Submerged in the Virtual: Religious Embodiment in Virtual Space

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Abstract

As human bodies continue to increase their online presence in virtual spaces, virtual embodiment has become a commonplace reality. Contemporary practitioners of religious traditions can now experience simulated religious spaces, rituals, and worship services, engaging them through a virtual avatar from the comfort of their home. Virtual reality baptisms mark a unique development in the evolution of Christianity. Physical bodies are being initiated into religious traditions in incorporeal space, simulating a traditionally material rite. This presentation examines the discourse surrounding the performance of virtual reality baptisms, analyzing how contemporary Christians who engage in this form of the practice accommodate the virtual in their construction of religious identities and community. Focusing on central themes of embodiment, materiality, and the aesthetics of human perception, the source analysis is grounded in the digital presence of the VR Church, the perspective of its founder, DJ Soto, and the testimonial uploads of church members and YouTube influencers.

1. Introduction

The work performed in this paper is a discourse analysis seeking to critically address how notions of reality are handled amongst a community of Christians practicing in virtual reality. The community being analyzed calls itself VR Church and is unique in its performance of baptism rituals in virtual reality. Seeking to understand how virtual reality impacts the construction of religious identity, this discourse analysis works with VR Church's encounters with the press and public, both in written interviews, videos, and published webpages. Working with the conceptual lens of Baudrillard's hyper-reality, Talal Asad's analysis of ritual, and Rachel Wagner's work on religion as interactive systems, virtual baptism is analyzed in its intersectional context of postmodern culture and Christian faith.

The front-page of VR Church's website quotes Morpheus from *The Matrix*: "Unfortunately, no one can be told what the Matrix is. You have to see it for yourself."[1] While *The Matrix* was influenced and based on the work of French philosopher Jean Baudrillard, *The Encyclopedia of Literary and Cultural Theory* notes that he dismissed the film as having no reference to his work.[2] Though Baudrillard felt that *The Matrix* missed the mark, VR Church's usage of the film's words in this context demonstrate his ideas of hyper-reality and simulation, introducing the initial perspective and key concepts which define this analysis. For Baudrillard, hyper-reality is defined by a detachment from actual reality through an integration of imaginal notions that become embodied, enacted, and disseminated. The project of making a map, a mental model of reality, becomes removed from its reference to the territory, actual reality, and the map-making becomes integrated into the territory. Of this functioning he says, "It is nothing more than operational."[3]

How does this connect to Morpheus, *The Matrix,* and VR Church? *The Matrix* takes a strong stance on the idea of a simulated reality. Here, the Matrix, as a word, is a signifier referring to the simulation, the virtual world that Neo and the other characters live within and mistake as actual. Neo can only conceive of the Matrix as a signified concept. Existing within a Platonic cave, he has no idea of what life is like outside of the simulation and cannot truly claim to know what the Matrix refers to until he leaves it. When VR Church positions this quote as a signifier to the virtual reality platforms which they use to host their community, this quote is stripped of its referent and its meaning is

changed.

To truly function as Morpheus to Neo, VR Church would need to be waking people up out of a simulation they are unaware of, not introducing them to a simulation they can easily recognize. Christian Gnostic ideas of the demiurge, an evil or ignorant world-creator, that position Christ as a savior from another, higher world certainly come close to grounding this pop-culture quote within an analogous context. The Apostle's Creed is listed on VR Church's webpage under a section titled "Beliefs." This Christian orthodoxy- "I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Creator of Heaven and Earth"- directly contradicts the Gnostic potential. [4] If the phenomenal world is not the demiurge's illusion, but rather the Almighty Father's beloved world, entering into virtual reality, a human created simulation, could read as a rejection of God's actual creation. In this quote, the Matrix could refer to sinful human condition, and/or of living without knowledge of God and Jesus. Just as the quote's original context is defined by Neo's uninitiated ignorance, a lack of gnosis, these situations would appropriately connect the quote to an experience or perspective which is analogous to the film. The hierophantic Morpheus would then easily translate to D.J. Soto, his ship the *Nebuchadnezzer* to VR Church, and Neo, as his name suggests, the new, potential members of VR Church. It is clear from interacting with VR Church's media presence that this quote serves a different purpose; it glorifies the virtual reality simulation, enticing the audience with familiar images of popular films.

Baudrillard's work exposes this functioning of popular culture, a hyper-reality where signs are created and signify ideas without a rooted truth of reference, producing notions that are groundless and an entirely unreal way of interacting with experience. From this perspective, communication is simulated at the apparent level of words and images, but actually occurs indirectly through the associations that media pieces create. As individuals mistake their simulated selves for real selves, they remain unaware of the influence, or mediation, that is constantly occurring, shepherding them through an amorphous reality. VR Church's disorienting usage of *The Matrix* betrays an unconscious orientation toward hyper-reality.

2. Orientation

Talal Asad's *Genealogies* links the concept of ritual to the reading of a text. This reading occurs when ritual is treated as a signifier, as symbolic or representative.[5] Asad's explorations link the development of a simulated persona to a social disposition that reads behavior with notions of character, seen or unseen. When these political maneuverings of the social sphere become prominent, ritual performance reveals aspects of internal character, creating an image of a person that is legible for community members. Witches become evil through their foreign rituals, while the familiar, readable baptism rites easily mark who is good and who belongs.

