

Kerstin Radde-Antweiler (Ed.)

Being Virtually Real?



**Virtual Worlds from a
Cultural Studies' Perspective.**

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S(L)PIRITUALITY

IMMERSIVE WORLDS AS A WINDOW TO SPIRITUALITY

PHENOMENA

PABLO MARTINEZ-ZÁRATE, ISABELA CORDUNEANU & LUIS MIGUEL MARTINEZ

Introduction

This paper focuses on several conceptual and methodological considerations for studying spirituality in *Massive Multiuser Online Environments* (MMOEs), taking *Second Life* (SL) as our main case study. This inquiry represents the follow-up of two previous research lines, one related with pop-esoteric products and operational belief system, and the other with communication patterns and social networks within online environments. Hence, our current objective pretends to highlight how operational belief articulates, or acquires meaning, through users' interaction inside online environments.

We chose SL for what we considered relevant differentials with other immersive worlds like *Massive Multiplayer Online Role-playing Games* (MMORPGs), probably the most representative branch of online worlds – in terms of market share. As Castronova states¹ platforms like *World of Warcraft* (WoW) and *Second Life*, even if they share several features, differ in significant ways. Initially, the lack of specific rules within open simulations like SL has an immediate impact on our approach to spirituality based on operational belief systems. This happens, in the first place, because a teleology² of SL-residents' activities is not constrained by the presence of a game's pre-established motto; in the second place, and still more important, because the institutions that emerge within SL are not constrained in a pre-fixed narrative (or a legitimate discourse).

These institutions, as we have found in previous research, are constructed through value creation processes which underscore interaction in SL at a discrete level.³ Each individual has the opportunity to harvest a personal patrimony upon economical, social (including religious), and political assets (with concrete, physical retributions on the users' personal and economic development). The former feature, which can be shared across different virtual worlds,

¹ See Castronova 2005.

² The use of teleology refers to the explanation of phenomena by the meanings behind purposeful action.

³ See Martínez-Zárate 2007.

acquires a particular facet under *Linden Lab*'s policy regarding the concession of commercial and property rights to those users who spend their time uploading 99% of the content that composes SL. The previous, as we suggest, enhances the transformation of the avatar (the representation of the self within an online environment) in relation to other residents and the environment (no million dollars needed for a plastic surgery in SL). This feature can be traced through the presence of fantastic, sometimes phantasmagoric scenarios that accompany the actions of the user. Nevertheless, this representational gap among the avatar (source system) and the user's subjectivity, what Ian Bogost refers to as the "simulation gap"⁴ can be understood as an operational constraint (or enhancer, depending on the meaning-making process described) proper of most human-computer interactions based on graphic interfaces.

After situating SL among virtual worlds, and acknowledging the particular features of *Linden Lab*'s user-created world, several setbacks emerged (some reappeared) during our first ethnographic approaches. At this stage, we acknowledged the needs of conceptual and methodological delimitations regarding spirituality phenomena in SL, and this is one of the aims of this paper: to propose, as a subject of reflection, the limits and the outreach of some concepts and techniques of research that have been validated in "real life" (RL), which, nonetheless are still under figuration in the digital realm.

On one hand, we present some considerations on what can be understood by religious and spiritual practices in virtual words, taking into account the presence of a "filter" that does not exist in RL, the avatar. In addition, we introduce some ethical considerations on the application of the research methodology, as well as its advantages and potential limitations.

Spiritual and religious practices

Most scholars currently recognize a relationship between religion and spirituality, however it has been identified as hierarchical or as divergent. Zinnbauer et al. identify this relationship in three main domains: concrete, abstract and metaphysical.⁵ Their seminal paper⁶ points out the diversity of views amongst researchers and research participants identifying at least thirteen categories of definitions of religiousness and spirituality. Hence, we agree that a single category for either construct cannot be accounted.

⁴ See Bogost 2006.

⁵ See Zinnbauer et al. 1999.

⁶ See Zinnbauer et al. 1997.

