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Virtual Christian Places

Between Innovation and Tradition

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Abstract

With the starting point of all Christian places (114 places) in the virtual world Second Life (SL), this article aims to study how SL is part of a negotiation process between old offline media and new online media, between established traditions and innovation. The questions addressed in this article are how such places are constructed, the constructor's intentions and how they are related to established traditions.

The idea behind this study was that the owners (studied through a questionnaire) set the agenda for what is going on at the place they own, and for how the places are constructed.

The virtual world gives almost endless possibilities to create any form of place for Christian community and celebration, and people are limited only by their imaginations, but still tradition play an important aspect of the constructions.

Concepts such as 'remediation', 'hybridity', and 'affordance' are used to interpret the places and their relation to traditions and the so called real world.

Keywords

1   Introduction

It has been assumed that digital media affect religious faith and practices in new and previously unpredictable ways. Within the growing academic field of 'digital religion', this notion is gradually nuanced and made more complex than before. Although the internet in general, and social media and virtual worlds in particular, are claimed to transform our whole culture and way of living and,

therefore, the religious landscape, evidence shows that such far-reaching claims must be revisited. This article seeks to revise and nuance such statements.

With the starting point of Christian places in the virtual world Second Life (SL), this article aims to study how SL is part of a negotiation process between old offline media and new online media, between established traditions and innovation.

The aim is to investigate the intention behind the places as seen from the owners' point of view with a special focus on the relation between offline and online and between tradition and innovation. Questions addressed in this article are how such spaces are constructed, the constructor's intentions and how the sites are related to established traditions. The idea behind this study was that the owners set the agenda for what is going on at the place they own, and for how the places are constructed, and that this is negotiated in relation to the possibilities and constraints provided by the medium. The virtual world gives almost endless possibilities to create any form of place for Christian community and celebration, and people are limited only by their imaginations. This study differs from most studies on SL religiosity that have mainly focused on what is happening in-world and thus are focused on in-world activities and participants such as visitors, laymen, preachers, clergymen, and so forth.

Research on digital religion has been described as going through different stages throughout the years (Campbell 2013; Højsgaard & Warburg 2005). Beginning in the 1990s, research on digital religion defined online expressions as an alternative to the so-called real world – as a so-called cyberspace – with its own set of rules. In the second wave of research, scholars nuanced this assumption and began to develop an interest in mapping the diversity of online expressions. In the third wave of research, it was noted and studied how the online and the offline worlds were linked together and complemented each other. In what might be called a fourth wave of research on digital religion, it is acknowledged how the digital world has become woven into the fabric of our everyday lives and how the digital and physical are merging (Campbell 2013; Cheong, Fischer-Nielsen, Gelfgren & Ess 2012) into a single, but mixed, hybrid state (see, for example, Lindgren 2013) or a third space (Hoover & Echchaibi 2012).

In a previous study in which all Christian places (at that time 114 places) within SL were mapped and categorized (at the end of 2011), it was noticed how a majority of Christian places are designed according fairly traditional concepts throughout the Christian sphere – including Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant traditions alike (Gelfgren & Hutchings 2014). In another related study, the hybrid nature of the Church building (both the virtual and the physical) was emphasized, and it was claimed that there is a relation between the physical and the virtual church building and how they both attempt to reach – or transcend – into the realm of the sacred (Gelfgren 2014). This article will use the study of the Christian places as a foundation to be further built upon through a questionnaire

survey and interviews with the owners of the sites. At the center of the argumentation of this article lies the relation between the virtual and the physical, between tradition and progression, and between familiarity and innovation.

SL might nowadays be considered as out-of-date given its declining media attention and user statistics. However, approximately one million users are still active, between 30,000 and 60,000 logins are made per day, and 10,000 new accounts are created every day ("Metrics," n.d; ."Infographic: 10 Years of Second Life" 2013). Given the fact that there are other and newer virtual worlds such as World of Warcraft, Minecraft, and Eve online, as well as other games and worlds (often two dimensional) for younger Internet users such as Moviestarplanet, Panfu, and Club Penguin, and new devices such as the Oculus Rift, we have probably not seen the end of virtual worlds. As one of the largest virtual worlds, and with a significant amount of freedom for the user to create his/her own 'universe' in any conceivable way, SL is interesting to study when it comes to issues such as hybridity and the relation between innovation and tradition.

