

CYBER-RITUALS IN VIRTUAL WORLDS, WEDDING-ONLINE IN SECOND LIFE*

by

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In the context of Internet Research, Virtual Worlds offer a new environment to meet, communicate and perform rituals - the so called Online-Rituals - in a virtual reality, irrespective of geographical and real-life body conditions. The most prominent example for such worlds that have existed since 1998 is the privately-owned, subscription-based 3D application Second Life. An increasing number of residents use this World not only as a kind of virtual playground but as an enlargement of their real-life possibilities that has to be taken seriously: The users are both socially and religiously very active and consequently transfer real-life activities and therefore also rituals into virtual space. With the shift of technical boundaries former seemingly fixed religious and ritual frameworks will be modified and transformed. Different wedding rituals designed and performed in Second Life, for example, show the possibility to identify processes of ritual transfer and of ritual patchworking.

INTRODUCTION [1]

The very general thesis with which Internet Research started in the context of Religious Studies was that the Internet as a new media reveals the phenomenon which Luckmann called "invisible religion".¹ Because of its ability to show numerous processes of individual religious constructions, the Internet represents a new and incomparable source for Religious Studies and has been used as a source for the study of religions and of rituals. The Internet thereby showed that lively and dynamic debates about religion and rituals

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¹ See Luckmann, T. (1967). *The Invisible Religion*. New York: Macmillan.

are not restricted to the institutionalized churches but also happen within the individual realm.

In the following paper we want to show that with the emergence of Virtual Worlds a further step and a completely new field of research has been opened, since they offer a new environment to meet, communicate and contrary to the "WWW" also perform rituals the so called Online-Rituals² in a virtual reality, irrespective of geographical and real life body conditions.

SECOND LIFE – A VIRTUAL WORLD [2]

In contrast to the idea that Virtual Worlds are a matter of fantasy and imagination one could describe a Virtual World as a computer-simulated environment intended for its users to inhabit and interact via avatars. This environment usually is represented in the form of two or three-dimensional graphical representations of humanoids (or other graphical or text-based avatars). In computer science the term "virtual" is described as "something whose existence is simulated with software rather than actually existing in hardware or some other physical form."³ Or in other words: "They are sophisticated pieces of software that enable their users to project an identity into a generated three-dimensional reality through the use of advanced computer graphics and – through the eyes of this digital persona or *avatar* – interact with other players and wander through this generated reality."⁴

² The distinction between 'Rituals Online' and 'Online Rituals' was developed in analogy to Hellands 'Online Religion' and Religion Online'. See Helland, Ch. (2000). Online-Religion/Religion-Online and Virtual Communitas. In: J. K. Hadden, D. E. Cowan (Eds.). Religion on the Internet: Research Prospects and Promises. (Religion and Social Order 8) Amsterdam: JAI, 205-223. See also Radde-Antweiler, K. (2006). Rituals Online. Transferring and Designing Rituals. *Online – Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 2.1. Retrieved November 18th, from <http://www.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/archiv/5823>

'Rituals Online' primarily refers to ritual prescripts, texts, description etc. presented on websites whereas Online-Rituals define whole performances put into an online-environment. Naturally these categories form an idealistic typology and mostly hybrid forms can be found, like ritual space online mixed with elements of the performance in meatspace.

For further enhancements and the distinction between information and interactivity zone see Helland, Ch. (2005). Online Religion as Lived Religion. Methodological Issues in the Study of Religious Participation on the Internet. In: *Online – Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 1.1, p. 1-16. Retrieved November 18th, from <http://www.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/archiv/5823>.

Examples for the beginnings of ritual spaces online are the Inanna temple retrieved on http://www.inanna.de/inanna_tempe12.html or the Redemptoris Mater Chapel of John Paul II. on http://www.vatican.va/redemptoris_mater/index_en.htm.

³ Hiltz, R. S. (1992). Constructing and Evaluating a Virtual Classroom. In: Lea, M. (Ed). *Context of Computer-Mediated Communication*. Harvester-Wheatsheaf, p. 189.

