





# Paraethnographic Film

## Virtual Enactment and Collaboration in Our Digital Selves

TOM BOELLSTORFF

### ABSTRACT

The film *Our Digital Selves: My Avatar Is Me* (Bernhard Drax, director: 74m, 2018, <https://youtu.be/GQw02-me0W4>) chronicles the experiences and insights of disabled persons in the virtual world Second Life. In this article, I focus on the making of the film through collaboration between researchers, filmmakers, and community. By discussing techniques of what I term *virtual enactment*, I explore how *Our Digital Selves* constitutes *paraethnographic film* created through a triple collaboration between community members, filmmakers, and ethnographers. This concept can contribute to visual anthropology as a set of representational and analytical techniques responsive to emergent cultures and communities.

### KEYWORDS

digital culture, disability, enactment, ethnographic film, virtual worlds

## At the Drive-in

Draxtor is exasperated. *Everyone, please stop typing. The sound of your text chat is getting in the way. The broom sound is great and I'm going to use this audio.* The ten of us—participants in *Our Digital Selves*, Draxtor's nearly completed documentary—switch to voice, which Draxtor can mute while recording his virtual footage. Our avatars sit in (and on) six vintage cars, including a Mustang convertible and a Volkswagen Beetle. The virtual cars face the screen at a virtual drive-in movie theater: a scene of us watching a movie here will be used in the closing credits. Behind us are virtual vending machines in a weather-worn store. A ticket booth stands nearby; next to it, a sign proclaims “Drax Files World Makers” with one letter drooping out of place. That precarious letter will never fall but nicely evokes small-town decay—like the desert landscape, the worn road, the telephone poles whose wires slice the gray-blue sky. The broom sound comes from Ben, who won a contest to appear as an extra. We were lucky to find a janitor's avatar outfit for him, complete with sweeping animation and that great broom sound. Ben sweeps flawless virtual asphalt as the credits roll (Figure 1).

This article is about making a documentary in a virtual world, and I have begun with a scene from its making. A scene of collaboration and reflexivity—watching the film inside the film—all within the virtual world of Second Life. *Our Digital Selves: My Avatar Is Me* (Drax, 2018), which is freely available on YouTube (<https://youtu.be/GQw02-me0W4>), chronicles the experiences and insights of disabled persons in Second Life, through the lens of research I conducted.<sup>1</sup> Virtual worlds are places online where persons embody as avatars. In the case of an open-ended virtual world like Second Life, residents can build inworld and engage in almost any imaginable activity.

As many readers of this journal know, ethnography and film have been linked since their joint emergence in the nineteenth century, despite the domination of the written form in anthropological scholarship (de Brigard [2003] 2003; Grimshaw 2001; Heider 2006). Yet, even in the digital era, when smartphones and other devices facilitate visual methods for data collection and ethnographic representation, some skepticism toward visual ethnography persists. *Our Digital Selves* illuminates the potential of virtual worlds for ethnographic filmmaking. The film also provides fascinating insights regarding the intersection of disability and digital cultures. While I touch on both of these issues throughout this article, my argument is pitched more broadly. Digital technology is not a niche concern but a pervasive feature of contemporary life.

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FIG. 1

Furthermore, disability activists and scholars have long emphasized that disability speaks to the human condition in the broadest sense, not least because it “is a category anyone might enter through aging or in a heartbeat, challenging lifelong presumptions of stable identities and normativity” (Ginsburg and Rapp 2013, 55).

Within the scope of this article, I seek to delineate conceptual and methodological insights that speak to ethnographic film generally, noting along the way points germane to disability studies and digital anthropology (see also Boellstorff 2015, 2019, 2020). I focus on how *Our Digital Selves* was created through particular forms of collaboration between researchers, filmmakers, and community, and the filmmaking techniques used to realize this collaboration. I term the product of this set of collaborations and techniques *paraethnographic film*. In *Our Digital Selves*, paraethnographic filmmaking is shaped by disability and the digital, but such filmmaking need not be limited to either.

In the next section, I discuss the origins of *Our Digital Selves* and recount its narrative. I then explore a crucial methodological technique used in the film. I term this technique *virtual enactment* and provide examples of the two forms it takes, *virtual reenactment* and *virtual staging*. The following two sections build a detailed analysis of paraethnographic film as a genre of film created through a triple collaboration between community members, filmmakers, and ethnographers. In particular, paraethnographic film helps us reframe the relationship between ethnographer and filmmaker in terms of collaboration beyond co-direction. I end by using the concept of

paraethnographic film to argue for the value of visual anthropology as a set of representational and analytical techniques responsive to emergent cultures and communities.

