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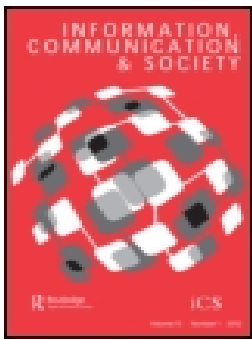
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## The opportunity to contribute: disability and the digital entrepreneur

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### ABSTRACT

A range of scholarly work in communications, informatics, and media studies has identified ‘entrepreneurs’ as central to an emerging paradigm of digital labor. Drawing on data from a multi-year research project in the virtual world Second Life, I explore disability experiences of entrepreneurship, focusing on intersections of creativity, risk, and inclusion. Since its founding in 2003, Second Life has witnessed significant disability participation. Many such residents engage in forms of entrepreneurship that destabilize dominant understandings of digital labor. Most make little or no profit; some labor at a loss. Something is being articulated through languages and practices of entrepreneurship, something that challenges the ableist paradigms that still deeply structure both digital socialities and conceptions of labor.

Disability is typically assumed to be incompatible with work, an assumption often reinforced by policies that withdraw benefits from disabled persons whose income exceeds a meagre threshold. Responses to such exclusion appear when disabled persons in Second Life frame ‘entrepreneur’ as a selfhood characterized by creativity and contribution, not just initiative and risk. In navigating structural barriers with regard to income and access, including affordances of the virtual world itself, they implicitly contest reconfigurations of personhood under neoliberalism, where the laboring self becomes framed not as a worker earning an hourly wage, but as a business with the ‘ability’ to sell services. This reveals how digital technology reworks the interplay of selfhood, work, and value – but in ways that remain culturally specific and embedded in forms of inequality.

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### Ellie’s best-selling bed

Summits of green-topped mountains peek over the walls of Ellie’s store. It cannot rain, so ceilings are unneeded. Ellie leads me room to room, showing me her merchandise: case studies in clever beauty, attentive originality. Furniture from beds to desks and even swings for the yard, all with custom animations built right in. A shirt that can manifest in three or even five sizes for 100 lindens.

Of course, the reason it cannot rain – that a piece of furniture can have ‘animations’ inside it – that a shirt can change its size at will – is because Ellie’s store is in the virtual

world Second Life. Here, commerce takes place in Linden Dollars (or ‘lindens’); the exchange rate is usually around 250 for one US dollar. Ellie’s 40-cent virtual shirt is typically priced. But Ellie has been crafting things long before discovering this virtual world: ‘Let me explain the way I was raised. We didn’t have a dining room: we had a cutting board and three sewing machines ... I have always crafted; if I was watching TV I was crocheting something’. This earlier crafting had sometimes represented a source of income – for instance, making miniature items for dollhouses:

you could take a box of colored paper clips, two round-nosed pliers, straighten out the paper clip and rebend it into a coat hanger, sell ten of them for \$5. There were 100 [paper clips] in a package, so you’d make \$50.

A worsening disability made work and crafting nearly impossible for Ellie. One day:

I had tried to start my crocheting, and I could not hold onto my crochet hook, I kept on dropping it. I mean, I could not crochet at all ... And to me, that was just, okay, shoot me now, my life is over. A friend of mine came in and found me just bawling, I mean he thought if he couldn’t calm me down he was going to have to take me to the hospital. And he goes, ‘okay, I’m going to take you somewhere, if you can hold onto the computer mouse’. I said ‘yeah, but that gets boring, you know, because it’s not crafty’. He said ‘well, I’m going to take you somewhere where you can build, and you can make things’.

This was Ellie’s introduction to Second Life, where she not only reclaimed crafting but found opportunities to sell. This included the virtual furniture mentioned earlier – in particular, beds, one of Ellie’s specialties. Ellie would purchase a basic bed shape someone else had designed in a third-party program like Maya or Blender. These basic shapes, known as ‘kits’, could be imported into Second Life as three-dimensional objects. Ellie added textures, making the bed appear to be made of worn wood or fine-patterned fabric. She would add animations so an avatar could sleep, read a book, or sit with legs dangling. As Ellie showed me around her store, she described the financial calculus involved:

This bed we’re sitting on. It costs me 2,500 lindens to get the kit. I’m selling it for 200. So I’d have to sell 13 of them to break even. Well, no, 15 to break even, because you’ve gotta consider I put money into the textures and money into the animations, right? ... It costs about 3,000 lindens to make this. So I’m going to have to be able to sell a good 15 of them to break even. This is my most popular selling bed. I’ve sold 5.

