Our Lady of Persistent Liminality

Virtual Church, Cyberspace, and Second Life

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Can someone desecrate a virtual church? Is it possible to commit a "virtual" sin? Who would have thought, a few decades ago, that we'd ask what it means to "really" perform a religious ritual, or whether we need our bodies to do so? But given the recent proliferation of deeply immersive online experiences, these are exactly the questions we now ask. In the online virtual community Second Life, for example, one can find a "Catholic" church run by a non-priest in priest's digital garb, and people attending (and even sleeping through) services; a real-life Buddhist monk spreading the dharma; a replica of a Mayan temple with a real-life donation feature; and recently, a "prim" (a digital representation of a piece of wood, manufactured randomly) that some claim displays a miraculous image of the Virgin Mary. Clearly, there is religion in Second Life. But what kind of religion is it?

In 2006, I co-led a team that conducted a series of interviews in Second Life.[1] Based on the responses it is clear that, in online environments, distinctions between sacred and profane, virtual and real, play and ritual break down, challenging our sense of what is "here" and what is "there." Boundaries of all kinds—between play and ritual, between virtual reality and material reality, between the physical body and the digital body—are disrupted in online spaces like Second Life, raising questions about some of the most pertinent issues at stake in today's discussion of virtual religion. What is happening today may seem strange, new, and fascinating for the study of religion and what it means for people to come together in a collective experience, but it also highlights the notion that religious experience has always been a form of imaginative "play."

Virtual Religions: Churches in Second Life

What makes a space sacred? This question seems easier to answer in real life than in virtual space—one either enters a sanctuary or one doesn't. The physical space of a church or synagogue demarcates it as different from the surrounding world. However, in Second Life, one can see an erosion of the distinction between sacred and profane space.

Mark Brown is an Anglican priest who was ordained by the Bishop of Wellington, New Zealand, with the charge of "overseeing the virtual ministry instead of one based in a church built of bricks and mortar" (Hamilton 2008). Brown ministers exclusively in Second Life, and in his Christian Mission to a Virtual World, a missive about ministry in Second Life, he offers readers directions about how to download the software, log in, create an avatar (a digital representation of oneself), locate the virtual Anglican Cathedral, and then "teleport" to the Cathedral grounds:

> You would then be welcomed by the service leader and given the liturgy by clicking on a book located on a table near the entrance. You then click on a virtual pew and select 'sit.' The service leader will then either type the liturgy, or say it for all to hear or offer both . . . When it comes to the sermon the message has been prerecorded and at the appropriate time is streamed into Second Life. Following the service people [avatars] congregate around the Cathedral for

> fellowship and discussion. Wherever you are in the [real] world, if you have a good internet connection and a reasonably powerful computer you can attend church. (Brown 2008, 6)

Another SL resident called "Alwin Alcott" could be channeling religious theorist Mircea Eliade when he remarks that Second Life "can help with understanding the untouchable divine world."[2] Eliade defines the distinction between sacred and profane as "two modes of being in the world, two existential situations assumed by man in the course of his history" (1957, 14). He says that "[r]evelation of a sacred space makes it possible to obtain a fixed point and hence to acquire orientation in the chaos of homogeneity, to 'found the world' and to live in a real sense" (1957, 23). Despite the impossibility of absolutely identifying sacred and profane in Second Life, these categories enable us to examine how users see their own spaces and how this illuminates the erosion of the distinction between sacred and profane in cyberspace.

In particular, Eliade helps us understand the impulse to build, which the religious person does as a means of staving off chaos, and in apparent imitation of an unchanging sacred realm that is inaccessible in his present life. Entering a space that has not been given order well matches Eliade's description of chaos as "an uncosmicized because unconsecrated space, a mere amorphous extent into which no orientation has yet been projected, and hence in which no structure has yet arisen" (1957, 64). In Second Life, churches and temples establish for their builders a hierophany—"an irruption of the sacred" that makes an area "qualitatively different" from those around it, and as such "reveals an absolute fixed point, a center" in undifferentiated (chaotic) space (Eliade

1957, 26, 21). By building in the profane spaces in Second Life, residents "symbolically transform [them] into a cosmos through a ritual repetition of the cosmogony" (Eliade 1957, 31). Since, for the religious person, profane space represents absolute nonbeing, this gives a sense of order and predictability to a chaotic realm, and permits for the performance of ritual as it is authenticated by it. It is, for Eliade, a singularly religious act.

However, Krystina Derrickson argues that representation of the sacred in virtual space is not the same thing as the construction of sacred space in real life. Considering the online hajj, Derrickson points out the "ambiguous" nature of sacred space in Second Life, where the simulated Mecca "may be considered a form of sacred virtual space," because of the "detailed reconstructions of spiritually-charged physical loci," and the "behavioral regulations encouraged by sim owners in the treatment of those virtual spaces (2008).[3] For Derrickson, when sacred space is constructed in a virtual context, its sacredness is endowed by intent. The sacredness that any virtual building exhibits is thus contested, reflexively constructed, and subject to simultaneous multiple interpretations. We can see this in the opinions of Second Life resident "Beauman Hargson," who built a virtual replica of a well-known cathedral, and one day discovered a digital penis on its altar. As "Hargson" noted, rather nonchalantly: "one mouse-click and it is deleted so I don't mind too much about that."

