

# An Examination of Virtual Rituals Found in Online Gaming Communities

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Clearing one's schedule for the day to indulge in well-deserved relaxation or entertainment is neither delinquency or a sin; nor are the myriad of personal retreats into fantasy that people so often employ in order to escape reality and find solace. Virtual multi-user environments operate without halts (barring system or network failures), offering support and capturing the imaginations of a diverse group of users around the world thereby transforming individuals into a community. Virtual communities provide an entirely new type of existence complete with the abilities to build relationships, find employment, raise a family, or even control a universe. Within these worlds, political systems are created (from tyrannies to communes), laws are enforced, economies thrive or fall, individuals may openly join groups or wander alone, and personas develop. What was once considered nothing more than pure fantasy becomes more than a hobby or fascinating pastime; it becomes one's entire life.

Although there have been considerations of such issues as the representation of religious values in video-games,<sup>1</sup> or prevalent religious imagery and communities found in online multi-user-dungeons,<sup>2</sup> there has not yet been sufficient realization of how emergent rituals in online games can be used for detailed religious studies. The emergence of in-game virtual religious rituals exceeds the original program boundaries of most virtual environments. Developed by the end-users and often incorporating religious symbols and styles from a variety of sources, these virtual rituals allow opportunities to study a developing process of expressed ritual style. Due to

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1. See "The Values in Video Games." *Religion and Ethics Newsweekly*. Kim Lawton. PBS. May 30, 2003. Episode no. 639. <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/week639/cover.html>.

2. See Ramji, R. "Building Community Word by Word: Religion in the Virtual World." *God in the Details: American Religion in Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge Press, 2001), pp. 267–280.

the ephemeral nature of the virtual environment as well as the difficulty in assessing player motivation there are underlying criticisms against labeling online ritual action as meaningful or authentically religious in nature. The first step in examining these computer-mediated rituals will be to provide an overview of what these games are and what they are not; we shall clarify the environments and subjects involved, as well as displayed symbols. We shall then consider these virtual events according to the ritual theories of E. Thomas Lawson and Robert N. McCauley as well as Roy A. Rappaport; we shall explain why these particular approaches are well suited for analyzing these virtual ritual displays, and we shall discuss existing views on the validity of such in-game occurrences. Finally, we shall outline some future considerations and possible lines of inquiry that apply to online religious rituals in gaming environments.

Although previous scholarship has outlined social and religious elements within online social guilds and conceptions of virtual bodies, specific virtual religious ritual and conduct has been largely overlooked.<sup>3</sup> We shall focus on the particularly religious aspects of in-game player behavior applying existing ritual theories to observed practice. Before our analysis however, it is important that we define our subjects and clear a path through some of the developing virtual jargon. Often compared to the Wild West<sup>4</sup> in its lack of boundaries, morals or justice, the internet gaming communities attract over half a million users on a daily basis and are far from bland digital realms in which users shoot at mock-creatures or type random messages to other players. Within virtual game worlds it is common to find social groups formed around virtual clans or guilds as such social networks help to guide new players as well as continue in-game actions.

While multiplayer games appear to have integrated religious motifs and provided online spaces for religious communities to develop, they are (overwhelmingly) not specifically geared to religious systems, or tailored for

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3. Some exceptions include Ralph, S. "The Sacred and the Virtual: Religion in Multi-User Virtual Reality" *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication*, 4 (2) December 1999, <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol4/issue2/Schroeder.html>; Ramji, R. "Building Community Word by Word: Religion in the Virtual World." *God in the Details: American Religion in Popular Culture*. (New York: Routledge Press, 2001), pp. 267–280; and Yee, N. "Superstitions" *The Daedalus Project*, March 20 2007, <http://www.nickyyee.com/daedalus/archives/001554.php>.

4. See Morris A.P. "The Wild West Meets Cyberspace." *The Freeman: Ideas on Liberty*, July 1998 Vol. 48 No. 7. <http://www.fee.org/publications/the-freeman/article.asp?aid=3446>.

a traditionally religious audience. This is not to say that religiously-oriented games do not exist; there are a variety of games created specifically for religious participants that provide integrated messages of spiritual values to player(s) during the gaming experience. Such games are often funded by religious organizations and marketed as alternatives to popular secular video-game titles that do not take values such as non-violence, or religious lessons into consideration. Games with specific religious orientation are commonly not interactive on the communal level, the environment is not multi-user and not a virtual environment in which players/avatars can build, talk, or play together. Such single-player titles such as: *Victory at Hebron*, *GodSpeed 3D*, *Ominous Horizons*, *Charlie Church Mouse Bible*, or *Bible Touch Down* embody such religious-oriented learning games and are endorsed by Christian-oriented multimedia groups. Religious game reviewers note such titles and give corresponding endorsements; for example, the praise for *Victory at Hebron*:

Gamers (Christian and non-Christian) should really take notice of this one. Its (sic) fun, challenging, has unique game play, and is high-quality. Parents looking for a good, clean game for their school age children might want to consider buying this game. Its focus on the Bible and the strategic elements promote high values as well as logic and mathematical skills (Guiding Light Videos ¶2).

Such titles are only a select few religious games created with the express purpose of teaching specific moral lessons, or scriptural references. Indeed, there are thousands of such programs available online for download, or sale, representing faiths from all over the globe. Without difficulty one may find religiously applicable software titles catering to Jews, Muslims, Christians, Hindus, Buddhists, Pagans and more.<sup>5</sup> However, just as one can find titles to teach traditional religious doctrine to gamers, one can also find particularly virulent software that has proselytization as its focus. Such brands of software are often overt in their message, yet they incorporate a subtle approach that draws a player into an onscreen scenario which can only lead to one proper outcome according to programming standards. Any

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5. See the Yahoo® Directory of Religions and Spirituality for specific locations of each faith's video-game collection of downloadable titles, [http://dir.yahoo.com/Society\\_and\\_Culture/Religion\\_and\\_Spirituality/](http://dir.yahoo.com/Society_and_Culture/Religion_and_Spirituality/).

deviations from pre-programmed game standards inevitably cause a player to lose.

These types of games differ greatly from the 'secular' online multiplayer environments where any overt attempt on the part of programmers to incorporate religious material, or proselytization, would be considered in poor taste at best. Writing for *CNN Money*, Chris Morris reports, "There aren't a lot of taboos in the video game industry. The Vietnam War, drug running and brutal homicides have all featured prominently in past and upcoming releases. But mention religion to most publishers and they'll break land speed records as they dash in the opposite direction" (Morris, ¶1). Yet, if Morris is correct, how can we account for the great variety of apparently religiously-based (if not symbolically rich) rituals that online users have created in the last several years?<sup>6</sup> One factor is the freedom of players to develop and enhance their own virtual world. While game designers provide the genre, environment outline and tools, the users often assume the role of programming new social scenarios, events, items, and personas inside the game. The various genres of online games span a variety of historical and mythic scenarios: medieval Europe, Camelot-style fantasy worlds, futuristic alien encounters, classical Roman or Greek eras, present-day urban warfare theatres, or indeed a blending of elements from all the above and more. Unlike religiously pre-determined gaming scenarios, religious symbols and ritual systems within secular online games arise spontaneously.