## The Film's Story

A documentary was not originally part of this project. During the research phase, however, Bernhard Drax ("Draxtor"), a member of the flourishing community of Second Life filmmakers, contacted us. He was well known for "The Drax Files," a series of short films about Second Life, and proposed making an episode about our research. On June 19, 2017, he met with a group of disabled persons engaged in the research project. Responses were strongly positive: one member noted the film would be *a real opportunity to communicate what possibilities this world is offering us and our journeys*, while another emphasized, *I think one of the things we really need to get across is that while Facebook and other forums can give us social-emotional help, virtual worlds can do so much more*. Draxtor discussed how he wanted to include some physical world footage:

*As long as we have two or three people where I can show the connection between the physical person and the avatar, then we can "get away with" some others who are represented via their avatars. It's important for this type of storytelling that we see the connection, so the viewer knows that the avatar is the digital extension of the physical person .... We only use avatar names.*

As community interest grew, my research collaborator and I obtained funding so Draxtor could make a full-length documentary film. The funding allowed Draxtor to physically visit four of the 13 persons featured in the film, as well as make two trips to San Francisco, where Linden Lab (the company that owns Second Life) is headquartered.

The film opens with a gathering of disabled persons in Second Life, including Shyla. She is also shown in the physical world, sitting in a special chair that alleviates her pain, reading a poem to the group (0:55; Figure 2). Draxtor explains the documentary's goals, noting that he will appear in the film as his avatar. My co-researcher and I appear in Second Life and the physical world, discussing virtual worlds, embodiment, and disability (2:57).

The next section of the film is titled "Placemaking" and turns to Jady. She talks about Second Life as her "substitute career" (5:21) because she had to retire due to her disability.

FIG.1 *Ben sweeping his virtual broom*. Frame grab from *Our Digital Selves*, 2018. [This figure appears in color in the online issue.]

She describes how mental illness is often termed an “invisible disability,” recalling how she once went to a doctor’s office and the nurse did not believe she was disabled. In *Second Life*, she sometimes makes her disability visible by wearing a “brain sling” on her avatar head, and wishes she had one in the physical world.

Later Daisy, who identifies as a dwarf in the physical world, is profiled. Appearing as a small alligator, she notes her original hesitation to participate because disabled persons are often misrepresented in film, as if they “sit around all day thinking about how horrible their disabilities are” (14:45). This is accompanied by a scene of a disabled person sitting in a room watching television, and then Daisy closing a book called *My Thoughts On: The Media and Disability* (Figure 3).

The next section of *Our Digital Selves*, “Healing,” includes a scene with Lady, whom we meet on a virtual beach with her ornate mansion in the background. She discusses her experience as an African American woman, and also how she has seven babies in *Second Life* because she cannot have children in the physical world due to her disability. Draxtor sits with Lady, each holding a fishing pole on a virtual seashore, and asks: “Now Lady, you are aware that many people will see this finished film. And you shared a lot of personal information. How do you feel about that?” (33:11). Lady replies:

I was so afraid of talking. And I’m still afraid because I have no idea what I’ve said to you, and I’ve revealed so much of myself. But I am not going to worry about it; I’m just going to go out on a limb and live with whatever happens. I am sixty-one years old. I deserve to express myself and be heard. As who I am. (33:20)

The film then introduces Cody LaScala at another beach—the Santa Monica Pier in California (33:49). At a group meeting in *Second Life*, I ask Cody, “What does your avatar mean to you?” With the assistance of his caregiver, Cecii, he replies, “It means everything to me. It means I can do whatever I want.” He then invites the group to his *Second Life* house, and we dance around his virtual backyard pool. This staged scene cuts to his recollection of the day when, as an infant, he nearly drowned in a swimming pool, the origin of his cerebral palsy (36:36; Figure 4). We see Cody’s adult avatar at the virtual pool’s side, watching the scene in a director’s chair, a somber contrast to the earlier pool party. The next scene alternates between Cody riding a virtual motorcycle (with other members of the community accompanying him on bicycles, airplanes, even bubbles) and physical world images of

FIG. 2 *Shyla at the group meeting.* Frame grab from *Our Digital Selves*, 2018.

FIG. 3 *Closing the book on My Thoughts On: The Media and Disability.* Frame grab from *Our Digital Selves*, 2018.



