# Flowing Between Sacred Grounds:
## Constructing Socio-Religious Communities in 3D (Three-Dimensional) Virtual Worlds

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Abstract:

Technological advances have created alternative pathways for social action (Hess, 2007). While different types of virtual environments allow for different user affordances, all virtual worlds are subject to technological constraints and liberties that impact the meanings, identities and artifacts constructed within them (Pearce, 2009). This research builds upon user-driven innovation theories in analyzing reformed religious artifacts and practices emerging within 3D (three-dimensional) virtual worlds.
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> "A new communication system, increasingly speaking a universal, digital language, is both integrating globally the production and distribution of words, sounds and images of our culture (the new commodity is information), and customizing them to the tastes of the identities and moods of individuals (the new form of intercourse is over the internet and within information networks).[1]

Over a decade ago, Manuel Castells' (2000) grappled with the social implications of global and massive Internet access. Castells argued that the "new communication system" has created a "network society"—a society that communicates, interacts, and exchanges through words, sounds, and images transmitted digitally over the Internet. The implications have been vast, particularly for how we understand collective social action. Today, several scholars (Castells, 2000, 2004; Ammerman, 2003; Von Hippel, 2005; Swidler, 2002; and Hess, 2007) contend that society is moving towards a culture where users have open access to Internet base technologies in which they are empowered to create, customize, and freely share information or products, as opposed to solely relying on institutions to act on their behalf. While many are used to collective action being filtered through institutional structures, the communication technologies of post-modernity have made organizing and group work possible without requiring formal management, overhead, and massive resources that created the institutional dilemma in the first place (Shirky, 2009). Consequently, large groups of actors are able to act across boundaries, challenging hierarchy and decision making within any particular institutional structure; not by creating collective action, but by removing the obstacles to it (Shirky, 2009).

Open access has also given rise to open innovation. Users are creating innovation communities where knowledge is freely and openly shared. Often a lead user emerges, but this role is fluid and flexible within the community.[2] Several of the organizations of the new model of innovation (religious, non-profit, and activist oriented) consist of volunteer labor. They are local and temporal in nature, with a goal of empowering those that are disempowered in various sectors of civil society, and whose repertoires of action include domains outside of traditional institutions (Hess, 2007; Castells, 2000, 2004). As a result, "innovation by users appears to increase social welfare" and challenge "a major structure of the social division of labor."[3] The social division of labor between producer and user is altered when information and products are constructed in collaboration amongst users with similar interests or needs; and freely revealed (accessible) to others via the Internet. Further, user-centered innovation advances social welfare by diminishing the cultural and material capital

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[1] See Manuel Castells, The Rise of the Network Society, 2, 160-161, 215.
[2] See Von Hippel, chapter 2, regarding patterns and profiles of lead-users.
[3] Von Hippel, 2.

normally required to provide information and physical products to those with need or interest. What is the relevance of these new models of open innovation to the study of religion in virtual worlds and religious formation particularly?

**Shapen in Virtuosity**

Design of religious communities within 3D virtual worlds is guided by principals of open innovation, as well as belief and doctrinal systems. It is a communal process that involves both individual knowledge and shared knowledge. The acquisition of land, the design of the landscape, the creation or purchasing of objects, the development of scripts, the decisions around religious artifacts, images, and narratives incorporated into the religious landscape, are all a part of the design process. I use the term design here intentionally, to highlight that "being religious" within the virtual realm involves intentional and strategic actions and technical skills. This process may be initiated by a lead user, land owner, or the leader of the religious group. Yet the religious gathering space is added to, reformed, and modified by the presence and actions of each visitor to the land.[4]

The emergence of reformed religious thought in the midst of social and technological change is not a new revelation. Religion has always been dynamic in relation to its social context (Berger, 1967; Bellah, 2004; Parsons, 1964). Civil religion (Tipton, 2005), Black Liberation Theology (Cone, 1984), and The Self Revelation Church of Absolute Monism (Bainbridge, 1997) are all examples of religious innovation; construction, production, and distribution of reformed theological insights that sought to unite sacred and secular ideals amongst groups that share common social purposes (Bellah, 2004; Paris, 1985). However, there are some uniqueness to 3D virtual worlds as a culture and a technology that impact the transference of religious artifacts and performance into the virtual environment, as well as the group engaged in the religious experience.

