Medieval Saints and Modern Screens
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My Avatar, My Soul: When Mystics Log On

Vision, Presence, and Virtual Reality

If there’s one thing wannabe-saint Margery Kempe can do well, it’s hobnob with biblical types. Margery makes it a priority to be seen at all the best spiritual parties. In one of her earliest visions, she inserts herself into the Nativity scene as a dutiful helpmate to the Virgin and her baby. She procures lodgings in Bethlehem, begs for food and cloth, and even swaddles the Christ Child. So doing, Margery takes on the role of the handmaid or midwife that assists at Christ’s birth, an apocryphal figure that was nevertheless a main-stay of Nativity iconography. As with most elements in Margery’s career as a holy woman, though, she’s got some stiff competition in the child-care arena. In a vision, Ida of Louvain goes one further, and bathes the infant Christ. Drying him off, Ida plays with him ‘familiarly in motherly fashion’ (‘materno more familiariter’). In fact, her maternal attachment is so strong that she refuses the Virgin Mary’s request for her to hand back the child, leading to a farcical wrestling match between the pair.

Margery Kempe and Ida of Louvain do not contemplate biblical history with dry theological detachment. Rather, they immerse themselves in it fully, injecting themselves into the action. Their devotional proclivities reflect the growing popularity of dynamic visualization of biblical history as a form of prayer. Meditational manuals proliferated from the mid-twelfth century onwards. These works are essentially ‘visionary scripts’, ‘texts meant to help readers visualize the life of Christ so vividly that pious imagination would shade into visionary experience’. For the skilled, ‘visualizing becomes seeing’. The ultimate aim of seeing was to become fully present at the moment in which the event occurs. This is underscored by the fourteenth-century pseudo-Bonaventuran Meditaciones vite Christi (Meditations on the Life of Christ), the most popular text of its kind. The author, somewhat dubiously identified as John of Caulibus, proclaims: ‘Simply make yourself present in the very place where, before your eyes, it occurs to your mind that

1 *MKB*, 1.6.402-35.32-33.
2 *VILovEng*, 2.11.22c.56; *VILov*, 2.5.22.177.
4 Ibid., p. 29.
events were taking place’. In this move, the visionary inserts themselves into biblical history as an active participant in a kind of divine ‘virtual reality’. Writing in 2013, Jesuit priest Antonio Spadaro maintains that this kind of medieval ‘virtual reality’ meets the needs of modern Christians, thoroughly acculturated to the participatory and individualistic bent of much modern media culture. In an earlier article, published in a journal approved by the Vatican Secretary of State, the cleric called upon Catholics to enter the three-dimensional online environment of Second Life (SL). The virtual world represents a mission field, in which the pious should spread the Word.

It’s 28 April 2016. I’m sat at home, in front of my laptop. On the screen in front of me, my digital representation (avatar) is in SL. Spadaro’s contentions as to the draw of spiritual ‘virtual reality’, and SL as a space for religious ministry, ring in my ears. I’m attending a service at the First United Church of Christ and Conference Centre in Second Life (FUCCSL), along with a handful of other SL users. The minister’s sermon consists of ‘imaginative prayer’. The pastor situates us as actors in a biblical scene: ‘You’ve spent the night sleeping in the same room as Jesus and his disciples’. At the climax of the scene, Jesus speaks to us directly: “I’m glad you’re here. […] I was praying. Would you like to pray with me?” He then teaches us the Lord’s Prayer. It’s an uncanny parallel of the immersive visualizations contained in medieval meditation manuals. SL is particularly suited to the technique, or so it feels. I’m already engaged in an act of visualization, projecting myself from offline body to online avatar. I don’t just see my avatar, I am my avatar, authentically present in the ‘real’ digital realm. A further projection outwards, backwards into the biblical narrative, just adds another layer. It’s as if my SL avatar ‘logs on’ to another virtual world, one that happens to be religiously themed.