Due to their virtual nature, sacred structures in Second Life, unlike real-life sacred structures, are infinitely malleable. Digital pollutions are momentary; sanitation is as easy as a click of the mouse. The ambiguous quality of "sacredness" in Second Life became apparent to me in the spring semester, 2008, when students in one of my classes explored the online hajj, and I was uncertain whether one of their avatars should "enter" the digital hajj in his Batman costume. Such questions are the hallmark of the contested nature of sacred space in a virtual context.

The ambiguity of the sacred means that certain traditional religious rituals are generally acceptable in Second Life, such as lighting Shabbat candles, praying, or meditating. However, for those with bona fide religious credentials who engage in ritual activity within Second Life, there are some limitations to on-line ritual performance. You can enact an animation to "kneel" while you pray (Hamilton), but you cannot engage in the traditional sacraments. You will find no marriages, baptisms, or eucharists performed in the Anglican Cathedral. The Catholic Church affirms this proscription, and has banned any consideration of virtual eucharist. Rabbi Yosef Y. Kazen argues that the embodied, physical aspect of religious identity is crucial for certain religious practices. Kazen, who manages a number of online resources for Orthodox Jews, claims that rituals such as a bar mitzvah ceremony or a prayer service with a minyan (ten adult males) cannot be conducted in a virtual environment. "We don't necessarily see the spiritual reality of what is happening [when we engage in embodied rituals]," he says, "but certain things have to be done with physical people, just as food has to be eaten by physical people" (quoted in Zaleski 1997, 19). Latter-day Saint and "Second Lifer" "Mo Hax" agrees: "Even though we Mormons take the sacrament (communion) and don't believe in literal transubstantiation, the rite seems out of place in SL, to me at least . . . priestly ordination is done 'by the laying on of hands.' Such things require physicality."

Rev. Brown explains that on line, the Anglican Church offers only "non-eucharistic services" along with Bible study and discussion groups; that is, those things that help to build a sense of community but which do not require any sense of physicality or verification of religious authority. This sentiment is echoed by New Zealander Anglican theologian Bosco Peters, who explains his view with implicit references to theological arguments about the relationship between “inner” and “outer” signs of grace:

> Baptism, immersion into the Christian community, the body of Christ, and hence into the nature of God the Holy Trinity may have some internet equivalents—for example, being welcomed into a moderated group. But my own current position would be to shy away from . . . having a virtual baptism of a Second Life avatar. Similarly, I would currently steer away from eucharist and other sacraments in the virtual world. Sacraments are outward and visible signs—the virtual world is still very much at the inner and invisible level. (Peters 2009)

Peters disapproves of performing the sacraments on line precisely because he claims they depend upon physicality. The traditional church-administered sacraments, he says, rely upon the “outward” (their physicality). He quips: “Baptism uses water, Eucharist uses bread and wine. We cannot pour a jar of jelly-beans over someone and say they are baptized. We cannot consecrate a bicycle and say this is the Eucharist. . . . Hence, we cannot baptize an avatar in the virtual world—as there is no water there, nor is an avatar a person on whom we can confer baptism” (Peters, 2009). The efficacy of Second Life activities, says Peters, are too “inner” and “invisible,” meaning, it seems, that they are too symbolic.

Such claims seem a bit odd when one considers the "inner" and "invisible" activity of the Holy Spirit hoped for by Christians through the performance of the sacraments, and when one observes that the sacraments themselves are "virtual" in that they merely represent something deeper, namely, the work of grace. Mark Brown also insists that his missionary work in Second Life is based on the Anglican commitment to an "incarnational mission," an equally problematic assertion for a group that sees physicality as a hallmark of authenticity. It seems that the real problem here is the confusion of what "real" means in a world of increasing representation and replication, and the way that this discussion highlights the "virtual" nature of symbolism already inherent in the most traditional aspects of ritual.

Accompanying the question of physicality is the related question of identity in Second Life which allows people to decide, in some cases, who religiously they would like to be and which religious mask (or masks) they would like to wear. On the one hand, Lisa Hamilton argues that virtual church "offers the safety of anonymity," in that "[n]othing prevents members from creating avatars in the opposite gender, or even ones resembling animals more than humans . . . there are no name tags in the virtual church" (2008). Second Life faith communities can invite diverse groups to mingle, as in Second Life mosques where Sufi, Salafi, Sunni, and Shia Muslims all congregate, and where, as one Muslim in Second Life remarks, "they all talk to each other, which might not be the case in real life, I regret to say" (Crabtree 2007).

On the other hand, questions of identity create new problems in the performance of online rituals. In an interview with "Omega," who read the liturgy and led the mass in Second Life, James Wagner Au learned that not all who seem to be priests on line really are. As "Omega" explains, he wanted the experience to be "like an actual mass" even though he is not Catholic and even though he is "certainly not a real minister, nor do I do this sort of thing in real life... I wanted to bring more real-world things into SL so people could experience them if they couldn't in real life" (2004). At the end of a service conducted by "Omega," a woman asked for a blessing of her unborn child. "Omega" replied that the blessing wouldn't be "legit" or "hold much value" since he was not a "real priest." In classic reflexive posture, the woman claimed "it would count to me."

