SFB 619
Ritualdynamik

Kerstin Radde-Antweiler (Ed.)

Being Virtually Real?

Virtual Worlds from a Cultural Studies' Perspective.

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ENHANCING THE SPIRITUAL RELATIONSHIP

THE IMPACT OF VIRTUAL WORSHIP ON THE REAL WORLD CHURCH EXPERIENCE

ANDREÉ ROBINSON-NEAL

Introduction

"*For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am in the midst of them*"[1]

I rush home from worship service, despite the fact that, in the tradition of many Protestant churches, it was the first Sunday of the month and we had taken extra time to fellowship and celebrate Holy Communion. I hurry to my computer; as a member of the ALM Cyberchurch, one of twenty-eight[2] who maintain a presence in Second Life, a three-dimensional virtual world that has become home to some three million[3] individuals, I am anxious to get 'in-world' and join the service.

Second Life, the product of California-based Linden Lab, came online publicly in 2003 and boasts of an active variety of communities including clubs, casinos, stores and malls, education facilities, and churches. These virtual communities are created and maintained by real-world people who appear (virtually) in Second Life as men, women, mechanized creations, and furry humanoids, collectively known as avatars. Although there are locations in the Second Life world where gaming simulations occur, Second Life itself cannot be described as a game. It has been categorized with other Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Play Games (MMORPGs) such as "World of Warcraft"[4] and "Neverwinter Nights"[5], yet it has additional elements such as homes for rent, commerce in the form of employment, and items for purchase that make it more of a Multi-User Virtual Environment (MUVE) which

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[1] See Scofield 1967.

[2] On 02/10/2007 searches for 'church', 'faith', and 'worship' in Second Life yield sixty-three listings: twenty-eight faith-based (including denominational, non-denominational, and meditation areas), two organizational (Templar Knights, Masonic), twenty-three non faith-based (role play, commerce, etc.), and ten duplicate listings.

[3] On 02/09/2007, the Second Life resident counter on the website indicated that there were 3,421,854 registered 'residents'.

[4] See Website of Blizzard.com.

[5] See Website of Neverwinter Nights.

include so-called real-life applications such as "There"[6] and "ActiveWorlds"[7]; MUVEs are considered the newest iteration of Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs) or MUD object-oriented (MOO) systems, which had their start as text-based multiple-user applications.

In my first few months of exploration in Second Life, I became very involved in the daily activities; I searched for employment; made money (known as Linden or L$) by camping, where the avatar simply sits somewhere, dances or is involved in some non-work activity for free money; and met other avatars. During one camping session I was conversing with my neighbor who invited me to attend a worship service; prior to that conversation I was not aware that there was a faith-based presence in Second Life. I agreed to attend and was introduced to the ALM Cyberchurch family. The church is headed by Reverend Benjamin Faust and his wife, Jennifer; Reverend and Mrs. Faust lead the Living Sounds ministry and have a very active website[8] where their mission is "to reach the virtual world for Jesus"; they began with a small circle of worshippers in a tiny sanctuary within Second Life in order to take the Gospel into a new virtual mission field.

As real-world churches expand their missions to include the World Wide Web, what are the implications for worship? Are people using virtual worship to enhance their faith? The next section provides a brief literature review regarding the development of online worship sites, issues related to online worship, and the influence of the Internet on real-world congregations. The article concludes with a personal reflection, including the summary of results from an online virtual worship survey, as well as implications for further study.

The Development of Faith's Online Presence

Faith is present in most areas of the world; there are churches, synagogues, temples, meeting houses, mosques, worship and meditation centers, or sanctuaries of faith in every community. These various sanctuaries come in all sizes, from bible study groups that meet in private homes to what are known as 'mega-churches' that have thousands of members. One thing that many religions seem to have in common is the desire to share their faith with others; as man's technological capabilities increased, the faith world kept pace. Christian radio and television bloomed in the United States in the early 1920s when a number of tent

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[6] See Website of There.com.
[7] See Website of Activeworlds, Inc.
[8] See Website of Living Sounds.