In the second chapter of Rachel Wagner's *Godwired,* "The Stories We Play," the author explores contemporary engagement with narrative and sacred text as affected by 21st century technology. Wagner constructs a model that delineates five modes of engagement with stories, two of which are important to my analysis of VR Church: "stories as fate," and "stories as interactive systems". [6] By stories of fate, Wagner refers to engaging with narratives and texts as linear and literal. As an example, films are normally read from beginning to end. Because the narrative is fixed, its meaning is viewed as being contained within it, grasped by watching the film and reading it correctly. The narrative's meaning is then viewed as self-evident and passively received. Wagner argues that this mode of engagement is prevalent in contemporary Christian communities.[7] The biblical narrative in those communities is treated as the inerrant word, divinely inspired and sanctioned. Treating the sacred text in this way makes room for orthodox hermeneutics to be revealed. Here, a harmony arises between Asad's idea of behavior as text and Wagner's perception of Christian biblical engagement.

Asad addresses Reformation orthodoxy as a macrocosmic manifestation of attention toward symbolic modes of behaving, simulating and dissimulating intentions in the social sphere.[8] The unifying existence of a consensual reality model, a religious orthodoxy, assuages the tension of a world with ambiguous meanings that must be read carefully and critically. This assuaging function lies in the ability of the orthodoxy to generate a model that delivers reality as an easily read text. Identity for Western individuals has been predicated upon world views that are linear in their construction, simulating an attempt at reaching truth. Just as Asad argues the notion that ritual is a symbolic gesture that arises codeterminately with a tendency to read behavior, Enlightenment philosophy develops out of an attempt to comprehensively read reality. Socialized by a society feverishly preoccupied with constructing a nice, linear reading of a text, we are fish in the water of the prevailing ethos.

Wagner's "stories as interactive systems" mode is developed with the voices of game-theorists who define a system as, "a set of things that affect one another within an environment to form a larger pattern that is different from any of the individual parts". [9] A website, the original format of this research, is an interactive system. One's movement

through it creates an individual narrative, limited by the structure of the site and its content, conditioned by pre-existing perspectives and preconceived notions. When one leaves the site, they are different than when they entered it. The interactive system becomes integrated into being because the narrative generated is personalized and embodied. It is based on one's own navigation. The website, as an interactive system, can be seen as a world of its own, prepackaged for the user to engage with. The text, ideas, videos, pictures, buttons, and the author all cooperate to communicate something larger than any of the components. The quote below sees Wagner, with game-theorist Jesper Juul, exploring how fiction, story and world intertwine to generate meaning in an interactive system.

"Recognizing the difficulty of ever fully distinguishing storytelling from gameplay, Juul lands on the term 'fictional worlds' to describe the hybrid. Fiction, says Juul, 'is commonly confused with storytelling,' but we would better view fiction as 'any kind of imagined world.' Thus a story can be viewed as one possible trajectory through a fiction-as-world, so that the story is 'a sequence of events that is presented (enacted or narrated) to a user.'"[10]

Virtual reality provides the appearance of continuity, synonymous with the animated, moving images of film. However, VR Church's platforms, AltSpaceVR and VR Chat, unlike films, are in the business of simulating interactive, responsive images that give users the illusion of embodiment and social experience within a 'world.' Because these platforms allow users to interact with one another, host events, create spaces, and contain objects which can be interacted with in simulated physics, I consider AltSpaceVR and VR Chat to be interactive systems, a fiction-as-world. Wagner considers the sacred text as an interactive system that, in tandem with the restriction of ritual systems, creates the potential for narrative to arise through user engagement. Codified rituals and sacred texts act as components that determine a user's potential movements through the physical world as they live their lives and interact within preset conditions.[11] For VR Church, the religious restrictions then intertwine with the restrictions of software and hardware, creating a unique religious community built around an interplay of these two systems.

Within an engagement mode that is interactive, meaning making is the inevitable function of an individual. A first-person narrative is constructed as the body moves through life, regardless of its placement within the context of a religious system. This reality constructing modality must start off necessarily obscured from the individual partaking in it, as a natural functioning of a human within the system. Wagner's argument concludes with a quote from digital-media scholar, Janet Murray, on cyber-narratives, "a stirring narrative in any medium can be experienced as a virtual reality because our brains are programmed to tune into stories with an intensity that can obliterate the world around us"[12] (Wagner 52). Living within various stories, various contexts, various worlds, our ability to recognize the conditions of our perception become occluded by our own assumptions that what we perceive is true, that it is real.

The set up of these contemporary media technologies speaks volumes. As humans interacting with these technologies, our agency is emphasized through choice. We are called users, communicating a sense of power and autonomy. Actually, we are individually tracked and shepherded by advertisements. Content is suggested, curated, and delivered. We relish in the illusion of choice, simulated by our ability to have aesthetic tastes or preferences. This virtual experience of agency arises through the interactive system that we share with VR Church members. We operate within its confines when using smartphones, smart TVs, and computers. We carry these technologies with us and integrate them into our personal narratives. This a more overt textual engagement that our contemporary lives are defined by. The rules and restrictions of our technology, the developers who create the simulations for us to interact with, the coding languages, the hardware specifications, and the money we make constitute units in the "set of things that affect one another" within the interactive system we navigate daily.

