worlds* offers inspiration, questions to ask, problems to ponder, or points to disagree with for anyone with an interest in what forms today's audience studies may take.

References

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