revivalists such as Dwight L. Moody discovered the media. Archbishop Fulton Sheen was an early media evangelist[9]; he was one of the first preachers to have a radio ministry and in 1940 was the first to have a television ministry broadcast. The so-called 'electronic church' developed in the 1950s as television became more prevalent.[10] By the 1980s there were over two hundred faith-based television stations, three of which were on the air for twenty-four hours per day.[11]

In its early days the Internet did not have many development regulations, making it difficult to create a completely accurate chronology of the online evangelical movement. It appears that churches, faith-based groups, and individual faith-based sites were not prevalent on the World Wide Web until the mid-1990s[12] with the launch of informational sites for those in real-world ministries. The Pew Foundation, an organization headquartered in Washington, D.C. that is dedicated to data collection and research on numerous projects such as domestic policy, global attitudes, and social trends, compiled quantitative information on how the Internet is being used by churches and synagogues in the United States.[13] The survey showed that the Internet is being used by congregations to strengthen the faith and spiritual growth of their members, evangelize and perform missions in their communities and around the world, and perform a wide variety of pious and practical activities for their congregations. Many believe the Internet has helped these faith communities become better places.

Further, Pew researchers found that the faith-based groups they surveyed felt that the Internet was appealing for a number of reasons:

- The Internet is always available to individuals who may have questions about the ministry and prefer a more anonymous method of inquiry.
- A website provides the organization with a way to display information about itself (staff, philosophy, activities, and so forth).
- Organizations are able to use the Internet to link to one another and to other websites related to their discipline and doctrine without having to self-generate content.
- The Internet provides different communication capabilities which allow the organization to do outreach with a much larger community.

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[9] See Longenecker 2003.
[10] See Boyd 1957.
[11] See Frankl 1998.
[12] See McCarthy 2000, 8.
[13] See Larsen, 2000 2-7.

In 2004, the Pew Foundation explored how Americans use the Internet for faith-based reasons[14] and found that

- more than one half of all United States Internet users have done things online that are related to faith-based issues (such as emailing spiritual content and reading about religious events and holidays);

- individuals use the Internet for "personal spiritual matters more than for traditional religious functions" and this online activity is a supplement to their offline religious activity;

- most of those seeking faith-based experiences online were white, middle-aged females.

Pew Foundation researchers coined the term 'Religion Surfers'[15] to describe the vast number of Americans who use the Internet to seek out information about faith and to connect with others who are online for similar purposes:

For Religious Surfers, the Internet is a useful supplemental tool that enhances their already-deep commitment to their beliefs and their churches, synagogues, or mosques. Use of the Internet also seems to be especially helpful to those who feel they are not part of mainstream religious group. They take their faith seriously in the offline world and use online tools to enrich their knowledge of their faith and to practice their devotions.

It is important to note that the last point about how the Internet was used for faith-based reasons should not be surprising; the Internet, while extremely pervasive in most developed societies, is not fully global in nature. There are countries around the world where technology is in its infancy and the Internet is a rare commodity.[16]

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[14] See Hoover, Clark, & Rainie 2004.
[15] See Larsen 2001, 2-3.
[16] See Dawson & Cowan 2004, 5-6.

Online Worship: An Examination of Issues

While more individuals are using the Internet to look for information about faith, some researchers are concerned about legitimacy. As mentioned previously, the development of websites has largely been without regulation; Internet service providers often offer free website creation tools, making it easier for individuals and groups to have an online presence. It is this ease of site creation and development that causes concern: Dawson and Cowan[17] question whether online religious groups "mean anything at all", considering the fact that anyone can create and lead an online group; these groups seem less concerned than real-world worship circles about the leaders' credentials. Further, the very nature of the Internet may pose a problem for faith-based groups because it "exposes the Net surfer to a more fluid doctrinal environment, one that has the potential to encourage individual religious and spiritual experimentation." This suggestion leads to another – that religiosity online is both different from and similar to real-world practice[18]; while the virtual representation of the real person may be made to mimic real-world expressions and reactions during an online worship experience, the avatar's actions are not a replacement for real-world sensations and experiences:

Can religious experience be embodied in words alone? In asking this question we must keep in mind that many of the most momentous events in religious history are the product of human encounters with words (e.g., the conversion experience of St. Augustine). That is part of the power and importance of scriptures, and the Internet, like radio and television, can be the vehicle for the delivery of many moving words and images. But in the end what distinguishes the Internet as a medium for religious communication is its potential for interactivit. The distinct advantage of the Internet is its capacity for ongoing, adaptive, and two-way interaction (though still largely in typed words).

