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Attachment, Connectivity, and Virtual Belief Communities

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### Introduction

The near ubiquitous use of information-centric technologies, such as the Internet, offers important opportunities to revisit and re-conceptualize the operation of communities, especially those in which modes of communication substitute for geographic proximity. Looking specifically at virtual religious communities, the somewhat disappointing outcomes of some efforts to sustain virtual religious communities without an underlying recognized proximate connection seems to suggest that a core concept of community must exist; that the successful functioning of a virtual community results from some extant interconnection, and not the converse. However, building virtual spiritual communities simply because it is possible often results in an empty space, or, in the example of Second Life, in lifeless avatars, unless there is connection that supports “communion.” Conventional wisdom on virtual spaces for persons of faith communities at one time assumed that “if you build it they will come,” but it has become apparent this is only the case if people have some reason for going there. This chapter explores the connectivity- and community-related issues behind faith as a motivating factor for participation in online communities, using the case of Second Life.

The construct and interpretation of virtual communities as considered here concentrates on three constituent components of online (virtual) religious groups: Community, Proximity, and Practice, using as examples Buddhist communities and the de facto community (gamers) based

entirely in a virtual communication construct, namely Second Life. These are particularly of interest in a virtual setting due to the meditative/mystical, praxis-oriented characteristics of the former case, and the self-organizing, substrate-dependent characteristics of the latter.

In terms of structure, the term virtual community refers to the aggregations of group interactions (hence “community”) made possible by digital information and communication technologies (ICTs) (virtual), where the group cohesion or connection is based primarily on electronic, generally computer-mediated, interactions. This is in distinction to the more common usage of the term, community, in which communication is in-person and contextual, both temporally and proximately, or geographically linked. Yet as Ward (2001, p. 246) noted, virtual and “imaginary” communities have existed for some time before the contemporary cybernetic usage.

While communities are by definition grounded in a commonality of interest, most typical usages of the term suggest a neighborhood, interest, political, social, or proximate (geographic) orientation; increasingly, the communication component of community has been noted (Delanty, 2003). The character and functioning of spiritually based groups offers an interesting set of cases where the community is one of interest, in this case, religion and spirituality, or practice of spirituality, operating in a non-proximate, virtual realm made possible by the digital communication of information interlinking distributed computers.

Ward (2001, pp. 248–9) took a somewhat more restrictive approach, arguing that virtual communities are not really places, spaces, or states, but rather a praxis, an artifact of telecommunications, and of participation in that medium, and lack the significant substance of which “real communities” are composed. However, if virtual communities can be understood as types of real communities that use new systems of communication or particular mediated modes

of social interaction to sustain themselves (Burnett, 2002), then understanding the ways in which virtual communities function must focus on the mode of interaction, as well as on the conditions within which such interaction takes place, rather than the locale in which such interactions take place. For these communities, the where is of less interest than the what, that is, the communication (or “text”) is the focus of the analysis.

In either case, given the core component of communication in these groups, it is useful to consider not only structure/composition of virtual communities but also the content (text) of the interaction that lends itself appropriate to the tools of cultural hermeneutics. According to Aarseth (2001, p. 231), “the basic tenet of hermeneutics is that understanding is gradual, a circle alternating between the parts and the whole, and thus closing in on a better view of the world, but with the realization that there can never be a final, closed interpretation.” The hermeneutic circle is a particularly useful model for the computer-based processes and virtual environments where simulation can be thought of as not necessarily creating new realities, but alternative interpretations and understandings of our extant realities. Burnett (2002) argued that a process much like the one described by Ricoeur as “the mode of ‘as if’” is used by participants in virtual communities as a means of creating and sustaining those communities. This process unfolds in an ongoing public “performance” of writing texts, reading and interpreting those texts, and making those readings and interpretations explicit through the creation of further texts. Additionally, Ward (2005, p. 71–72) focused on cultural hermeneutics and cultural transformation in which there is no general hermeneutics or isolatable text, but a situation practice specific to the cultural context in which it operates, providing alternative insight to community hermeneutics.