Various individuals have commented on the religious valency of cyberspace. Julian Dibbell, a consultant to the creators of SL (Linden Lab), argues that there are significant links between all online/virtual
and (religious) offline experiences. He maintains that the experience of virtual reality involves the same processes of making meaning from signs and symbols as religious experience: ‘You see signs and signals but you give them meaning. Even the rites of the Catholic Church are an interaction of signs, tokens and material symbols of faith, given their meaning by what is happening in the mind and soul of the believer.” 11 Scholar of online religious behaviour Cheryl Casey maintains that cyberspace is ‘a uniquely appropriate medium’ for religious rituals: ‘By offering virtual presence from inside a virtual realm, ritual, as enacted symbol in cyberspace, is all the more effective at pointing beyond itself to the divine or the sacred.’ 12 More emphatically, sociologist of religion Rachel Wagner argues that SL, in its totality, can be understood as a sacred space:

The computer defines its space (at least with current technology) with a window into which we peer – and into which we are invited to project our selves in some way or another. [...] One enters Second Life. One leaves Second Life. One shifts one’s ‘appearance’ when one enacts one’s avatar. One forgoes the ordinary needs of daily life when one enters – there is no eating, no sleeping, and no aging in Second Life. Some have even considered the possibility of inhabiting virtual space as a sort of digital heaven [...] 13

In this chapter, I argue that the divine visions of medieval saints are meditative experiences in which they access a similar kind of ‘digital heaven’. Whilst the SL user logs on to this space via mouse-clicks and passwords, the medieval saint logs on to visions via devout prayer and contemplation. The modern worship experiences of SL Christians elucidate the experiences of medieval mystics, and vice versa. Clear parallels emerge between SL and vision space, as both are notionally disembodied realms, filled with live and authentic interactions. The offline user (body) and online avatar (spirit) can never fully be separated. There is a marked tension between orthodox and heterodox usage of SL as a religious space. The same issue troubles mystical vision space, a realm which potentially offers medieval holy women liberation from clerical control.

To begin, a brief overview of SL is necessary. SL is an internet-based virtual world designed to allow users (‘Residents’) to live out a fabricated

12 P. 76.
13 P. 275.
version of life. Customizable avatars – virtual representations of the SL user in front of the computer – allow Residents to navigate the World and interact (via text-based instant messenger or voice chat). Residents can engage in hobbies, hold down full-time virtual jobs, buy land, create and trade virtual products, tour the virtual globe, and so on. Launched in 2003 by Linden Lab, SL has proved to be hugely popular, and claims to be the ‘largest-ever 3D virtual world created entirely by its users’. Exact figures for usage of SL are not available, and it is difficult to determine consistent long-term usage of the site. However, as of April 2017, just under fifty million accounts had been registered. Based on data from the first quarter of 2017, SL’s daily concurrency (the amount of Residents logged-in per day) ranges from 53,000 to 31,000 users, with a median of 43,000 users. On average, there are currently 8,000 to 10,000 new user signups for SL per day. In February 2017, Linden Lab reported 800,000 Residents are active in the environment per month. The last official statement relating to SL’s economic buoyancy dates to April 2016. Ebbe Altberg, Linden Lab’s CEO, informed journalists that SL’s gross domestic profit (GDP) amounted to $500 million, a GDP ‘the size of some small countries’. Thanks to in-World transactions, SL businesses redeemed $60 million in ‘real’ money in 2015.