FIG. 2

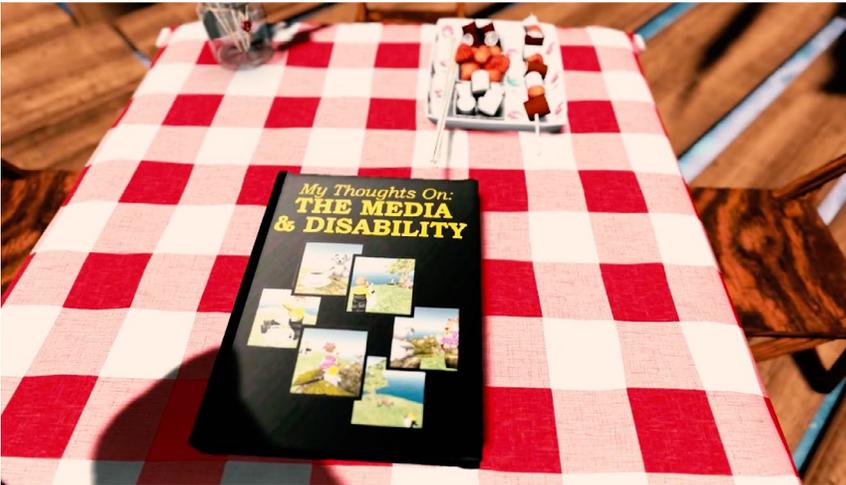


FIG. 3

Cody using a trackball with his foot to drive the motorcycle. He states, "I see myself as an able-bodied person who has a little bit different abilities. I don't see myself as disabled" (37:45).

The film then returns to Shyla in the physical world, driving with Draxtor in the passenger seat. She wants to head into town, but they give up because the traffic is moving slowly and Shyla knows her pain will become unbearable. The film cuts between her speaking in the car and her avatar in Second Life, surrounded by giant children's alphabet blocks. She moves the blocks around to first spell *advocate*, *creates*, *poet*, *relevant*, *strong*, and then rearranges them to spell *abandoned*, *ableism*, *afraid*, *pain* (40:25). This is followed by a scene where a young

boy asks Shyla if her body braces hurt. When she explains they actually help, the boy exclaims, “That’s good, because you look like Tron!” (41:23).

The final section of the film, “On the Road” (51:56), begins with Draxtor and me driving from Los Angeles to San Francisco to visit Linden Lab. En route, we stop by the home of Solas, who had to leave a successful career in fashion design due to early-onset Parkinson’s disease, but now makes avatar clothing (see Davis and Boellstorff 2016). A scene accompanies Solas’s description of how her five-year-old son once told her he was glad she had Parkinson’s because it meant she was at home with him (54:30; Figure 5). The film concludes with a visit to the offices of Linden Lab and a discussion with its CEO about the future of virtual worlds.

### Virtual Enactment

With this synopsis in mind, I now turn to the implications of a key technique used in *Our Digital Selves*: time and again, a protagonist speaks in voiceover while a scene constructed of digital objects and bodies enacts what is spoken. This is not computer-generated animation as normally understood; it is a live-action technique where real people are filmed as they move avatars on virtual world sets. I term this *virtual enactment*: using the virtual to collaboratively “realize” a filmic narrative. Draxtor is not the first person to employ this technique; similar techniques are used in machinima, films created inside virtual worlds. But this innovative use of virtual enactment helps frame the notion of paraethnographic film to which I turn later in this article.

Virtual enactment builds on the history of reenactments, “which date more or less to the origin of cinema” and have long been used to reconsider notions of truth in narrative (Kahana 2009a, 53; see also Griffiths 2003; Nichols 2008). Yet reenactments have often been critiqued as inauthentic, even when interlocutors suggest them. For instance, in his discussion of collaborative video with Mayan interlocutors in Guatemala, anthropologist Carlos Flores stated, “The elders and their wives ... suggested that they ‘reenact’ their cultural practices in front of the camera, something that we politely rejected” (Flores 2007, 214). This rejection is unfortunate because it discounts the constructedness of all narrative. In his 1953 essay “Repeated and Organized Scenes in Documentary Films,” Dutch documentary filmmaker Joris Ivens asked:

Why are people opposed to organized, reenacted shooting in documentary films? Because they think

FIG. 4 *The infant Cody*.  
Frame grab from *Our Digital Selves*, 2018.

FIG. 5 *Solas’s son telling her he’s glad she has Parkinson’s disease*. Frame grab from *Our Digital Selves*, 2018.

