

Kerstin Radde-Antweiler (Ed.)

Being Virtually Real?



Virtual Worlds from a Cultural Studies' Perspective.

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RITUALS AND PIXELS

EXPERIMENTS IN ONLINE CHURCH

SIMON JENKINS

Back in the late 1970s, I was among a group of theology graduates who launched a small magazine called *Ship of Fools*. We subtitled it, ‘the magazine of Christian unrest,’ because we wanted to ask critical questions about the church and satirise the unintentionally laughable side of the Christian faith, both historically and in the contemporary world.

The Scottish politician Nick Fairbairn used to say: ‘One of the great difficulties of Christianity is that it keeps falling into the hands of the wrong people.’ We wanted to debate, satirise and create laughter about that, from a committed faith position. We believed that self-criticism is an important part of faith.

On April Fools Day, 1998, we relaunched *Ship of Fools* as a net magazine (at <http://shipoffools.com>). We immediately found the net very conducive to what we wanted to do – much more conducive than print had ever been. Entering the net was like entering a new world for us, a world which was more fluid in terms of communication, and where your readers (to use the old language of print) became active participants in what you were doing. *Ship of Fools* very quickly became popular not just as an online magazine, but as a virtual community. Each month it currently attracts over 130,000 visitors, who look at 2.7 million pages.

The community dimension of *Ship of Fools* is delivered via bulletin boards. The boards function like a genuine community, with people getting to know each other, pray for each other, meet up in real life, and sometimes marry each other, too. There have been six marriages I know of, and I was Best Man at one of them.

In 2002, one of our members, whose alias on the boards was Miss Molly, was diagnosed with terminal lung cancer. She decided to share the last three months of her life with us, in a thread she posted called ‘Fields of Gold’, named after the song by Sting. ‘It will be a sort of diary,’ she said, ‘a place to post my musings, and a place where I will try to answer any questions you may have about this time in my life.’

Figure 1: Ship of Fools website.



The response from the community was amazing. The hospital where Miss Molly was being treated received so many bunches of flowers, cards and other gifts that the nursing staff asked her if she was a film star. She received practical and emotional support during those months, including a quilt which was put together by a team from pieces sent from all over the world. After three months, and almost 1,000 posts on the thread, Miss Molly died.

This episode had a very powerful effect in strengthening the bonds of the community. Looking at events such as this, over the nine years we've been running online community, we've often asked ourselves if we could ever be a church, or ever run as a sort of alternative church online.

But we always reached the same answer of No, essentially because we believed that running an act of worship online would need a greater sense of place than we had. We felt that the key difference would be to have somewhere that looked and felt like sacred space, and which gave a visible metaphor for people meeting together. And that was something we just did not have.

The Ark: Internet reality gameshow (2003)

The following year, in 2003, we were able to realize a big project which created 3D space online. Here was the concept we followed:

‘Have you ever found yourself wondering what it would be like if you got some of the best known characters of the Bible together in a bar for a drink or two? How would they get on, these saints and sinners, these heroes and villains of the Bible? Would Moses compare beard lengths with John the Baptist? Would Eve offend Paul with her figleaf costume? It’s inevitable that some of the great saints would find it hard to spend even a few minutes in each other’s company.’

That was the key idea at the heart of the project we called The Ark. This was how it worked. Twelve real people, sitting at their computer screens round the world, logging in and playing the role of a biblical saint or sinner, onboard a virtual Ark for 40 days and 40 nights. The divine dozen would play games, complete tasks, overcome crises, discuss the big issues of the day and argue over whose turn it was to muck out the gorillas. All in full view of a global audience, watching them on the Internet.

In this project, we were funded by the UK’s Jerusalem Trust, and worked with Specialmoves, a new media agency in London. We put out a call for contestants in the three months before we launched, and over 1,000 people round the world responded, wanting to become a Bible hero.

Out of all our applicants, we eventually chose our 12 Arkmates. Six were from the UK; four were from the US (from New York, Washington DC, New Orleans and California); and the final two were from Canada. They included three priests, two youth workers, a teacher, a psychologist and an astrophysicist.

