

Kerstin Radde-Antweiler (Ed.)

Being Virtually Real?



Virtual Worlds from a Cultural Studies' Perspective.

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THE CHURCH OF FOOLS

VIRTUAL RITUAL AND MATERIAL FAITH

RANDOLPH KLUVER & YANLI CHEN

Introduction

Church of Fools was a British-based Christian virtual church which officially opened its doors to online worshippers on the 11th of May 2004. Sponsored by the Methodist Church of England, the site got significant press attention at its launch because of its novel approach to online spiritual experience. In the Church of Fools, online worshippers choose a cartoon-like avatar in which to participate in a worship services. Moreover, these avatars enabled the participants to enter a three dimensional (3D) church, kneel, stand, pray, sing a hymn, ring the church bells, make gestures such as cross themselves, and so on, on the screen. The Church of Fools was a three-month experiment: Would Internet-savvy Christians and non-Christians embrace a three-dimensional, virtual reality church?

The website ultimately closed down due to a lack of funding, but the community that developed out of the experience was unwilling to let the attempt die. Although the three-dimensional church space disappeared, the chatrooms continued, and eventually, organizers found support from the Methodist Church of Britain to revive the online church through another site, St. Pixels. After a period of discussion about what it was that was ultimately the most valuable about the Church of Fools, in mid-2006 the organizers of St. Pixels re-established the online church, focusing first on spiritually rich content, and secondarily on digital technologies.

Both sites gained significant media attention (primarily due to participants treating the site irreverently) and significant number of visitors that visited the site did indeed demonstrate that there was indeed an audience for this type of spiritual activity. Church of Fools was more than just the avatarish worship experience, but also an online discussion forum, where participants from all over Britain participated in serious, intellectually rich discussions of the Christian faith.

The purpose of this essay is to explore the nature of the spiritual world created by Church of Fools and St Pixels, and explore the relevance of that world both to the traditional

conceptions of Christian spirituality, as well as the way in which this attempt to bring traditional Christianity into cyberspace paid homage to the new world driven largely by the Internet. Through an ethnographic investigation into the Church of Fools/St Pixels experience, both through the virtual reality portal it provided, as well as interviews with participants, we explore the way in which the sites fused a material sense of spirituality with the virtual world created online.

As of 2004, nearly two in three adult Internet users in the United States had used the Internet for faith-related matters, and the number of churches maintaining websites has skyrocketed in recent years.¹ Moreover, the use of the Internet has become a popular supplement to offline religious experiences, and the number of spiritually-oriented websites continues to grow. The goal of the Church of Fools was from the beginning to bring an online church experience not to those who were already involved in religious activities, but rather to reach those who were unlikely physically visit a church. Although this was the goal, it became clear that many Christians saw the online church as an extension of their offline church life.

However, many believers questioned whether the mediated environment could adequately capture all that a religious service should be. The concern of the organizers was not whether or not the online church could be an acceptable substitute for attending church for those who regularly attended, but would it be “enough” for a non-believer?

The backdrop of the intent is clear. Britain, like many Western European nations, is largely secularized, and church attendance remains quite low. However, although church attendance and affiliation seems to be in decline in Britain, a substantial majority still profess adherence to some mixture of traditional Christian beliefs, leading to what sociologist Grace Davie referred to as “believing without belonging.”² In other words, there was a disjunction between the public form of church attendance, and private beliefs, which are not as “in decline” as outer behavior might suggest. The Church of Fools was an attempt to create a new locus for worship, outside of the traditional trappings of church life. On the website, the organizers indicated that “We are keen to reach what we have dubbed “Generation X-Box” – the under 30s who are pursuing spirituality on the Internet, but may never darken the doors of their local church.”³

For this study, we have conducted a “virtual ethnography” of both manifestations of the online church, the Church of Fools.com and St. Pixels. We have supplemented this analysis

¹ Hoover 2004.

² Davie 1994.

³ <http://www.churchoffools.com/got-questions/audience.html>.

with interviews of a number of participants and organizers of the sites, although the bulk of our analysis consists of the actual lived experience of the site. We have chosen an ethnographic approach because it best helps to understand the experience of the user who goes to the site.

Religion and Internet: Preliminary considerations

Helland's foundational heuristic model to study religion and the Internet distinguishes between "religion online" and "online religion."⁴ Whereas the former is mainly informational and hierarchical, the latter is solely contingent upon participation from Internet users, and is driven typically by non-religious professionals. Much of the current research on religion and Internet is currently of the religion online type. There has, however, been a growing body of research on "online religion," which has demonstrated the ways in which believers attempt to create spiritually oriented communities, outside the framework of institutional religious bodies or organizations. For example, Schroeder, Heather, and Lee argue that while there is a significant amount of "transfer" of offline religious ritual to the online world, there is also a significant amount of transformation, as the elements of traditional worship are shortened, short-circuited, or even dropped altogether.⁵

One of the most critical issues emerging from previous literature is the extent to which it is possible to create a "spiritual experience," or some sort of interaction with the the sacred, through the technology. Traditionally, almost all religions have viewed corporate religious expression as an important part of religion, although few would argue that it is the whole experience. For example, at least one author has argued that the "technological quest is a spiritual quest," in that recent innovations in technology are in fact attempts to replace pre-modern religious quests, or that "technology is actually carrying out a religious program for immortality, a utopian 'New Heaven and a New Earth.'⁶

Others, however, believe that the technology can "re-enchant," to use Bettelheim's phrase, the religious imagination, by reintroducing elements of beauty and art into the religious experience. Lindemann, for example, argues that the absorbing quality of web pages potentially promotes a form of 'slow-reading' thus drawing parallels to the private practice of

⁴ Helland 2000.

⁵ Schroeder & Heather 1998.

⁶ Bauwens & Rossi 1999.

