

Simone Heidbrink, Nadja Miczek (Eds.)

Aesthetics



and the Dimensions of the Senses

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VIRTUAL BUDDHISM

AN ANALYSIS OF AESTHETICS IN RELATION TO RELIGIOUS PRACTICE

LOUISE CONNELLY

Introduction

This article focuses on the discussion of religious practice within the online multi-player world called *Second Life*. In particular I will focus on three specific areas in order to demonstrate the relationship between aesthetics and religious practice online. Firstly, I will provide an analysis of the aesthetics within the virtual environment known as the *Buddha Center*¹; secondly, I will examine the aesthetics and religious practice found within two locations in the *Buddha Center*: the main temple and the Deer Park; and lastly, throughout the discussion the continuities and discontinuities between online and offline Buddhist religious practice and aesthetics will be illustrated.

Before commencing with the main discussion it is necessary to provide a definition for the term ‘aesthetic’ and ‘religious practice’, to avoid any ambiguity. Within the eighteenth century the term ‘aesthetic’ was commonly used to define a philosophical movement interested in beauty but the term originates from “Aristotle’s use of the Greek word *aisthesis* which means perception or sensation.”² Consequently, the original definition which emphasises sensory experience or perception is more fitting for the understanding of the sensory experience within an online culture and so it is this definition that will be adhered to.

The discussion of the senses is particularly important within the online context as there is a notable absence of three of the five senses, that is, taste, smell and touch. However, the argument presented here will also include the visual depiction of objects relating to taste and smell and this could be said to evoke these senses via a cognitive process. I will also demonstrate that there is a type of quasi-touch which I have labelled ‘imitation-touch’ rather than ‘virtual-touch’, to differentiate from the physical feeling obtained from a virtual reality suit or other virtual technology as the imitation-touch does not incur a sensory physical feeling.

Regarding the definition of religious practice I refer to Smart’s classification of ritual or the practical dimension which he defines “as the aspect of religion which involves such activities as worship, meditation, pilgrimage, sacrifice, sacramental rites and healing activities.”³ There is a similarity between Smart’s list and the type of activities which take place within the online environment of *Second Life*. Therefore, for the

¹ For in-world address see Buddha Center 137, 130, 21.

² See Morgan 2009, 141.

³ See Smart 1996, 10.

purpose of this discussion the definition of religious practice draws on Smart's classification and is defined as the engagement with a Buddhist or Buddhist influenced ritual or activity and this can be undertaken autonomously or within a group.⁴

In order to analyse the relationship between aesthetics and religious practice a multi-disciplinary methodology has been employed including the theories and methods found within the fields of anthropology, religious studies and visual cultural studies. Due to the uniquely limited sensory experience found in an online environment the discussion of the senses focuses heavily on the visual component. The theoretical insights are derived from the field of material and visual culture and reference will be made to Morgan's definition of material culture which is the examination of artefacts and objects of a culture that derive meaning and symbolism for the individual or society.⁵ Morgan also elucidates on the importance of the visual in relation to religion, stating that "Visual practices help fabricate the worlds in which people live and therefore present a promising way of deepening our understanding of how religion works."⁶ The theoretical insights drawn from the field of visual culture assist with the examination of the online culture and the practice of online religion and in doing so resulting in a greater awareness of "how images articulate the social structures of the believer's world" and their significance for engaging and mediating between religious practice in real life and *Second Life*.⁷

From undertaking an ethnographic study and conducting a number of interviews, observing and participating in a variety of religious practices between 2009 and 2010 I am able to provide further insight into sensory and Buddhist religious practice within the *Buddha Center* in *Second Life*.⁸ It is within the following discussion of the *Buddha Center*, the main temple and the Deer Park that I will demonstrate the relationship between perception, the senses (aesthetics) and religious practice. In conclusion, I will assert that there is a need for further investigation of Buddhism and aesthetics online and this should include not only the aural and visual senses but also imitation-touch, thus reflecting further on the cognitive and embodied sensory experience. I now turn to the first of three areas for discussion, the *Buddha Center*.

The Buddha Center: Historical Background

In order to contextualise the discussion of the *Buddha Center* which is situated on the virtual landmass known as *Buddhism*⁹ in *Second Life*, it is useful to provide a brief historical background. The *Buddha Center* was founded by Zino March and Delani Gabardini in September 2008 and it originally comprised of a small

⁴ Smart 1996, acknowledges that the boundary between ritual and custom can on occasion be blurred.

⁵ See Eck 1998; Morgan 2009.

⁶ See Morgan 2000, 51.

⁷ See Morgan 1998, 2.

⁸ See Hine 2000; Kozinets 2010 regarding online ethnographic and ethical issues.

⁹ For in-world address see Buddhism 137, 130, 22.

temple which hosted only a handful of teachings by Zino and Delani.¹⁰ Within two years the *Buddha Center* has grown and now includes a larger temple where a number of Buddhist teachers, facilitators¹¹ and more than 2,500 participants can freely engage with the surroundings and Buddhist practice.¹² Due to the business like approach taken by the founders, Zino and Delani, the *Buddha Center* is arguably one of the largest Buddhist communities in *Second Life*. Furthermore, they have supplemented the information and teachings presented in *Second Life* and made these accessible via Facebook¹³ and a website (see figure 1).¹⁴ The *Buddha Center* is currently confined to the virtual realm but it was during one of the interview sessions that Zino and Delani describe their future aspiration of setting up and developing a non-profit organisation in real life, which would mirror the practices and ethos of the online *Buddha Center*.¹⁵

Figure 1: The Buddha Center Website



Although Zino and Delani have very different religious backgrounds - Zino had a Jewish upbringing and is now a Buddhist, whilst Delani is an ordained Zen Buddhist priest - together they have successfully co-opted a number of their friends and colleagues to participate, teach and assist with the development of the *Buddha Center*. Both Zino and Delani stress that they know the teachers personally, stating that they “stick to people we know in RL”¹⁶ in order to ensure that they are good presenters and to avoid “fake Buddhism.” The

¹⁰ This is their in-world names.