During their initial market introduction the target audience for these online games consisted primarily of computer-enthusiasts; predominately males in their early teens to late twenties.<sup>7</sup> Today the demographic still holds to this general pattern, the majority of online players being teen males, nevertheless, there are an increasing number of adult users including many female players. As reported by Robin Greenspan of the ClickZ Statistics Archive:

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6. Morris does in fact recognize the expansion in religious attributes found in video-games in recent years, (specifically the incorporation of virtues and morals that are purposefully encoded into games such as the Ultima series) breaking away from the unofficial separation of 'spirit' and game that has dominated the industry.

7. See the Canadian-based Media Awareness Network on how online companies target specific demographics of young people for Internet use, [http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/parents/internet/kids\\_for\\_sale\\_parents/marketers\\_target\\_kids\\_p.cfm](http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/parents/internet/kids_for_sale_parents/marketers_target_kids_p.cfm).

The U.S. survey, conducted during December 2003 and January 2004 by Digital Marketing Services (DMS) of more than 3,600 individuals who have played online games within the last three months, revealed that a significant portion of 40-something women used gaming almost daily as a way to relieve stress, increase skill levels and inspire social interaction. While only 22 percent of teens admitted to playing games every day, 41 percent of 40-something women were daily gamers (Greenspan, ¶2).

The historical development of these online games is not difficult to trace, particularly since the networks capable of running the complex programs have only been in public service for the last decade. Beginning with small groups of computer enthusiasts swapping emails and playing small intranet games on BBS<sup>8</sup> exchanges, the fledgling online games developed into an internet-based exchange which provided for increased stability and more users. It is a logical progression for many teens who have spent time playing early versions of online games to continue the practice as they age. What was once a group of young, fantasy-oriented, males gathering in small online groups has evolved into communities of thirty and forty year-olds with disposable income and leisure time; gathering in highly organized and technically complex virtual worlds to meet and socially interact.<sup>9</sup> The notion that these online spaces are simply places where children play at vacuous

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8. Microcomputer Bulletin Board's beginnings trace back first as a dial-up message center. It was 1978 when Ward Christianson and Randy Suess in Chicago, Illinois, wrote CBBS (Community Bulletin Board System) an on-line message base for utilizing a common home microcomputer and modem. Before that most people (who actually owned modems, which were very few) connected to those large computers in universities or the above mentioned private computer networks. From that point on BBSs became a place for many computer hobbyists of the day to exchange helpful tips, information about their machines, and occasionally discussions. Many of the boards were run by computer hobbyists, not to unlike ham radio operators, mostly paying all their expenses out of their own pocket and giving free access to their users. The first BBSs were little more than a message center with E-Mail and open discussions. If one wanted to share a program one had written with others, it would be "listed" in ASCII format in a message and then the receiver would either have to write it down, retype it, or, if they had the know-how, code a program that would convert it into the computer's language directly (Anderson ¶4).

9. If we take the findings of Castulus Kolo and Timo Baur's "Living a Virtual Life: Social Dynamics of Online Gaming" to be accurate approximations of user-time, then the compulsion to immerse oneself into the virtual world on average will take up 23 hours a week in real time with a cost of approximately 75 U.S. dollars (Kolo & Baur ¶23). Although Kolo & Baur's investigation limited itself to the *Ultima Online* environment, we find that similar (if not greater)

video games akin to the Pac-man arcades of the 1980's is simply out of date. As gaming enthusiasts explain:

While many may scoff at the idea of both children and adults playing in a world of fantasy, the online community fulfills a basic need for some—to feel that they belong. Players in an online game gain the feeling of being involved in something bigger than themselves. Part of a community in which they can live a different life and meet different people (Fallingthrough ¶7).

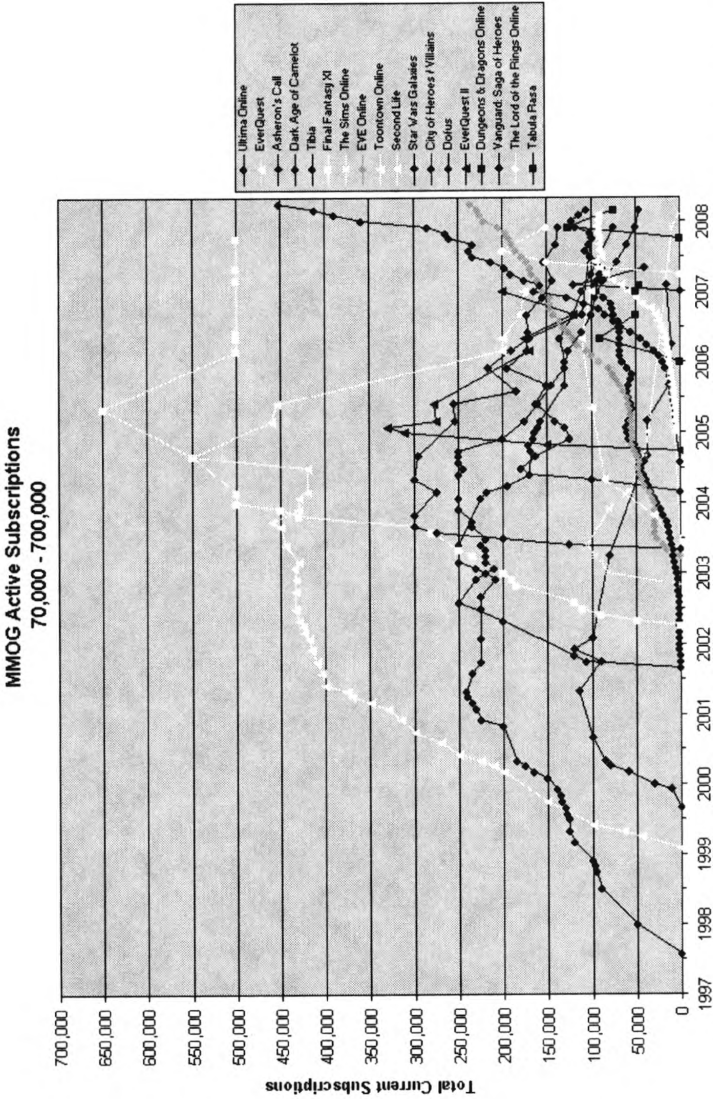
Tracking the statistics of online users since the boom in multiplayer games began in the late 1990's the Massively Multiplayer Online Games Chart Organization provides up-to-date information regarding the numbers of players and subscription services. Figure 1 shows us the approximate number of users over a nine-year period in each specific online environment (each a unique game design and genre). Currently, newer online games such as *EverQuest*, *World of Warcraft*, or the *Final Fantasy* series have outstripped the competition with larger servers and increasing system requirements. Yet, even within these newer games, we find that religious archetypes persist and communities of players often form around ritual practice.

Some of the earliest communal games (for example, *Ultima Online* [UO]) appear to be heavily influenced by religious symbols and theory. The forms of in-game religion are diverse, often a hybrid of Christian and Eastern mysticism, and their manifestations appear to cross multiple genres of video games, from first-person shooters to multi-user dungeons (MUDS).<sup>10</sup> In-game discussions of religious theory and ritual can undoubtedly be nothing more than passing conversations or even role-playing but we find groups of avatars and virtual churches spring from such communications. Since the avatar in the virtual world is the personification of the self—a self capable of represented action and yet not technically 'alive'—theories regarding the states of human existence often arise within online communities. The phenomena of avatar representation is

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hours of game time are dedicated by the players to other online games that have comparable virtual populations and have since become more popular titles for users to purchase.

