Intersecting Virtualities: Applied Research on Digital Anthropology and Virtual Environments

Editors: Ana Correa, Urte Undine Frömming, Daniel Wood
Special thanks to Dr. Kateryna Maltseva at the National University of Kyiv-Mohala Academy

Website and Layout: Deborah Bischofberger

Introduction to Journal of Visual and Media Anthropology December 2022
By, Ana Correa, Urte Undine Frömming, Daniel Wood

The seventh edition of the Journal of Visual and Media Anthropology presents the work of nine scholars conducting research in digital anthropology and virtual environments through intersecting crises and an era of rapid technological change. The publication contains four papers, five films, and one 3d gallery, all of which approach the increasing digitization of life and space from intersecting positions and contexts. With an expanded scope from previous years, this seventh edition brings the work of M.A. students in Visual and Media Anthropology at HMKW Berlin and the work of M.A. students at the National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy, who participated in the Digital LION project over the past semester.

We would especially like to thank Dr. Kateryna Maltseva, the head of the sociology department at NaUKMA, and all of our Ukrainian collaborators, who produced incredibly impressive research under the conditions of invasion and war. Despite the loss and devastation of the russia-Ukraine war (as collaborator Oskana Buts styles it in her text), these digital scholars utilize innovative tools to continue to produce research from positions within Ukraine. Combined with the work of HMKW Berlin students, the authors in this journal are linked by a commitment to digital modes of conducting social scientific research, as well as an understanding of the various virtual tools that enable social scientists to invent new forms of scholarly production that sidestep the limitations imposed by their on-/offline fieldwork.

There is already a strong lineage of ethnographic research into virtual worlds within anthropology. For over a decade, researchers have used platforms like Second Life as field sites to explore virtual communities ethnographically and as tools to augment various kinds of digital research (Boellstorff 2012, 2015; Frömming 2013; Frömming et al. 2017; Pink et al. 2016). These virtual environments enable the instant connection between people, also known as avatars or users, across virtual space. As computing and graphic capabilities expand, the virtual environments that researchers contend with today are increasingly embodied and multi-dimensional. While various corporate technology platforms dominate visions of what the virtual world can and should look like, social scientists, in turn, play an essential role in understanding the implications of these technologies to social and political life (Allam et al. 2022; Bolger, 2021; Egliston & Carter 2021; Smith 2022). Several authors in this text expand on this lineage by continuing to conduct social science research in and on virtual environments as the platforms and technologies that enable these worlds to evolve.

The journal begins with authors, filmmakers, and digital creators who work in various virtual environments, such as Ubuntuland, FrameVR, AltspaceVR, and Second Life. In some cases, like Simoa Nangle's and Mariia Sokolova's, the virtual world is the focus of research; in others, like

Oksana Buts', these spaces become a tool to answer the further anthropological inquiry. The journal also includes several pieces from the field of digital anthropology that exist outside of these virtual worlds. With varying scopes, each researcher uses innovative digital tools to produce critically informed work in a virtual era. Together, the authors of this edition utilize an anthropologically-informed research process across intersecting virtualities, with a shared commitment to document and record broad aspects of life, loss, and trauma into an open digital archive accessible across time and space.

In "*the commodification of Africa – an ethnographic study on Africa's first metaverse,*" **Simoa Nangle** explores the digital pioneering of Ubunutland, a virtual environment and NFT marketplace for African artists to access the digital economy. Nangle deconstructs the platform's branding as a metaverse for and by Africans while examining how histories of colonialism and imperialism translate into virtual space. In addition, she explores connections between land ownership in digital environments and land-based issues in Africa and questions whether the platform helps artists to access the digital economy from a self-supported community. This analysis pokes holes in the utopian branding of this vision of the metaverse with a systematic study of the practical and political implications of one tech platform.

Using yet another 3D virtual environment, Frame VR, **Viktoriia Sofia Khorkava** presents an immersive gallery and accompanying video tour that powerfully demonstrates the destruction of Ukraine amidst the ongoing russia-Ukraine war from a personal perspective. Spectators can view the gallery in video format via Khorkava's avatar-led tour or visit the 3D space from their computers using FrameVR. This unique 3D virtual environment and gallery includes photos and videos taken by the creator before and after the invasion, accompanied by text, sound, visual effects, 3D renderings, and stories. Khorkava is correct in her statement that "you will not forget this tour," as it leaves an indelible mark on the viewers across borders.

Researchers can use virtual worlds as objects for critical study and productive tools for ethnographic fieldwork across various contexts. For example, within another virtual world, AltSpaceVR, **Oksana Buts** studies several narratives of the russia-Ukraine war. In "Perceptions of the russia-Ukraine war by representatives of the AltspaceVR community," Buts uses the platform as a research tool to quickly and semi-anonymously collect ethnographic data on political beliefs and narratives across geographic boundaries. The author analyzes common narratives across a broad geographic sample from inside Ukraine, isolating various ways the war in her country is discussed abroad. The exploratory research finds several common narratives worldwide while analyzing their political implications.