As Ellie herself noted, ‘people say “why is your stuff so cheap?” ... I’m not trying to sell it for a profit’. Indeed, because Ellie also paid a monthly fee for the virtual land on which her store stood, she had a negative cash flow of \$50–100 a month:

This is my therapy. My shrink actually said that I should submit the bill to Medicaid ... You see, if I did not have this outlet for my creative side, they would have to have me on drugs to keep me from going totally wacko ... For me this is a four-part therapy, okay? I get my creativity release, which will build up and truly drive me insane if I don’t. I get a place where I can talk to other people about my disability. I have a place where I can ... satisfy my need to be an instructor ... The fourth is, my friends are here ... Which is a big thing many handicapped people do not get ... I gave up driving a long time ago. I can’t drive. I can barely get out of the house, with help, right now.

How can someone who identifies as an entrepreneur have a ‘best-selling’ bed only five people have purchased? How can such a person not seek to sell for profit – indeed, lose money? Is this false consciousness, someone duped by neoliberal capitalism? Or might there be a more complicated interplay of selfhood, labor, and ability in a digital context? This is the point of departure for my analysis. Disabled persons in Second Life like Ellie are articulating something through languages and practices of entrepreneurship, something that challenges the ableist paradigms structuring digital socialities and regimes of labor.<sup>1</sup>

### **Digital technology, labor, disability**

This article is based on 14 years’ research in Second Life, 5 years of which have focused on disability (e.g., Boellstorff, 2015; Davis & Boellstorff, 2016). This virtual world is owned by Linden Lab; during my research it had about 600,000 residents. There is no cost to obtaining an account so long as your computer and internet connection suffice, but one must pay to own virtual land. I gathered data using methods including inworld participant observation, physical-world and inworld individual interviews, and inworld group interviews. I got to know disability communities through my original fieldwork and built on those connections for this research. These disability communities are as diverse as in the physical world, including visual and auditory impairments, limb loss, autism, epilepsy, post-traumatic stress disorder, multiple sclerosis, and the effects of strokes, cancer, Parkinson’s disease, and other illnesses. This diversity thus includes congenital disabilities, disabilities acquired later in life due to disease or accidents, and conditions whose status as ‘disability’ is contested (for instance, Deafness and autism). Most of my interlocutors were between 40 and 60, but some were in the 20–40 range, and a few were in their seventies, eighties, and even nineties.

From its origins in the early 2000s, Second Life was designed as a virtual world where most objects and experiences would be created by residents (Ondrejka, 2004). This model, known by terms like ‘user-generated content’ or ‘prosuming’, is fundamental to platform capitalism in that platforms are underdetermined: Facebook does not produce most of its posts; YouTube does not create most of its videos. In Second Life, user-generated content can be given away freely or sold for Linden Dollars; as noted above, these can be exchanged for US dollars.<sup>2</sup> Most commodities sell for the equivalent of 50 cents to two dollars, but there are many items in the \$5–20 range and a few for more than \$50, \$100, or even \$1000 (see Au, 2017).

The open-ended design of Second Life means there are ample possibilities for content creation and sales, but some characteristics of the virtual world work against these possibilities, particularly for disabled persons. While Second Life accounts are free, the relatively high cost of renting land is a barrier. A full region (‘sim’) costs \$600 to set up, with a monthly fee of \$295. Regions can be shared, and it is possible to own smaller parcels (or rent parcels from larger virtual landowners) so that one has a monthly fee of \$25 or less, but even this is prohibitive for some disabled persons. Without land, creating and selling objects is harder though not impossible (see the ‘Second Life Marketplace’ discussed below).

Despite these barriers, throughout my fieldwork I have been struck by how often disabled persons in Second Life participate in content creation and sales. The exact number of such persons is not key: ethnographic analysis is not about establishing what is prevalent

but exploring what is possible. Demographic data are difficult to obtain because accounts can be obtained anonymously, and not everyone reveals their disability inworld. Morgan, a disabled entrepreneur, noted that:

In our community, this is huge because we can choose how much anonymity we want. And for some of our members, that anonymity is key to their comfort zone of participation. And then, of course there are a lot of people who just, they don't tell people, period ... They're just choosing to explore this world without the D-word attached to it. They're not trying to be able-bodied. They're just trying to kind of see what it's like to not have the Big D front and center.

With these limitations in mind, it was clear that most of my interlocutors lived in North America or Europe. Most had limited resources – for instance, an annual income under \$15,000 in the United States – though some identified as middle class. (One indicator: the research project was to have a virtual reality component involving the purchase of VR headsets for at least 16 participants, but it was only possible to do this for three participants because the rest did not own sufficiently powerful computers.) In line with surveys estimating that around 60% of virtual-world residents identify as female in the physical world (Pearce, Symborski, & Blackburn, 2015, p. 15), the majority of my interlocutors were women. I emphasize female narratives in this analysis and address how gender intersects with disability in the domain of entrepreneurship. While not commonly emphasized by my interlocutors, it bears recalling that through their creative labor they were contributing to the profits of Linden Lab (analogous to the way that content creators are pivotal to the profits of Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and so on; see Ekbia & Nardi, 2017).