10. The game-architecture of an online environment commonly follows programmer design patterns that classify the type of play as viewed from the perspective of the individual playing the game. Typically: a first-person-shooter view, where the screen is tailored to mimic the forward view of the player in any direction, or an over-head view which shows the player as one graphical representation amongst many others in a multi-user environment.



**Figure 1.** The growth of online gaming communities presented from Woodcock, Bruce Sterling. "An Analysis of MMOG Subscription Growth" MMOGCHART.COM 12.0. 9 April 2008. 9 September 2009. <http://www.mmogchart.com>

esoterically akin to living as flesh and blood in the real-world and then existing only as spirit or soul in an afterlife; one has physical substance, the other transcends matter.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, the concept of virtual existence is more comparable to several traditional religious descriptions of apparitions, ghosts, and an afterlife than to biological life: there is no physical substance, movement is limitless, obsessions between justice, good and evil are often the reason for existence, earthly boundaries are left behind, and instantaneous communication is symbolic in nature. Heidi Campbell explains the very real nature of online religious communities in her work *Congregation of the Disembodied: A Look at Religious Community on the Internet* and looks beyond the idea of whether or not a community of people online can be considered a 'church' in the conventional sense of the word, defending the notion that such gatherings, disembodied though they may be, represent a shared form of identity. We see this shared identity in the religious gathering points found in online games. Such locations are used for the expression of spiritual elements such as the quest for compassion, love, humility, wisdom and peace. Campbell correctly explains that "cyberspace is about making connections, not just with data but with the individual creators of the information" (Campbell 180).

This interplay between real people in virtual form is what gives the internet community its substance; without it we are simply examining the interactions between an individual and a computer model in which there can be no true dialogue, or exchange of beliefs beyond that of the programmer and the viewer—much like a television broadcast without viewer feedback or input. The increase of religious interactions in multi-user virtual environments not only makes for new areas of study into the social-dynamics of web-users, it also provides the opportunity to examine the way religion impacts the lives of adherents; the paralleling of the virtual and real worlds is often indistinguishable:

I met my RL husband, Dar Villous, on *UO* about 3 years ago. We became friends and met in RL . . . We ended up married in game . . . and he actually proposed to me in game a RL marriage. We got married in game and then about 6 months later were married in RL. In game Rose is a shoot from the hip kind of gal, says what's on her mind even if it's not what people want to hear. In RL, I'm told I'm the same

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11. Thus there is an analogy between life on earth (off-line) and in 'heaven' (on-line).



way. I just can't be bothered with people trying to play games. I'm not like that. So I guess, Rose is me. In a sense . . . (Gaming Treasures ¶4).

In reaction to the growth of virtual communities, and the real issue of persons spending capital to acquire virtual assets, F Gregory Lastowka and Dan Hunter, writing for the Institute of Law and Economics at the University of Pennsylvania, ask whether virtual-world users have real-world property interests in virtual objects. More than this, they seek to clarify in current legal standards, "whether avatars have enforceable legal and moral rights. Avatars, the user-controlled entities that interact with virtual worlds, are a persistent extension of their human users, and users identify with them so closely that the human-avatar being can be thought of as a cyborg" (Lastowka and Hunter, ii).<sup>12</sup> With the growth of these online communities come true academic forms of analysis and critical theory.<sup>13</sup> Several virtual gaming communities have been examined from a sociological perspective in order to analyze group interactions, player relationships (both on and off-line) or how the virtual world influences participants.<sup>14</sup>

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12. The 'avatar' of a player is usually humanoid in form, although as a graphical representation is ultimately any object, creature or creation that the end-user chooses. As the virtual 'incarnation' of the owner the term is drawn from Hindu origins. In multi-user virtual environments the avatar is typically represented in three-dimensions giving other participants a clear view of all actions. Also used as representative graphics on computer blogs, forums, or chats (though usually only in two-dimensions, as icons or photos) the avatar can be personalized by the user and easily changed.

13. See Becker, H.A. "The Emergence of Simulation and Gaming." *Simulation and Games*, 11, 1980, pp. 223–345; Bruckman, A. "Gender Swapping on the Internet." Proceedings of INET, 93. Reston, VA: The Internet Society, 1993. Presented at the Internet Society (INET '93) in San Francisco, CA. <http://www.cc.gatech.edu/fac/Amy.Brocman/papers/index.html>; Bruckman, A. "Approaches to Managing Deviant Behavior in Virtual Communities." Proceedings of CHI. New York: Association for Computing Machinery, 1994, <http://www.cc.gatech.edu/fac/Amy.Brocman/papers/index.html>; Poole, S. *Trigger Happy: Videogames and the Entertainment Revolution*. London: 4th Estate, 2000; Herz, J.C. *Joystick Nation: How Videogames Ate Our Quarters, Won Our Hearts, and Rewired Our Minds*. Princeton, (NJ): Little Brown & Company, 1997).

14. See Williams, D. et al. "From Tree House to Barracks: The Social Life of Guilds in World of Warcraft" *Games and Culture*, Vol. 1 No. 4 Oct. 2006 pp. 338–361; Taylor, T.L. "Living Digitally: Embodiment in Virtual Worlds" in R. Schroeder (ed.), *The Social Life of Avatars: Presence and Interaction in Shared Virtual Environments*. London: Springer-Verlag, 2002, <http://www.itu.dk/~tltaylor/papers/Taylor-LivingDigitally.pdf>.

Within these online neighborhoods we find developing patterns of religiosity even if the original game design had no such plan in its conception. Perhaps it is the combination of players seeking to unite into clan-structures and find permanent relationships or perhaps it is the inevitable evolution of players interacting in gaming environments that provide the freedom to incorporate religious overtones and images as part of the playing experience. Regardless, the players appear to have embraced it; for, “having a system of religion inside of the game serves to reinforce this sense of community through group community actions and rituals, such as religious services and prayer” (Fallingthrough ¶7).

These rituals are diverse and yet mirror real world scenarios: attending religious services, weddings, funerals, anniversaries, etc. The popularity of these in-game rituals has become so great that game developers have accommodated players by incorporating standardized virtual services and documents to facilitate the process. As displayed at the main website for the *Ultima Online* server,

“the Wedding Proposal Deed and the kit it creates are intended to facilitate marriage ceremonies in-game . . . Weddings would also be recognized on a special page of the *UO* website, dedicated to marriage announcements. When a player double-clicks on a Wedding Proposal Deed, a gump<sup>15</sup> is displayed, outlining the two ring types (silver or gold), and the inscriptions to be placed on the rings. Once chosen, the inscription is placed on both rings” (*Ultima Online* ¶1).

This type of breakdown between real-world and *UO* boundaries could be viewed as merely an extension of personalized play, or a juvenile form of creating personal relationships without the risk of true-to-life consequences. Yet, as Andrew B. Newberg aptly explains in his work on the cognitive and neurophysiological aspects of religious experiences, “these unitary experiences consist of a decreased awareness of the boundaries between the self and the external world, sometimes leading to a feeling of oneness with other perceived individuals, thereby generating a sense of community” (Newberg 307). Verifying Newberg’s interpretations, players attest to this increased social solidity:

While online role-playing games are often not taken seriously by the ‘real life’ community, many aspects of online community life have generated both

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15. A pop-up in-game graphical menu.

speculation and debate on the value of interactions and systems on the web . . . .  
The manner in which the religious system functions in *Dark Ages Online Roleplaying* mirrors the way a religion functions in reality; it serves to increase group cohesion and, through a complex structure of religious symbols, provide supernatural sanctions against the violation of group norms (Fallingthrough ¶3).