## Exemplar Groups

This chapter explores the application of hermeneutic examination to two examples of virtual communities with varying degrees of objectively defined spiritual components. Buddhists, and “gamers”—in the latter case, individuals who participate in online immersive virtual worlds such as Second Life and who have an interest in spiritual activity. Buddhist groups represent an interesting case, in as much as one can generalize about Buddhist worldviews, with respect to concepts of community, transmission of knowledge, and technology. Can there be Sangha, or spiritual community, in an online or virtual space? This is a nontrivial question, as Buddhism can be thought of as a practice, or way of approaching life, as much as a philosophical/theological structure (see Gethin, 1998, and Payutto, 1995). It is best practiced corporately, with others traveling the same path, and with those who embody its goal. Traditionally, the Sangha was the community of monks and nuns who lived together and served to transmit the Buddha’s teachings to the community (Gethin, 1998, p. 92), and which served as a “witness to Buddhism” (Abe, 1993, p. 109). However when considering the evolution of Buddhism as it expanded west, in the broadest sense, Sangha is often thought of as referring to all of the Buddhists in the world and all those of the past and of the future. This is especially a useful definition if one is referring to the aggregate interactions and transmission of teaching that occurs in cyberspace, or what Prebish (1999, 2004) referred to as the cybersangha. In general western usage, however, Sangha refers to other Buddhists with whom one is in a practice context.

In contrast, an alternative type of online community shifts the connection from an emphasis on content that is, the specific connection involved, to the substrate, which we could refer to in a sense as habitus, in a virtual, constructed world, or, in the sense of gamers, the

platform. Here we are using the substrate, a specialized case of “online,” in which the “space of social possibles” (Ward, 2005, p. 23 ) is the virtual gaming environment, as well as the way individuals are represented, as graphical avatars or representatives, instead of by the literally textual content of communication (Grossman, 2007).

### **Technologies of Virtual Spaces**

As used here, the term virtual communities refers to a self-defined construct, a “space of flows” (Castells, 1996), a “condition of co-presence”: (Giddens, 1991), or a praxis or participation in a medium (Ward, 2005), generated by the aggregations of communication made possible by digital information and communication technologies (ICTs), and where the group communality is based primarily on electronic interactions. The operation of virtual communities, in general, and with respect to the translation of religious or spiritual practice to this virtual, online, substrate, can be thought of variously, representing an extension of the use of communications technology by traditional spiritual communities (top down), or the use of communications technologies to allow the identification of, and organization of, individuals of like-minded interests (bottom up). While a number of observers have noted the increasing use of ICTs by religious-based groups (e.g. Brasher, 2001; Barzilai-Nahon & Barzilai, 2005; and Hoisgaard, 2005), particularly those with fundamentalist or evangelical orientation, this chapter focuses on communities that use the Internet as a primary venue, and are non-proximate in composition. Interestingly enough, the use of ICTs has been linked, not without some irony, to both the decline, as well as facilitation, of community: depending on which variables are under examination, ICTs have been used to describe both sides of this discussion.

These more versatile information and communication technologies offer the potential to facilitate communication and interactions otherwise subject to the limitations of distance and physical accessibility in a way that goes beyond the long-used bidirectional telephone and broadcast technologies (Cairncross, 2000; Helland, 2000). This is particularly true of groups with interests that are specialized, rare, or potentially perceived as less than socially acceptable, for which the virtual world offers a place to congregate in a way that would be impractical, risky, or inconvenient, in the physical world.

Some spiritual groups can be said to fall into at least one of these categories. Specific examples might include religious cults, obscure or new age religions, or religion/belief structures with a foreign, exotic, or alien image—Buddhists, Islam, B’hais, and Hindus in the latter case—when viewed through the cultural lenses of western observers, especially from an American viewpoint.

The widespread adoption of ICTs, and the subsequent emergence of first online personas, or identities, and then online communities, suggests that a re-conceptualization of the definition of community is necessary, one that takes into account a sense of connection beyond the immediate proximate context into a virtual space defined by the flow of data and communication of ideas, extending the traditional understanding of community linked to a sense of place (Castells, 1996). The emerging field of Internet research has led to the development of a variety of techniques to observe and interpret activities in virtual space in general, and more recently to the study of online religion (Cowan & Hadden, 2000). This is reflected in the development of highly active professional groups such as the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) and the Association for Computing Machinery Special Interest Group on Computer Human Interaction (SigCHI). This chapter includes a theoretical/conceptual overview for mapping the activities of

belief-based communities in virtual space, drawing on religious, communication, and hermeneutically based approaches, as well as on the insights arising from geographic approaches to online virtual spaces (Dodge & Kitchin, 2001). Virtual spiritual communities represent a rich and relatively understudied area of research, and the operation of communities with non-proximate cores presents an intriguing area of inquiry, both in terms of the sociology of group interactions, as well as those of substantive, theological interest.