My ethnographic material understandably speaks to a range of topics; everyday experience (online or offline) always involves multiple cultural domains. I seek to contribute to literatures on digital technology and labor; literatures on disability and labor; and the emerging body of work addressing all three of these domains (e.g., Friedner, 2015). I turn particularly to entrepreneurship. As a pivotal theme addressed by current research on technology and labor, entrepreneurship opens the analysis to questions of intersubjectivity and belonging – to how 'contribution' as affect and social fact shapes intersections of disability and labor. This is important because many disabled persons do not work for wages: indeed, state and national laws often forbid income as a condition for benefits. Appreciating the contributions of disability experience to the question of digital technology and labor requires moving beyond 'employment' narrowly construed.

Scholars writing on entrepreneurship have noted its connection to aspects of selfhood in addition to gender:

where work is coded as entrepreneurship, [workers] learn to imagine themselves as risk takers rather than laborers. Their cultural characteristics – such as gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, citizenship status, and religion – make it possible for them to succeed in mobilizing themselves or others like them as labor. (Tsing, 2009, p. 167)

This is a 'gendered, racialized, and classed distribution of opportunities and vulnerabilities' (van Doorn, 2017, p. 898), a context in which 'age, gender, ethnicity, region and family income re-emerge ... and add their own weight to the life chances of those who are attempting to make a living' (McRobbie, 2002, p. 518). While these authors do not list ability, I am certain they would consider it relevant, given that 'the concept of disability emerged alongside the rise of industrial capitalism ... disability came to be understood

as a limit to one's ability to earn a living' (Ross & Taylor, 2017, p. 85). It is 'because of the Industrial Revolution ... [that] disability emerged as both an analytical concept and lived way of experiencing the world' (Friedner, 2015, p. 121); at the same time, disabled persons have long been reworking non-medical technologies in unexpected ways (Williamson, 2012). One vital analytical task is to trace how such disability lifeworlds are transforming in the contemporary digital era.

While my argument is informed by recent developments in online socialities, it is important to place these developments in historical context. The connection between technology and labor has been a concern since the ancient Greeks and was central to Marx's critique of capitalism. For instance, in Chapter 15 of *Capital, Vol. 1* Marx discussed how alongside lengthening the working day and compelling workers to labor harder, technology allows capitalists to produce surplus value and thereby profit at the worker's expense. Here as elsewhere, Marx emphasized labor's embeddedness in society: 'Technology ... lays bare [man's] mode of formation of his social relations, and of the mental conceptions that flow from them' (Marx, 1976, p. 493).

For over a century, anthropologists have taken up these questions of technology and labor. Malinowski's classic *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922) was 'totally devoted to the analysis of economic relations' (Godelier, 1977, p. 15). Other work showed how ostensibly 'primitive' peoples without money actually interweave economics and culture in a complex fashion: 'they make their economic relationships do social work ... [and] in all this primitive economic systems differ only in degree and not in kind from our own' (Firth, 1954, p. 22; see Bloch, 1983). By showing the cultural embeddedness of labor, anthropological scholarship in dialogue with feminist Marxism challenged the image of a universal proletariat (e.g., Harris & Young, 1981; Meillassoux, 1972; Nash, 1993; Ong, 1987; Taussig, 1980). More recent work has explored how 'Like workers, capitalists are always constituted as particular kinds of persons through historically specific cultural processes' (Yanagisako, 2002, p. 5; see Dunn, 2017). Anthropology has thus contributed an analysis that 'treats capitalist action as culturally produced and, therefore, always infused with cultural meaning and value' (Yanagisako, 2002, p. 6). How might it be that *entrepreneurs are being constituted as particular kinds of persons* through historically specific conjunctions of disability and digital technology? Anthropological approaches can explore how these conjunctions might act as forms of 'dislocation' in which 'both places and persons are reconfigured by the movements of capital' (Harvey & Krohn-Hansen, 2018, p. 10; see also Bear, Ho, Tsing, & Yanagisako, 2015).

### Labor as contribution

Although Second Life is designed around the user-generated content model, making content for profit is neither obligatory nor a universal goal. Most residents do not produce items for sale at all: they purchase what others make or obtain items for free. Those who create often do so for the pleasure of creating, perhaps giving copies of favorite items to friends.

