

Kerstin Radde-Antweiler (Ed.)

Being Virtually Real?



Virtual Worlds from a Cultural Studies' Perspective.

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RELIGION BECOMING VIRTUALISED.

INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE ON RELIGION IN VIRTUAL WORLDS.¹

KERSTIN RADDE-ANTWEILER

In the academic field of “Cultural Studies”, as in other cultural and social disciplines, the relevance of the Internet as a new media is constantly increasing. New areas of academic research can be found on homepages, weblogs, in chat rooms, in newsgroups and in virtual 3D environments, where religious topics are presented and continuously discussed. As Christine Hine stated in her programmatic book “Virtual Ethnography”, the Internet can be seen as a “cultural context in its own right”. In this respect the Internet has become an important part of our cultural and scientific resources, heritage and memory and as such it also forms, modifies and creates new cultural structures.

Therefore, the challenges of this media provide the scholar with materials in a still mainly unexplored field of research, demanding new scientific methods and methodologies in order to analyse the likewise new realm of religious beliefs and utterances in this virtual space. New scientific methods and methodologies are needed in order to analyse the similarly new realm of religious beliefs and utterances in this virtual realm.

In the context of Internet Research, the area of Virtual Worlds offer a particularly new environment to meet, communicate and perform social and cultural activity in a virtual reality, irrespective of geographical and real-life body conditions. Examples of such Virtual Worlds – which can be defined as “digital spaces, occupied in large part by human controlled agents, known as avatars, participating in a collective virtual space” (Krausnick 2006: 1) - are “Active Worlds” and “The Palace” - both in use since 1995 - and “There” since 1998. The most prominent and famous example is the privately-owned, subscription-based 3D application “Second Life“ that first became available to the public online in 2003. But also so called “Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games” (MMORPGs) like “World of Warcraft”, “Everquest” oder “Diablo” offer their users an environment with religious symbols and myths where social and cultural activities take place. An increasing number of residents

¹ Sincere thanks are given to Laila Abu-Er-Rub for the helping hand in editorial work and Jan Wessel for the layout !

use such environments therefore not only as a kind of virtual playground but as an extension of their real-life possibilities. This “virtual life” has to be taken seriously: The users are both socially and religiously very active and consequently transfer their real-life activities into virtual space. Like Krausnick already stated in 2006: “These virtual worlds have not only evolved from text based to graphical but they have also begun to depart from existing as spaces to play to social meeting places.” (Krausnick 2006: 1).

Sadly enough, until now, the research area of so-called Virtual Worlds has mostly been excluded, sometimes even banned from scholarly attention. In the special issue of the journal *Online - Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* on the topic “*Being Virtually Real. Virtual Worlds from a Cultural Studies' Perspective*” therefore different academic papers that deal with the ideas of cultural and / or religious activities in Virtual Worlds like “Second Life“ and MMORPGs such as “Everquest,“ “World of Warcraft,“ etc were collected. A huge amount of research from different disciplines was compiled, trying to make a contribution to this disregarded area of research.

In the first part of this journal the problems of defining Virtual Worlds and therefore also determining the object of the investigation are central themes.

Gordon Calleja gives an historical overview about the history of Virtual Worlds. In his article “*Virtual Worlds Today: Gaming and Online Sociality*” he thus focuses on the problems that come with trying to define “virtual” and “Virtual Worlds” and gives an illustrative overview about various types of different so-called Virtual Worlds.

Libuse Martinkova discusses in her article “*Computer Mediated Religious Life of Technoshamans and Cybershamans*” the artificial dichotomy of 'Virtuality' and 'Reality' and online and offline borders. In the case study she presents two different groups and thus two different reasons for applying new technology to ritualistic settings: Computer technology is in one setting mainly used as a tool for specific shamanistic rituals whereas in the other setting computer technology serves as a space for conducting shamanic rituals.

The virtual ethnographic study by **Kathryn Stam** and **Michael Scialdone** seeks to understand social interaction through the Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPG) communities of Furcadia and Runescape. Their article on “*Where Dreams and Dragons Meet. An Ethnographic Analysis of two Examples of Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games*“ attempt to understand some key aspects of this genre of online activity and interaction. Using an adaptation of Grounded Theory and analytic induction methods, they explored the nature of these two online communities and the interaction between characters. In this context they discuss some of the main methodological and ethical issues

such as the difference between public versus private spheres, the concept of consent in challenging environments, new considerations of reciprocity within the game, the building of online trust, and representation of the researcher of him- or herself.

In the second section three different articles deal with the British Christian Virtual Church “Church of Fools”. This project started as a three-month experiment on the 11th of May 2004, sponsored by the Methodist Church of England. For the first time it became possible to conduct worship online. This innovation was extensively covered by both the press and the media.

Simon Jenkins, the founder of the famous “Church of Fools”, writes about his experiences of turning Christian rituals into virtual reality. In his article *“Rituals and Pixels. Experiments in Online Church”* he describes from an emic perspective the beginnings and the formation of the “Church of Fools” as an experiment of a 3D-Faith-Environment, its development and his latest project, “St Pixels”.