In times when established religious institutions are being contested and undermined due to an increasing pluralism, at least in the Western world, one might expect a degree of (market) adaptation among churches and other Christian institutions (see, for example, Martin 2010; Taylor 2007). This assumption ties in to what is happening online, and SL churches give us an opportunity to investigate this – i.e., they show us how established traditions comply with the potential of transformation and adaptation. Douglas Estes (2009) mentions in his book on how to be a church in a virtual world that "this type of church is unlike any church the world has ever seen […] It is a completely different type of church from any the world has ever seen." (p. 18)

Negotiating religious authority is one reoccurring theme within digital religion (see Cheong 2012, for a good introduction and overview), and similar claims are tied to the transforming potential of the internet in general. The internet is often associated with processes that have overthrown established structures such as those associated with political power – as was seen in The Arab Spring uprisings – and that have the potential to transform our personal lives and relationships and lead to new paradigms in education, journalism, and marketing. This disruptive potential of the Internet is often seen as intertwined with the media itself and as part of positive Internet rhetoric (Castells 2003; Jenkins 2006; Rheingold 2002).

Internet was created in close relation to the needs of the military in the sixties, but further developed by Californian entrepreneurs with a background in the flower power movement, hence developing the anti-hierarchical and counter cultural aspect of Internet (Rainie & Wellman 2012; Turner 2006). Its transformative power has been claimed over and over again, in relation to religious change as well (Brasher 2001; Helland 2005). The 'many to many' communicative character of internet (Castells 2003), its anti-hierarchical structure, and openness is claimed to be

entwined into very nature of the internet, and the disruptive nature is seen as inherent in the technology itself.

Well-known media scholars such as Marshall McLuhan (1964) and Walter Ong (1982) (and many more) have famously pointed out how the medium itself determines and formulates the message, expressed in McLuhan's famous words "the media is the message". It is, however, too simplistic to stress media alone as the main factor behind such social and political changes. It is becoming increasingly difficult to claim such monocausal explanations (see, for example, Morozov 2011). Nevertheless, these are not just rhetorical issues; the Internet has been proven to have a transformative and disruptive role, but such assertions are complex.

1.1   Affordance, remediation, and hybridity

How can one make use of an object or a medium such as Second Life and does the medium support or constrain certain actions? Here the relation between the object and the subject is highlighted through the concept of affordance. The use of an environment or object is related to both the object itself and to the subject's prejudices and previous understandings of the object (as influenced by, for example, Gaver 1991 and Gibson 1979, and for an overview see, for example, Örnberg Berglund 2009). Norman (1999) adds 'conventions' to the concept of affordance to highlight how it is possible for a group of users to learn and establish rules for how objects are supposed to be used – patterns that only slowly evolve over time. Thus when creating Christian places in SL people might construct them based on their previous understanding of what a Christian place or a church is.

In their influential work on remediation, Bolter and Grusin (1999) explained how new media always rely on older media forms. They wrote: "What is new about new media comes from the particular ways in which they refashion older media and the ways in which older media refashion themselves to answer the challenges of new media" (p. 15). This article deals with the first step of this argument – how the church is refashioned and thus remediated in a new medium such as a virtual world. In the same way as new media relies on old media, digital religious expressions rely on physical expressions of religious faith and practices.

The virtual churches are also seen as hybrid spaces where the virtual world is intertwined with the physical world (Gelfgren 2014). Lindgren, Dahlberg-Grundberg, and Johansson (2014) write about hybridity as the representation of "the coming together of online and offline, media and matter, or, more dynamically, as the interplay between the online and offline dimension. But, more specifically, it could also be viewed in terms of interaction between old and new media" (p. 2). The intersection between old and new media is of particular interest in this article.

The hypothesis of this article is that virtual churches and Christian places are constructed in ways that are related to, and rooted in, perceived concepts and understandings of what 'ordinary' and so-called real life churches and Christian places are. The assumption that virtual churches and places are something qualitatively new is, therefore, contested. The novelty of virtual worlds does not necessarily mean that something completely new is created, instead there is a hybrid mix of old and new media, a blend of tradition and innovation, and an act of balancing the familiar and the imaginable.

1.2   Empirical material

During late 2011 and early 2012, Gelfgren and Hutchings conducted a study (2014) and located 114 different Christian places in SL through the in-world search function by searching for terms such as 'Christian', 'church', 'chapel', and the like.[1] Christian groups were also searched for with references to places. The search terms were English, but Swedish, German, Egyptian, and places of other origin were found.

In the current work, the 2014 study has been complemented and nuanced by a questionnaire sent out to the owners of the different Christian places. Questions focused the owners, their engagement with SL, how they view tradition in relation to SL, and how the places are constructed. Information about the owner was found under 'place profile' and 'about land' in the SL browser. The answer frequency was approximately 50% of the assigned owners of the Christian places. One owner can own different places, and in this case six owners owned two places each. The owners were contacted individually three times asking them to fill in the online survey that was made with the Survey Monkey tool (http://www.surveymonkey.com). The survey mixed multiple-choice questions (most of them with the possibility to add comments) with a few additional open-ended questions. In addition, five in-depth interviews were conducted, including three via Skype, one through in-world chatting, and one respondent who preferred answering a set of written questions. In this article, the interviewees are referred to by their SL avatar's name. The interviews are first and foremost used to deepen and balance the answers from the online questionnaire.