¹¹ The *Buddha Center* differentiates between facilitators and teachers, the former guiding and leading but not teaching, the latter including ordained Buddhist priests.

¹² Zino posted this figure on the Buddha Center website on 23 July 2010, <http://www.thebuddhacenter.org/2010/07/23/thanks-to-buddha-center-staff/>. Retrieved 27 July 2010.

¹³ See *Buddha Center* on Facebook, <http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=351610288438>. Retrieved 8 July 2010.

¹⁴ See The *Buddha Center* website, <http://www.thebuddhacenter.org/>. Retrieved 8 July 2010.

¹⁵ The interview with Delani and Zino was conducted on 2 June 2010 and all quotes are from this date unless otherwise stipulated.

¹⁶ RL means ‘real life’.

avoidance of “fake Buddhism” is further highlighted on the website which contains the capitalised strap line “TRUE BUDDHISM IN VIRTUAL REALITY SECOND LIFE”.

The strand of Buddhism taught and depicted is not limited to one particular school of Buddhism and includes Zen, Tibetan and Theravada Buddhism. When asked, Zino maintains that there is “not ‘one’ Buddhism” and that “Buddha is Buddha, the roots are the same.” Delani corroborates Zino’s statement and calls it “universal Buddhism.” Collectively, the multi-faceted virtual artefacts and objects found in the *Buddha Center* could be said to depict an eclectic type of Buddhism and “present[s] all aspects of Buddhism” which Delani refers to as “universal Buddhism.”¹⁷ Throughout the following discussion the different schools of Buddhism will be highlighted and reference will be made to the artefacts and objects which illustrate and are associated with a specific culture. For example, the gardens and tea ceremony are associated with Zen Buddhism and the prayer wheels and mandalas¹⁸ are found within Indian and Tibetan Buddhism. I now turn to the first area of discussion, namely the aesthetics and religious practice in the *Buddha Center*.

The Buddha Center: Religious Practice & Aesthetics

The *Buddha Center* contains a number of architectural features, aspects from nature and facilities including a large temple, tea houses, shops, a deer garden, a library, an art centre and yoga and tai chi exercise areas. It is within the central area that there is a teleport¹⁹ and a group notice board which provides details of the different facilitators, teachers and times for practice. This area provides information to those who are both new and are regular visitors to the area and it is here that visitors are first introduced to both an auditory and visual sensory experience. In relation to the auditory aspect there is the sound of tinkling from the wind chimes which are hanging from the doorway of the information centre and the nearby temple. The wind chimes can also be found in a number of locations and specifically within a shop which is dedicated entirely to the merchandising of them. However, the most noticeable auditory feature is the sound from a flag flapping in the wind, denoting a climatic environment (shown in figure 2). The flag depicts the *Buddha Center* logo and draws attention to both the visual and auditory aspects of the object. Moreover, the branding and the use of the *Buddha Center* logo can also be found in other Buddhist temple locations such as Kannonji and Karma Khadro.²⁰ The scope of this article does not extend to the analysis of the marketing strategies for the *Buddha Center*, however, it is worth acknowledging that the intentional marketing and branding of the *Buddha Center* is likely to be a factor that has contributed to its success.

¹⁷ Comments taken from IM chat with Delani on 10 August 2010.

¹⁸ A mandala is typically made from coloured grains of sand and these are used to create an intricate depiction of the cosmos.

¹⁹ The teleport feature enables the avatar to be transported between different locations.

²⁰ For in-world address see Kannonji 227,47,22 and Karma Khadro 41,185,50.

Figure 2: *Buddha Center* logo



There are further aspects of visual Buddhism found in the information centre including a large coloured mandala covering the ground. A mandala is commonly associated with Tibetan Buddhism and it represents the cosmos, impermanence and the Buddha, as well as often being used as a visualisation tool in tantric Buddhism (see figure 3). It is therefore befitting that a colourful mandala is positioned within the main area of the *Buddha Center* as it not only provides a visually colourful and engaging image but also epitomises a recognised cultural and religious object commonly associated with Buddhism. The mandala is also found in other areas of the *Buddha Center* including the floor coverings for a number of tea houses, on top of a hill where the trance dance activity takes place and as rugs within many of the shops. Arguably, the visual depiction and intentional use of this image provides an object which mediates between the online and offline culture.

Other images within the information centre are found on the four walls and include snapshots from previous religious events held at the *Buddha Center*; avatar pictures of the facilitators and teachers; a schedule of the daily practice; and an image from the *Buddha Center* blog which can be accessed out with *Second Life*.²¹ Figure three illustrates the different aspects within this area including the mandala floor covering, the information provided on the walls, the flag and the teleport.

Figure 3: Information Area in the *Buddha Center*²²



²¹ See The *Buddha Center* website, <http://www.thebuddhacenter.org/>. Retrieved 8 July 2010.