Kale concludes that most people distinguish from either construct.⁷ While spirituality is commonly associated with transcendence and the personalization of faith, religiousness can rather be linked with “a formalized and institutionalized manifestation of faith”⁸. Spohn identifies four areas of analysis, which suggest the same number of categories for definitions: skepticism, transformationism, and traditionalism – restless or comfortable; reinforcing the aforementioned diversity of views regarding religiousness and spirituality.⁹ Most current definitions¹⁰ agree with the role of the self – as an individual or as part of an institution. Concepts can be distinguished as proposed by Walach and Reich¹¹, claiming that “Spirituality can be understood as a direct inner experience of reality, or transcendent being.” Meanwhile, King accepts a linkage between both constructs with a persistent implicit distinction.¹² The analysis of Ubani and Tirri concludes that religion can be related to organizations, rituals and ideologies, in contrast to spirituality linked to the person, affection, experience and thought.¹³ Therefore, our research proposes that religiousness and spirituality are related but not necessarily due to a hierarchical dependence. Both constructs result from the role of the person within the organization of a system of beliefs, whether an individual with a self-organization of beliefs or as part of an institutionalized system. Such a person and his experience of reality, determine his values and practices; either from the interior (spirituality) or the institution (religiousness). Hence we agree with Hyman and Handal regarding that the individual can be “spiritual without being religious or religious without being spiritual.”¹⁴

Having said that, we acknowledge spirituality as an operational rather than conceptual construct. Hence, our observation aims to identify spiritual practices through what Ian Bogost calls *unit operations*, which are “modes of meaning-making that privilege discrete, disconnected actions over deterministic, progressive systems.”¹⁵ We describe the actions of the avatar in *Second Life*, as well as we intend to trace how the user is experimenting those commands that (s)he’s *transmitting* to the avatar. That is, one might propose that, while an avatar is performing a strictly religious, institutional action, as going to the church (in the virtual world), the user behind the avatar lives a spiritual experience. Therefore we can expect that spiritual trails of these users are, at least in part, walked (or flown) by their avatar.

⁷ See Kale 2004.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ See Spohn 2001.

¹⁰ See Mason et al. 2007; Kale 2004; Jackelén 2005; Teske 2002; Rustum 2002; Clayton 1999; Angel et al. 2006.

¹¹ See Walach & Reich 2005.

¹² See King 2007.

¹³ See Ubani & Tirri 2007.

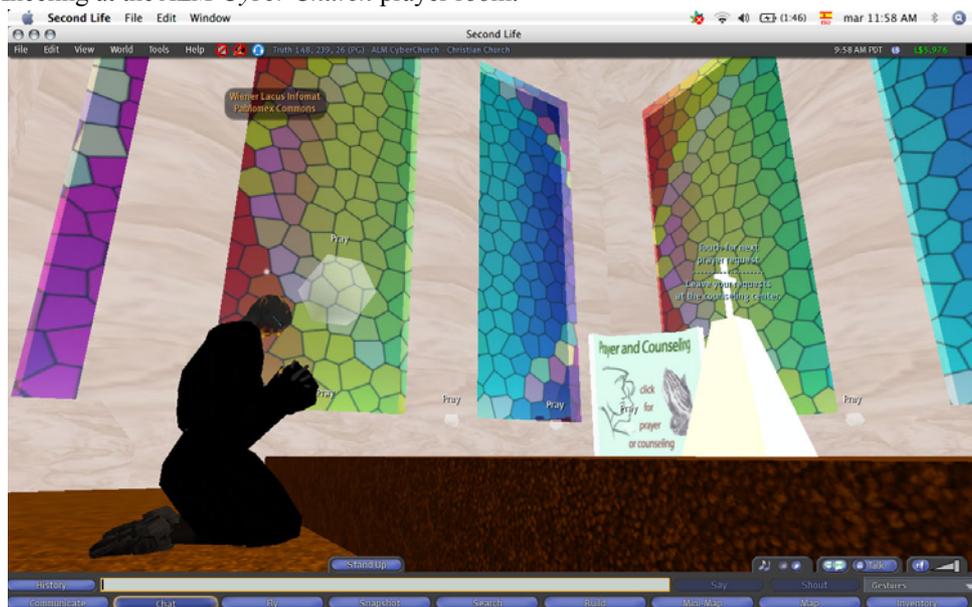
¹⁴ See Hyman & Handal 1999.

¹⁵ See Bogost 2006, 3.

