

The Discursive Construct of Virtual Angels, Temples, and Religious Worship: Mormon Theology and Culture in Second Life

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Cyberspace is changing the way religion is practiced in contemporary society. A 2004 Pew Internet and American Life project estimated that 64 percent of American internet users go online for spiritual or religious purposes.¹ Religious organizations large and small are increasingly participating in cyberspace; and according to Peter Horsfield, the influence of digital media is producing major consequences for religious institutions and ideologies.²

One popular digital platform is Second Life, a virtual world owned by Linden Lab. Created in 2003, this site transcends both the real and imagined. Players pay a monthly fee to “own” virtual lots or islands on which they can build virtual buildings and homes, using components purchased with virtual money—Linden dollars (\$L). Players maintain intellectual property rights to anything they create in this setting, allowing their virtual selves (avatars) to sell these cyber goods for Linden dollars, which can subsequently be exchanged for real money. Corporations selling virtual products in Second Life generate more than \$1 million a day in real-world trade.³ By 2007, Second Life had reached 10 million registered users with the estimated resident population of about 600,000 players per day.⁴

Some players use Second Life to communicate religious beliefs

or to reinforce their religious identity. Kerstin Radde-Antweiler, traced Second Life's religious topography and found clusters of Jewish, Christian, Buddhist, Muslim, and Hindu players who were involved in varying levels of religious practice. These included sharing beliefs through official doctrines or requiring agreement to codes of religious conduct or values; offering (or requiring) avatar clothing that was consistent with religious beliefs (i.e., modesty requirements, skull-caps, burkas); practicing ritual worship, and building sacred sites (e.g., the wailing wall, temples, mosques, cathedrals).⁵

A virtual island in Second Life, Adam-ondi-Ahman (AoA), is named after the site where, according to Mormon beliefs, Adam and Eve resided after their expulsion from the Garden of Eden and where, before Jesus Christ's second coming, Adam will judge his posterity, receiving all of the keys bestowed in each successive dispensation, preparatory to turning them back to Christ. Although not endorsed by the LDS Church, island creator Skyler Goode (avatar name) states that the island functions as a place of respite for LDS players and also as a means of communicating the message of "the Gospel of Jesus Christ" to others. Visitors and residents agree to abide by LDS standards of dress and morality.⁶ The island also offers activities and objects for LDS or LDS-curious avatars (such as singles meets, socials, genealogy forums, and retreats), but it does not feature religious services or temple ceremonies.

The prevalence of "ritual knowledge" available through cyberspace signifies a momentous shift in both the traditional structure of religion and that of religious communities.⁷ If religion becomes "virtualized" in cyberspace, what elements of "real world" faith are co-opted in a virtual world to resonate with the expectations of the player? This article addresses this question by analyzing the role of religious iconography and symbols used to represent Mormonism and the LDS Church in Second Life.

I take the approach of an ethnographer avatar examining AoA intent on locating how the layout and construction of the visual enhance my experience and connection to LDS theology and culture in this virtual space. This analysis is grounded in the constructivist theory of worldview building as applied to religious

belief systems. I season this construct delicately with postmodern concepts of the power of the visual in that world-building process.

I begin with a diversion into the ramifications of these theoretical constructs, followed by a brief examination of the unique value of studying Second Life and Mormonism. Following a brief summary of the approach guiding my analysis, I discuss the prevalent findings and offer some concluding thoughts on my role and experience as a tourist in Second Life

Religious Worldviews and Visual Theology

Anthropologist Peter Berger's 1967 treatise on religion as a social construct posits that religious worldviews are built and maintained not so much by religious institutions themselves, but by participation in networks of individuals with shared belief systems ("plausibility structures"). This paradigm recognizes that personally held religious beliefs are built and sustained primarily through "conversations" with others.⁸ Berger's theory has influenced a number of scholars interested in the interaction between social settings and religious worldviews.⁹ In fact, some research suggests that participation in religious plausibility structures correlates with higher levels of religious commitment and adherence to religious beliefs.¹⁰