²² For in-world address see 137, 130, 21.

There are a number of activities available to the visitor including: tai chi, yoga, trance dance, dharma talks, silent meditation, chanting, real life talks using video streaming and teachings from sutras, all of which are associated with different schools of Buddhism. The activities and religious practice use both sound and importantly sight to provide an inclusive and engaging experience for the participant. In addition to the senses of sight and hearing there is also the sense of touch. The action of touch which I will refer to as ‘imitation-touch’ is where the person uses the keyboard or mouse to control the actions of the avatar. In *Second Life* imitation-touch does not incur a physical sensation it simply imitates a real-life action. Therefore, it is not as sophisticated as the manufactured virtual skin suit which is associated with the field of artificial intelligence rather it imitates a non-physical sensory movement via the avatar.²³ Consequently, imitation-touch provides an action or series of actions that are associated with Buddhist ritual, ceremony or practice and this importantly displays to others that the avatar is engaging in a religious activity.

An example of imitation-touch is prominently found in the action of the turning of the Buddhist prayer wheels which are found within the *stupas* or large freestanding structures scattered throughout the *Buddha Center*, two examples of these are shown in figure four. The prayer wheel originated in India but is usually associated with Tibetan Buddhism. Typically a prayer wheel requires a person to touch and spin it and in doing so it usually releases the sound of the chant ‘om mani padme hum’.²⁴ In the context of the *Buddha Center* this action is imitated by the avatar who is required to touch the prayer wheel in order for it to spin and release the sound of the chant. The majority of the prayer wheels within the *Buddha Center* require the avatar to touch them with the exception of those which are for sale in the shop, as these are constantly spinning and the ‘om mani padme hum’ chant continuously resonates.

The purpose of the prayer wheel is soteriological, as the ritualistic action of spinning the prayer wheel and releasing the prayer is associated with gaining merit.²⁵ Within Buddhism it is the accumulation of merit which is connected to a persons’ ethical and moral living and the aspiration for a better rebirth and the eventual release from the cyclic existence (*samsara*). The question which arises is whether or not the touching and spinning of the prayer wheel in *Second Life* can be said to emulate the soteriological meaning and practice of this ritual which takes place in real life. Arguably, this is the intention, as the technology does not prohibit the prayer wheels from perpetually turning in cyberspace, which is evident from the prayer wheels found in the shop. As a result, the creation of a virtual object which requires the individual to participate in a specific religious action imitates the merit-attaining religious practice found offline.

However, this does not necessarily conclude whether there is the same meritorious outcome for the avatar who interacts with the prayer wheel, although I would argue that this is the intention. My rationale for drawing this conclusion relates to the similarity of the prayer wheels which are found in monasteries in real life. Many of them continuously spin and are driven by electricity or water from local streams and so the

²³ See Classen 2005.

²⁴ The chant is often known as the *mani mantra* and is a *mantra* related to the Bodhisattava Avalokitesvara.

²⁵ See Harvey 1990, 136.

merit incurred is released into the atmosphere and passed onto those who have paid for the installation of the prayer wheel or for those who have looked upon them or touched them.²⁶ Also, Zino who creates the virtual prayer wheels in the *Buddha Center* corroborates this proposition and he states that merit “can be obtained from a virtual object as long as it is done with the same intention.”²⁷ Therefore, sight, hearing and imitation-touch are the three senses which are intrinsically connected to the interactivity with the prayer wheel and the associated soteriological objective.

Figure 4: Two types of prayer wheels in the *Buddha Center*, both require touch



As I have alluded to earlier, *Second Life* provides an environment that is a rich visual experience for the participant. The depiction of the visual component is evident in relation to the religious art, Asian influenced furniture (see figure 5), plants and animals, statues, *stupas*, a library, tea houses and Zen gardens, all of which provide a powerful and visually stimulating experience for the visitor to the *Buddha Center*.

²⁶ See Harvey 1990, 186.

²⁷ Comments obtained from further discussion with Zino on 10 August 2010.

Figure 5: Asian influenced furniture for sale in one of the *Buddha Center* shops



The visual experience is further heightened by the intentional demarcation of activities. An example of this is the tea ceremony which is found within the various tea houses situated within the *Buddha Center* and which can be associated with Japanese culture and Zen Buddhism. The aesthetics and design of the tea houses include a Taoist influenced tea house which comprises of a pagoda like structure, open on all sides and a yin yang symbol covering the floor (see figure 6). Another example of a tea house is the Buddhist influenced design which includes a number of cushions positioned on a mandala style rug and four large prayer wheels located at one end of the completely open area (see figure 7). The more normative style of tea house which is complete with bamboo doors, cushions and even lights that can be dimmed, can be found secluded on the outskirts of the *Buddha Center* (see figure 8). The intentional design of the various tea houses clearly epitomises an eclectic Eastern cultural theme and provides a visually stimulating and interactive experience.

The participation and interaction within the tea house can be an autonomous or a social activity and involves the avatar touching the tea pot and selecting from a range of drinks. Furthermore the environment within the tea house has been designed to consider a number of senses such as touch, hearing and sight. However, it is the depiction and suggestion of an activity which involves the absent senses of taste and smell which requires further consideration. The custom of pouring tea is an activity which brings an element of realness and authenticity to the environment, an authenticity implied by the creators of the artefacts. Also, it could be said that the activity engages with a cognitive process and extends beyond the boundaries of only a visual and auditory experience. Whether it is successful in achieving this result would require further analysis but it is suffice to say that there is an implied experience related to the sense of smell and taste and in doing so providing or rather implying a complete sensory experience.

