**The internet at 40**
*Excavating the internet*

**Penny Boreham:**
I'm Penny Boreham and I'm here with Rodney Harrison who's a Lecturer in Heritage Studies at The Open University, and the Course Chair of Understanding Global Heritage.  We're going to talk about a research project of Rodney's in the new and cutting edge field of Cyber Archaeology, the archaeology of the internet.  This project looks at the function of heritage in one particular online community which is called Second Life.  First of all, Rodney, what drew you to the archaeology of the internet, and in particular to an online or virtual community?

**Rodney:**
I became interested in looking at the internet as part of a sort of broader project which I'm involved in which is working on an archaeology of everyday lived contemporary life, and I've always been very interested in the relationship between contemporary people, living people, and their material worlds. Online communities are permeable, so ideas that sort of circulate in online communities also make their way into the real world, you get this sort of traffic of ideas and images, and senses of identity, and creation of community that flow between the real world and online worlds.  Online communities also act as a sort of microcosm of the real world so we can study things that happen in the real world through looking at online communities, and there has been quite a bit of anthropological work done on the nature of online communities, but I was interested in looking at how an archaeologist might approach the study of the internet.

**Penny Boreham:**
How would an archaeological approach differ from an anthropological one?

**Rodney:**
The kind of traditional anthropological definition of community is around a group of people that are partially defined by a particular space, but the sort of new thing about virtual communities is that communities can arise without needing any face to face contact, they don't need to be based in the same place, they share a virtual space which is not a physical space, so anthropologists are kind of really interested in these new configurations of community and these new conceptions of community that arise as a result of these new communicative technologies.  An archaeological approach to the internet would involve not only a sort of study of the technologies that allow the internet to exist in the world of sort of computers and the sort of hardware stuff, but also a study of virtual material culture and material culture that's made within virtual worlds.  It's this interest in the relationship between virtual material culture and virtual communities that led me to become interested in looking at this particular virtual community of Second Life.

**Penny Boreham:**
Is Second Life a typical virtual community or did you choose it for any particular reason?

**Rodney:**
It's a space which looks very much like what people might think of a computer game looking like, which is on the internet, which people log on to, and it's also one that is sort of economically important, that there's a lot of money that's kind of constantly made in Second Life, which is one of the things that makes it important.  They have their own avatar which is a representation of themself.  You're able to modify that avatar to look like whatever you want it to look like as long as you have the ability to use the technologies within the game to allow yourself to do that.  You might be a man, a middle aged man in real life, but you might look like a chipmunk in the virtual world, or you might be an old woman and you may look like a

man with a very long beard in Second Life, so one can change one's appearance to represent themself in whatever way they would choose to do that.

**Penny Boreham:**
To what extent are the people who use Second Life limited by what has been developed and designed, and how much input can they actually have in creating and making changes to it?

**Rodney:**
The Second Life and any online, or any sort of virtual world, is governed by a set of world rules in the same way that the real world is governed by real world rules of physics, so at the end of the day you're always governed by the kind of set of rules that dictate your existence in Second Life, but the interesting thing about Second Life is that you can create things in Second Life, you can create material culture, you can edit and manipulate the world, and you can edit and manipulate your environment and yourself, your avatar, the clothes that you wear very, very easily, and that's part of what it's all about, so for an archaeologist the idea of studying a world in which people can spontaneously generate and create material culture is very interesting, and it's a place that we would expect material culture to be very important to people's sense of selfhood as well as the communities within Second Life that use it in terms of their sense of identity, and in terms of the way in which they interact with one another. A lot of the things that people buy and sell in Second Life are to do with fashion like they are in the real world so they're items of clothing, but in addition to items of clothing, they might be hairstyles, or they might be appearances. In addition to things that you can wear on your body, there might be ways of wearing your body itself.

**Penny Boreham:**
So in terms of you being an archaeologist and you virtually excavating this world, this Second Life, what new tools do you need to be an archaeologist working in a virtual environment?

**Rodney:**
The archaeological study of material culture is actually quite easy. You can click on objects, and objects have a history, objects have a sort of trail, they have a kind of paper trail that you can read by sort of accessing something in the menu that exists in any object, and this is a really interesting thing because it allows you to sort of look at how objects move so who owned this object in the first place, who created it, and who has subsequently owned it and passed it on to somebody else, and it also allows you to look at the things that we use to create it in the first place, so often people model something using something else so you can look at the way in which one thing is transformed into another thing. So it's not a kind of traditional conception that people have of excavating with a trowel, it's kind of excavating metaphorically in a way, it's digging into the sort of history of an object by looking at the way it's passed between different people. The other sort of form of archaeology in Second Life is looking at defunct technologies so in the same way that in the real world there's fashions for certain objects, certain objects come in and out of fashion in Second Life, and one of the objects that I looked at were these hippos which are objects that you could put keywords into and when you walk within, when your avatar walks within proximity of somebody else with the same keyword in their hippo, your hippo lights up.

**Penny Boreham:**
Is a hippo actually a hippopotamus?

**Rodney:**
It's a small statue of a hippo. These were objects that were around and were popular around about 2004/2005 in Second Life. They never really caught on and they went out of fashion, and there is now an example of a hippo that's in the Second Life Museum.

**Penny Boreham:**
So what was particularly revealing – was it the fact that it had been put in a museum that was interesting, or was it the hippo in itself that showed something about that stage of the development of Second Life?