'lectio divina', the prayerful reading of texts. The use of images, light, sound, and other technological features can serve the same role as illuminated bible texts of earlier centuries.⁷

Likewise, Anthony Judge argues the architecture of the web can simulate sacred pilgrimages, in that "the journeys a user makes through the Web then become like spiritual pilgrimages of discovery between sacred sites. But for this to be of deep personal or social significance, such journeys would have to be genuine learning journeys of transformation."⁸ Charles Henderson likens hypertext to biblical texts, in that the reading of biblical texts follows a multi-narrative format where one text plays off another, much like how hyperlinks lead one in different, serendipitous directions.⁹

Although religious leaders have affirmed the use of the Internet as a tool for religious teaching and other religious observances, there is a marked reluctance to endorse the idea that online spiritual experiences are effective substitutes for offline participation. In 2005, the Roman Catholic Church explicitly declared that there could be no online sacraments. The Pontifical Council for Social Communications noted "to receive the sacrament of confession, in addition to the conditions and requirements inherent in the sacrament, the physical presence of the faithful and the manifestation of his faults to the priest in person is indispensable." However, the Church also noted although "the virtual reality of cyberspace cannot substitute for real interpersonal community, the incarnational reality of the sacraments and the liturgy, or the immediate and direct proclamation of the gospel, it can complement them, attract people to a fuller experience of the life of faith, and enrich the religious lives of users."¹⁰ In other words, although the sacraments cannot be conducted online, the Internet can be a compelling aid to religious devotion.

In a different cultural context, Kluver and Cheong interviewed religious leaders from among the Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, and Buddhist faiths in Singapore, and found nearly unanimous agreement from among all traditions that the Internet was not an acceptable substitute for offline religious participation.¹¹ The objections to "online worship" revolved primarily around two key arguments. The first is that worship is intensely interpersonal, and the artificiality and impersonal aspect of the Internet does not bring one into contact with God. Second, religious leaders argued that worship is a corporate matter. Worshipping alone

⁷ Lindemann 2004.

⁸ Judge 1997.

⁹ Henderson 1997.

¹⁰ Foley 2005.

¹¹ Kluver & Cheong 2007.

in front of a screen, even if there is interaction with others through the online experience, is qualitatively different from corporate worship.

Eliade argues that the essence of religion is in the demarcation of the sacred from the profane. Irruptions of the sacred in the profane results in a form of “manifestation of the sacred where the real unveils itself,” the irruptions results in a “break in plane” which ‘makes possible ontological passage from one mode of being to another’ (i.e. from the sacred to the profane).¹² Eliade thus proposes the use of the term “hierophany” which is the “act of manifestation of the sacred” to define the nature of spiritual experiences. Although numerous authors, such as Eliade, have attempted to define a spiritual experience, the precise meaning of spirituality and worship are issues about which there is seldom agreement.

Thus, for the purposes of our study, we are concerned with the potential of the online ‘cyberspace’ in providing such manifestations of the sacred. In particular, in this study we draw upon the Methodist tradition of the ‘means of grace’ through which one encounters God, while taking into account Christian objections that the Holy cannot be fully manifested in a virtual environment. The Methodist tradition is privileged in this study primarily because of the Methodist Church’s sponsorship of the Church of Fools, rather than because of any academic or theological reasons. As the online experience is sponsored by the Methodist Church, it seems appropriate to use a Methodist yardstick for evaluating its effectiveness.

Methodism springs largely from the 18th century ministry of John and Charles Wesley, who formed a group within the Anglican church in Britain that focused on systematic, or methodical (hence “Methodist”) approaches to study of the Bible, and upon the role of the Holy Spirit in the believer’s life. In John Wesley’s famous sermon, “The Means of Grace,” he writes:

“I understand outward signs, words, or actions, ordained of God, and appointed for this end, to be the ordinary channels whereby he might convey to men, preventing, justifying, or sanctifying grace. I use this expression, means of grace, because I know none better; and because it has been generally used in the Christian church for many ages; – in particular by our own Church, which directs us to bless God both for the means of grace, and hope of glory; and teaches us, that a sacrament is “an outward sign of inward grace, and a means whereby we receive the same.”

“The chief of these means are prayer, whether in secret or with the great congregation; searching the Scriptures (which implies reading, hearing, and meditating thereon); and receiving the Lord's Supper, eating bread and drinking wine in remembrance of Him:

¹² Eliade 1957, 63.

And these we believe to be ordained of God, as the ordinary channels of conveying his grace to the souls of men.”¹³

For Wesley, then, the acts of the sacraments of prayer, bible study, and communion are the chief means of grace, although other actions or events would also presumably be means of grace. Other activities, such as fasting and public worship are also means of experiencing grace. But, the activities of prayer, bible study and meditation, and communion present the most accessible means of Eliade’s “irruption” between the sacred and the profane. In the church of fools and St Pixels, parallels to traditional mechanisms of prayer and bible study are easy to find, although there is no online parallel to the Lord’s supper. Moreover, the Church of Fools/St Pixels takes advantage of new technology features to add spiritual dimensions to the online experience, in ways that are clearly attempts to create a “means of grace.”

The Church of Fools/St Pixels experience

For our analysis, we have deployed a multi-modal form of analysis in order to discern not just the content of the Church of Fools/St Pixels, but the experience and meaning of the online worship to its users. At the time of this writing (in early 2007), the 3D Church of Fools was closed, even for private viewing, and the corresponding technology being developed for St Pixels was not yet online. Thus, we have employed several different methods for ferreting out descriptions of, as well as responses to, the online experience.