Examples for such Virtual Worlds are *Active Worlds*⁵ in use since 1995 and *There*⁶ since 1998. But the most prominent and famous example is represented by the privately-owned, subscription-based 3D application *Second Life*⁷ that went online for the public in 2003. For the most part it resembles various traditional so called Massively Multiplayer Online Role Player Games (MMORPG), but differs in some important points.⁸ First of all, *Second Life* does not have a specific goal or quest like a conquest of a land or defeating an enemy. Instead, the creativity of the users is stressed which means that the world of *Second Life* is whatever the residents make of it. In contrast to all other existing Virtual Worlds *Second Life* offers the possibility of creating things and then selling them: the residents literally own anything they make and retain any legal rights on their in-world creations. So *Second Life* presents an entirely user-created environment in which players use official game design tools or their own customised software applications to shape the in-world. The official trailer of *Second Life* underlines this goal and the self-conception as an opportunity for a new and better world: „A new society, a new world, created by the resident. Explore a world of surprise and adventure. Create anything you can imagine. Compete for fame, fortune, or victory. Connect with new and exciting people. Your world. Your imagination. *Second Life*.“⁹

In order to play *Second Life* the user - or from an emic point of view the 'resident' - has to download the software that is necessary to log in to *Second Life* to be connected with the other residents from the official web-

⁴ Mayer-Schönberger, V., Crowley, J. (2005). *Napster's Second Life? – The Regulatory Challenges of Virtual Worlds. Faculty Research. Working Papers Series RWP05-052*, p. 6f. Retrieved on 18.11.2006, from: http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=822385.

⁵ See <http://www.activeworlds.com/>.

⁶ See <http://www.there.com/>.

⁷ See <http://secondlife.com/>.

⁸ There is a current controversial discussion if *Second Life* could be defined as a game from an emic perspective. *Second Life* itself gives an indefinite answer: "While the *Second Life* interface and display are similar to most popular massively multiplayer online role playing games (MMORPGs), there are two key, unique differences:

1. Creativity: *Second Life* provides near unlimited freedom to its Residents. This world really is whatever you make it, and your experience is what you want out of it. If you want to hang out with your friends in a garden or nightclub, you can. If you want to go shopping or fight dragons, you can. If you want to start a business, create a game or build a skyscraper you can. It's up to you.

2. Ownership: Instead of paying a monthly subscription fee, Residents can obtain their first Basic account for FREE. Additional Basic accounts cost a one-time flat fee of just \$9.95. If you choose to own land to live, work and build on, you pay a monthly lease fee based on the amount of land you own. You also own anything you create — residents retain IP rights over their in-world creations." See <http://secondlife.com/whatis/faq.php>.

site and register himself. Residents obtain their first Basic account for free. Additional Basic accounts which enables them to buy land from Linden Lab cost approx. six to nine U.S. Dollars per month present. If they choose to own land to live, work and build on, they pay a monthly lease fee based on the amount of land they own. This kind of registration is restricted by the use of a credit card, which also checks the age.

According to Linden Lab in October 2006, Second Life consisted of over 1.300.000 residents from over 80 countries.¹⁰ "Demographically, 60% are men, 40% are women and they span in age from 18 - 85. They are gamers, housewives, artists, musicians, programmers, lawyers, firemen, political activists, college students, business owners, active duty military overseas, architects, and medical doctors, to name just a few."¹¹ For people from 13 to 18 in the middle of this year the Virtual World *Teen Second Life*¹² was build.

Each resident has tools to add to and edit the world, for example buying land, creating objects or building complete houses. *Second Life* has its own economic system and its own currency, the "Linden Dollars", which can be changed into U.S. Dollars by using a stock market system. Their monetary circulation corresponds to financial transactions in real life, as Linden Lab's revenues clearly show: according to their own statements *Second Life* generates an average of approx. \$500,000(US) each week.¹³ The growing transaction volume shows that an increasing number of residents use *Second Life* not only as a kind of virtual playground but as an enlargement of their real life possibilities that has to be taken seriously.