Additionally, this means that as narratives proper of the digital realm commence to cover the spiritual demands of the user community, it seems more difficult to identify an offline legitimate, solid, and unified religious “corpus”, discourse or institution behind the spiritual activity of SL residents.

One notable example of more traditional religious practices within SL is the *ALM Cyber Church*¹⁶, situated in the SL region of *Truth*. This location offers Sunday Services (with streaming audio) and Bible-study groups hosted by pastors Rev. Benjamin and Mariposa Psaltery, and by a community (British) that goes by the name of *Living Sounds Online*¹⁷. One particularity of this church is its prayer room. After entering, the individuals approach a square upon which perimeter they can find some “pose balls” that allow kneeling (their avatar), and at the center of the prayer room we find an interactive object (pyramidal with a cross on the top) that allows avatars to pray on the requests made by themselves or other visitors of the church (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Kneeling at the *ALM Cyber Church* prayer room.



Another example, acquired during the initial phase of participant observation, is a semi-structured interview with a *chinese orphan* in a Buddhist Avatarian temple. As we may infer from the following fragment of the conversation,¹⁸ he embodies the avatar of a child that collects charity for a Chinese order. But, since the temple where the encounter took place was

¹⁶ <http://almcyberchurch.org/>.

¹⁷ <http://livingsounds.org/index.php>.

¹⁸ The interviewee explicitly agreed on the use of the conversation for academic purposes, including publication without altering the content and with no need of using a pseudonym. The interview took place inside *Second Life*, on Thursday, 03/01/2007, and was guided by Pablomex Commons (Pablo Martínez-Zárate).

in a mature region within SL main grid (there is a SL grid for teenagers), we can also assume that behind that childish looking avatar sat an older user (but of course it could have been a child).

[17:16] Pookie Oh: Could you spare some change for an orphan, kind sir?
[17:17] Pookie Oh: Thank you, may Guanyin Pusa bless your path.
[17:17] Pookie Oh: Where are you from?
[17:17] You: I'm from México.
[17:17] You: Who is Guanyin Pusa?
[17:18] Pookie Oh: The Boddhisatva of Compassion.
[17:18] Pookie Oh: Ni hui shuo Zhongguohua ma?
[17:18] You: mmmm
[17:18] You: ?
[17:18] You: :)
[17:18] Pookie Oh: You should turn from wicked paths...
[17:19] You: What do you mean Pookie Oh?
[17:19] Pookie Oh: Well, something is wrong with your qi.
[17:19] You: Why do you say that?
[17:19] Pookie Oh: Your body is too hot.
[17:20] You: Oh really, can you sense that?
[17:20] Pookie Oh: Yes.
[17:20] Pookie Oh: You eat too many peppers...
[17:21] Pookie Oh: You should deal gently with crude people.
[17:21] Pookie Oh: Don't forget distant friends.
[17:21] Pookie Oh: It's a bad time to start building.
[17:21] You: I won't Pookie:)
[17:21] Pookie Oh: Walk through water.
[17:21] Pookie Oh: Walk in the middle.
[17:22] Pookie Oh: Eight, is an unlucky number for you.

As we can read, our interviewee recommended the interviewer to walk through water in order to redeem his avatar of being too hot (or was he talking about the temperature of the user?). The conversation continued. He asserted that exactly in the day the interview took place, he was to be reincarnated, since beyond the role of an orphan, Pookie Oh was actually a spirit.

[17:23] You: Can you tell me a little about yourself and your beliefs?
[17:23] Pookie Oh: Hmm.
[17:23] Pookie Oh: Pookie is a spirit...
[17:23] You: So, tell me kind spirit, what are the Avatarians?
[17:24] Pookie Oh: We are the temple for all avatars.
[17:24] You: And what is your mission?
[17:24] Pookie Oh: It is a Chinese order.
[17:24] Pookie Oh: We collect for charity.
[17:24] Pookie Oh: Today I must be reincarnated

The case of Pookie Oh serves as a digital metaphor of the semantic relationship in the use of *avatar* as the digital representation of the self, acknowledged to Neal Stephenson's novel *Snow Crash*¹⁹, and the older and curiously more religious use, referring to *avatar* as a bodily, incarnated manifestation of a deity (some dictionaries include a broader meaning referring reincarnation or embodiment)²⁰. Beyond those semantic coincidences, the Avatars are a good example of how traditional religious discourses incorporate emergent narratives proper to the digital realm.