Our first form of analysis is a “virtual ethnography” to describe both the 2D and 3D aspects of the Church of Fools/St Pixels. In particular, we discuss the role of the “avatar” and the 3D environment, as well as other “means of grace” created for the site. We also consulted a number of press accounts of the site, primarily because most people first encountered the CoF/St Pixels through media, both online and offline news sources. We believe this is significant because media framing of religious events and experiences often have an indirect relationship with social processes, especially when people find their first encounter with the experience through the media. More importantly, as Christine Hine argues, the offline world “is rendered as present within the online spaces of interactions...[d]espite the presence of the internet, it seems that the role of the mass media in providing for shared experience of distant events is not diminished.”¹⁴ The news articles thus serve to ground our virtual ethnography in

¹³ Wesley 1872.

¹⁴ Hine 2000.

an offline context, and add significant interpretation of the online experience. We examined both articles that were first person narratives about the site and commentary about the site, as well as third person accounts and wire feeds. Our analysis, however, draws primarily upon the first person accounts.

In addition, we identified fifty web pages drawn from a Google search for “church of fools.” 20 out of the 50 web sites identified by the Google search were blogs.¹⁵ We find that this examination of blogs is important because as Murley (2005) and others have noted, blogs have become a compelling mechanism for the personal expression of religious belief.¹⁶

Church of Fools began as an online experimental church experience in May of 2004. The project was spearheaded by Ship of Fools, an online alternative Christian publication. Ship of Fools took its name and its persona from the tradition of “holy foolishness,” exemplified through historical figures such as Saint Simeon. The goal is to act “foolish” in order to reveal the holy things of God, expressed in I Corinthians 1.27, which says that “God chooses the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; the weak things of the world to shame the strong.” As noted earlier, the organizers of the Church of Fools sought to design an experience to reach the “Generation X-Box”, the unchurched, under 30s, who might be interested in pursuing a form of spirituality on the Internet. The organizers claimed that more than half of their visitors are less than 30 years of age, of which 60 per cent are male. The busiest day of its trial period, from May to September of 2004, saw 41,000 attempts to log into the church. On average of 7,300 visits per day were recorded throughout the four months.¹⁷

Thus, the organizers were quite clear that their intention was to reach people who had little interest in religious services or faith. On the Church of Fools informational website, the organizers provided an FAQ for interested webservers. On that page, the organizers had this direct response to the question that concerns this study:

The Bible talks about gathering together for fellowship and worship. Can you really have true, meaningful church online?

We're more concerned that many of the people coming to Church of Fools are not getting “true, meaningful church” *offline*. The church received considerable press coverage both in print and on screen. Reports of trolls, disruptive cyber-Satans, and other irreverent forms of behavior made the site an interesting, humorous news story that many newspapers gleefully

¹⁵ This Google search was conducted in the fall of 2005. A current search would reveal different sources.

¹⁶ Murley 2005.

¹⁷ Blake 2006.

featured. Some of the most notorious examples included users who would cause their avatar to stand during the service proclaiming blasphemies. A Lexis-Nexis and Factiva search found slightly over 45% of the coverage of the virtual church took as its angle that of the irreverence of the site. 47 out of 107 articles collected had the following words in its lead paragraph: “devils,” “Satan,” “swearing,” “profanities,” “foul-mouthed,” “hackers,” “swearers,” and “expletives,” thus testifying to the issue that seemed to get the most attention. After this short lived experience in radical ecclesial democracy, the organizers decided to create a new category of user, called “Church Wardens,” who had the ability to ‘smite’ errant worshippers, or remove them from the virtual service. However, the irreverent image of the virtual church persisted.

Besides the harassment from trolls, Church of Fools also experienced technical glitches. A minister who was supposed to preside at the first service mysteriously disappeared when his computer crashed.¹⁸ In the early days, a number of cyber trolls had playfully worked together to block the porch, preventing other worshippers from entering the church.¹⁹

In spite of all the initial problems, the site persisted in attempting to create an online religious service. A number of prominent ministers, from the UK and the US, participated in services, an activity that earned them the title ‘revatars’. The church followed trinitarian orthodoxy, and incorporating elements from various traditions, including Anglicanism, Catholicism, and Charismatic worship elements. Regular services were held and their timings were posted on the forums of the website.

The Church of Fools/St. Pixels Experience

The Church of Fools was noteworthy primarily because of its attempt to create a 3D virtual worship experience online. The 3D church consisted of a number of rooms in which various activities could be conducted. The main sanctuary of the church was in the form of a basilica, in a Norman architectural style. There were four columns on both sides of the aisles and six rows of pews. It was a rather modest church with a simple pulpit, altar and a stained glass window at the apse. Along the sides of the main sanctuary were placed “icons,” or pieces of devotional art, where an avatar could walk up and observe the art. A popup box would provide a brief explanation of the art.

¹⁸ Wilson 2004.

¹⁹ Heinen 2004.

In the tradition of most medieval European churches, the Church of Fools has images of its patrons on the windows. Although it didn't call attention itself, the stained glass recognizably had images of the pixilated shipoffools.com's little green 'boat' and its patron Saint, the Holy Fool, St. Simeon. The logo of Ship of Fools is an image of two people in a boat rowing in opposite directions. Levity here is subtly introduced into the sacred space behind the virtual altar on the stained glass window. The "ship of fools" moniker also recalls a recurring motif in Western literature of a sense that the world and its human passengers are on a voyage to damnation, but none aboard either know nor care about their fate. The name also is a common medieval pun on the Latin word "navus", which means a boat as well as referring to the nave of a Church

Figure 1: The sanctuary of the Church of Fools. The Ship of Fools logo is visible in the stained glass window, on the bottom of the window. Image courtesy Ship of Fools.



In addition to the main sanctuary, there were other physical spaces within the Church of Fools, such as the porch, which serves as a passage way between the sacred and profane spaces. In the Church of Fools, arguably, the porch functions as the 'threshold.' 'The Porch' is the place where worshippers first enter the church, as well as the name of the chat room associated with the Church of Fools. The Porch as the chat room is where moderators welcome those new to the church, and thus, initiates newcomers into the church. Likewise, the crypt, where avatars could gather for less formal interaction, came complete with several vending machines, including one for Church of Fools T-shirt and one for holy water. The crypt had plenty of seats for people and icons advertising Specialmoves, the webdesign firm that created the site, along the side of the room.

