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Margaret Gibson • Clarissa Carden

# Living and Dying in a Virtual World

Digital Kinships, Nostalgia, and Mourning  
in Second Life

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*A book of this nature is not merely the work of its authors. We owe an enormous debt of gratitude to the residents of Second Life: those we interviewed and those we have met through our fieldwork. This book is for them. We are also grateful to colleagues and particularly to Clare Kennedy who translated into English a small commemorative book written in Italian by a Second Life resident.*

## PREFACE

The purpose of this book is to offer an ethnographic analysis of what it means to live, die, and mourn in the virtual world Second Life. Second Life is a valuable space for research as it represents a type of environment that has only now come into being: the mature virtual world. At 14 years old, Second Life can no longer be perceived as the young, cutting-edge environment it once was. As one may expect, it no longer draws swathes of real-world companies to set up headquarters on its shores. In this book we argue that, far from signalling its impending death, these changes mark Second Life's transition to maturity and therefore another kind of significance. Today, Second Life boasts residents who have been involved in their online lives for over a decade. These residents have built homes and communities. They have lived in suburbs. They have been the regular patrons of cafes and bars with friends and family and created and bought virtual objects (e.g. clothing and furniture) that have become imbued with memories and attachments. They've strolled along virtual shorelines hand in hand with lovers and suffered heartbreak. They have patronised art galleries, attended protests, and been the mourners at funerals. In light of these proactive, embedded practices of connection and memory formation with the second lives of others, social death, either by departure while physically alive or departure through actual biological death, has a material and emotional impact. The social departure of Second Life residents, because of biological death, or some other known or unknown reason, creates the need for places and spaces in which to share stories, mourn, and remember. Sometimes second lives go missing, and friends of the missed and missing are not always sure if they are biologically alive, will

return to Second Life in the future, or have in fact returned but in another avatar identity and life. This kind of loss and ambiguity creates for those left behind an existential need to find answers and search for the missing or missed, and sometimes decisions are made to pronounce a missing person as dead in their second life. Sometimes this is accompanied by a memorial, which thereby materialises this decision. As it exists today, Second Life is a world with its own culture, its own history, and its own rituals. Much like the offline world, it is a world imbued with memory and mourning.

The book is based on conversations with people who have made lives for themselves in Second Life, including those who have memorialised Second Life and “real-life” friends, lovers, and family members within Second Life. It provokes questions about the value and meaning of a second life and what it means for this life to die, disappear, or become memorialised. For example, are avatars mournable lives beyond the lives and consciousness that animate and give them substance? Can a second life be just as meaningful or even more meaningful than a real life lived in physical space and place? And what can be learned from the stories of lives lived and lost in Second Life memorials and other acts of remembrance? This book asks us to examine what we know or understand about mourning in the realm of virtual world lives and their creative histories.

It is becoming increasingly important in university cultures of teaching to understand how everyday and embedded digital worlds are. This includes an understanding of the everydayness of virtual communities, whether they are social media communities or more place-based communities that include places like Second Life and also social game worlds. University teaching takes place in Second Life, but, in addition to this, university teaching in a more mainstream sense embeds and turns to case studies of our contemporary forms of digital sociality. The growth of books engaged with methodologies of digital ethnographies speaks to the importance of research that not only engages with digital modes of living and digital forms of data collection but also speaks to the reality of social and historical archives as located in the digital. In the last fifteen to twenty years there has been a growing body of research concerned with the place and significance of the digital in practices and processes of memory, mourning, and commemoration. There has been a significant amount of research done on Facebook as a site of digital mourning and commemoration; more recently work is emerging around sites such as YouTube. There is now considerable interest in media cultures and media technologies of

mourning (e.g. mobile phones) in which human lives, histories, and memories are created, shared, archived, and lost. These complex, mediated cultures and technologies create macro and micro publics and more private or discrete archives in transnational histories and social networks. We hope that this book will be valuable for researchers in the field of digital ethnography, digital cultures, mourning and memory studies, digital and media sites, and cultures of grief, memorialisation, and nostalgia; and cultural geographers of sites of death, mourning, and memorialisation that work within the sphere of the digital.

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