Pearce (2009) notes that virtual worlds have several distinct characteristics, four of them significantly impact religion. One, virtual worlds are persistent—that is they are always "on" and actions are cumulative. Two, engagement in virtual worlds is through embodied persistent identities—people have embodied representations—avatars, which are user-controlled, distinguishable from first-person, and evolve over time. Third, virtual worlds are inhabitable; one lives, participates, and contributes to the culture. Fourthly, virtual world participation is consequential. In other words, the world and other's experience of the world are transformed by one's presence and actions. All of these characteristics become elements that play a role in the sustainability and forms of religious engagement in 3D virtual worlds.

Before we can understand religious practices and formation in 3D virtual worlds, a preliminary task of contextualizing the virtual space in relation to religion and the sacred is necessary. Rachel Wagner (2012) addresses the issue of the sacred and the virtual in great detail. She states,

> "The question of where we situate the "virtual" in relation to the "sacred" and the "profane" exposes the indeterminacy in our own understanding of what religion even is , and how we can know it when we see it. If the sacred and the virtual are identical in both being non-material opposites of the physical world—that is, both are "not real," then there is no reason to protect brick-and-mortar building from violation, nor is there any reason to worship in one place over another…If the sacred can manifest on both the virtual and in the physical world, then virtual miracles are possible, and virtual desecration should be resisted." (Wagner, 2012, p. 79)

Wagner reviews several theories, including the virtual as hierophony and the virtual as a "magic circle". From the hierophany perspective "the screen is an entry point into the transcendence" (Wagner, 2012, p.80). It upholds the theory that the virtual is separate from the physical, an escape or fantasy realm with little impact on reality. Huzinga's (1955) theory of the magic circle is often applied to highlight the act of performance that occurs within the virtual. Similar to

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[4] Land is a term common to Second Life. It denotes the parcel of digital space purchased by users' with currency and upon which users' can build objects, scripts, codes, as well as control access, activities, and rules (all as a sub-tier to the overall platform restrictions).

ritual, it is in the demarcation that the sacredness is preserved. We can completely immerse into our performance roles, but they are separate from other roles/everyday life. However, both theories are limiting because, they only interpret the virtual relation to the sacred in terms of boundaries. Recent studies (Turkle, Boellstorff, 2008; Pearce, 2009; Ellison 2011; have shown that while the virtual includes fantasy, play, and rules of performance, it is not disconnected or demarcated from the "actual"/ "physical" world.[5] The virtual is a culture (Salen and Zimmerman, 2004), an open system, an augmented reality (Wagner, 2012), a "between space" (Pearce, 2009)—that blends the virtual and the physical. Thus, its relation to the sacred can also be viewed as open, augmented, fluid, and blended.

Questions of "realness", community (Dawson, 2004), and sacredness (O'Leary, 2004) often stand as barriers to any further explorations into the dynamics of what is occurring within these virtual religious spaces. These questions represent two ends of a spectrum along which many struggle to understand and analyze religion and religious practices occurring within virtual worlds. What often is the underlining question behind these questions is "are these acts religious and what is at stake if it is acknowledged that they are or are not"? The admittance in either answer is that acts and practices commonly associated with religion, and how religion functions in the world, are now occurring within virtual world technologies.

This research builds upon user-driven innovation theories in analyzing reformed religious artifacts and practices emerging within 3D (three-dimensional) virtual worlds. More specifically, how religious space, roles, rituals, and artifacts are negotiated during construction and participation within 3D virtual worlds will be examined.