For some, however, the work of creating leads to sales. This is usually done either through an inworld store, on the 'Second Life Marketplace' website, or both. (An inworld store incurs the cost of paying for the virtual land on which it sits, unless one advertises one's wares inside someone else's store, in which case a fee is often paid. If listing on the

Second Life Marketplace, Linden Lab charges a 5% commission.) A few residents make thousands of US dollars selling avatar clothing or managing virtual real estate, though job-hunting in Second Life is not necessarily easy (Au, 2018). Most residents, however, earn lesser amounts of money, and this pattern holds for disabled entrepreneurs as well. A few have earned what they consider significant income – for instance, from managing a series of rental estates covering almost 40 Second Life regions, with 6 paid employees. Often, however, the income is more modest. For instance, one disabled fashion designer usually priced clothing items at around 450 lindens, and sold approximately 500 items a month, giving a monthly income of around \$1000. And often there is no significant income at all: recall that Ellie had sold five copies of her best-selling bed, earning about five dollars.

How do disabled persons understand these dynamics of virtual labor in the context of entrepreneurial selfhood? How might disability intersect with and transform expectations regarding such forms of selfhood – given that in the United States and elsewhere, ‘entrepreneurship’ is promoted by state and other entities as a way to conceptualize disability ‘self-employment’?<sup>3</sup> How is entrepreneurship being framed as a modality by which one’s inner self is revealed to oneself and the social world?

Morgan, whose thoughts on anonymity and the ‘Big D’ I cited above, had a good number of disabled acquaintances. So many of them were successful entrepreneurs – or sought to become entrepreneurs – that she founded an organization for disabled persons already in Second Life interested in entrepreneurship. Sitting in my Second Life home one day, she explained that her goal was to help ensure that for ‘people who don’t feel like they have any contribution to make, we get them to a place where they can see they have a contribution’:

No longer do we have to sit there and go ‘I have to make a certain amount of money a year’. For most of us, the society we’re in doesn’t support that for us. Right? It looks at us, and it doesn’t even give us the opportunity to contribute in that way. You know, when they see a wheelchair coming through the door, or somebody with a stick to guide them, or they hear that they need an animal on site, ‘no, we can’t accommodate that’, right? And so our opportunities become more limited, but it doesn’t mean that our potential is gone. It’s definitely critical for me to feel that I have something to contribute.

Like my disabled interlocutors more generally, experiences with employment and unemployment in the physical world led Morgan to reflect on the implications of disability for virtual-world entrepreneurship. Particularly relevant for my analysis is her linking of selfhood with a sense of contribution: ‘Contributing something back to society takes us off the focus of our condition and its challenges, to this focus on this other thing that we’re contributing ... That’s what gives us that initiative’. Furthermore, Morgan (like others) directly connected this initiative to entrepreneurship: ‘The definition of an entrepreneur is a person who organizes and manages any enterprise, usually with considerable initiative and risk ... “I’m putting myself out there; this is what I do”’.

Morgan’s definition of entrepreneurship recalls scholarly definitions discussed below. I have given Morgan the first word to underscore her point that entrepreneurship can be collaborative. Entrepreneurs are of course always part of collectivities that can include funders, peers, and workers, but for Morgan and my disabled interlocutors more generally, the idea of nurturing members of a community was not external to the definition of entrepreneurship. For instance, Morgan was aware of Ellie and her best-selling bed: ‘you know,



I listen to Ellie say “hey, I spend more than I make”. But actually I’m guessing, with a few skill sets, Ellie could make more than she spends, because she’s super-talented’. These skill sets could include things like learning programs outside Second Life helpful in content creation, or better marketing. But what already stands out in this data is that disability languages and practices of entrepreneurship are shaping cultural logics beyond the economic.

### ‘Entrepreneur’ as subject position

There has been sustained interest in the entrepreneur as a culturally and historically specific subject position – a socially extant category of selfhood that can be occupied in various ways (i.e., as individualized ‘subjectivities’; see Boellstorff, 2005). One classic theorization of the entrepreneur subject position comes from Schumpeter’s *The theory of economic development*. Schumpeter was concerned with the role of ‘new combinations of means of production’ in economic development: ‘The carrying out of new combinations we call “enterprise”, the individuals whose function it is to carry them out we call “entrepreneurs”’ (Schumpeter, 1949, p. 74).

With regard to digital capitalism, Schumpeter’s idea that entrepreneurs are pivotal to economic recombination and thus social change has gained mythic status – as indicated by the mere mention of (nota bene: male) names like Jobs, Gates, Zuckerberg, and Bezos. However, a rich body of scholarship has explored how conceptions of entrepreneurship have expanded beyond this figure of the corporate titan. The metaphor for employee–employer relations has shifted from that of property, where workers own themselves as if ‘they were property that could be rented to an employer for a certain period of time’ (Gershon, 2017, p. 2) to a metaphor where ‘people now think they own themselves as though they are businesses – bundles of skills, assets, qualities, experiences, and relationships, bundles that must be consciously managed and constantly enhanced’ (Gershon, 2017). This newly dominant metaphor represents ‘new imaginaries of labor in which making a living appears as entrepreneurship’ (Stensrud, 2017, p. 161). In this framework ‘contemporary culture’s benchmark of success is the figure of the entrepreneur’ (Duffy, 2017, p. 2): it is assumed that ‘you are no longer a worker, with worker’s rights. Instead, you’re an entrepreneur, and entrepreneurs take risks (and suffer them too)’ (Dewhurst, 2017, p. 21).