Sacred (Cyber)Space: The Church of Second Life

What if we examine Second Life itself as a sacred space, entered into from the profane realm of our own ordinary lives? The computer defines its space (at least with current technology) with a window into which we peer—and into which we are invited to project our selves in some way or another. As Jennifer Cobb puts it, virtual reality is "a place that feels removed from the physical world" (1998, 31), just as the sacred space of a church or synagogue "feels removed" from the profane space of the physical world. One enters Second Life. One leaves Second Life. One shifts one's "appearance" when one enacts one's avatar. One forgoes the ordinary needs of daily life when one enters—there is no eating, no sleeping, and no aging in Second Life. Some have even considered the possibility of inhabiting virtual space as a sort of digital heaven, or perhaps, as Cobb describes it, "the Platonic realm incarnate" (ibid.).

Passage into Second Life involves ritualized behavior set in motion by the log-ins, clicking procedures, and teleporting that allow one to "enter" into the virtual environment. This ritual—what theorist of ritual Victor Turner might have called a rite of passage—is typically the place or time within which a participant crosses from one mode of being into another, typically via a symbolic limen or "threshold." According to Turner, rites of passage involve admission into the community at new levels. The initiant "passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state," and, once in this stage, stands outside of "the network of classifications" that traditionally organize and confer status. "Liminal entities" are therefore "betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial" (1969, 94-95).

The notion of the threshold resonates well with the boundary where the hardware of the body meets the hardware of the computer that houses a virtual "space," and if there were any place where we might be able to observe the presence of distinctive realms, it would be in the threshold between them. When my avatar first entered Second Life in 2006, it appeared on "Orientation Island" which was, at one time, the place where all new avatars were spawned. When one appeared in this digital environment, it exhibited what the Second Life developers call the "default avatar look." Everyone's avatar looked exactly the same, with the exception of basic gender patterns. As soon as you learned how to use the controls, however, you could make changes to your avatar's appearance, including its body shape, skin color, and hair and eye color, as well as "attachments" (clothes, objects, etc.). You could also quickly acquire animations, or mini-programs that allow specified movements (Rymaszewski et al., 80). Experienced "Second Lifers" could easily recognize a "newbie" by the quality of his or her avatar, and by his or her agility using animations.

The parallels between the rituals performed in Second Life and Turner's academic description of rites of passage suggest an important relationship between them. Of the liminal entities engaging in a rite of passage, Turner says: "It is as though they are being reduced or ground down to a uniform condition to be fashioned anew and endowed with additional powers to enable them to cope with their new station in life. . . Secular distinctions of rank and status disappear or are homogenized." Turner notes that "as liminal beings they have no status, property, insignia, secular clothing indicating rank or role, position in a kinship system—in short, nothing to distinguish them from their fellow neophytes or initiands." In a rite of passage, a "neophyte," says Turner, must "be a tabula rasa, a blank slate, on which is inscribed new knowledge and wisdom of the group . . . in order to prepare them to cope with their new responsibilities" (1969, 103). New initiants into Second Life, too, are "ground down," in that their real-life selves are shorn away in some respects, leaving only a digital visage that represents them in the "new" world.

Even for those who are long-time "Second Lifers," the experience of liminality is refreshed in some ways with each new session, suggesting that the user indeed experiences what Krystina Derrickson calls "a profound sense of entry" (2006). She describes the experience of logging on:

> Once the user enters her password, her avatar begins to materialize, coalescing from a gray mass into a patchwork of flashing colors, and finally into her ultimate form, every time awakening into the sim where she ended her previous session. The sim itself loads, flickering into existence, and bodies begin to appear moving

> around and beyond her at various distances though she cannot move. There is a sense of immersion in an immaterial but materializing landscape. (2006)

This moment of transition, or passage through a ritual portal, has been aptly described by Arnold van Gennep in his more individual look at liminal rites: "the door is the boundary between the foreign and domestic worlds in the case of an ordinary dwelling, between the profane and the sacred worlds in the case of a temple." Therefore, says van Gennep, "to cross the threshold is to unite oneself with a new world" (1996, 532). In the case of Second Life, the "door" is the process of logging on: the series of mouse-clicks and intentional digital interactions that constitute the "passage" from one "world" to the next.

Turner's description of the rite of passage extends into the new Second Life resident's ongoing orientation into the new world, where the shared nature of the experience is again apparent. Users in new online environments usually must spend some time in what T. L. Taylor calls "newbie zones," where they spend time with other "low-level" players and "learn the initial skills required for the game and the ways to coordinate with other" (2006, 31). Gradually, users "undergo a socialization process" that helps them go beyond initial training and become participants in a "community of practice" (2006, 32). In Second Life, everyone begins with the same status but gradually accumulates animations, customized hair, professionally rendered "skin," and group associations that help them to be recognized as "insiders" or true "Second Lifers."

Beyond the point of orientation, Second Life is itself a liminal space that affords initiants the freedom to do otherwise unacceptable things, prompting a temporary disruption of social order that helps maintain the status quo in real life. In such rituals, liminality temporarily grinds all participants down to the same level, so that the most powerful are subjected to the playful derision of the least powerful, representing what Turner calls communitas. Thus we have an explanation for the popularity of an event like the grid-wide winter holiday snowball fight in which the “Lindens” (the only institutionalized power structure in Second Life) are pelted by “everyone else.” According to Turner, liminality focuses on the “ritual powers of the weak” (Turner 1969, 102). People are permitted to “revile” the chief-elect “and most fully express [their] resentment, going into as much detail as [they] desire[].” The chief-elect must simply listen in patience and humility (Turner 1969, 101).