To an increasing degree, scholars recognize the power of the visual in building and sustaining religious plausibility structures.¹¹ Influential anthropologist Clifford Geertz explained that a religion is embodied primarily "by images and metaphors its adherents use to characterize reality."¹² W. J. Thomas Mitchell, Distinguished Service Professor of English and Art History at the University of Chicago, argues that the visual experience is often more important than language in the development of religious worldviews, and others suggest that scholars should attempt to better understand the integration of popular culture and religious identity.¹³

Certainly, religious institutions recognize the discursive power of visual artifacts in strengthening religious commitment. Religious art has been used since the earliest days of worship,¹⁴ and in an era of mass-produced religious iconography, "the use of photographs, prints, and mass-produced paintings in religious education and devotion has been very important to Christians . . . because

these images allow a subtle transition from artifact to world.”¹⁵ Even the architecture and spatial settings of religious sites enhance a sense of the numinous.¹⁶ Religious representations are more persuasive when they appropriate popular cultural referents because, in an era of mass-mediated religion, they form a cycle of influences in which believers identify with a particular religious image they have seen elsewhere.¹⁷ When religious images are inconsistent, or when they conflict with cultural archetypes, they become confusing—thereby losing much of their persuasive power.¹⁸

The pervasiveness of digital images adds another layer to this ongoing exchange of religious plausibility structures. The world of cyberspace and the spiritual world are connected in profound ways, and the line between “virtual” and “real” in the digital age is becoming less clear.¹⁹ Virtual worlds often blur the boundaries between the “virtual” and the “real.”²⁰ This is especially true when the spiritual and ritual practices of contemporary religious culture are co-opted by the somewhat ephemeral boundaries of cyberspace.²¹ Social scientists recognize that virtual worlds become all the more plausible when they resonate with the discursive practices of their participants. “The apparent authenticity of a religious activity or experience will play a determinate role . . . in whether the Internet will become a forum for core religious activities and serious religious engagement.”²² A growing line of scholarship indicates that the increasing ability of cyberspace to recreate religious ritual and imagery is a significant factor in the growth of online religious practices in contemporary society.²³

Why Second Life and Mormons?

Despite a recent surge in investigations of online religious ritual and identity,²⁴ we lack any serious consideration of the role of religious imagery and iconography in the construct of Mormon identity on the internet. AoA in Second Life presents a unique opportunity to determine in what way religious images are appropriated from the popular religious culture of Mormonism in an effort to enhance players’ expectation of the authentic.

Second Life is user-generated. It allows players to create, trade, purchase, or sell items and objects ranging from complex structures (houses, boats, animals) to simple patterns or textures that enhance the realism of a product (such as wood grain to ap-

ply to a veranda). The limitless possibilities of arranging and creating objects in Second Life are bound only by the player's desire and imaginative ability to create a sense of the real. If a Second Life artifact deviates too far from other players' expectations or needs, (i.e., clothes do not "fit" the avatar, or perhaps a surface does not allow avatars to walk on it correctly), they typically express frustration.²⁵ This appeal to the "authority" of the natural is especially compelling if a Second Life structure is meant to represent a religious ideology or organization because of the discursive (and fragile) nature of religious worldviews.²⁶

Another reason to examine LDS images and icons is that the Mormon Church has developed a distinctive scope of art and iconography that distinguishes it from other Christian faiths.²⁷ Church leaders have endorsed (and sometimes commissioned) particular renditions of Jesus, and Utah has a growing market of artists with particular appeal to LDS congregants.²⁸ Furthermore, the Church offers a plethora of visual aids for use in teaching members and non-believers about its basic tenets.²⁹ Although LDS buildings offer various images of Christ, crosses or crucifixes are not incorporated in any way in contemporary LDS religious practices.³⁰ Instead, the quintessential icon of Mormonism today is the Angel Moroni—often displayed as a gold-covered wingless statue holding a trumpet to his lips. Mormons believe this angelic visitor first appeared to Joseph Smith in 1823, directing him to the location of inscribed metal plates with the appearance of gold from which he subsequently translated the Book of Mormon (1830). Moroni is significant to Latter-day Saints because they see him as the angel of Revelation 14:6 who would preach "the everlasting gospel" to "every nation, and kindred, and tongue, and people" before Christ's millennial reign.³¹ Most LDS temples are adorned with a statue of Moroni on their highest spires, LDS gravestones in Utah often feature a Moroni image (rather than a cross), and the Church has trademarked the archetypal angel.³²