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1   A quick search with the in-world search function (29/04/14) for places related to 'church' now generates 314 hits, and 'Christian' generates 114 hits, which can be compared to 3 hits for 'mosque' and 11 for 'Muslim' and 5 hits for 'synagogue' and 13 for 'Jewish' . This can be compared, for example, with 566 hits for 'university', 205 for 'museum', 1609 for 'party', 569 for 'erotic', and 3172 for 'sex'. Christian places and churches are thus a noticeable part of the SL community and are probably the largest among the established religious traditions.

2   Second Life and the Christian places

SL was launched in 2003 by the California-based company Linden Labs. It is free to download the needed software (the SL browser) and to become a member (a resident) of the community. In-world, it is possible to rent land (islands or parts of islands), and this makes it possible to sculpt the landscape into whatever shape one might want, or to build any form of constructions such as churches, parks, cemeteries, night clubs, museums, whole villages, etc. Residents are represented by avatars that can be in almost any form one might wish, although humanoid characters are the most common. It is possible to create and sell virtual goods with so-called Linden dollars, a currency connected to the US dollar that can be transferred in and out of the SL world.

SL is not really a game in the sense that it has a purpose of winning or completing missions, and it is instead more a digital mirror of the physical world we live in. People, the residents, 'live' their lives in SL; they socialize, build relations, attend different social events, and much more (for an introduction, see Boellstorff 2008). Visitors can, in terms of religious participation, join Buddhist meditation (Grieve 2010), pray in a mosque (Derrickson 2008), visit synagogues (Cohen 2012), attend neopagan ceremonies (Radde-Antweiler 2007), and more.

2.1   Christian places in Second Life

The majority of Christian places are associated with the Protestant branch of the Church (including denominational, non-denominational, and former state churches), but there is a considerable number of Catholic places and to a lesser degree also Orthodox places. Approximately two thirds of the places have a representational church building on it, i.e., a church that is clearly recognizable as a church with a familiar interior design and architectural style that often includes pews, stained glass, an altar, and an ambo. In addition, many places also have spaces for contemplation, recreation, or amusement, and these are areas and functions that extend the traditional use of a Christian place.

The study by Gelfgren and Hutchings (2014) aimed to get an overview of the visual look of all the places. The authors categorized the churches in five different styles, including 'ornamental churches', 'Protestant reproduction churches', 'Roman Catholic and Orthodox reproduction churches', churches with a 'fantasy architecture', and a fifth category with 'non-church architectural style'. 'Ornamental churches' are churches built without being intended for Christian worship. Instead they can be a part of an authentic village, a copy of a famous church meant to be a tourist attraction, or a building for wedding ceremonies. 'Reproduction churches' are buildings with a religious purpose modeled after traditional churches. 'Fantasy churches' have a more imaginative

construct, and the 'non-church' category includes buildings without having any function as a active church.

Fig. 1: The Koelner Dom

For example, the Koelner Dom (Cologne Cathedral) is a replica of the real dome in Cologne and is used as a tourist attraction, and Second Norway has a replica of a traditional Norwegian stave church that can be rented for ceremonies like weddings and other parties. A place such as Basset Hills Fellowship Church looks like a reconstruction of a modern Protestant American church with a small bell tower on top of the roof, pews, stained glass, and a stage with an ambo as well as dressing rooms and a room for babysitting. Outside there are parking lots that even have spaces for disabled people. This place represents what one would expect from a real world church.

Fig. 2: Basset Hills Fellowship Church

The St George Orthodox Christian Church is an Orthodox Church also built like a reproduction of a real church with icons, an iconostasis, an altar, and pose balls for praying and bowing before the Lord. In these two cases there is no doubt that a visitor is facing a church. On the other hand, we found churches such as The Church of the Dawntreader with an open structure, without walls, but with a pulpit and two rows of pews arranged in a semi-circular shape. The 'church' is covered with a cupola with huge brass bells, and it is situated next to the shore with crashing waves. Close to the church we find a dance floor, trees, a labyrinth, and more. At His Love we find a grassy and hilly landscape with trees, a Calvary scene, and a waterfall accompanied by several spots for contemplation.