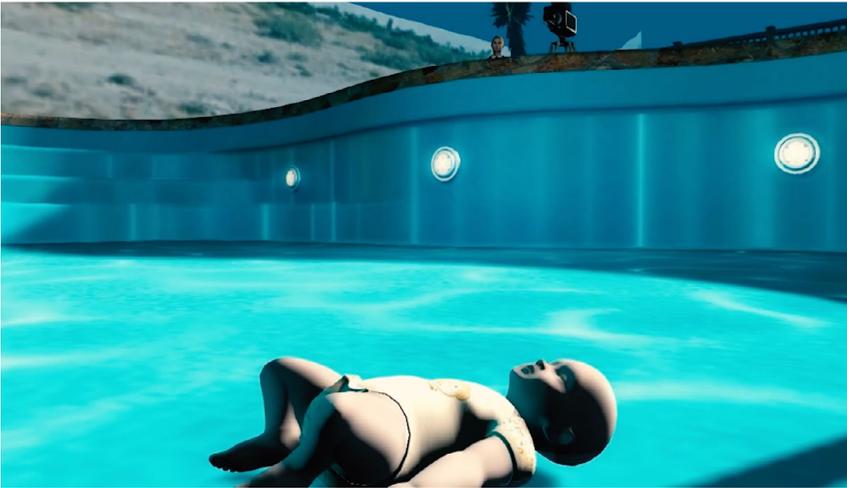


FIG. 4



FIG. 5

it makes the film less truthful ... [R]e-enactment starts with the interference of the director ... by insisting [people] “do not look into the camera.” But it is well-known that in most documentary films the director goes further than this basic intrusion, he insists that actions be repeated, he organizes new circumstances or situations. (Ivens [1953] 1999, 265)

One example of virtual reenactment was when Jadyn recounted how she once went to a doctor’s office and the nurse did not believe she was disabled. Draxtor employed a virtual



FIG. 6

set, with community members using avatars to play the roles of a skeptical nurse and other patients, and Jady's avatar wearing the "brain sling" she described (Figure 6). The scene opens showing the virtual doctor's office within a virtual movie studio labeled "Stage 1A," and with Draxtor's avatar surrounded by camera gear (5:58).

This story of visiting the doctor's office is a reenactment. But Daisy's virtual book *My Thoughts On: The Media and Disability* did not reenact anything. Rather, it *staged* what she was saying. In other words, virtual enactment takes two forms: reenactment and staging. Draxtor did not make any technical distinction between these; both used inworld sets, avatars acting out roles, and protagonist voiceover. Indeed, a single scene sometimes combined reenactment and staging: Jady's story of visiting the doctor's office reenacted a past event, but the "brain sling" staged a point she was making in the present. In an interview, Draxtor explained:

*Reenacting things that you don't have any visuals for is a challenge for any documentary filmmaker .... When we do this inside a virtual world, the big difference is that it's ... much more akin to a staged reenacting than if you were to do it in the physical world .... In Jady's case [of the brain sling], this is something where, it's like a dream that she has .... It becomes real in the reenactment.*

It is important to note that while virtual enactment takes place by having avatars interact in virtual places, it is distinct from

filming everyday interaction in a virtual world. In the case of *Our Digital Selves*, no scenes of everyday interaction were used: all of the shots were virtual enactments (either virtual reenactments or virtual stagings). Even scenes like hanging out at Cody's pool were staged for the film. It is, of course, possible to film footage of everyday virtual world interaction and incorporate that into a film. However, for *Our Digital Selves* Draxtor not only avoided such footage but highlighted enactment through conceits like a studio soundstage, director's chair, and camera. In flagging the performative character of virtual enactment, Draxtor harked back to the insights of film theorists like André Bazin, who were interested in "the rough edges of representation, the moment of encounter and productive maladjustment between representation and the actuality of filmmaking" (Margulies 2003, 4). Bazin was responding to claims that films were a form of spectacle opposed to a reality that was always physical. He emphasized instead that the making of images involves "the creation of an ideal world in the likeness of the real, with its own temporal destiny" (Bazin 1960, 6; see also Rosen 2003; Wollen 1969).

### Collaboration in Ethnographic Film

While the myth of the lone anthropologist sailing off to a remote island persists, it is widely recognized that ethnographic research always involves collaboration—for instance, with research assistants (Gupta 2014; Middleton and Cons 2014). With ethnographic film, collaboration can become even more important for two reasons: first, the complexities of filmmaking mean it is rarely a solo endeavor; and, second, it is easier to share films with the communities studied than books or articles.