Temples are also especially iconic and important for Mormons. The Church distinguishes temples from regular meeting-houses,³³ and leaders encourage congregants to display pictures of temples in their homes.³⁴ Entrance to LDS temples is limited only to members who are certified by their priesthood leaders as living by the highest of LDS standards. Even the Salt Lake Temple

in Utah—a dominant icon of the LDS faith—is not open to tourists. Temple worship among Mormons represents the highest and most sacred level of religious ritual and practice worldwide. Its unique status among believers offers yet another means of enhancing religious identity that is unique among Christian faiths in the United States.

Finally, the LDS Church endorses the Book of Mormon as a sacred text that recounts a history of three Middle-Eastern migrations to the Americas and a visit by the resurrected Christ around A.D. 34. The Book of Mormon is revered as scripture by Latter-day Saints and plays a central role in building and maintaining the faith. Therefore, visual representations of Book of Mormon events are uniquely aligned with LDS plausibility structures. In an attempt to identify the religious images offered to build and sustain LDS world-views in AoA, my analysis is grounded by the following questions:

1. How does AoA use LDS icons to appeal to a sense of an “authentic” Mormon place?
2. What role does iconography and/or graphics play in the building or sustaining of LDS plausibility-structures?

Procedures and Limitations

In this article, I approach AoA as a virtual ethnographer or participant observer. This approach follows a blend of research strategies used to understand museums and ritual in cyberspace.³⁵ My analysis spans approximately two weeks of real-time immersion in Adam-ondi-Ahman as a visiting and unseasoned Second Life player. Because my focus is on the role of icons and images in this virtual island, I limited my interaction with other players when possible. It isn't uncommon for players to teleport in and out of Second Life areas, so the disappearance or sudden appearance of an avatar is not unusual. This was my method of travel between disparate locations in AoA.

I recognize that the boundaries for any field site are contested in part by the ethnographers themselves, and I do not suggest that too much can be learned about AoA in a two-week period. Second Life and AoA are vast in terms of objects, people, and possibilities. Although I attempted to visit every building I could find, no doubt I missed places and objects. Furthermore, it would remiss

of me to suggest that my analysis would be the only plausible interpretation of the experience. Certainly, players bring with them many subjective positions (self, gender, age-group, family, class, nation, ethnicity, etc.) in addition to their religiosity. I also recognize that this analysis is premised on observations that are fixed in time and place but that cultures “do not hold still for their portraits.”³⁶ Even as I compose the findings of this study, AoA continues to evolve and morph into a new space as players continue to add objects and buildings to their world.

Findings

AoA encourages an “authentic” Mormon experience by recreating a sense of locale through the use of iconic LDS buildings and art. Ironically, the most iconic structures in AoA are also the least functional (or the least interactive), indicating that their primary function is to enhance realism, rather than explicate theology.

With few exceptions, the more dominant structures are co-opted from Temple Square in Salt Lake City and from other LDS religious structures or monuments (such as the Angel Moroni). The power of religious images in AoA is derived from their association with particular doctrines. When placed near a narrative (such as a picture of Jesus next to a scriptural reference about Him), these images can potentially strengthen the message in much the same way they would in the real world. However, in Second Life, these images often appear merely as window dressing accompanying a particular doctrinal statement. When offered in this context, they seem to detract from, rather than enhance, a sense of the real. In these situations, the subjectivity of the player shifts from that of virtual tourist in a real LDS setting to a sense of self immersed in the malleable world of Second Life.