2.1. Spatial Relationships and Language

"Instead of having everyone come to our traditional church, they're gonna come here, to this space."[13] Brian Leupold, wearing a VR headset, holding VR controllers, speaks these words while standing in his home in Ohio. His language usage refers to a space that is not present in the actual room for the individuals recording him. We can catch a glimpse of what Brian is visually and volitionally engaging in on the computer screen to the left of the video's image. Motion blurred head movements pan around the digital replication of a backyard pool vista, a scene used in other VR Church media. This video, a one minute production titled "Virtual Reality Church Will Baptize Oregon Man" introduces the pattern of spatial association that VR Church members exhibit in their accommodation of the flatness of virtual simulations.

"This space," Leupold says to the recording crew, even though they are not present in the virtual world. They are standing in his kitchen, with edible food items, while he wears a material piece of technology and gestures wildly through the air. His body uses nonverbal communication which emphasizes locality, picking up his arms and moving them from one side of his body to another, to emphasize "here." For those individuals who are video recording his

physical body, the 'this space' he speaks of would be more appropriately called 'that space." Leupold's gesticulating not only conveys a sense of space to the audience of the video, but it conveys a sense of space to his own consciousness. These physical movements and linguistic compromises demonstrate that Brian Leupold is living in what Baudrillard calls hyper-reality.

Leupold's usage of language ascribes material qualities to the virtual reality simulation, referring to organic matter occurring in virtual space: "We will have a water baptism in virtual reality." [14] Patrice Flichy's work *The Internet Imaginaire* also notes a similar functioning in groups termed "hackers, nerds." [15] Flichy remarks on how this functioning manifests as a projection of living and organic language onto mechanical and inert phenomena, quoting scholar Steven Levy's research on hackers: "…they actually consider that life is elsewhere; they see computing as something alive that must be worked at and improved, in short a place of real life. As Levy remarked, 'Systems are organic, living creations: if people stop working on them, they die.'" [16]

In much the same way, the VR Church community consistently projects notions traditionally associated with physicality onto the simulated composite that we all readily accept as a world. What begins to happen when we refer to material elements and directionality, simulating a conceptual navigation of spatial relationships in a virtual impression of space? How would the recording crew refer to their involvement in this experience? Would they consider themselves to be a part of the virtual space that Brian Leupold includes them in, as voyeurs who are peering into his virtual backyard, or rational beings gazing at an irrational fantasy? Do they position themselves and Leupold in a linear narrative, taking the easy reading provided by implicit notions of real and fake, or virtual and actual? Because he is part of the space and they are present in the room with him, are they present 'in' that space by proxy? Does his usage of language indicate that he considers them present, regardless of their connection to the simulation? For Brian Leupold, the simulation is no longer clearly demarcated from the real, a mark of hyperreality.

The use of spatial language is a messy thing when engaging with virtual worlds, because they are persistent. The notion that a world is always there, changing continuously while you are away, generates a sense of reality which is illusory. Even the idea of returning to the virtual world connotes a spatial relationship that gives these interactive illusions a sense of reality. They do not have any actual spatial dimensions, and they do not actually exist as our physical world does. We know that they are computer simulations, initialized by code, designed by humans, powered by electricity that is generated by environmentally destructive power plants. However, they feel real, and our brains are engaged actively in constructing and interacting with their appearance.

Confusing a rope for a snake creates an unnecessarily distressed psycho-somatic state. Just like Morpheus helps Neo wake up to his delusional perceptions, this metaphor from the Upanishads deals with mistaking illusions for reality. When I discuss VR Church's hyper-real reference to *The Matrix* in the Introduction, I mention that the reference strips the signifier from the referent, the film's 'Matrix', an imprisoning reality simulation. For VR Church, seeing the Matrix becomes engaging with virtual reality technology, rather than being imprisoned in an illusory reality. In this situation the reversal of the snake-rope analogy creates an appropriate model for understanding. If a snake is mistaken for a jump-rope, the notion of illusion is still present, but this time a level of danger is inherent. Our society is normalizing virtual reality. The technology has innocuously planted itself within the periphery of our awareness. Content to keep it easy to read, it has been designated an object of fascination for the technologically inclined, science-fiction fans, and virtually inclined bodies who localize their identities primarily on the internet. Though some may not see jumping-rope as a stimulating past-time, the misperception of the snake is still fatal.

In *Simulations,* Baudrillard uses Disneyland as an example of a simulated image of the real, so obviously fake that it implies a 'real world' actually exists.[17] In Baudrillard's model, Disneyland's artificiality orients us as being located within a real-world, American society, masking the artificiality of our own culture. He uses prisons as an example of the same relationship, creating a sense of freedom in society through an appeal to obvious incarceration. Victorian freak-shows exemplify this functioning as well. Because the relationally negative, the freak, is in *there*, the corresponding positive, the normal person, is out *here*. Spatial orientations like these serve to create linear texts, boxing reality into easy-to-read categories which serve the privileged gaze. Taking this one step further, virtual reality sees the metaphor extend into the hyper-real, where simulated narratives and imagined identities become actualized within a simulation of a reality. For some Americans virtual reality may be obviously fake and serve to embolden notions of actual reality, but for VR Church members this platform is very meaningful and real.