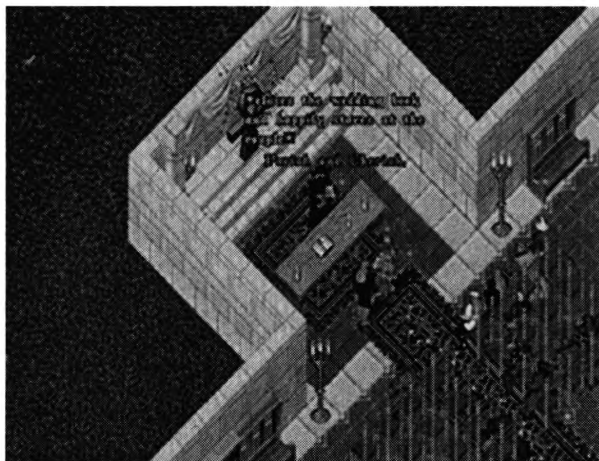
The *UO* system provides for chapels or shrines, as well as religious paraphernalia such as candles, altars, pews, texts, statues, and more. Figure 2 depicts a *UO* marriage rite with a large number of game players in attendance; Figure 3 shows a smaller service, again on the *UO* server. A more detailed set of diverse examples can be seen at the *Second Life*<sup>16</sup> game environment; as we can see in Figures 4–7: a number of virtual sacred locations and online religious rituals in progress.



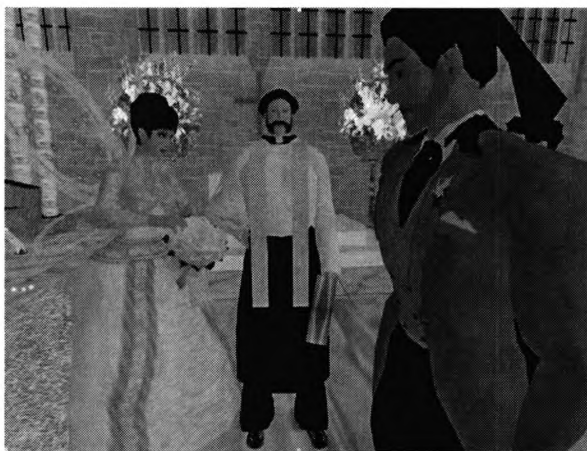
**Figure 2.** A wedding ceremony in the *Ultima Online* gaming environment. The purple altar is flanked by the wedding party with three officiating avatars dressed in blue robes. Ultima Onnline Age of Shadows

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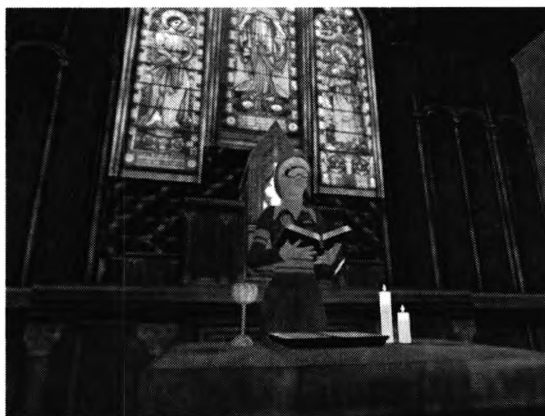
16. Second Life is a 3-D virtual world entirely built and owned by its residents. Since opening to the public in 2003, it has grown explosively and as of May, 2007 was inhabited by a total of 1,049,831 people from around the globe.



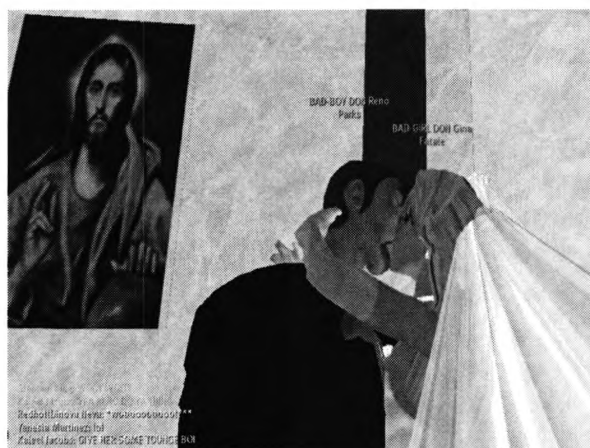
**Figure 3.** A less public wedding ceremony in the *Ultima Online* gaming environment. A single robed figure officiated behind the altar; an ankh stands raised against the wall. The couple to be wed stands in front of the altar with other participants seated. *Ultima Online* Age of Shadows.



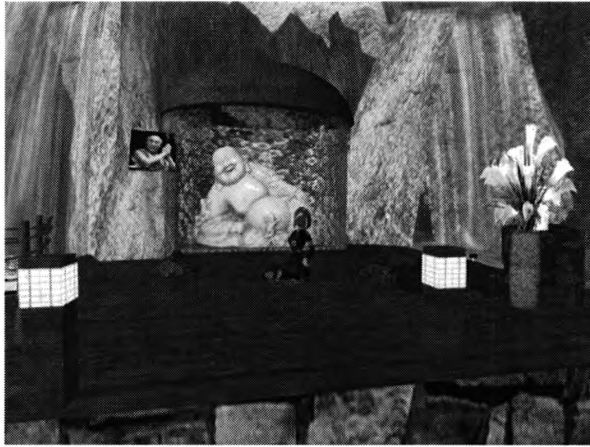
**Figure 4.** A wedding ceremony taking place inside the *Second Life* game environment. Both bride and groom have programmed in the attire and have chosen the virtual cathedral as the location. An avatar dressed in priestly robes offers the ritual words and instructions.



**Figure 5.** A member of the *Second Life* game environment conducts a Christian-based service at the altar in a virtual church. While the user is not depicted in clerical garb, several ritual objects are part of the ceremony, each programmed into the game system. The virtual stained-glass windows show Christian saints.



**Figure 6.** The final vows and conclusion of a wedding ritual inside the *Second Life* environment. The avatars 'Bay-boy Don Reno Parks' and 'Bad-Girl Don Gina Fatale' kiss under the image of Christ in a local virtual church. Comments from the witnesses can be seen in the lower left corner. *Second Life*.



**Figure 7.** The location of the Buddhist-based rituals within the *Second Life* environment. A programmed stone Buddha reclines within a carved niche with a video of the Dalai-Lama playing beside him. An avatar meditates at the shrine listening to the words. *Second Life*.

Given the fluid (often flamboyant) nature of players' avatars questions regarding the meaningful authenticity of such ceremonies are common. The gaming experience on the part of the players reflects a genuine desire for some type of community involvement or development for personal relationships; so much so that the elements of religious ritual are used as reinforcements. Yet Anne Foerst warns in her analysis of religion and social interaction in virtual reality:

Because there is no physical commitment or connection in cyberspace, web communities may be ultimately indifferent and meaningless to the people involved . . . Virtual reality, however, is a direct result of the assumption that embodiment and shared physical space are not important for community building because the body is not part of what turns a human into an individual. But if cognitive science theories are correct, then virtual reality spaces lack the required physicality, and relationships in them are incomplete (Foerst 924).