This sense of communitas offers some people—those who are typically without power—experiences of temporary potency. Among the topics discussed in connection with video games—and, one could argue, Second Life—notes Miroslaw Filiciak, are “[e]scapism, getting away from everyday life worries, and deriving satisfaction in doing things that we could never do in the real world” (2003, 99). “Roger Junchke,” a self-proclaimed Second Life “terrorist,” spends his time blowing up virtual churches. The act is excusable, however, since, as “Junchke” claims, “nothing actually gets destroyed in SL so all it really does is lights and smoke.” For “Junchke,” his actions have a liminal function, in that they are his “benign and petty way of expressing my dislike of Christian fundamentalists.”

Not all examples of liminal experimentation—from “naked avatars sitting on the Koran to a swastika painted on the synagogue” (Crabtree 2007)—are well received in Second Life. According to Second Life’s Community Standards, certain areas are designated as appropriate for “offensive” and/or sexual activities and others are not.

Upon joining Second Life, each resident agrees to a code of conduct that includes a statement about not engaging in “assault” in a “Safe Area”; that is, not “shooting, pushing or shoving another Resident . . . [or] creating or using scripted objects which singularly or persistently target another Resident” (“Community Standards” n.d.). According to the authors of Second Life: The Official Guide, in the online world you can participate in all the “virtual hedonism” that you want—“having as much virtual sex as possible” or “shooting at other people, possibly while piloting a spaceship” (2007, 13). You can even purchase animations and identify partners willing to enact virtual rape within Second Life, or find avatars who look like children to engage in animated pedophiliac pornographic fantasies. Obviously, the ethical implications of these virtual acts require serious scrutiny. This demands that we take seriously the problem of defining just what kind of “space” Second Life is, and who “we” are when we inhabit it.

In Violence and the Sacred, Rene Girard argues that societies periodically need a disruption of social order. After establishing his case that society by its very nature is invested with a desire for violence and retribution, Girard argues that, through selecting a sacrificial victim, “society is seeking to deflect upon a relatively indifferent victim, a ‘sacrificeable victim,’ the violence that would otherwise be vented on its own members.” Thus violence is “not denied,” but is “diverted to another object, something it can sink its teeth into” (1977, 4). If this is how things work in Second Life, then we can understand the violence in it to be functioning within a broadly religious framework.

One such violent area is the “Death Pit” in Second Life. According to “Second Lifer” Warren Ellis:

> A mechanical Death Pit has been constructed on the Potato Farm, a parcel on the north road. A square caged floor. The floor is made out of metal panels. The idea is that people don the Wastelands Combat Head-Up-Display—a piece of software that turns your avatar into a videogame character that can deal and receive damage—pull one of the local, horribly primitive weapons, and slash each other to death in the cage. But the metal panels are tricked out. Some flip under your feet and drop you down a hole. Some pop out, I swear, buzzsaws that are coded to do your avatar damage, complete with squirting-blood animation. If the designer wasn't on Second Life, he'd be working at [U.S. military prison] Abu Ghraib. Or for Dr Evil. (Ellis 2007)

Clearly, the claim that this violence is not "real" contributes to its appeal. The case of the non-player character (NPC) in Second Life (and other virtual reality contexts) pushes the question of virtual violence even further. In the Buddhist hells of Second Life, one can see crudely-crafted human NPCs perpetually burning, being impaled, and thrown about by huge and loathsome horned creatures. In light of Girard's analysis, it would seem that the NPC victims in the Buddhist hells "can be exposed to violence without fear of reprisal" (Girard 1977, 13) precisely because they are permanently liminal, looking like but not being fully human. Had these NPCs been programmed with more human-like characteristics or interactive scripts, the problem of liminality in virtual reality would be even more sharply defined.

However, the victims need not be NPCs to fulfill a violent urge in a liminal environment. Girard argues that society is bloodthirsty by nature, and that by offering a sacrifice, people in a given society are appeased, and thus the sacrifice "serves to protect the entire community from its own violence" (1977, 8). This form of violence, Girard argues, is functional because it is "a form of violence that will put an end once and for all to violence itself" (1977, 27). The ritualizing of violence, including both actual sacrifice and rituals merely remembering sacrifice, function for society precisely because they "keep violence outside the community" (1977, 92). The sacrificial ritual, in fact, is "designed to function during periods of relative calm" because it is "not curative, but preventive" (1977, 102). This may help us to understand the remarks of resident "Thadeus Kalig," who describes a Second Life group that was "impailing [sic] themselves one night," complete with "blood pools and all." He describes this event as "ritualistic." "Rex Dars" says that the activity in Second Life is "a role play and not intended to [be] real." It is "like acting out a sceen [sic] from a movie." For "Dars," "what happens online is totally sep[a]rate [from real life in most cases] . . . if it [is] play acting and somebody gets 'killed' I see nothing wrong with that."