⁹ See <http://secondlife.com/>. See also their own self-definition on <http://secondlife.com/corporate/tos.php>: "'Second Life' is the multi-user online service offered by Linden Lab, including the software provided to you by Linden Lab (collectively, the 'Linden Software') and the online environments that support the service, including without limitation access to the websites and services available from the domain and subdomains of <http://secondlife.com> (the 'Websites')."

¹⁰ The actual number was on November 21th, 2006 1.544.732. On the official Website <http://secondlife.com/> the actual numbers of residents altogether, the number of residents currently online and the volume of recent money transactions are presented. If in the last years the world was primarily inhabited by US-residents, the number of European users increased substantially in the recent months. The German group for example consists currently of approx. 15 000 residents and is one of the fastest growing groups. See the article "Second Life kommt auf Deutsch" (Second Life is released in German) in a well-known German newspaper 'The Focus'. Retrieved on November 18th, from http://www.focus.de/digital/netguide/online-game_nid_36203.html.

¹¹ <http://secondlife.com/whatis/faq.php>.

¹² See <http://teen.secondlife.com/>.

¹³ For further details dealing with the economic factors see Castronova, E. (2005). *Synthetic Worlds: The Business and Culture of Online Games*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

SECOND LIFE – WEDDING RITUALS [3]

Apart from financial aspects and influences cultural activities in Second Life play an important role: the users are both socially and religiously very active and consequently transfer real-life activities and therefore also religious symbols and performances into the virtual space. An example of religious space and activities can be seen in the Ruach Ministry¹⁴ which offers church services, prayer and meditation groups as one of about 20 churches in Second Life but also the possibility to pray on one's own, with complete prayer instructions and prescripts and the corresponding animation for the avatar. On the other hand, one can also find other religious temples like the Green Tara Tibetan Temple Drolma Lhakhang,¹⁵ where one can meditate and light candles as well as a Muslim mosque. Further examples are the Center for Hermetic Inquiry in Second Life,¹⁶ a lodge of freemasonry,¹⁷ a Daoist¹⁸ or a 'Guan Yin Shrine of the Goddess o'¹⁹ and many more which were all built by the users.

Besides religious activities there is one phenomenon that has become very popular in Second Life – the so called Online-Weddings.²⁰ There are many people who offer their services as wedding designers with a huge area full of wedding complexes in which currently approx. four to eight weddings take place per week. The weddings differ a lot in their style and performances: there are various wedding settings which range from small romantic places like beach areas, traditional churches, smaller and bigger castles to a rune setting for "hand fasting ceremonies", depending on what kind of ritual is required and how much one is willing to pay. Additionally, the residents can order individual settings that built just for this event. The same is true for the choice of the wedding dress, the jewellery, hair-style and make up, presents, and so on. Whatever one has to consider in a real

¹⁴ See the in-world adress: Veritas 112, 225, 27.

¹⁵ See the in-world adress: Wakeley 27, 71, 148.

¹⁶ See the in-world adress: Namhae 8, 212, 44.

¹⁷ See the in-world adress for the SL Masonic Lodge No. 1: Owllet 127, 97, 127.

¹⁸ See the in-world adress Callisto 240,231,76.

¹⁹ See the in-world adress Mieum 45, 90, 84.

²⁰ This phenomenon can also be found in other games, like Diablo II. To the surprise of the game developer the users demanded the implementation of an additional tool for the possibility to get married.

life wedding is also be observed in Second Life. We can find the same economic factors marking the basic conditions for a wedding. In this context one has to consider that weddings – in relation to the other costs like rent, clothing etc. – are relatively expensive in Second Life: prizes range – depending on the ‘package’ the couple chooses – from 5000 to 50.000 Linden Dollars. As in real life, a wedding in Second Life is arranged as a big event; it is well planned and money is put aside for it. Weddings also receive an official character, if the partners decide to give the name of his/her partner on the in-world-profile such as visit cards, where other persons can find information about the avatar’s activity, first life etc.²¹