The embodiment of the end-user through the computer avatar is itself a fascinating example of a modern interaction between the 'natural' and the

'artificial';<sup>17</sup> particularly since the human body becomes entwined with the constructs of electronic symbols and words. Because the boundaries between the player and avatar are so fluid, we find that topics of gender-identity and personality come into question when one enters the virtual community. Is the projected persona the same in any way to the person behind the screen? Jungian masks take on ever increased forms in a virtual community in which players project themselves as, literally, anything desired.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, because the entire gaming experience is a fantasy projection unto itself there is almost no reason to believe that any avatar encountered within the game is akin to the end-user; they are merely the current apparitions of the desires of the user and are subject to constant reinvention. This brings out the question of whether or not a true religious community or ritual is even possible in a virtual gaming environment since the 'people' represented in the game are fantasy. Can one be an 'authentic' member of a religious community if represented as a different gender, race, species, or personality all together?

Within religious studies the problem of understanding the sincerities of a ritual participant's devotion or representation is hardly rare. In traditional real-world religious communities there are undoubtedly members that don a public appearance, or persona of an individual which is, in fact, at complete odds with their 'true' nature. Such explorations of honesty or authenticity in social experiences are, however, outside the limited scope of our specific examination of religious rituals within online games. To view a player's religious constructions inside a fantasy environment is possible, but to view the sincerities behind them would be labyrinthine. Suffice to say, the problem of studying a ritual participants' *intent* is no easier within the virtual world than in the real world. Yet such difficulties in the study of religion are not insurmountable nor do they halt continued research in the field.

Turning to an application of established ritual theories in order to analyze these online actions we find that while there are a variety of interpretive methodologies and definitions of what classifies actions as

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17. For the ambiguity of this natural and artificial difference see Haraway, D. "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century." *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, (New York: Routledge, 1991).

18. See C.G. Jung. *The Collected Works of C.G. Jung: Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious* v. 9. Pt. 1 (*Collected Works of C.G. Jung*). Eds. Gerhard Adler & R.F.C. Hull. (USA: Princeton University Press, 1969).

religious and ritual in nature. Two specific approaches help clarify our categories, the first application shall utilize ritual theory put forward by E. Thomas Lawson<sup>19</sup> and Robert N. McCauley;<sup>20</sup> the second from Roy A. Rappaport.<sup>21</sup> Lawson and McCauley provide a categorization of religious ritual based on cognitive methodology. They arrive at a number of key rules that help to define a series of actions and events as 'religious' in nature, or at the very least as ordered in levels of importance to those participating in the ritual. Based upon action, as performed by agents, with objects that hold specific importance and function, the theory that Lawson and McCauley put forward allows us to view the virtual ceremonies in terms of who is performing them, what they are doing, and with what virtual objects. Lawson and McCauley place religious ritual actions, agents, and objects in a template-like format, an action representation system, which allows for an organizational model of ritual description and estimation of ritual value. The location of a superhuman agent within the action representation system will suggest the specific ritual's relative importance within a religious system.

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19. Professor of Comparative Religion, Western Michigan University; executive editor of the *Journal of Cognition and Culture*, Distinguished International Fellow at the Institute of Cognition and Culture at Queen's University, Belfast, Northern Ireland. Selected Publications: co-author *Rethinking Religion: Connecting Cognition and Culture* (Cambridge 1990), *Religions of Africa: Traditions in Transformation* (Waveland Press 1998), *Bringing Ritual to Mind: Psychological Foundations of Cultural Forms* (Cambridge 2002), "The Wedding of Psychology, Ethnography and History: Methodological Bigamy or Tripartite Free Love?" in *Theorizing Religions Past*. (Altamira Press 2004), and "Ritual form and ritual frequency: From Ethnographic Reports to Experimental Findings" in *Mind and religion: Psychological and Cognitive Foundations of Religiosity* (Altamira Press 2005).

20. Professor of Philosophy, Emory University; philosophy of science, cognitive science of religion, and naturalized epistemology. Selected Publications: *Rethinking Religion: Connecting Cognition and Culture* (Cambridge 1990) and *Bringing Ritual to Mind: Psychological Foundations of Cultural Forms* (Cambridge 2002), both with E. Thomas Lawson. Editor of *The Churchlands and Their Critics* (Blackwell 1996). Research articles in *Philosophy of Science*, *Synthese*, *Philosophical Psychology*, *Consciousness and Cognition*, *Theory and Psychology*, *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion*, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, and *History of Religions*.

21. (1926–1997). Former Chair for the Department of Anthropology and President of the American Anthropological Association. Selected Publications: *Pigs for the Ancestors* (Yale University Press 1968), *Ecology, Meaning and Religion* (North Atlantic Books 1979), *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* (Cambridge 1999).



This aspect of ritual gradation is explained in Lawson and McCauley's first principle, that of Superhuman Agency:

Those rituals where superhuman agents function as the agent in the ritual (for example, when Jesus institutes the church) will always prove more central to a religious system than those where the superhuman agents serve some other role (as, for example, when they serve as the passive recipient of a sacrifice). In short, the most central religious rituals are always those where the gods themselves directly act (Lawson and McCauley 124–125).

Continuing to follow the descriptive levels within the action representation system, Lawson and McCauley refine their ritual theory with a second principle: Superhuman Immediacy. Rituals with the least distance between a superhuman agent and ritual enabling actions will find a greater fundamental role in the overall religious system as opposed to rituals in which the actions between superhuman agents and participant are remote. As Lawson and McCauley explain, "The fewer enabling actions to which appeal must be made in order to implicate a superhuman agent, the more fundamental the ritual is to the religious system in question" (Lawson and McCauley 125). Writing in the *Journal of Ritual Studies* Brian Malley and Justin Barrett give both summary and reasons for interest in Lawson and McCauley's ritual theory:

Lawson and McCauley have therefore proposed a precise ritual theory in which religious rituals are constrained by assumptions about the structure of action and by the mythology that informs the ritual structure. The action representation system organizes rituals into discrete actors, instruments, and agents, and provides an implicational framework within which rituals may be interrelated. Mythology, by stipulating where in the action structure a superhuman agent fits, causally affects a ritual's relative centrality, repeatability, reversibility, sensory pageantry, and emotionality. The Lawson-McCauley proposal is particularly interesting because it suggests that even religious rituals—often regarded as a clear case of purely cultural variation—are informed and constrained in very precise ways by human cognitive architecture, and that there is more to the psychology of religious ritual than alpha waves and symbolism (Malley and Barrett 2).

Lawson and McCauley include greater detail in this analysis of ritual theory by outlining characteristics such as reversibility, repetition and pageantry (variables that indicate the relative strength of a ritual). They claim, then, that special agent rituals are emotional, involve relatively heightened sensory pageantry, are unrepeatable, and are (at least potentially)

reversible (Malley and Barrett 2). By interviewing a diverse group of religious participants with regards to the relevance and observations of a number of their religious rituals, Malley and Barrett were able to verify the hypothesis of Lawson and McCauley to a great degree:

The success of the Lawson-McCauley hypotheses in predicting participants' judgments about repeatability and reversibility is striking given that the hypotheses base their predictions exclusively on the way in which special agents are implicated in the ritual structure. Their predictions about the relatively heightened sensory pageantry and emotionality of special agent rituals are also largely borne out. Systematic comparison shows that the Lawson-McCauley predictions for emotionality are statistically significant. Their predictions for sensory pageantry are also above chance, though falling slightly short of the conventional standard of  $p0.05$  (Malley and Barrett 14).