While the Internet as a place for worship is different from so-called traditional 'brick and mortar' services, it has the capacity to offer similar experiences for its users.

In addition to concerns about legitimacy, online worship has created a related concern about trustworthiness.[19] As more online business ventures are exposed as fraudulent, the motives of online organizational leaders are often questioned. As in real-world religions, believers must trust or 'have faith in' their leaders; the development of trust in virtual space

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[17] See Dawson & Cowan 2004, 2-3.
[18] See Dawson 2005, 15-37.
[19] See Pace 2004.

may not occur as easily as it does in the real world, especially if there is no connection to real-world information (such as financial records; since most real-world faith groups are considered non-profit entities, their financial overview is usually public information). Researchers point to the lack of regulation as a factor that contributes to their concern about the trustworthiness of some faith-based sites, particularly those created by leaders of some newer religions:[20]

The Internet has certainly enabled the new religions themselves to have a voice of their own, unobstructed by editorial processes, to which seekers and members of the public can gain access. Legal issues apart, however, the absence of editorial constraints has the consequence that some of the material that can be found on the Net falls far below the standard of even the worst examples of traditional vanity publishing.

There are places of worship online that have been created in such a way that they mirror real-world worship. The Ark of Salvation in Atlanta, Georgia has a website that appears to be an online replacement, created for those who "can't get to church, just don't feel like going," or who have a desire to hear preaching more often.[21] Website users are directed to an Internet religious service that offers a traditional Protestant order, including prayer, scripture reading, songs, welcome message, prayer for tithes and offerings, a sermon, offers of salvation and membership, and benediction; visitors are assured of a different service each time they visit the website. However, some online worshippers express concern about such "replacement services" because the notion of participating in faith ceremonies such as Holy Communion through the Internet is considered "almost sacrilegious."[22]

Online Worship: Support or Hindrance?

As noted in the previous section, there are some practices that online worshippers believe are best served in the real world. There has been little research done that provides insight into what impact virtual worship has on real-world worship, but a few websites[23] have elicited feedback regarding whether online churches will replace real-world churches; it seems that

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[20] See Pace 2004, para. 10-15; Chryssides 1996.
[21] See website of VirtualChurch.com.
[22] See Ostrowski 2006, para. 17.
[23] See website of OurChurch.com; Wilson 2004.

most respondents feel online worship will not replace the worship that occurs in their local churches.

There are individuals and groups who find so-called organized religion to be lacking; worshippers are looking for more in their connections with other believers. As shown by the spirited postings on the sites referenced in the previous paragraph, there are some worshippers who feel websites such as "Church of Fools" are useless because they are a poor representation of 'real' churches. Again, these reactions seem to come from individuals involved in the older, more traditional faiths as compared to those individuals who follow newer religions; sometimes referred to as 'neo-pagans',[24] these worshippers are described as being more tolerant of other faiths and tend to be more open about the practices of worship.

Personal Reflections

As I mentioned in the introduction, I am a member of an online congregation within the 3D community of Second Life. Figure 1 shows a view of the ALM Cyberchurch; my avatar is the one outlined by the white circle. Each figure shown in this virtual sanctuary is backed by a real person, somewhere in the world, who logged into the program and came to the church's location for worship.

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[24] See Krogh & Pillifant 2004, 167-168.