Most of the observed²² weddings contains specific elements: after the arrival of the guests, the ‘handing over’ of the bride and the opening words from the so called ‘reverend’, who is mostly the wedding designer himself – but may also be an extra ‘reverend’ for the ceremony who is permanently employed in case the wedding design company consists of more people – the ceremony begins with the questioning of the couple whether they are willing to love each other, be honest and be there for the partner and vice versa. The structure and form of the weddings are relatively flexible, depending on what kind of wedding or ceremony the couple prefer. Mostly it includes the questioning, the vows, the exchange of rings and a long mostly self-written statement about their love and commitment to each other. The explicit and reflexive reproduction of religious traditions are rather the exception than the norm, but it is possible to identify implicit processes of reception and combination of elements from different traditions, like parts of anglican liturgy mixed with elements of modern handfasting ritual.

THEORETICAL REFLECTIONS [4]

Online-Weddings in Virtual Worlds represent a classical example for transfer processes and can be analysed with the concept of ‘Transfer of Ritual’²³ developed in the context of the Collaborative Research Center 619 “Dynam-

²¹ On the Site <http://secondlife.com/community/partners.php> you can fill out a proposal with which you can create a partnership, which will be published on your profile in-world.

²² In my analyses I used observant participation and made expert interviews. For further discussion about virtual ethnography see Hine, C. (2000). *Virtual Ethnography*. London: Sage.

²³ For the concept of „Ritual transfer“ see Langer, R., Lüddeckens, D., Radde, K., Snoek, J.A.M. (2006). Ritualtransfer. In: *Journal of Ritual Studies* 20(1), 1-20.

ics of Ritual".²⁴ In contrast to older ritual theories which assume rituals as unchangeable, repetitive, as having a fixed intention and framing and as being performed in a community, analyses verified the thesis that from an etic perspective rituals are always changing. The concept Transfer of Ritual thereby assumes that rituals – understood as a polythetic class²⁵ – are not isolated phenomena but are rather performed within a specific cultural context. The thesis is that "when a ritual is transferred, i.e. when one or more of its context aspects changes, changes in one or more of its internal dimensions can be expected".²⁶

By applying this theory to Online-Weddings in Virtual Worlds one can see the major change of the contextual aspect 'media'. This change affects the "internal dimensions".²⁷ First of all there is a change of performance and action. Because of the limited technical possibilities the avatars can only carry out restricted actions. Except for the arrival of the guests, the walk of the bridal couple, the sitting down on chairs – actions activated through animation poses - and the jubilation of the guests after the wedding, the ritual activities consist mainly of communication. Therefore the meaning of words, the spoken words of the reverend, the answers of the bridal couple and their thoughts via chat and instant messaging become more important. An example is presented by the missing exchange of rings, which is nevertheless said: "Groom: (Brides Name); with this ring I thee wed. Take it and wear it as a symbol of all we shall share. Bride: (Grooms Name); with this

²⁴ For further informations see <http://www.ritualdynamik.uni-hd.de/en/index.htm>.

²⁵ According to the polythetic approach ritual dimensions can be understood as a set of attributes which can be found in various rituals but need not be in every ritual. See Snoek, J. (2006). Defining 'Rituals'. In: Kreinath, J., Snoek, J., Stausberg, M. (Eds.). *Theorizing Rituals Vol. 1. Issues, Topics, Approaches, Concepts*. Leiden: Brill, p. 4f.: „A class is polythetic if and only if (A) each member of the class has a large but unspecified number of a set of characteristics occurring in the class as a whole, (B) each of those characteristic is possessed by a large number of those members, and (if fully polythetic) (C) no one of those characteristic is possessed by every member of the class." This paper can be considered as an enhancement of his dissertation published in 1987. See Snoek, J. (1987). *Initiations. A Methodological Approach to the Application of Classification and Definition Theory in the Study of Rituals*. Pijnacker: Dutch Efficiency Bureau, p. 29ff.

²⁶ Langer, R., Lüddeckens, D., Radde, K., Snoek, J.A.M. (2006). Ritualtransfer. In: *Journal of Ritual Studies* 20(1), p. 1.

