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Being Virtually Real?

Virtual Worlds from a Cultural Studies' Perspective.



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ONLINE RITUALS IN VIRTUAL WORLDS

CHRISTIAN ONLINE SERVICES BETWEEN DYNAMICS AND STABILITY

NADJA MICZEK

Introduction

From the very beginning, the Internet was used by almost all faiths as a new space to pursue their goals. Due to the quick spread of this new medium, religious groups and individuals have been trying to keep pace with current developments and trends concerning the work on and the use of the Internet in the past 10 years. Religious groups use the Internet as a platform to provide information about their groups or belief systems on their homepages, to discuss theological, ethical or social issues concerning their religious traditions in forums, newsgroups or weblogs and to ask people to take active part in their faith by practising online rituals for example. Observations show that religious traditions along with many other user groups are adapting new technical possibilities provided by the internet at a great speed. In light of this fact it is not surprising that an increasing number of religious groups in particular are conquering the so-called ‘Virtual Worlds’. In the current discourse¹ on these Virtual Worlds there are a lot of different terms which are often used for identical things. This is why at least some terms have to be explained and referred to in order to make it clear what this paper is all about. In general, a Virtual World can be described as a computer-based simulated (often) 3D environment. The user can move and (inter-)act via an avatar, the graphical representation of an Internet user. Virtual Worlds are mainly based on multi-player modes which allow a large number of people to use the virtual space simultaneously. Another important criterion is the continuance of these worlds even if the user is offline. There are several other terms for these worlds. The most familiar one is probably ‘Massively Multiplayer Online (Role-)Playing Game (MMO(R)PG)’. As the name implies, the term derives from the influential area of online gaming; famous games are e.g. Everquest or World of Warcraft.² But in general the term is often used for worlds like Second Life (SL) or Alpha

¹ See Jakobsson 2006, 24-29.

² For a brief summary of the history of Virtual Worlds see Tylor 2006, 21-28.

Wold, too.³ However, the virtual worlds referred to in this article should not be labelled MMORPGs because the gaming aspects which are emphasized by this term are just one component but not the most important one. Virtual Worlds like There, Alpha World, SL or smaller environments such as the Church of Fools are primarily based on social interaction. There is no specific gaming aim which has to be achieved by the users. For sure, these environments want to have strong gaming aspects and the ‘fun-factor’ also seems to be very important. But to avoid the association that these worlds are “just” a game, the participants only play a certain role. I prefer therefore to use the more general term ‘Virtual Worlds’ when referring later on to the attributes mentioned above. Let me emphasize this in the case of SL with a short quotation from an interview conducted in this virtual world:⁴

“I am often surprised at the nature, the depth, of connections people make in this virtual space. I have long since [sic!] stopped regarding SL as a game, but as more.”

As I have already mentioned, both religious individuals and groups were among the first users to develop their own individual mode of representation and performance in this new space. One expression of religious action in Virtual Worlds is ritual. These so-called ‘Online-Rituals’ will be the focus of this paper.

In general, a distinction between Ritual Online and Online-Ritual⁵ can be made. The term ‘Ritual Online’ refers to ritual texts, prescripts or descriptions mainly found on websites whereas the ritual itself is performed in an offline scenario. In contrast, the term ‘Online-Ritual’ refers to rituals *performed* online. This means that the term focuses on activities performed in a virtual space. This space provides a wide range of possibilities: a website where one can click through the Eucharist⁶, a 2D chat room in which regular prayer meetings are held⁷ or virtual 3D environments, in which the user operates via an avatar in order to pray, meditate or get married.

The history of Online-Rituals goes back to the 1990s when the first Online-Rituals were

³ Other established terms are Collaborative Virtual Environment (CVE) and Multi User Virtual Environment (MUVE).

⁴ Interview on 08/09/2007 in SL conducted by the author. Due to privacy issues the citation was made anonymous.

⁵ The terms refer to a distinction made by Christopher Helland in 2000. In one of his articles he distinguished between the terms Religion-Online and Online Religion. See Helland 2000, 205-223. However, this assumption was revised in 2005, acknowledging the fact that an absolute distinction between both terms seemed to be difficult in terms of recent web content. See Helland 2005. In this article I will pick up his terminology and transfer it into the field of rituals by employing the terms Online Ritual and Ritual Online as heuristic working tools.

⁶ See for example Alpha Church. Retrieved on 09/28/2007, from: <http://www.alphachurch.org/holycomm.htm>.

⁷ See for example St. Pixels. Retrieved on 09/28/2007, from: <http://www.stpixels.com>.

practiced. In terms of technical design, they were quite simple, merely text-based and took place in 2D chat rooms. Stephan D. O’Leary described them in an article from 1996.⁸ He gave an interesting report about early pagan rituals performed in online conference rooms. He tried to eliminate the prevailing prejudice that these rituals were not real because of their virtuality. The form of Online-Rituals has changed with the growing complexity of technical structures of the Internet and the development of new possibilities such as Virtual Worlds. In popular worlds such as ‘Alpha World’, Online-Rituals have been performed since 1996 when probably the first cyber wedding took place in a virtual 3D environment.⁹ Christian groups were also among the first communities to join these new worlds. The descriptions of Christian online services presented by Ralph Schroeder et al. in 1998 show many criteria which can still be observed nowadays.¹⁰

After a short general introduction to modern ritual theory and recent methodical issues concerning Virtual Worlds, this article will examine some Online-Rituals performed mainly by Christian groups from two different virtual 3D environments. First of all, the so-called ‘Church of Fools’ and its online services will be presented as one of the most popular examples for a Christian group Online-Ritual. The virtual 3D church experiment is aimed at discovering the different possibilities of online services. The project gained widespread publicity and paved the way for other Online-Ritual settings. After that, two online churches of the Virtual World ‘Second Life’ which have chosen different forms of online service will be presented. Following the descriptive part the given examples will be discussed under some theoretical aspects which also occur as keywords of modern ritual theory.¹¹ The main questions are: what happens if a very traditional ritual like a Christian service in its various forms is transferred into an online 3D environment? What kind of changes can be observed? Are these rituals highly dynamic or do they also contain stable elements? Is it possible at all to classify a ritual as dynamic or stable?

⁸ See O’Leary 1996, 781-808.