The contestants all logged into the game to play it live and were in full control of their online avatars. They keyed in what they wanted to say, hit return, and their speech appeared onscreen in floating speech bubbles. They could move their avatars around via point and click and do a good amount of gesturing.

Figure 2: The Ark Chapel.



The Ark was online every day for an hour in the evening over 40 days, so it was a long-running story. Up to 4,000 people per day logging into The Ark environment, either to watch the live action, or follow recorded highlights, or just to explore for themselves.

The Ark was quite a large environment, with seven rooms on two floors, plus two lower decks for storage and animals, which included pairs of elephants, alligators, zebras – and a single tyrannosaurus rex. Gradually the contestants were voted off The Ark by our audience, with each contestant walking the plank, until just one of them stepped ashore on Mt Ararat to claim fame and a fortune of £666. The Ark still remains online, and can be visited and explored at: <http://ark.saintsimeon.co.uk>.

We learned many things from running The Ark gameshow, but two really stand out...

First was the contestants' emotional involvement in the game. This was expressed in their immersion in the 3D world, the strong relationships which developed between the contestants, and the way they bonded with their online identity. 'It was one of the strangest, most intense experiences I've ever had,' said the person playing the role of Esther. 'I didn't think the interactions would feel so real,' said the contestant playing Simon Peter.

The second standout point was this. Each Sunday during the game, we turned The Ark's spacious living room into a chapel, and gave three of the Arkmates the task of preparing Divine Service for everyone else to join in. When we saw how this worked, with preaching,

Bible readings, prayers and discussion, it planted an idea in our minds that this might be a way to realise the idea of online church. How would it be if we detached the chapel from The Ark and ran it week by week as a virtual church? What we saw happening in The Ark's chapel eventually grew into Church of Fools.

Church of Fools (2004)

Church of Fools wasn't the first attempt to run religious services online in a 3D environment. That had been happening for some time inside existing virtual worlds, especially when people wanted to get married online. The first-claimed such marriage happened inside AlphaWorld, one of the oldest virtual worlds on the net, and took place on May 8th 1996 between Janka and Tomas, a young couple living in the US.

Janka and Tomas spent several weeks planning their wedding, constructing the special pavilion for the event, making avatars for themselves, sending out invitations and... well, you get the idea. Just like a 'real-life' wedding, there was a lot to do. They also had to think about crowd control, because their wedding, being a first, was likely to attract a lot of people, some of whom might want to wreck it.

The event lasted three hours, and participants reported that it felt like they had 'been somewhere and done something'. After the online ceremony, Tomas, who was in Texas, drove 3,100 miles to Tacoma, Washington, to be with his bride – which was said to be the longest delayed 'you may kiss the bride' in history!

Just three weeks before we launched Church of Fools in May 2004, a Catholic Mass was attempted in a huge cathedral inside Second Life. This was an unofficial Mass, of course, because the service wasn't backed by the Catholic Church.

Rafin Grimm, who built the church, appeared in an avatar with splendid angel wings, and led the Lord's Prayer. The service followed the liturgy for the Roman Mass, and included the giving of the peace, although it stopped short of blessing virtual bread and wine. After the service, Grimm told the worshippers who had gathered: 'I didn't build the church for anyone to have the Catholic religion forced on them...It was not meant to convert, just to let you see what a Mass is generally like in the Catholic church.'

Figure 3: Church of Fools.



OmegaX Zapata, who led the Mass, said, ‘I am 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 Second Life so people could experience them if they couldn’t in real life.’ As far as is known, services didn’t continue inside the cathedral, so this was a unique event.

When we came to build Church of Fools, it was different in many ways from what had come before. We were building a dedicated church environment (in Shockwave), rather than adding something to an existing online world. Church of Fools was self-contained as an environment and a project. We had also decided to run it as a three-month experiment to see if sustained online church was possible, and if it would have any value. For all we knew, it would be dull and wouldn’t work very well, and then we could all forget about it and go home. We had three underlying aims:

1. We wanted to try translating church into the medium of the net. It was to be a genuine experiment, seeking visitor feedback, to find out if online church is a viable way to ‘do church’.
2. We wanted to create moments of genuine depth and spirituality, helping people feel they were connecting with God, themselves and others.
3. We wanted to educate and inform people who would never darken the doors of a church about Christian worship and fellowship. We hoped to break down the barriers people have about going to church.