²⁷ See Langer, R., Lüddeckens, D., Radde, K., Snoek, J.A.M. (2006). Ritualtransfer. In: *Journal of Ritual Studies* 20(1), 1-20, p.2: "Rituals are not only performed within a context (...) which affect them 'from outside'. A number of other aspects can be distinguished with respect to the rituals themselves. These can be interpreted within ritual theory as the different internal dimensions of a ritual." Examples for such Internal Dimensions are Performance, Script, Aesthetics, Structure, Interaction and many more.

ring I thee wed. Take it and wear it as a symbol of all we shall share.”²⁸ But the rings are not actually exchange as in ‘real-life’ weddings.²⁹ Another example is the changed importance of aesthetics. Many answers to the question why avatars marry in Second Life refer to the fact that contrary to ‘real life’ one can host a ‘Dream Wedding’ with a wedding gown like a princess etc.³⁰ Connected with this is the matter of participants. Because of the ability to have a tall, slender modell-like avatar with beautiful hair most of the residents look extremely good. Ugly avatars present the exception. Therefore one has more possibilities to create his/her own perfect wedding with the perfect good-looking avatar. Appearance and style consequently become very important for the participants.

Because of the technical possibilities and their limitations another change of the role of participants can be observed: only a restricted number of participants can be invited. With too many residents at the same place the system gets technical problems and the graphic representation for each attending guest becomes slower – a phenomenon called ‘time lag’. It is also not uncommon that the system crashes during the ceremony and the bride or groom disappear for a while to which the reverend has to react spontaneously.³¹

The Transfer of Ritual presents only one process of ‘Patchwork Rituals’ as a microcosm of ‘Patchwork Religion’ or one aspect of ‘Individual Religiousness.’ Individual Religiousness tries to describe individual constellations in the history of religions, which differ from predominant theologies which prescribe what a believer of a specific religion has to believe. Because

²⁸ This passage is taken from a ritual prescript “basic marriage ceremony” from the wedding designer R.M.

²⁹ For speechact theory see for example Austin, J. L. (1979²). *Zur Theorie der Sprechakte*. Stuttgart: Reclam and Searle, J. (1982). *Ausdruck und Bedeutung*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp.

³⁰ See the statement of the person S.A. who married her real life husband again in Second Life. Asked about her motivation to marry twice she answered: “first I was at jp no friends just us and family (...) this I i have a gown a wedding like i dreamed about but couldnt afford in rl and good friends to celebrate with.” Interview made by the author on September 25th 2006.

³¹ Interestingly a lot of wedding designers use these criteria as a new way to differ from their competitors. See the advertisement on the notecard from “Wedding Belle’s at Cameo Island’: *LAG* the dread of every Bride in SL! How embarrassing will it be when you drift off course because you’re so lagged you think you are still walking down the aisle when in fact you have walked over half of your guests on accident! Not at Wedding Belle’s! We’ve developed a remedy to wedding day lag! No more cumbersome balls to stand on while someone else *drags* you down the aisle, no more “floating” on an unanimated pose ball; no more hitching and straying off course by trying to walk on your own. Simply Glide down the aisle on our Custom Made Bridal Party Gliders and actually “Walk” down the aisle, serene and smiling at your guests and your Beloved awaiting you at the altar. Even hold Daddy’s arm as he escorts you to the altar.”

of the ability of the Internet to render religious discussions and the wide range of variations of religious self-conceptions not only of the ritual experts, but also of the common individual believers 'visible', analyses in the context of religious studies have to consider them and develop new analytical tools.³² Ritual Design and patchworking rituals as one process of it refer to the processes of combination of different religious or secular 'traditional elements' to a temporarily valid system for an individual, a group, a theology/ dogmatic or an institution: "(s)eparate elements of rituals are removed from their original context and in a new process [they are] (...) combined in different variations and moved into a new context."³³ It consists of different processes, such as selection, transfer, combination and recontextualisation of different traditions or so called traditional elements which have to come under examination. An explicit example for Ritual Design can be seen in the conception of wedding rituals for each bridal couple including their wishes and criteria:

"We customize your wedding to make it a dream come true. We have several Chapels to chose from or you give us your ideas and we work with them to give you the wedding you always dreamed of. That is what we are here for as your Angelic Wedding Planners. Chapels We Currently Have At the Main Location – Babylon – Wedding Castle – Beach Wedding Chapel – Goth Wedding Chapel – And recently added – Hawaiian Chapel – Autumn Chapel.