Discussion

LDS Buildings and Their Contents

The layout of the island’s center encourages players to wander on attractive walkways through iconic Church buildings and lush gardens that feature numerous representations of LDS culture, architecture, and theology. Even before signs, pictures, and directions appear in AoA, iconic LDS buildings materialize to sur-

round the visitor. Because all of the user-created material is stored as data on Linden Lab's servers, the graphics take a few seconds to materialize as a player passes through an area. AoA is immediately recognizable as a Mormon region. Both the sacred and the mundane are framed in the context of LDS culture and theology. Many recognizable Mormon buildings and structures surround a central square, and the region is replete with posters, signs, and instructions directing the player to respect LDS values, interact with virtual missionaries, learn doctrine, tour buildings, or participate in LDS activities (such as doing genealogical research in the Family History Center or learning about the Book of Mormon).

Other buildings, while not distinctively Mormon, function primarily as spaces upon which to "hang" images or texts that advance LDS teachings. The presence of so many iconic buildings immerses the avatar in an LDS world. The most obvious—at least, obvious to anybody familiar with Mormonism—are a temple (complete with the Angel Moroni), a chapel, a Christus statue at the center of the square (from Temple Square in Salt Lake City), and the dome-roofed Salt Lake Tabernacle. Images of the Angel Moroni are also scattered throughout the island—sometimes in distracting ways, but always as signifiers of the Mormon-centric nature of the community. Ironically, these most recognizable LDS structures offer much less theology than the remaining nondescript buildings and structures in AoA. Their role, it seems, is primarily to create a sense of place.

The AoA temple resembles the Washington DC Temple located in Virginia. Like its counterpart, it sits atop a hill, towering over other buildings in the surrounding area. As a symbol of the Church in Second Life, it is illuminated even at night. Also, like its real-world counterpart, its interior is inaccessible to tourists.

The Salt Lake Tabernacle is another easily recognizable Mormon icon in AoA. The AoA building mirrors the Salt Lake Tabernacle from its iconic dome roof to the contents of the interior—right down to a KSL-TV camera set up inside. (KSL is Church-owned NBC affiliate station in Salt Lake City.)

The absence of posters, signs, and other religious texts inside the AoA buildings enhance their authenticity, as their presence would conflict with what would be seen at Temple Square. However, one anomaly stands out in the tabernacle; a large screen at the

front of the room invites the visitor to “Hear the words of a living prophet of God.” Touching it activates a streaming video of a sermon given by President Thomas S. Monson. In this moment, the evangelical mission of the Tabernacle’s creator trumps the appeal to rigid authenticity. The power of the real surrenders to the Second Life culture of embedding digital images within disparate objects. However, because this message is targeting non-Mormons (who are probably much more conversant with Second Life plausibility structures than they are with the real-world Mormon Tabernacle), it is unlikely that the fusion of the authentic and the imaginary in this particular setting would be particularly distracting.

An LDS meetinghouse sits near the tabernacle. For Latter-day Saint players, the red brick building and its interior would be easily recognizable. A sign outside the building displays “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” announced by the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve in 1995, which spells out the Church’s stance on marriage, homosexuality, and proper roles within the family.³⁷ In this case, its presence detracts from the building’s authenticity. It is unlikely that even a person unfamiliar with Mormonism would expect to see a larger-than-life sign rising to the height of a church building. As is true of the streaming video in the Tabernacle, a theological message in this setting only displaces the sense of realism.

Otherwise, the building’s authenticity is enhanced by the attention to detail from the arrangement of meeting rooms to the “announcements” on a bulletin board in the foyer. The sanctuary is indiscernible from what can be found in a typical LDS chapel—e.g., carpeting, pews, official green hymnals, the nature of the pulpit, a covered sacrament table, an organ, and even the page numbers of the hymns the congregation will sing, displayed on a slotted board at the front of the chapel. The fact that its creator, Skyler Goode, takes pride in the building’s realism is clear in his response to my question about why there is a basketball court in the “cultural hall,” but no baptismal font. He responded, “Not all LDS churches have baptismal fonts.” (It is also true that not all LDS chapels have basketball courts.)