Factors like these have long placed collaboration at the center of ethnographic filmmaking (Ruby 2000). French anthropologist and filmmaker Jean Rouch linked these dimensions of collaboration with his notion of *cinéma vérité* (truthful cinema), insisting that anthropologists were not contaminants to be absented from the screen. Instead, Rouch advocated the "development of film as a vehicle for the creation of a 'shared anthropology'... First and foremost is his concern that one's knowledge about another culture be produced in a way that can be shared with members of that culture" (Ginsburg 1995, 65; see also Henley 2009, 317–22; Rouch 1974). Later scholarship developed collaborative filmmaking as "a kind of ethnographic work in which ordinary boundaries between image maker and subject, between scholar and ordinary men and women dissolve or become permeable" (Elder 1995, 101; see also Wolfram 2018).

FIG. 6 *Jadyn and her "brain sling."* Frame grab from *Our Digital Selves*, 2018. [This figure appears in color in the online issue.]

Such notions of collaboration have shaped more recent uses of reenactment, given that “all film is a relationship between the filmmaker and subjects and that ‘cinema truth’ comes from collaboration between these two.... Reenactment was a way to respond to a specific filmmaking challenge” (Kahana 2009b, 68). By the 2010s, it was “almost impossible to implement any major project without including those who are believed to be most affected” (Gruber 2016, 15; see also Deger 2006; Underberg and Zorn 2013; Winston 1999). This statement recalls the well-known saying in disability activism “nothing about us without us,” a response to histories of exclusion in which everything from medical research to public policy addressed disability without including disabled persons in decision-making roles. As Daisy noted, mass media—including documentary film—has sometimes participated in this dynamic of exclusion.

It is within these histories of ethnographic film that *Our Digital Selves* highlights questions of collaboration between filmmaker and ethnographer and also filmmaker and community. As noted at the outset, these questions are of general import. In addition, however, it is certainly the case that these techniques speak to “the complexities of disability and media together” (Ellcessor, Hagood, and Kirkpatrick 2017, 3; see also Ellcessor 2016; Garland-Thomson 2011; Mitchell and Snyder 2015). I thus build on work addressing what digital technologies bring to questions of disability and “new media” (Ellis and Kent 2010; Goggin and Newell 2002). I am particularly interested in thinking through what virtual worlds bring to these questions (as distinct from, say, social network sites like Facebook). The digital is not a unified entity, and there is a real need for exploring the affordances and implications of different online socialities for both disability and ethnographic representation. As performance studies scholar Arseli Dokumaci notes in her exploration of “disability as method” through collaborative visual ethnography: “I sought not only to explore what I call ‘the habitus of ableism’ but also to intervene in the way it shapes media-making practices” (2018, 1–2). *Our Digital Selves* illustrates possibilities for intervention in virtual ableism through collaborative visual production.

Ethnographic filmmakers have developed a range of techniques for collaborating with fieldsite interlocutors (Grimshaw 2002; MacDougall 1987). This has included forms of improvisation (Gruber 2016; Lea and Povinelli 2018), “ethnofiction” (Sjöberg 2008), and “filmic anthropology” (Møhl 2011), so as to “undermine the traditional, commonly under-theorized, division between informants’ and ethnographers’ perspectives” (Stewart 2013, 305). It has also included fieldsite interlocutor

participation in filmmaking, which can blur the distinction between “indigenous” and “ethnographic” film (see Pink 2013, 112–16; White 2003). While raising issues of access and status within a group (Turner 1992), such participation can “shift the focus of attention... to the *process of producing* the representation” (Turner 1995, 104–5; emphasis in original).

*Our Digital Selves* builds on this history of collaborative innovation, particularly because “emergent digital and visual methodologies... are opening up new possibilities for participatory approaches that appeal to diverse audiences and reposition participants as co-producers of knowledge and potentially as co-researchers” (Gubrium and Harper 2013, 13; see Møhl 2011; Stewart 2013). Digital technologies make filming and editing more accessible, particularly when interlocutors already make digital images and videos and images (e.g., when engaging with fandom and other forms of participatory culture [Barney et al. 2016; Jenkins 2006]).

*Our Digital Selves* points toward new collaborative possibilities in regard to what we might term *ethnographic machinima*. It is not only that film equipment has become smaller and cheaper: the location of filming itself becomes newly accessible when taking place in a virtual world—not just in terms of mobility (a virtual place one can access from anywhere on earth) but pseudonymity (one can appear only as an avatar) and multimodality (one can use text in addition to, or instead of, speech). Virtual world ethnographic film also allows for techniques like virtual enactment that enable new forms of collaboration. For instance, with regard to the scene that showed Cody’s adult avatar sitting in a director’s chair, watching his childhood near-drowning in the family pool, Draxtor noted: *I told Cody, “You’re basically acting as a director, you’re not really directing it but you’re sitting there as if you were to reenact it. As if you were in charge of the reenactment.”* Draxtor added that *Cody was very adamant about how the avatars looked, what they dressed like, so he was basically doing the whole wardrobe thing. He was also kind of critiquing the set that we built... so you could say he was a set supervisor or a location manager.*