Just as the Methodist church leader John Wesley took his preaching out of churches and into the fields and streets in the 18th century, we wanted to take church to where people are in the 21st century – on the Net.

In keeping with the Wesley connexion, we were sponsored by the Methodist Church of Great Britain – and also by the Bishop of London – and that was a huge plus. It was good to be backed by real-life churches which had an interest in the virtual world, too. Although we were non-denominational, we wanted to be in the mainstream of trinitarian orthodoxy, and so we planned to use Anglican, Celtic and other liturgies in running our services.

The Church of Fools environment

We had plenty of discussion about what Church of Fools should look like, and considered modern as well as ancient styles of architecture. But since we wanted to appeal to people who never went to church, we decided that we wanted a church which said ‘church’ as soon as you saw it. Which meant pointed arches, stained glass, pews and other familiar items from historic church architecture.

Since our church was going to appear in the medium of computer games, we thought this ecclesiastical style would create atmosphere and give the whole thing a playful, experimental edge. And we were curious to see how people would respond to such a religious-looking environment. The whole building was able to accommodate just over 30 visible avatars, which made the building look quite full.

The church sanctuary contained the spaces you would normally find in a sacred Christian building. There was a nave, with wooden pews for seating. There was a chancel, which contained an altar with a cross, a pulpit and a reading lectern. Out of these three objects, we only used the pulpit and the lectern, but it was valuable to have the symbol of the cross as a visible sign of what we were doing.

Figure 4: Church of Fools chancel.



As one of our aims was to help create genuine moments of spirituality in Church of Fools, we decided to enrich the environment by adding a modern equivalent of ‘stations of the cross’. The church was basically designed for corporate worship, for everyone to join in, but these stations would offer an opportunity for individual prayer and reflection. We included six stations in total, three on each side of the nave.

Each station had an image from the passion of Christ, painted or sculpted by a contemporary artist. The images were taken from an exhibition called ‘Presence’ which had toured six English cathedrals earlier in 2004. If you clicked on one of the stations, a second window opened to show a large version of the image, plus two or three paragraphs of text offered as a meditation on it.

The stations gave us the opportunity to add both visual and verbal content to our environment, and they also signalled that we were attempting to create a form of sacred space, even if the overall context of the environment was cartoon-like and had the feel of a computer game.

Church of Fools also had a downstairs which we called the crypt. While the atmosphere of the sanctuary was formal and religious, the crypt was much more informal, a place where you could hang out, socialise, meet friends and debate with others. There was plenty of room here to sit down. One group of three chairs came to be called ‘Atheist’s Corner’, because three atheists from the Netherlands regularly visited and sat there. They told us they enjoyed the church as a place where they could have intelligent debate about the issues which mattered to them.

Figure 5: Church of Fools stations.



Figure 6: Church of Fools crypt.



In terms of human interaction, Church of Fools was primarily a text-based environment. We had a limited amount of sound, which included church bells, hymn tunes and the ambient sound of an echoing church. But people spoke to each other by keying words into a control panel. You could choose whether to speak out loud so people immediately around you could hear, or to whisper to just one person. The control panel also included navigation, so you could move your character around, and read notices of future services.

Of course, we knew that the church would be used by people who wanted nothing more than a 3D chatroom, but because we also wanted to run public services of worship, we had to find a way to privilege the speech of people leading services. The protocol we established was that ordinary speech among visitors appeared as white text which scrolled up from the bottom

of the screen. But speech by people leading services appeared as speech bubbles above the head of their avatar, and gradually floated upwards. This visual distinction gave visitors a very clear signal about what was happening in worship services.

Figure 7: Church of Fools control panel.



Avatars which could cross themselves

Everyone who successfully logged into Church of Fools appeared in the environment as a cartoon-like avatar. Visitors were able to choose from a selection of male and female avatars with a variety of hair and skin colours, and dressed in different clothes styles. The avatars could talk to each other, walk around, sit down on a pew or chair, or kneel on the ground.