In addition to the main chapel, LDS meetinghouses have numerous classrooms used for the meetings of various subgroups, including Sunday School for adults and youth, Primary for chil-

dren, priesthood quorums for the men and boys over age twelve, and Relief Society for women. Objects located in these rooms sometimes offer LDS teachings, but their primary function is to identify its purposes. For example, one classroom shows a piano next to a table decorated with a lace tablecloth and a vase of flowers. On one wall hangs a poster depicting the general presidents of the Relief Society since its founding in 1842. Written on the blackboard is the organization's motto, "Charity never faileth," a scripture that appears in both the New Testament and the Book of Mormon (1 Cor. 13:8; Moro. 7:46). These items coalesce as cultural and theological signifiers identifying that the player is in a classroom prepared for a meeting of LDS women. In fact, the flowers and lace tablecloth are so dominant in Relief Society rooms that they've become the subject of some insider jokes among Church members.³⁸ The poster depicting women leaders and the motto ("Charity never faileth") further authenticate and identify the players' locale. Furthermore, these objects function to teach players something about Mormon beliefs.

The dual nature of objects enhancing both a sense of the real and religious beliefs is prevalent throughout this building. Bulletin board announcements add authenticity and teach something about the Church's missionary program and other LDS resources. In another room, the art on the wall depicting Jesus surrounded by children identifies a Primary classroom while affirming the LDS belief in Christ. The nursery for children between ages eighteen months and three is signaled not only by the toys but also by a Book of Mormon scripture denouncing infant baptism (Moro. 8:9) written on the blackboard, making the doctrinal point that Mormons do not accept the validity of infant baptism.

There are dozens of non-iconic buildings and structures dotting the landscape of AoA. Like other structures in Second Life, these buildings, reflecting the tastes of their creators, offer a broad array of architectural styles from Southwestern desert-stylized homes to futuristic glass mansions. Nevertheless, their religious nature is often evident in their interior decor and/or names. For example, although a cabin with plank floors and a rug is relatively empty, on its walls hang pictures of the presidents of the LDS Church and a framed copy of the Articles of Faith, canonized in 1890 as statements of LDS basic tenets. Just outside the

cabin, flags of various nationalities with links to copies of the Book of Mormon in the represented languages overshadow the building. Elsewhere, a postmodern glass structure encloses a dance club, “Brother Brigham’s,” named after the Church’s iconic second leader who led the Saints to Utah from the Midwest in 1847. Another nondescript museum-like building, under construction during my visit to the site, offered a virtual walking tour of artifacts and narratives emphasizing LDS teachings about the nature of the family and the purpose of temple worship. These many other AoA buildings reflect the way that the openness of Second Life creates limitless possibilities for building styles, limited only by the desire and ability of AoA residents to integrate LDS theology or culture into their space.

Integrating Theology, Images, and Objects

Second Life not only encourages limitless architectural styles but also allows players to add random images, movies, and sounds to their properties. This feature is evident throughout AoA where popular LDS art and images dominate the landscape. These features at times add to the realism of the island; but more often, they seem awkwardly embedded in the surroundings. AoA representations of LDS objects and art can serve two primary (though not necessarily mutually exclusive) purposes: functional and theological. Functional images create context, enhancing the sense of authenticity. They act as the glue that keeps the remaining visuals cohesive and valid. Images that emphasize the theological at the expense of realism, however, might detract significantly from the experience, thus rendering their message less persuasive. These embedded displays seem to “hang” in AoA in unusual locations that sometimes seem to “shout” LDS beliefs at the player in startling ways.