Figure 1: The ALM Cyberchurch

I was introduced to this particular ministry by another avatar, whose real-world counterpart felt that Second Life was a ripe mission field. After attending one service, I decided to search for other Second Life churches but did not feel the others met my needs as well as ALM; there is a distinct similarity to real-world worship because the service is held in a virtual chapel. There is also a greeter, Mariposa Psaltery, the avatar of Jennifer Faust, at the door and service begins each Sunday morning with praise and singing. Reverend Benjamin Psaltery, the Second Life counterpart of Living Sounds ministry leader Reverend Benjamin Faust, stands at the pulpit to open the service in prayer: the pastor's avatar stays there during the sermon (which is a recording delivered by streaming audio) while the congregation of avatars listens. Members and those in attendance can give financially to the ministry either in the virtual world or on the Living Sounds website.

The experience is only slightly different from worship at my local church: in addition to expressions of affirmation and encouragement of the day's message, there are sometimes conversations (which occur as typed chat sessions) about faith, the various world belief systems, and sharing of scriptures pertaining to a topic being discussed. It is interesting that while these sidebar conversations can be distracting, I find them no more bothersome than verbal chatter in my real church.

As I look at my personal faith walk, I must agree with Pace's contention that faith in leadership is very important to the believer; I was initially skeptical about attending an online church service but my skepticism was soon replaced by trust and belief. The leaders of ALM Cyberchurch are also real-world ministry leaders; Reverend Faust has links in Second Life to his Living Sounds website, where the ministry's mission is made clear. I was able to quickly locate information that I would expect from a legitimate church:

- A well-defined belief statement: Reverend Faust's ministry statement provides an overview and explanation of his church's beliefs, which are Biblically based according to Christian theology.
- Easily accessible financial reports: although the link was not up to date, I was able to see how the ministry solicited donations for the development and maintenance of its virtual outreach.
- A mechanism for faith-based support: the site offers a prayer request list; a Christian web link, where ministry participants can access other faith-based websites and services; a web version of the Holy Bible; a faith community where believers can connect, ask questions, and socialize online; and member pages that offer Bible study links and reports about the goings-on at the virtual church.

There were other things that attracted me to Reverend Faust's ministry; Living Sounds offers a weekly email newsletter that gives the weekly virtual church attendance figures, an overview of the prayer requests and praise reports (answers to prayers submitted by ministry participants), and links to both an audio recording or printed transcript of the sermon. Some real-world churches have the technology and financial capital to offer recorded and printed material each week; it is convenient to be able to access a Living Sounds transcript, or search the newsletter archive for a particular sermon recording at any time, from anywhere in the world.

I have found that my participation in the ALM Cyberchurch services have enhanced my personal worship experience, in that this online ministry gives me access to additional faith-based studies beyond what I get from my local church. I am also able to connect with a larger community of believers. As an educator, I began my explorations into Second Life in order to determine how I might use it in professional practice; I quickly found myself (or my avatar, as it were) wandering aimlessly through the vast virtual world, unsure of what to do or where to

go that would guide my exploration. After connecting with the Living Sounds ministry, I found that while my personal desire for using Second Life was the same, I began changing my avatar's 'lifestyle'. I became more aware of where I took my avatar: it was not as comfortable to walk through the clubs and casinos in the areas marked "adult"; I stopped looking for money making opportunities on Sundays and instead only stayed logged in to Second Life long enough to attend worship services. It was as if my avatar had made a move to a more Christian lifestyle.

The Virtual Worship Survey

In an effort to understand whether other virtual worshippers felt that their experiences impacted their real-life worship, I created and distributed an online survey.

Method

The instrument was created with a popular online survey creation program and was distributed to five pools of potential respondents over the course of six weeks: an email containing a link to the survey's web address was sent to the Second Life Educator's group; a message with a link to the survey website was sent in Second Life to a group devoted to prayer and meditation; a posting containing the survey web address link was placed on a forum located on the Second Life website; an email similar to the one sent to the educator's group was sent to a graduate school colleague who works in Second Life with her students; and a posting similar to the one placed on the Second Life website forum was placed on a public faith-based online bulletin board. All respondents were provided with a link to the location of the survey, where they could read more in-depth information about data collection, participant anonymity, and how to request a summary of the compiled data.