We also gave the avatars a menu of 12 gestures, which became very important in social behaviour and also in ritual actions during services. Three of these were specifically ‘religious’ gestures. This is how they were shown on the gestures menu, which appeared next to the avatar when it was clicked:

- > bless
- > cross self
- > hallelujah

In the ‘bless’ gesture, the avatar raised its hand to bless the people in front of it; in the ‘cross self’ gesture, the avatar made the sign of the cross on its body and bowed its head; while in the ‘hallelujah’ gesture, the avatar flung its hands in the air and arched its back. Keyboard shortcuts for the gestures allowed visitors to speak and gesture at the same time.

Looked at ecclesiologically, some of the gestures are mutually contradictory, because Christians who make the sign of the cross are not normally seen throwing their hands in the air to shout ‘hallelujah!’ But as we were an ecumenical project, we wanted to offer options to people of all expressions of the Christian faith. As the project progressed, we found Christians from a variety of churches using all the available gestures.

Alongside the three ‘religious’ gestures were nine socialising gestures, some of which were gradually adapted to become ritual actions in the church services. These nine gestures were:

- > clap
- > hands on hips
- > laugh
- > point
- > pull hair out
- > shrug
- > scratch head
- > shake hands
- > wave

The power of gesture and avatar body language was apparent as soon as the environment was opened. On the day the development team was first able to go into the church, we entered the sanctuary as avatars and started to explore. One of the team members came up to me and said, ‘I think we should pray, as this is a church.’ I said, ‘Of course, let’s pray everyone.’ We gathered our avatars by the chancel steps and one by one our avatars knelt to pray.

As the prayers started to appear on the screen – ‘Thank you God for this place’ – I immediately knew that this not only felt like prayer, but was actually prayer. Even though it was being done in a virtual space, and we were separated by hundreds and even thousands of miles geographically, what we were doing was authentically praying together. At this point, I knew that our experiment would lead to genuine expressions of spirituality and would be exciting and worthwhile as an attempt to do church on the Net.

Figure 8: Church of Fools Service.



Over the 12 weeks Church of Fools was live, most of our regular visitors had the experience of bonding with their avatars. If you were a daily visitor to Church of Fools, the experience of walking your avatar, sitting it on a pew next to other avatars, and using it to pray or talk to others, forged an emotional bond between you and the cartoon character. The avatar became ‘me in the church’.

One Church of Fools regular visitor described it like this: ‘Typing the command to cross myself and then seeing myself do it was as real and meaningful as doing so with my physical hand. I would find losing that immediate feedback of my gestures a real loss.’

Of course, Church of Fools was not unique in that; it’s a common experience of computer gamers. But it underlines how real this experience was for those who took part. The visible actions and gestures of the avatars was also very significant in fostering a sense of spirituality, and even a sense of the holy, during the course of the experiment.

Although only 30 people could be logged into the church at any one time as a visible avatar, we allowed for large numbers of people wanting to enter the church. Anyone who arrived after the church was full could log in as a ‘ghost’, with a semi-transparent avatar capable of speaking and performing gestures. If you were in the church as a ghost, no one else could see you or your speech, although you could see all the visible avatars, their conversations, and everything else that was happening in the church. There were sometimes 200-300 ghosts in the church at one time, all of them able to see and read conversation, but not able to fully take part. This informed the way we ran services, which is described below.

Launch day for Church of Fools

We were serious about running Church of Fools as an actual church. In fact, one of our earliest ideas about setting up an online church was to allow people to join only if they left their ‘real life’ church first. They could be part of the online church on condition that it was the only church to which they belonged. We wanted people to commit to the idea that online church could be a genuine expression of Christian community.

That idea was left behind as we developed Church of Fools, but we were committed to running genuine services every Sunday in the 3D environment. We therefore invited some real preachers to occupy our virtual pulpit, and made some customised avatars which were modelled on their appearance.

Figure 9: Bishop of London Avatar.