- [17:29] You: What are the main beliefs behind your order?
[17:29] Pookie Oh: Existence is suffering.
[17:29] You: And what is your answer to that suffering?
[17:30] Pookie Oh: The Eightfold path.
[17:30] You: Which is?
[17:30] Pookie Oh: Knowing something isn't the same as doing it...
[17:31] Pookie Oh: Knowledge is useless without application.
[17:31] Pookie Oh: Everything is impermanent and illusion.
[17:32] Pookie Oh: Right intention is very important.
[17:32] You: How do you evaluate the righteousness of an intention?
[17:33] Pookie Oh: Do you see that fish swimming there in the water?
[17:33] You: Yes
[17:33] Pookie Oh: What is it doing?
[17:33] You: Swimming in circles.
[17:33] That is the same thing that all beings in existence are doing.

Taking Avatarianism as an operative path towards more formal religious discourse (in this case, Buddhism), the spiritual narrative that grounds Pookie Oh's beliefs serves as an example, as said above, that reflects how a traditional religious "corpus" re-figures inside SL.

According to Bogost, "in complex networks, discrete unit operations form the foundation for emergent structures. In the case of social software, the individual relationships between friends or colleagues form the groundwork for a social network, not the other way around."²¹ How are these unit operations related with spiritual activities? What are the motivations of these practices within the virtual world? Which are the gratifications that the users find behind these practices? These are some of the research questions that we intend to explore. Our initial hypothesis is that the virtual world is not only a simulation of the real world; it is not like playing with dolls, imitating a behavior. It is likely that the user behind the avatar finds more than the pleasure of mimetic action. (S)he is constructing other meanings of her/his

¹⁹ See Stephenson 1992.

²⁰ According to several dictionaries, the term "avatar" is derived from the Sanskrit *avatāra*, referring "descent". When the meaning refers to a deity's incarnation, it is linked to Hinduism.

²¹ See Bogost 2006, 148.

experience in the virtual world, an experience that is historically and socially framed in the real life. In other words, the line between the real and virtual world is less evident than we may imagine: in the first place, the action of the avatar requires consistent representation of the user in order to persist within a social network, but furthermore, the institutions configured within SL frontiers irradiate institutions outside SL and vice versa.

We can consider that the process of meaning construction of the spiritual experience occurs at the intersection of four factors: the avatar, the virtual world, the user, and concrete physical landscape or context surrounding the user. It is likely that the avatar can represent an extension of the user's emotions, but it is also possible that the user is fulfilling some spiritual gaps that might find difficult to fulfill in the offline horizon.

For instance, one of our interviewees, a priest, (his avatar is a monk, and claims to be a Catholic priest outside SL and having heard of *Second Life* from the youngsters from his parish) affirms continuing his work in virtual world:

“Another day I found a Chilean boy who was lost (...) yesterday I found a French girl who wanted to encounter God.”

For him, the search for happiness, spirituality fulfillment and meaning are the same in *Second Life* and in *Real Life*; in both worlds, the avatar and the agent behind him obey the principles of “serving.” He believes that if people access SL, then he can serve others (avatars) and find a path to God as well.

While it is clear for us that we encountered a meaning making process, both about a digital world and on a virtual identity, the avatar, we still do not have a full typology either of the incentives the users consider for performing spiritual and religious practices in the digital world, or the typologies of the users themselves whom have an spiritual approach to the virtual worlds. This last gap is the objective to be followed in the future. To address this gap we will base our approach on the previous research regarding operational belief systems.

In the above mentioned research on pop-esoteric products and operational belief system²² we found three main types of consumers – the modern subject, the popular religious subject and the postmodern subject, that differentiate each other through their relationship with the inscribed, adscribed and acquired systems of beliefs, within a market context of the real world. The present research aims to test the above mentioned typology for virtual worlds with individuals that perform social and cultural practices through the intermediation of an avatar. This intermediation does not mean that the significance of their social and cultural practices

²² See Henríquez-Mendoza & Corduneanu 2007.

are reduced to that of “playing” a game, but that of performing a role; mainly constituted by the meanings constructed around this virtual world.