We have a formal ceremony already written with the ability for you to write your own vows. If you have found something else that you would prefer to use, we can work with that too."³⁴

Or "Ministry Weddings realizes that not everyone wants a traditional wedding if you are have a specific theme in mind, let us know! We have several theme ideas as well! Examples: Seasonal wedding themes, Egyptian/ Roman

³² For further information about 'Individual Religiousness' as a new paradigm in the study of religions see <http://www.rituals-online.uni-hd.de/en/>. Other analytical tools in this context are the ideas of 'Cluster' and 'Individual Rituality'. Further see Meier, G. (2006). Religion meets Internet. Plädoyer für einen differenzierten Umgang mit einem neuen Forschungsfeld. In: *Berliner Theologische Zeitschrift* 23/2, p.277-284 and Heidbrink, S., Miczek, N. (forthc.). Cyberspace – Ritual Space? Impulse zu religionswissenschaftlichen Untersuchungen christlicher Rituale im Internet. In: Arbeitstelle Gottesdienst. Göttingen.

³³ Radde-Antweiler, K. (2006). Rituals-Online. Transferring and Designing Rituals. *Online - Heidelberg Journal for Religions on the Internet*. (1/2). Special Issue on Rituals on the Internet, 66. See for further information Radde-Antweiler, K. (forthc.). *Ritualdesign im Medium Internet. Rezeption und Invention von Ritualtraditionen bei sogenannten magischen Ritualen der Wicca-Bewegung*. [PhD Thesis].

³⁴ From a notecard from "Angelic Wedding". See the in-world adress Tavarua 171, 89, 24.

weddings, Chinese/Indian/Hawaiian weddings, Renaissance weddings, Royal weddings, Victorian weddings, Star Trek weddings and many more! Please note: Custom weddings will need to be discussed in detail with a Ministry Weddings consultant and you will be provided a quote within 48 hours."³⁵

Linked with ritual patchworking of course is the question of ritual authority. Analysis shows that interactivity, commercialization and market-orientation influence the wedding designer concerning the selection of various ritual elements in order to attract as many users as possible. As an example, let me quote from an interview with the wedding designer called O.T. which was conducted via internet relay chat. To my question whether he integrates religious traditions in a wedding he answered: "T.: My first wedding I was asked to be a Rabbi. I was raised Jewish and had no trouble on that end. I am pagan and tend to focus on that end of the spectrum..and further on I am planning a Druidic Traditioned hand fasting for my next venture" On the question of how to actually plan such weddings he answered: "well there is a lot of text on Druidism...".

In conclusion one can stress that in contrast to Felicia Hughes-Freeland's statement that "(t)here is strong evidence for the claim that ritual cannot be subsumed or reproduced through media representations", analyses of On-line-Weddings in Second Life very clearly show that these rituals are very explicitly understood by the ritual participants and designers to be 'real rituals'. An example can be seen in an interview with a wedding designer. To the question how he would define a ritual he answered:

"T.O.: a ritual is an event that all parties involved perceive as a ritual

T.O.: If you went to a rabbi and had him say a bunch of words in Hebrew and you were raised French and knew no Hebrew .. this would not be a ritual

T.O.: the rabbi may think it is

T.O.: but the participants would not

T.O.: by the time my clients are married they know how real this day is".

And further of his distinction between online and offline-wedding:

"T.O.: in RL I have done a handfasting after I did my first in SL

T.O.: no difference...

T.O.: if you have the same intent that is what matters"³⁶.

³⁵ From a notecard from "Ministry Weddings". See the in-world address Sanggae 138, 176, 52.

³⁶ Interview conducted by the author on September 12th 2006.

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