Demographics

While no respondent-specific identifiers were used, some basic demographic information was collected related to both real-world and online sexual identification, age, and worship practices. The survey allowed for one hundred total responses; fifteen complete responses were received along with twenty-two partially completed surveys. While this total may seem like a small percentage, the anonymous and open-invitation format of this online survey lends itself to such results. All responses are considered in the overview provided below:

Concerning sexual identification in real life, fifty percent of respondents identified themselves as female, thirty six percent identified as male, and two percent identified as trans-gendered; respondents could only choose one option. When asked to report the sexual identification of their avatar or online personalities, respondents could choose one or more options as they felt appropriate: fifty four percent of respondents identified their avatar or online personality as female, fifty four percent identified as male, eight percent identified as trans-gendered, twenty three percent were furry, and eight percent were something else (such as an octopus, robot, rabbit, and dog; it is important to note that in Second Life particularly a person can design the avatar of their choice and there is a distinct difference between a 'furry' avatar, which is typically humanoid in appearance, and an 'animal' avatar).

Concerning age, respondents could only choose one age range ("between 18 and 25 years of age", "between 26 and 35 years of age", "between 36 and 45 years of age", "between 46 and 55 years of age", "between 56 and 65 years of age", "over 65 years of age", or "other"). The majority (forty three percent) of respondents indicated that they were between 46 and 55 years of age in real life, while the ages of their online personalities were from 18 years of age to over 65 years of age; the majority (forty six percent) indicated that their avatars were between 36 and 55 years of age, while one respondent wrote "I don't think of my avatars as having ages".

Fifty-seven percent of respondents identified themselves as Christians in real life, while another forty three percent identified as non-Christian or as following another belief system (including Tolerant, Unitarian/Buddhist, Jewish, Unitarian Universalist, and Christian/Pagan).

When asked about worship, sixty four percent indicated that they attended services in real life at least once per month or more; twenty eight percent indicated that they attended virtual worship services at least once per month or more; and respondents could only choose one option. On a multiple-choice question, forty three percent of respondents indicated that they participated in some other form of real-world worship experience such as Bible study or prayer meetings at least monthly. Twenty-eight percent indicated that they also watch television ministries.

Participants were asked to respond to the question "why do you attend virtual services?" The answers covered many different reasons, including but not limited to issues related to the respondent's inability to get to real-world services; personal curiosity; convenience of virtual worship; and the variety of peoples, ideals, and doctrines presented at virtual services.

When asked "how did you learn about your virtual church," respondents again gave a variety of answers: some were searching for something else and stumbled upon virtual places

of worship by accident (twenty one percent); some were searching specifically for faith-based information (fifty percent); some were involved in starting the virtual church they attend (seven percent); while others were informed by other avatars (seven percent). Other respondents either did not have a response or discovered their virtual church in some other way.

Respondents were asked whether they saw themselves as members or attendees of their virtual church; the majority (ninety three percent) indicated that they were attendees rather than members. Narrative responses to the question "Please say a bit about why you feel you are a member or attendee (and what do you see as the difference between the two)" focused on the level of commitment and involvement that membership implies; one respondent also indicated that there is currently no formal mechanism for membership at the virtual church they attend, while another stated "I don't believe formal church membership is a Biblical concept".

Many real-world Christian ministries refer to the "time, talent, and treasure" their members contribute: despite the overwhelming number of respondents who felt they did not contribute or participate regularly enough to be considered a 'member', most indicated some level of participation in their virtual ministry; when asked whether they contributed to their virtual church in any way, forty percent indicated that they serve as a ministry leader, on a prayer ministry, or in some other capacity ("time"); twenty percent indicated that they provide scripting, design, or layout services for their virtual church ("talent"); twenty percent indicated that they donate real-world money, virtual currency, or both ("treasure"); and twenty percent indicated that they are currently not contributing. Each respondent could only choose one option.

Lastly, in response to a question about whether participation in virtual church impacts real-world worship, sixty four percent felt that there was no impact, twenty nine percent felt that virtual church enhances their real-world worship, and seven percent did not have a response.