We made an avatar for Richard Chartres, the Anglican Bishop of London, who preached at our opening service; for US evangelist and sociologist Tony Campolo, who also delivered a sermon, on ‘Why many people hate America’; and for Canon Lucy Winkett of St Paul’s Cathedral, London. Ten other church leaders from a number of Christian denominations also preached for us, using generic avatars.

On Day 1 of the project, May 11th 2004, we launched at a Christian exhibition just outside London. The church was full of the avatars of invited journalists from the Times, the BBC and CNN, and the Bishop of London sat next to me and dictated his sermon, while I rattled it into the environment on a keyboard. In his sermon, he talked about ‘setting out into the cyber ocean aware that the Spirit of God is already brooding over the face of the deep.’

We had a technical hitch, of course. A second minister was there to lead the service while the Bishop preached. He was the Revd Jeremy Clines, and was at his computer 200 miles

away from us in York. Everything started well. The avatars of the Bishop and the minister processed up the aisle together at the start of the service, and then disaster struck. Just as Revd Clines was about to deliver the opening words of the service, his avatar suddenly walked over to a wall and froze. It turned out that his computer had crashed. The Bishop, like a true professional, simply took over and led the service.

The Times journalist wrote about the service: ‘Personally, I found that after 44 years of deference in church, it was heaven being able to wear a low-cut t-shirt and tight blue jeans to church, and even better to be able to type ‘zzzzzzzz’ as the bishop preached (even though it was a good sermon).’

The opening of the church attracted huge media interest. And that in turn attracted large numbers of visitors. On Day 9 of the project, we were featured on Slashdot, a site for techies and programmers which often generates enough traffic to basically melt your server. That day, we recorded 41,000 visits to the church in one 24 hour period, which we reckoned made us the most popular church in the world on that day. On average, we recorded 7,337 visits per day during the first 52 days of the project. In other words, we were drawing cathedral-sized congregations to our little church.

Running the online church services

Our original plan for Church of Fools was to run one service a week, on Sunday evenings, with a full liturgy, prayers, readings, a hymn and sermon. But due to the demand of our visitors, we soon started running daily services of morning and night prayer in UK time, and eventually also ran an evening service for US visitors, and other ad hoc services during the day and night.

The services began by ringing the church bell. This was a sound file of a single cathedral bell which tolled about 10 times, and it became our ‘call to prayer’. When visitors sitting in the crypt heard the bell, they dashed upstairs to the church sanctuary for the service. Despite increasing problems from hackers and trolls as the experiment went on, there was a sense of reverence in the services. A typical comment from a visitor was: ‘I was touched by how everyone “fell silent” for the duration of the service.’

Different members of the administrative team, who had been given ‘warden’ powers (see more on this below) led the services, and they developed and wrote their own liturgies, or conducted services in a more informal way. We quickly learned what worked for online

church: short services, very short sermons, prayers and creeds broken down for audience participation, and plenty of opportunities for visitors to contribute with their own spoken words and gestures.

One of the service leaders, Late Quartet, reported back on what he found most effective in the early days of the experiment: “So far I have been happiest at the impromptu services of Night Prayer at the point when we recite the bit of Psalm 134 which goes, “Lift up your hands towards the sanctuary”. I look down the aisle of the church and there will be about 30 avatars all waving their arms in the air in unison!”

We were surprised when a key component in services turned out to be the Lord’s Prayer. Although this prayer of Jesus is a standard feature of ‘real life’ church services, it is not the central act of worship which it quickly became in Church of Fools. Visitors were invited to say the prayer ‘in the language and version you know best’, and what followed was a rapid scrolling up of text on the screen, as 20-30 people all keyed in the words of the Lord’s Prayer, often in several languages. For example:

Lillys: Our Father, who art in heaven
Choris: Our Father, who art in heaven hallowed be thy name
Babybear: Ein tad, yr hwn wyt yn y nefoed
Jeff: Our Father in heaven
Peter22: Pater Noster qui es in caelis
Lillys: hallowed be thy name
Karen: thy kingdom come
Ilkku: your kingdom come your will be done

The experience of praying the Lord’s Prayer together focused attention on our togetherness in prayer and worship, despite our distance in terms of geography, culture, language and faith expression. The people sitting on either side of you in a Church of Fools pew could be from Melbourne and Kansas City, and yet here you were, sitting in the same imaginative space, and being able to talk and pray together, even though you would probably never meet each other face to face in the physical world. Theologically speaking, it was like the coming together of the church on the Day of Pentecost, showing the unity of the church regardless of time and space. And it had big emotional impact.