Most visitors to Church of Fools would enter the church as eavesdropping observers, each represented by a ghostlike avatar that's invisible to the others in the room. As a user would log on, they were given the choice of a number of potential avatars, who could then be manipulated throughout the virtual building, and visit different rooms, as well as conducting various actions and engaging in typed conversations. Up to 500 at a time could enter into the church and explore the features. They could also make 11 private ritualized gestures. But up to 25 to 30 visitors could enter the church as solid avatars, which could not only walk, kneel, sit and make public gestures, such as throwing their arms up in a hallelujah exclamation – they also can use typed comments to pray, shout out, whisper confidentially to another “solid” or conduct dialogue with groups of them.

Figure 2: A view of a worshipper in the sanctuary, with the commands for manipulating the avatar visible. Image courtesy Ship of Fools.



When praying, the user types the words of the prayer into a text box which then slowly floats up the screen, presumably to heaven. Navigational controls also allow visitors to take a bird's eye view of the church, or to take a closer view of ones avatar in relation to others. This ability to move about and interact with the environment led to some of the more interesting events in the life of the church, when irreverent avatars would either storm the pulpit, proclaim their identity as Satan, or otherwise become disruptive.

Figure 3: Avatars participate in worship at Church of Fools. Image courtesy of Church of Fools.



In addition to the real time worship services, Church of Fools offered other opportunities for interaction, and in fact, many argued that the real “life” of the church took place in the chatrooms and forums. Through these forums, people shared their real life struggles, their prayer requests, and had extended online conversations that would be familiar to any chatroom or forum user.

In online chats with CoF users, we discovered that a variety of people began to see the virtual church as not just an interesting experience, but a community, in the way that Rheingold initially foresaw.²⁰ One group of users that was not anticipated by the organizers were members of the traditional clergy or professional church workers, who frequented the Church of Fools because it was the only “non-work” worship experience that they had access to. They found traditional offline worship experiences at their own churches to be consumed by tasks and responsibilities, with little opportunity to share their lives, reflect on their spiritual experiences, and pray with others for their own needs. Thus, Church of Fools became a worship space for them, while their offline churches remained places where they had to conduct their work.

²⁰ Rheingold 1993.

Figure 4: The Revetar (Avatar) of the Bishop of London interacting with users. Image courtesy of Church of Fools.

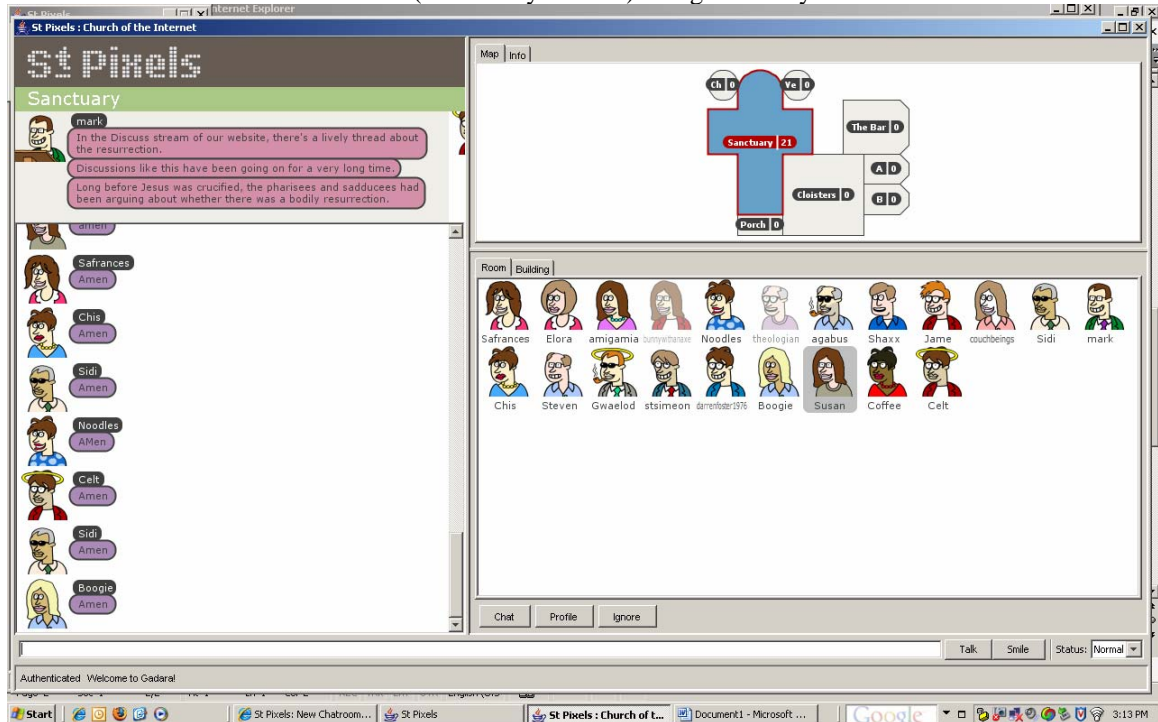


After funding ran out for the Church of Fools, which did continue longer than it was initially expected, the visual elements of the church closed, and the church moved to a “2D format,” consisting primarily of chatrooms and forums. So what happened is that the “experimental,” “Generation X-box” experience disappeared, while the feelings of community and intimacy that drove the conversations migrated to message boards and chatrooms, and eventually led several of the participants to seek to keep the experiment going. Thus, in mid-2006, a number of the original participants, as well as new ones, announced that the community would move to a new space, designated “St. Pixels.” After the community moved to a new software environment, participants began the development of a new 3D environment, but continued its activity using a visually oriented chatroom.

