

Avatars and Rituals:  
Immersive Religious Practices in the Digital Space  
*Victoria Dos Santos*

---

1. *Introduction*

One of the most characteristic figures of digital immersion is currently represented by the avatar. Coming from the Hinduist religious culture, the term has been used in the cyber-cultural scenario referring to the user's graphic representation in the virtual world. Despite the contribution to its popularity provided by digital games, the Avatar has a wider role in the ways that individuals manifest, relate and experience the online thanks to the ubiquity of digital media in almost – if not all – human activities.

As Paula Sibilía assures, the new practices of online self-exhibition “would be strategies that contemporary subjects put into action in order to respond to these new sociocultural demands, marking new ways of being in the world” (2008: 28). On that matter, users have found in the avatar a mechanism to express their subjectivities in all the different fields of actions that it covers, starting from virtual communities and web forums to digital games. Moreover, avatars also have allowed the interaction not only with the media but also with other subjects or entities with whom they share the virtual world. For such reasons, in this study the avatar will be analyzed as a strategy of participation in online religious performances while updating the potentialities of virtual spaces. This situation is particularly interesting since the avatar highlights how users act both as writers and readers of the virtual space, contributing to the production and reception of meaning.

This analysis also responds to the current conditions of the digital scenario, where due to its constant fluxes of information and intertextual dynamics, the dialogues with cultural expressions – as religion – has been intensifying. One of the consequences, is an increasing number of performances experienced through the figure of digital avatars – due to their immeasurable potentialities of interaction – not only in platforms with innovative and interactive interfaces, but even in spaces as those of digital games. On that matter, open-world<sup>1</sup> games such as Minecraft<sup>2</sup> and 3D virtual communities as Second Life<sup>3</sup>, have become collaborative and configurable spaces where many users engage with religious practices at considerable levels of immersion, and therefore become a medium in which to share, portray and practice their faiths.

This paper seeks to explore the potentialities of meaning of both the avatar and the digital open spaces of Minecraft and Second Life, in order to analyse how, through the enunciation of the religious by digital avatars, the way in which users can propose new experiences while enhancing the uses of such texts. In this scenario, the avatar is a powerful instrument of self-reflection – the subject projecting as a believer – and action – every time it creates or participates in religious

---

manifestations such as ritual – of the online context. This takes into account how religious practice in virtual worlds has allowed the reformulation the concept of the digital, understanding it not as a simple artefact, but rather as an environment in which particular meanings related to the spiritual are produced.

Julia Kristeva's theories of the *semanalysis*<sup>4</sup> and the signifying process, together with Umberto Eco's *Open Work* (1962) and the *Model Reader* (1979), comprise an interesting ground of analysis. Kristeva, on one side, will allow us to explore the processes of production of meaning occurring in the avatar, understanding it as a text – a signifying process – where dynamism and subjectivity is clearly conceived because of the speaking subject<sup>5</sup>. Eco's pragmatic model of cooperative interpretation, on the other hand, can highlight how the user's conceives the potentialities of the avatar and the virtual territory in order to manifest religious discourses. However, the main approach is that the very significant potential of these texts allow the production of practices that have a religious motivation. This, by paying singular attention to Kristeva's notion of text as interactive and heterogeneous, resulting from intertextual transpositions.

According to this, both the avatar and the virtual space are considered texts – following Kristeva's notion – that when coming into contact can even produce a ritual practice in the online context. This is important not only for the implications such interactions produced in the spiritual practice itself – which will be transforming and disrupting in virtual worlds – but to understand how users will take those texts and relieve them of their static condition by reactivating the poetic language. This notion of “poetic” allows a whole variety of new meanings and even new experiences, while challenging the homogeneity of language.

Two main reflections emerge in this study. The textual avatar, on the one hand, represents an act of productivity<sup>6</sup> due to its configurable, dynamic and dialogic characteristics, allowing the representation of the user in multiple ways without being forced to represent the ‘real’<sup>7</sup>. Instead of iconic or indexical correspondences, the translation from offline bodies to online numeric representations of oneself lies in the arbitrariness of the symbolic (Leone 2014: 11), thus “[t]he progressive digitalization of the signifier has transforms it in pure simulacra, which does not represent its object in the sense of a geometric projection but in that of an arithmetic reinvention” (*ibid.*).