One of the journalists who was at our first service, Giles Wilson from the BBC website, later wrote about this experience. ‘When Bishop Chartres announces the Lord’s Prayer, everyone in the church starts typing it, some in traditional form, some modern, some in French, some in Latin. Although it feels slightly daft, suddenly any notion that this is a game

is gone. These people are praying together, and that is as real as if they were standing in the same room. That they are in a dozen different towns and countries seems a trifling matter.’

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

Leader: Let’s pray for the people of the third world
for people with no food, no clean water
for people who have seen their homes demolished
for people devastated by war
Please use the ‘tear hair out’ gesture as we think of them.

Lament is a feature of the Old Testament, but it figures hardly at all in modern, ‘real life’ worship. It worked very well in this use of a visual gesture in Church of Fools.

The other socialising gesture which we adapted for use in services was the ‘shake hands’ gesture. We used this when we ‘prayed for the ghosts’ – for visitors who were logged in as ghosts, and who couldn’t fully participate in the services. At a particular moment in the services, we asked the congregation to shake hands in mid-air as a way of greeting the ghosts:

Let’s pray for everyone in this church
for the people standing next to you
for those you can see around you
and also for those we can’t see,
who are here as ghosts tonight
walk into the aisles
shake hands with our invisible friends
and pray God’s peace on them
and then give your peace to those you can see

‘The whole ghost thing is rather beautifully symbolical, I think,’ said one visitor. ‘The fact that we’re worshipping with unseen multitudes, while it’s happening literally in Church of Fools, would be good to remember in real life churches too!’

And some ghosts got creative: ‘I could only get in as a ghost until recently. It gets frustrating not being able to interact, but I found a cool way to. When I ran across someone kneeling, I would kneel next to them and pray for whatever they were praying for. Sometimes they were praying “out loud” and sometimes not, but I would just pray for them.’

The response of visitors

What was the response of visitors to Church of Fools? From the moment we opened, we had problem visitors, of course. We knew this would happen, so we had appointed several church wardens. In the wardens' console was a special button marked with the word 'smite'. Clicking on a user, and then clicking this button, would 'smite' them out of the church into logged-out hell! We thought it best to take an Old Testament approach to wardening.

The wardens' job description, though, was to welcome people and to keep order. At times, the keeping order side predominated, and our wardens basically became security personnel, which became a time-consuming and stressful duty for them.

One of our first problem customers was a visitor called 'Satan' who installed himself in our pulpit and started demanding the worship of everyone in the church. I stood my avatar below the pulpit and asked him what he was doing. 'Who is this who dares approach the Evil One?' he thundered. 'Well...I'm one of the church wardens,' I replied, 'with the power to smite you out of the church.' 'Ah' he said, and then started to apologise. I confess it was rather disappointing to have Satan saying sorry to me in church.

After that, we frequently had people shouting 'Praise be to Satan!' in the church. I even received an email one day from a Satanist apologising for the behaviour of his fellow Satanists. 'I have been Satanist all my life and would never have pulled any such thing,' he wrote. 'So, for all the immature twits within the Satanic community, you have my sympathies as I truly hope to see you fix the problem soon. Best of luck, sincerely, Satanist with a heart.' This was one of the most heartwarming offers of support during the church's problems with disruptive visitors.

We had many problems of people playing with and subverting the space, which ranged from amusing to challenging. They included:

- > blocking doorways
- > preaching in the pulpit
- > using kneeling to suggest oral sex
- > worshipping the vending machines

But we also had some very serious problems with organised groups of trolls and ragers, who posted the times of our services on their websites, and then arrived in big numbers. Some simply wanted to cause disruption (by setting visitors against each other, or by shouting sexual and racist insults), while other groups attempted to hack into the client- or server-side code with the aim of causing more serious problems.