⁹ For short information and screenshots from the wedding see the following homepage:
<http://www.ccon.org/events/wedding.html>, retrieved on 09/13/07.

¹⁰ See Schroeder et al. 1998.

¹¹ For a widespread compendium of modern ritual theory see Kreinath, Snoek & Stausberg 2006.

Theoretical approaches to rituals

Recent discussions about rituals are, as with many others in cultural studies, affected by current discourses about dynamics, fluidity or hybridism. The outlines of our subjects, which used to be valid for a long time, seem to collapse at a growing pace, ending up in indefinable structures moving diffusely through a history which might only be understood as a history of discourses or narrated plots¹² instead of ‘facts’. Therefore it does not seem surprising that some contemporary theoretical approaches to rituals refer to these current developments.

The term ‘ritual’ is used nowadays by both participants and researchers and is therefore constantly negotiated discursively between all parties involved. The definition of a ritual primarily depends on the context to which an investigation belongs. However, this fact does not imply complete arbitrariness but calls for approaches which consider the discursive structures the phenomenon thus inherits. One of the approaches I want to take in this article is the suggestion to operate with a polythetic definition made by Jan Snoek. In contrast to a monothetic definition which relies on exclusive criteria that have to be part of *all* the phenomena referred to, a polythetic definition works with a set of characteristics which may be applied but do not necessarily have to.¹³ This allows the description of phenomena such as rituals which are embedded in very different contexts and discussed by various groups of actors. One way of working out the main characteristics of a polythetic definition of ritual is the application of a wide range of theoretic concepts which together try to examine several aspects of rituals. They can be understood as a kind of layers or perspectives used to focus on the topic, for example: performance, agency, gender, embodiment, and efficacy. Such a definition – if a constructivist basis is taken seriously – is along any other issue the result of certain discursive debates. This article does not aim at formulating a polythetic definition of rituals. It intends to provide unknown material and interesting topics of a relatively new field of research for new discussions on ‘rituals’.

However it is not only in matters of definition that so-called ‘post-modern’ debates¹⁴ have shown an important influence on the theoretical studies on rituals. The aspect *Dynamics of*

¹² For a brief history of the idea and an application see White 1975.

¹³ Snoek operates with classes: “A class is monothetic if and only if (A) each member of the class has all the characteristics defining the class as a whole, and (B) each of those characteristics is possessed by all of those members. A class is **polythetic** [emphasis in original, N.M.] if and only if (A) each member of the class has a large but unspecified number of a set of characteristics occurring in the class as a whole, (B) each of those characteristics is possessed by a large number of those members, and (if fully **polythetic** [emphasis in original, N.M.] (C) no one of those characteristics is possessed by every member of the class.” See Snoek 2006, 4.

¹⁴ For an overview see Gabardi 2001.

Rituals is a very important focus.¹⁵ This means that rituals are no longer regarded as fixed, unchangeable, community-based subjects handed over from one generation to the other. They are in fact more dynamic than ever imagined.¹⁶ The concept of ‘Transfer of Ritual’¹⁷ is a theoretical approach which resulted from recent discussions about Ritual Dynamics. It is also a promising basis for further analytical debates. The authors emphasize that the transfer of ritual is always a form of Ritual Dynamics but not vice versa.¹⁸ Ritual Dynamics can also occur due to “internal dynamics”¹⁹ such as ritual failure or ritual creativity. The concept of ‘transfer of ritual’ is formulated by the authors as follows:

“Our theory is, that when a ritual is transferred, i.e. when one or more of its contextual aspects is changed, changes in one or more of its internal dimensions can also be expected. However, just as not all contextual aspects need to change (equally significantly), it is to be expected that not all internal dimensions will be modified (equally intensely). Reversely, if a modification of an internal dimension is observed, it is warranted to ask if this might be caused by a change in one or more of the contextual aspects.”²⁰

Fields such as media, geography, culture, society, history are considered to be contextual elements and aspects such as script, performance, aesthetics, structure, communication, symbolism are regarded as internal dimensions.

The investigation of rituals which are transferred into new virtual environments may reveal some interesting aspects which used to be unknown or inaccessible in offline rituals. As Ron Grimes pointed out correctly “[n]ot long ago, the terms ‘ritual’ and ‘media’ would have been regarded as labels for separate cultural domains – the one sacred, the other secular...”.²¹ Nowadays the situation has changed. Rituals are not only performed with the support of computer-aided tools but also *in the virtual space* itself. First studies²² on this area show that the transfer of rituals into computer-aided environments often requires processes of adaption and change. Some of them will be discussed in this paper for the case of Christian online services. But before turning to the case study, one of the main focuses of this paper in the following chapter, the notion of dynamics and stability will be introduced in more detail.

¹⁵ For current research see the Collaborative Research Centre 619 “Dynamics of Rituals” at the University of Heidelberg (Germany).

¹⁶ See Michaels 2004.

¹⁷ See Langer, Lüddeckens, Radde & Snoek 2006, 1-10.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.

²¹ See Grimes 2006, 3.

²² See Radde-Antweiler 2006, 54-72.

Dynamics and Stability

Rituals which are transferred from an offline to an online environment are supposed to show many changing processes which occur as a result of the transfer. By applying certain analytical terms which will be introduced soon, an attempt to describe the changing processes on a more general level is made.

There may be two main reasons for changing processes observed in the Christian services in Virtual Worlds: the transfer of the rituals or internal dynamics like creativity or failure. In the following the main focus will be put on processes caused by the transfer but the internal dynamics shall not be excluded. However, both topics seem to be closely intertwined. It would be too difficult or even impossible to define if a changing aspect of a ritual is still caused by the transfer or if the new situation is already settled enough to allow so called 'internal dynamics'. By using the theoretical approach of 'transfer of ritual' it will be possible to identify the changed contextual aspects and internal dimensions of the services presented in the case study.