At the time of this writing, St Pixels is visually oriented, and something between the purely textual environment of a normal chatroom and the completely visual environment of Church of Fools. Participants still choose an avatar, and thus are visually represented. Participants log on and click on a visual map of a church to choose which “room” they want to be in, and the rooms represent the different type of activity. Thus, when one first logs on, they find themselves on the “porch,” engaged in all types of conversation. The “Services”, which are held each day at 9 pm GMT, are held in the sanctuary. Other rooms are for more informal

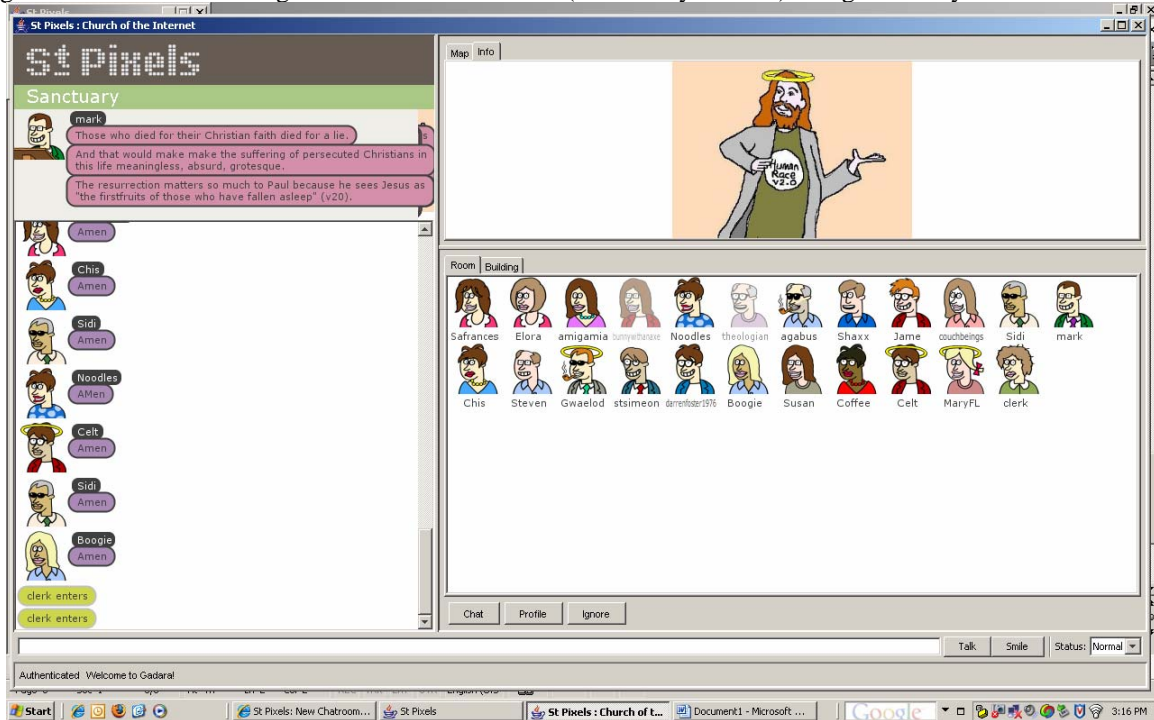
conversations, or even private prayer. There is even a vestry, presumably for the management team to discuss issues privately.

Figure 5: St Pixels Chatroom. 08/04/2007 (Easter Day Service). Image courtesy of author.



When services are ongoing, one organizer can take the role of a pastor, and the text coming from that person fills the upper left quadrant. Other participants in the service can type responses, repetitions, questions or comments, or prayers that will also be visible to all in the room. Audio files can be streamed to all participants, and images of art or illustrations can be presented to supplement the verbal material that helps to illustrate the point.

Figure 6: St Pixels with image illustration. 08/04/2007 (Easter Day Service). Image courtesy of the author.



The website of St. Pixels, in describing the history of the group, declares that the “community is larger than the software,” and that the original 3D format, and the platform, was not optimal for further development. The organizers promise to continue to develop the technological platform to ultimately return to a 3D, more immersive experience.²¹ In a private chat, organizers told us that they believed the “technology had run ahead of the purpose,” and that they were attempting to develop a new technological platform that would focus on intimacy and faith in Christ rather than on the avatarish experience.

It is apparent, however, that in its second iteration, the purpose of the “virtual church” had changed somewhat. In its first iteration, the purpose of the church of Fools was to reach the “unchurched,” or those who had little interest or experience with offline church. The vision of St. Pixels, however, states that it is “our vision to create a sacred space, a welcoming and witnessing community on the internet.”²² There are subtle changes, but these changes do point to the nature of the mediating role of technology. Whereas the first purpose was to create a space which would draw the disinterested, the new purpose is to create a “sacred space” where community is the primary focus. The site still “welcomes and witnesses,” but the intention is to move the community forward.

²¹ St. Pixels 2007.

²² Ibid.

These distinctions might be subtle, but they do signal that the organizers of CoF/St. Pixels have learned that the 3D environment can seek to reproduce a sacred space, but ultimately it is the relationships developed online that drove the experiment forward.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine to what extent it is possible for the online, virtual church experiment to create an authentically spiritual experience. There are a number of issues embedded within that question, however, such as a sense of community, a sense of being in a sacred space, and most importantly, the sense that one's physical environment is transcended, and one can encounter something beyond ordinary experience. These correspond roughly to Durkheim's identification of three elements of a religious ritual: the physical co-presence of people to enhance emotional energy, the ritualization of actions which includes "coordinating their gestures and voices," and a symbolic sacred object that reifies and reinforces the group's sense of itself.²³ We need not agree with Durkheim's assertion that the "sacred object" merely reifies group cohesion to agree that there does need to be some sacred focus.