The most appealing objects (as I learned when visiting the chapel) manage to fulfill both purposes. They enhance the visual experience of communing with Mormons and Mormon culture, while at the same time fostering a sense of the numinous. Such artifacts encourage a sense of the sacred that enhances the veracity of the physical and the spiritual in a very real way. A tour of AoA reveals that many of the visual artifacts used to emphasize theological (rather than cultural) aspects of the Mormonism stray

from the ideal. A haphazard stack of cubes identify the Church's Twelve Apostles; paintings of Christ are unconvincingly embedded in granite monuments or other free-standing structures; and the walls near a Christus statue feature links to LDS magazines and a slideshow about LDS temples. Random signs aimed at linking or informing players of other LDS events or ideas litter the environment and detract from the flow of religious thought embedded in the more cohesive AoA areas.

Similar context-free objects are common throughout Second Life but lose something of their appeal as signifiers of a real-world religion in these circumstances. One particularly distracting AoA locale is the Maze—an array of hedges and walls that integrates texts, images, and theology to guide the players along a path presenting LDS beliefs. It begins with a narrative about Book of Mormon events and history and concludes by explaining key Book of Mormon teachings: “faith, repentance, baptism, Holy Ghost, the godhead, Jesus Christ, charity, service, citizenship, eternal life, second coming of Christ, priesthood, sin, judgment, mercy, & scripture.” Mormon texts, images, and theological beliefs thus appear in a setting that visitors are supposed to “follow” through to the end.

The Maze at times mimics a museum; virtual placards (resembling parchment scrolls, aged paper, or golden plates) accompany a great number of LDS pictures and objects in an effort to enhance the written narrative. The use of objects and images in the Maze is not entirely incohesive. Mormons would quickly recognize the texture backing the illustrations as a popular representation of the gold plates from which the Book of Mormon is believed to have been translated.³⁹ The images accompanying the narrative of the Maze are dominant in LDS culture and are frequently used in LDS worship and missionary work. In fact, many (if not all) of the Book of Mormon displays feature paintings by Arnold Friberg, an LDS artist commissioned by the Church's Primary Association, whose Book of Mormon characters are so prevalent in LDS culture that many Latter-day Saints tend to judge all representations of the Book of Mormon by his standard.⁴⁰

What is amiss, however, is a reasonable context in which these works of art are presented. The interplay of narrative and art mimics what one might see at the visitors' centers at Temple

Square in Salt Lake City where narratives, artifacts, and art are brought together to tell the story of the Church. In such a setting, the objects themselves take on religious significance as referents not only of a religious story, but also of the artist's devotion to the faith.⁴¹ In the AoA Maze however, the aberrant context in which these visuals are presented distances the player from the transcendent quality of the art or artifact. Without an appeal to the "authentic" museum experience, the numinous power of these objects in AoA is diminished.

The challenge of conveying religious thought by integrating art, narrative, and virtual objects in the typical fashion of Second Life is illustrated by a section of the Maze that tells a Book of Mormon story of Nephi building a ship. The narrative is inscribed on a gold-colored backing that hangs on a mural depicting the ocean. The story is illustrated by two Friberg paintings: one depicts Nephi rebuking his brothers for not helping him build the ship; the other portrays Nephi with his family aboard the ship. Leaning against this wall (which is also a hedge) are an anchor, a ship's wheel, and ship-building tools that, for the observant Second Lifer, appear to be random items gathered from other areas in this virtual world. The player travels along a grassy path that changes to sand near the display.

This cacophony of objects, structures, and cultural referents here distracted me from the intended message. Instead of enhancing the numinous by integrating authentic objects, this visual smorgasbord illustrated the creator's skill as a well-versed Second Life resident. I make this observation not as a critique of the creator, but as an example of one way in which the abilities of the virtual world can inadvertently reduce the plausibility of the intended message. Ironically, just as the most powerfully constructed messages draw their plausibility from the authentic nature of their surroundings (e.g., the iconic buildings discussed earlier), the most archetypal Mormon images littering the Maze lose their credibility because they seem out of place.