### **Communities, Context, and Virtuality**

What, then, constitutes the substance of an online or spiritual community; what is the “virtual reality” of such a community? The expression virtual community, as used in discussions of the Internet and the related cyberspaces, generally refers to a construct generated by a non-geographic matrix represented by an electronic coordinate system used for routing communication protocols—the Internet, or more precisely, ICTs. Though retaining some elements of a spatial metaphor, virtual space is at least one step removed in abstractness from a physically characterized infrastructure. Thus, by stepping back from the physical characteristics of online/virtual spiritual communities and focusing on a functional characterization, we can reconceptualize the characteristics of a proximate community to capture the defining characteristic of a specifically online or virtual community.

While a variety of typological schemes have been constructed to describe online spiritual communities (see Bradley, 1997; Helland, 2000; Dawson, 2000), this paper classifies communities in terms of all the dynamic relations that constitute them. Accordingly, with a unit of analysis at the level of the individual, embedded in a variety of information, social, and neighborhood networks, linked by computer-mediated communication (CMC) and other ICT

connections, “community” encompasses a variety of different types of relationships, depending on the context (Wellman & Gulia, 1997). All virtual communities, spiritual or otherwise, while operating in a nonproximate space, still must be physically realized (science fiction examples notwithstanding), that is, there is a real physical location occupied by computers, network, technologies, and support personnel. Accordingly, this notion of “virtual community” can be characterized as a collection of social interactions occurring online, in computer-mediated cyberspace, through repeated contact within a specified boundary or place (e.g., a listserv, chat room, or website-related discussion group) that is categorically delineated by topic of interest (Baker & Ward, 2000). For Buddhist groups it could be said that there is, by necessity, an attachment to the physical, even when engaged in nonattached virtual communication.

### **Community**

The term community, quite common in usage and comforting in its familiarity, is in reality a complex concept frequently defined and understood by the context in which it occurs, either in terms of field of research (i.e., sociology, politics, religion) or locale (geographic, virtual). For any meaningful discourse to occur the observers (not to mention the participants) must negotiate a common understanding of the substance and nature of the specific aggregate entity (community) under examination.

While the literature on virtual communities has richly described the online communities that have emerged in the cyberspace realm (Rheingold, 1993, p. 5), in terms of proximate communities, what does community, in a sense of neighborhood, mean if cyberspace substitutes the flow of electrons for community churches, zendos, or ashrams? Is it possible to have a "here" when there is no “there”? If the geographic link is weakened, then what sort of connection exists



among members of a community? Thus, if a community is defined by relationships or communication rather than place, then what is the nature of relationships? What linkages connect people in an analogous manner to proximate space, or geographic place? Ward observed, “what had once been praxis, is now regarded as reality itself” (2000).

It is sometimes argued that virtual communities are “thin” communities, often communities of strangers with a single or narrow commonality of interest, in contrast to physical communities based on strong, multidimensional linkages. This is in contrast to traditional “thick” or organic communities, grounded in common geography, history, and tradition, which offer constituents a “sense of community” through the allocation of roles and identities and the establishment of mutual trust (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Online spiritual communities, then, operating in a locale in the contemporary Internet, could be regarded as offering a global market of interests where strangers exchange information, engage in interpersonal transactions, and if a sufficient commonality and extended interaction develops, thus generates “thin” community (Delanty, 2003).

Bender’s (1982) definition of community described an involvement of a limited number of individuals in a somewhat restricted social space or network (emphasis added) held together by shared understanding and a sense of obligation. Relationships are close, often intimate, and generally involve face-to-face interactions. Individuals are bound together by affective or emotional ties rather than by a perception of individual self-interest. There is a “we-ness” in a community; one is a member. Building on this, Galston (1999) suggested that at least four key structural components make up a virtual community:

- limited membership—a typical feature of online groups is weak control of admission and participation of members. Low barriers to entry, and little obligation to support or

maintain the community potentially leads to rapid turnover and iteratively diluting the sense of intimacy and community from a point of stability.

- shared norms—virtual groups appear to develop protocols for behavior in response to three kinds of imperatives: promoting shared purposes, safeguarding the quality of group discussion, and managing scarce resources in the virtual commons.