On the other, the intertextual relations occurring between the avatar and the religious digital ritual – as two heteroclitic texts – can form interesting connections because of their open condition; allowing the emergence of new practices resulting from cooperative interpretations. The avatar's user, therefore, acquires the quality of *Model Reader* due to its essential role in the process of meaning making, contributing to actualize the potentialities of the virtual world by participating in the offered narratives. The user becomes also a Model Author, by proposing to other participants an alternative reading of the digital space, as a place to perform and experience religious activities.

For that matter, the value of such practices will not be based on the content of the objects but rather on the process by which it has been produced, which is the result of interpretative and intertextual dynamics: that of the ritual performance. Both theories considers the Peircean unlimited semiosis as well as the aperture and dialogic nature of texts. There are certainly radical differences between these two models, however they can work on different levels of analysis when exploring the uses of avatars for creating sacred spaces in digital worlds. There are, as well,

some interpretative limitations that must be taken into account. The potential interpretation of these spaces has clear limits depending on the platform interface and other aspects related to the narrative and the aesthetics.

For the purposes of this article, when avatars are mentioned the term will be referring to any graphical and visible constructions of the subject that allow the user's interaction with other digital avatars and the virtual world itself. Regarding the objects of study, the research will be carried out in open-world games – Second Life and Minecraft – which per se allows a multiplicity of potential options and strategies of enunciation.

## 2. *Avatars: an act of productivity*

One of the most important aspects in our integration process with computational technology is related to the user's experience of immersion with the digital environment, enabling a merge between the offline and the online contexts. With regard to this matter, when reflecting about the processes of embodiment within the virtual world, the figure of the avatar pops up: a device through which the user inhabits and experiences the online landscape in a more functional way. The avatar can be defined as “graphic representation that acts as a digital proxy through which internet users, a cybernetic community or a computer interface (as in the case of video games), negotiate their presence and interact with synthetic objects or other avatars of the digital world” (Pinotti 2019: 28).

In the classical notion, the Sanskrit term *avatāra* literally refers to “descent”. That is to say, the descent to earth of a divinity, in particular Vishnu, in order to restore and preserve the cosmic order. The avatar indicates a new, unexpected or revolutionary event such as the descent of the divine in a sensible and perceptible form – whether in animal or human body – to the physical plane. However, the meaning of the term in contemporary times is due to its massive use in computational media and its reference into narratives from cyberculture and science fiction of the nineties. The digital avatar actually reverses the process of the Hindu avatar “bringing the earthly into a realm of mediated abstraction” (Coleman 2011: 44), that is to say, placing the embodied user in the virtual world (Mukherjee 2012) and allowing him to inhabit a plane that otherwise would result unattainable for the user. On that matter, divinity would not become flesh, but “flesh would become virtual” (Dovey & Kennedy 2006: 144).

In the spaces of the virtual world, the relationships established between the user and the computer are carried out through graphic interfaces, in which the digital image occupies a preponderant place. Since the avatar becomes the graphic representation of the user, it would allow him to configure and configure himself as an image, proposing “new models of subjectivation based on the transfiguration of oneself”. The avatar, as a digital image, can be understood as “a sensitive transformation regarding the status of the virtual [allowing] intervention and transfiguration”. Digital images can, therefore, be altered and used in multiple ways (Sánchez Martínez 2011: 35).

Due to its dynamic and configurable properties, the digital avatar allows the user to establish micro-universes of subjectivities, without having to reproduce its physical referent. In other words, it reveals the “enunciated” user by processes of self-representation and self-reflection without necessarily repeating the “offline

subject” through simulations. The avatar, for that matter, is mostly symbolic. Its arbitrariness allows a liberating aperture on the users to processes of negotiation of meaning (Pinotti 2019) about their own identities. However, when configured in that other virtual universe, the avatar incorporates differences generated by the digital interfaces themselves, since “the interface links, through a device, technical aspects with individuals”. That is to say, it would no longer be “the same”, since it makes use of the tools and innovations that the computational medium offers, in order to generate a certain iconic correspondence with its physical referent – the user – or to creatively express its own identity as a simulation. In this sense, the avatar reveals the very openness of the digital system, giving the user the freedom to choose – among all the possible options – its own graphic construction.

The changeability and pragmatic properties of the digital avatar are, in some way, still related to its original classic roots from the Hindu religion. Even if the field of action has drastically change, both holds analogical relations between each other. For instance: neither the classic avatar nor its digital version holds iconic relations with its referent. Besides, the Hindu avatar’s cyclicity and numerousness (Sheth 2002: 112-113), offer more similitudes to the virtual heterogenic scenario than the dualistic and linear cartesian conceptions of the west.