In the case of Online-Rituals two main contextual aspects which are closely intertwined are changed. Rituals are transferred from an offline into an online environment by using the Internet as a medium. That involves at the same time a transfer between different realities, from the physical/material reality to the virtual one. According to the theoretical approach there can now occur various changes within the internal dimensions of the rituals. Instead of focusing on the description of contextual aspects and internal dimensions, my concern is now to specify the processes of change in more detail. To identify these dynamic processes it is crucial to also look at moments of stability, because they are both just two sides of the same coin. This is underlined by the statement made by Bruce Kapferer in his article about 'Dynamics':

“I do not oppose dynamics to statics, for what appears to be static, repetitive, or unchanging in ritual is nonetheless a product of the particular dynamics of its action, which has the capacity to effect changes in the experience of participants, as well as within the wider social and political contexts in which rituals are enacted.”²³

He describes the static appearance of a ritual as a consequence of its dynamics. I would like to go a step further by suggesting that a ritual is not dynamic or static itself. Rituals are *described as* either more dynamic or static, but the perception strongly depends on the points

²³ See Kapferer 2006, 507.

of reference. The two terms refer to the condition or state of a ritual. For their application it is necessary to know former conditions to be able to recognize the changing processes by comparing both states. In the case of Online-Rituals there are at least two points of reference. It is possible to compare the offline and online versions of a ritual or to compare different online versions with each other. In our case we will choose the former to identify and investigate changing processes that occur. It becomes apparent that the backgrounds of both settings are completely different, the offline rituals are underlying physical/material conditions and the basis of online rituals are – to put it bluntly – just ones and zeros which are interpreted by machines. A comparison of such diverse scenarios offers the chance to reveal links, interdependencies or connections which in an offline scenario are perhaps not as visible as in this transfer process. Finally this can help us to sharpen the focus of our attention – rituals.

It can be assumed that there are always noticeable changing processes if a ritual is transferred into new media. These changing processes can be described by applying the heuristic terms of transformation, invention and exclusion. And depending on the degree of these changing's the ritual or elements of it are *perceived* as dynamic or stable by either the researcher or the participants.

There are of course a lot of suitable terms, but for the focus of this short paper the application of the following three seems complex enough. The changing processes which will be described can be characterized by acts of transformation, invention²⁴ and exclusion. Transformation is viewed here as a process in which something is (re-)formed or shaped that already exists in the same ritual before. This can affect the structure and the content of the subject but does not necessarily concern both of them. The next category is invention. The element of newness is the main character of this heuristic term. Something that has never been part of the ritual before is creatively designed or otherwise invented and then carried out as part of the ritual. The last term is called exclusion. It describes the process of the elimination of something already established in the observed context. This elimination can be actively carried out by excluding the subject or passively by leaving it out when it comes to changing processes.

On the basis of the concept of transfer of ritual the suggested heuristic terms will be applied in the following to case studies from two different virtual worlds thereby considering the notion of dynamics and statics as *processes of ascription*.

²⁴ For 'Ritual Design' see Radde-Antweiler (forthc.).

Research on virtual worlds

But before going into the case study I would like to make some short remarks on the methods of the Virtual 3D Environment Research (VER).

VER is due to the recent invention of its main point of reference ‘Virtual Worlds’ still in its beginnings.²⁵ The application of methodological and methodical issues on Virtual Worlds has moved more and more to the centre of many academic debates. VER as a multi-methodical approach consists of a canon of usable methods which often have to be combined in a research scenario to gain as much comprehensive material as possible. Therefore up to now well known methods from the fields of anthropology and empirical social research such as participant observation have been applied to this online environment. But text and discourse analysis are methods which have to be used for this multi-methodical approach as well. In the process of adaption necessary modifications and changes of the different methods have to be taken into consideration. In contrast to methods such as the traditional offline participant observation, in Virtual Worlds the researcher is confronted with the fact that the users’ virtual life always has a certain relation to the first life behind the screen. However, it is hardly possible to recognise the respective interdependencies while moving in virtual space. If for example somebody breaks off a conversation abruptly he might do this on purpose or he might be ‘afk’ (away from keyboard) for a short moment or his computer might even crash. Most of the time, the researcher does not know the specific reasons and therefore he has to be careful when interpreting the results of his data. Other major components of VER are interviews particularly in the field of qualitative research. Meanwhile the different types of online interviews have found wide basis of experiences and applications in many scientific studies. In previous steps, the adaption process was complicated due to the loss of the ‘body’-component (from first life to mostly 2D settings like chat rooms or E-mails). The traditional interview situation underwent considerable changes in the Virtual World. Now in these environments, there is again a body, even though it is a virtual one called ‘avatar’. It is able to make certain gestures, to move around and to take active part in an interview situation. However, in contrast to first life, certain gestures such as facial expressions which are very important for thorough interpretations are missing. Another very important issue in terms of interpretation is the fact that a virtual body cannot perform spontaneous activities. Every single movement is consciously conceived and performed by the user. Obviously, there are a

²⁵ In contrast to approaches such as Christine Hines’ “Virtual Ethnography” which tries to cover the entire scope of internet data, VER is limited only to 3D environments. See Hine 2000.

lot of methodical questions in the field of VER that have to be discussed in the years to come. The ethical component of VER is the final issue I would like to address in this context.²⁶ Virtual worlds seem to provide nearly endless opportunities for researchers, but there is the danger of unethical research. How easy is it to do hidden fieldwork on a particular religious group in virtual space or to conduct interviews without the explicit knowledge of the participants? These methods have to be rejected in any case. In some points VER guidelines have to be much stricter than offline research guidelines.²⁷ Obviously, the most important issue is information. The persons and groups who serve as research participants should have access to information about the research project and the researcher himself should not act as undercover.²⁸ For the researches it is most helpful to get in contact with other researches and participate in recent debates on that issue.²⁹ When writing about VER and the users of Virtual Worlds the guidelines which are followed in offline research should also be applied for virtual research. The protection of personal data should be guaranteed in any case.

Online Services at the Church of Fools

The Church of Fools (CoF)³⁰ was founded in 2004 and announced itself as the first interactive 3D church on the Web. Its name comes from the title of the British magazine “Ship of Fools” which was founded by a group of Christian students in 1977. The editors’ aimed at covering Christian topics in humorous and modern ways. After some ups and downs the magazine went online in 1995 and became a big forum with a high number of participants. The members claim their ‘being foolish’ outright:

“There is method in our foolishness: we want to offer people frustrated by the failings of traditional Christianity the chance to vent and discuss the issues, and discover a community of sceptical saints at the same time.”³¹

The CoF is one of the more recent projects of the Ship. It was initiated by editor Simon

²⁶ For the recent discussion see Buchanan 2004.

²⁷ For ethical guidelines see <http://www.aoir.org/reports/ethics.pdf>, retrieved on 10/10/2007.