This created some big dilemmas for us. One of our core aims was to attract and welcome people who would never normally enter a church, and here we had exactly those people. We did not want to make everything ‘nice’ and force people to behave in a reverential, church-like way. We did not want to put in a swearing filter, for instance, where every time someone said ‘shit’ it would appear on screen as ‘hallelujah’ – which is what happens on some Christian chat sites: ‘Go to hell’ gets translated to ‘Come to Bible Study’.

We wanted Church of Fools to be an antidote to the dull, safe environment church services so often are, and we wanted there to be genuine debate between people of different faith positions, and of no faith at all. But for people who were there only to cause trouble, we had to use the smite button. And we had to step up our security software, because there was a real danger that we could lose the hacker war. In the worst period, when trolls were swarming through our doors at a very high rate, the wardens could find themselves having to smite as many as 100 people in an hour.

On the positive side, a large number of people who visited the church wanted to share problems, talk about ethical and theological issues, or simply find out more about church online. Several of our trolls also gradually came to respect the church and became valued regulars. Here are some of the positive situations which arose, as described by members of the wardening team:

“I have been chatting to a guy who feels hated by God. He seemed to think that God was going to zap everything into shape. He wanted me to pray with him. We chatted for quite a while, and I hope that having someone to talk with and pray with will have helped him.”

“Was in a group conversation yesterday about the gender of God (initiated by someone ID-ing as Wiccan who worshipped a goddess). Almost everyone in that group was a programmer or systems analyst logged in from work.”

“I chatted to quite a distressed girl, and then `sat` and held her hand through late night prayer, which was really lovely. To begin with I wondered if she was just telling me stuff and making it up, but I think she really was a troubled lass, and it was good to talk to her.”

During the time we were online, we carried out an online survey to discover who our visitors were and what they thought of Church of Fools. Some 2,400 people took part, and here are the headline figures:

> 58% of visitors were male – which probably reflects the game-like environment.

> 50% of visitors were under 30.

> 39% of visitors were not regular churchgoers (if they went to church at all, they were only there for Christmas, Easter and family occasions).

> 48% of visitors were from the US; 27% were from the UK, and 12% were from continental Europe.

People who heard about us were initially divided in their opinions about the value of online church. Some said that a virtual church could never replace the real thing, and that it was scandalous that we were even attempting it. Others thought that the Internet was too important for churches to ignore, and that the different denominations should try planting churches in cyberspace. Many people entered the church thinking (as we had) that the whole thing would be too trivial to consider seriously, but found themselves surprised...and maybe even surprised by God.

‘Church of Fools is an oasis in my day,’ said one regular visitor from Georgia in the US. ‘I often leave my “ghost” alone, kneeling at prayer in the church while I work nearby.’

Another visitor from North Carolina wrote to us: ‘I have a friend who had a crisis this week. No way would he ever go to a real church. But he went to yours and said his first prayer in many years. You are providing a valuable site for him and others who might never go to a traditional house of worship.’

Postscript: St Pixels

In conclusion, here are a few words about where the Church of Fools project has gone since it closed in September 2004, and where it is now.

When we closed our doors at the end of our three-month experiment, we did not know what would happen next. But what had happened during the time we were open was that a small community of people had grown around the 3D church. That community has continued via a bulletin board website, despite the loss of 3D, and is now called St Pixels.

St Pixels has its own website, and about 1500 people have registered as members. Currently, there is no 3D church environment there, but we are developing our own software to reopen in 3D by the end of 2007.

Of course, it takes money to build community software such as this, but we have received fresh support from the Methodist Church of Great Britain, who want to see us establish St Pixels as a long-term church on the Internet, and as a self-sustaining project. The members of St Pixels are already providing good levels of financial support, which are helping pay the costs of keeping the church online.

The software we have developed includes many different media, such as blogs, discussion boards, a chat room, and soon, the 3D environment which will become the media focus of the community. St Pixels can be found at this address: <http://www.stpixels.com>.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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