In that regard, instead of being a closed work with fixed meaning, the contemporary avatar can be conceived as a *productivity*, because it proposes a different reading of itself – as a corpus – and allows for new expectations of analysis. In other words, the avatar is a text of multiple readings each time it is updated. It is not only a system or signs structure, but an unfinished process. Therefore, it would also bring about other processes of reading and interpreting the digital space, contributing to the textual cooperation between authors and receivers.

This conception of productivity comes from the semiotic theory of Julia Kristeva, for whom language is a dynamic transgressive process. In the development of what she calls the *semanalysis* – a critique of the elements and laws of meaning (Kristeva 1969: 23) – the text is described as a web of connections, a dynamized object and an intertextual network whose nature is fluid and open (Kristeva 1969), possessing a potential infinity of significance (Pérez Iglesias 1981). Each text is made up of multiple writings that, upon contact, form a dialogue, generating other discourses and entities, and disputing the notion of stable meanings: “Any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another” (Kristeva 1969: 37).

According to Kristeva, the text itself is a complex practice that must be understood through the specific significative act that takes place through language, even if it is not reduced to language itself. Kristeva moves away from the conception of signification and enters in that of *significance*<sup>8</sup>, since the text searches for the processes of production and transformation of meaning. The result is the establishment of the *signifying practice*, which can be understood as the recognition of a “speaking subject within a social framework”, that in turn he challenges, producing change and renewal (Kristeva 1980: 18). Therefore, the Kristevian text cannot be understood outside the open and infinitized productivity of meaning that the intertextual process implies (Bohórquez 1997).

The *signifying practice* taking place in texts, can be subdivided in two parts: a first and deeper area would represent the *genotex*, “which may be detected by means of certain aspects or elements of language, even though it is not linguistic per se” (Kristeva 1980: 7). The *genotex* is not a structure. It portrays the semiotic ele-

ment, the heterogenous and the potential infinity. Instead of revealing a signifying process it offers all possible signifying processes. The second and superficial area, the *phenotex*<sup>9</sup>, is “the language of communication” (Kristeva 1980: 7) and represents the articulated operations of the *genotex*. The *phenotex* supposed a subject of the enunciation and a receiver. It is the text in its concrete manifestation or material form. This pheno/geno distinction gives light to the processes of formation of the speaking subject and the works produced by him or her.

When bringing the avatar to this analysis, its field of action in digital environments is always in an state of virtual potentiality before being articulated as a discourse. That condition of “emptiness” ends when the user starts the process of its writing<sup>10</sup>, by designing its appearance, providing some information details, interacting with other avatars or entering into the story telling of the digital world where it belongs. Therefore, only when it is enunciated, the avatar’s *phenotex* is available. Only the *genotex* is always present: that deeper level possessing all the unintelligible information and data already given by the algorithmic construction of the avatar.

In this open dynamic of meanings generated by the avatar, Julia Kristeva’s semiotic and textual proposal will allow us to consider it more as an entity in process – a productivity – than as an established, closed and unalterable product (Fig. 1-2). This is in fact the logic of the Kristevian texts: less signification and more significance. Given that analysis, the “avatar text” is the result of intertextual connections among which other contextual circumstances, intervening in the production of its significance, also stand out. It is a multimodal, intertextual and dialogic corpus, representing a practice of productivity of other texts and meanings. Therefore, “its intertextual position symbolizes its configuration of words and utterances that already existed making a text double-voiced. It is a permutation of texts, an intertextuality: in the space of a text, many utterances taken from other texts intersect with one another and neutralize one another” (Orr 2003: 27; Raj 2015: 78).

### 3. Religious practice on the digital space: A textual practice.

Following Stewart Hoover (2012: 28), in order to understand religion in contemporary society “we must also understand media and the ways religions are being remade through their interaction with modern media”. This intersection



Fig. 1, 2 - *Second Life* Avatar.

between the spiritual and the digital environment, known among scholars as Digital Religion, can be defined as “that technological and cultural space that is evoked when we discuss how the religious spheres of online and offline have become increasingly mixed or integrated into our networked society” (Campbell 2012: 15). Therefore, by transcending “the bodily, the geographical, and the temporal” the virtual world, with its innate properties<sup>11</sup>, would come to represent that sphere “where time and space no longer limit what is possible” (Partridge 2005: 135).