Michael Crichton's film *Westworld* paints a picture that is much more fitting than *The Matrix* or Disneyland for virtual reality worlds.[18] In *Westworld*, a futuristic theme-park offers guests the chance to experience adventures in a physically simulated historical period, inhabited by artificial intelligences that are responsive to their choices. The visitors perceive Westworld to be a jump-rope, an object for entertainment, but as the narrative progresses the simulation turns out to be a snake, breaking the tacit models of reality that users and creators of Westworld had constructed and revealing the cold, mechanical forces simulating the world.

The experience of VR Church members is most likely not going to end with a murderous catastrophe. Even if, in a worst-case scenario, D.J. Soto turned out to be a destructive leader abusing his power over the congregation, VR Church is relatively decentralized without a physical locality. Beyond the obvious binaries of life and death, unseen economic privilege makes its mark on the world while VR Church locates itself in simulated space that rests upon inequality. AltSpace VR, where VR Church holds service, is a free app on the Oculus platform. The Oculus Quest, which VR Church officially recommends for the best VR Church experience, was released at $399 and $499 price-points in May of 2019.[19] Officially sold out at major retailers, the Oculus Quest can now be purchased on E-bay for $600 to $700. The gatekeeper of VR Church is not the Gospel of John's Jesus Christ, but a paywall restricting access to those with the capital necessary to simulate reality. The price of developing, running, and consuming these technologies is obscured by the projection of spatial notions, mistaking a snake for a jump-rope. All of this meaning-making is taking place while there are humans experiencing vastly different interactive systems that restrict their narrative constructions. VR Church symbolizes a component in those interactive systems, Western economic privilege. Wrestled from the world through domination and control, alongside subjugation of the environment and the global community, virtual reality technology depends on physical resources and human bodies.

3. Simulation

Talal Asad's "Toward a Genealogy of the Concept of Ritual" ends where this section begins. Throughout his work Asad breaks apart the idea of ritual and examines its formation throughout hundreds of years of social interaction. Underlying this procedure is a perspective: systemic changes in society are bound to our self-concept and theory of mind, and these intuitive, inherited conceptions correlate with the views we take on ritual.[20] His genealogy of ritual establishes a challenging history of ethics in the West. In summary, early Christian monastics view ritual as a codified means to cultivating virtue. Transitioning into the Machiavellian early modern period, the self becomes objectified through a Cartesian mind-body dualism and Western society becomes preoccupied with the idea of simulation and dissimulation. The development of notions of character corresponds with a development of simulated behaviors, manners, and suddenly people can be read and analyzed, like text. Asad's main point is that, as this happens to the human individual, ritual as praxis for cultivating virtue is forgotten and ritual as symbolic representation, as text, or signifier of character, emerges.

The simulation and dissimulation of Asad are worked into his argument drawing on the work of 16th century philosopher Francis Bacon. Bacon is shown defining simulation as a false profession of character or status, while positing dissimulation as a negative form, pretending not to be what you are.[21] "Alina's Virtual Reality Baptism Story," a testimonial account of virtual reality baptism produced by D.J. Soto, simulates cinematography familiar to contemporary audiences.[22] The video starts with a cold open, jumping directly into the narrative only to formally introduce the main character, Alina, thirty seconds in. The whole time the audience engages with animated computer graphics that simulate the appearance of physical reality. The video is a text, and when reading it, the text exemplifies Asad's exploration of ritual as a signifier of character. The narrative positioned by the text aims to control how we read Alina's character, and the simulation of baptism in virtual reality simultaneously works toward the same control. Simulating a baptism in virtual reality also allows Alina to interact with a system that controls her own reading of herself and the world she lives in. This validates the simulation of virtual reality, making it tangible and dignified, changing the way that virtual reality itself is read.

When Soto says of Alina, "she came out of the water," he ascribes materiality to a simulated image, a representation of water. [23] Drilling in the theme here, his representation is not actually water. Language that refers to material phenomena, when applied to simulated phenomena, subconsciously validates the notion of a fake virtual and undermines the oppressive notion of the physical. This linguistic simulation allows for a liminal ignorance to exist where the user avoids the threatening notion of virtual as fake, by justifying it as real and demeaning the actuality of physical reality.

The Gospel of Matthew's call to baptize is used to substantialize the evangelical mission to spread the good news and baptize new followers. The NASB's Matthew 28:19 illustrates Christ, saying, "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit."[24]

Baptism initiates the individual into the mysteries of Christ, orienting the individual in an extant tradition's worldview, the Biblical narrative, as interpreted by the conditional community. Baptism simulates the biblical baptism of Christ in whatever way the community practicing the rite deems significant. Baptism signifies the individual's acceptance of Christ as savior, and their willingness to repent from sin. Baptism at once promulgates the signified baptismal identity, allowing the individual to proclaim their acceptance of Christ and the Gospel to the community, to

the world, and to God. It also therefore acts as a termination of one mode of existing, for the beginning of a new. Many parallels exist between this understanding of baptism and the world simulation found in virtual-reality technology. By enacting his notions of baptism in virtual reality, D.J. Soto simulates a connection to Christian tradition, and he orients himself in relationship to Matthew 28:19. By receiving and performing baptism in virtual reality simulations, VR Church members orient their usage of virtual reality technology in the Christian narrative, simulating a connection to the traditionally physical institution of organized religion.