In two interview periods, in 2011 and 2016, I conducted a research study within SL, asking a total of twenty-four Christian Residents about their religious worship online and offline. The excerpts from the interviews featured in this book have been anonymized, with only basic data appended. Where possible, a particular denomination is also attached to specific responses. This study was intended to offer a snapshot of Christian worship practices in SL, with responses garnered from across the denominational spectrum. To qualify for inclusion in the study, Residents must have expressed their religion online in some form in the six months preceding our interview, recognizing their activities as a meaningful part of their personal worship. The small sample size of the interviews means that the data are not statistically rigorous. Nevertheless, the results offer meaningful insight into this area of devotion, with Christians testifying, in their own words, about

14 On SL generally, see: Au, Making; Boellstorff; Meadows; Turkle, pp. 158-61, 192-93, 212-19.
16 Linden Lab, ‘User Statistics’, n.p. As of 7 April 2017 (2.30pm), the number of registered accounts totalled 49,791,006, and 34,749 users were logged in.
17 Voyager, n.p. All statistics are derived from a database containing both historical and up-to-the minute SL metrics. For this, see: Shepherd.
19 Maberg, n.p.
how and why they practise in SL. Non-standard spelling, punctuation, and grammar in all quotations from interviewees and online message boards are preserved. Half of interviewees (twelve respondents) hold positions of religious leadership or are employed in some religious capacity offline. Moreover, over half of respondents (fourteen Residents) act as a spiritual leader or functionary in SL, undertaking tasks integral to the running of their religious community. Thus, the results from this study are necessarily skewed to present the attitudes of a highly engaged core of practitioners. The religious utility of SL is founded on the World’s precise mechanics. In the following section, then, I situate the environment within media more generally, clarifying what makes SL unique as a representational space.

Situating SL: Disentangling Television, Film, and Virtual Worlds

Philip Auslander argues that television is understood ontologically as live, and the medium’s ‘essence’ is grounded in the understanding of ‘its ability to transmit events as they occur, not in a filmic capacity to record events for later viewing’.20 Though the majority of television is now recorded output, the medium’s origin in live transmissions forms an ideological framework of ‘liveness’ which continues to this day. Television, then, is more akin to theatre than film. Whilst the latter may purport to capture live moments, the audience is never watching a truly live event as it unfolds. Disappearance is integral to live performances, televisual or theatre-based, as the event being watched immediately and ineluctably disappears from view, never to be seen again.21 By contrast, film – in viewing patterns of the modern audience – is based on repetition. The viewer can watch and rewatch the filmic ‘present’ event at will, by replaying a DVD or digital file over and over. Nonetheless, viewing movies more traditionally at the cinema contains a kernel of ‘liveness’ inasmuch as the spectator is having a specific experience of the film which was impossible to repeat in the era before VHS, DVD, and digital media streaming. Further, spectators in a movie theatre have a shared, unrepeatable experience by dint of the presence of other audience members in the screening room. In a footnote, Auslander acknowledges that interactive computer technologies – a grouping which includes SL – are also grounded in a sense of ‘liveness’, that is the immediate contact between user

21 Auslander, pp. 43-46.
and machine, or in the case of SL, the ‘live’ contact between user, machine, and other users.\textsuperscript{22}

For Auslander, an important facet of live performance is the disjunction between the audience and the performers. Whilst watching theatre, for example, ‘provokes our desire for community’, ultimately it ‘cannot satisfy that desire because performance is founded on difference, on separation and fragmentation, not unity’.\textsuperscript{23} SL interactions challenge Auslander’s propositions, in particular the ‘unbridgeable distance between audience and performance’. In SL, users operate on the level of audience member and of the performer as the avatar ‘performs’ the user’s offline identity in a shared space, populated by other avatars, whose users are equally engaged in ‘performance’. The Resident is thus ‘an active participant in constituting the spectacle’.\textsuperscript{24} Moreover, SL is predicated on such user creation of ‘action’ in the World. In this way, it is ‘more than just a game’, as Marc Fetscherin and Christoph Lattemann affirm: ‘there are no levels, no scores, and there is no “game over”’.\textsuperscript{25} Similarly, Bernhard Drax, a veteran documentarian of and expert in SL culture, underlines the fact that the World is ‘absolutely not a game’.\textsuperscript{26} Rather, SL is an immersive digital ecosystem, in which user-created games may be played. Though virtual environments find parallels in television thanks to a shared ‘ontology of liveness’, the former is vitally constituted by user participation and interaction with the medium, which the latter can only partially mimic.\textsuperscript{27}