Methodological and Ethical considerations for researching spirituality in the digital world

While we can conserve the traditional techniques as ethnography and interviews, we have to call the attention to some differences. First, we observe two different worlds that are researched simultaneously. We have the virtual world, where the actions are performed by the avatar, but they are thought by the user, so actually, we observe a two-fold action through ethnography. The same duplicity is considered in interviews, although we consider that the problem of whom is speaking is spurious: it is like asking who is speaking, the marionette or the puppeteer that is behind it. Another different question is why the marionette is performing certain actions, and what the puppeteer thinks (s)he is doing while commanding its avatar in the virtual world – i.e., the metacognition level of the performance.

Another useful observation about online research refers to the issues of validity and liability of the research. As already proposed for qualitative research, the issues of validity and liability should be replaced by authenticity and triangulation of strategies, methods and theoretical perspectives. In other words, it is most important that our participants can really express what they are experiencing in the virtual world (an authentic experience), by using a truth-lie filter in the coding of the collected data. Taking into account the example of the monk-avatar above, we are not interested in finding out if he (or she) is a priest in the offline world, since we are researching what the avatar and the user behind it are experiencing in the *Second Life*. As Denzin puts it, the qualitative research is “attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of meanings people bring to them.”²³

Therefore, we consider that the most appropriate methodology for researching virtual worlds is the qualitative one, as we are dealing with a symbolic world, with roles and with meanings, and not with “real facts” (in this case, quantitative inquiries must find a way to incorporate the operative dissonances between the world of the avatar and that of the agents). What our avatars, and the users behind them, think they are experiencing, is real. This is related to the fact that online experiences, as mentioned, cannot be conceived as independent

²³ See Denzin 1998, 2.

or completely separated from the offline world, a subject that has been addressed by different scholars.²⁴

Researching the digital world through an avatar supposes a deeper level of participation than a participant observation in offline settings, although we consider that it is not so different from a researcher that assumes an active participant role inside the organization (s)he is researching.²⁵ Hence, we are not interested in knowing who are the users behind the avatar, but what they (and their avatars) experience as actors of the digital world.

As immersive media, online worlds involve the researcher in social dynamics. Therefore, we talk about the performance of a role within the environment and in front of other residents. Considering that social, economic or political value can be edified within SL frontiers, the residents (including researchers) acquire trust-based relationships that imply obligation and responsibility with the environment and other users. Related to this, the easiness of knowledge harvesting in addition to the acquisition of social capital within SL are elements that compromise the researcher with his sources of information. This does not imply that offline fieldwork is free from these ties, but technology based scenarios present their particular facets.²⁶ Speaking particularly of spiritual phenomena, intuition and sensibility may be useful, considering that we are dealing with the users' beliefs.

What Bogost refers to as “the simulation gap,” which exists between a source system and a user's subjectivity, manifests an operative dissonance between the avatars and the agents behind them. This implies an experiential paradox for the user, and therefore the researcher, which manifests itself as an accentuation of a transformative dimension inside 3D worlds, opposite to more rigid concrete physical sceneries. Our hypothesis is that this feature enables the configuration of mixed narratives that go beyond established religious discourses proper of the offline world.

Nevertheless, the contradiction between agent and avatar does not necessarily imply that anonymity would be an obstacle for finding meaningful data. The fact that the other residents can present themselves “as they wish” and some do try to maintain distance with their first life (this process of constructing masks, according to authors such as Shakespeare, Ervin Goffman or Paul de Man, is far from an exclusively online practice), is irrelevant to the value of the information obtained during exploration.

²⁴ For some, see: Kendall 1999; Fernback 1999; Garton, Hwytthorntwaite & Wellman 1999; Yus 2001; Bampton & Cowton 2002; Brow 2002; Holge-Hazelton 2002; Knobel 2003; Ardévol Bertrán, Callén & Pérez 2003; Mayan i Planells 2003; Rocha Silva 2004; Flick 2004; Sassen & Latham 2005; Castronova 2005.

²⁵ Taylor & Bogdan 1992.

²⁶ See Sassen and Latham 2005.