Game studies theorists Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman argue that games can "play with meaning" and create a sort of "social contract" within which "forbidden play" can occur. Games can "create social contexts in which, very often, behaviors take place that would be strictly forbidden in society at large." In this "forbidden play" space, the player is "always in danger of [really] overstepping the social boundaries of play, jumping the gun, and breaking the magic circle" (2003, 479). Cindy Poremba calls such experiences "brink games." Brink games "use their status as 'only a game' as a strategic gesture." Poremba is interested in those types of "forbidden play" that most intensely play with the boundary between game and reality, games that use the conceit of "it's just a game" with "a knowing wink" (2007, 772). "Brink" games exploit the relationship between the real, the virtual, and the taboo, and are exciting precisely because of "the tangible threat of [a] breach" (2007, 776). Although most Second Life users claim that it is not a "game," it does exhibit the qualities of "forbidden play" by inviting its users to find that place where virtuality and reality meet. Of course, none of this answers the question of whether Second Life is a place of "play" or a space of shared human community and thus subject to certain standards of decency. The ability to engage in what I call "persistent liminality" means that some people will see their bad behavior as "play" anywhere online, and others will insist that the online world be subject to the same ethical standards as real life.

Not surprisingly, the authors of Second Life: The Official Guide explain that in Second Life, we can experience powers we might otherwise not: "Second Life works as if you were a god in real life. Not an almighty god, perhaps—more like one of those mythological minor gods, who tended to specialize in certain areas, get drunk, have sex, fight, and [most important] cast spells left, right and center. . . And just like a mythological god, you're able to fly, and teleport wherever you like in an instant" (Rymaszewski et al. 2007, 7). But just as believers today can imagine Heaven but not enter into it in this life, so those who dwell in the real world can never fully inhabit the "sacred" space of Second Life. Game theorists have recognized the yearning induced by virtual reality. Miroslaw Filiciak says that the experience of interacting in virtual reality is characterized by intense desire: "We make the screen a fetish; we desire it, not only do we want to watch the screen but also to 'be seen' on it" (2003, 100). Ken Hillis expresses precisely such a sentiment about virtual reality's ability to induce a sense of longing and transcendence:

> There is a widespread belief that space (understood variously as distance, extension, or orientation) constitutes something elemental, and VR [virtual reality] reflects support for a belief that because light illuminates space it may therefore produce space a priori. As a result, VR users may experience desire or even something akin to a moral imperative to enter into virtuality where space and light...have become one immaterial "wherein." The ability to experience a sense of entry into the image and illumination enabled by VR's design, coupled with both esoteric and pragmatic desires to view the technology as a "transcendence machine" or subjectivity enhancer, works to collapse distinctions between the conceptions built into virtual environments by their developers and the perceptive faculties of users. (2006, 349)

Although writing before the advent of Second Life, Brenda Brasher makes a similar point: "That cyberspace is taken for a materialized instance of eternity may explain in part our passionate obsession with it . . . To the true believers, cyberspace is a temporal heaven. Except, of course, it isn't" (2001, 53). The computer functions as a "transcendence machine," inducing in us what Margaret Wertheim calls "a longing for the annihilation of pain, restriction, and even death" (1999, 259), and making our desire to inhabit virtual space strangely akin to our desire for immortality.

Brasher observes in cyberspace what she calls “omnitemporality”—“the religious idea of eternity as perpetual persistence”—and says that cyberspace is “[c]ontinuously accessible and ostensibly disconnected from the cycles of the earth” (Brasher 2001, 52). It is no surprise that cyber-imagination and religious imagination are related:

> [Virtual reality] appeared to its first Western consumers to be a concrete expression or materialization of the monks’ concept of eternity . . . It is always present. Whatever exists within it never decays. Whatever is expressed in cyberspace, as long as it remains in cyberspace, is perpetually expressed . . . the quasi-mystical appeal that cyberspace exudes stems from this taste of eternity that it imparts to those who interact with it. (Brasher 2001, 52)

The desire for permanence is also easily seen in virtual memorials of the type Brasher discusses (2001, 54) and which have also cropped up recently in Second Life. Users who wish to mourn the loss (through re-entry into real-life) of a fellow Second Life resident can memorialize his or her avatar in Second Life with a complete burial and re-usable casket. Of Memoris, a virtual graveyard in Second Life, blogger Warren Ellis says that, when real-life people die, they are sometimes memorialized in Second Life in this new way because message boards, the previous mode of grieving, “makes such losses transient. The community rolls on, and tributes and remembrance get lost in the churn. It is, to say the least, an unusual idea, that in a virtual world a permanent space be erected in memoriam of the people we’ve lost” (Ellis 2007). An earlier Web-page version of a cyber-memorial, Cyber Heaven, provokes what Brasher calls “the elusive tang of cyber-eternity" (2001, 55), the longing for permanence that is expressed by some in their fascination with virtuality. This permanence remains tantalizingly out of reach in Second Life.

But aside from questions about ongoing memorials of the departed, can a soul or self survive the death of the physical body in Second Life? SL resident "Harry Bulder" thinks so when he describes the potential for "cybernetic afterlife." Eventually, he says, "people will be able to create what amounts to a 'clone of themselves that exists in the network." The virtual clone can "learn what it is like to be 'me' and gradually become indistinguishable . . . but it will not be a mortal being, just a program, and thus without death." For Bulder, the intangible self that enters into Second Life could remain there, in digitized form, when the physical body is no longer an acceptable vessel for it. Margaret Wertheim aptly points out that "while the concept of transcending bodily limitation was once seen as theologically possible, now it is increasingly conceived as technologically feasible" (1999, 263; emphasis in original).