Figure 6: Taoist Influenced Tea House



Figure 7: Buddhist Influenced Tea House/Area



Figure 8: Secluded Tea House



Within the *Buddha Center* there are a number of auditory experiences for the participant. Examples of this include the sound of the waterfalls, the wind in the trees, the sound of animals in the Deer Park and the constant melodic background music.²⁸ The sound provides an additional sensory aspect to a predominantly visual experience and in doing so provides a more realistic environment which imitates the environment found in real life. Zino acknowledges this and states that he only incorporates a little fantasy and imagination into the design and so he intentionally creates the environment to be similar to that found in real life.²⁹

Within the Buddhist context, sound is particularly important and can include chanting, recitation of texts and musical artefacts used in rituals such as the singing bowl or gong, all of which I will discuss in more detail in the next section. The importance of sound is corroborated by a number of those who were interviewed, such as Miah Leissa who states that “as a Buddhist we believe that sound is very powerful, we use sound in mantras and chants. We use sound to manipulate energy.”³⁰ Miah’s partner in *Second Life*, Hotei Zahm, also comments on the use of technology as an aid to participate in chanting through the use of a microphone and real life voice. However, he states that it is still not possible to successfully achieve group chanting using voice as the sound is not of a high enough quality and not all users have microphones in order to participate, although hopefully this will be improved and be achievable in the future.³¹

Therefore, it is the demarcation of land areas and the integration of a multi-sensory experience that provides the visitor with a feeling of exploration and awareness of different Buddhist practices, customs and rituals. Specifically, it is the imitation of artefacts and architecture from Tibet, Nepal, China, Japan and India that provides an authenticity and familiarity to the surroundings and which bridges the gap between an online and offline culture as the depiction of the “religious images participate fundamentally in the social construction of reality.”³² It can also be said that the eclectic mix of cultures epitomise different styles and depictions of Buddhism and possibly the “universal Buddhism” that was mentioned earlier. In order to further examine the relationship between the senses and religious practice I will now focus on two main geographic areas in the *Buddha Center*, the main temple and the Deer Park.

The Main Temple

It is from a number of visits to the *Buddha Center* that I have obtained an awareness of the facilities and an appreciation of the different design elements and so it is these that I now turn to. The main temple is positioned between the waterfalls and hills and is the central feature of the *Buddha Center* (see figure 9). Leading up to the temple is a path lined by fire torches which can be turned on or off by the avatar using

²⁸ This can be turned off.

²⁹ Comments obtained from further discussion with Zino on 10 August 2010.

³⁰ The interview with Miah was conducted on 2 June 2010, unless otherwise stated.

³¹ The interview with Hotei was conducted on 2 June 2010.

³² See Morgan 1998, 207.

imitation-touch. On the left side of the path there is a Zen garden containing sculpted sand and carefully positioned stones.³³ On both sides of the path there are cherry blossom trees which are typically associated with Japan although they can be found further afield. The temple itself is white with a gold dome and the surrounding two buildings include a library and a video viewing room.³⁴ Both the library and video room are white with gold domes but they also have the painted eyes commonly associated with Nepalese Buddhism and the all seeing Buddha Vairochana.³⁵

On entering the temple there is the sound of the water from the central pool and meditation cushions are positioned around it. There are only twenty two cushions as this is the limit for the number of avatars attending any one event which is set by Linden Labs, the creators of *Second Life*. Zino explains that to overcome this limitation, the *Buddha Center* would need to develop into a full sim,³⁶ something which he is keen to do in the future. However, he also recognises that this would require further funding in order to finance the development and maintain such a large scale organisation within *Second Life*. The funding aspect in *Second Life* is as important as that found in real life, as a regular income of linden dollars (the SL currency) is required in order for temples to remain open. To assist with the funding aspect there is a collection of donations via a number of ‘donation pots’ scattered throughout the *Buddha Center*. The act of donation or giving is commonly found within South Asian religions and Buddhist cultures and it is known as *dana*. Due to space, it is not possible to discuss this further but it is certainly worthy of wider investigation in order to assess the cultural, ethical and soteriological implications from the action of giving within the Buddhist locations found in *Second Life*.³⁷

Figure 9: Main Temple (centre), Video Room (left), Library (right)



³³ See Plate 2002.

³⁴ The library has a link to a list of books on the Amazon website and so integrating other websites with *Second Life*.

³⁵ See McArthur 2002, 24.

³⁶ A sim in a fully functional online world in its own right.

³⁷ See Heim 2004 for further discussion of the theories of the gift in Buddhism, Jainism and Hinduism.

Further aesthetic aspects of the temple include a large gold Buddha at the far end, fire wall sconces, a central pool, plants and Buddhist religious objects such as the singing bowl and gong. The walls are also adorned with photographs of Buddhist teachers such as the Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh and the Tibetan religious leader, the Dalai Lama. Incense burns in holders that are painted with the eyes of the Buddha, similar to those on the domes of the buildings and some of the *stupas*. The intentional depiction of the incense in the temple imitates the object which would be found in a temple offline.³⁸

A question arises as to why it is important to depict incense when there is obviously no sense of smell online. One of the facilitators, Miah Leissa provides an insight into this quandary and explains that the use of incense draws on the visual sense and the mind in order to imagine the smell and so “mostly we see it and ‘smell’ it.” Therefore, it can be said that there is an expectation that the visual depiction of the incense will resonate with a memory of the smell. An alternative explanation is that the visual depiction of the incense acts as a reminder for the person to light incense offline when they are participating in the religious practice online.