Fig. 3: St George Orthodox Christian Church

Fig. 4: Church of the Dawntreader

Fig. 5: His Love

Of these 114 places, 81 (71%) had a traditional church on the site that was reproduced with a clearly recognizable offline architectural style – often with a rectangular structure with walls, windows, church door, pews, altar, and ambo. In a previous case-based study, based upon the study of two churches ("The Anglican Cathedral" in Second Life, and "Church online" which is present online in SL and through a web-based interface), Hutching pointed out how virtual churches are deliberately constructed to be familiar and recognizable for the visitors. He writes that "[v]isual and liturgical familiarity can also function in this way, demonstrating the authenticity of the church to visitors who understand the appropriate codes of meaning" (2010, p. 77). Only nine places had erected a building with the function of a church but in a more imaginative architectural style. Of the 114 Christian places, no more than 15 places had buildings such as nightclubs, cafés, and

meditations spaces, but no actual church building. Nine locations used the landscape as the primary setting for religious faith and practices. Instead of a church and other buildings, the landscape was made up of hills and rivers, trees, flowers, sculptures, places with benches and campfires, and so on. Often the church building was only one part of a place and was complemented with additional areas for socializing, recreation, and amusement. Fireplaces, shops, flower gardens, majestic trees, scenic views, houses for rent, games, and so on were common features at many Christian places. At places with churches, 65% also had additional areas for socializing, 58% had areas for contemplation, and 58% had a garden. Thus there were other purposes connected to the places, and these will be dealt with below.

Of these places, 67 of the 114 (59%) could be designated as Protestant based on theological or denominational statements associated with the place and were either denominational, non-denominational, or with an unknown Protestant affiliation. Twenty-five places could be identified as Roman Catholic and five as Orthodox. It was possible to identify 17 places without a specific Christian affiliation. Thirteen of the Protestant places were designed with a specific focus on socializing and fellowship, but none of the Roman Catholic or Orthodox places were designed with a primarily social aspect in mind. Instead, Roman Catholic and Orthodox places tended to emphasize personal meditation and contemplation with only a few examples of areas for socializing. In other words, Protestants have a higher degree of presence and visibility in SL as well as a wider range of facilities ranging from amusements, to fellowship, to conducting services when compared with Roman Catholic and Orthodox places (compare with Campbell's (2010) discussion on 'religious social shaping of technology').

Given the possibility to construct places in any conceivable way in terms of imaginative architecture or mixing elements from different religious/Christian traditions, a vast majority of Christian places are at a first glance faithful to 'real world' structures and the traditions they observe. The assumed innovation and mixing of traditions and anti-hierarchical structures seems to be rather scarce.

2.2   The owners of the places

Why are the Christian places constructed in the way they are? There are no physical constraints in terms of building materials or gravity, and there are no particular social or traditional boundaries to consider when making these places. Still, the degree of innovation and 'rule bending' are rather low even though it is possible to see a change in these tendencies.

The Internet is claimed to have the power to challenge and overthrow established structures. It is not only the media itself that contributes to such processes, and the actors behind the media

play a significant role in such activities. For example, Heidi Campbell (2013), inspired by Jon Anderson (1999), has pointed out how new actors and religious authorities emerge online and find a platform within the religious sphere. She divides the group that she calls 'religious digital creatives' into three separate categories. First are the 'creole pioneers' who are persons skilled in technology and who can use their digital competence to gain a reputation online. Then there are the 'reformer critics' consisting of people who are critical toward prevalent structures and who use the Internet as a platform to reach an audience and to set an alternative agenda for the discussion. Finally there are the 'spokesperson-activists' who are digitally skilled persons working within established structures. In the material gathered for this study, we got an insight into their backgrounds and current situations and how they engaged in Second Life Christianity as the owners of the places.

Men made up 58% of the informants, and 65% were between 41 and 60 years old. Only 2% were between 21 and 30 years old. Among them, 82% stated that they were the owners of the place and 35% claimed the function of a 'teacher' (such as priest, pastor, or similar). A total of 42% of the informants also built and made constructions at the places.

In the survey, only 15% of the respondents answered "no" to the question "do you have a Christian affiliation offline?" In other words, people who are involved in owning and running the Christian places were likely to have an offline Christian affiliation, and consequently 74% of the places were related to a specific Christian tradition. When asked if the site is "related to a specific Christian tradition – how is it related to your offline-affiliation", 80% answered that it was the same (we note, however, that 21 out of 51 respondents skipped the question, which was much higher than for other questions on the survey).

It is beyond any doubt that the large majority of the sites are run by people with a religious engagement offline and that the places are related to their offline affiliation. This might not be a surprise, but it illustrates the hybrid mix of how online engagement is complemented with offline engagement rather than being two separate entities. At the same time, 66% of the respondents answered that they did not have a similar role in an offline church. Their SL engagement thus appears to be a way to express other forms of commitment than what their traditional church provides space for.

Among the interviewed persons, we find different reasons for their SL work. One woman among the interviewees was carrying out her volunteer work online because an illness prevented her from engaging in such work in her offline church (interview with Lady Starbrook-Yosuke). Another interviewee was engaged in SL and had the function of an owner and clergyman through his capacity as a clergy to be (interview with Daniel Arbizu). The owner of Bible Island was a pastor in an offline church and his place was an extension, an outreach, of his church (interview with Helios Telling). Another of the interviewees worked in SL as part of his position as a clergyman in a

Lutheran church (interview with Markus Pexington). One site, S:t Sava, is run by a previous Christian Orthodox, but nowadays "almost an atheist", who wants to present the Orthodox church to people outside the Orthodox faith. Thus there are various relations between offline and online in terms of personal engagement – and we found people within all three different categories according to Campbell's categorization.