**A Context of Study: Brand New Hope Christian Center (BNH)**

Preliminary explorations of Second Life (SL) reveal a dynamic religious sector within virtual worlds. Second Life is an internet base virtual world environment designed using three-dimensional computer graphic interface protocol. Second Life launched in 2003. The server platform upon which the objects in Second Life are built, are owned and provided by Linden Lab. Everything else in Second Life is completely user created.[6] Residents have created several churches, synagogues, mosque, and other religious gathering spaces in Second Life (SL). One of the largest is the Christian Church of Second Life with 738 listed members. The Roman Catholic Church in Second Life has approximately 500 listed members and Second Life Synagogue-Temple Beit Israel has more than 200 listed members (Crabtree, 2007). Member list reflect anyone that has joined the group since its inception. Yet, they do not reflect random visits to a particular land/sim (simulation) owned by the group, nor the frequency of engagement with the group. Some memberships are as low as 3, the average is around 100 members. There are also other religious communities in Second Life. It is more challenging to identify these groups as religious communities through general searches and databases. But with the inclusion of these numbers I estimate that religious communities/groups are close to 200 or more.

Several SL religious communities have been visited and observed as a part of this study. This paper will focus on one SL community, particularly, Brand New Hope Christian Center (pseudonym). Brand New Hope (BNH) has approximately 372 listed members. Pastor Tanya (pseudonym) is the founder.[7] The community meets Tuesdays, Thursdays, Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays. BNH has closed enrollment, static and restricted roles, and much of the

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[5] In contrast to the terms of "real" or "physical", Boellstorff uses the term "actual" to denote aspects of culture that are different than the virtual (in that they are "not realized by computer programs through the Internet"). See Boellstorff, 2008, p 21.

[6] Second Life users are known as residents. Residents create the digital objects for avatars, clothes, islands, buildings, and any other object used for interaction and exchange in Second Life. In 4th quarter of 2010 Linden Lab reported 750,000 unique residents, 105 million hours of usage and approximately $165 thousand (USD) equivalent Linden dollars in virtual goods within Second Life (Retrieved June 2011 http://lindenlab.com/about).

[7] I am using pseudonyms throughout this paper in acknowledgement of the potential anonymity that may need to be maintained by the virtual community. Although I have acquired the necessary consent to observe this virtual community, at this time one-on-one interviews have not been conducted by which I can note the users' and communities preference regarding naming. As a virtual ethnographer I have not decided the best form of representation (pseudo or as reflected in-world) for the communities reflected in the larger research study.

architecture mirrors offline religious structures. BNH uses traditional biblical text and performs some traditional rituals/sacraments. During a 5 month observation period I spent many hours in-world; attending worship services, prayer meeting, bible study, dance parties, and other events organized by the community or a sub-group of the communities selected for observation. Close attention was given to the landscape of the virtual space, gathering procedures, rituals, religious narratives, discourse, creation of symbols and objects, leadership structures, and levels of cooperation and participation. Two of the themes that emerged will be discussed in this paper: the multidimensional meeting space and the 4th self.

## *Flowing Between Sacred Grounds: The Multidimensional Meeting Space*

> It is Sunday evening and I have raced from my small inner city Baptist church to log into Second Life, to catch the evening service, for which I received a notice via email, welcoming all to come, bring your bibles, and a friend or two, as the topic will be "The Red Carpet." As the computer generated world is uploading a mirage of color, text, and sound appear before me. I teleport into the virtual world at the entrance way of Brand New Hope Christian Church. There is a welcome sign to the left, cobble stone walkway to the door, birds flying and chirping behind, I make my way into the vestibule and there is a social media panel (visit us here), artwork of various religious symbols, and two rooms. I hear the song "We have come to worship; we have come to bless your holy name." I follow the sound of the music into the sanctuary, to the left is a cross, submersed in a water pool background, rows of burgundy and brown pews are in front of me, images with scriptural text line the wall across from me, two love seats with a circular signage rotating above are in the rear of the sanctuary. I receive a message via chat "Welcome Zaryiah, it is good to see you" I respond "Thanks, it is good to be hear", I make my way over to an empty pew in the back. I left click on it, a pop-up menu appears (object info… sit here). I choose "sit here". As I am seated another pop-up menu appears (pew object…choose posture: attentive, worship, pray, receive, relax, casual). I choose attentive, which positions me at the edge of the pew, head up, facing forward, ankles crossed. Simultaneously, I see an avatar proceed to the front of the sanctuary and walk into the pulpit. A voice streams, "Good afternoon." It is a male voice , which matches the avatar of a middle age white male configuration. As the voice streams, a green sound wave is animated above the head of the avatar. He continues, "Can everyone hear the music, my video is almost ended, so I think we can begin now…"

As one enters the virtual religious space one may find many of the images, sounds, and narratives familiar—the language, the scriptural text, the crucifix, the communion table, the pulpit, the music all seem to coincide with non-virtual religious structures and experiences. Yet, there are several distinctions, modifications to the standard gathering rituals, reformed constructions of religious images, blurring of boundaries between virtual and the non-virtual, and a blending of the fleshly and digitally embodied self. It is as if a migration and a metamorphosis have occurred, simultaneously.