²⁸ In SL the researcher can disclose his identity by offering information about his research on his profile. It also might be useful to set up an additional source e.g. a homepage about the research project which can provide references to research participants. See for example <http://www.sl-research.de>.

²⁹ For current discussions see Association of Internet Researchers, <http://www.aoir.org>, retrieved on 10/10/2007.

³⁰ See also the article of Simon Jenkins in this special issue.

³¹ See Jenkins 2004.

Jenkins in 2004 and it was developed in cooperation with the software company Special Moves. The design of the virtual 3D church is based on role models of historic first life churches. It combines traditional elements such as stone walls, stained glass, pews and an organ. It was embedded in a large website hosting a forum and several information links. The virtual church itself was conceived and realized as a small 3D environment in which the visitors could interact and communicate via avatars. From the very beginning, the CoF experiment was designed for a period of three months. It aimed at researching the possibilities as well as the limits of online-worship. Even though the project was sponsored by the Christian Resources Exhibition and the Methodist Church of Great Britain the operators stressed their independence from any Christian denomination. On 03/11/2004 the CoF was officially opened with a great service held by Richard Chartres, Bishop of London. Thanks to the great success of the CoF in its trial period, services were soon extended. In addition to the traditional Sunday services daily morning and evening prayers held by active members of the church were launched. Since the project enjoyed so much popularity the operators decided to run the virtual church for four months instead of three. On 09/26/2004, the virtual doors of the CoF were closed for community action.³² Thanks to its success the project was even covered by the print media all over Europe. As a result of this, the CoF project also received recognition from more traditional churches such as the Protestant or Catholic Church, initiating the first discussions about the validity of online service from a theological perspective.

The virtual 3D environment of the church provided a sanctuary consisting of a pulpit and an altar area which in the beginning was open to the public at any time. The area however was eventually closed down due to desecrations. The sanctuary was described by the creators as follows:

“The sanctuary is a place for worship services and prayer. As you wander around, you will find images on some of the walls. Clicking them will load a pop-up window with material for prayer and meditation. Outside service times, you can use the sanctuary for personal acts of worship or prayer. If you come across someone doing this, please respect their space while they do so.”³³

The second room was the so-called crypt located ‘beneath’ the sanctuary which was filled with some chairs and benches. According to the description, this room was a place for conversation.

³² Since then it has only been possible to enter the church alone, interaction with other avatars is not possible any more.

³³ Description was given at the entrance of the church, which is no longer available.

“The crypt is a relaxed place under the sanctuary where you can take a seat, trade views on the singing and the preaching, generally talk to others and spark off lively debate.”³⁴

Before entering the virtual church the visitors had to choose between different options concerning their virtual presence in the church. First of all, the visitors had to decide if they wanted to be visible to others or not. If so, they could choose an avatar from a certain number of male and female characters³⁵. If they preferred to remain invisible to others they then had the opportunity to enter the church as a so-called ghost, a white and transparent figure without interacting with others.³⁶ The avatars were able to walk and perform several gestures even religious ones e.g. the Hallelujah-Gesture.

Figure 1: Two avatars in Hallelujah-Gesture in CoF.³⁷



As mentioned above, there were regular Sunday services (in the evening). Different priests were invited to deliver a sermon. For example Richard Chartres, Bishop of London, Rev Dr Janet Wootton, Director of Studies for the Congregational Federation or Steve Titus, General Secretary from United Congregational Church of Southern Africa were among them.

The other parts of the service were arranged and held by the so-called ‘wardens’, a group of dedicated people who were also in charge of keeping order within the church and kicking out trolls³⁸ and other trouble makers. The services were so popular that every single place was taken. The way in which the services were offered was adjusted to first life Christian services

³⁴ Description was given at the entrance of the church, which is no longer available.

³⁵ It was not possible to change or adapt the appearance of the characters provided individually.

³⁶ Due to technical barriers it was only for possible for 30 persons to enter simultaneously as visible persons, the other were automatically ask to log in as ghosts.

³⁷ Retrieved on 04/09/07 from: <http://churchoffools.com/media-resources/hi-res-images.html>.

³⁸ A troll is a person who intentionally posts controversial messages in an online community.

with the exception of the Lord's Supper which was not provided for the online scenario.

The online service³⁹ started with the traditional bell-ringing as a sign of the beginning of the ritual. When the service began the conversations between the visitors usually abated or broke off completely. Another sign of a changing situation was when a small box with 'service live' was displayed on the screen. From this moment on, the visitors usually stopped walking around in the sanctuary. The opening was followed by a short welcome note and a prayer in the form of written chat usually held by wardens. After that, the congregation started 'singing' a hymn. In the virtual church, this meant that an organ-style melody sounded from the background while the text of the hymn was displayed on the upper screen in yellow letters. The actual 'singing' was replaced by written text typed into the chat window verse by verse. Many people took part in this 'written chat singing'.⁴⁰ The modifications that this element of the ritual underwent have to be emphasized. Vital yet missing options like the use of first life voices are adapted to the possibilities of the new environment. As a result of this, the important part of this ritual is performed by a combination of active and passive text and background sound. Spoken language is replaced by different types of texts. This implies that there is a transformation from an audio-based to visual-based ritual elements.

A Warden subsequently stepped up to the reading desk in the front area and read from the bible. The reading was followed by the sermon held by several host referents. Therefore, the referent climbed up the lectern and addressed the community. The referent's words were displayed in big white bubbles and contained the text of the sermon. However, there had not been any safety measures against unexpected incidents. One time due to technical problems Rev. Gwyn suddenly disappeared when he delivered the sermon.⁴¹ A few minutes later he came back and was able to finish the sermon himself. The community was happy to have him back and no comments were made indicating any sort of irritation. This leads to the assumption, that the tolerance towards sources of errors or ritual failure in virtual environments which the users attribute to a greater instability is even higher than in first life.

³⁹ The exact order of the different elements of worship had been variable; it didn't need to content all of the named elements.

⁴⁰ Unfortunately there is no data about how many people did first life singing in front of their screens at home too.

⁴¹ Service from 06/27/2004.