In the following discussion, we will focus our discussion on the three key "means of grace" identified earlier, prayer, bible study, and communion. We will also discuss other aspects of the Church of Fools/St. Pixels experience that have contributed to what some of its participants regard as its "church-like" nature.

The two easiest elements to identify within the church are prayer and bible study, which might take place in various forms. Of these two elements, the Church of Fool abounded. Prayers were expressed through typed text, and we can safely presume that the typed prayers reflected real prayer on the part of the typists. The church provided opportunities for corporate prayer during services, and for individual prayer. Of course, one doesn't need a church to pray, but the sense of praying in a church is evident within the Church of Fools experience. Moreover, Bible study is present in the sermons, the conversations that occurred in both real time and the message boards, as people reflected on various biblical passages together, or even taught one another about the Christian scriptures.

²³ Schroeder et al. 1998.

Among Protestant Christians, “Communion” is a term that refers to a specific ritual, the re-enactment of the last meal that Jesus took with his disciples, according to the New Testament. Through the ritual eating of unleavened bread and drinking of a small amount of wine (or a non-alcoholic equivalent), Christians signify their solidarity with the sufferings of Christ, and with one another. But communion also refers not just to this ritual, but also the community of believers, and the intimacy that can arise from interaction with one another. In the CoF/St. Pixels experience, there is no way to physically take bread and wine and ingest them, and so far, it seems that the organizers have not attempted to find a way to do this. However, the second sense of communion is very much at the heart of the experience.

Many religious leaders argue that the communal nature of religious worship is an indispensable part of “church.” If this is the case, then can the church of Fools create a sense of shared physical space? Jonathan Steuer defines telepresence as “the experience of presence in an environment by means of a communication medium.”²⁴ Steuer classifies the vividness and interactivity of media technologies, with graphical MUDs with sound (the closest category resembling Church of Fools) ranked high in interactivity and around mid-range in vividness.

The use of ambient sound, the spatial quality of the 3D church, and the presence of iconic representations of a church all contributed significantly to the sense of a recreation of a sacred space, but the technology itself led to some associations that were decidedly “unholy.” A report in the Guardian noted that “One visitor looked around with her five year-old son on her lap. “Wow!” he said. “Who’s on your team and which ones do you kill?” – a sentiment many traditional churchgoers will recognise.”²⁵ The technology definitely looked familiar to “generation X-box,” but the sentiments that arose were not necessarily the ones the organizers had hoped to provoke.

Moreover, the ability to project oneself as the avatar of choice heightens the sense of presence in being in a physical church itself. However, the use of a cartoonish avatar detracts from the sense of vividness. Moreover, the Church, designed to be fun, and even game-like, was too much fun to evoke a sense of spirituality for some observers. As one reporter wrote:

“I logged on to the church last week and what was most captivating was that it didn't really feel like a conventional house of worship. For one thing, this pixilated chapel was cheerful. Rendered in chirpy 3-D, it exuded a cartoonish sense of fun. One cannot

²⁴ Steuer 1992, 76.

²⁵ The URL of the Beast, Guardian, UK. 20 May 2004.

Cf. http://www.churchoffools.com/media-resources/guardian_5_04.html.

imagine a place further removed from the dour surroundings in which most Irish Christians converse with their maker.”²⁶

In addition to the issue of community and space, is the extent to which the virtual church can create a sense of transcending the merely physical, and somehow encountering something that is inherently spiritual. The Church of Fools allowed, indeed, even invited, a *mélange* of levity and gravitas. A video clip kept in the archives shows virtual worshippers lined up in front of some vending machine in the church’s crypt and worshipping the vending machines.²⁷ In keeping with the theme of “foolery,” the site encouraged all kinds of foolery, including puns, jokes, and actions which perhaps are not typically encouraged in a church service.

Figure 7: Vending machines in the vault. This image also shows a variety of ways for the user to manipulate the space. Image courtesy of the author.



Drawing upon a study of religious expression globally, Eliade argued that sacred space is distinct from profane space because it is ordered. It reflects an absolute reality, a centre on which the world is founded. Conversely, the continuous and homogeneous nature of profane

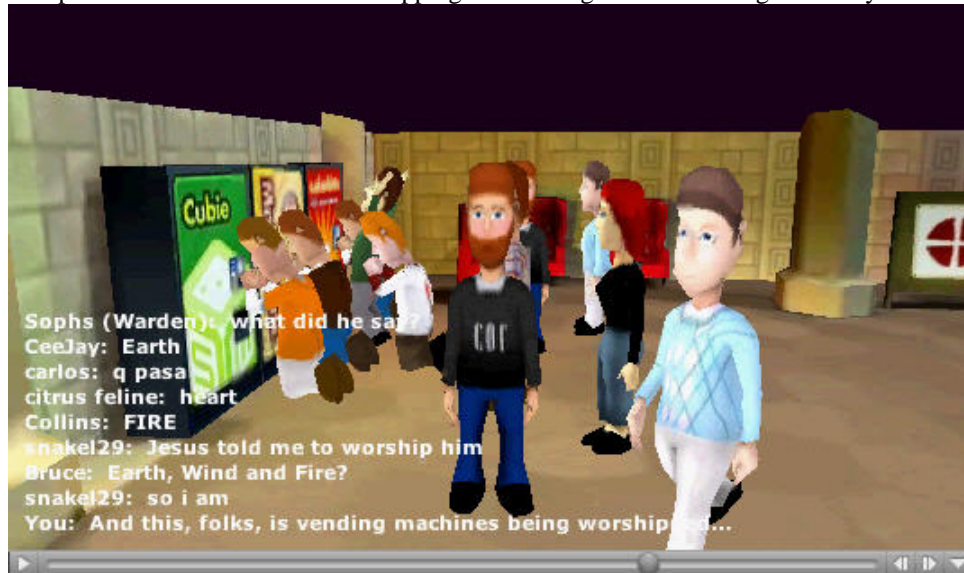
²⁶ Powell 2004.