The loop of baptismal initiation contextualizes the Christian identity as a religious meme, which is spread through initiation, orientation, simulation, signification, and promulgation, culminating in reproduced religious identity. As the baptismal chain continues forward in space-time, the original referent of 'baptism' becomes obscured, and now we have simulations of the notion of baptism. Baptism in virtual reality is one simulation of a notion of baptism. In order to signify the notion of baptism to the individual VR user, the VR baptism simulates an easily readable physical location, with illusory water, and proceeds as if it were replicating a physical experience. The entirety of the simulated situation is predicated upon the physical world as VR Church members see and understand it. The subtext seems to be that the virtual, as a simulation, is acting as a substitute for the real thing. As a symbolic representative, a sign, of the real thing. It may not be difficult for VR Church members to navigate this sense of the virtual at all. When baptism is seen as a ritual symbolically representing the baptism of Christ, signifying a character change which is internal, the constituent elements of the outward representation are less important. This sort of view makes virtual reality baptism no different than physical baptism for those engaging it, because a deliberate connection to the material elements is unnecessary.

3.1. Drumsy and Simulation

"I Got A Real Priest To Baptize Me In Virtual Reality" has 289k views and was posted in May of 2019.[25] It is part of a double production put on by popular content creators Drumsy and Syrmor. Syrmor's video's title is equally alluring: "Real Pastor in Virtual Reality Baptizes Anime Girl."[26] This video has over a million views. As Drumsy eloquently describes in his video report, a "big-titty anime avatar" receives baptism from a "man crazy enough to try it."[27]. Drumsy's video is littered with witty allusions to Christianity. Not only does he compare virtual reality to "the devil's apartment," he ends the video ironically simulating for his audience a new baptismal identity.

"Thank you for watching, and welcome to my Christian YouTube channel. Praise be unto all of my subscriber-cucks. Please donate a like and comment to our Lord and savior."

Note the grammatical simulation Drumsy uses, which betrays a tacit notion of formal religiosity: "Praise be unto all." This sort of ironic simulation for humor's sake, for sensational enticement, is obvious. Drumsy's eroticization of his anime avatar, coupled with the signification "subscriber-cucks," create the playful appearance of a psychologically abusive, sexual relationship. Cuck, short for cuckold, conjures the image of emasculated men, pushovers who will let another man take their wife. One Urban Dictionary definition defines the term: "Nowadays it's basically a term for a pussy who lets women walk all over him..aka a DOORMAT."[28] Drumsy toys with the idea that his subscribers are 'pussy-whipped,' addicted to his channel, getting off by watching his erotic adventures through virtual reality, and in this case Christianity.

At the end of this baptism scene, Drumsy works to eroticize the baptism. This narrative construction plays on the implicit sexual tension that Drumsy generates between his "cucks" and his virtual identity. Stripping Soto's words of their context, Drumsy repositions them as a sexual innuendo. "God's love coming inside you," becomes God's love coming inside your "big-titty anime avatar." Here the baptismal body, Paul's "new creation"[29], is immediately contextualized by the penetrating, objectifying male gaze. The new self, simulating a born-again virgin, becomes a hyper-real object of sexual attraction. Before the baptism, it was already immaculate and pure, completely unlike reality in its appearance. This manipulation and repositioning of meaning, distorting connections to the referent, positions everyone in this video as partaking in the nature of Baudrillard's hyper-reality. This video communicates to our imaginations, not just to our rational mind, which assumes what is 'real' exists somewhere out there. While these assumptions play out, perceptions are influenced by the framing that content creators like Drumsy use, intentionally or unintentionally, and general social dispositions are enforced or cultivated.

Drumsy reflecting on the experience of virtual baptism says, "I feel like I'm out of breath… I feel like I just had an experience."[30] Baudrillard notes that simulation, unlike dissimulation, becomes more than just feigning.[31] Dissimulation, he argues, leaves reality intact, because though it is masked it remains clear to the person who dissimulates. In other words, if it is your birthday and I have planned a surprise party, I dissimulate by feigning that I have made no plans. This does not reject reality for me. Using the image from *Simulations*, if I play sick, I simulate,

and I also take on some of the qualities of being diseased. This simulating function removes one from reality. Baudrillard's question becomes, since I produce symptoms of sickness, am I actually sick? When Drumsy simulates an identity through his VR Chat avatar, if his psycho-somatic responses are 'real' then they are what Baudrillard refers to. If Drumsy is dissimulating in this moment, he is still simulating with his avatar, and the question becomes will the baptism have an effect on his identity after this simulated experience?