From Abrahamic faiths to aboriginal religions, and from Asian traditions to contemporary paganism, a multiplicity of religious communities have been finding in the virtual context a space in which to manifest and carry out their practices, provoking structural changes in the belief systems and in the way which people understand and use digital platforms and devices. For that matter, “it is not possible to think of religion and media as separate spheres [since] the two are now converging on one another” (Hoover 2012: 30), contributing to a sort of “re-enchantment 2.0”, where the technical developments and progress are also accompanied by the mystification<sup>12</sup> of technology itself (Aupers 2002: 218). Such statements highlight a scenario of capital importance for semiotics, considering how the permeation of technological innovation in a sphere as universal as religion has distorted the structures of meaning, producing new objects of analysis: religions using digital media as instruments and religions inhabiting digital media as an environment.

Considering the growing presence of digital religious practices, the interest of scholars began to be directed towards the changes suffered by the more traditional faiths in their migration to the online arena (Bunt 2003) and how communication technologies influence the way in which users practice or perceive religiosity (Campbell 2005). “Digital Religion” has been focused not only on the migration of various spiritualities to cyberspace, but also the unleashing of new discourses, creating other paradigms of faith which are “fluid and evolving, and seeks out new resources, symbols, and experiences to bring into a kind of ‘syncretism of individual experience’” (Hoover 2012: 30). In other words, the particular conditions of the virtual space have determined the spiritual experience itself, contributing to processes that influence traditional religions and that have perhaps allowed the manifestation of innovative ways of experiencing religious encounters and performances.

Among all religious activities that can be carried out in such mediums, ritual is ultimately the most interactive and immersive one that expresses certain meanings and effects (Bell 1997: 138) and consequently, in which one can experience transformation and religion itself. Ritual<sup>13</sup> is a heterogeneous and polyedric term with multiple and complex potentialities of construction and transformation of meaning. From a pragmatic point of view, it is one of the most outstanding aspects of religion, since it represents the practice that best legitimates, renews and portrays the relation between the believer and the spiritual path. When studying digital performances of a religious nature, the avatar’s possibilities can be tested in rituals, not only in order to reach an aesthetic resemblance to the offline experience, but also to obtain the immersive levels that are needed to generate their transformative effects (Fig. 3).

If the main believer’s intention is to connect with the sacred, as well as with other participants, they need virtual interactive environments allowing them to share



Fig. 3 - Temple in *Minecraft*.

personal beliefs and to participate in acts of faith through dynamic forms of on-line interaction and reciprocal engagement (Helland 2015). Many of those digital experiences are lived in different types of platforms or media that function as “sacramental spaces” (Campbell 2004) because of the adaptation of symbols, ritual and practices within the virtual environment for religious purposes.

Digital games, for instance, have become one of those meaning-making contemporary practices, functioning as Sacramental Spaces, in which it is possible to portray or emulate religious narratives in a direct or implicit way<sup>14</sup>. Even if it is not new to observe religious ideologies in digital games, many believers from traditional and non-traditional religions have been using them consciously as a medium to share, portray and practice their faiths. These dialogues with spiritual beliefs “allows players to participate emotionally in the game even if this presents scenarios and situations that they would not accept as realistic or possible in their everyday life” (Idone & Thibault 2019: 75). Therefore, “[t]he ludic experience itself become a paradigmatic setting for reflections on the nature of fiction and truth, for the experience of leap of faiths or to test our own convictions and perspectives” (*ibid.*).

In *Minecraft* and *Second Life*, the actions carried out by the avatar would update such spaces by bringing their own religious activities to the plane of expression. Therefore, it will increase the significant possibilities of the digital environment by building different and novel texts. Through this, a diversity of activities and practices appearing to be far or opposed to spiritual pursuits acquire a religious dimension. This makes the digital religious performance not only highly dialogic but translinguistic<sup>15</sup>, given that it is comprised of different languages emerging from different areas of culture and society. On that matter, the experience is deeply close to the religious, even if the way it has been uttered may even seem profane.