Social scientists have explored links between economic formations and selfhood since at least Weber’s *The Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism* (1905). At issue are the ableist forms these links take in digital contexts. I coined the term ‘creationist capitalism’ in my analysis of user-generated regimes emerging online since the 2000s (Boellstorff, 2015, Chapter 8). With this neologism I sought to highlight how creativity was becoming construed as a form of labor, particularly in the context of digital socialities where the cost of producing, say, 10 virtual chairs was not 10 times the cost of producing one chair (as opposed to the cost of producing 10 wooden chairs compared to one wooden chair). I also sought to highlight how the Christian metaphysics Weber identified as central to dominant capitalist formations of the nineteenth century remain, albeit transformed, in the twenty-first century. I identified the pivotal transformation as one in which ‘workers are not just sellers of labor-power, but creators of their own worlds’ (Boellstorff, 2015, p. 209). Rather than worldly success indicating divine favor, in creationist capitalism it

is creation that reveals one's inner self. Increasingly, this inner self is an entrepreneurial self (rather than, say, the self of kinship or wage labor).

We now have a constellation of terms alongside 'creationist capitalism' that track these shifts in digital labor, including communicative capitalism (Dean, 2010), aspirational labor (Duffy, 2017), platform capitalism (Srnicsek, 2017), platform labor (van Doorn, 2017), and venture labor, 'the explicit expression of entrepreneurial values by nonentrepreneurs' (Neff, 2015, p. 16). The actions, experiences, and subjectivities of my disabled interlocutors in Second Life further develop Neff's insights: in addition to nonentrepreneurs expressing entrepreneurial values, *the horizon of what counts as entrepreneurship is expanding across the terrain of the human*. The binarism of 'entrepreneur' and 'nonentrepreneur' is becoming destabilized in favor of multiple inhabitations of the entrepreneur subject position (just as, for instance, one can inhabit the 'teenager' subject position as a diligent 'geek', athletic 'jock', and so on).

My analysis here thus explores how a concept related to self-identity can be transformed in ways never expected at the time the concept was originally formulated. Disability experience in virtual worlds provides new perspectives on how reconfigurations of 'entrepreneur' are emerging – notions of entrepreneurial selfhood that do not stand outside the dominant discourse but cannot be reduced to it either. In other words, a working hypothesis I derive from my ethnographic data is that a prototypical Silicon Valley 'entrepreneur' and the disabled persons I discuss in this article differentially inhabit a shared subject position. At issue is not conflating different forms of selfhood but recognizing how differing forms of selfhood can be informed by a shared cultural logic. This illuminates emerging contours of an 'entrepreneurial subjectivity' that involves reconfigurations of self-presentation and self-understanding (Bröckling, 2016; Marwick, 2017). Such reconfigurations include new forms of 'entrepreneurial citizenship' in which 'entrepreneurialism is not only a project of the self, but a project that posits relations between selves and those they govern, guide, and employ' (Irani, *in press*).

These are, in short, forms of 'entrepreneurial living' (Lindtner, *in press*) in which selfhood and citizenship are construed as an intertwined entrepreneurial project. The scholars cited above in this section are among those who explore the benefits and dangers in these new forms of selfhood. At stake in understanding these benefits and dangers is nothing less than what human agency and equality will mean in the digital age. We need analytical tools for comprehending this expansion of the entrepreneur subject position, such that people 'increasingly define themselves as self-branding entrepreneurs rather than employees' (Robinson, 2017, p. 2018). Recalling Weber, it is remarkable that this can be at least partially delinked from the desire for wealth (see Weeks, 2011). Neff notes that 'When people think of their jobs as an investment or as having a future payoff other than regular wages, they embody venture labor' (Neff, 2017, p. 16). This is a culture of capitalism that 'shifts content creators' focus from the present to the future, dangling the prospect of a career where labor and leisure coexist' (Duffy, 2017, p. 4).

My interlocutors, most of whom did not enter Second Life with entrepreneurship in mind, reframe these conceptions of laboring selfhood. Lila, for instance, got to know Second Life after a friend asked her to spend time there: she had been inworld for four years before being disabled by a significant chronic illness. She then became a creator of roleplaying clothing, avatar body attachments, and furniture. However, she emphasized 'I actually didn't want to deal with building when I wasn't sick ... I was crazy bored at

home and I wanted to do more, something to make me feel productive even if I didn't sell many things'. Like Ellie and many other disabled entrepreneurs, a sense of productivity was linked to creating, collaborating, and sharing, not sales. For instance, customers had purchased about 40 copies of one of Lila's signature pieces of furniture. Some months she would sell enough to pay the rent for her inworld store (about \$15), but not consistently. However, Lila's real motivation was 'I like the fact that someone else enjoys things I make. I get some sense of satisfaction for work done'.