**Rodney:**
You have an example of what's essentially a sort of social networking technology that is being produced to work inside what's already a sort of social networking site, so this is a kind of like second tier of social networking technology, which I found very interesting that such a thing would exist. The other thing that is interesting about the hippo is the fact that this is something which people consider important enough to conserve, it's something which tells us about the history of this virtual community, that there was an explicit program of heritage conservation in Second Life, there were places from the very early builds of Second Life which were actively being conserved, which would normally just be overwritten in terms of the code, but which were actively being conserved as aspects of heritage of the early life of Second Life.

**Penny Boreham:**
Who would have been responsible for creating those museums – would it have been particular users or was it written into the program that there was a possibility for that?

**Rodney:**
The program of heritage conservation seems to have largely been started by enthusiasts, by people who had some sort of association with the sort of earliest build of the programs, that's kind of long term users, as well as people that were associated with the Lindens, which is the Linden Lab, is the lab, the group that created Second Life, it's kind of the equivalent of the State creating its own myths, its own origin myths, and this is something that really interests me because my work is in heritage, and I'm really interested in the way in which the State in real life uses objects from the past to create stories about nationhood, origin stories. What we see in operation in heritage in Second Life mirrors what we see in the real world, but it deals with a much more limited palate of heritage than the real world. We see the sort of creation of a single official history, a single set of official heritages. The places that are actively conserved as heritage in Second Life they tend to be the sorts of places that we would see as being related to authoritative forms of heritage from the real world, places that are like house museums so, for example, Governor Linden's house, Governor Linden who was the kind of first creator figure in Second Life, the house that was built for Governor Linden has been conserved as a house museum so this is sort of the equivalent of a sort of castle or a palace. I think we're much less likely to see what we would call working class heritage being conserved in Second Life, it's not a sort of everyday set of heritages, it's places that represent the governing classes and places that represent the sort of official doctrine, the official sort of dogma of the place. It's much harder to find anything which we might consider to be a sort of contesting set of heritages.

**Penny Boreham:**
Might it be because aren't people going into the virtual world because they might be looking for something other than in their real life?

**Rodney:**
It's possible that people are approaching Second Life for a form of escapism from the real world. Perhaps people are looking for a world in which the rules are more firmly stated. What concerns me about this limited palate of ideas about heritage in Second Life is that people exist both in virtual and real worlds simultaneously. If we have this very strict set of ideas about what heritage is, existing in this virtual world, that will ultimately make their way back out to the real world and this will influence how heritage works in the real world as well, and it will mean that contested heritages have less chance of existing and less chance of sort of sticking within the narratives of heritage in the real world.

**Penny Boreham:**
So you're saying that in some ways the virtual world seems at first sight to be somewhere people can fulfil their imaginations and go in all sorts of directions, but in fact they're more strictly controlled in that world than they are in the real world, and they don't know it?

**Rodney:**
Whether people know it or not, I'm not sure. At first glance you would assume that you were free to do anything in a virtual world - you can fly, you can change your clothes, you can walk

around naked and no-one's going to care, you can do anything, or apparently do anything that you would like in a virtual world, but virtual worlds are dictated by rules in the same way that the real world is dictated by rules, and in many ways those rules are much stricter in the virtual world because all it would take is the company that owns that virtual world to pull the plug on it, and it doesn't exist any more, so there is a kind of fragility to a virtual existence which doesn't mirror the real world, and that's a sort of interesting aspect of virtual communities.

**Penny Boreham:**
How necessary is it when archaeologists study something like Second Life for boundaries between disciplines to be blurred, I mean do you necessarily have to start looking at the psychology of the people who go online in a way that you might not have to do if you weren't studying something like this as an archaeologist?

**Rodney:**
I think if you're an archaeologist who works on the Palaeolithic it's very easy to kind of see what you do as done somehow in isolation; one goes to a cave, one excavates the cave, one stays all those things in isolation, although you know archaeologists who work on the Palaeolithic also work with specialists in other fields, so they might work with somebody who's an expert in radio carbon dating and they may well work with a sort of psychologist who knows something about art and the nature of, in terms of studying cave art, But the nature of the contemporary past forces you to think in a much more cross-disciplinary fashion, and to look at different ways that other people approach, so it becomes very important to sort of look at how other people are approaching contemporary material, culture and to use those approaches when they're appropriate, and to use more conventional archaeological approaches when they are appropriate.  So the archaeological study of the sort of postings and their age is about retrieving things which are very easily overlooked, or retrieving things which are very easily forgotten, things that don't make their way into dominant narratives.

**Penny Boreham:**
And why is it important to be self conscious about all this, why is it important to analyse all this?  If we don't, what would happen?

**Rodney:**
My interest in contemporary archaeology is to do with my interest in social justice actually.  The sort of work that I used to do in Australia was work with aboriginal people and it was making sure that aboriginal people were better represented in national historical narratives through looking at aboriginal people's labour in the pastoral industry, looking at the relationship between archaeology and land rights' issues, and my interest in heritage is driven by similar sorts of interests.  It's to do with representation and broader ideas to do with social justice, so I've brought those interests to my work on the archaeology of the internet, and the archaeology of cyberspace, and that's what's driven my interest in heritage within Second Life, and this idea of representation, this idea of these very official heritage discourses that I kind of see as existing within Second Life, and my concern about those official discourses and the way in which they force other dissenting discourses out from the margins, and this is why I've been very interested in looking at how heritage manifests itself in Second Life.  And so it's these issues of inclusion and exclusion, these issues of representation which interest me most in terms of an archaeology of the internet because things, ideas flow so easily between the virtual and the real that it's very important for us to analyse what's happening in virtual worlds, and understanding what's happening in virtual worlds, because those things will influence the real world.