Given the data within the Malley and Barrett study, a criticism of Lawson and McCauley's ritual theory appears to be a lack of specific knowledge on the part of the participant as to where the location of a superhuman agent was to be found within the structure or origin of certain rituals.<sup>22</sup>

This simple yet effective application of a ritual theory should find little difficulty within a virtual environment and could yield valuable insight into the motivations of ritual participants even when outside the normal structures of real-world religious institutions and community gatherings. Indeed, others have examined Lawson and McCauley's linguistically developed generative representation of action-ritual and have applied differing online rituals in such terms. We see this in Kenneth Hansen's 'Models of Virtual Culture', where online rituals in *ActiveWorlds*<sup>23</sup> are examined in terms of this generative model and the rules surrounding it. While the application

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22. Their research did, however, raise a serious difficulty for the Lawson-McCauley theory. Frequently informants did not know how a ritual implicated a superhuman agent. Some rituals either do not have mythology surrounding their institution, or, if they do have it, their informants were unaware of it (Malley and Barrett 13).

23. Self-described: "ActiveWorlds hosts a Universe of over 1000 3D virtual reality worlds. In these worlds you can choose from a vast array of avatars that fit your personality (or your perceived personality—that's half the fun!). You can then move about, play online games, shop and make friends with people from all over the planet. You can even stake claim to a piece of land and build your own virtual home, mansion, estate or castle! If you like to travel, there is plenty to explore. With ActiveWorlds' most popular world, AlphaWorld, boasting

of the actual components within a virtual system fit well into Lawson and McCauley's representational action model, it is not simply the ease of integration that makes the model well suited for studying virtual religious rituals. In-game rituals (religious or secular) can be outlined with relative simplicity and minimal substitutions within the representation system. Hansen shows this for both religious and non-religious virtual rituals; one can readily represent the virtual participants, objects and actions. We see this in Figure 9, the application of Lawson and McCauley's rules to a virtual wedding ceremony within *ActiveWorlds*.

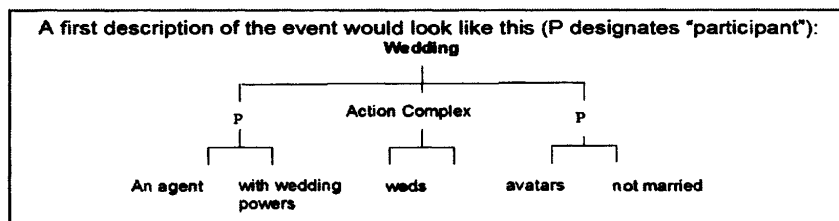


Figure 9. Hanson's Action-Complex-Chart based on Lawson and McCauley's ritual rules, 11.

Here, Hanson integrates Lawson and McCauley's rules regarding Superhuman Immediacy and Superhuman Agency but substitutes player's avatar as the force of 'superhuman'.<sup>24</sup> As we have outlined, in the original description by Lawson and McCauley, the Principle of Superhuman Agency contends that rituals are more integral or central to a religious system if superhuman agents serve in a direct role as agent within the ritual rather than as passive recipients or observers of the ritual.<sup>25</sup> Likewise, the Principle of

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virtual land space larger than California, there is plenty of opportunity to be awed by the creations of others!" <http://www.activeworlds.com/overview.asp>.

24. The starting point of the theory is the fundamental observation that all religious rituals involve supernatural agents. This typically happens through a ritually constructed relation between participants and a God or several Gods. This fundamental relation is either done through the main ritual itself or it is previously performed, presumed hypothetically or represented in a row of smaller rituals. Hence, the structural analysis of a religious ritual must include, somewhere, a supernatural agent. 'Virtual rituals' in the 3D cyberspace system *Active Worlds* do, it would appear, in a similar way, always involve the representation of the user as a kind of 'supernatural' agent, i.e. as an avatar (Hanson 11).

25. See Lawson and McCauley, 125.

Superhuman Immediacy serves to set a standard of importance to religious rituals by claiming that those religious rituals which have fewer enabling actions that link the superhuman agent to the ritual are more fundamental to a religious system.<sup>26</sup> These two principles allow us to look at virtual religious rituals with a critical eye, identifying where, or what, the superhuman agents are. With respect to avatar actions during a virtual ritual, two in-game scenarios can be distinguished; one in which the avatar(s) perform ritual actions aimed at purely fictional, pre-programmed in-game 'deities' which are employed for game realism, storyline advancement and general player interest. The second scenario sees players using their avatars with apparent genuine piety: as tools to express ritual actions within the virtual world which are directed at religious symbols or superhuman agents with real-world origins (for example as depicted in Fig. 5 or Fig. 7). Thus the avatar becomes an expression of the players' real-world religious devotions. In a literalist sense, there are no superhuman agents in a virtual world; anything which an avatar appears to worship has been programmed in by some real-world person and is thus less than superhuman. If the end-user is merely appealing to a traditional understanding of superhuman agents which originate outside the virtual environment then the avatar is simply another expression of their religious dedication.

Looking beyond the ritual itself to the conceptual activity and schemes that surround them, we find that Lawson and McCauley explain how conceptual religious systems serve a number of functions. These include explaining a ritual's origin, eligible participants, and "how ritual participants other than human beings (which include culturally postulated superhuman agents at least, and, perhaps, objects with culturally postulated superhuman properties, animals, or inanimate objects as well) take part not only in theoretical rituals but in religious rituals human participants perform" (Lawson and McCauley 157). The virtual environment serves to surround the system of in-game religious rituals, providing the worlds' characteristics and activities that interact with the virtual rituals. Thus, the virtual environment itself is a participant in the virtual ritual. We could then apply the virtual environment as the superhuman agent within the action representation system, whereby the participants' ritual actions bring the avatar closer to the world in which it exists. Possible avenues of inquiry are

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26. See Lawson and McCauley, 125.

intriguing since parallels could be made between such behaviours and forms of Gaia theology or belief systems that elevate the environment or humans to superhuman status. Suffice to say that for our purpose of presenting the value of virtual rituals to the study of ritual theory and religion, specific examinations of such parallels must be relegated to future studies.

At any given moment within an online community the supernatural agents seem to be the avatars themselves, the transcendent virtual environment, established religious agents outside the game-world, and even, the makers of the games themselves. Given this array of choices, can we truly apply Lawson and McCauley's system to virtual worlds? With the exception of analyzing online rituals specifically dedicated to established non-virtual religious agents, is it appropriate to classify anything in a virtual world in the same manner as is defined within Lawson and McCauley's system? At the very least, in all cases, such those with a fictional in-game superhuman agent or those appealing to a traditional real-world superhuman agent, we are able to use Lawson and McCauley's methodology to situate the ritual's importance. Determining the nature of the superhuman agent within the virtual world allows us to judge whether the ritual being studied can truly be categorized as traditionally religious in nature. Even though online environments contain groups of avatars who knowingly worship fictitious superhuman agents, can we not find parallels of this behaviour in the real-world? One could argue that a similar situation exists in the case of Buddhism, where a strict understanding of the religion would imply that it has no superhuman agent. Yet, it continues to function as a perfectly intact religious ritual system. However, even if a virtual superhuman agent is classified as completely fictional or exclusively game-oriented, the outlined methodology aids in sociological classifications of player actions and relationships.