Each space is custom designed to fit the needs and purposes of the targeted community. Most religious SIMS consists of multiple gathering spaces: a greeting & welcome space, a sanctuary, a bible study space, art/media space, Prayer/meditation space, Fun/casual fellowship space, and the open landscape that surrounds the close compartmental spaces.

**Figure 1.1: Variations of Brand New Hope Christian Center: Top left (outer landscape), Top right (vestibule), bottom left (sanctuary rear view), bottom right (sanctuary front view).**

The virtual religious space is an interactive mesh of cultural norms, technical affordances, and religious imagination. It is a multidimensional space in both religious and technical terms. It reflects the open, fluid, blended luminal-liminoid technological culture of the virtual world. It is also a transformative space where one encounters the text, the images, and the narratives of the sacred by presence and transcendence. The open innovative quality of virtual religious communal space is not to suggest that these spaces are religious experimentation labs. Religious formation, even in virtual environments, is not detached from the tradition. The tradition provides the text, symbols, and rituals around which these online communities gather (Ammerman, 2003). These elements of religious formation are cultivated within virtual religious communities. However, they are not simply transposed but transformed through technological innovations that are guided by specific beliefs and interpretations – (Campbell, 2004).

BNH profile states, "We are a bible believing Church that lifts up the name of Jesus"

This simple straightforward declaration helps one understand the layout of the sanctuary, the dominance of "Jesus" imagery, the use of biblical scripture, the theological claims made during sermons, prayer, and even in informal chatter. It also aligns with the simple and informal culture of BNH. The use of pink recliners in the prayer circle (see Figure 1.2). The 10-20 minutes of casual conversation, story-telling, and laughter that follows each worship service.

Figure 1.2: Prayer meeting at BNH (with recliners that automatically populate when an avatar moves in proximity of the meeting space).

Design and engagement within the virtual religious space is equally guided by the affordances and limitations of the technology itself. Unlike the static screenshots above, the virtual religious space is dynamic. The space is transformed by the presence and actions of each person. The screen view may as a new avatar enters into proximity. A growing population in the same space can alter the streaming of the virtual media, impacting prayer, song, or chat. The chat box includes all nearby chats (unless restricted). Objects are often designed with information cards and communicate with all that "touch" it.

Consequently, Virtual Worlds are not social utopias. Pearce (2009) suggest that virtual worlds are often considered open-ended, co-constructed utopias when in actuality the behaviors witnessed there emerge out of complex interactions between participants and the technological affordances designed within the virtual space. The designer's intentions/ideologies are often the hidden element within virtual worlds that gets overlooked in analysis. Designer intentions erupt throughout religious gatherings in SL. The chat pop-up during the sermons, the ability for participants to have side dialogue both via private IM or via public chat, are all unintended consequences of designer intentions that become part of the religious experience.

## Worship in 4<sup>th</sup> Person: Avatars, Animation, and SL Interaction

Interaction in SL is also multiple and varied. The visual interaction is based on avatar and avatar animation. Other's are mindful when an avatar appears, the posture of an avatar, the gestures, the avatar animations—all signal to other's your presence and actions. When music is played (often at the beginning and end of the gathering time), some avatars promptly stand with raised hands and swaying, signaling to other's a form of worship (see Figure 1.3). Yet, the actor for whom the avatar is an extension, is also watching an aspect of self.

The development of the 4<sup>th</sup> self is a part of religious formation in 3D virtual worlds. The ability to perceive where one is in relation to others and the environment at all times creates a heightened sense of perceptive and emotional presence—an awareness of self and others that is major in the formation process (Pearce, 2009).

Figure 1.3: Praise & Worship at BNH (occurs 15 minutes before noon, evening, and mid-week service).