This interaction between sight and the mind is acknowledged by Pattison who states “It is not the eye that sees, though sight would be impossible without it. It is the eye-brain working together in an integrated system that creates visual perceptions. These complex perceptual representations constitute our knowledge and experience of reality.”³⁹ The power of the mind or the “energy” which Miah and also Zino and Delani speak of, begin to resonate with the Buddhist philosophical depiction of not five but the six senses of sight, hearing, taste, smell, touch and the mind.⁴⁰ The importance of the mind in relation to the visual sensory experience is highlighted by a number of scholars including Plate who maintains that “seeing is an active practice bound up with the visible *and* the invisible, the body *and* the mind. Through this process, the viewer is transformed into a participant by way of a visual interaction.”⁴¹ Arguably, this theory is shown to be true in the correlation between the seeing and the smelling of the incense and the participation in the religious practice within *Second Life*.

Now that I have discussed some of the aesthetics of the main temple I want to specifically discuss the religious practice of meditation which takes place there. Meditation is the practice of stilling the mind in order to obtain wisdom (Pali *panna*, Sanskrit *prajna*).⁴² The format of meditation can vary between different schools of Buddhism. Within the *Buddha Center* the meditation class is led by a number of facilitators and teachers who align themselves with different traditions including Tibetan and Zen Buddhism. There are

³⁸ See Harvey 1990, 175, who discusses the significance of incense in relation to Pali Buddhist scriptures and the verse where the Buddha is described as ‘fragrant’.

³⁹ See Pattison 2007, 48.

⁴⁰ See Hamilton 1996, 47. Buddhist texts such as the canonical scriptures of the *Majjhima* and *Samyutta Nikaya* provide a comprehensive analysis of the person and the senses. The relationship between eye, object and consciousness is discussed within the *Majjhima Nikaya*.

⁴¹ See Plate 2002, 161. Italics are in the original.

⁴² Diacritics have been omitted.

usually one to three practices held each day and the times are advertised on the main group board in the information centre.

Figure 10: Inside the Main Temple



Before the practice commences it is customary for the participants to prostrate on entering and leaving the temple. The prostration is done three times and so reflects the devotion to the ‘three refuges’ of the *Dhamma* (truth), the Buddha and the *sangha* (community). The act of prostration in front of the Buddha is undertaken by the majority of the participants with the exception of those who may have wandered into the temple out of curiosity or who are not aware of the ritual. Prostration can also be undertaken in front of a number of other Buddha statues positioned throughout the *Buddha Center*. The virtual act of prostration depicts a religious action as well as showing respect and is therefore acknowledging “what he or she is supposed to feel” within a Buddhist temple.⁴³

Within the main temple the meditation practice typically involves each avatar sitting in a crossed legged lotus position on a meditation cushion while listening to the facilitator or teacher. There are often scriptures, Zen koans or quotes provided on note cards which automatically display and are viewed by each participant (see figure 11 and 12). The note card has two purposes, firstly it provides a visual aid to accompany the words that the teacher or facilitator is speaking and secondly it is a momentum from the practice as it can be saved to the avatars inventory so that it can be retrieved, used or looked at whenever he or she wishes.

The meditation practice is held by a number of teachers and facilitators including Delani Gabardini, Miah Leissa and Talon Falconer. They begin the practice with three rings of the bell and end with one ring of the bell. The teachings may be given orally via real life voice with the aid of a microphone, textually on note cards or via the instant chat facility. The use of both voice and text provides an aesthetic which captures both

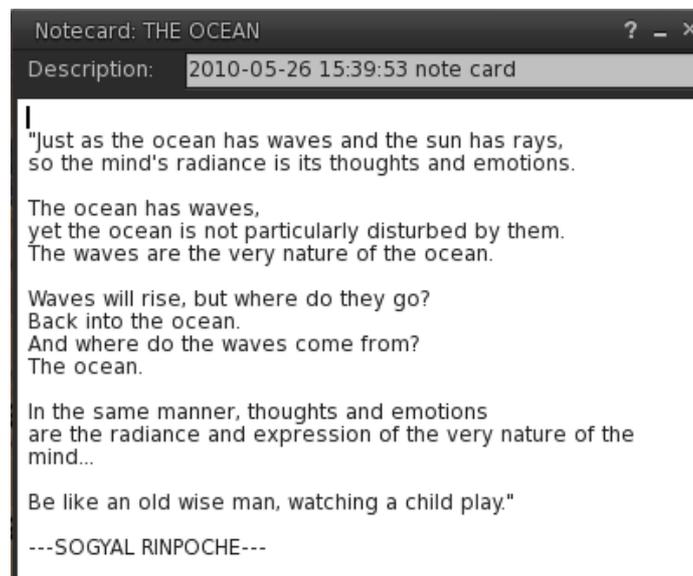
⁴³ See Kieschnick in Corrigan 2008, 230.

sound and sight and therefore ensures that the audience can participate in the religious practice. This is particularly important as the facilitators are not aware of the technological or physical capabilities of those attending the practice. For example, some participants may not have speakers attached to their computer or some may be visually impaired and so it is important to encapsulate as many aesthetics as possible to enable the participant to experience.