In the previous chapter, I analysed the ways in which different audiences – fan bases – produce specific iterations of a celebrity or saint’s identity, with reference to Marie of Oignies. Throughout the discussion, I emphasized Marie’s lack of participation in constructing her celebrity image. SL users, by comparison, are highly dynamic producers of their own mediated representations. Helen Woods defines celebrity as ‘being someone through the media’.\textsuperscript{28} This exceptional classification breaks down with SL, and in the digital era more generally, as almost all of us are mediatized online in some form. Michael A. Stefanone et al. remark that ‘social behaviors commonly associated with mediated celebrity are now being enacted by non-celebrities in an increasingly mediated social environment’.\textsuperscript{29} In other words, ‘normal’

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{22} Ibid., p. 13, n. 2.
\item \textsuperscript{23} Ibid., p. 57.
\item \textsuperscript{24} Bolter, p. 21.
\item \textsuperscript{25} P. 231.
\item \textsuperscript{26} N.p.
\item \textsuperscript{27} Auslander, p. 12.
\item \textsuperscript{28} P. 269.
\item \textsuperscript{29} P. 108.
\end{itemize}
individuals are increasingly taking control over the mediation to which they could be subject – if only they were already famous. Technology offered by Web 2.0 is largely responsible for the proliferation of such self-mediated identities, with blogs, online virtual environments, and social networks offering internet users the chance to represent themselves as they see fit, without undue external interference.\textsuperscript{30} Further, the internet allows for the dissemination of the self-directed representation across a much wider area than a non-celebrity could heretofore reach, as a disembodied virtual presence is accessible to anyone with an internet connection and the right hardware.

Although SL is clearly differentiated from film, Residents can be understood in terms borrowed from film production which relate to mediated performances: as ‘vactors’ (virtual actors) or ‘synthespians’ (synthetic thespians).\textsuperscript{31} These terms relate to computer-mediated actors, including performers wholly constructed by digital technology – such as those found in \textit{Toy Story} (John Lasseter, 1995) – or hybrid performances, whereby computer representation is grafted onto an actor’s body via motion-capture technology – such as with the actors playing the role of Na’vi aliens in \textit{Avatar} (James Cameron, 2009).\textsuperscript{32} Barry King argues that \textit{Avatar} stages ‘the interaction between the filmic and pro-filmic realms’.\textsuperscript{33} An examination of \textit{Avatar}’s use of ‘synthespians’ affords insight into the interaction between the virtual and offline spaces which SL users negotiate. A brief recapitulation of the film’s plot is necessary in order to understand the nuanced levels of performance at play. In 2154, humans have almost completely denuded the Earth of natural resources. A group of explorers financed by the government target the world of Pandora, a distant moon, in order to source vast stores of the mineral ‘unobtanium’ to sell for profit. Pandora is also home to a race of blue nature-worshipping peaceful aliens, the ‘Na’vi’, whose existence is threatened by human mining activities. To traverse Pandora and make contact with the locals, humans use hybrid human-Na’vi avatars: bodies which resemble the indigenous Na’vi race, operated remotely by a human’s consciousness. A paraplegic former marine, Jake Scully (played by Sam Worthington), is the hero of the piece, initially tasked to infiltrate the Na’vi to secure information to help the mining activities. Ultimately, Jake sympathizes overwhelmingly with the Na’vi, with whom he bonds, even

\textsuperscript{30} On blogs, see in particular: Bruns, \textit{Blogs}, pp. 69–99; Hevern. On mediated identities, see also: Annese; Dunn; Wood.

\textsuperscript{31} I borrow these terms from B. King.

\textsuperscript{32} On \textit{Avatar} in this context, see: B. King, pp. 254–57.

\textsuperscript{33} P. 255.
taking on a Na’vi mate (Neytiri, played by Zoe Saldana). He helps the aliens beat back the destructive humans, and finally becomes fully absorbed into his Na’vi avatar by contact with the connotatively mystical Tree of Souls, the focal point of Na’vi nature worship.