Video 1: Sunday Service from 06/27/2004 with Rev. Gwyn



The sermon was followed by intercessions and prayers for peace and many avatars were encouraged to kneel down. At this point, the visitors were often asked to take active part in the service by typing out the names of the persons to be remembered. In contrast to first life intercessions more people can participate publicly in this part of the ritual. At the same time the authority structures shift from the well known front-to-visitors mode to a more democratic style of common prayer. Finally, the visitors were invited to say the Lord's Prayer together: "We now join together in the prayer that Jesus told us. Please type or pray along, using which ever version or language is most comfortable..." The Lords Prayer soon became one of the most important elements of the online service. Although the visitors were often very reserved about making comments via chat during the lecture or the sermon, most of them took part in the Lord's Prayer. A process of internationalization was carried out by using different languages and versions for the Lord's Prayer and replaced the otherwise limited use of foreign languages within the church.⁴² The different versions of the Lord's Prayer out of respect for non-native speakers strengthened the sense of community and may have been the reason for the success of this specific prayer in the online services. Finally, the service ended with some greeting words. Afterwards most of the visitors stayed in the church and chatted with others.

In addition to the Sunday services, daily services were established one and a half months after the official opening of the project. The services were held by wardens every morning and evening and took about 20 minutes. They consisted of prayers, intercessions and ended with the Lord's Prayer.

⁴² By restricting the languages to English the wardens (mostly English native speakers) had better control over the chat and were therefore able to make sure that no defaming conversation was going on.

Shortly after the experiment was launched, some sort of core community had established itself which gathered in the church not only during the services. The Sunday services in particular were very popular. Many people participated actively in the services by using different gestures. It is an interesting fact that the three religious gestures “Cross yourself”, “Hallelujah!” and “Bless” which were originally provided to express the ecumenical character of the CoF were used by many visitors along with the other nine non-religious gestures during the services. There were even some very creative applications. The Hallelujah-gesture for example was used to perform church-wide Laola waves. Conversely, gestures that were intentionally meant by the church creators to act as social gestures began to be introduced as religious ones during the service. Simon Jenkins describes them as follows:

“Over time, we adapted two of the avatars’ socialising gestures for use in our services. One of them was the ‘pull hair out’ gesture, where avatars would grab their hair and pull it out. Originally, we had included this as an amusing way of showing frustration and anger, but we began to use it as part of public prayer, as a symbol of lament for the suffering of the world”⁴³

This can be described in terms of a transformation of ritual gestures. Taking the descriptions about the online service into consideration, it becomes clear that the transfer of the ritual into virtual space entails various change processes. On the one hand, the mode of communication turns from spoken language in first life to written chat in the Virtual World. Moreover, creative ritual gestures are introduced and ritual elements such as the Lord’s Prayer become a central focus of the ritual. On the other hand, there are parts of the ritual which seem to experience considerable changes in a virtual setting. The sermon for example was abridged and subdivided into single sentences which are displayed one by one and with a short gap in between, but the content of the sermons does not differ much from first life sermons. This is why it can be assumed that some change processes appear to be dynamic whereas others are perceived as stable.

But before I go into detail and provide a more abstract differentiation I would like to present two examples from another Virtual World in order to highlight the wide range of online services.

⁴³ Jenkins 2008, 110.

Christian Online Services in Second Life

Second Life (SL), a virtual 3D environment owned by the company Linden Labs is currently one of the most popular Virtual Worlds. It was opened to the public in 2003 and started with a few thousand users. The so-called 'residents' had the option to buy their own virtual land and to create and own all kinds of items.⁴⁴ Nowadays, big companies such as Adidas or T-Mobile invest in virtual estate. The economy in SL has been growing faster than ever and meanwhile, there are more than 8.5 million registered residents.⁴⁵ The SL users interact and move around in this Virtual World via avatars. However, in contrast to other virtual environments the user in SL has the option to design his or her personal avatar. Almost every part of the body – which incidentally does not have to be human – can be adapted to personal preferences, even the wrinkle between nose and mouth can be shaped individually. The avatar can be animated via keyboard and in order to move around he can choose between walking and flying. Up to now, most of the communication in SL is done via written chat. However due to the fact that Linden Lab introduced the voice chat in August 2007 there might be a shift to this mode of communication in the near future.

In the past few years even a wide range of religious traditions have gained a foothold in this virtual environment. Replicas of Buddhist temples, Zen gardens and meditation centers were built right beside Christian cathedrals and churches, Jewish synagogues or the Hare Krishna temple. A lot of different religious groups and buildings can be found in the Christian cluster in particular. There is a wide variety of Christian groups in SL, for example the Liberal Christians, the Korea Christian Club, the Anglicans of Second Life or the SL Lutherans. Denominations which are strongly defined by the influence of laymen are at the forefront of setting up their own Christian groups in SL. Up to now; the leading denominations such as the Catholic Church or the Orthodox Church have not been represented officially in SL, even though these branches have been represented by laymen. The number of churches or church like buildings seems to increase steadily. Meanwhile, there are about 20 buildings.

The architectural style of the churches is usually very elaborate and they are often richly decorated with paintings, figures and ornaments. They are often replicas of first life churches or try to copy architectural styles such as the Gothic or Romanesque style.

⁴⁴ For a detailed description of Second Life see Rymaszewski 2007.

⁴⁵ The number of people logged in during the last 60 days counted only 1.6 million (date of inquiry 08/05/2007). Therefore one has to presume that beside the large number of registered inhabitants the numbers of actual users are much lower.

Figure 2: Basilica Cardinale Cathedral Church⁴⁶



But there are also examples which prove that certain designers use the virtual world and its possibilities to create new styles for example for the meeting areas. The First Unitarian Universalist Church of Second Life built a meeting area which disposed of cushions instead of rows of benches, a pool with a waterfall and a big flame burning behind the speakers' desk. The whole area is located in a natural setting and the trees and the birds create a relaxing and comfortable ambience.

Figure 2: First Unitarian Universalist Church of Second Life⁴⁷



As already mentioned there is a wide range of churches. Some of them have a lot in common with traditional churches and others differ from them entirely. There are also

⁴⁶ See in SL: Braunworth 110, 135, 585, retrieved on 09/10/2007.