4. Signification

Avatars are characters like letters in an alphabet. They signify and communicate certain ideas, meaning they are read. We may not be consciously aware of our communication when using or reading alphabet characters as it often happens automatically, but the discourse that surrounds language usage reflects that ideas of communication are integrated into our notions of writing and reading. We know that we read letters, even though we unconsciously, automatically read them. This is not the case with avatars, at least not at first. Here, the signifier, a virtual body communicating my presence, becomes consciously read as a character that means 'me,' and identification occurs. In this case, like God, users exist outside of the virtual world and send forth their signifier, the avatar, into the world to do their bidding. They are revealed to other users through their avatar, the symbol that signifies their participation on the screen that others see. Just as Jesus Christ is the Word of God, a signifier of God's presence in the world, so too are avatars the Word of the User.

In John 17:14 the Christian identity of 'being in the world but not of it' finds its source: "…and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world."[32] The parallels between this identity and the experience of entering into a virtual world make the personalization of the avatar very natural for VR Church users. Christian identity is built around a rejection of worldliness, constructing a connection to other worldliness. Until virtual reality technology became crystallized, the experience of sensually experiencing other worlds would necessarily be reserved for dreams, meditative experiences, mystical revelation, and death. Now, that vacuum is filled in the material realm by computer technologies that simulate other worldliness for the physical body. Users that are Christian may find a synonymity between the experience of simulating a virtual identity and Christian religious identity. Because VR Church users are not engaging with AltSpace VR to actively create and inhabit worlds, but rather to interact with and experience them, they strengthen this association while ignoring human godliness that defines it.

Tom Boellstorf explores the signification of self through avatar in his work *Coming of Age in Second Life.*[33] This work deals with the virtual world Second Life. Online since 2003, Second Life as a system is more developed and interactive, without the hardware and software restrictions of virtual reality technology, but also without the first-person sense of embodiment and advanced computer graphics. As VR Church users transfer notions of space and physicality to the simulation, Boelstorff notes Second Life users similarly relate to their own signifiers as real, simulating a second life: "But for many residents, Second Life had an immediacy that could not be reduced to a simulation of actual-world embodiment. Residents, for instance, might say that a particular animated chair caused their avatar to sit in an 'unnatural' manner in comparison to the more natural 'animation they typically used.'Virtual embodiment could even be understood as more authentic than actual-world embodiment; as one Second Life resident put it, 'this is how I see myself on the inside.'"[34]

Boelstorff displays an orienting signification in this quote, denoting his subjects as 'residents.' When using these words, Second Life starts to feel tangible because it is oriented in the language of physicality. Boelstorff simulates notions of space and habitation when he terms these individuals residents, yet virtual worlds are actually digital hallucinations brought about by coding languages and computer hardware. These individuals would then be residents of an illusion without substance. As the simulating of identity within a simulated reality begins to produce causal effects in the physical world, the virtual world becomes actualized as a reality for the individual. Because of this transition, we cannot refute the reality of these experiences, but engaging with them critically exposes societal privilege. As explored in Orientation, there are costs that come prepackaged into these experiences that affect the rest of an inter-dependent humanity. Our society is effectively normalized to the consumerism that defines it. This situation is symptomatic of a callous disregard for the environment and the connection we all share. Individualism extended to the sphere of kinship with God and Christ has allowed avatars to be quickly read as words representing complex beings, reducing the reality of a human life to an easily read self-concept. This type of self-understanding is dysfunctional. It operates without a regard for the complete dependence it has on the actual world of human inter-dependence. It betrays an unconscious disposition toward solipsism, a covert egotism, a narcissistic inclination characteristic of our contemporary American society.

4.1. Signed, Sealed, Delivered

One minute and twenty-eight seconds into D.J. Soto's YouTube video, "Alina's Virtual Reality Baptism Story", a magenta, android avatar flashes its eyes and a voice plays over the image, "It absolutely felt real."[35] The avatar image stands in a representation of a middle-class American backyard swimming pool, the water realistically occluding the pool steps behind it. A single, crisp palm tree in the background strives failingly toward the illusion of depth, and what looks like a bright orange, kettle-charcoal grill is smoking under the cover of the house's roof. Though it is not explicitly stated, the viewer is to understand that behind this magenta representation there is a human individual, one who has a dark, electrical box strapped around their head. In that box are two holes for the eyes and an artificially lit screen which is placed just a few inches from the cornea. Alina's avatar makes hand gestures as her body's recorded voice plays over the computer graphics, implying that the virtual reality technology she is using captures her hand movements as well. Her recorded voice testifies about her experience of virtual baptism.

"Alina's Virtual Reality Baptism Story" was posted by D.J. Soto to YouTube, mid May of 2018.[36] Two years later on VR Church's webpage, Alina is now an official pastor for the VR Church community.[37] A selfie of her living, human body's face is located to the right of a picture of her VR Church avatar. Resting below, a short blurb identifies some key info about her physical life and virtual role with VR Church. Leading with a narrative, constructed around her physical disability, the blurb reads:

"Alina was a flight attendant and had a passion for skydiving till she became disabled about 10 years ago. She has an autoimmune conditions [sic] as well as a rare disorder called Erythromelalgia. These keep her confined to her home a majority of the time. She is now a pastor at VR Church and has started a charity giving VR headsets to those in need. She is married to a loving, supportive husband and is blessed to have her VR family. She says she has never known so much love as she does today."[38]

Physically, Alina's hair is magenta, just like her avatar. A connection suggesting a degree of control and personalization, this signification allows for a conscious synonymity between the two bodies and worlds. Alina's avatar visually signifies, stands for, her physical body, but the avatar can only go so far. While granting access to a virtual representation of space, Alina's avatar cannot compensate for the reality of her physical body, its needs, and its ailments. Alina does not choose to let her avatar signify her in perfect parallel, symbolically representing her own disability. Christian belief in the resurrection body may mirror Alina's disposition toward her avatar. The resurrection body begins to signify the true identity of the Christian soul, which temporarily inhabits the weak and imperfect body. The conscious synonymity suggested above is eclipsed by the unconscious synonymity between the world of virtual reality and the world of Christianity. When the physical body becomes a signifier for the soul, the experience of virtual reality is not so foreign after all.