2.3   Why a church building?

For one question, the respondents had to mark on a scale their adherence to a few different concepts. They were chosen to be seen as contradictory pairs and included tradition–progressivity, familiarity–innovation, and faithful–ecumenical. The answers did not differ significantly, but the top three were, as seen by the owners, progressivity, innovation and ecumenism – i.e. the three concepts that are in line with a transforming form of Christianity. However, as hinted above in this article, most places still seemed to emphasize tradition and the familiar, at least in the way the places were constructed.

When looking upon the different places as a whole, the churches were only a part of the setting and the different places had spaces with other functions as well. Among those who answered the questionnaire, 89% had constructed a church building, and among them 98% claimed that their church building was "easily recognized as a church". When listing different artifacts associated with a recognizable church, church-like architecture (95%), pews (80%), and an altar (74%) were the top three most common items found in the places studied here. All three features are associated with a traditional and hierarchical structure. Stained glass, candle holders, crucifixes/crosses, icons, and pulpits were other artifacts that appeared in more than 40% of the churches.

The church building has a central role at most Christian places, and the reason for putting a traditional church building in the space was, in most cases, rather obvious. The respondents basically wanted a church. They stressed how they explicitly wanted the real life church to transcend into SL – "[it is] in line with our original vision, to take RL [real life] church into SL", according to one respondent. Familiarity and recognizability were reoccurring themes associated with the church building and were seen as important when creating these Christian environments. "It's meant to be a church", "it's a church", "so it will be easily recognizable as a church", and "we wanted attendees to feel like they were in a real church" were some of the answers to the question regarding the reason why they built a representational church.

Grace Cuthbertsson, leader of the Vine Christian Fellowship, said:

We contemplated going with a simple, nonidentifiable building type, but instead decided on a modern structure that is not too traditional but is still recognizable as a church so that those who find the atmosphere of a building to be important in worship would sense that they are on sacred ground, and we wanted newcomers to know without a doubt that we are a Christian ministry and not a store, nightclub etc. We wanted our purpose to be evident.

Fig. 6 The Vine Christian Fellowship

The church building is one of the main symbols for the Church and the Christian community together with other artifacts and symbols such as the cross, the bible, and icons. While most churches looked like traditional churches, there were exceptions. For example, at Kirkkosaari they have deliberately chosen to replicate a 'real life'church (The Ristikiven kirkko) that looks like an adaptation to SL, with no roof, a boulder altar, and logs as pews.
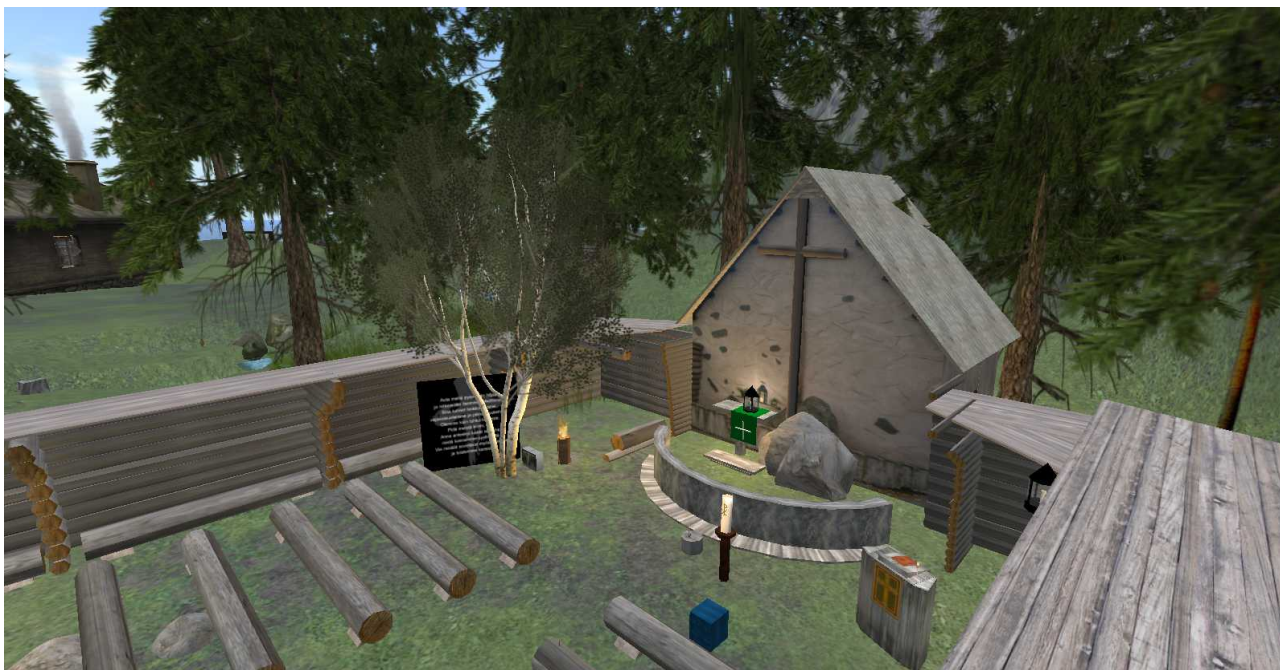
Fig. 7: Ristikiven kirkko