As I noted earlier, this kind of ethnographic analysis confronts the complex interplay of multiple cultural domains. Lila's experience and that of many of my interlocutors draws on notions of craftsmanship (Sennett, 2009), but is also gendered, reflecting how historically the work of women has often not been seen as real 'labor': reassigned an emotional value and conflated with a 'domestic' sphere. Entrepreneurial selfhood is thus not external to a gendered logic in which 'online technology allows workers to carve out strategies to cope with conditions that are highly intensified because they are taken to be individual rather than structural in nature' (Gregg, 2011, p. 3; see Hochschild, 2001). Gender and ability are both shaped by this dynamic, which means that 'people increasingly ... have to do the work of the structures [like the welfare state] by themselves ... which in turn requires intensive practices of self-monitoring or "reflexivity"' (McRobbie, 2002, p. 518). It is in this context of intensification through individuation – making work more overwhelming by making it more personal – that my interlocutors' naming of collaboration as intrinsic to their conception of entrepreneurship is particularly revealing.

## Collaboration and capability

In this section I focus on the question of collaboration. While certainly informed by gender, as noted above the ideal of collaborative labor is mobilized by other cultural characteristics, including disability. For my interlocutors the link between disability, digital entrepreneurship, and collaboration was often shaped by upsetting and economically devastating experiences of physical-world employment discrimination. Consider how one morning a group of disabled persons discussed labor in both Second Life ('SL') and the physical world (often colloquially termed 'RL' or 'real life', but with an understanding that Second Life was real as well):

RHONDA: wonder if anyone else is afraid to try to get a job in RL ... I fear that if I am unable to do it, keep up with my work, or if I cannot understand or am too slow ... then I'll get fired and I will have lost my benefits.

JASON: I share that.

RUBY: ughhhh

SYLVIA: I will start my teacher training in March, and just like any social work I am afraid I will burn out twice as hard.

RHONDA: Sometimes I'm sick or just unable to do things for a month or so ... I don't think they take that into account when they think we should try to work, but could lose our benefits. So I've got lots of fear of that happening.

Sylvia: ♥

DAVID: The last job I had in RL, I lost two days before my trial period was over. It was in a hotel, shift work. And they scheduled me to do the late shift, and then I'd have to do the early shift the next day after, which meant that when I got home and

took my meds, it took me at least a couple hours to go to sleep. So I didn't get enough sleep, and it kept burning me out.

SYLVIA: Gotta love the retail type of jobs ...

DAVID: When I asked my boss if they could accommodate me, because basically they have to by law here in France, he asked why, so I was open with him and said it's because I have bipolar disorder. And his face just turned, and he talked about how people with manic depression are unreliable and dangerous to have around.

LILA: sighs

Michelle: dang

SYLVIA: GRRRRRR

DAVID: So they let me go. And that was the last time I worked in RL. I'm on disability now, stable, and I find that I can make a little pocket money here in Second Life by making custom mesh [objects] for people, some cars and some little buildings, and I'm working on a big house. So thanks to Michelle and others for teaching me how to do it! But that's how I use Second Life, a little pocket money here and there.

Another interlocutor, Joseph, noted how:

I was told I would lose medical benefits by working. If anything, I could work and have \$1 deducted for every \$2 earned, I cannot have more than \$2,000 in an account, and it can work out to earn an extra \$30 a week ... employment means a whole lot more than money. It means having a place to go every single day where I am (hopefully) wanted and needed.

In conversations like these and in everyday practices of digital entrepreneurship, we find (as in David's statements above) a valuing of creativity, a de-emphasis on sales despite income precarity, and a stressing of collaboration and learning. These responses to con-  
flations of labor and self-worth extend beyond disability:

Work is crucial not only to those whose lives are centered around it, but also, in a society that expects people to work for wages, to those who are expelled or excluded from work and marginalized in relation to it. (Weeks, 2011, p. 2)

Morgan noted that:

It is such a conflicting situation, of constantly facing barriers to what you are capable of doing. And constantly having these outside forces suggest you're not being honest about your capabilities, and that you could do more ... [Disabled persons] are actually forced into the position of entrepreneurship ... You're going to have to have the initiative to prove that you can make that contribution.