Considering the implications of such theories, Wertheim says that "[t]he idea that the essence of a person can be separated from his or her body and transformed into the ephemeral media of computer code is a clear repudiation of the materialist view that man is made of matter alone" (1999, 268). This transformation would make Second Life a de-facto non-material heaven, presumably amenable to a postmodern, post-Enlightenment, secular world. Wertheim remarks that cyberspace becomes, in such a view, "a place outside space and time, a place where the body can somehow be reconstituted in all its glory" (1999, 263). Were cybernetic afterlife to be achieved, the user, or some remnant thereof, would at last fully inhabit the sacred space of virtual reality, and—dare I say—

heaven? Wertheim notes that were the “immaterial self” to “survive the death of the body and ‘live on’ forever beyond physical space and time,” we would be “back in the realm of medieval Christian dualism” (1999, 268). In other words, the “transcendence machine” could enable a final resolution of the liminality of space, place, and person.

Despite its consistent function as a meaningful means of entry into the virtual world, the rite of passage into Second Life is not a stable one, and in this way contrasts with many traditional religious rites of passage, especially those that are integral and longstanding parts of a community’s life. Early in Second Life’s development, upon entering the world, one’s avatar was spawned looking just like the other avatars of the same gender. More recently, one was led through a series of fluency-building exercises, one of which was a series of challenges to appease the “volcano goddess” while learning how to chat with other users. Today, new avatars are spawned in various “Help Islands” around Second Life, and users can define a distinctive avatar before it ever walks in virtual space.

This fluidity is characteristic of the online experience in general; it is “ambiguous”; it resists normal social and cultural classifications; it places us “neither here nor there” but rather “betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial” (Turner 1969, 95). In Second Life, one doesn’t cross over from one state into the other in any kind of permanent way as, say, one might if one were a bar mitzvah or experienced some other coming-of-age rite of passage. Rather, all of Second Life invokes a state of persistent liminality and all the complexities that such a notion brings along with it. Such fluidity and persistent liminality also characterize the representation of self in Second Life. Sherry Turkle says that when people select avatars in virtual reality they don't simply "become who they play." Rather, they "play who they are or who they want to be or who they don't want to be" (Turkle 1997, 192). As Elizabeth Reid puts it, in cyberspace identities are self-defined in that "virtual reality is a construct within the mind of a human being" (1995, 166). The effect of interaction with and through one's avatar can affect one's daily life, since players "sometimes talk about their real selves as a composite of their characters and sometimes talk about their screen personae as means for working on their RL lives" (Turkle 1997, 192). In this respect, virtual environments produce the possibility of "liquid identity" (Filiciak 2003, 92).

Of course, the notion of hybrid identity has always been a part of human experience in drama and in religious ritual. For example, hybridity of identity characterizes Turner's analysis of the function of masks in traditional African ritual. In assessing the role of masks in a ritual for boys' circumcision, Turner found himself uncertain how participants in the ritual viewed the relationship between mask-wearer, ancestor (shade) represented, and the "Mvweng'i" (divine spirit) inhabiting the wearer: "Some informants say that the shade is identified with Mvweng'i, others that shade and masker operate in conjunction. The latter say that the shade rouses Mvweng'i and enlists his aid in afflicting the victim" in the rite of passage (1969, 17). It is remarkable how the same questions could be applied to one's sense of self in Second Life: are you your embodied self, your avatar, the role your avatar is currently playing, or someone else entirely when you are online? Or are you all of these at once?

If the use of avatars in Second Life evinces a hybridity of identity, then the same complexity must accompany the deeds enacted by avatars. Indeed, in our interviews residents' opinions about the nature of sin in Second Life depended largely upon their views about the relationship between embodied self and avatar. For residents like "Chumov Rapunoch," behavior in Second Life is not related to real-life at all: "it is less sinning if you do it in SL . . . it's not like real SIN." If people engage in transgressive sexual acts, for example, they "get away with it because there is no harm to anyone . . .even though it is a sin and against the law in RL, people do it in SL, so SL 'downgrades' these actions." For others, it has primarily to do with the intent of the performer. "Rex Dars" told us that "the person mak[es] the decisions [regardless of whether] it's a real-life or Second Life body carrying [a sinful action] out . . . but . . . some thing[s] are done [in] a role-play and not intended to be 'real' like acting out a scene in a movie or something . . . it's all subject to interpretation I guess." Intent is also the deciding factor for "Boli Lurri": "If you believe that certain actions are sinful and yet act them out, either in RL or SL, then . . . according to [one's] religion, that person has sinned." So is virtual sin non-existent because we are not the same as our virtual representations? Or is it "real" sin because we are somehow intrinsically connected to our virtual selves? Can the answer be different for different people (and avatars)?

For other Second Life residents, there is a definite continuity between embodied self and avatar, such that acts engaged in within Second Life are claimed to be of real-life consequence. Second Life resident "Murdoch Moore" told us that "I am still Jewish even when I am in Second Life . . . the idea of being someone else in Second Life makes me uncomfortable." SL resident "Jonah Song" claims that "Second Life is just an extension of RL [real life]. 'Real life' is made up of interactions, the outflowing of people's inner lives. Second Life is the same thing." When asked about the notion of the soul, "Song" suggested that the soul can inhabit virtual and real space equally as well: “Just like our physical bodies aren’t us, but what our spirits wear to interact in a physical world, we’re interacting in a digital world through ‘digital bodies.’” The views “Song” expressed about the soul as the seat of moral responsibility allow him to view the relationship between the real world and Second Life as morally continuous: “Jesus taught that if you look upon a woman lustfully, you’ve committed adultery in your heart; or if you harbor murderous thoughts, you’ve murdered in your heart. We just use our bodies to sin, but it’s not our bodies sinning but US. And the same thing is true for a place like the virtual world.” For residents like “Song,” the self or soul transcends its inhabitation in either digital or physical vessels. One might even say that for “Song,” it is the soul that is most real—and that it can, apparently, inhabit our bodies and our avatars simultaneously.