Turning back to the ethics discussion, the researcher is able to register any conversation between users (as well as taking snapshots and video), which in case of “misuse” could risk valuable assets that the researcher may possess in-world (from losing close relationships to a reputation demise). Being aware of our limitations and biases, we always expose certain data concerning our search for information inside *Second Life*²⁷. Therefore, the strategy followed remains as a non-secrecy and transparent discourse corresponding to the use of the information and the objectives behind the whole quest. This means that we always informed our interviewees and informants about the use of the conversations (and only those who agreed on getting it published are the ones used for presenting findings).

We concluded that the main difference found between offline and online research was in terms of operative procedures. For the same reason, ethical gaps emerge when approaching a domain where human actions follow discordant operational patterns. Nevertheless, we proved that the adaptability of research methods to digital environments can be done considering modifications and adjustments in order to avoid a methodological incoherence.

Conclusions and Further Questioning

In sum, we are confident on the adoption of an open and operational definition of spirituality that may lead us to identify the types of users in SL who approach the environment to fulfill their spiritual needs, as well the typology of these needs themselves. So far we identified the typology of *The Gatekeeper* (the monk and the child, which are, as in RL, those who administrate the spiritual offer). What is still lacking is to see what other avatars are doing with these offers, and how the user and the avatar are involved in a meaning-making related to spirituality online. We will test the other typologies found in previous research.²⁸ The postmodern subject that combines various sources of spirituality and religion, the modern subject that uses a more institutional model and the popular-religious subject who is attached to the gate-keeper indications about how to combine the three sources of the belief (the inscribed, the ascribed and the acquired).

Additionally, we proved that it is feasible to apply conventional research methodologies for the innovative study of activities within MMOEs. Although we have experimented a number of qualitative and quantitative methods within these virtual environments with positive

²⁷ See Knobel 2003.

²⁸ See Henríquez-Mendoza & Corduneanu 2007.

results, still some issues arise from the validity of these. Qualitative methods seem more useful and reliable compared to those quantitative techniques. Such results have proven useful for identify, at least but not the less, one of the three types of media consumers identified from previous research.

Our research has confirmed the relevant role of the avatar within the virtual environment and those activities in the so called “real world.” Nevertheless, such a metaphor suggests specific methodologies for the investigation of activity within the immersive worlds. Our observations suggest a subtle difference between procedures due to in-world limitations rather than a methodological incoherence.

The main outcome of this paper, hence, was twofold: first, to propose a categorization for identifying spiritual practices within SL, based on an operative approach to belief systems; second, to prove that “traditional” research methods can very well serve within a digital environment when they correspond to the objectives of the inquiry. The later drove us to the acknowledgment of the needs of finding ethical standards coherent with the contemporary world.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

PABLO MARTINEZ-ZÁRATE finished his BA in Communications in May 2007, at the Universidad Iberoamericana Mexico City (UIA), with a Laudatory Mention for his dissertation about online communities and immersive environments. Since 2005, he labors at this same institution supporting research related to digital media. As of August 2007 he is the youngest professor-researcher at the UIA Department of Communication, specializing in Communications and Technology. His main areas of research cover digital media, social networks, and philosophy of communication.

Address: Pablo Martínez-Zárate
Universidad Iberoamericana, Mexico

PROFESSOR ISABELA CORDUNEANU has her PhD degree in History from European University Institute in Florence (Italy), History and Civilization Department and a MA degree in Central European History from Central European University in Budapest. Her fields of research cover cultural studies, oral history, and research methodology. Currently, she is professor-researcher at the Universidad Autonoma de la Ciudad de Mexico in Mexico and teaches at the Universidad Iberoamericana in the Department of Communications.

Address: Isabela Corduneanu
Universidad Iberoamericana, Mexico

LUIS MIGUEL MARTINEZ currently heads the Digital Convergence Program at the Department of Communication. Luis is a senior professor and lecturer in the Departments of Engineering and of Communications since 1992. Luis is an electronics and communications engineer (Universidad Iberoamericana, 1992) with a MSc in Industrial Measurement Systems and a PhD from Brunel University (1995, and 2002 respectively). His research is focused on the impact of technology in education, media and society.

Address: Luis Martinez
Universidad Iberoamericana, Mexico