In interactive virtual communities like *Second Life*, there are plenty of visual tools working as means of stimulation, in order to ‘travel’ between different realities. This platform has been gaining a high degree of popularity among religious participants for its interactive dynamics that have transcended the merely ludic. In

Second Life, it is possible to carry out different types of actions like interacting with other participants, building iconic sacred spaces, praying and even developing ritual performances. In those spaces, users that are embodied-incarnated in their avatars can actually perform all that diversity of interactions through them. For instance, in The Buddha Center<sup>16</sup> (Fig. 4), members can learn Buddhism from experienced monastics while meeting with other users who will speak of their various practices and personal experiences.

However, the options are also open for non-traditional religions, like the neo-pagan communities. They can buy sacred tools in the official Second Life Marketplace and can also attend classes and celebrations in organized pagan communities which actually exist in the real world. In the Wiccan Learning Center<sup>17</sup>, members can read books and even learn how to prepare an altar. Something similar happens in the Children of Artemis<sup>18</sup> (Fig. 5), a coven – that is, an organized group of witches or pagans – created in order to connect people with same spiritual interest in order to assist or participate in religious festivities. In the specific case of rituals, the preparation for them is ultimately the most important step, as the user’s subjectivity is expressed to the fullest there. An example can be seen in Alexis Nightlinger<sup>19</sup>, a Second Life member who appears as a contemporary witch. When preparing to celebrate Samhain – the Indo-European festivity that inspired Halloween – she not only dressed up her avatar with the relevant clothing, jewels and makeup, but also arranged her virtual home with iconic references to the sacred tools, fictionalized creatures and objects which really exist in the physical world. Her altar contained a variety of symbolic pagan elements, which while remaining faithful to her religion, also included a notable level of personalization (Fig. 6). There is also the possibility of “activating” some of those elements, for instance, clicking on the altar in order to light the candles.

As Massimo Leone (2011: 340) assured, “the enunciation of the religious dimension in Second Life through the various semiotic elements that compose its representation and interactive dynamics can become an object of study, according to the perspective that requires an aesthetic, phenomenological and semiotic sensi-



Fig. 4 - Buddha Center in *Second Life*.



Fig. 5 - Children of Artemis in *Second Life*.



Fig. 6 - Samhain ritual in *Second Life*.



bility”. However, and for purposes of this article, the analysis will be limited to how the interpretation of such environments allows users to construct and express their religious dimension.

One of the main advantages of Second Life are the multiple alternative combinations when creating an avatar. When users are free from the limitations of the offline environment, they find themselves surrounded by a multiplicity of options from which to choose, combine and construct their avatar bodies, as well as their sacred spaces. The participant can be in control of every small detail, including the flooring, and particular elements for the priests and priestess to develop their celebrations or sermons. The creator can also enable specific animations, (like praying) in order to create a more immersive experience. Furthermore, users are in a constant performative condition considering that such practices are the result of their imagination and interpretation, creating particular narratives in those virtual worlds.

Minecraft, an open-world, exploratory and generative game, represents an interesting example. Because it is highly interactive, many participants make use of the game’s unlimited building possibilities to introduce into it religious actions and aesthetics. By using virtual bricks, there is the possibility of creating a variety of elements: from Noah’s Ark, to religious icons – basically using blocky objects representing “skin” – in the form of Jesus, popes, priests, rabbis, and angels, for example<sup>20</sup>. When performing a ritual, it is possible to have access to a diversity of objects like potions, crystal balls, altars and spells, depending on the user’s religious path. It is also possible to create fictional religious narratives working as a pastiche of many different belief systems. For instance, in the Botania mod<sup>21</sup> – characterized by natural magic and magically altered flowers – the user can prepare a ritual for summoning Gaia (Fig. 7) by carefully constructing the “sacred space” with blocks, flowers and other magic objects. The player even has a instruction manual that allows the user to successfully undertake the activity. Here the game makes reference to neo-pagan or even shamanic religious traditions.

Another interesting case, is that of Jeremy Smith<sup>22</sup>, creator of the Minecraft Theology Project, where he shares key principles of Christianity, while at the same time playing the game. Smith sought to represent his religious reflections in the game, by creating a narrative that aligns both the ludic and the spiritual. For instance, in one of his videos he talked about how important is to let God be in control of given situations, meanwhile his avatar was subject to difficult conditions in the virtual world. He recreated a practical experience in a Catholic sermon within the game, and even shared biblical messages such as: “So do not fear, for



Fig. 7 - Gaia Ritual in *Minecraft*.