On one occasion, a female avatar enters an on-going prayer session. The circle of recliners automatically increases in number, as it does whenever a new avatar enters into the prayer room. Upon entry she does not take a seat. She stands behind the group, sharing and praying with the other attendees. She is offered a seat, through chat, by one of the leaders gathered in the prayer circle. She does not respond. Initially, her position and lack of response was not particular noteworthy to the group. Often delays, lack of response, or sudden disappearance of an avatar signal an issue with streaming bandwidth, or that someone has stepped away from the computer briefly.[8] However, after a longer period of time (approx 11 minutes after the first offer to have a seat) the following exchange occurs between a member of the prayer group, Pastor Tanya, and the female avatar:

> John: Goodness there is a spare seat
> Pastor Tanya:  It's wonderful to see every one here today
> Goodness:  I am fine standing up thanks
> John: ok Goodness but don't make us nervous ;-)
> Pastor Tanya: Goodness is fine
> Pastor Tanya: She prefers to stand and that is ok

Goodness avatar was an extension of self. Whether her non-virtual self was seated, typing, pacing around the house, was of no consequence to the sense of presence perceived by those represented in the prayer group. At the same time, the avatar representation was not the only representation of self in 3D virtual worlds. Words and voice also were an extension of self. The pronouns of he and she often accompanied the voice and the narrative shared, rather than the visual representation of one's avatar. This is particularly noticeable for animal avatar representations—called furries. Within the religious gathering furries often did not have seats in chairs, they lie beside the pew, or in the aisle. They "purr" instead of "shout". They sometimes "lick" instead of "hug". However, during interaction with others it is the words shared within chat, or even the act of chatting, or the voice that is streamed, which all serve as a part of the 4th person engaged in the religious community. Not a fantasy person, or even a projection of ideas or values, but a hybrid augmented form of the first-person, communicating out to others.

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[8] Tom Broellstorff  in chapter 4 of *Coming to Age in Second Life* elaborates on the significance of place and time in SL. He goes on to explain that in SL experiences in lag (delayed downloading) or afk( away-from-keyboard) are acceptable norms. Avatars are only present in-world as long as the program is running and the person is logged in. At times, people may need to take care of quick task in the actual world, but they do not want to completely log out and disappear from the community in-world. However, if there is no interactive activity for approximately 3 minutes, the avatar is animated to bow its head; eventually the lack of computer activity will cause you to be logged out of SL altogether (See Boellstorff, 2008, pp. 90-117).

This is not to say that the 4th self is a post-human experience. Contrarily, virtual worlds reconfigure selfhood and sociality but this is only possible because they rework the virtuality [symbolic representations through which we perceive the world] that characterizes human being in the actual world."[9] Notions of self are re-worked in the virtual realm, but the real/actual also meet in the virtual world. James Gee makes distinctions between the virtual, real, and projective identity in virtual worlds. According to Gee, virtual identity is the character users control in the virtual world, real identity is the non-virtual identity that gets filtered into the virtual world, and projective identity is the values and goals projected onto the virtual character.[10] Even in the non-virtual world we constantly perceive the world through symbolic representations. Yet, many of those representations are constructed by the elite for the oppressed. Now "we are moving toward a culture of simulation in which people are increasingly comfortable with substitution representations of reality for the real."[11] In the virtual world those representations are reworked by the participants engaged in exchange. Mary Hess argues that the agency involved in learning to perform a self within these spaces where context collapse, while making sense of ourselves in relation to religion, is crucial to faith formation in post-modernity (Hess, 2011). Co-constructing socio-religious communities in 3D virtual worlds includes developing a 4th self.

The vitality and deep commitments of religion are shaped within the social milieu of a people. Religion, in turn, shapes the social perspectives, values, and attitudes of the larger culture. In the virtual world, the technological forces that are also embedded within the flows and codes of sounds, words, and images become a part of the forms of religion that are emerging there. We are just beginning to understand religious formation within these multidimensional spaces and through the 4th person.

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[9] Boellstorff, 2008, p. 29.
[10] See Gee, *What video games have to teach us about learning and literacy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 54-56.
[11] Turkle, *Life on the Screen*, 23.

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