Morgan indicates that the 'opportunity' to contribute can be a compulsion as well. The intersection of disability and the digital reveals how the entrepreneur subject position is centered on a normatively ableist self. This is a self who ostensibly faces no barriers to work, particularly when 'vocational rehabilitation' programs frame entrepreneurship as a paradigm of disability self-employment. Digital technologies are now commonly linked to that paradigm, as if they ensure labor transparently reveals one's value. This is one way that such technologies have often furthered, not mitigated, exclusions of disabled persons from the workforce (Ross & Taylor, 2017). To recall one of the most enduring insights of technology studies, no technology has an inevitable social valence. Technology does not inherently 'make things better'.

The ableist self on which the entrepreneur subject position is centered is presumed to be constituted through risk and individual productivity. It is thereby part of a cultural framework that narrowcasts dependency, mutuality, and collaboration in terms of start-up or open-source ‘disruptions’ of corporate capitalism (Lindtner, *in press*). However, my analysis builds on the growing body of work showing how the dynamics in play involve inclusion as well:

[D]isabled people are being produced as idealized ‘workers with disabilities’ and included in neoliberal workplaces ... they provide added value through helping corporations rack up CSR [Corporate Social Responsibility] ‘brownie points’. They are also remaking the workplace as a more affective space for [able-bodied] coworkers who experience novel feelings of responsibility, inspiration, attachment, and love. (Friedner, 2015, p. 121)

Disabled persons in Second Life respond to these shifting dynamics of exclusion and inclusion when framing ‘entrepreneur’ as a selfhood characterized by collaboration and contribution as well as initiative and risk. This construes ability as interpersonal, and entrepreneurship as a capability that cannot be slotted into a classic teleology of wealth accumulation or even full employment. It is an aspirational labor where one key ‘aspiration’ is the opportunity to contribute itself – recalling capabilities approaches to human rights that focus on ‘what people are actually able to do and to be, in a way informed by an intuitive idea of a life that is worthy of the dignity of the human being’ (Nussbaum, 2006, p. 70; see also Burchardt, 2004; Sen, 2005). For my interlocutors, Second Life enabled collaborative entrepreneurship not just because of mobility limitations, but because the affordances of virtual worlds included community and tools for creation. When describing her unemployment, Michelle once noted that ‘job situations don’t accommodate mental unwellness very well. What I find in Second Life though is an opportunity to get some of the very positive rewards of “working”, of being productive, of making a contribution to the wider world’.

That this ‘wider world’ includes a *virtual world* underscores how the internet is not a monolithic cultural entity. Affordances of various online socialities vary, with often-unforeseen consequences. Morgan once noted that:

When you compare to Facebook, Facebook is a social media ... there’s nothing solid in it, right? There’s no open mikes: any creative expression I post on Facebook can be potentially limited to those that I would allow to see it, and those who see it, they’re not going to pay me a dime for it.

Morgan here emphasizes Facebook’s form as a network. In contrast, Second Life is ‘solid’ – meaning not that it is physical, but that it is a place. It does not mediate between two locations of culture, but is a site of culture itself:

If I try to go out and be an entrepreneur in the real world, I got bankers telling me why they’re not going to fund me, I got office buildings telling me why they’re not going to rent to me, I’ve got all kinds of people telling me what they can’t do. And I find in the virtual world there’s very little of that. You have a whole lot of the opposite. Which is, ‘yeah, you should do that. Yeah. I know someone who knows how to do that. You should talk to this person’ ... I didn’t think I’d be able to build. And the people who build were like magicians to me, and I would watch people – Ellie was one of the first people I watched build, and I was pretty sure she was a magician, because she can build anything in a few seconds ... and I’m just like ‘that will never be me; I’m not capable or competent’, but I have come to realize I am capable of things I never imagined.

Morgan summarized her experiences and those of her fellow disabled entrepreneurs:

Our lives aren't over, and here is a virtual world where we can express that, and how we choose to define success. That's why we don't define it by somebody who can support themselves off their linden dollars annually. That's not a valid measurement of success.

### **Conclusion: toward an anthropology of absences**

One possible interpretation of the materials discussed in this article is that disability entrepreneurs in Second Life are duped by neoliberal capitalism. However, more careful ethnographic attention reveals persons who in a sense take rhetorics of entrepreneurialism at their word, yet forge visions of a better self and community. Recentering entrepreneurial selfhood on collaboration and simultaneously reframing what 'collaboration' entails, they sideline rhetorics of productivity and challenge dominant logics of ableism. As Michelle noted, 'Second Life has given me a way to feel once again like I am a contributing member of society. It has helped me reconstruct my sense of identity, in the wake of becoming disabled'.

At a methodological level, my analysis illustrates how 'ethnographic thick description can surely offer a way forward for rethinking the economy outside of a capitalocentric frame' (Gibson-Graham, 2014, p. S149). Beliefs and practices around disability entrepreneurship in Second Life do nothing less than rework the notion of value – but in ways that cannot be reduced to either complicity or opposition. The relation to dominant beliefs is not so unilinear. Recalling insights gained from earlier research in Indonesia, I might say that these Second Life residents are not 'translating' dominant notions of ability and labor. Rather, they 'dub' them like a movie is dubbed into another language, resulting in an ongoing juxtaposition where moving lips never quite match the new, dubbed voice, but meaning-making nonetheless occurs (Boellstorff, 2003).