⁴⁷ See in SL: Modesta 127, 79, 64, retrieved on 09/10/2007.

churches which do not want to be taken too seriously such as the Church of Elvis. It follows the slogan “Accept no imitations!” and offers weekly services on Sunday. It looks as if many churches were built to copy first life structures. Many small districts for example have a church because churches are considered to be necessary elements. As a result of this, visitors can only look at the building but there is no religious group which organizes any religious activities. There is for example a district called ‘Old York’ with timbered houses hosting several shops. A large medieval-like church is located in the middle of this area which seems to be regarded as belonging to such a place.⁴⁸ But in SL there are at least 10-15 Christian churches which are led by an organizer or a complete team who try to offer regular religious activities to their visitors. In some of these places the visitors have the possibility to perform some individual rituals such as lighting virtual candles or delivering personal prayer requests.

Figure 3: Lighting candles in St. Catharine Church⁴⁹



As in first life one pays a small amount of Linden Dollars⁵⁰ to the church in order to light a candle and to send personal prayers or thoughts to Jesus, Maria or other saints worshipped in this area. It is often possible for the visitor to motivate his or her avatar to perform a special gesture like ‘kneeling down’ or ‘praying’.

In the following, the ALM Cyber Church⁵¹ will be presented as an example of a Christian online service in SL. The ALM⁵² Cyber Church is the SL branch of a Christian Web

⁴⁸ See in SL: Tefnut 153,109,83, retrieved on 09/10/2007.

⁴⁹ See in SL: Numbat 106, 37, 74, retrieved on 09/10/2007.

⁵⁰ Linden Dollar is the currency in SL which can be changed in US-Dollars and back.

⁵¹ See in SL: Truth 124, 135, 25, retrieved on 09/10/2007.

⁵² ALM stands for Abundant Living Ministries.

Community⁵³ situated in the USA. It is connected with the evangelical Christian traditions founded in the USA.⁵⁴ The aim of the cyber church is described as follows:

“Our vision is to see the name of Jesus glorified in the virtual world. Jesus told us to go into ALL[emphasis in original, N.M.] the world and proclaim the good news that there is reconciliation to God through him. This includes the virtual world.”⁵⁵

The Ministry is led by a US layman-pastor and his wife who takes care of the large area in which the church is situated. The church which includes a separated prayer room is surrounded by the ALM Recreation Center, the Dokimos Cafe, the Women's Ministry House and the Garden of Faith. In the large sanctuary of the actual church building⁵⁶ the visitors can see different musical instruments and microphones arranged in the foreground. In the background beneath a huge freely suspended cross lies a small basin with two animation balls which position the avatars in poses for baptism. The church offers weekly Sunday services which are ministered by the pastor mainly via audio streaming. Only small parts are realized via written chat. The following descriptions refer to a service attended by the author in September 2007.

At the beginning, the pastor stands in front of the community and starts the audio stream so that everybody can listen to it. After a short welcoming speech, a first prayer is read and the community is asked to stand up. After this, the service continues with songs. Every visitor has the possibility to get a ‘Worship Animation Package’ at the entrance of the church for his avatar. It enables visitors to put their avatars in a standing and hands-over-the-head-waving position.

⁵³ See <http://livingsounds.org>.

⁵⁴ From the emic perspective the term ‘fundamental’ is often preferred. Basic lines of evangelical belief were already formulated at the end of the 19th century in the Niagara Bible Conference in 1883. The following principles of faith summoned at the conference are: Inerrancy of the Scriptures, virgin birth and deity of Jesus, substitutionary atonement through God's grace and human faith, bodily resurrection of Jesus and authenticity of Christ's miracles. With small variations the ALM Cyber Church follows these principles; see Notecard: ALM Cyber Church Welcome! (2006-08-13 08:23:11 note card), retrieved on 08/08/2007, from: <http://www.secondlife.com>; location: Truth 124.164.26 (PG).

⁵⁵ See Notecard: ALM Cyber Church Welcome! (2006-08-13 08:23:11 note card), retrieved on 08/08/2007, from: <http://www.secondlife.com>; location: Truth 124.164.26 (PG).

⁵⁶ Several months ago the organizers bought new SL land and moved the church there. At the same time they expanded their offerings and they seem intent on increasing demand.

Figure 4: Service in ALM Cyber Church



In contrast to the hymn singing in the CoF there is no text visible to the visitors. This means that they have to know the worship songs beforehand or they have to settle for listening. It is striking that there is hardly any active participation of the visitors during the songs with the exception of the animation of the avatars. Hardly comments or religious statements are brought into written chat. This means that the physical component of common singing known from evangelical services is transferred into the virtual environment but there is no participation in terms of written or spoken words.

Some readings from the Bible follow this as well as an interpretation which is also done through audio streaming. Both video screens in the background are used to display the respective text of the lecture on the virtual walls. During the lecture the visitors remain seated and they usually listen very quietly to the words being spoken. This means that there is hardly any chat activity. At the end of the service the pastor asks the visitors to move forward and pray together. This can happen in public which implies that the personal prayer text is visible for everybody in the chat window or it can happen in private which means that everybody can write a personal message directly to the pastor and his assistants. The following short excerpt shows that the prayers range from very personal to more general prayers.⁵⁷

“[12:03] V(1): Heal her 6 year old body Lord Jesus.
[12:03] V(2): and toil the soil with great Joy
[12:03] V(3): Yes Lord
[12:03] V(2): not that we sined but thatw e dio [sic!] your bidding
[12:04] V(3): Send your healing touch Lord

⁵⁷ Due to identity protection the chat was left anonymous. No date was given when the data was collected. V stands for ‘Visitor’.

[12:04] V(2): we ask only that you heal the innocent and help the wicked
[12:04] V(3) We worship you Lord
[12:04] V(2): so we may better serve
[12:04] V(2): to have and to hold you from this day forth
[12:04] V(2): befor [sic!] and ever afterwards
[12:05] V(2): amen
[12:05] V(1): Father, I ask that you would touch those who are expecting children. I ask that each baby would be healthy, delivery would be easy and there would be no complications. I ask for a special blessing on these women.!”

This example does not only show the different prayer styles but also the different contents. In contrast to first life, the prayers in this case are clearly visible and accessible to the researcher. This is one of the most striking criteria of online worship in general. It enables the researcher to trace the different styles of prayers and to look at the prayer’s content. This is usually not visible to the researcher in offline scenarios because the prayers are said in a low voice or expressed by thought. This allows for new insights in the performance of this ritual element. In addition to this, it is also possible to observe the physical components. The question could be for example which special religious animations are performed during the prayers.