- affective ties—as an explanatory aspect is complicated by debates among experts as to whether genuine community occurs or merely a type of “pseudocommunity.” The intensity of “flaming” and the rather emotional language that can occur in online communications, however, might serve as an indicator that some type of emotional attachments are possible, even in non face-to-face settings. The aspect of what constitutes inappropriate communication is itself not always a given—many groups struggle with balancing a commitment to freedom of expression with a need to prevent decay of group civility, in an attempt to prevent a communication “tragedy of the commons.”

- mutual obligation—while a sense of mutual obligation to the other members may or may not occur, ancillary face-to-face contact strengthens subsequent online interactions.

Therefore, it might not be unreasonable to speculate that an online community with a geographic identity (and the possibility of further face-to-face re-enforcement) would be more likely to have a greater sense of mutual obligation develop.

Summarizing, online community can be operationalized as a self-organizing, self-defining collection of individuals whose central principle is a shared interest, or set of interests. This definition draws conceptually, to some extent, from Howard Rheingold’s 1993 definition of virtual communities as “social aggregations that emerge from the [Internet] when enough people

carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace” (Dutton, 1999; Rheingold, 1993; Wellman, 1997).

Sometimes a community will self-organize because of minimal outside influences—for example, communities of scholars or organized soccer teams. In this case, the group is held together by a mutual attraction or commonality of interest. Conversely, they may self-organize in direct response to an outside influence, such as gay activists (or Evangelical Christians) mobilizing coalitions in response to social legislation, unions organizing against corporate interests, or in response to available resources such as a new stream of external funding. In these cases, the group is forming in response to or against an outside factor and held together by a common exterior influence or threat. Although some note is made of the factors that inhibit the formation of communities (McMillian & Chavis, 1986)—often lumped generically under issues of organization, this chapter focuses on factors influencing the successful formation of online (virtual) spiritual/religious communities oriented toward the contemplative, meditative, or mystic. Even though frequently used in a geographic sense, there is nothing that necessitates that the meaning of “community” be narrowly linked to a specific spatial location. For example, a metropolis is generally considered to be a large, sprawling urban center of culture and trade, or an incorporated municipality, whose boundaries may be legally precise and geographically vague in a cultural sense. Similarly, a religious community extends conceptually beyond the proximate and temporal into a conceptual realm encompassing soft communication and perceptual linkages. The notion of community, like many conceptual constructs, is undergoing cultural modifications in response to newly emergent forms. Ward (2002) comments that the reconceptualization of community blurs a variety of boundaries such as between between real and virtual (communities of proximity and of interest), between human and machine, and type of activity

This transition makes the mapping and interpretation of communities more complex.

### **Proximity: Geographic and Corporeal**

Because of the increasing sophistication of ICTs, individuals are no longer restricted to communication with people with whom they share primarily geographic locale. ICTs enable users to seek out people with whom they share a similar intensity of “concern” based on more general human interests, as well as concerns based on, and created by, widely disseminated information, such as television, radio, and “net” coverage. Concern about the ramifications of widespread use of these technologies as a substitution for in situ interactions has been expressed by Quentin Schultze (2001) who opined that overly focusing on the technology, and the wizard-like power that it conveys in terms of breadth and sheer amount of information available, will draw people away from spiritual contemplation, leading to superficial, shallow lives. This would seem to echo the traditional Buddhist admonition to beware of worldly attachments and even to be on guard against the seductive nature of the powers of advanced spiritual practice. Advanced communications technologies and computer-simulated environments enable one to completely bypass the effort required to achieve some characteristics of spiritual adepts without the practice that buffers against achievement (knowledge) without understanding of consequences (wisdom). The image that comes to mind would be the Karmic equivalent of Goethe’s Sorcerer’s Apprentice.

Beyond the geographic notion of proximity, there is also the physical, corporeal, component of spiritual communities. It would be expected that the import of body would have more or less of an impact depending on the nature of the group in question (Foltz & Foltz, 2003). The nature of corporeality is particularly intriguing when parsed in the context of spiritual

matters. Thus an online, virtual group focused on spirituality that is grounded in a physical reality presents some interesting contradictions. For instance, the question has been raised on more than a few occasions on how one sits in zazen online (perhaps unless one was an extraordinary advanced practitioner), simply because the nature of the practice does not correlate well to an environment that is still primarily based on a flow of communication—in which logical words bits “paint” the space by flowing. The cessation of this, much like the ceasing of the painting of electrons on a television, results in the fading of the picture (and, by analogy, the group’s existence) to nothingness.