While some anthropologists are understandably 'uncomfortable with scholarly insistence that people with disabilities teach us something' (Kulick & Rydström, 2015, p. 16), ethnographic analysis contributes more than knowledge regarding the specific community studied. For instance, attention to disability entrepreneurs in virtual worlds speaks to emerging dynamics of digital labor and the implications of platform socialities for personhood. Their forms of mutual support challenge individualistic tropes of the self-made genius. Their experiences of value creation challenge the binarism of 'ability' versus 'disability', suggesting that rubrics attentive to human capability might prove more effective. Such insights also broaden intersections of disability studies and digital studies. To date, disability scholarship addressing virtual worlds has highlighted opportunities for 'information, socialization, and community membership' (Stewart, Hansen, & Carey, 2010, p. 254). These are all valuable topics, but foregrounding labor allows us to pose different questions regarding current contexts and future possibilities for disability inclusion.

The point, then, is not that disabled persons be compelled to 'teach us something', but that they have a place at the table of recognized ways of living a fully human life. In this sense, I might term my analysis an 'anthropology of absences'. This builds on Boaventura de Sousa Santos's notion of a 'sociology of absences ... an inquiry that aims to explain that what does not exist is, in fact, actively produced as non-existent' (2004, p. 239). He emphasized that one way such 'non-existence' is produced is 'non-productiveness', which applied to labor takes the form of assumptions regarding. He emphasized that one way such 'non-



existence' is produced is 'non-productiveness', which applied to labor takes the form of assumptions regarding 'discardable populations' (2004, p. 239), and which can be countered by 'recuperating and valorising alternative systems of production ... hidden or discredited by the capitalist orthodoxy of productivity' (Santos, 2004, p. 240; see Mitchell & Snyder, 2010). In recuperating and valorising the work of digital disability entrepreneurs, I respond to how disability can be made to appear absent in regimes of labor, and how some disabled persons in Second Life presence their ability through languages and practices of entrepreneurship. This is why income can be partially delinked from entrepreneurship: 'entrepreneurship' is being used to make present ability and contribution.

I also respond to the reality that some contemporary digital scholarship actively produces virtual worlds as non-existent, particularly those virtual worlds not oriented toward children (like Minecraft) or predominantly structured as games (like World of Warcraft). I remain amazed by how often colleagues ask me some version of the question 'is Second Life even around any more'? Yet

[F]or ethnographers today, no task is more important than to make small facts speak to large concerns, to make the ethical acts ethnography describes into a performative ontology of economy and the threads of hope that emerge into stories of everyday revolution. (Gibson-Graham, 2014, p. S147)

This is true despite the danger that the disability entrepreneurs I discuss in this article could be taken as 'poster children' for virtual worlds (and capitalist markets to boot). The tendency for disability experience to be reduced either to catastrophe or 'inspiration' (Rouso, 2013) does not disappear in the digital domain. The response to this tendency should be neither to marginalize disability experience nor treat it as an instance of 'technosolutionism' (Lindtner, Bardzell, & Bardzell, 2016), but engage with that experience as deeply contributing to interdisciplinary conversations regarding the human condition.

Making the lifeworlds of disability entrepreneurs in Second Life present in our conceptual debates can contribute powerfully toward better understanding the emerging digital economies that already transform societies. It reframes disability as a form of social action irreducible to limitation or lack. In a contemporary moment when so much discussion of online socialities foregrounds surveillance, deception, and precarity, the lifeworlds of disability entrepreneurs in Second Life point to the no less real possibilities for connection, possibility, and creativity. And it is in approaches founded neither in utopia or dystopia, however promising or fearful the future might seem, that we find the best hope of comprehending our unfolding present.

## Notes

1. In this article, I employ 'disabled persons' rather than 'people with disabilities'. Both are contested and imperfect, but I find person-first language less effective (see Sinclair, 2013; Titchkosky, 2001; Broderick & Ne'eman, 2008). I received Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval for this research. No HIPAA (Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act) related details of health status were obtained, and details of self-identified disabilities (along with other personally identifying details) have been altered. Physical world and screen names have been changed: quoted text chat has been altered so make it harder to find using a search engine.
2. By extension the money can then be converted to any currency, but Linden Dollars are directly exchangeable only into US dollars.

3. See, for instance, <https://www.dol.gov/odep/topics/SelfEmploymentEntrepreneurship.htm> (accessed March 6, 2018); <https://www.colorado.gov/pacific/dvr/self-employment> (accessed March 6, 2018).

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