The emphasis on Alina's physical state in her personal description on the VR Church leader's page is evidence of a pattern that occurs throughout the community's discourse about their work. Soto's explanation of VR Baptism typically involves Alina's story, reproduced and simplified in a way that stresses her physical disability. This rhetorical appeal, like many others, is intended to win the favor of Soto's audience. In Alina's testimony, emotion is used in order to demonstrate the 'realness' of what she has experienced. This stance shows that Soto and VR Church are on the defense, posturing their identities and discourse in relationship to the gaze of others.

A collection of human beings who are traversing uncharted waters, VR Church members are forced to grapple with and modify ideas of physicality and identity, either consciously or unconsciously, as they reposition and reassemble a sense of self within an incorporeal, electrically sustained world, from the comfort of their own home. How they choose to signify their sense of identity is defined by and through the material, within the larger social context of the physical world. The virtual is dependent upon the actual.

5. Promulgation

Christ's initiatory calling to make disciples and baptize them is the engine of Christian promulgation. Proclaiming the dead and risen Christ's good news, the apostles spread throughout the nations and become the first missionaries. As a community existing through and within a radically new technology, VR Church contextualizes itself within a narrative of Christian adaptation to new media. Extending himself from the physical into the virtual, Soto becomes a Christ-like mediator between worlds. Retracting from the virtual in order to extend into the physical, Soto promulgates VR Church's communal dispositions toward virtual reality technology, often times navigating these communications with little reference to Christianity. A critical pattern that emerges when Soto extends to others, physical or virtual, is a

mimetic preoccupation with popular cultural references. These media references can be seen as a rhetorical device which allow both Soto and the audience to easily navigate the disparate notions of virtual simulations and the actuality of the physical world. I consider this to be an imperative accommodation for Soto. This outward strategy creates a virtual reality which extends from the simulated world into the physical world, nurturing a sense of familiarity and ease, crafting the audience's reading of Soto, VR Church, and virtual reality technology.

Using the film *Limitless* to relate his own subjective experiences to the audience, Soto defers absolute knowledge of the reference: "That Bradley Cooper movie, is that his name? That *Limitless* movie…"[39] Coupled with a heavy-handed deference to the audience's intelligence that follows, Soto's rhetoric here is one of subtle humility. With this reference, he connects the familiar to the audience, and also defers notions of knowledge, of cultural literacy, as well. In another news appearance, D.J. Soto explains how VR Church contains all of the elements of regular church, excepting that it takes place in a "Ready Player One, Matrix, Inception, kind of virtual world." [40]

Soto appeals to these fantasy worlds as a positive reference. These movies are heralded for their creativity and their representations of simulation. They are pop-culture icons that are well received. By connoting a relationship between VR Church and these artworks, Soto dignifies the VR Church community and its virtual space. These references will fall flat for the reader of this video who is not familiar with contemporary science fiction films. Another alternative narrative that this video may produce lies with viewers who are prejudiced against science fiction, and therefore associate Soto with those preconceived notions. The number of narratives that it may generate is innumerable.

His popular culture references extend to video games as well. When interviewing with Drumsy and Syrmor he says, "The apostles are your pioneers, you can think of them like your tank."[41] Just as the restrictive interactive system of World of Warcraft involves classes and roles, for Soto, so does Christianity. Here he explains Christianity in terms of role-playing games and reflects a sense of personal organization. This does not read as Soto making sense of Christianity in Drumsy and Syrmor's terms, but as communicating his own understanding of himself and his religion. An understanding that has been made plausible through the model that World of Warcraft provides.

5.1. Branding and Emergent Narratives

In the Passion Talks International video, D.J. Soto leads into the VR Church story with another pop-culture film reference: "When I explain virtual reality church, I kind of feel like this…"[42] He then uses *The Matrix* to frame the story of VR Church and develops an association between himself and the hierophantic character Morpheus, played by Lawrence Fishbourne. He then rapidly dissolves this reference and moves on. This moment serves as a key moment of simulation for D.J. Soto, one where he maintains an internal image of himself, extending that image into the physical sphere, relating to the actual world through technologically created media. The laughter from audience members in response to this reference speaks to the efficacy of Soto's rhetoric.

Through playing with signifying and references, Soto conditions the image of VR Church to be associated with *The Matrix*, a film which is a pop-culture icon. Using it as a reference to control the narrative around VR Church is a skillful accommodation which focuses the attention of the audience, creating limitations for audience members that modify potential readings of the situation. These tactful marketing skills position VR Church as a brand, a signifier that reads easily. A brand, like an avatar, a word, or a text, is about communicating character, signifying a notion beyond the visible sign.