Past as prologue (Bradley, 1997) offered an interesting take on the virtual spiritual communities, drawing from historical perspective to provide an alternative to techno-futurist speculation on net society. Bradley suggested that the Internet might be interpreted using a historical lens reflecting the role and activity of contemplative religious communities in the medieval period, aware of others and sharing in a common idea via letters and transmitted communications—the “virtuality” of its day. She reported that a common component of religious activity was those seeking community on the web—in this case an extension of extent communities—and documented the effort of many communities of the (proximate) religious with a sense of the past. She observed that the character and flavor of many of the orders extends into cyberspace, their virtual presence mirroring their earthly practices. Here, she cited the visually complex websites of the Benedictines, the Dominicans’ web presence oriented toward ecumenical inter-religious dialogues, reflecting their teaching orientation, the inward-directed historical orientation reflecting their contemplative orientation, among others. She was surprised at the overwhelming presence of the religious orders that one would normally expect to disdain such worldly things. Rather, she found that there is in fact a connection with, and familiarity to,

the “otherworldly”—thus the virtual world is a not-unfamiliar extension of their communities. Alternatively, one could say it is a way of engaging the world without being of the world.

### **Implementation/Practice**

As noted above, virtual spiritual communities have a variety of conceptual limitations to the way they operate. The nature of the virtual (online) world is one that seems to manifest most frequently in the “library” or research function of a group—the transmittal of formalized, textual information, teaching, question and answer, and background information (Foltz & Foltz, 2003). If one envisions the operation of a spiritual group as providing the online analogue to bulletin boards, encyclopedias, or reference desks—the virtual “clubhouse wall,” then this is a reasonable understanding. This manifested level of development, in essence “websites,” does not require a high level of expertise to bring into being and is in fact not uncommon for a variety of religious groups (Hoover et al., 2004; Thumma, 2002b; Thumma, 2002c). Surprisingly, some of the newer, more advanced ICT-based simulated environments such as Second Life, one of the many massively multiplayer (>15 million participants that might have 100,000 players at the same time) online simulations, would seem to be an ideal environment for virtual religious communities, yet very little activity of this nature has extensively materialized. As more and more educational and business collaborative activities begin to be built up online— simulated environments such as Second Life—it is possible that religious groups will be more comfortable experimenting with this setting.

Much of the extent research on the function or presence of religion or spiritually focused groups, congregations, or institutions on the Internet is at the exploratory and descriptive level (e.g. Hoover et al., 2004; Thumma, 2002a; Thumma, 2002b; Thumma, 2002c; Larsen, 2000),

and focuses primarily on the technology, and technological uses of the technology, rather than the actual sociology of the communities. Helland (2000) offered a heuristic device for differentiating the efforts of “online religion” (that which originates with formal institutions of religion) and “religion online” (the less institutionally supported expressions of faith and belief). Helland’s analysis suggests that the Internet offers unprecedented opportunities for religious communities, although the Internet may not be as different from its precedents in other communication media as he would like to believe. Analysis of communications media has noted the way various media blur the boundaries of the public and private sphere, a characteristic not new to the Internet.

A 2004 empirical study (Hoover et al., 2004) provides some interesting insights into online religiously oriented behavior, and to some extent supports Helland’s viewpoint (2000). According to this report, 64% of the online population —128 million Internet users (at that time) —have conducted online religiously related activity (Hoover et al., 2004, p. 4). This survey, conducted by the Pew Internet and American Life Project, found that contrary to previous theoretical speculation, online activity was less likely to consist of religious “seeking” among those outside of traditional religions, and was used more by those already identified as religious to find out more about their own traditions (Hoover et al., 2004, p. 20). Online usage was more likely used to facilitate spiritual or religious interactions with others already engaged in traditional religious contexts and communities.

While the study was primarily conducted among those identifying as Christian (Protestants, Catholics, and Evangelicals) and Jewish, there was a category for those identifying as “Other,” though they constituted a relatively small percentage of the participants. As noted above, it seems that a good deal of online activity falls more into the category of “expressing

one's own spiritual beliefs" as evidenced by such reported activities as passing along religious or spiritual emails, prayer requests, or other communications (Hoover et al., 2004, p. 20). Finally those that identified as both spiritual and religious had the highest usage of the Internet, and, with Evangelical rural users, were the most ardent users.