Bringing the Na’vi to the cinema screen was dependent on the use of performance capture. The performances of human actors in pro-filmsic space – i.e. the space in front of the camera in which filmmaking takes place – were rendered into three-dimensional space by the use of various technologies, transforming the human visage and body into the Na’vi for the final product. Na’vi characters are a blend of human motion and emotion with digital effects: ‘synthespians’. King elegantly summarizes the various ‘vectors of reference’ at play here: ‘Sam Worthington performs directly with Zoe Saldana in pro-filmsic space, but only with Neytiri on screen. He also performs in two modes, as his cinematic images (as Marine veteran Jake Sully) and as his digital image (as a Na’vi/human Avatar). Saldana only interacts with others (Avatars, humans and Na’vi) through the mediation of Neytiri.’34 As a ‘synthespian’, Saldana can only interact with other characters in the narrative via her digital representation. SL users similarly connect solely via their avatars in virtual space. To exist in Pandora, a human requires an avatar. The same is true of SL. Nonetheless, the existence of Neytiri is dependent on Saldana’s non-virtual acting and bodily form. Although side-lined in the field of representation, the human body is central to the entire operation. In the same way, a SL avatar cannot exist ‘alone’. An offline body must log on to SL and direct an avatar’s actions. In this manner, the Resident also parallels Jake’s operation of his Na’vi hybrid form. Both Jake’s consciousness and the SL user command a ‘body’ which allows for physical presence in a space that is impossible to access directly.

The capacity of SL to operate as a stand-in for Pandora is evidenced by the uptake of SL by certain Avatar spectators to enmesh themselves more meaningfully in the fictional world. In various Pandora sims, dedicated areas of SL fabricated to look like the ‘real’ Pandora in Avatar, Residents re-enact the film’s narrative, more or less faithfully, through role-play. For a significant minority of moviegoers, Avatar provoked profound and relatively long-lasting emotional reactions outside of the gamut of affect a film might typically stimulate. Matthew Holtmeier describes an audience subsection as experiencing ‘Post-Pandoran Depression’ (PPD).35 PPD issues from an unfulfillable desire towards the screen and for the fictional world

34 Ibid.
35 Passim. On PPD, see also: Bjørnvig, pp. 47-48.
of Pandora, as spectators feel anguish at the impossibility of ever inhabiting the world themselves. The real world outside the multiplex is inferior; watching *Avatar* affords a dream-like space of plenitude and beauty. As one PPD sufferer comments in an online forum: ‘After I watched Avatar at the first time, I truly felt depressed as I “wake” up in this world again...’.

PPD is based upon the perceived superiority of Pandora, alongside a lingering sense of the authenticity – the ‘reality’ – of the virtual world. Several commenters on the AVATAR Forums thread on coping with PPD write of the belief that they are Na’vi intrinsically, ‘trapped’ in a ‘human shell’. ‘Dreaming’ by watching *Avatar* equates, for at least one PPD sufferer, to a liberation from the human form and reincarnation in a true self by identification with characters onscreen, and a conflation of the offscreen individual’s identity with the Na’vi on screen. Although it is impossible to know whether they are affected with PPD, some *Avatar* viewers have turned to SL to relive – and inhabit – the ‘dream’ more fully. Another self-identified PPD sufferer opines that watching *Avatar* is not like typical film

37 Citation from AlphaNavi, in ‘Ways to Cope’, p. 9, comment 86.
38 Keeper of Na’vi, in ‘Ways to Cope’, p. 9, comment 87.
spectatorship: ‘A movie doesn’t give me these kind of feelings. Avatar was a whole new experience’. The virtual environment of SL offers a different means of interacting imaginatively with the film, and a means which parallels the ‘whole new experience’ of watching Avatar for some. By utilizing SL, Residents create their own immersive Avatar fanfiction.

