



## VIDEO

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### *The Amazons of Aquarius: an ethnographic journey in Second Life*

Link: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zCMFEr40Z-s>  
(or click on the html file)

Virtuality and so-called „online communities“ are concepts that are becoming more and more part of our everyday lives, and the exploration of these new dimensions of the human experience is of a growing interest within the discipline. A milestone in the ethnographic research within virtual community and specifically within Second Life (SL) is represented by the work of Tom Boellstorff „Coming of Age in Second Life“. His assertion that “virtual worlds are legitimate sites of culture” (Boellstorff 2008: 61) is a good starting point in order to perceive virtual communities as communities in themselves, that can be approached with the same methodologies of any other ethnographic research.

Therefore, in conducting my fieldwork within SL, I decided to apply participant observation as the main tool to gather information about the reality I was studying, spending the ten months of field research participating in the activities of the „Amazons of Aquarius“, a group of forty members within the online virtual world of SL.

Participant observation was not my only source of information. I also relied on non-SL generated sources, such as blogs, websites and forums that were either created by the group members, or that group members were participating in. I furthermore decided to conduct interviews with some members of the Amazon group.

The short film „The Amazon of Aquarius“ is a visual outcome of these months of research. Through the video the audience is introduced into the Amazon group in a mix of observational ethnography, interviews with the participants and the presence of the anthropologist.

The film opens with the images of a marriage within two members of the community, both in a shape of female avatars. The images of the marriage, that in its virtuality is as lavish and well-groomed as a real life marriage, are accompanied with the speech of the female registrar, in which concepts of real life, virtuality, validity of same-sex marriages are brought into question:

“We are the Amazons, we have seen this love when it was born, we have seen it growing, suffering, weakening. We prayed for this love, we hoped for this love and we have seen it growing stronger every day until we arrived at this new starting point. Because this is not an end point—no, this is a new starting point [...] such a feeling one day will have to cross the boundaries of the virtual and

take possession of the every day reality. This is what we all truly hope, because this ceremony that we celebrate unfortunately will never be valid in the real life, not in this country, not at this time, not under these circumstances.” (Rafflesia speech during the marriage, 26.08.2010)

The marriage thereby became a ritual not only involving the two brides, but in-volving the whole community, in which the duality between “real” and “virtual” is openly discussed and where the principles of the actual world are brought into question through a virtual action.

The duality of „real“ and „virtual“ is a recurring thread also in the interviews with the participants, in which other important threads are as well brought to the attention of the viewer. The creation of the group, its importance in supporting the members of the community of Aquarius, the personal perception that the participants have of their virtual dimension and virtual bodies, are some of the themes that are emerging through their voices.

Rafflesia: to have a body here is fundamental, at least for me... this changes everything...[...] sometimes it is even dangerous, because there is a total identification... you know.. when you look at yourself in the mirror, sometimes in RL you see something that does not satisfy you...instead here it does satisfy you. It gives you a certain feeling of being secure.

(Interview with Rafflesia in Aquarius, 18.11.2010)

The importance of the body assumes a special value for Rafflesia, who in real life is „trapped“ in a male body. However SL is not simply represented as a place where she can express her real self in a total secure space, but a dimension that put in discussion the relationship that she has with her real body.

In her story and in the stories of the other Amazons, we see how “online and offline experiences blend into a single, albeit multifaced, narrative of life” (Campbell 2004: 100 in Boellstorf 2008: 61).

The anthropologist takes the viewer into a journey, visually represented in the short film by my actual avatar traveling on a boat in order to reach Aquarius, the SL Land of the Amazons. During this journey, the starting questions of the research are revealed: how is the relationship between real life and SL? Can SL communities be considered as „true“? What is the meaning of being an Amazon in SL?

With these questions as a starting point, the seven minutes film becomes not only an ethnography of the Amazons of Aquarius through the everyday practices of the community and through the words of the participants, but also the investigation on the validity of virtual communities in themselves, on the importance of virtual bodies and virtual spaces, in a call for more interest within the discipline for the growing virtual dimension of our everyday lives.

## References

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“Statuto delle Amazzoni di Aquarius” ( “Statute of the Amazons of Aquarius”) personally received by the Amazons group on 17.06.2010.

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(b. 1985, Negrar, Italy) graduated in Anthropology at the University of Bologna with the research thesis “Rethinking blackness: reflections on Pan-Africanism and Black Movements in the Cultural Studies” developed during the Overseas period in California, Santa Cruz. Elena graduated in 2011 in Visual and Media Anthropology at Freie Universität Berlin with a research thesis and a film about mobility and new forms of migrations among Italian women in Berlin. Her fields of interests are the concept of identity (especially in the stage of the identity creation), virtual worlds and virtual lives, and migration studies. She traveled in Sudan and Egypt, developing a special interest in Sub-Saharan and Mediterranean cultures.