Given the relatively small number of empirical studies, we can speculate additionally on how virtual communities of different philosophical bases might operate. Bradley (1997) noted that the proportion of Buddhist websites at the time was higher than the percentage of Buddhists in the U.S. populations. The recent Pew survey reported that the use of the Internet by categories of Protestants was relatively similar; Catholics were measurably less likely to use the Internet to explore aspects of their religion. A variety of reasons could be offered for this based on the demographic (income, age, education, cultural grouping) or the philosophical (the structural nature of Catholicism, which generally discourages non-doctrinal endeavors).

### **Virtual Habitus/Virtually Buddhist**

As noted above, the fact that that numerous websites with a Buddhist orientation exist appears to be primarily an example of virtual community(ies) maintaining an identity culture, rather than attempting to engage in online practice—no *zazen*—an understandable limitation given the current state of online technology. In fact, very little “worship” activity, however one constructs it, seems to occur at present (Foltz & Foltz, 2003). Buddhists are not loath to use technology (Hershock, 1999; Hayes, 1999; Greider, 2000), however, the resource and physically intensive nature of the Internet might give some pause, and the seductive nature of immersion in the online flow of information and access to knowledge raises the possibly of unhealthy



attachment to collection of information. Prebish (1999), in his early exploration of online Buddhist activities, observed:

Perhaps the most consequential impact of the aggressive spread of Buddhism into cyberspace, along with the creation of a new kind of American Buddhist sangha never imagined by the Buddha, is the uniting of all the Buddhist communities or sanghas into one universal sangha that can communicate effectively in an attempt to eliminate the suffering of individuals throughout the world. (p. 232)

Hayes (1999, p. 177), another early observer, commented that much of the community (of the time) was generated by email and newsgroup traffic. The community focused a great deal on “westerners with misconceptions of the nature of Buddhism.” Here, the focus of the communication seemed to be transmission of information and/or cultural aspects of Buddhism, and was as much educational in nature as it was a conversation about the nature of community, or the practice and maintenance of Buddhism in a non-proximate setting. To some extent, the shift that occurs in the intensity and nature of communication is a function of (a) the possibilities that advances in technology allow; (b) the rapid diffusion of technology so that participants are not only those with an interest in technology, but also those for whom the technology is simply a tool rather than an interest, per se; and (c) the rapid decline in cost, and increased availability of broadband transmission of information, which in turn enables the use of more robust technologies of engagement.

Kim (2005) reported on the operation of a Buddhist community (Chollian Buddhist Community) that offers an interesting case. The online community of 300 sub-communities was formed in 1991 and operated using its own menu-driven system of communication for members

until converting to a web-based one in 2001 (Kim, 2005, p. 143–145). Kim argued that in the case of this community, the development of an integrated system offered a robust system of information that provided interpretive and integrative functions as well as the more common interactive ones. The rather hierarchical system offered bifurcated options of “intimacy” (i.e. personal communications, open letters, “chat” opportunities) as well as “information” opportunities intended to increase the level and availability of religious information transmission and exchange.

The author concluded that the community (in this case it might be more appropriate to refer to it as an organization rather than a simple spiritual community), was especially effective in that it offered an opportunity to those who had a passing interest in Buddhism, especially urban dwellers, to explore without the commitment, demands, or inconvenience of offline (primarily) rural meetings (p.146). Here, the community (from 1996–97) performed the functions of (a) a belief community providing a system of beliefs and practices; (b) a relational community, satisfying a need for belonging; (c) an affective community, providing a group identity; and (d) a utilitarian community providing a means of resource mobilization. A more recent expression of the community ([www.buddhasite.net](http://www.buddhasite.net)) indicates that it is shifting from a structural/service model into more of an online community, offering a virtual “locale” oriented at more robust community interactions rather than more purely educational/informative ones. As the Buddhist scholar Venerable Pannyavaro noted, “if the Buddha were alive today he would be using the Internet.” Given the tradition of the transmission of knowledge and the way that Buddhism traveled, this seems likely. He raised, in balance, quite rightly, a concern about maintaining the authentic teaching of Buddhism, but added that if one falls back on the validation of lineage, then this becomes less of a problem (2002).