In *Our Digital Selves*, collaboration involved everything from community members acting out roles and building sets to conversations regarding what the film should include. That all this took place in a virtual world, with avatars and digital stages, expands the common understanding of reenactments as “a self-consciously staged performance that nonetheless engages the bodies of real people in real time” (Erickson 2009, 110). Yet it differs from animation (even computer animation) because it is a performance engaging the avatar bodies of real people in real time. Many of *Our Digital Selves*’s protagonists

never appear in the film with their physical bodies. Respecting their desire to appear only as avatars, yet have their experiences and insights treated equally, was crucial to the film's structure. Draxtor had often found that funders of his virtual world documentaries would not allow him to include persons unless they consented to appear on camera in the physical world. We placed no such restriction on Draxtor, since our own ethnographic research was not predicated on meeting interlocutors in the physical world. Draxtor noted:

*What I'm really proud of is that because of the way it was financed and put together, I was able to incorporate people in the film who did not consent to be seen on camera... People's stories don't get told in a visual medium if they won't appear on camera. Often the only option is something like blacked-out silhouette [which creates] a coloring of that person... like there's something nefarious about it.*

### Paraethnographic Film

This discussion brings us to a question of genre: What kind of film does *Our Digital Selves* represent? In a sense it is documentary, and in another ethnographic film, but neither term fully captures how the film was created and what it conveys. I contend that *Our Digital Selves* represents paraethnographic film, which I define as a genre of film created through a triple collaboration between community members, filmmakers, and ethnographers. One meaning of the prefix *para-* is “distinct but analogous,” as in paramedic (a person working in medicine who is not a doctor) or paralegal (a person working in law who is not a lawyer). Extending the prefix to ethnography, anthropologists Douglas Holmes and George Marcus ask, “How do we pursue our inquiry when our subjects are themselves engaged in intellectual labors that resemble approximately or are entirely indistinguishable from our own methodological practices?” (2008, 596).

With the concept of paraethnographic film, I name a genre that overlaps with documentary and ethnographic film, but with the feature that the roles of filmmaker(s) and ethnographer(s) are distinct. It shares an ethos with ethnography in its attention to empirical detail and emic understandings, as well as recognition of situated knowledge and the politics of representation. In an interview with Draxtor, I noted that I had often been asked, *How do you know if someone in Second Life is telling the truth if you never meet them in the physical world?*

I explained that I found that this issue was not about online or offline. For instance, in my research on queer Indonesians, I would often meet gay men in parks repeatedly over a period of weeks or months. I would learn much without the ability to verify what was said—but “verification” misses the kinds of cultural logics that were my ethnographic goal (Boellstorff 2005, 2007). Draxtor responded, *The more I learn from you, from the approach, the ethnographic tools that you use, the more I feel very comfortable with that.... What we are depicting here is an emotional truth.... The way she or he says it, it's true in that moment for you.*

Paraethnographic film extends collaboration beyond co-directing. In a sense, we could speak of *paradirecting* (on the part of ethnographers) or even *paracommunity*. However, I intend paraethnographic film to serve as an overarching term identifying these multifaceted forms of collaboration. An important question to ask is this: In what ways is there medium specificity to paraethnographic film? It is certainly true that the specific affordances of Second Life supported the techniques of virtual enactment, since it is possible to build and film freely within it. However, as noted earlier, similar techniques are used in machinima made in a range of other virtual worlds, from *Minecraft* to *Fortnite* to *Animal Crossing*. All such virtual worlds constitute places that can thereby act as movie sets. Furthermore, other digital media that emphasize video, from YouTube and Vimeo to TikTok and Instagram, can be used for forms of virtual enactment that employ virtual world footage, physical world footage, reediting existing film in montage form, or some combination of these.

In other words, these processes can take place beyond Second Life. It is also the case that film made within Second Life is not necessarily paraethnographic. It is true, then, that the making of *Our Digital Selves* in Second Life exemplifies paraethnographic film and techniques of virtual enactment. However, the value of *Our Digital Selves* lies precisely in the fact that its implications extend beyond its own case study: as is typical in ethnographic analysis, at issue is “a continuous dialectical tacking between the most local of local detail and the most global of global structure in such a way as to bring them into simultaneous view” (Geertz 1983, 69). An important area for further scholarship will be to address how techniques of virtual enactment differ from their physical world counterparts. It is certainly the case that these virtual techniques allowed forms of representation impossible in the physical world: for instance, Cody as an infant nearly drowning at the bottom of a pool while as an adult he sits nearby in a director's chair. They also allowed community members to participate

without revealing their actual identities, in a manner far more empowering than silhouettes or altered voices. As Draxtor noted above, such methods imply deception and do not place those involved on the same footing as others in the filmmaking process.