Reflections and Concluding Thoughts

Any ethnographic investigation of a location in a virtual world would be empty without at least some insight into the subjectivity and personal experience of the participant observer. My

initial visits to AoA were a little disconcerting.⁴² As anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski wrote in 1922 of his study of the indigenous people of the Trobriand Islands, I soon recognized that I was a beginner with few means of learning how to effectively find my way through this new world.⁴³ Instantly upon arrival, I was a stranger. I was immediately surrounded by buildings, signs, gardens, sidewalks, interactive missionaries, links to Church magazines, Church websites, and LDS commodities. I felt a sudden rush of confusion. Where to go? What to see first? What does it mean?

In the “real” world, I have visited Temple Square and seen much of the Mormon art there. I’ve seen LDS buildings, watched films about and/or by Mormons, and conducted research dealing with the interplay of religion, media, and culture among Utahns and Latter-day Saints. So when I first entered AoA, I found myself immersed in a place that was real and surreal, profane and sacred, strange yet familiar. Unlike other locations in Second Life, the area was largely avatar-free during most of my time there. I felt like a voyeur as I walked through empty streets and sometimes entered the homes of the local residents. I felt especially self-conscious as I walked through the vacant meetinghouse and Mormon tabernacle. At times my curiosity was tinged by feelings of guilt and apprehension. I was an intruder in a sacred place, and nobody knew I was there. What would happen if I were caught? These feelings encapsulate the power of virtual space and the convincing array of Mormon archetypes and icons in some AoA neighborhoods.

During my initial hours there, I avoided contact with others, hoping to gather impressions without being overly influenced. I brought with me a vehement distrust of any players, knowing that their avatars are unlikely to represent the person behind the keyboard of another computer. On rare occasions, I met other avatars, but I do not recall seeing more than three or four in the same region anywhere on the AoA island. This dearth of other players, more than anything else, contributed to my sense of experiencing much of AoA an outsider and a voyeur. As a newcomer to Second Life (without the subsequent knowledge of keyboard shortcuts, online etiquette, and means of using many objects there), I found

it challenging to navigate quickly through the island or to develop relationships with other players I met.

Furthermore, because I was unknown to the players in AoA (I hadn't officially befriended any of them), I was treated primarily as an outsider. This does not mean I was treated with contempt or derision; rather, I was viewed as a potential convert to the faith. With the exception of the rare avatar who wished to sell me something, the vast majority of players encouraged me to learn LDS beliefs on the island. I was directed to AoA areas that presented both beliefs and links to other internet sites where I could learn more. Furthermore, despite my attempts to avoid "going native," I was, at times, impressed and stunned by much of what I found there. Occasionally I experienced emotions ranging from awe to frustration, depending on the ease of the interface and the sense of the real as I toured the landscape. I was surprised that, on several occasions, I felt a true sense of the numinous when particular monuments or artifacts led me through a narrative that I found both real and immersive.

Most impressive and unexpected to me was the construction of the new AoA building intended to convey LDS beliefs about the temple. I suspect that it was rapidly built because of a conversation between a player and the island's owner. Only two days after another avatar asked Goode why players couldn't enter the virtual temple, this new building materialized with a sign "under construction" at the entrance. Though incomplete during my most recent visit, the interior of this virtual visitors' center presented narratives and displays in an organized fashion that in many ways resembles the two visitors' centers at Temple Square in Salt Lake City, including a Christus, images of a starry universe, a model of an LDS temple, and a baptismal font resting on the backs of twelve oxen. This tactic of not allowing visitors into the virtual temple, yet allowing them (and me) a chance to experience the theology of the sacred in another setting added, in my experience, credence to the notion of the temple as sacred and distinct from other LDS buildings—even in this virtual setting.

Conclusion

AoA illustrates the way in which religious plausibility structures have transcended typical communications venues and worked their

way into the discursive practices of believers in cyberspace. That many of the buildings and much of the virtual art I experienced there were so easily recognizable demonstrates the pervasiveness of these icons in Mormon culture. Furthermore, the prevalence of particular LDS images in a landscape built and inhabited by a variety of Second Life players suggests that AoA tends to narrow, rather than broaden, the conversation about Mormon theology. This is a surprising discovery, given the capacity of Second Life to let players borrow from a nearly limitless array of objects and artifacts created by millions of players. The prevalence of *other* “borrowed” features of this cyber world (embedded videos and images) suggests that AoA players are definitely open to the idea of expanding the method of relating their beliefs to the Mormon community and others.