Linden Lab utilized the notion of avatars specific to Avatar in advertising for the World shortly after the film’s release (see Fig. 12 for an example from the campaign). During the period the advertisements ran, more SL users logged on and users spent more Linden dollars (L$) in-World. It seems that SL tapped into a seductive parallel between the movie narrative and in-World experiences. As Avatar’s hero, Jake, adopts an avatar to experience life on Pandora, spectators take up SL avatars to inhabit a virtual Pandora (or Pandoras) created in SL. By role-playing Avatar in SL, the SL user has an avatar in two senses: a three-dimensional representation which facilitates their existence in the World, alongside a ‘Navitar’ as the SL embodiments look identical to the Na’vi facsimile donned by Jake. SL allows for spectators to become ‘synthespians’ in a second way, this time operating seemingly from within the diegesis itself. Sam Worthington plays human Jake Scully, who then performs as the human-Na’vi avatar Jake. The Resident offline performs their identity as an avatar in SL, which then acts the role of a Na’vi.

Another similarity presents itself with SL ‘Navitars’ and actors in Avatar due to the mechanics of filming the movie. Whilst executing scenes highly dependent on computer-generated imagery (CGI) technology, actors could see their virtual representation on a screen (in Na’vi avatar form) whilst they performed a given action. This parallels the Resident’s experience of being in their own body (offline) whilst also seeing their virtual embodiment operating in the World (as online avatar). Such functional coincidence between SL and film performance is rendered even more potent with the production of SL machinima based in the Avatar universe. Machinima is a neologism for ‘machine cinema’, film-making by recording scripted activities in a three-dimensional virtual world. In machinima, live avatar performances in SL are recorded with screen-capture software, and videos

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39 Elequin, in ‘Ways to Cope’, p. 8, comment 80.
41 Ibid.; Nino, n.p.
42 For an overview of SL Pandora environments, see: Second Pandora. For insight into ‘Navitar’ usage, see: Oakleaf.
43 Reinhard, n.p.
44 On machinima, see in particular: Johnson and Pettit; Lowood and Nitsche (eds.); Ng (ed.).
may be edited to add soundtracks and similar filmic elements. SL users have also produced Avatar-themed machinima, with Residents – as ‘Navitars’ – playing pre-defined roles different to their normal online identities.\(^{45}\) Beyond overtly adopting the role of director or editor in machinima, a Resident implicitly assumes similar roles normally found in film production as they control what is seen on the computer screen, including changing the viewing angle of the ‘camera’ which changes what is seen on the user’s screen. Drax notes that film-making in virtual worlds entails a ‘democratization’ of cinema, allowing those without access to traditional funding streams to make their own content.\(^{46}\) For such creators, ‘Second Life becomes [their] Hollywood studio’. By creating Avatar-based machinima in SL, Residents access Avatar in terms of film production, alongside meaningfully inhabiting the movie’s diegesis on some level.

The examples above bring to the fore the conflation of three roles in SL which are typically segregated in pre-digital content consumption: spectator, performer, and producer. Axel Bruns deploys the term ‘produsage’ to delineate a new model of content creation and consumption in the Web 2.0 era which ‘stands in direct contrast to traditional modes of industrial production’.\(^{47}\) The traditional production chain operates linearly from producer to distributor to consumer, leaving little to no flexibility for the consumer to intervene in the process. With produsage, the traditional consumer becomes both user and producer (hence ‘produser’), playing an instrumental role in the entire process. Produsage is founded on four key precepts: 1) an atmosphere of inclusivity, which targets the participation of many individual users, and in which the user base collectively critiques contributions; 2) the attitude that all users are equipotential, leading to a flexible and non-hierarchical governance dependent on specific contributions at different times; 3) the dissection of projects into ‘granular’ tasks, leading to always-unfinished content which evolves gradually, with processes rather than outcomes privileged; 4) the ownership of created content by all produsers, both current and future.\(^{48}\)

\(^{45}\) See, for example: AVATAR Second life. Part 1; The Birth of A Baby Na’vi Second Life (Zet’ey baby girl); SL AVATAR TO NA’VI ( Escape To Pandora ).