The meditation session may include the leader providing an insight into different Buddhist teachings including those from Zen, Tibetan or Theravada scriptures. Alternatively, they may relay a story or recent event from the news or ask the participants to visualise on certain objects such as a bright light entering the body and passing through the different chakras.⁴⁴ The visualisation technique is found in a number of the religious practice sessions and this will be discussed again in relation to the practice found in the Deer Park. The meditation session ends with participants thanking the facilitator or teacher, often using the expression 'namaste' which is a phrase offering respect or greetings. In addition to the text and voice communication there is also the use of paralanguage such as the use of the emoticon for hands in prayer, _^_.⁴⁵ Some avatars will also gesture a humble bow towards the teacher or facilitator as a mark of respect.

Therefore, the surroundings including the visual depiction of incense, a Buddha statue, meditation cushions and the use of note cards provides a powerful visual element to enable the practice of meditation. Furthermore, the use of voice to deliver teachings and the sound emanating from the various artefacts, such as the bell, provides an element of authenticity to the religious practice of meditation within the main temple.

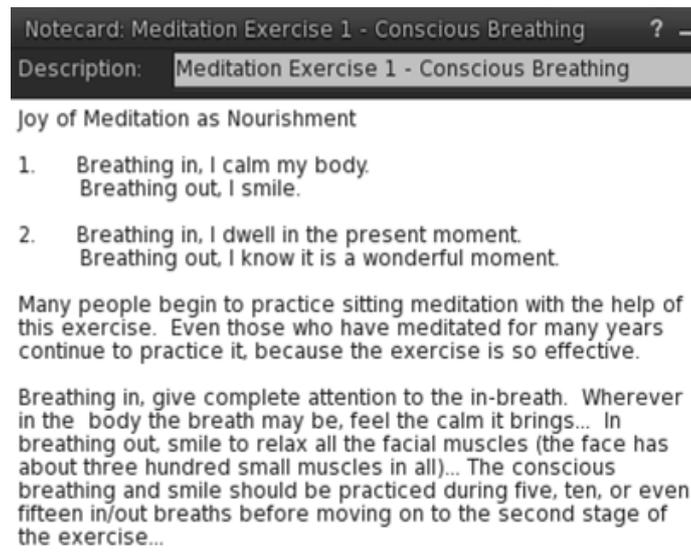
Figure 11: Note card from a meditation session, received 26 May 2010



⁴⁴ A chakra can be defined as one of the seven centres or energy points within the body and is associated with yoga and discussed in Eastern philosophy.

⁴⁵ See Kozinets 2010.

Figure 12: Note card from a meditation session, received 31 May 2010



On the other hand, although the avatar is depicted as meditating there is an expectation that the person behind the computer, the person controlling the avatar is meditating in real life. This expectation is reinforced by the facilitators who, at the beginning of the session, request that everyone gets comfortable and do what they feel suits them best during their own practice of meditation. Many of the facilitators ask the participants to take deep relaxing breathes before they begin the thirty minute silent meditation. It can be concluded that the purpose of the meditation class in *Second Life* is to provide a virtual experience but it can also provide a focus and some guidance on Buddhist practice and teachings to be undertaken in real life. This, then, provides a strong example of mediation between offline and online religious practice.

In addition, I have shown that there is an intrinsic relationship between the Buddhist religious artefacts such as the bell, the practice of meditation and the reliance on the aural and visual senses. Significantly it is the reliance on the visual aspect of the practice which assists in providing a complete experience and so corroborating Morgan's assertion that "Seeing is part of the embodied experience of feeling, and therefore is properly understood as a fundamental part of many religious practices."⁴⁶ Moreover, the online meditation practice does not need to be confined to *Second Life* and in fact it is unlikely to be contained in *Second Life* as the intention is to provide a practice to aid and guide the person in their real life meditation practice.

⁴⁶ See Morgan 2009, 133.

The Deer Park

The Deer Park provides a venue for a number of scheduled Buddhist talks and carries the same name as the location where the Buddha gave his first sermon and expounded his teachings of the *Dhamma* (truth).⁴⁷ Before I discuss the specifics of the religious practice held at this location I want to discuss the auditory and visual features in order to capture the extensive consideration that has been given to the design of this area.

The Deer Park is situated on the outer edges of the landmass of the *Buddha Center* and is flanked by trees and plants on one side and the sea on the other. Many of the trees and shrubbery are flowering and replicate plants found in real life, which is acknowledged by one of the creators and meditation facilitators, Talon Falconer.⁴⁸ In an interview with Talon, she describes how she created some of the plants such as the flowering redbud tree and that the design of the tree is inspired by one that she has in her backyard in real life. Talon refers to a discontinuity between the tree which is found offline and online, stating that the one in *Second Life* flowers all year round and “it always blooms :)” whereas the one in real life doesn’t.⁴⁹ Talon is not the only one who draws their design inspiration from real life. Zino who designs and builds the majority of the features within the *Buddha Center* states that he has travelled a lot and recreates what he has seen in real life within *Second Life*, maintaining “I tried to keep all building textures close to reality.”⁵⁰

In addition to the flowering trees and plants within the Deer Park there are two large Buddha statues and there is a circle of stones surrounded by grazing deer and a small fawn curled up in front of the fire (see figure 13). The stones are designed to enable the avatars to sit or relax around the camp fire and in doing so, experiencing not only the images around them but also the sound. There are a number of sounds including insects chirping, birds squawking, the crackling of the fire and noticeably the sound of the nearby sea lapping against the shoreline and splashing on the rocks. It was while conducting an interview with Talon at the Deer Park that she asked “you’ve heard the waves? . . . the waves are part of the peace.” Many of those who I interviewed or who I have spoken with at the *Buddha Center* express how important the design is and also how beautiful they perceive it to be.