Mariia Sokolova's "Does the homo sacer exist in virtual reality?" examines the political and legal foundations of AltSpaceVR through the lens of exclusion. Sokolova reviews the application of Agamben's homo sacer concept alongside a broader discussion on political philosophy and virtuality. Throughout the article, the author analyses how this term contextualizes the sovereignty of virtual spaces while segueing into an analysis of anthropological questions about politics, statehood, reality, nature, and culture. Finally, the research focuses on the emergence of virtual spaces as a sphere of political influence, asking how these spatial shifts are in the politics of exclusion and nation-states.

In *Living Ghosts*, **Akefetey Ephraim** shares the stories of Oromo refugees from Ethiopia face while fleeing to different parts of the world. The poetically framed film intersperses interviews with digitally produced machinima film and even cuts to Second Life with poetic framing. Inside and out of a virtual setting, this film portrays the constant state of suspension and uncertainty that a migration process involves from a multivocal perspective.

The film *Hell on Heaven* also uses digital research techniques to record the memory of an environmental disaster in Turkey in 2017. **Yusuf Ölmez** investigates solastalgia, or existential dread over climate catastrophe, after the ecological disaster in Istanbul on the 27th of July 2017. Ölmez presents a "digital eye" that allows users to gaze through memories of the past in new ways enabled by digitization. The film navigates how to generate collective memory of this significant event and a broader sense of solastalgia, or existential dread over climate catastrophe, through a "digital eye."

Entering an entirely simulated environment again, **Christopher Michael**'s film explores "transcendental moments" produced around completely simulated environments, in this case, truck drive games. *Transcendent Simulator* takes viewers on truck drives through the virtual space of video games, which can produce "out-of-body" experiences in some viewers. Through online research and fieldwork with the game, Michael takes viewers into this virtual experience of travel and transcendence.

Situated in a concrete material space, **Elke Hautala** approaches the digital dimension of her research differently. *3,260 Souls in the Digital World* seeks new ways to tell the story of the three thousand two hundred and sixty people buried in Seattle's Potter's Field. Using screencast film, staged portraits, field recordings, sound effects, and voiceover, the film reaches for an audiovisual language to remember those who are lost, many of whom came from economically and politically marginalized backgrounds. Hautala adds life to their collective story by applying digital tools and creative representation to an analogue archive. Translating Potter's Field into a digital realm, the film adds new layers of representation to memories lost to the past.

While the digital world brings new possibilities for archiving and remembering disaster, loss, and death, it also brings exciting potentials and limitations for people bringing life into the world. In her paper "Social Media and the Reproductive Justice Movement" and accompanying film *The Communities We Create*, **Melissa de Seguin** describes online reproductive and child-birthing communities that share and reframe different forms of knowledge about the highly medicalized process through social media. The paper describes a counterculture in birthing that emerged from highly corporatized and mainstream social networks, mainly Instagram. Limited by the control of the platform, these forms of collective thrive and reproduce amidst competing information streams. In essay form and film, de Seguin locates a fight for reproductive justice in the "communities we create" over social media, reminding readers/viewers of the various possibilities for life enabled by shared digital conditions.

References:

Allam, Zaheer, Ayyoob Sharifi, Simon Elias Bibri, David Sydney Jones, and John Krogstie. (2022). "The Metaverse as a Virtual Form of Smart Cities: Opportunities and Challenges

for Environmental, Economic, and Social Sustainability in Urban Futures." *Smart Cities* 5 (3): 771–801. https://doi.org/10.3390/smartcities5030040.

Boellstorff, T. (2012). *Ethnography and virtual worlds: a handbook of method*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

---. 2015. *Coming of age in Second Life: an anthropologist explores the virtually human*. First new edition paperback. Ed. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Bolger, Ryan K. (2021). "Finding Wholes in the Metaverse: Posthuman Mystics as Agents of Evolutionary Contextualization." *Religions* 12 (9). https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12090768.

Egliston, Ben, & Marcus Carter (2021). "Critical questions for Facebook's virtual reality: data, power, and the metaverse." *Internet Policy Review* 10 (4). https://doi.org/10.14763/2021.4.1610.

Frömming, Urte Undine, ed. (2013). *Virtual Environments and Cultures*. Berlin: Peter Lang.

Frömming, Urte Undine, Steffen Köhn, Samantha Fox, and Mike Terry, eds. (2017). *Digital Environments: Ethnographic Perspectives across Global Online and Offline Spaces*. Bielefeld, Germany: transcript Verlag.

Pink, Sarah, Heather A. Horst, John Postill, Larissa Hjorth, Tania Lewis, and Jo Tacchi. (2016). *Digital ethnography: principles and practice*. Los Angeles: SAGE.

Smith, Patriann (2022). "Black immigrants in the United States: Transraciolinguistic justice for imagined futures in a global metaverse." *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics* 42: 109–118. https://doi.org/10.1017/s0267190522000046.