\(^{46}\) N.p. Despite avowing the clear parallels machinima shares with more traditional film, Drax stresses that machinima is a specific ‘artform’ and deserves ‘proper recognition’ as such, perhaps as a new film genre or sub-genre of animated film. Some pieces of machinima simply allow creators to re-enact their ‘Hollywood dreams’. Nevertheless, other pieces operate according to a coherent aesthetic regime, unique to the format and directly linked to the fact that machinima is a more ‘democratic’ creative endeavour.

\(^{47}\) Blogs, p. 9. On this, see also: ‘Content Production’; ‘Broader Framework’.

\(^{48}\) Bruns, Blogs, pp. 24-30.
Bruns argues that SL ‘harnesses the key principles of produsage’, and even offers a vision of a future prodused non-virtual environment, as SL is successful in produsing artefacts, though they are simulated.\textsuperscript{49} SL’s status as a prodused environment, at odds with traditional consumption models, contributes to a tension between labile spiritual expression for which the environment seems uniquely suited and authorized religious behaviours which correlate by and large with pre-digital models of top-down consumption processes. I elucidate this hypothesis more fully in the ‘Agency and Dependency’ section below.\textsuperscript{50}

As Residents produse their virtual domicile, they also produse their own mediated identities. SL avatars are unfinished artefacts of identity, inevitably shaped by reactions from other users and the user’s desired outcomes. All Residents have the same technology at their disposal in the creation of self-representational avatars, and at different times and in different ways may tap into the zeitgeist of audience appreciation.\textsuperscript{51} For example, ‘Navitars’ seemed particularly noteworthy and cool – for want of a better word – in the months after Avatar’s release, but have since waned in socio-cultural value in the World. Produsage is founded upon the power of users as a collective. It is an endeavour entirely based upon meaningful group participation in a shared environment, an environment created in large part because of the presence of users in the first place.\textsuperscript{52} SL is not a game but instead an interactional space, which allows for the dismantling of geographical and linguistic barriers to bring users together for authentic communication. In a connotatively similar manner, medieval mystical space functions as a visualization of the interactive assembly of the communion of saints.

The Online Communion of Saints

Barbara Newman suggests that the space which saints access during visions is the communion of saints, a location which ‘transcends space and time’.\textsuperscript{53} Belief in the communion of saints (\textit{communio sanctorum}) is a basic tenet of

\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., p. 303. See also: ibid., pp. 289–312; Schneckloth, pp. 75–77.
\textsuperscript{50} Pp. 239–42.
\textsuperscript{51} Whilst this is true in theory, in actuality various factors may limit user equality. For example, user skills (or lack thereof) may mitigate the raw power of a given piece of software. Additionally, hardware is a limiting factor: users with slower internet connections, older devices and less advanced video cards will be disadvantaged in comparison to their peers. Such limitations typically lead to ‘buggier’ video rendering and increased lag time in online virtual environments.
\textsuperscript{52} Bruns, \textit{Blogs}, pp. 289–90.
\textsuperscript{53} ‘Preface’, p. xl.
Catholicism, expressed in the *Apostles’ Creed*: ‘I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy [C]atholic Church, the communion of saints’ (‘[c]redo in Spiritum Sanctum, sanctam Ecclesiam catholicam, sanctorum communionem’). Although found in vernacular forms in France from the ninth century, and formally adopted by Rome in the tenth century, the *Creed* has its origins several centuries earlier. The Latin phrase *communio sanctorum* generates uncertainty as to the precise signification of the precept. The word *sanctorum* can be read in either a neuter or masculine form, suggesting a definition of either the sharing of sacraments or an intimate bond between the pious respectively. It was ‘not an either/or option’ in the Middle Ages, when the word was understood as having both meanings at once. Sacramental Communion equates to an ecclesial Communion, as the believer becomes one with the Church (and other believers) via union with Christ by ingesting the Eucharist. In its thirteenth-century inflection, the communion of saints was understood as ‘the reciprocal contacts among the Church Militant on earth, the Church Suffering in purgatory, and the Church Triumphant in heaven’. In other words, the communion of saints consists of the living, souls in purgatory, and souls in heaven: a collective of all those who have received sacramental Communion. In this assembly, all are commingled with the Lord, as expressed by Paul in Romans 12.4-6: ‘For as in one body we have many members, but all the members have not the same office: So we being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another.’ Each Catholic becomes one with the Lord, a ‘member’ of Christ’s body, whilst also completely united with all other believers. Intercession and intercommunication are central to the conceptualization of the communion of saints. The living’s prayers could help a soul escape purgatory, and those in heaven can bestow grace on the living. Souls in purgatory visit the living to describe their torments, testifying as to the realities of the hereafter for a sinner.