What of the critique that virtual rituals are based upon temporary relationships, and are less likely to make meaning for in-game participants? Lawson and McCauley explain that simply because religious systems emerge from temporary relations within the entire system of symbols does not imply that religious systems are meaningless (Lawson and McCauley 157). It is important to realize that these in-game rituals do not necessarily attempt to seek *truth* as offered by traditional religious organizations. It appears that meaning and community are the greater aims. Only a long-term study regarding the migration patterns of avatars between game-worlds and

the relationships between the players outside the virtual environment could specifically answer questions regarding the authenticity of virtual rituals. It is important to note, however, that because Lawson and McCauley cast their theory as a competence model, based on the Chomskyan approach to linguistics, they look to idealize performances and ritual behaviours. Because the intentions of all participants cannot be readily assessed we would do well to remember that to truly understand the broader religious significance to players it is not enough to simply examine ritual performances. This does not negate the value of Lawson and McCauley's approach in understanding virtual rituals, it simply reminds us that to understand meaning, or cognition, the broader the view the better.

Adding to our understanding of how to define and make use of these virtual rituals within religious ritual study, we turn to some of the forms and features of ritual as described by Roy A. Rappaport. Rappaport provides a series of definitions and directions that help us situate virtual rituals and compare them to more conventional examples. In *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* Rappaport defines ritual as, "the performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances not entirely encoded by the performers" ("Ritual and Religion" 24). As well, Rappaport points out that, "all ritual is not religious, [and] not all religious acts are ritual," ("Ritual and Religion" 25). Like Lawson and McCauley we find that ritual as defined by Rappaport does not stipulate what a ritual is 'for' but seeks to understand what a ritual 'makes'. What do the participants gain from such experiences and how does this turn them into (or away from) a community? Rappaport's ritual theory is concerned with how rituals affect the relationships between a congregation and entities external to it – this includes other groups but also the environment itself. This is an extension of the functional definitions of religion whereby the chaos of the external world causes the anxieties and fears within humanity, which in turn prompts the development of ritual in order to provide stability and security. Rappaport's anthropological analysis of ritual attempts to show how it mediates relationships on a wide scale; between persons within the society, between the population and agricultural cycles, land use, energy expenditures, etc. This does not imply that practitioners view the ritual in the same terms. From the perspective of the participant, this ritual mediation usually involves the member(s) and non-empirical entities. Rappaport's study of ritual and ecology amongst New Guinea tribal societies outlined some of

the many areas affected in this relationship between ritual, ritual cycles, and life. In *Pigs for the Ancestors*, he observes the many functions of rituals and taboos: serving to promote nutritional additions, regulate times of peace, war or personal conflicts, controlling pig and group populations, orientating trade goods, etc.<sup>27</sup> Some initial problems in applying Rappaport's method of viewing rituals as action-oriented messages within a virtual environment may appear to be the difficulty in distinguishing between ritual and taboo, and the ever-expanding nature of the online environment. While we are able to observe several forms of religious ritual and avatar participation online, the incorporation of avatar taboos is not certain. Do congregations of avatars adhere to, or even have knowledge of, specific virtual taboos? There are certainly social faux pas within the gaming communities that can lead to an avatar's banishment, shunning, or even violent in-game conflicts, but do these constitute virtual taboos?<sup>28</sup> As well, given the expanding nature of the virtual world, is there a need for any kind of ritual cycle to regulate periods of population growth or the use of resources? One may be tempted to assume not since the virtual landscape can be programmed with whatever the end-user can create. Yet, this assumption is excessive as many online worlds do have strict limits on all environmental variables, from the number of trade goods to the populations of randomly generated flora and fauna.

Rappaport sets out a series of forms that are often observed in rituals. Verbal expression is often central to these forms (although certainly not the only conveyed sense or method of communication).<sup>29</sup> Within the virtual environment, however, verbal forms of communication in ritual expression are not the dominant mode. Because of technological evolution, the common way of ritual participation online is through typed communication via one's avatar. These messages appear in displayed graphical bubbles above the icon's location or at the bottom of the screen with the speaker clearly identified. One could argue that this symbolic representation of ritual speech is all the more powerful in its intent and substance since the

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27. See Rappaport *Pigs for the Ancestors*, 72, 109, 125–26, 136, 159, 164, 189–193.

28. Most online environments provide a number of 'helpfiles' for new users in order to avoid online behaviours that offend established players. Such files include instructions on proper avatar actions in certain areas of the game-world, proper questions to ask in open forums, forms of communications that are discouraged, prohibitions on cheating and specific rules of in-game play.

29. See Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion*, 29.

effort of entering in commands and text in order to share one's thoughts and emotions is a more complex process than simple speech. This is to say, there is a great effort on the part of the end-user to communicate and participate in the virtual ritual to the extent of having to program in verbal commands, text messages, and mouse-driven displays of avatar actions in order to complete the communication process. Added to this effort is the in-game syntax and ritual language that has developed within the online environments that have become part of the symbolic language of internet communication. Expressions and graphical representations are often used as messages to all participants within the virtual ritual and convey a broadly understood set of directions and meanings. We can see an example of this in Figure 6 where the participants in an online wedding ceremony 'speak' to each other with terms such as 'lol' (laughing out loud) and 'woot' (an expression of joy often with hands raised).

Rappaport's observations regarding the encoding of rituals by persons other than performers also bears on virtual rituals in that they appear to be composed of borrowed (or, in the case of the wedding ritual, directly copied) elements of previously established real-world religious rituals. Rappaport notes that "rituals composed entirely of new elements are, however, seldom if ever attempted. 'New' rituals are likely to be largely composed of elements taken from older rituals" ("Ritual and Religion" 32). Likewise, change within an established religious ritual is often met with rejection, although, "the authors of change in religious ritual sometimes claim, however, that they are not inventing liturgy but merely reforming it, or they escape contradiction by claiming that they are merely divesting the ritual of the inconsequential, profane or evil accretions of time and error, returning to it the purity that prevailed in more righteous days" ("Ritual and Religion" 33). Ironically, there are efforts on the part of virtual ritual authors to claim in-game religious ritual as 'purer' than their real-world counterparts. This claim is not linked to looking *backwards* in time to religious ritual, but rather, to the belief in the *present* (and future) virtual system as superior to periods of time that did not have the technological capabilities to instantaneously bring together participants from all over the world, regardless of location, or language. One can argue that the virtual religious ritual brings people together to worship from anywhere on earth, understanding one another in their own symbolic language, representing



themselves in the emotionally pure forms that they have picked out through their avatar's graphical display and are thus 'truer' to religious openness.

