

## PREFACE TO THE 2024 EDITION

There was a time when studying culture solely meant conducting research in the physical world. This handbook responds to the reality that for some time now, culture has been found in online spaces as well. We are four ethnographers who have conducted research in virtual worlds. We wrote this book responding to requests for guidance on how to design and carry out such work. We envisioned this text as a handbook in every sense of the word: lean, practical, and meant to be carried into the field, even if the field is online. Since it was first published in 2012, we have been gratified to see it adopted by individual researchers and in classroom settings in a variety of disciplines. This affirms one of our strongest conclusions: the ethnography of virtual worlds builds on and is part of a strong methodological tradition. Virtual ethnography *is* ethnography. It requires customization—but no more or less than the customization ethnographers have always had to do for radically different fieldsites around the physical world. This informed our decision to leave the chapters that follow as originally published, and we believe they remain as relevant as when first written. Because ethnography's primary aim is the study of culture, it has utility for the study of online spaces and sociotechnical systems broadly.

Virtual worlds are places of incredible potential and promise, for leisure and entertainment, but also for everything from education and medicine to work and community. Yet there are perils as well. These include forms of racism, sexism, homophobia, and ableism, as well as antidemocratic and exclusionary politics. In addition, compared to the early days of virtual worlds in the 1990s, or even the 2010s, the most well-known of these environments are now overwhelmingly owned and controlled by corporations. Their agendas should not stand for what virtual worlds actually are or could be.

Given these rapid and ongoing transformations, the need for informed ethnographic research into these spaces is even more urgent than when this handbook was initially written. Virtual worlds have been going through yet another cycle of boom and bust, amid the ongoing roller coaster of

technology hype. In this preface we provide four “frames” to help you cut through the hype and anti-hype and use this handbook to design effective and impactful research.

## FOUR FRAMES

### Multi-sited

The author of the foreword, Professor George Marcus, helped develop the notion of multi-sited ethnography for cultural phenomena that transcend a single geographical location. He built on a key aspect of ethnographic practice established in ethnography’s earliest beginnings—that human societies have always included forms of migration, trade, and the movement of ideas across space. For instance, while Bronislaw Malinowski’s *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* is rightly regarded as a classic text of ethnographic method, it is often overlooked that Malinowski was not researching an island community but the *kula* trading ring. Involving multiple sites over hundreds of miles, requiring sea travel, this was a distributed network rather than a single fieldsite.

Even before writing this handbook, we had brought this approach to virtual worlds. Our framework for thinking about multi-sitedness included both offline and online spaces. For instance, in *Communities of Play*, Celia chronicled how a community in one virtual world, Uru: Myst Online, moved to several other virtual worlds when the original game was shut down. In *Coming of Age in Second Life*, Tom had an entire section titled “Beyond Virtual Worlds” examining how websites, forums, and other online places constituted a virtual Second Life where residents furthered community connection. In *Play Between Worlds*, which focused on the video game EverQuest, T. L. opened with participant observation at a convention in Boston but also constructed the fieldsite across third-party websites that were crucial for the community. Bonnie’s study of World of Warcraft, *My Life as a Night Elf Priest*, included fieldwork in China and North America.

The ethnographic approach encourages researchers to conceive of their fieldsite holistically, to attend to the ways online experience is often constructed across multiple sites, including both physical and virtual ones. The networked aspect of online spaces is one of the most foundational properties of the internet. There are a multitude of connections between virtual worlds and other entities. This includes the work of organizations like the Metaverse Standards Forum, the use of platforms like Discord

and Reddit, and aggregators like Curse that allow worlds to be extended in myriad ways. Tracing these dynamics of connection and separation, seeing virtual fieldsites as particular realities always connected beyond themselves, will continue to generate new research agendas and methodological innovations.

### Multi-method

Just as ethnography is always multi-sited even when focused on a particular virtual world, so too ethnographic methods are always multiple. Such methods have historically centered on qualitative approaches like participant observation and interviews. The study of virtual worlds often clearly calls for us to attend to the visual and aesthetic, technological artifacts, and careful archival work. Ethnography has also always included quantitative methods like surveys and censuses.

The real distinction in social research is not between qualitative and quantitative methods but between experimental and field-based methods. Rather than attempting to control for context by holding variables constant, ethnographers bring in as much living context as is possible within a coherent narrative. Ethnographic methods, including in virtual worlds, are multiple. They do not involve the artificiality of creating laboratory environments. Ethnography is first and foremost about what actual people are doing in their actual contexts of life and action. The field-based methods ethnographers use drive a holistic approach in which connections, relations, links, and networks are central. A multiplicity of methods provides multiple perspectives, allowing ethnographers to address the holism of culture. The approach we develop in this handbook is thus open to new methods as future online cultures take form and develop.

### Multi-authorial

Ethnographic methods are always collaborative, for the fundamental reason that we study interlocutors who help us develop not just data but frameworks for analysis. Ethnographers sometimes conduct fieldwork together as a team. It is also possible for ethnographers to collaborate as authors even if they did not collaborate as researchers. That is the approach we used in this handbook. This text is not an edited collection, nor a series of chapters each authored by one of us. It is not written as a conversation or debate animated by clashing perceptions. Instead, we wrote the handbook in a single voice, the consequence of years of discussion and

synthesis, building on insights from our various projects and the work of other scholars.

### Multi-disciplinary

Ethnographers come from many fields, not just anthropology. A methodology is not the same as a discipline. In the case of this handbook, it was useful to us that while we were all employing ethnographic methods, we could draw on the broader theoretical and conceptual perspectives of sociology, anthropology, and media studies. The purposes of research—perhaps even the hopes and dreams of the researcher—drive the selection of ethnography as a methodology. Ultimately, specific methods used should be driven by curiosity, by core research questions: What are the people I'm studying about? How do they live, interact, and produce culture together? What are their values? How do they themselves understand their experiences? What stories do they tell themselves and each other about who they are? What makes them tick? One's personal proclivities toward how to engage in research with people—which involve personality and ethos—can be more determinative of ethnography as a choice than disciplinary training.

As authors of this handbook, we shared a desire to know what our informants thought about their communities within virtual worlds. We cared about practices and how culture is embodied in daily life. We wanted to watch them acting in these worlds, to talk to them as they went about their activities, to spend months or years with them to understand the cultures they were bringing into being. Such questions and preferences for intersubjective relations transcend disciplinary boundaries. Ethnography thus has broad appeal to scholars across the social sciences and humanities. Different disciplines can pick up on the technique of ethnography and use it fruitfully.

### CONCLUSION

We hope that these four frames serve as a road map and point of departure for how you might use this handbook to develop research that responds to the ongoing transformations in virtual worlds. At the heart of virtual worlds are the people and the cultures they create with and through them.

In this regard, *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds* is a call to action. Ethnographers can conduct research into, for example, how virtual worlds are

used for the development of divisive incursions into civil society, and, more generally, they can study ongoing social, cultural, and political impacts. The positive potential of virtual worlds is immense, but as with any technology, such potential will not automatically manifest itself. Technologies are always cultures as well, constituted through belief and practice and embedded in the larger world. The ethnography of virtual worlds can help us chart these new horizons and their implications for the human journey.