One can also assume how conventions, as in Norman's (1999) sense of how they are associated with affordance, limit the notion of what a church is. Even though it is possible to talk about limitations and conventions, there were often well thought through ideas behind the traditional look of the churches as will be dealt with further below.

2.4   Traditional churches – innovative use

Many owners of the Christian places built a traditional church, often at a central position, and they had an ambition to do something else compared to the so-called real-life churches. As mentioned, adherence to 'progressivity', 'innovation', and 'ecumenical' were regarded more highly than 'tradition', 'familiarity', and 'faithful'.

When the owners were asked about how the place was intended to be used, "individual contemplation or prayer" was pointed out as the most important activity. Forty-five (out of 51 respondents) answered this particular question, and 82% marked 'contemplation/prayer' as something they had intended for the site. 'Socializing with fellow Christians' (76%) and 'reaching out to the SL community' (73%) were the next top two reasons for building the church, and these were followed by 'worship', 'scheduled services and meetings', and 'providing information about the Christian faith'.

Even though the large amount of traditional church buildings pointed toward a structured, familiar, and recognizable form of Christian practices, the owners still tended to see their places as progressive and innovative. One must rhetorically ask how this is possible. We found however a tendency for the Christian places in SL to lean toward the spiritual and communal side of Christian tradition, and many sites (with or without churches) had additional spaces for socializing and fellowship. It is, of course, difficult to evaluate what can be considered progression and innovation under such circumstances, and such a task is beyond the scope of this work.

There were also examples of how the affordance of SL was used to visualize and make the visitor experience aspects of Christian faith. At NoWay Kingdom, the assigned clergyman had built a man-sized replica of the so-called Wreath of Christ (from Swedish – 'Frälsarkransen'[2]) made up of beads whispering prayers. Normally the Wreath of Christ is a bracelet. Bible Island had a walk illustrating the 'narrow path' through life, and a few places provided the possibility to walk the stations of the cross, among them the Finnish Lutheran Church (Kirkkosaari). At His Love it was possible to be crucified next to Jesus on top of a grassy mountain. Several places had collections of resources (books, videos, slideshows, and so on) for the visitors to review.

On questions focusing on how the places relate to tradition, those regarding intentions, and in the open question about the places in general, many respondents pointed out how there was an aim to be open, inclusive, welcoming, and tolerant. Some owners emphasized how the place was open at any time and free to visit for prayer, socializing, or anything. The place "is available at any time for people to drop in and visit", said one, and another claimed that "formal worship isn't held but anyone can go there and it's usable by anyone". Others pointed toward how tolerant the places were intended to be. This might be one aspect of the progressive, innovative, and 'rule bending' nature of SL.

2.5   Tolerance versus dogmatism in style and spirit

One question this article raises is to what extent the studied places mixed different traditions – and if it is possible to relate this to SL as a medium. Before going into that question, we must once again highlight the fact that it is difficult to separate what is going on in SL from the physical world. In a time of ongoing secularization, including a higher degree of pluralization, and when institutionalized religion is being put on trial (at least in the Western world), ecumenism and the pick-and-mix approach to religion are outcomes to meet new demands when people are turning away from the religious institutions (Heelas & Woodhead 2005; Taylor 2007). Specific traditions

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2   "Also known as the Pearls of Life, it is a pearl ribbon developed in 1995 by the Swedish Evangelic-Lutheran bishop emeritus Martin Lönnebo" (from Wikipedia).

and dogmatism are thus downplayed in favor of coming together in mutual understanding. Fundamentalism and the stern conviction of being the conveyor of the Truth are, however, the flipside of the coin (Emerson & Hartman 2006). Both outcomes can be seen in SL, but there is a clear tendency slant toward downplaying the role of tradition and formal affiliation and instead to have a more loose approach to formal adherence.