### **Virtually (Essentially) Virtual**

The example of individuals (gamers) engaged in participating in the complex simulated environment of Second Life represents an interesting alternative example of an online belief structure, and was chosen more for the potential it represents rather than the actual practices yet occurring. At present, due to a combination of factors, (e.g., a rapidly changing environment, a rapidly escalating—yet fluctuating—population, questions about data collection and validity) little actual data has been compiled on Second Life as a “place” (or space as it may be), beyond journalistic articles. It has begun to draw the attention of researchers from a variety of fields due to the tremendous possibilities it represents. Starting with the general, part of the power of the virtual world is that it frees individuals from some of the physical limitations (as well as advantages) of the body, especially in the case of people with disabilities (Forman et al., 2011, 2012), transforming the individual from a corporal presence, with the concurrent body habitus and practices, to a disembodied but emotionally connected avatar, a detached “toy” that focuses on communication rather than the complex connectivity of corporal presence. An obvious escapist attraction exists, not to mention the appeal of the ability to project virtually any physical, sexual, or other aspect of identity. In Second Life, you could be “a dog on the internet.” The participants, as can be expected of a gaming environment, tended to be composed of libertarians, young males, and creative types, originally, but corporations, business people, and others are increasingly more common participants as the game becomes more mainstream.

While an extraordinary number of groups (or, in a liberal sense, “communities”) exist in Second Life, a sampling of groups, conducted in March 2010, with identifiers using the keywords “religion, spirituality, Christian, Buddhist, Jewish or Islam” (see Appendix 1 for listing

of groups and “parcels or places” labeled with an apparent religious identity) yields marginal results. Using the search terms listed above, some 456 groups were generated with total registered participants numbering 54,594. If compared to the total population of almost 19 million, this represents only 3% of the total metaverse. This represents the “joiners,” and given the ephemeral nature of relationships and contact in Second Life, can be expected to grossly underestimate individuals with an interest in religion.

A 2007 article on religion in Second Life noted that while much of the religious- (or more accurately, “spiritual-”) identified activity involved alternative groups “seekers” and architectural constructs of primarily visual appeal, it also involved an increasing amount of traditional, if virtual, spaces of prayer, study, support, and counseling (Grossman, 2007). For example, George Byrd, a real-estate broker from Columbus, Ohio, built the lavishly landscaped First Unitarian Universalist Church of Second Life, and organized weekly services that draw more than 60 people (2012). He feels that virtual services in Second Life are as authentic as those in the physical-world church he attends in Columbus. “The spiritual connection is in your brain and in your soul. It’s the same either way,” Byrd says. Another member, who is disabled in real life, finds that attending services in Second Life affords her a community that she cannot easily access in the real world (Sutton, 2007). And another member, commenting on the nature of online interaction, noted:

There’s a real difference in goal and result, ....In real life . . . it’s possible to come away with the glow of community, of whatever it is you’ve heard or absorbed, in music and reading and sermon. You can’t come away with as much from a virtual service. It really has to rely on the sense of community more than anything that might reach you through music or even poetry or ambience. (Sutton, 2007)

Aside from the self-organizing groups created by community-oriented individuals seeking to utilize the virtual substrate, you are beginning to see the participation of the ecclesiastical equivalents of corporations. For instance, another 2007 article reported on the entrance of a large, technology-savvy church in “real life”—Lifechurch.TV (Biever, 2007). They viewed Second Life both as an experimental setting in another form of media (an extension of an existing community communication) and as a way to virtually replicate existing physical structures (a kind of attempt to recapture some of the characteristics of a proximate/geographic sense of community), and, of course, a huge pool of “unchurched.” In this case the online community is not in place of geographic community, but uses a variant of the televangelical church model—a broadcast type of relationship rather than a community- (interactive) focused one, per se. Another example of this type of activity is conducted by Larry Transue, pastor of the Second Life non-denominational Northbound Community Church, who sees Second Life as a mission field, is involved in evangelism and outreach at his real-world Northbound Church, and replicated it online to “practice what I preach no matter where I am” (Grossman, 2007).