“Horace Max,” a Latter-day Saint SL resident, agrees. If we engage in activities in Second Life, “the consequences are spiritual.” “Max” describes a virtual romantic relationship in which “one friend and I flew around in the sunset, danced and such, but I was plagued with real mortal guilt after that.” For “Max,” though, the “spirit” resides only in RL: “there isn’t a SL spirit.” This means that the consequences of activities in Second Life can only have real-life impact. SL resident “Cloud Meade” concurs: “acting out the things we think—even though it may only be virtual—has [real-life] consequences—ones that can hurt others.” “Richard Bartle” makes a similar argument when he advises would-be game designers that virtual worlds “are an extension of real life” because “the interaction between players gives rise to a real-life morality that makes virtual worlds more than the mere games they would otherwise be.” Says “Bartle”: “it’s because we’re real that virtual worlds must be treated in moral terms as if they were equally real" (2003, 589; emphasis in original). In this case, "persistent liminality" calls for a consistent moral framework.

However, one need not believe in God to argue for continuity of meaning between real-life and Second Life. Atheist resident "Benji Midway" told us that "SL is no less 'real' than the rest of our lives. The people are 'real' . . . Both my physical body and my avatar's 'body' are actually just a persistent temporal organization of subatomic particles." For "Midway," an avatar is "similarly an extension of [the] body." Because he saw his Second Life self as identical to his real-life self, SL resident "Daniel Kendall" eloped virtually with another resident and they were married in-world. When asked about the ceremony and its significance, "Kendall" said, "the intent counts. We didn't need the big ceremony. We are married, no matter the physical aspects included . . . [and] it means the same to me as in real-life." When we spoke with "Kendall," he was about to meet his new "wife" in real-life in a few hours. So what are we to make of virtual sin? Unfortunately, there is no simple answer. Different people engage with their avatars in different ways—and how they view the actions of those avatars depends tremendously on the degree of immersion in the lives of their avatars; on the nature of the virtual space they inhabit; and on their view of the relationship between the physical body and the virtual one.

Play, Ritual, and the Virtual: Making Sense of the Sacred

It seems it should be easy to define Second Life as either play or ritual—but it isn't. What does it mean to "play" at something, and how does this compare to the performance of a religious ritual? Play and ritual have a long history of imitating one another. Johan Huizinga, a scholar of play and the author of the landmark study Homo Ludens—describes play as “a free standing activity quite consciously outside ‘ordinary’ life as being ‘not serious’ but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly” (2006, 107). Huizinga argues that a sacred performance is “played or performed within a playground that is literally ‘staked out’ . . . A sacred space, a temporarily real world of its own, has been expressly hedged off for it” (108). To Huizinga, “[t]he turf, the tennis court, the chess-board and pavement hopscotch cannot formally be distinguished from the temple or the magic circle.” We should recognize, he says, “the essential and original identity of play and ritual” so we can “recognize the hallowed spot as a playground” (113). This suggests that play and ritual have a lot more in common than we might at first think.

Like the tennis court or the chessboard, Second Life is a space apart from everyday life, and can thus be viewed as a form of play. But participation in it also can be viewed as a ritual. To make matters even more complicated, within Second Life there are areas that some residents treat as “magic circles” of play, and others that are viewed as arenas for ritual, and how one defines the boundary between them fluctuates widely based on the varying perspectives of the “Second Lifers.” If we then introduce the boundary between the “virtual” and the “real” into this complex stew, the possibilities for a single ordering paradigm become increasingly unlikely.

Accordingly, T.L. Taylor questions whether identifying such a line between the virtual world and the real world—or between play and non-play—is even reasonable. For Taylor, the magic circle of play “can hide (and even mystify) the much messier relationship that exists between spheres—especially in the realm of MMOGs [massively multiplayer online games].” If we look at how people have utilized online spaces, he says, “we find people negotiating levels of self-disclosure and performance, multiple forms of embodiment, and the importing of meaningful offline issues and values into online spaces” (2006, 152). Calling for “non-dichotomous models,” Taylor claims that “the boundary between online and offline life is messy, contested, and constantly under negotiation” (2006, 153). This “messiness” can be seen in all aspects of theoretical analysis of religion and Second Life.

Virtual reality is liminal, fluid, and hybrid, as we are too when we interact with it, making the distinction between religion and media a harder one to draw than we might like. After all, religion and media are both about mediation and communication—how we receive important information and how its transmission affects reception. Media theorist Stewart Hoover rejects the oversimplified assumption that “the media and religion are separate and competing spheres and that, on some level, they inhabit the roles of ‘sacred’ (religion) and ‘profane’ (the media) influences in contemporary life.” Instead, what has developed is “a less definite space where those distinctions exist in a state of fluidity and flux” (Hoover 2001, 50). This fluidity is readily evident in what “Second Lifers” had to tell us in our interviews about five recurring topics: ritual, violence, identity, sin, and the afterlife. These categories cropped up again and again as the ones most important to residents and most pertinent to the discussion of what is really going on with religion in Second Life. The notion of persistent liminality is easily recognizable in the contested nature of religious experience in Second Life.