The service takes about 45 minutes and is open-ended. The visitors can stay and pray in the church as long as they want. After the service many people remain in or in front of the church for discussions or regular chats.

Instructions concerning the behavior during the service are issued by the ministry on a note card. Two of them seem to be very interested in switching the focus on rituals:

“Guideline 2: Let the preacher preach. ;o) Please be respectful and don't go on the stage unless asked by the pastor or a minister to do so.
Guideline 3: Ask questions AFTER the service. Please hold all questions, comments, and conversations until after the service when we go next door for fellowship.”⁵⁸

The behavior demanded in these guidelines reminds the reader of the traditional scenario in first life churches. A special ritual area (in this case the stage) is reserved primarily for the ritual expert who is in charge of the performance of the ritual. As in a first life service the possibilities of communication during the service are expected to be limited, the agency with respect to communication lies with the ritual expert. The active participation of the visitors is supposed to focus on singing along or dancing. In doing so the visitors are to feel free to

⁵⁸ See Notecard: ALM Cyber Church Welcome! (2006-08-13 08:23:11 note card), retrieved on 08/08/2007, from: <http://www.secondlife.com>; location: Truth 124.164.26 (PG).

express themselves in the way they want to.⁵⁹

Before going further into ritualistic details another example of online services in SL should be given to emphasize the variety of performances which can be observed in this Virtual World. Another Christian church is called Koinonia Church⁶⁰ and is affiliated with the United Church of Christ.⁶¹ The community possesses a large area in SL containing a house, a garden with cherry trees and an open-air amphitheatre with a large screen in the background which is used for classes mainly held by host preachers. The main building resembles a large wooden hall. One of the meeting areas is located in the middle of the building. In contrast to traditional offline areas this meeting area contains a circle of sofas and armchairs. Many prayers and worship meetings are held in this room.

Figure 5: Service in Koinonia Church of Christ



Asked about the design of the main hall of Koinonia the leading pastor answered in an interview:

“[6:39] S. R.: the chapel or church is meant to be open - modern/post-modern - and comfortable, not pews facing an authority figure

[6:39] S. R.: there are no doors

[6:39] S. R.: that is intentional”

Outside in the garden there are information boards where the visitors can get note cards providing them with information about the United Church of Christ, for example about their

⁵⁹ Guideline 4. See Notecard: ALM Cyber Church Welcome! (2006-08-13 08:23:11 note card), retrieved on 08/08/2007, from: <http://www.secondlife.com>; location: Truth 124.164.26 (PG).

⁶⁰ See in SL: Xenia 151, 118, 36, retrieved on 09/10/2007.

⁶¹ The United Church of Christ is one of the mainline churches in the USA formed in 1957 by a union of the Evangelical and Reformed Church and the Congregational Christian Churches.

beliefs and their sacraments. On a welcome note card passed at the entrance of the hall some guidelines are given to the visitors:

“Welcome to Koinonia United Church of Christ. Please come and join us for worship. Please enter and sit amongst your neighbors [sic!] with peace and respect. This is a sacred time of worship, prayer and community. Please refrain from open discussion; there will be time for questions and dialogue after the service...”⁶²

On a large schedule at the entrance the visitors can check the prayer and service times of the church. These are held weekly on Mondays, Wednesdays and from Friday to Sunday; sometimes there are even two meetings a day. Because of the fact that this article only provides a small insight into this topic I will give two other short examples of services in Koinonia. The first one was a devotion held in August 2007. A small group of people (five including myself) gathered at the meeting point in the hall. In the beginning, the leading person passed a note card with the liturgical procedure to all visitors. The devotion began with a morning prayer which was taken from a New Zealand prayer book:

“THE SENTENCE OF THE DAY

L: Great is the Lord and worthy of all praise.

C: Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom, thanksgiving and honour, power and might, be to our God for ever and ever! Amen.

OPENING SONG

SCRIPTURE

L: Hear these words of Scripture.

CONFESSION*

L: Let us kneel and, in silence, remember our need for God's forgiveness.

Silence

L: Let us confess our sins to God.”⁶³

The actual ritual was held via written chat and the songs were imported by the leading person from an external source. An excerpt from the chat protocol illustrates the procedure:⁶⁴

[6:17] L: we are beginning - the liturgy is in the note card

[6:17] L: Great is the Lord and worthy of all praise.

[6:18] V(1): Amen

[6:18] V(2): amen

[6:18] V(3): Amen

[6:18] V(4): amen

⁶² See Notecard: Welcome note card [(2004-09-28 18:01:04 note card), retrieved on 08/08/2007, from: <http://www.secondlife.com>; location: Xenia 160.199.36.

⁶³ Taken from a notecard handed over during a Friday Prayer in Koinonia United Church of Christ, Xenia 148.141.37 in SL, August 2007

⁶⁴ For keeping the privacy of the visitors all names are changed. The leading person is titled with ‘L’, the visitors with ‘V(n)’.

- [6:18] V(1): : Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom, thanksgiving and honour, power and might, be to our God for ever and ever! Amen.
- [6:19] L: Our opening song is stay with us from the Taize community
- [6:23] L: Hear these words of Scripture: [1 Peter 4:7-11]: The end of all things is near; therefore be serious and discipline yourselves for the sake of your prayers. (...) To him belong the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen.
- [6:24] V(1): Amen
- [6:24] V(3): Amen
- [6:24] V(2): Amen
- [6:25] V(4): amen
- [6:25] L: Let us kneel and, in silence, remember our need for God's forgiveness.
- [6:26] L gave you Prayer.
- [6:26] V(1): in gestures, :0)
- [6:26] L: Let us confess our sins to God.”⁶⁵

The visitors had the possibility to copy and paste the text from the note card into the chat window. As the reader can see in the excerpt the ritual usually followed the liturgical order but some of the visitors transferred longer sentences into the chat window. The ‘Amen’ is very often used (also in the rest of the service) to confirm the pastor’s words and to take an active part in the ritual. However, gestures like kneeling down are hardly used.

Another example for Sunday service in Koinonia will now be described briefly. This will show in how many different ways an online service can be held even if it takes place in the same church. Parts of the service took place via live voice chat and others via written chat. After a short welcome speech, the leading avatar opened the service with prayer and joy sharing. For this, the mode of communication was switched back to written chat, so that all visitors even those who did not possess the voice chat function could actively participate by writing down the things they were grateful for. This was followed by a song which was audible in the background and which all visitors listened to very quietly. Afterwards, a lecture from the New Testament was held, again using the live voice chat. After having switched back to the written chat mode the service continued with intercession. The finishing prayer was spoken by the leading person via voice chat and ended with the Lord’s Prayer. In contrast to the CoF there was no active participation in this specific prayer. The service finished with another song.