I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God (Fig. 8). I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand” (Isaiah 41,10). What is important for our purposes in those online performances is not their value or their content; it is the signifying process taking place in those texts, which as a dynamic production of meaning, are both open and intertextual. This semiotic understanding of texts, contrary to the Greimasian theories, is at the same time closer to Fontanille’s conception of practices, where the development is open and there is not an initial or final point from which to extract a specific transformation (Fontanille 2016: 130). Instead of having a specific value, these textual practices have objectives<sup>23</sup>, which are simultaneously built into the action (*ibid.*).

The scenarios already presented comprise interesting grounds of analysis for the cooperative interpretation of digital spaces and avatars, when bringing – or creatively constructing – religious rituals online. Not only for the implications such interactions produce in the spiritual practice itself – which will be transforming and disrupting in virtual worlds – but also for the way that users will take those texts and relieve them of their static condition. It thus re-activates the poetic language, by welcoming a new range of meanings and practices.

The value of the poetic language relies on its own construction and, as Kristeva (1969: 67) asserts, refers to everything that isn’t still a law. In this sense, the important aspect is set neither in the practice’s value nor in the relationship with its own objects, but in the performative development, as well as in the connections, updates or other types of cooperation that are built up in such practices. Therefore, the key aspect is the way in which the user’s “artisan labour” produces experiences emerging from their own religious interpretation as well as from the opening of such texts.

#### 4. *Writer and Reader: the avatar as a double*

According to what has been mentioned before, if the avatar re-writes its functions and its mode of participation when bringing the religious aspect to the online experience, it will be able to position both itself and the virtual sacred space as a *production*, and not as a *product*, since the later would imply delimiting its significant potentialities. Therefore, the avatar’s performance in the digital environment represents an open text that, through the user, expresses its potentialities of significance while updating.

The constructions of religious temples and altars, as well as the performance of rituals in platforms like Minecraft and Second Life, can be understood according



Fig. 8 - Minecraft Theology project in *Minecraft*.

to Umberto Eco's theory, where the text, in order to function, needs to be updated by the reader's cooperative, active and conscious movements (Eco 1979: 76). For that matter, the religious practice carried out through an avatar is actualized within one of its multiple potentialities every time it is performed (Fig. 9). In other words, when building a sacred space and bringing a ritual to the "online", the way in which it is performed would determinate the reader's interpretation of the text. And at the same time, the reader will be the one keeping the text working through his interpretive cooperation.

Through the avatar, the user also manifests its own subjectivities when enunciating in the digital text. It is here that we can also observe how the empirical reader becomes a model reader: through its own textual cooperation, the user updates the potentialities that are virtually contained in the avatar's *genotext*. In this process, the reader also transforms itself into a author, because its performance will produce other texts that will be interpreted by other players. However, it is important to specify that the user cannot be completely considered the author of such texts, since both the avatar and the digital platform are already created, and the cooperation they can receive are already virtually delimited. Therefore, because it is possible to track the author's strategies by the answers and movements performed by the model reader (Meneghelli 2009: 118), the interpretative actions are never arbitrary. Barthes's theory about the text – as opposed to the work – resonates in this scenario, as well as Kristeva's assertions about the text always in process and about the semiotics of productivity that tends to apprehend the dynamic way of production instead of the product itself (Kristeva 1969: 51). Therefore, the avatar acts as a double – writer and reader – when actively participating in the development of the performance, as well as when proposing new ways of acting and modifying the digital space. In consequence, the avatar would function as a generator of processes of meaning.

Two significant factors enter into this reflection: the first is based upon how the creators of the platform believe the online medium should be used when it comes to engagement with religious narratives. In this way, the acknowledgment of the author's intention would transform the user into a model reader. The second factor involves the participants' own reading and interpretation of the medium. Here they choose how religious actions should take place and how to interact with the platform. This will affect future "readings" of the game and how the developers of these platforms will consider the potentialities of the virtual space. Regarding the religious performances, it would therefore be important when considering other ways of relating with the numinous in an environment that, although diverse, is no less real.