Paraethnographic film is useful to highlight these linkages between representation, interpretation, and politics. However, a particular value of the concept lies in addressing collaboration between filmmakers and ethnographers. Discussions of collaboration in ethnographic film typically focus on collaboration between filmmakers and communities. For instance, anthropologist Martin Gruber's analysis of "participatory ethnographic filmmaking" details complex relationships with community members. Yet despite mentioning in passing "my co-director Michael Pröpper" (2016, 17), Gruber does not discuss this relationship between filmmaker and ethnographer as collaboration. This is not an isolated example. When recounting her collaborative filmmaking with Inupiaq and Yup'ik Eskimo communities, media studies scholar Sarah Elder acknowledges decades of work with her colleague, filmmaker Leonard Kamerling: "[We] serve as co-directors, photographer, sound recordist and editor. We do claim authorship. We make esthetic, technical, contextual and structural choices" (1995, 94). But this falls outside her discussion of collaboration. Filmmaker Paul Wolffram's analysis of collaborative ethnographic filmmaking with a community in Papua New Guinea does not treat as collaboration "the assistance of camera operators who accompany me into the field" (2018, 269). Flores's description of collaborative ethnographic film included the observation that the participation of younger community members, "*together with the presence of outsiders among the video crew*, stimulated the development of a unique, intimate and revealing window... on the different roles adopted by the diverse members of the community" (2007, 214, emphasis added; see also the incidental mention of Curtis Levy in MacDougall [1987] and Vincent Blanchet in Møhl [2011]).

These questions are not novel. In his article "The Camera and Man," which is "widely regarded as the foundational text for the academic subdiscipline of visual anthropology" (Henley 2009, 314), Jean Rouch stated, "Personally, unless forced into it, I am violently opposed to crews.... It is the ethnographer alone, to my mind, who really knows when, where, and how to film—in other words, to 'direct'" (1974, 40). Yet Rouch admitted that "there are always a few exceptions ... [including] *The Hadza*, shot by the young filmmaker Sean Hudson in close collaboration with anthropologist James Woodburn; or *The Feast*, where Timothy Asch was completely integrated in Napoleon Chagnon's study of

the Yanomamo” (1974, 40). With the notion of paraethnographic film, I seek to render an acknowledgment of collaboration between filmmakers and ethnographers as less exceptional and less focused on directing as the model for collaboration. The goal is to illuminate how the ethnographer–filmmaker relationship deserves the same analytical attention as both the ethnographer–community relationship and the filmmaker–community relationship. Paraethnographic film challenges the conventions of authorship (Ruby 1995), suggesting ways to rethink collaboration in terms of emergent recombinations of expertise.

What happens to Rouch’s notion of “shared anthropology” when sharing between filmmakers and ethnographers is brought into the frame? In addressing this question, I build on existing discussions of such collaborations. For instance, Timothy Asch has emphasized that “it is the anthropologist’s job to try to provide a broader context for the filmmaker” (1982, 9). In what may be the most extended such discussion, anthropologists Ilisa Barbash and Lucien Taylor note that “collaborations between an anthropologist and a filmmaker are often fraught with tension because each may have different expectations of what a film can accomplish,” emphasizing the importance of articulating shared goals (1997, 75). In *Ethnographic Film*, visual anthropologist Karl Heider asked:

Should one person be both filmmaker and anthropologist? Or should there be a filmmaker in addition to the anthropologist?... I do think that it is unreasonable to expect one person to be able to fulfill the duties of both ethnographer and filmmaker.... The success of teams in making the Netsilik Eskimo films, *Dead Birch*, *The Feast*, *Kypseli*, *Desert People*, and the Balinese films about Jero, to name just a few, supports the argument that one person should be the filmmaker, and another the ethnographer. But it is also essential that each person should understand and respect the *métier* of the other. This may be the most difficult obstacle to overcome. (2006, 114–15)

Even existing discussions tend to frame the collaborative relationship between filmmaker and ethnographer in terms of co-directing. With the concept of paraethnographic film, I emphasize that other forms of collaboration are possible, ones that do not divide filmmakers and ethnographers (or, for that matter, community members) neatly into professional and amateur roles. This opens possibilities for filmmaking limited neither to virtual worlds nor to disability.