When asked in an interview, the Pastor of the Koinonia Church gave the following statement about the different and sometimes fast changing modes of communication during the service:

⁶⁵ Friday Prayer in Koinonia United Church of Christ, Xenia 148.141.37 in SL, August 2007.

- [6:52] S. R.: the longer services in which a sermon/homily is offered voice is preferred
[6:52] You: why?
[6:52] S. R.: there is so much to communicate in a sermon in the nuances of voice
[6:52] You: ah ok
[6:53] S. R.: emotions are more effectively [sic!] communicated, sermons are a spoken event, meant to be heard, an exposition on text - so i feel voice is critical⁶⁶

So the means of communication are adapted to the needs of a specific situation and take influence from the performance of the ritual. During the service most participants remain seated on the sofas, gestures were hardly used. The ritual is therefore mostly held via online communication, the physical/bodily performance seems to be irrelevant in this case. The ritual elements used in both services are widely known from offline services. Apart from the ritual setting no special online elements are invented here. On the level of content it is trying to copy offline services as good as possible into the virtual world. For this purpose i.e. transformation of communication and limitation of physical/bodily performance are accepted. The continuance of ritual content and a great part of the structure guarantee that the ritual is recognised as a Christian service which the visitors can follow.

Conclusion

The above examples of Christian online services in Virtual Worlds have shown many changing processes which refer to their transfer into a new medium. Considering the data the heuristic terms suggested at the beginning can be applied in many cases.

As there is no room for a detailed analysis in this paper there will be only some quotes from obvious examples. The most striking changing process affects the communication mode and structures of rituals. The transformation of communication is visible in many scenarios. Due to the conditions of the medium the mode of 'spoken language' is turned in many cases into written chat. This can work for the entire ritual as in the CoF or just for special parts of it as in Koinonia Church (second service). In the ALM Cyber Church almost the entire service is done via audio stream. The transformation of communication causes noticeable changes in the presentation and mediation of the ritual, but it hardly affects the content. But even in the parts of live voice service in Koinonia Church lays a transformation. In contrast to first life

⁶⁶ The interview was conducted on 09/08/2007 in SL (White Rabbit Research Station, Naked Monkeys 237.43.23).

the voice is broadcasted via Internet by using a headset. But compared to first life the level of transformation is not as high as in the case of written chat. Communication seems to be one element of rituals which can be used very flexible. The participants and the ritual experts are able to adapt and transform communication structures according to the requirements of the medium. It is obvious, that the changing processes often only affect the representational structure of communication, the content of what is communicated is hardly changed.

Also on the level of ritual embodiment⁶⁷ there are some transformations observable. For example ritual gestures are transformed in different ways if transferred into an online 3D environment. As mentioned in the example of CoF, non-religious gestures are used as religious gestures during the ritual. Or in case of the ALM cyber church the performance of ritual gestures is limited compared to first life. The avatars are only able to use fixed animation scripts for their virtual body. In general, the body is said to be one of the most important elements in a ritual. Participants in particular often describe the importance of sensual impressions gained during a ritual. The body can be seen as a medium to express oneself and at the same time to gain impressions within a ritual setting. The first life body is in our cases replaced by avatars, which means that its mode of representation is changed. To some extent the often limited abilities of the virtual body are creatively applied in the online ritual, but usually this is not the case. It has to be asked what kind of implications these limitations have for a ritual. This is why it will be indispensable to take the experiences of the participants into account and see what kind of meaning they ascribe the physical component in an Online-Ritual.

An example for an invention, in this case the invention of a ritual setting can be observed in Koinonia Church for which the leader intentionally designed a new ritual place. But in general the invention of new ritual elements or even entire ritual structures can only be found in very few cases within Virtual Worlds. As the presented examples show, the leaders of online Christian communities tried to transfer the services which are already known from offline scenarios into Virtual Worlds. Creative inventions are therefore rather an exception than a regular case. The participants get a sense of continuity which allows them to feel safe in an environment which is perceived insecure and instable.

When considering the above shown case studies it becomes obvious that in many areas processes of exclusion can be found but which in most cases are usually not brought up as a central topic. Up until now each one of the presented churches excluded the performance of

⁶⁷ For an overview of embodiment theories see Bell 2006.

sacraments during their services. Due to heated theological discussions on online sacraments, most of the churches exclude this element from the service. Secondly, this exclusion is followed by a change of structure in the Online-Ritual. Once more, the participants have to be surveyed in order to be able to draw deeper conclusions on the effects caused by this change in ritual structure. Another case of exclusion is the discontinuation of most mobile ritual objects. The churches neither provide song books nor bibles as visible objects for their visitors. Instead of this, the gap is sometimes filled with recently invented equivalents such as the video screen wall in the ALM Cyber Church on which the song texts are displayed for the participants. The Koinonia Church for example sometimes distributes note cards containing the order of the service.

The examples given in the text show that it might be helpful to use the proposed heuristic terms for a closer characterization of changing processes appearing within rituals. It is obvious that in the terms are many points closely connected or depend on each other. When it comes to the data, it can be assumed that there are three levels which seem to be very important in terms of transfer: the level of content, structure and (re-)presentation.⁶⁸ The level of (re-)presentation is probably most affected by changing processes. In this case, the transformation, invention and exclusion of ritual elements are highly distinctive and let this process appear more dynamic. It is striking that in the majority of the shown Online-Rituals the content and the structure appear relatively stable compared to offline settings because both are already known from first life services

Christian rituals in Virtual Words turned out to be not only a fascinating but also a very complex research focus. There is a wide range of choices, but the first life rituals of the various Christian traditions still serve as role models. The transfer of services into an online 3D environment is always connected with changing processes which influence the content, the structure and the presentation of the ritual. But it depends on the extent of the influencing processes whether the changes appear more dynamic or more stable.

⁶⁸ The separation of these levels has to be understood only as a heuristic tool for description. There are certainly strong interdependencies between aspects of content, structure and (re-)presentation within rituals.

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