### **Conclusions**

While “place” and the impact of distance are significantly minimized as a function of use of ICTs, delineation of “place” in a virtual, or connected, context becomes increasingly a question of identity and choice rather than of geography and history. Frequently, virtual constructs are increasingly more robust analogues of the physical world, but it is questionable, as Ward (2002) noted, if they can be read as more than “toys.” In physical, sometimes “unconnected” communities, relationships are impacted by distance so that a decay function

occurs as one moves from the core to the periphery. In terms of virtual communities, we can posit that intensity of interest (or conversely, commitment), the habitus of the group, may be the analogue to distance in the "new spaces," so that increased intensity of interest places one closer to the conceptual center of a group. This becomes more important in thin communities such as virtual groups where, in the absence of other sorts of norms or context, the group practices are maintained by key actors, the community "elders." Could the concepts of "there" and "not there" among the connected be more concerned with how frequently a community member communicates, indicating a level of interest and hence how more or less "close" they are to the center of a virtual community?

Centralization vs. patchy-ness: While the decentralizing spatial effect of ICTs has been noted, conversely an opposite effect is noted with respect to concentration of the "physical infrastructure"— i.e., the actual wires and servers, and access to bandwidth. ICTs enable a user to be anywhere, but the density of physical infrastructure underlying communication technologies enables a richer, denser flow (in this case, speed) of information. While a virtual community may spread over a large physical area, a fast and reliable connection to the Internet seems to provide a reason to re-centralize. Geography, while minimized, is still a factor even in virtual realms. Being virtually "connected," even metaphorically, still relies on "connectivity" technologically.

Maintenance of Community: Leadership of online spiritual communities becomes more complex than that of physical groups. Computer-mediated communication, while robust, is not as rich as the multi-channel communication that occurs in face-to-face physical interactions. Agreement and discussion of protocol requires skill in written communication, which shifts leadership balance to those who are the most proficient in written communication, in distinction

to the physical world where leadership may be a function of verbal skills and “presence.”

Without the contextual or proximate cues, subtlety and nuance can be lost as communication must be explicitly (textually) coded rather than inferred. How does a virtual community regulate the interactions of the members, and to what standard are they held? Further, given the “thin” or weak nature of online bonds, what factors enable sustainability of these online communities?

Norms of practice: How do members of community “authenticate” the communication of participants’ absent contextual clues? What protocol exists for the transmission of core community values and beliefs? In spiritual communities this poses a problem for validating transmissions of new teachings or interpretations. How do we know something is “true”? Where does Truth emanate from? How do we decide on what we agree on? Do different communities of faith operate differently in virtual communities?

The characterization of a community is more than a function of determining boundaries of place and space, and is increasingly reliant upon the concept of community as based in identity. The growing deployment of advanced ICTs makes for alternative modes of online communication and information, enabling an entirely new array of relationships to emerge. Community can be expanded to include the loosely linked networks of interaction, with emphasis shifting from a locational requisite to one based in commonality of interest or purpose. Cautious observers have warned that the use of ICTs will reduce social capital, diminish the nature of geographic community, and weaken (locale-based) community relationships. Others have championed ICTs as enabling a new wave of community participation due to the ease of networked based communication.

Empirical research to date has begun to suggest that contrary to early speculation, virtual communities do not eliminate or weaken the role of underlying geographic community, unless

the community is weak in and of itself. Rather, online communities, spiritual or otherwise, are extensions of the experience, wants, and needs of the physical world. Online virtual communities can be thought of as extensions of the real world into a conceptual information overlay of the world. While creation of entirely new networks of connection (or community) is possible, it is more likely, as Calhoun (1998) speculated, that online communities reinforce existing interests or connections. Or, put another way, the “connected” and the “unconnected” can coexist.

If the current examples of spiritual communities presented in the literature are at all representative of the possibilities of the virtual world, then we may conclude that it is not the virtual world that is a competitive threat to belief structures or churches, but a condition intrinsic to the existing physical communities. Virtual spiritual communities seem to act mainly as an augmented or richer form of community interaction rather than a replacement per se. Even as telephones and automobiles did not eliminate the need for "places," ICTs are unlikely to replace the need to meet face to face. We see that in those places where a geographic-related spiritual community exists, then ICTs can serve as intensifiers, or more efficient conduits for information flow.

On the other hand, the somewhat disappointing outcomes of some efforts to sustain virtual religious communities without an underlying recognized proximate connection seem to suggest that a core concept of community must exist, that the successful functional of a virtual community results from some extant interconnection, and not the converse. Building a virtual spiritual community simply because it is possible will result in an empty space, unless there is reason to express communication and achieve “communion.” If you build it they will come, but only if they have some other reason for going there.



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