²⁷ See http://www.churchoffools.com/view-clips/ct_536.html.

space results in Chaos where there are no systems of absolute truths and no codes of absolute moral demands. The irruptions reveal breaks in the profane space where Chaos can be ordered into a coherent Cosmos. The Church of Fools, however, violates this principle of orderliness. In fact, the “sacred space” is in fact a space of both centering and chaos; centered on God and Christian community, and yet chaos and mayhem are tolerated and encouraged.

Even in the Church of Fools, however, there are ways of maintaining discipline. Although initially it never occurred to the organizers that they might have to “smite” or log out unruly participants, they soon discovered their error. Other mechanisms for social control also were present, though, including old fashioned peer pressure. The site employed a loose registration policy, with humorous house rules, including rules banning multiple identities and noted that moderators would “not discuss specific instances of “smiting” or “banning in public.” Second, the moderators maintained a consistent presence on the forum, initiating new members into the online congregation and conducting ‘practice boards’ teaching new users in topics ranging from how to solve problems with Macromedia Flash to get into the 3D church to how to send private messages to other registered users. They also guide meaningful discussions on topics such as “What makes a church a church?” Finally, the Church of Fools delineated boundaries, and inevitably, hierarchies, by making certain ‘spaces,’ such as the pulpit, out of bounds to common worshippers.

Figure 8: Participants in Church of Fools worshipping the vending machines. Image courtesy Church of Fools.



And yet at the same time, the Church of Fools encouraged serious devotion, through the use of prayer, of scriptural teaching, and of devotional art. The “revetars” took their charge seriously, and preached real sermons. The devotional art was anything but flippant. The icons

on the side of the sanctuary drew worshippers into reflection of the art, and the art challenged simple, simplistic, or irreverent approaches to the faith. For example, the commentary accompanying a painting by Albert Herbert read as follows:

“Near the ground, clothed in white with his head bent down, Christ smiles. This isn’t the Christ of St Alphonsus or those hundreds of Victorian images that delight in the Gothic horror of the Passion. This is a Christ for whom the Cross is a burden worth bearing. Though the Cross is depicted as black and heavy, Christ only needs to support it with one hand as he raises himself up, so at the same time the Cross seems almost disturbingly weightless.

A heavy but weightless Cross. Could this be at the heart of the experience of Christianity? The weight of our sinfulness, the mistakes of our lives lie heavy upon us and force us down. Yet through the reality of redemption that cross is lifted from us so that we can be raised up; therefore the experience of the cross remains authentic but not overwhelming. The smile of Christ who is about to be crucified and who has fallen to the ground testifies to this.”²⁸

Figure 9: Albert Herbert, Jesus falls under the cross, 1987. Copyright: Albert Herbert.England & Co Gallery and Bridgeman Art Library.



The language and narrative is unmistakably serious and bears with it a *gravitas* that is quite unlike the cartoonish appearance of the rest of the church.

²⁸ Church of Fools, no date.

There are numerous other examples of how sacred space is constantly undermined by a general sense of levity in the design of Church of Fools despite the pains taken to create a credible ‘mediated presence’ of being there in sacred space.

For example, the Church itself is in the form of a basilica, Romanesque and even has a church organ. Since the church organ cannot be played, it appears that its function is purely an aesthetic choice to mimic as closely as possible a real physical church. Eliade argues that the basilica (and indeed any other religious architecture) is not only an ‘*imago mundi*’; it is “also interpreted as the earthly reproduction of a transcendent model.” In the design of Church of Fools, the close detailed replication of a physical church extends to the stained glass windows behind the altar.

Secondly, the symbolic cross is portrayed in the traditional context on a virtual altar; on the other hand, it is also provocatively portrayed on a vending machine selling holy water in the splash page of the site. Here, the sacred exists alongside the profane in a *mélange* of levity and gravitas. In the Church of Fools, the dialectic between the sacred and profane is foregrounded to the extent that it is humorous, and even slightly confrontational. More importantly, it seems the designers deliberately introduced the *mélange* of levity and gravitas in the subtle details of the church. Religious experience in the Church of Fools is inherently paradoxical, and certainly not all about dignity and reverence. Rather, it is at the same time about questioning and searching for the sacred in the midst of the profane. This sense of searching is heightened by the sheer interactivity of the site.

The ‘interface controls’ for Church of Fools is intuitive and interactive. Interactivity is suggested to be an important cause of presence. Lombard & Ditton outline five variables which affects the degree of interactivity of a medium: number of inputs from user that the medium accepts, the number (and type) of characteristics of the mediated presentation or experience that can be modified by the user (the more range of inputs, the better); the range or amount of change possible in each characteristic of the mediated presentation or experience; the degree of correspondence between the type of user input and the type of medium response; the speed with which the medium responds to user inputs.²⁹

The church of fools fulfils these in varying degrees. As a real-time medium, it responds immediately to user inputs. However, the only one source of input is through clicking the mouse, thus limiting the tactual and other sensory inputs and reactions with the environment. The physical options offered to the user ranged from the sacred (crossing oneself, saying

²⁹ Lombard & Ditton 1997.

hallelujah) to the mundane (hands on hips, scratching ones head) to the purely social (pointing, shaking hands).

In this section, we have briefly discussed the ability of Church of Fools' technology and design in providing an online experience that can mimic the presence of worshipping in a church. We found a provocative levity within the gravitas of the sacred space of Church of Fools. Our interpretation of this is that it provokes a search for the sacred in the profane. One critic of the site faulted it not for its technical platform, but rather for the lack of creativity in the vision:

“In the early days of VRML, the inventors and visionaries of the newly born web Virtual Reality hoped to make cyberspace into a spiritual experience. But it mostly failed due to lack of polygons and the ability to create an atmosphere that evokes a feeling of awe. VRML just could not hold a candle to Chartres Cathedral or Angkor Wat [...]