Conclusion

Based on the outcomes from this particular instrument, online worship exists less as a support to real life worship and more as an outlet for curiosity about the experience for many who participate in it. Rather than enhancing strong real world religious beliefs, virtual

worship seems to fill a gap for those who go online and participate in these multi-user environments; for those who attend worship services in real life, it seems that to have an avatar who searches for and becomes involved in virtual worship of some kind would be a natural extension to the other life-simulating activities the avatar participates in.

There seems to be an unspoken desire by the creators of these online multi-user experiences to allow participants to experience a world that is different from the one in which they live. Second Life, by nature of its name and the description on the 'About' page, attempts to embody the concept: once I sign up to become a resident, I can begin creating my second life. However as I explored the continents, towns, and various locations 'in-world', I saw that people had come together and in effect had re-created reality; an avatar can live a life in Second Life that is very similar to real life. In real life, there are dance clubs, casinos, and realty offices. In real life, there is decadence. All this and more exists in the virtual world.

For educators, corporations, and clerics, the virtual landscape can be considered the new mission field. Both institutions of higher education and major businesses are using multi-user environments and social networking websites for student and employee recruitment efforts; churches and other places of worship are beginning to use the Internet in more innovative ways to reach their constituencies also.

A Closing Personal Word about the Survey

I was somewhat surprised at the outcome of the Virtual Worship Survey. Based on the interactions I have had with other virtual worshippers and various online faith communities, I expected that more respondents would indicate that virtual worship had an impact on their real life experiences with their faith. There is much activity during the virtual worship service my avatar attends: each one of the avatars represented has a real world counterpart who guides the avatar's actions; the raising of the avatar's hands and the expressions of agreement and scripture quotes that are written in the chat bar are all inspired by events associated with the worship service. I do not raise my avatar's hand or type a message of affirmation in the chat bar unless something in the service inspires me to do so. The sermon or message of the week causes me to consider additional scriptures; I frequently comment about and can incorporate the message from the virtual service into my real world Bible study or Sunday School classes into the conversations about the lessons being taught.

I assumed that many others who participate in virtual worship take what they hear with them into their real world faith experiences. After reviewing the results of my survey, I have come to understand that for many people, virtual worship does not have a strong impact on their real world experience; virtual worship appears to be another activity that helps people connect to others within the various MUVEs.

Implications

Online role-play or other MUVEs represent a potential new mission field for churches and religions. Through this medium, faith-based leaders can reach a number of audiences, including their current members who are unable to attend real-world services or current members who are interested in participating with others in worship activities more frequently; individuals who are not members of their specific congregation but worship under the tenets of the same faith and are interested in a virtual experience; and perhaps most importantly the 'faith-curious', who are seeking information about a particular faith and are using newer modes of communication to do so.

While current studies and the aforementioned survey imply that virtual religions will not supplant real-world worship, it is suggested that faith-based organizations consider incorporating an Internet component to their ministries to reach members and potential members who would ordinarily become disconnected or be left out of recruitment efforts. For example, it is important to note that as technology advances, more of the physically disabled are using the Internet to communicate; virtual worship provides more severely limited individuals with the opportunity to participate in a form of worship that mirrors real world faith activity.

My introduction opened with a quote from the Bible; in it Jesus states that where a few people are together for His sake, He will be there with them. Instructors of religion may want to consider the implications of virtual worship through the lens of this verse. Further examination is warranted regarding the suggestion that the real world counterparts of the avatars involved in virtual worship are also 'gathered together' and benefit from the service.

Finally, although the literature suggests that there are certain practices such as Holy Communion for those of the Catholic and certain Protestant faiths that are not appropriate for online worship experiences, the connection to others of similar belief and the ability to participate in other faith-specific online practices has value for some congregants. The inference here is not that faith communities must do as the world does by using technology and by developing virtual representations of themselves but that faith communities should

explore how to accomplish their mission; most faith-based organizations suggest that sharing the precepts of their belief with the masses is a priority and the virtual world may be an additional way to address that undertaking in order to reach a more technologically-dependent audience.

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