But the preponderance of distinctively LDS images in the evangelical portions of the island might be more persuasive to outsiders, not only if they were contextualized more authentically, but also perhaps if they expanded the range of sacred artifacts to include religious images and archetypes from a broader array of religious belief-systems.

Future research might compare AoA directly with other religious locations in Second Life to determine if the exclusion of religious ritual or worship significantly alters the conversation occurring in virtual space. More time interacting with AoA residents is also necessary to pursue a broader understanding about why particular Mormon images and icons were chosen over others in Second Life.

Notes

1. Stuart M. Hoover, Linsey S. Clark, and Lee Rainie, “64% of Wired Americans Have Used the Internet for Spiritual or Religious Purposes,” *Pew Internet & American Life*, 2004, www.pewinternet.org/Reports/Faith-Online.aspx (accessed March 22, 2010).

2. Lorne L. Dawson and Douglas E. Cowan, *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Peter Horsfield, “Electronic Media and the Past-Future of Christianity,” in *Mediating Religion: Conversations in Media, Religion, and Culture*, edited by W. J. T. Mitchell and S. Marriage (New York: T&T Clark, 2006), 271–84.

3. Tom Boellstorff, *Coming of Age in Second Life* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2010), 8.

4. Kerstin Radde-Antweiler, "Virtual Religion: An Approach to a Religious and Ritual Topography of 'Second Life,'" *Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 3, no. 1 (2008): 174–211.

5. Ibid.

6. No virtual alcohol, smoking, or immodest attire are permitted and—given that genitalia are available for purchase in Second Life—no sexual activity.

7. Oliver Kruger, "Methods and Theory for Studying Religion on the Internet," *Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet*, 1, no. 1 (2005): 1–7.

8. Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1967).

9. Claude S. Fischer, *To Dwell among Friends: Personal Networks in Town and City* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982); Claude S. Fischer, Robert M. Jackson, C. Ann Stueve, Kathleen Gerson, and Mark Baldassare, *Networks and Places: Social Relations in the Urban Setting* (New York: Free Press, 1977); Robert Gottlieb and Peter Wiley, *America's Saints: The Rise of Mormon Power* (San Diego, Calif.: Harcourt Brace, 1986).

10. Nancy T. Ammerman, *Bible Believers: Fundamentalists in the Modern World* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1987); Larry R. Petersen, "Religion, Plausibility Structures, and Education's Effect on Attitudes toward Elective Abortion," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 40, no. 2 (2001): 187–204; Larry R. Peterson and Gregory V. Donnenworth, "Secularization and the Influence of Religion on Beliefs about Premarital Sex," *Social Forces* 75 (1997): 1071–88.

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28. *Ibid.*, 214–17.

29. See the link for “Church Materials,” on www.lds.org where individuals can choose from a large array of LDS-approved art, videos, music, etc.

30. Michael De Groote, “Sunstone Speaker Attempts to Explain LDS ‘Aversion’ to Cross,” *Deseret News*, September, 10, 2009, <http://www.mormontimes.com/article/5418/Sunstone-speaker-attempts-to-explain-LDS-aversion-to-cross> (accessed November 29, 2010).

31. Terryl L. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture that Launched a World Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 245.

32. In fact, the Church Legal Department compelled a Utah coffee shop to cease using an image of Moroni drinking coffee from his trumpet. Reported by KSL, <http://www.ksl.com/?nid=148&sid=1168205> (accessed November 29, 2010).

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42. I will use the term "me" rather than "my avatar" to avoid the real/virtual distinction that would overly burden descriptions of AoA. I will also usually refer to AoA structures and images without the "virtual" caveat.

43. Bronislaw Malinowski, quoted in Boellstorff, *Coming of Age in "Second Life,"* 4.