Perhaps Rappaport's most valuable contribution to an understanding of virtual ritual is his emphasis on ritual's realization through performance. As he explains, "the act of performance is itself a part of the order performed, or, to put it a little differently, the manner of 'saying' and 'doing' is intrinsic to what is being said and done. The medium, as McLuhan and Fiore would have it, is itself a message, or better, a meta-message" ("Ritual and Religion" 38). The ritual 'message' is what separates it from being a sporting ritual, an anniversary ceremony, a dramatic production, or a religious endeavour. The message that a sporting ritual conveys may be community oriented, but it is also something that concentrates on the present outcome of a game being played—of winners and losers, not of transforming a ritual participant into something esoterically more than what they were before the game started. Rappaport makes this point often in his analysis in order to emphasize the importance that the act of ritual participation has to the ritual itself. He explains that in looking at dramatic ritual, sporting rituals and religious rituals we see that the participant's role and the outcomes are key to understanding the differences: drama represents actions, objects and events while participants view them in audience; sporting events present an outcome of immediate contest with participants viewing in audience; religious ritual goes beyond this by *conjoining* participants who are oriented towards the message and the future outcome of their actions.<sup>30</sup>

The application of the theories of Lawson and McCauley and of Rappaport to virtual religious events prove productive both theoretically and empirically. Lawson and McCauley's model of ritual generation does more than outline the ritual factors or even place the ritual within a religious conceptual scheme; it allows for testability.<sup>31</sup> We have seen this in the applications made by Malley and Barrett.<sup>32</sup> As Lawson and McCauley point out, several testable implications are available in order to predict whether or

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30. See Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion* 42–45.

31. See Lawson and McCauley, 176.

32. Other studies on the veracity of Lawson and McCauley's ritual theory include Barrett's "Dumb Gods, Petitionary Prayer, and the Cognitive Science of Religion," *Current Approaches in the Cognitive Study of Religion*. V. Anttonen and I. Pyysiainen, eds. London: Continuum, 2002. See also Barrett, J. L. & E. T. Lawson. "Ritual Intuitions: Cognitive Contributions to Judgments of Ritual Efficacy," *Journal of Cognition and Culture*. 1(2):183–201. 2001.

not rituals have orders of meaning for the participants. If we were to gather the avatars of an online environment together and ask them to classify their religious rituals, would they be consistent with the universal principles that Lawson and McCauley's theory expounds? A reasonable prediction may be that the opinions of religious rituals by real-world participants (as displayed by Malley and Barrett) would be comparable to opinions of online religious rituals by participating avatars. Given the discovery that real-world participants frequently lacked the knowledge to place superhuman agents within ritual structure, the lack of focus on a superhuman agent within the virtual environment should come as no great surprise. By examining the action-history of avatars involved in virtual rituals we could also discover whether these participants actively 'live' in the virtual world according to espoused ritual principles or simply engage in ritual action as part of the game; actions meaningless beyond entertainment purposes. Would the presence of identified superhuman agents within the ritual's structure point to levels of meaning and understanding that are accepted by those participants who frequently take part in rituals as compared to those that merely see the ritual as part of the next virtual fad? Lawson and McCauley's system of competence-theoretic approach "focuses upon the representation of religious *ritual action* rather than the more inclusive domain of religious *thought* or religious *ideas*" (Lawson 194). In this way we are able to apply their theory to a virtual environment which is riddled with the problem of authentically identifying participants, their understanding of the event and of the metaphysical aspects of the ritual.

Rappaport's emphasis on the cultural importance of religious rituals also fits well into the study of these virtual events. The microcosm of players, coupled with the plasticity of the virtual worlds, allows for detailed study of the emergence and changes of the virtual rituals within differing scenarios. Because the online worlds are so malleable, the players are able to shape the avatars, objects and ritual settings; since everything that a player does is technically recorded in a digital history, it allows for the opportunity to actually trace the emergence of an online religious ritual and see its effects on the burgeoning virtual culture. There are many online examples of how virtual cultures developed from humble beginnings into thousands of members. Within most we find periods of factionalization and group dynamics eventually leading to stability that display an evolution of online culture. In discussing how Rappaport's definitions and theories of

rituals show religion as culturally forming and contributive to the ordering of societies, Donald Wiebe explains that religious rituals construct meaning, communication, order, protection and the stability that societal life requires (Wiebe 92). Rappaport points out that since human beings have the ability to deceive and hurt each other all social orders must protect themselves to some degree against linguistic and societal disorder.<sup>33</sup> We find precisely this appeal to order as a religious foundation in virtual environments. Take, for example, the virtual world of *Habitat* and the reasons given for forming an online religious institution:

For instance, in the visual world of *Habitat* . . . the controllers of the world often saw fit to shape the world in ways that made the populous happy. In the initial plan of *Habitat*, avatars could snatch items from each other and run away with them. The *Habitat* community did not like this feature and complained. The god/wizards of *Habitat* responded by coding away the possibility of theft. Likewise, the avatars in *Habitat* could originally kill each other. Again, many users complained. The programmers responded by limiting avatar murder to the uncivilized borderlands of *Habitat*'s environment. This was not a sufficient answer for some, and a virtual church congregation was formed to promote avatar nonviolence (Dibbell ¶14).

The *Habitat* church was named the 'Order of the Holy Walnut' and, as Howard Rheingold, author of *The Virtual Community*, explains: "the founder, a Greek Orthodox priest in real life, required his disciples not to carry weapons or steal. 'His church became quite popular. . . and he became a very highly respected member of the *Habitat* community'" ("Real-time Tribes" ¶46).

In this paper we have shown that rituals within virtual gaming-worlds hold value as sources for the study of religious ritual and that ritual-theory can be applied to virtual ritual scenarios. We have examined only two such ritual-theories and applied them to virtual rituals. Other ritual-theories, for example Victor Turner's observations on liminal space, could also be applied or developed with respect to virtual worlds in order to further analyze avatar actions and beliefs. The use of online rituals as a ready source of objective material means that data collection can be carried out without secondary accounts and with a detailed computer history of all participant actions from the moment they first log in. Logging into these worlds in order to live through one's avatar is itself a ritual experience, something

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33. See Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion*, 417.

that allows for a transcendence of being and immersion into a community of like-minded people. Yet, the sheer number of hours that people have dedicated to creating online personas and living a 'second' life begs for the involvement of multiple-fields in order to understand the larger picture. For example, a psychologist may point to the end-user as ultimately an ill individual, unable to cope with the lack of meaning and success in the real world and thus turning to the virtual world for both. Likewise, sociologists may look to the virtual communities and their never-ending train of building, developing and re-inventing in order to better understand how humanity chooses to evolve when free to do so. I would suggest that too few scholars have discovered the value online worlds provide in understanding how we develop and relate, to rituals, others and to ourselves. As Rheingold explains:

MUDs are living laboratories for studying the first-level impacts of virtual communities—the impacts on our psyches, on our thoughts and feelings as individuals. And our attempts to analyze the second-level impacts of phenomena like MUDs on our real-life relationships and communities lead to fundamental questions about social values in an age when so many of our human relationships are mediated by communications technology ("Multi-User Dungeons and Alternate Identities" ¶6).

The increased appearance of religious ritual in the workplace<sup>34</sup> has captured the attention of the media and scholars yet few have taken advantage of the opportunity to study religious ritual in the playspace. As technology bridges the virtual and real world ritual actions will become indistinguishable to all but the programmers themselves.

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34. See for example, Michelle Conlin, November 1, 1999 *Businessweek Online* Cover Story, "Religion in the Workplace: The Growing Presence of Spirituality in Corporate America," [http://www.businessweek.com/1999/99\\_44/b3653001.htm](http://www.businessweek.com/1999/99_44/b3653001.htm).

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