At the end of Soto's presentation to Passion Talks International, he turns toward the future: "What's next for VR Church?"[43] Soto then explains how VR Church will extend itself into new platforms, describing them as new worlds. VR Church becomes an inter-dimensional missionary squad, linking Soto and his organization to his earlier image of Morpheus, this time with the crew of rebels on the *Nebuchadnezzer* that enter into the Matrix. While Soto sees his effort as a salvatory promulgation program, this talk also resembles Columbus appealing to the Spanish monarchy before sailing the ocean blue to the New World. *Wired* sees Soto intimately revealing the financial burdens created by pursuing the vision of VR Church in the 2018 article, "This Pastor is Putting His Faith in a Virtual Reality Church."[44] After Soto and his family moved into an RV to travel the country in support of this vision, "Soto visited with church leaders to drum up interest and financial assistance from pastors to expand VR Church into a larger network." The article then goes on to say that the family was "strung out" financially and dissociated from communities outside of VR Church.[45] Planting a church in virtual reality becomes a colonization effort requiring funding from the homeland's leadership.

In *Simulations*, Baudrillard explores the perceptions of European colonizers who encountered indigenous people in The New World. He suggests that their worldview was disrupted by the presence of a world beyond the reach of Christianity. Of this he says, "Thus, at the beginning of colonisation, there was a moment of stupor and amazement

before the very possibility of escaping the universal law of the Gospel. There were two possible responses: either to admit this law was not universal, or to exterminate the Indians so as to remove the evidence."[46]

Like computer programs encountering a foreign input, these humans could not compute the information they took in. A completely foreign world was so strange that the potential of comfortable reality models being false required a violent rejection of the evidence. Applying this lens to VR Church, the extension of Christianity into all metaverses becomes a conquest of the incomputable. The existence of virtual world undermines the idea of God's presence in the physical and, by extending Christianity into those fictional universes, D.J. Soto accommodates the strange and makes it comfortable and legible. Soto makes this legible for himself and simultaneously does so for his audience as well. These references allow both Soto and the audience to accommodate the unknown and uncomfortable, deciphering them expeditiously. Everyone involved navigates the completely foreign and new concepts of VR Church with orienting references to the lowest common denominator, popular culture. Through these references and presentations D.J. Soto is able to extend his view of world and reality, absorbing the virtual into his model and pushing for the extension of God into the virtual.

VR Church's extension into different metaverses is the very sort of promulgation which accommodates the idea of virtual worlds as actual, further disintegrating an already dissolving distinction between signifier and referent. If 'world' no longer signifies the physical realm and the notion is accepted that it refers to a broader category that includes human fictions, the word 'world' loses its reference and reality becomes a groundless notion used to communicate and control narrative construction. Baudrillard's perspective allows us to consider that these rhetorical strategies communicate notions of reality, deferring acknowledgments of the actual lack of reference. VR Church becomes a signifier of the reality of the virtual world. It serves as a way to dignify the virtual space itself, making it more real to us and to church members. I think that this functioning betrays an unconscious disregard for truth and consistency. Soto is working with two concepts of reality. One is mutable and can serve the ends of the person using it, and the other is a more deeply seated and conditioned perspective, which perceives personal experience to be concretely real and therefore justifiable by one other than oneself.

6. Termination

As you prepare to leave this narrative, to terminate your connection to this system, so too must virtual reality users terminate their connection to virtual worlds. Religious communities have traditionally gathered together in a physical space, perhaps a church building, a mosque, or a temple. For those individuals who attend physical church, their religious communities exist as an organ of a larger community. They cannot unplug from the larger social sphere that surrounds them. This world is where they go to work, get paid, eat food, go to the doctor, and take kids to school. Because the religious community meets and integrates into the larger social setting, we may think that these communities tend to be more aware of their connection to the humans around them. This type of ideal generalization simplifies the reality of human meaning-making and makes the virtual community easy to read. Though VR Church members continue to disconnect from their physical surroundings in order to form communities that are removed from larger social contexts, the technologies allowing them to do so are used for the same ends by non-religious Americans.

The voyeuristic gaze that this project takes is enabled by the culture of social media. Outsiders looking in, we are positioned like Christ in a final seat of judgment. Our immediate disposition toward this phenomenon is conditioned by the ideological narratives that we have embodied. When members signify to us that they are disabled and unable to partake in physical communities, we may be all too eager to accept their own personal narrative constructions in the name of progress. When we see 'blatantly fake' worlds being inhabited by irrational adults, we take a rationalistic gaze that reduces the other and dignifies our own perspectives. Moving beyond the binary of these two easily accessible choices, I believe we need to do the hard work, seeking a nuanced perspective, critical of the social institutions that create a need for this type of community building. Questioning the reality of another's experience is symptomatic of our obsession with reading, with grasping truth, pinning reality down and dominating it with our minds. Reality has always been a virtual construct actualized by individuals perceiving it to exist. Consensual reality models are a false flag that blind us to the truth of our own subjectivity. We can ask better questions: Is this a sustainable practice? At what cost does this feeling of community come? Why do VR Church users turn to simulated worlds to find affirmations of their own reality?

7. Acknowledgments

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