The combination of these sensory experiences provides an environment that is not only aesthetically pleasing but is intentionally created in order to assist the participant in their religious practice. Talon explains that there is an “effort to make surroundings good . . . especially when someone is new to a spiritual experience.”

⁴⁷ In further discussion with Delani on 10 August 2010, she confirms that the name was chosen to reflect the location where the Buddha taught.

⁴⁸ In-world name.

⁴⁹ The interview with Talon was conducted on 23 May 2010, unless otherwise stated.

⁵⁰ Comments obtained from further discussion with Zino on 10 August 2010.

Figure 13: The Deer Park



The Deer Park hosts a number of talks by teachers such as DokWang Augenblick, who is both an ordained Zen priest and a psychologist, as well as Sitar Ishelwood who provides talks on Hindu and Buddhist tantric practices.⁵¹ The talks are very well attended with more than ten to fifteen people being present and participating in the discussions. The format of the talks can include a general question and answer session or teachings from scriptures or real life practice. In one of the events that I attended there was an hour long video clip played which provided an insight into the Buddhist understanding of mindfulness.⁵² After the video there was a question and answer session with DokWang who uses real life voice whilst the attendees use text to communicate. At the beginning of the sessions he will ask the participants to focus on their breath and to “sit in a comfortable position”, listening and feeling the breath.⁵³ Therefore, while the discussion is taking place within *Second Life*, DokWang is acknowledging the embodied individual in real life and is therefore providing continuity between the two locations.

Sitar Ishelwood who is a yoga teacher and tantric practitioner in real life, teaches at the *Buddha Center* and he also provides a series of talks held at the Deer Park. At many of his talks the attendees share details of their own experiences and ask Sitar questions or to explain further about his teachings on Tantra. Like DokWang, Sitar communicates in real life voice with the aid of a microphone and the attendees use text to communicate. In one of his hour long sessions he asks that the attendees use a visualisation technique in order to focus their mind.⁵⁴ The visualisation focuses on the sound of the breath and the colour related to a chakra. He also asks everyone to chant a mantra. The chanting, visualisation and concentration on the breath is initiated in *Second Life* but actually takes place in real life. In an interview with Sitar, he stresses this fact,

⁵¹ DokWang and Sitar are their in-world names.

⁵² See BrightPathway, <http://www.brightpathway.com/>. Retrieved 5 August 2010.

⁵³ Quote taken from the discussion held at the Deer Park on 4 August 2010.

⁵⁴ Session held on 16 July 2010.

stating that it is hard to meditate in front of a computer screen as the vibrations are distracting and that the mind is happier in front of the beautiful. He concludes that *Second Life* should be seen as an addition and that practice should be focused on your own cushion in real life as “practice is something that you do that changes you.”⁵⁵

The religious practice held at the Deer Park could be said to be less formal than that held at the main temple as it actively encourages open discussion and is possibly therefore less ritualistic. The environment at the Deer Park is also very different as it is more relaxed, with the avatars lying down or propped up on the stones around the fire rather than in the lotus meditation position.

In sum, the name of the location intentionally captures the type of activity taking place in this location and the type of religious practice at the Deer Park possibly emulates the discursive activity which would have taken place between monks and the Buddha. The design of the environment provides a relaxing location in order for the participants to feel comfortable and to participate in the group discussion. However, it should not be overlooked that although the Deer Park is designed to provide a visually rich and auditory experience it provides continuity between real life and *Second Life* through the use of other technology, such as video as well as the use of real life voice. Therefore, there is a similarity between the meditation practice within the main temple and the talks that take place at the Deer Park as both use sight and sound to provide an experience for the participant in both *Second Life* and possibly in real life.

Conclusion

This article set out to examine religious practice in relation to aesthetics within the online world of *Second Life*. The definition of aesthetics and religious practice was discussed and respectively Aristotle’s and Smart’s definitions were referred to, thus ensuring that there was a clear rendering of each term. The importance of stressing the sensory aspect of aesthetics rather than the philosophy of the beautiful has ensured a wider and more importantly an accurate discussion of aesthetics in relation to the senses and religious practice within the *Buddha Center*.

It is through the course of this examination that three conclusions can be drawn. First, that there is an intrinsic relationship between the senses and religious practice online. It has also transpired that the absence of taste, smell and physical touch is not completely omitted as there is the implication of these three senses within *Second Life*. The use of imitation-touch ensures that there is both an action and the desired outcome which has been shown in the touching of the prayer wheels in order for them to spin and arguably for the obtaining of merit. Whilst imitation-touch does not result in a physical sensory experience for the person behind the computer screen it does provide an interactive experience and engagement with a number of

⁵⁵ The interview with Sitar was conducted on 16 July 2010, unless otherwise stated.