In his article *“The Church of Fools: Virtual Ritual and Material Faith”* **Randy Kluver** looks to investigate the nature of the spiritual world created by the Church of Fools “from the other side” and explores the relevance of that world for the traditional conceptions of Christian spirituality. He explores the relevance of that world both to the traditional conceptions of Christian spirituality, as well as the way in which the attempt to bring traditional Christianity into cyberspace pays homage to the new world driven largely by the Internet. In an investigation into the “Church of Fools” experience, in which he examines the virtual reality portal provided as well as interviewing “Church of Fools” participants, Kluver focuses on the way in which the “Church of Fools” combines a material sense of spirituality with the Virtual World created online.

In the last article in this section *“Online Rituals in Virtual Worlds. Christian Online Services between Dynamics and Stability”* **Nadja Miczek** reflects on Christian ritual settings in two case studies analysing different Online Services: “Church of Fools” and “Second Life.” She thereby focuses on recent concepts of ritual theory, like Ritual Dynamics and Ritual Transfer and broaches the issues of invention, transformation and exclusion at different stages of ritual action.

The next section focuses on a specific Virtual World, namely the privately owned 3D-Environment “Second Life”.

Kerstin Radde-Antweiler gives an overview or a cross section about the religious and ritualistic settings within “Second Life” and explores the question why studies in and around Virtual Worlds represent an important issue in the Study of Religions. In her article about

“*Virtual Religion. An Approach to a Religious and Ritual Topography of Second Life*” she introduces the theoretical concept of an “actor-related religious historiography” which tries to take into account the religiousness of the individual actor.

Pablo Martinez-Zárte, Isabela Corduneanu and Luis Miguel Martinez outline in their article “*S(l)pirituality. Immersive Worlds as a Window to Spirituality Phenomena*” some conceptual and methodological considerations for studying influential belief systems within online worlds, in particular “Second Life.” The authors' research is aimed at tracing the activities and narratives surrounding of the *avatar's* development inside digital worlds, focusing their attention on spiritual practices as performed by “Second Life“ residents. At the same time, they offer some methodological reflections on the particularities of online social research in Virtual Worlds.

In her article “*Enhancing the Spiritual Relationship: The Impact of Virtual Worship on the Real World Church Experience*” **Andréé Robinson-Neal** discusses her experiences as a virtual churchgoer in “Second Life“ and describes the relationship between online worship and her offline faith experience. The article centres around the reality of experience in virtual worship and how can both enhance and hinder the “real-life faith walk.”

The last section looks to introduce three different methods of analysing Virtual Worlds outside of ethnographical research. All paper stress therefore the aesthetic aspects of Virtual Worlds and the interdependencies between literature, myths and Virtual Worlds.

In her article “*Another Time, Another Space: Virtual Worlds, Myths and Imagination*” **Beatrice Bittarello** performs a reappraisal of the issue of Virtual Worlds using an interdisciplinary approach. She argues that Virtual Worlds existed before the introduction of the Internet. To back up her argument she outlines a history of literary and visual pre-Internet Virtual Worlds, all of which represent an alternative, mythical, and (often) religious space. She goes on to argue that finding a way of “reaching” Virtual Worlds is the key to the re-conception of (online) Virtual Worlds today. Many elements of literary Virtual Worlds can thus also be linked to contemporary examples of Virtual Worlds on the Internet. She stresses the importance of visual aspects, even though the imagination and the mythopoeic activity of the players play a key (and integral) role in Virtual Worlds on the Internet.

Michael Highland and Gino Yu “*Communicating Spiritual Experience with Video Game Technology*” deal with the aspect of experience. They stress that given the interactive nature of video game technology, it is an ideal medium for representing and communicating experience. As the game world is causally dependent on input from individual players, they

evoke feelings that are urgent, direct, and personalized. Online virtual spaces therefore provide an environment for people of different faiths to come together in conversation.

Finally **Ludmil Duridanov** and **Simeon Simoff** also call in their paper “*Inner Listening' as a Basic Principle for Developing Immersive Virtual Worlds*” for an approach that focuses on visualisation as an important way of analysing a Virtual World. They argued that immersive Virtual Worlds have developed on ad-hoc basis, driven mainly by the need for creating inhabited places for virtual communities and environments for distributed gameplay. The goal of achieving immersion has been mainly pursued using convincing 3D interactive graphics technology and the approaches to design have focused on the visualisation aspects, neglecting the “audio design” and the consistent integration of visual and audio designs. As the collaborative and community-related aspects of these environments are expected to be dominant in the future, the authors argue that there is a clear need to develop deeper underlying principles for the design of these inhabited virtual spaces. They conclude that Virtual Worlds of the future should be places that allow for a creative and enlightened state of mind by their inhabitants. Thereby two sources of wisdom – the Judeo-Islamic and Buddhist tradition – should be explored for establishing the principle of “inner listening” as one of the basic principles for developing immersive Virtual Worlds.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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