The church of fools fails to have any spiritual credibility for a different reason – lack of a compelling vision. Of course people are going to hack it and make fun of it; in this case the church is stodgy and boring while the 'satanist' hackers are a lot more creative and entertaining.”³⁰

There are other aspects of the juxtaposition of the sacred and the profane that invite reflection. Whereas Lindemann argues that “prayerful reading” *Lectio divina* of biblical texts increases the sense of awe and majesty, the Church of Fools invites worshippers to ‘play’ with the texts at hand. Unlike Lindemann’s contemplative ‘slow reading’, worship on the church of fools requires one to make choices, to click on one’s avatar to make it kneel or sing, or even, to which object to worship (icon or vending machine?).³¹

Secondly, in many ways, Church of Fools is humorously self-referential. From the title of the site, the patrons on the stained glass windows to the contents of the sermons (e.g. the first service held by the Church was playfully entitled “Fabled ship on a cyber ocean”), it constantly engages in a play of symbols and meanings.

Thirdly, the cross-denominational nature of its worship also throws up a juxtaposition of meanings and interpretations. For example, two of the choices available to the worshipper are crossing self or Hallelujah. Whereas a pious Catholic might cross him or herself, it would most likely be a Charismatic who would stand up, raise her hands, and say “Hallelujah.” Yet both options are equally available in the church of Fools, and both are engaged in by multiple participants. This sort of postmodernist and anti-institutional experience allows worshippers to ‘mix and match’ the ‘means of grace’ through which they attain spiritual experiences.

³⁰ Williams 2004.

A number of Christian authors have argued that postmodernism, with its relativization of truth claims and metanarratives, is incompatible with Christianity. For example, in the document referenced earlier, the Pontifical Council for Social Communications argued that

“the world of the media can sometimes seem indifferent and even hostile to Christian faith and morality. This is partly because media culture is so deeply imbued with a typically postmodern sense that the only absolute truth is that there are no absolute truths or that, if there were, they would be inaccessible to human reason and therefore irrelevant.”³²

In contrast, the Church of Fools stands as a representative example of the very sort of “faithful eclecticism” which postmodern culture demands, and the tradition of the “Holy Fool” legitimates this stance. The online environment appears to favor the development of religious and spiritual practices that are more personally expressive and more individually oriented.

The trend towards more individually oriented and pluralistic religious faith was documented as early as the 1970s before the Internet gained prominence in many areas. Marler & Roozen study concluded that church consumerism is increasingly influencing who goes to church and “[w]hat increasingly counts is the immediate relevancy of more traditional church norms and forms to my personal situation, my personal interest.”³³ Some have postulated that the Internet exacerbates such a trend,³⁴ while Hoover explains this phenomenon as a convergence of media and religion and describes spiritual seekers turning to “the marketplace of commodity culture for purposes of spiritual or religious exploration.”³⁵

This study has led us to the conclusion that the Church of Fools is a curious *mélange* of levity and gravitas, of sacred within the profane. As such, it is also a site of ‘questioning’ and a site of ‘Christian unrest,’ which is probably exactly what its developers originally envisioned. Some aspects of Church of Fools, such as the individualized context of online worship and consumerist approach to religious practice, were mirrored in the offline world even before the advent of the Internet. To answer our question of whether the online context can provide a spiritual experience, there are a number of possible answers.

First, some have argued that the online context mirrors a marked break of a new cultural ethos whereby religious experiences enter the postmodernist age and the demarcation between sacred and profane is no longer important or/and more contested than ever. This study lends

³¹ Lindemann 2004.

³² Foley 2005. See also Mohler nd.

³³ Marler & Roozen 1993.

³⁴ Dawson 2000.

³⁵ Hoover 2002, 28.

credence to this argument, in that the technology, in and of itself, seems to force a sort of sacred/profane dualism, and invisible boundaries. The boundary between logging in as “Christian” or “Satan” is very small, and there are few social controls that would limit one or the other.

Moreover, unlike the actual ‘presence’ of being in a sacred space in the offline world where all our senses are engaged, Church of Fools is simply a simulacrum (in the sense of being a copy of a copy, with significant dissipation of reality) of real “hierophany.” This argument is somewhat problematic as it presents the proposition that all that is at stake is a form of technology that is powerful enough to provide a virtual presence similar to the actual ‘presence’ of being there in sacred space. As Clifford Christians noted, “[m]edia technologies are especially powerful mechanisms for constructing inauthentic humanness.”³⁶

In one sense, the same criticisms that are leveled at the Church of Fools can easily be made of any other offline worship experience. Superficial relationships are not made more intimate by recognizing one’s offline features, and the irreverence and mocking thoughts are probably just as present in an offline church, although not as often articulated. There is certainly no comparison between Chartres Cathedral and the sanctuary in Church of Fools, but there is also no comparison between the aforesaid Cathedral and the bland architecture of many American worship spaces that have taken to meeting in any abandoned building.

Moreover, many formal writers on religion take as the exemplar the most powerful. In the Christian bible, however, God can speak as much through a donkey as through a prophet. Prophets are often vain and insecure, and the “meek shall inherit the earth.” Thus, it is possible to find God in the profane, as much as in the artificial constructions designed to elicit awe and wonder.

In a very real sense, the Church of Fools, and St. Pixels after it, are technological artifacts conceptually designed to introduce one to an experience beyond one’s immediate existence. Gothic arches were designed to inspire awe, and thus invite reflection upon God, and stained glass began as an attempt to teach largely illiterate peoples basic stories of the Bible. In both of these cases, the technological basis became more sophisticated, and came to be seen as beautiful, irrespective of their religious intention. In both cases, also, the relationships enacted within the technology, relationships with other humans and with God, eventually transcended the technologies themselves. Perhaps the experience of Church of Fools and St. Pixels will be the same.

³⁶ Christians 2002.

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