In the digital universe, with its own conditions and structures, users are offered new depths expanding their horizons, thus allowing them to access levels of ex-



Fig. 9 - *Second Life* collective Ritual.

perience otherwise impossible to be reached without the virtualization generated by such technologies<sup>24</sup>. The immersive and interactive characteristics of the avatar can be understood as complex enunciative strategies that conditions the success of the digital experience. Because of them, the avatar is able of experiencing the religious performance, while creating and inhabiting sacramental spaces in which the user rewrites its relationship with the sacred. For this reason, the influence of the avatar is bi-directional (Pinotti 2019): the relationships are not solely built from the physical dimension, but the practices carried out in the online context influence and affect the emotional, behavioural and cognitive spectrum of the user. The avatar confronts the ideas of the digital as an artificial environment by questioning the concept of presence, where other experiences as body ownership and agency also collaborate to increase the feeling of “being” into the territories of the online. That is the reason why the immersive potentialities are so important; from them it is possible to perceive the avatars’ experiences as their own, as well as the degree of participation and cooperation that can occur in the digital performance. On that matter, the bigger the quality of the avatar interface and the sense of being digitally embodied in them, the bigger the textual cooperation in order to provide a positive religious experience.

Through the examples of Second Life and Minecraft, is possible to see how 3D interactive communities and digital games “produce experiential and semiotic dimensions that are akin to those involved in religion” (Idone & Thibault 2019: 87) and the religious sense itself. Because they are open worlds, players can personalize them, and interpret them, combining those texts with their personal narratives. This can be understood by Eco’s notion of work in movement, “because they characteristically consist of unplanned or physically incomplete structural units” allowing a multiplicity of personal interventions. However this is not an invitation to indiscriminate participation, but instead to an organic involvement of the reader into an unfinished work that he can freely complete but always into certain possibilities already expected, or potentially consented, by the author.

## *5. Conclusion*

The role of digital technologies in our contemporary environment has introduced a scenario that a few decades ago was thought to belong only to fictional narratives: artificial Intelligence, advances in robotics, a more fluid interaction between human-machine interaction and an increasing use of virtual and augmented realities in the areas that range from the ludic to science and medicine. All of these conditions present in the contemporary panorama do not only imply the disruption and reformulation of the communicative processes mediated by computational platforms, but also a rethinking of how we relate to the digital universe and its complex processes.

Although digital networks have already become an important part of our memory and of our cultural and scientific heritage, their effect continues to transform and reinvent each and every one of these structures. Such a scenario is important when reflecting why digital networks represent a space in which believers can understand the global panorama and also discover their own beliefs. This can be done by taking into account that “religion has always been in the vanguard of social movements” (Cowan 2005: 5).

The limits of what was thought to be valid in terms of religious beliefs have been disrupted when novel ways of performing rituals take place. Therefore, when observing how computational technologies have acquired a great importance in every aspect of human lives, it is not a surprise that the algorithmic construction of virtual spaces and the peculiar dynamics of participation of digital games have the power to influence cultural practices as much as the religious ones. Quoting Campbell & Vitullo (2016: 82): “The Internet is not a completely separate space; it is integrated by its proximity in many religious behaviours and rituals. As part of everyday social life, it is also a central part of religious existence”.

Therefore, by establishing cyberspace as the stage where religious practices can also be manifested, the avatar would become that liminal element between the physical self of the user and the virtual universe in which the religious act takes place, representing at the same time all the potentialities that an online dimension in specific can offer. Through its participation as an avatar, the user contributes to the updating of digital texts in the dynamics of communications. However, it also becomes a co-author or “co-enunciator” (Meneghelli 2007) when proposing other potential actions or aesthetical combinations for the avatar as well as other relationships strategies with digital platforms, either by producing digital religious performances or by rethinking the virtual context as a space that welcomes the sacred. It is then possible to speak of a new scenario in which complex semiotic processes are being developed, while inviting the reader to collaborate and proposed other textual practices related to the religious.

As was already shown using the semiotic theory of Julia Kristeva, the text it is not a complete and finished semiotic product – as for instance in Greimasian semiotics – but is an act of productivity, more connected to Peirce’s unlimited semiosis. Both the Avatar and the virtual space, understood as texts, when combining generates other interesting textual relations, resulting in performances of poetic and heterogeneous nature as the digital rituals studied in this contribution. These performances can be also related to Fontanille’s semiotic practice, where a text can be understood from a practical point of view and therefore the importance lies not in the limitations or in the object’s meaning, but instead in how the development of such actions are articulated. That is to say, the meaning arises from the practice movements and dynamism (Fontanille 2016: 129).

Nevertheless, it is through Eco and Kristeva’s theories – acknowledging their different levels of action – that it is possible to understand how the interpretation of those spaces and the faculties of the avatar allows the user to transcend the dualistic limits of these practices – which most of the time propose the online scenario as merely artificial – and instead generate a poetic of the digital ritual practice, where the objective is not a specific act of communication but instead the production of *significance* by means of new intertextual connections and therefore new interpretations.