religious and non-religious activities within the *Buddha Center*. Regarding the sense of taste and smell, although these are clearly not present online there are a number of visual images that imply that they are, for example, the smell of incense or the taste of tea. The analysis of the absent senses requires further examination in other Buddhist religious activities and locations in *Second Life* in order to satisfactorily derive such a conclusion. Nonetheless, it can be hypothesised that the visual depiction does provide a purpose beyond the sense of sight and that the cognitive process is important in order to provide a complete sensory experience. The cognitive process is fundamental for the understanding of aesthetics and this is acknowledged by Plate in his discussion of Zen gardens as he states that it is both a psychological and physical process and moreover it connects the creator and the participant.⁵⁶

Second, there is a significant emphasis on Buddhist visual culture within the *Buddha Center* and this is notable with the intentional creation of artefacts and locations that will induce certain feelings or recognition such as those found in the main temple and at the Deer Park. Plate states that “Religious seeing is set within a series of ritual rules that *frame* the experience for the viewer providing boundaries for *what* is seen and *how* objects are seen” and this is very much evident in the *Buddha Center*.⁵⁷ Examples of this are the ritual of prostration, the ringing of the bell at the start and end of meditation, as well as the depiction of the incense placed in the pots painted with the eyes of the Buddha associated with Nepalese Buddhism. The theories found within the field of visual culture have been fundamental in order to undertake an examination of aesthetics within the *Buddha Center*. The importance of such theories is highlighted by Morgan who asserts that the theory of visual culture helps us “to examine visual practice and the cognitive and perceptual structures that shape our experience of images.”⁵⁸

Third, it is throughout the discussion that a number of continuities and discontinuities have been acknowledged between the offline and online practice of religion, as well as the relationship between objects and the senses. Significantly the emulation of the offline world implies authenticity as well as acceptance, as visitors recognise the familiar and known. The discontinuity relates to the absence of the three senses, namely taste, smell and touch. Moreover, there is the potential for creating and manipulating an environment so as to overcome the laws of physics and nature. This is evident where there is an intentionally created virtual location that is not controlled by climate and the laws of nature and so flowers can bloom all year round and deer and tigers can sit with humans around a camp fire.

In addition to these three conclusions there have been a number of tangential factors that have not been discussed due to space and the specific remit of this article, however a number of these areas have been highlighted throughout the discussion, including the marketing of Buddhism in *Second Life*⁵⁹; the importance

⁵⁶ See Plate 2002, 125-133.

⁵⁷ See Plate 2002, 162.

⁵⁸ See Morgan 2005, 25.

⁵⁹ See Einstein 2008 for a discussion of branding and marketing of religion.

of ritual and artefacts⁶⁰; emotion and religion⁶¹; the importance of integrating other technology such as video and using new media within our lives⁶²; and lastly the development of an online Buddhist community.⁶³ It is perhaps the communal aspect that is most intriguing and warrants a brief discussion at this juncture, as it raises a number of questions in relation to “universal Buddhism”, identity and how new media is being used. The communal aspect is certainly highlighted within *Second Life* and this is shown within the information area where there are links to other Buddhist temples, including Kannonji (Zen), Karma Khadro (Tibetan) and Pureland.⁶⁴ Furthermore, the facilitators and teachers at the *Buddha Center* either manage or also teach at the other Buddhist temples in *Second Life* and so they try not to overlap the schedules, ensuring that avatars can attend different events.

In addition to the communal aspect there is also the discussion of identity, an area which was not within the scope of this article but is worthy of mention. Notably many of the participants and in particular the facilitators and teachers at the *Buddha Center* adorn themselves with monastic robes, mala beads or hand held prayer wheels. The intentional depiction and association with Buddhism through attire and accessories raises a number of questions in relation to identity and this too warrants further analysis in order to examine intention, trends and possible manifestations of Buddhist culture online.

In conclusion, it is within this article that I have discussed and examined the relationship between aesthetics and Buddhist religious practice at the *Buddha Center* in *Second Life*. This has been achieved by undertaking an ethnographic study and incorporating theories from a number of other fields including religious studies and material and visual culture studies. Accordingly, I have illustrated that all five senses are implied but actually it is only the sense of sight and hearing that are present. I have also shown that there is a quasi-sense, namely imitation-touch which enables the avatar to carry out certain actions but this does not incur a physical sensory experience. Imitation-touch requires further examination in order to analyse whether this feature is found in other areas of religious practice in the virtual environment of *Second Life*. Therefore, it is through the use of sight, hearing and imitation-touch that religious practice is not only feasible online but provides continuity between real life and *Second Life*.

It should also be recognised that up to this point the majority of research of religion online has focused on Christianity⁶⁵ or Islam⁶⁶ and so this article directly addresses Campbell’s⁶⁷ and Ostrowski’s⁶⁸ plea that there is a need for further research of Asian religions online. Speculatively, I would argue that the dearth of research on this subject is due to the speed in which the internet has grown and that scholars have primarily

⁶⁰ See Swearer 2004.

⁶¹ See Corrigan 2008.

⁶² See Campbell 2010.

⁶³ See Ostrowski 2006

⁶⁴ See in-world address, respectively: 227,47,22; 41,185,50; 112,22,25.

⁶⁵ See Campbell 2010.

⁶⁶ See Bunt 2009.

⁶⁷ See Campbell 2010, 190.

⁶⁸ See Ostrowski 2006, 102.

concentrated on the predominant religions found within the West. Consequently, this article directly contributes to the discussion within the field of religion, media and culture but there is still much that needs to be examined in relation to Asian religions online which is both a challenge and an exciting prospect.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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