A total of 74% of all the owners (only one skipped this question) stated their site was related to a specific Christian tradition – 26% were an outreach ministry of a real-life church but 48% were not formally connected to a 'real' church. Thus there was a clear minority (28%) who did not relate to a specific tradition. However, when asked "if the site does not aim at being related to a specific Christian tradition – is there a mix of traditions instead?" 68% (of the 34 respondents) answered that they mixed traditions – 47% did so intentionally, and 21% did so for no specific reason. In other words, most places were designed with a specific tradition in mind but they were still open to including different and non-traditional elements into their sites.

Quite a few of the respondents emphasized how the places were "designed without dogma or preaching. It is a place designed to show God's love for you, nothing else". Also, places that were designed in accordance with specific traditions still stressed openness and tolerance and how they were designed to show God and the gospel in general rather than in line with a specific tradition. As one owner expressed it, "We follow what the Bible says and don't worry too much about what tradition or style we follow." A couple of places have a "specific focus on being inclusive and welcoming to all Second Life residents who are LGBT". Or, as the owner of a sponsored Methodist church said, "It accepts everyone, no matter their religion, sexual preference, belief in God, etc.".

All interviewees mentioned the open spirit of SL as an asset. Because people are as anonymous as they want to be through their avatars, and because social barriers and conventions are weak, it is a short cut to go into deep and existential discussions. This is seen as an advantage of SL. Persons can protect their identity behind their avatar and thus be more open with their inner life to an extent that rarely happens in 'real life' according to, for example, Arzibou and Telling. Arzibou mentioned how he came into contact with groups who felt misunderstood and excluded in 'ordinary' churches – groups such as bikers, the Goth community, and the so-called furries (according to Wikipedia – "a subculture interested in fictional anthropomorphic animal characters with human personalities and characteristics"). Both Starbrook-Yosuke and Telling also mentioned how they met people they normally would not meet in their offline church.

In the survey material, it was rarely expressed that tradition and obedience to specific dogmas were important, and instead the opposite – openness and tolerance – were often emphasized. It is impossible to claim that SL Christianity is inclusive as a rule, but the tendency to be so is clear. Openness toward dogmas and tradition can also be seen through architecture and artifacts. Thus

even though most sites adhere to a specific tradition, many places are open to mixing styles and elements from different Christian traditions.

3   Tradition versus innovation

The Christian places in SL are in other words simultaneously time both innovative and deeply rooted in traditions and established concepts of what a church is (both in terms of the church building and in terms of the community of Christians). However, in the same way that other technologies and media have changed our understanding of the world and our epistemological framework (a famous example is the printing press (Eisenstein 1980)), the internet is claimed to change our perception of our self and the conditions in which we live. But rather than inducing a sharp division between the old and the new, the online and the offline, the artificial and the real, our approach seeks to understand how the two realms of reality are intertwined. The Christian places in SL are good examples of the mix between the virtual world and the physical world (further developed in Gelfgren 2014), and the owners see their places as related, and as a complement, to the offline world.

One of Bolter and Grusin's (1999) concepts is 'remediation', which is the process in which older media reappear in newer media – how "one medium is itself incorporated or represented in another medium" (p. 45) – meaning that there is no sharp divide between different media. They claim further that "[n]o medium, it seems, can now function independently and establish its own separate and purified space of cultural meaning" (p. 55). It is a misunderstanding to believe that a new medium can be something completely new because they always rely upon previous media and our understanding of them. Digital virtual worlds are a novelty in the meaning that it has never before been possible to technologically construct a medium that immerses the user into the medium itself to the extent a virtual world does. Bolter and Grusin use the term 'transparent immediacy' to describe the situation where the medium disappears and the spectator becomes an active player within the medium. Still, we cannot understand virtual reality without understanding film, television, print, and so on.

The virtual world, and this is clear in the case of SL, is to a large extent an extension and a representation of the 'first life', the physical world. The environments are not photorealistic but still provide reasonable representations of reality. The assumption that it is even possible to do something radically different and completely imaginative tends to be a misconception. The respondents expressed such views in relation to the constructions of the Christian places. In most cases, the owners wanted to do, and build, something recognizable. For example, both Arzibou and

Telling mentioned how it is an advantage if people feel instantly at home, and thus know the purpose of the building. If they wished to create a Christian community and a Church, they did it using well-known templates. Architecture, artifacts, and sculpted landscapes gave a sense of the familiar. They built a church because they wanted a church, and places for socialization and fellowship were constructed as 'ordinary' parks, houses, and fireplaces. Second Life remediates well-known places and spaces, and the same phenomenon is found for rituals in virtual worlds according to Miczek (2008):

> The leaders of online Christian communities tried to transfer the services which are already known from offline scenarios into Virtual Worlds. Creative inventions are therefore rather an exception than a regular case. The participants get a sense of continuity which allows them to feel safe in an environment which is perceived insecure and instable.

However, as Hutchings (2010) points out, the familiar and recognizable "offer a platform for change" (p. 83), and this will be dealt with below.