In regard to distinguishing collaboration from co-directing, one of Draxtor's most important decisions was to interview the ethnographers alongside the other protagonists. In *Our Digital Selves*, my co-researcher and I never comment on Jady's brain sling, Daisy's *My Thoughts On: The Media and Disability*, or Lady's statements to Draxtor on the beach because those scenes did not yet exist when we were interviewed. At one point, however, I asked Draxtor to consider a second set of interviews so the ethnographers could provide such commentary. Draxtor politely refused, placing his interviews with us on the same epistemological footing as those of the protagonists: *if I would have done a second round of post-game analysis that would have really ruined this entire narrative, where the people are who they are, and they do what they do. And they have tremendous self-reflection about what they do.*

My co-researcher and I enthusiastically supported Draxtor's decision. We thus commented on the protagonists based on our prior knowledge of their lives—from our position as ethnographers—not what they said in the film—from a position as directors. For instance, in the segment on Lady, I note how she creates a sense of care with her virtual children (30:48) but without having seen her footage. Lady later told me, *The babies and having babies is something I could only experience on Second Life, no matter how different it is from RL. I am very thankful to you for saying what you did about me having babies on Second Life.* Here, Lady notes how my commentary as an ethnographer could help explain her narrative, precisely because it was “alongside,” not “above,” that narrative.

Paraethnographic film names this resonance by extending theories of collaboration to include the “shared anthropology” between filmmakers and ethnographers. It speaks to notions of multimodal ethnography but also multiplicity in authorship. This can inform the analysis of collaboration in ethnographic film more generally, as well as fundamental questions of ethnographic knowledge.

## Conclusion

Monday, May 21, 2018: the marquee proclaims that the Second Life premiere of *Our Digital Selves* will take place at 10:00 a.m. People are already teleporting to “The Broadway,” a virtual cinema Shyla built for the premiere. There are already 43 avatars filing into the theater. We take our seats in plush red chairs before a large movie screen scripted to stream the film via YouTube. Shyla comes to the front and thanks everyone for attending: “Welcome everyone to the SL premiere of *Our Digital Selves*.... Please stay for the credits; it is amazing how many

people contributed and made this film possible.” The film begins and we all watch, commenting in text chat along the way. During Jady’s scene, she gives out copies of her brain sling and we put them on our avatar heads. And as Shyla requested, everyone stays through the credits, until the ending scene with the broom sound at the drive-in.

This premiere marked the end of the film’s making. Seeing it in its completed form was a powerful experience for the film’s protagonists. As one participant put it, *Something I really enjoyed was watching Draxtor bring everybody together and being able to see the stories that I don’t know if I would’ve ever heard.* Another noted they were moved by *learning more about the others in the group... and the reenactments too. I liked those a lot. I felt they helped me to understand almost first-hand what others go through.* The protagonists also saw engaging with viewing publics as valuable. One person stated, *I hope, from the film, they get greater understanding, greater compassion, greater consideration.* Another hoped viewers would learn *that it’s way more than just a game to many of us in here. For some, it’s our only contact to the outside world, or where we feel the most comfortable sharing ourselves.*

As *Our Digital Selves* circulates into the future, it will continue to tell powerful stories about disability and virtual worlds. In this article, I have explored how it also tells a powerful story about collaboration between filmmakers, ethnographers, and communities. This story has implications for visual anthropology in that it can inform an analysis of collaboration and representation in filmic knowledge production. Virtual enactment, both as reenactment and staging, constitutes a form of collaborative filmmaking that productively troubles dominant notions of representation, authenticity, and temporality. The concept of paraethnographic film offers a way to rethink forms of interaction and creativity between filmmakers, ethnographers, and communities—not only in virtual worlds, and not only with reference to disability. As we move into a world where images become increasingly central to sociality (and increasingly linked to the digital), these forms of virtual enactment and online collaboration will offer not only challenges but also promising opportunities for anthropology, in all the stories it can tell about the human journey.

## Note

1. I reference events in the film using the notation “(minutes:seconds)” —for instance, the drive-in scene begins at (73:48). I employ “disabled persons” rather than “people with disabilities.” No terminology is perfect, but I find person-first language less effective because it “suggests that the [disability] can be separated from the person” (Sinclair [1999] 2013, 1; see also

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Broderick and Ne’eman 2008; Titchkosky 2001). As Sinclair notes, “[C]haracteristics that are recognized as central to a person’s identity are appropriately stated as adjectives, and may even be used as nouns” (1). Thus, we do not usually say “people with gayness,” “people with athleticism,” or “people with femaleness”; we speak of gay men, athletes, or women.

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