Chapter 3

Collective Building Projects in Second Life:
User Motives and Strategies Explained From an Architectural and Ethnographic Perspective

Bjarke Liboriussen
Copenhagen Business School, Denmark

ABSTRACT

Users of “Second Life” invest considerable amounts of time, money, and creativity in collective building projects. Informed by a 14-month ethnography, this chapter explains why and how from an architectural perspective. User motivation is explained with recourse to the concept of dwelling, and special attention is given to use of the architectural devices boundary and image. The user strategy employing such devices is summed up as a pop vernacular building strategy characterised by eclecticism but not by irony. Special attention is given to the way in which the avatar allows a sense of place to be bodily grounded in agency. Through its architectural focus on concepts such as place and dwelling, the chapter demonstrates the relevance of “old”, i.e., pre-digital, experiences in virtual worlds.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter explores the phenomenon of virtual dwelling in “Second Life” (and, by extension, other virtual worlds). Both methodologically and theoretically it is informed by the idea that it is meaningful and productive to approach virtual dwellings as places. Methodologically, the notion of place points towards an ethnographic approach. Theoretically, it points towards architectural theory and related fields, especially the philosophy of space and place. These methodological
and theoretical issues are addressed immediately below. I then turn towards my ethnography of a collective building project in “Second Life”. The motivation for that collective building project will be explored through the concept of dwelling. User practices aimed at dwelling will be explained from an architectural perspective through the devices of boundary and image, and summed up as a building strategy of the pop vernacular. Throughout the chapter, special attention is paid to the ways in which the avatar functions as a device for giving the user a bodily grounded sense of agency and place.

PLACE, ETHNOGRAPHY, ARCHITECTURE

People in Virtual Places

In Tom Boellstorff’s words (2008), virtual world ethnography presupposes that “virtual worlds are places”, and thus “fieldsites [...] making an ethnographic approach conceivable” (p. 91). At heart, and bracketing its many variations and the discussions surrounding it, ethnography is about entering a place and staying in that place long enough to get a sense of its culture from the inside. The ethnographic approach is, however, not the only approach to studying virtual worlds, and this section gives a brief overview of how ethnography is situated in recent virtual worlds research.

Annette N. Markham (1998) offers three categories for the ways in which users can conceptualise an online community: as tool, as place, and as way of being. Based on Markham’s work on (and in) text-based, online communities, the categories are meant to be a rough starting point for thinking about the myriad ways users approach such communities. The categories are also useful when surveying recent work on avatar-based, 3D virtual worlds such as “Second Life”. Markham stresses that the three concepts are not used exclusively and that they form a continuum. On a day when it seems to blend seamlessly into everyday life, a user might think of the virtual world as a way of being. Perhaps on the following day, the user thinks of it more as a place to be visited.

The tool approach is, e.g., employed by psychologist Nick Yee (2007) who have documented how the main tool for engagement with a virtual world, the avatar, influences not only how one is perceived by other users but also self-perception.

The notion of place is constantly present in Howard Rheingold’s early book (1993) on “The WELL” (a text-based world preceding the World Wide Web with almost a decade). Place also makes itself present in Lisbeth Klastrup’s work (2003) on “EverQuest” (SOE, 1999) in which she brings examples of how changes to virtual places radically alter social practices. A more recent article by Eric Hayot and Edward Wesp (2009) goes into detail with the social construction of place in “EverQuest”.

The notion of the virtual world as a way of being underlies work focusing on the blurred boundary between online and offline. Examples are Mário J. L. Guimarães, Jr.’s ethnographic study of “The Palace” (2005), a 2D precursor to contemporary virtual worlds (Time Warner Interactive, 1995), and T. L. Taylor’s ethnography (2006) of “EverQuest”, tellingly titled “Play Between Worlds”. In a sense, work focusing on blurred boundaries are a variant of the place approach, since there would not be a boundary, blurred or not, if the virtual world was not a place in its own right.

Based in the notion of place, ethnographic approaches have been used for text-based and two-dimensional virtual worlds. But the virtual world is, arguably, a place in a stronger sense when it is three-dimensional and engaged with through an avatar.

Avatars in Virtual Architecture

When users engage with virtual world places, they do so through and with an avatar. To understand the premise of virtual world ethnography, then, it
Related Content

**Is It Better to be Alone or in Company?: The Impact of the Structural Profile of Interpersonal Skills on Computer-Supported Group-Based Learning**
[www.igi-global.com/chapter/better-alone-company/68114?camid=4v1a](www.igi-global.com/chapter/better-alone-company/68114?camid=4v1a)

**Motion Cueing Algorithms: A Review: Algorithms, Evaluation and Tuning**
[www.igi-global.com/article/motion-cueing-algorithms-a-review/169937?camid=4v1a](www.igi-global.com/article/motion-cueing-algorithms-a-review/169937?camid=4v1a)

**Community and Gender in the Virtual Classroom**
[www.igi-global.com/chapter/community-gender-virtual-classroom/30996?camid=4v1a](www.igi-global.com/chapter/community-gender-virtual-classroom/30996?camid=4v1a)