It's not just "Orientation Island" or some other initiation activity that produces a liminal state in Second Life. Rather, throughout the Second Life experience the sacred and profane meet—virtual and real collide—and people are at once here and there, but neither here nor there. Second Life seems to offer persistent liminality, the on-demand and consistently ambiguous experience of liminality, characterized by the ambiguities of game/real life, sacred/profane, ritual/play, and self/other. In other words, the dissolution of absolute categories is a hallmark feature of religion in Second Life.

So why should we care about Second Life? Because it makes us think about what we mean when we talk about sacred space, about ritual, about self and community, and of course about religion. Second Life invites what Krystina Derrickson dubs a "Baudrillardian blurring of the RL/SL [real-life/Second Life] treatment of space" (Derrickson, 2008). In Second Life, a place like the online mosque in Mecca is designated as sacred, "and yet it is a contentious designation" (Derrickson 2008). Does this mean that the distinction between the sacred and the profane has lost significance when applied to Second Life? Not necessarily—it seems that what people believe when they enter a virtual context can help us understand what they believe about what happens within it. Remarking on the nature of personal intent in creating meaning in virtual contexts, Lorne Dawson asserts: "All that matter are the experiences that are experimentally generated and manipulated by the skilful understanding and use of words and the temporary worlds they create in the minds of individuals" (Dawson 2005, 25). Even if an easy distinction between the real and the virtual has collapsed in online worlds like Second Life, the category of the "sacred" may still have salience for those who utilize it: "In the classic postmodernist mode, the simulation can be substituted for the reality, yet there is not really a complete collapse of the sign and the signified since the focus is still on some seemingly 'authentic' experience" (Dawson 2005, 26). In other words, the concept of the "sacred" can help us make sense of how people think about the sacred, even if it cannot point to something about which everyone will easily agree. It seems self-evident that a postmodern Baudrillardian, reflexive perspective is required—whether we like it or not.

The situation is characteristic of religion-at-large in today's massively-mediated, complex, globalizing, multi-religious world. Referring to the construction of religious identity, Wade Clark Roof defines what he calls "reflexive spirituality," seeing in today's world "a situation encouraging a more deliberate, engaging effort on people's part for their own spiritual formation, both inside and outside religious communities" (1999, 75). This may be the best news yet, since reflexive spirituality is often thinking spirituality, as people decide what to do with the vast menu of options before them. In today's world, "[r]esponsibility falls more upon the individual—like that of the bricoleur—to cobble together a religious world from available images, symbols, moral codes, and doctrines, thereby exercising considerable agency in defining and shaping what is considered to be religiously meaningful" (1999, 75). In Second Life, this "cobbling" may involve some new construction as well, making it possible to consider religious identity in Second Life not as deconstructive of identity but constructive and deliberate in a way that interaction with less immersive media—and with less virtual bodies—may not be.

Dawson asks if "the exercise of reflexivity, long a hallmark of detached rational thought, is becoming, by radical extension, a new means of legitimating religious practice or even inducing 'authentic' religious experience," so that "the experience of reflexivity is itself being sacralized" (2005, 26). This is reflexivity at its most influential—reflexivity alone determines whether or not an individual's use of the Internet for online religious experience is "real" or not, and what that means for users. Furthermore, reflexivity itself is subject to the persistent liminality of experience that requires that we decide for ourselves if we are here, there, or somewhere in between. Interacting with Second Life, it can be all of the above. Perhaps virtual ritual creates its own justification in the form of self-reflection on its createdness. Stephen O'Leary seems to be saying something like this when he remarks that "ritual action in cyberspace is constantly faced with evidence of its own quality as constructed, as arbitrary, and as artificial, a game played with no material stakes or consequences" (cited in Dawson 2005, 21). But the very notion that construction is a crucial component in interactive new media may cause people to acknowledge more openly the constructed nature of all of religion, and to recognize the element of "play" that has always been a part of religious life.

NOTES

1. An earlier version of this paper (with Kim Gregson and Austra Zubkovs) was presented at the national meeting of the Popular Culture Association, Spring 2007. I deeply appreciate the substantial and invaluable assistance offered by Kim and Austra; their work managing the in-world collection of material made the interviews possible. The analysis of the data presented here is entirely my own.
2. An "SL resident" (also referred to in this work as a "Second Lifer") refers to anyone who has created an avatar (see note 3), passed through the orientation

procedures, and has become an online member in the world of Second Life. Many "Second Lifers" refer to the virtual world by its initials ("SL"), distinguishing it from the real (or non-virtual) world, which they often identify simply as "RL." I have changed the usernames of all interviewees in Second Life to protect their anonymity. Because all Second Lifers already have a "username" that masks their true identity and I met them only via their "usernames," this means that I have changed their "usernames" to add another level of anonymity within the world of Second Life.

3. "Sim" is short for "simulation" and refers to any number of structures made by users in the Second Life world. In this case, the "sim" is the digital replica of Mecca.

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