It is also possible to claim that these places are hybrid spaces that intertwine the physical world with the virtual. In the early 1990s, 'cyber/digital religion' was seen as a competitor to religion as practiced in the physical world. More recent research shows, and which the respondents confirmed in interviews (for example, Arzibou, Telling, and Cuthbertsson), how digital religion complements offline religiosity (Hutchings 2011). Cuthbertsson claims:

> We do not want to be viewed as an alternative to or substitute for offline churches (unless the person who attends our ministry is unable to attend a church in real life... such as disabled, or is of another religion and would be persecuted for attending a Christian church). We encourage those who attend to become involved in a real life church

In the 1990s, it was assumed that new forms of religion would emanate from cyberspace, and even if that is still possible, the prevalent situation is more about how traditional religious faith has moved to the Internet and thus, to a certain extent, has become transformed in both structure and practice. According to Lindgren, Dahlberg-Grundberg & Johansson (2014), who emphasize hybridity claim that "the online and the offline dimensions, which were formally thought of as mutually exclusive or at least conflicting, are becoming intertwined. This is both in reality and idea" (p. 1). "[W]hat goes on in hybrid media culture can be understood as a product of the suspension of the delimitation inherent in the online/offline divide" (p. 2).

In the case of SL Christianity, the division between online and offline is consequently blurred. Tendencies to change seem rather low, especially in terms of expressions and styles. According to the empirical material for this article, standards and formats set in the offline world

are taken into the virtual world with only some transformations. Most places have a traditional church made out of virtual brick and mortar, and most of their owners claim that they adhere to specific Christian traditions. There is a mixing of offline traditions in the virtual places, but the main difference is their claimed openness and tolerance due to their focus on the word of God as they see it.

Even though both the concepts of 'remediation' and 'hybridity' are used to stress how these virtual places depend upon their physical predecessors, there is something new about the Christian places. The concept of affordance can furthermore be used to highlight how the design of an object, or a medium, encourages and constrains certain uses of it. Affordance refers to the relation between an actor and how the actor perceives and uses an object (Gibson 1977). It encapsulates how "[p]eople perceive the environment directly in terms of its potentials for action, without significant intermediate stages involving memory or interferences" (Gaver 1991, p. 79). It is connected to the object itself and to the environmental, cultural, and social settings the object is situated in (Gaver 1991). Different actors respond differently toward an object or, in this case, a medium. But there are also constraints and conventions to how objects are used. Some constraints and conventions are connected to cultural groups and how they perceive the object. According to Norman (1999), "a convention is a constraint in that it prohibits some activities and encourages others" (p. 41). Conventions also evolve over time, and they require a community of practice. When owners, the community of practice, express the idea that they built a church because they wanted a church, they formulate their conventions of how a church is supposed to be. Simultaneously they use the perceived affordances of the internet as an open and anti-hierarchical environment when bending the boundaries of established traditions.

Adherence to established traditions is important among the Christian places, but at the same time they are seen as progressive and innovative by their owners. The aim to create an open, friendly, and tolerant environment (although definitions of such an environment can vary) is a reoccurring theme, but the question is if it is the medium itself that supports such a direction. Given the fact that many owners have other roles in SL compared to their "real life"; that the Christian places are constructed to support socializing and fellowship rather than to focus solely on formal services; that the places aim to support tolerance rather than dogmatism; and that the interviewees mentioned anonymity and openness as assets in SL compared to their offline experience, it seems as though the affordance of SL encourages transformation and slightly novel forms of Christian faith and practices compared with the physical world.

4   Conclusion

It is a false assumption to believe there is a clear division between the virtual and the physical world, and this has been noted previously. When the church (referring to both the building and the congregation of believers) is remediated through Second Life many aspects of the offline church are still present. The church buildings, and the places in general, are, in that sense, hybrid. They represent and complement the church in the offline world, and in that way the virtual church is a mix of the digital and the physical. The churches reflect the traditional hierarchical structure, with for example pews, pulpit, and stage, but despite the similarities the virtual church is still not the same as the church in the physical world. The affordance of the virtual world has a tendency to move SL Christianity into a more open, tolerant, and flexible state toward other traditions and beliefs. Institutionalized Christianity in the Western world is currently being undermined and challenged as the dominating systems of beliefs. In such a context, representatives of SL Christianity can be seen as pioneers who are exposed to an open religious market in which anything is possible. Still, however, they often choose to follow established lines of thinking and construction to a large extent. As one of the respondents said when asked if there was a reason why they had built an easily recognizable church – "We wanted attendees to feel like they were in a church."

Interviews

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Arbizu, Daniel (21/11/11)

Pexington, Markus (10/4/14)

Starbrook-Yosuke, Lady (21/3/14)

Cuthbertson, Grace (16/3/13)

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