---

1 Open-world games – also known as sandbox game – refers to “a video game with a gameplay element that gives the player a great degree of creativity to complete tasks towards a goal within the game, if such a goal exists” (cited from Wikipedia).

2 Created in 2009 by Markus “Notch” Persson and develop by Mojang, Minecraft is a sandbox digital game. There, users can create their own worlds and experiences, using building blocks, a variety of resources and their own creativity.

- 3 Created in 2003 by Linden Lab, Second Life is a popular and versatile user-created 3D universe. Quoting Massimo Leone (2010: 339), Second Life “creates a digital three-dimensional representation with a high degree of interactivity and verisimilitude with the non-digital reality (Krausnick 2006). Each user can interact with this representation and with the other users through a digital simulacrum as well as contribute to the construction and the changing of the representation as a whole”.
- 4 “With an axis on the concept of text as productivity, Kristeva proposes to develop a *semanalysis*, a critical and deconstructive science that, from the text and beyond the communicative language, explores language as production, transgression and meaning transformation” (Suniga & Tonkonoff 2012: 4).
- 5 The subject is an entity in process and it is attached to the text. Therefore, the text does not only conceives the renewal of meaning in relation to language and social phenomena, but also in relation to subjects. Subjectivity is implicit in all Kristeva’s work, because it focus in the disruptive processes occurring in human beings and how such “poetic liberation” produce meaning.
- 6 Kristeva links the text with the concept of productivity. She derives it from Marx’s concept of the “mode of production”, proposing how values are effect of a system of relations.
- 7 Through her analysis, Kristeva assures that the text is not satisfied in representing the real, simply because it is oriented in the significant system in which is produced and in the social process in which it participates as a discourse (Kristeva 1969).
- 8 Significance, as Kristeva uses this concept, refers to the operation performed in language “that enables a text to signify what representative and communicative speech does not say” (Kristeva 1980: 18). It is the heterogenic aspect of meaning.
- 9 The *phenotex* actually seeks to explain and make intelligible the Genotex.
- 10 For Kristeva (1969: 53) the concept of writing refers to a text seen as production.
- 11 The digital space is a collective ecosystem where all the ‘personal’ spaces are interrelated through software. Internet should not consider as an instrument but as an environment, providing experiences as “a new world gifted with new rules” (Vecoli 2013: 65).
- 12 This can be understood when thinking, for instance, of the continuous developments in extended realities and human-machine interaction, where the degree of immersion have certainly overcome the interface opacity, minimizing the perception of device mediation.
- 13 In a general sense, rituals can be defined as a way of communication (Douglas 1973: 25), which is constituted by a codified set of symbolic actions and articulated in a specific space and time, expressing the values and beliefs of a community with the purpose of creating and reinforcing the sense of identity and social cohesion (Chidester & Linenthal 1995: 9).
- 14 Implicit Religion refers to “some forms of contemporary practice or meaning-making can take on religious-like qualities to the extent that beliefs and practices associated with them can be defined as exhibiting a family resemblance to religion” (Campbell & Evolvi 2019: 12-13).
- 15 “Trans-linguistic apparatus that redistributes the order of language” (Kristeva 1980: 36) and it is not dominated by an ideology, nor by history, and cannot be reduced to any language .
- 16 Buddha Center webpage: <https://secondlife.com/destination/1066>.
- 17 Wiccan Learning Center webpage: <https://secondlife.com/destination/wiccan-learning-center>.
- 18 Children of Artemis webpage: <https://witchcraft.org/secondlife/>.
- 19 Alexis Nightlinger and her Halloween ritual performance: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=axxoawrA0Y4>.
- 20 Information took from a web article <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2018/02/06/if-you-build-they-pray-constructing-religious-worlds-minecraft/312030002/>.
- 21 Referring to an alteration of the original game through new characters or items.
- 22 Minecraft Theology Webpage: <https://churchm.ag/minecraft-theology-letting-god-be-in-control-season-3-episode-02/>
- 23 To read more about Fontanille’s semiotic practice, see: *Pratique sémiotique*, Presses Universitaires de France, 2008.
- 24 When carrying out a ritual without the space-time restrictions of the physical world and with the possibility of inviting and using any type of elements, even fictional ones.