Visions ‘clarify the content of this world and the next’, and mystical vision space operates as a realm in which the three spheres of the communion of saints come together and interact. In this way, the communion of saints is connected ontologically with television and SL, all three founded to

54 Denzinger (ed.), p. 27, DS 30.8.
55 For earlier versions of the Creed in the Western Church, see: ibid., pp. 19-26, DS 10-29.
57 Boersma, p. 115.
59 Douay-Rheims Bible.
different degrees upon the notion of ‘liveness’. The ‘liveness’ of visions is based upon their vital interactivity. The Liégeois – and those of us reading or hearing about them, to some degree – see, converse, and frequently make physical contact with the dead, biblical figures, and even Christ in ‘real time’, or at least in a temporality that feels ‘real’, and thus inhabitable, to mortals. For example, Lutgard of Aywières is visited by many deceased former colleagues and acquaintances, including Innocent III; Master John of Lioux; Cardinal James; Jordan of Saxony, the Dominicans’ Master General; the nun Yolendis; Simon, abbot of Foigny; and an anonymous spiritual sister.61 Biblical characters, angels, and saints also appear to Lutgard in visions. She sees and interacts with John the Evangelist; John the Baptist; St. Catherine; Marie of Oignies; and an unspecified multitude of saints, apostles, and angels.62 The Virgin Mary, Christ, and unnamed individuals sent by the Lord also repeatedly figure in her visions.63 In one of Ida of Nivelles’ visions, the communion of saints is represented by a book of life from which she reads, allowing for a ‘tangible’ representation of the symbolic community to which she belongs.64 The mystical book contains countless painted images accompanying text which details the fate of individuals both alive and dead – existence in heaven, hell, or purgatory. That vision space is an assembly of the entire Christian community, the communion of saints, is further shown when saints see the spirits of the still-living in their ecstatic visions, as in Ida’s book of life.

The communion of saints paradoxically exists both nowhere and everywhere. It is a spiritual, non-physical rendition of Christians’ relationship with God, and an expression of the breadth of God’s magnanimity. We are all located in Him, just as He is located within each of us. Visions allow for the amorphous communion of saints to have some form of location. The communion of saints is the ‘there’ which is accessed in rapture, the definitively ‘not here’. This is shown particularly well when Lutgard of Aywières tells Christ, with whom she is conversing in rapture, to wait for her ‘here’ (‘hic’) whilst she ‘logs off’ and takes care of some earthly business: ‘While she

61 Respectively: VLA, 2.1.7.245; 2.1.8.245; 3.1.5.257; 3.1.2.3.254; 2.1.12.246; 2.1.4.244; 2.1.13.246.
62 Respectively: ibid., 1.2.15.240; 3.2.13.259; 1.1.9.238; 3.1.8.257-58; 2.2.29.250; 2.3.42.252; 2.3.42.252.
63 For the Virgin Mary, see: ibid., 1.1.8.238; 2.1.1.243; 2.2.32.250; 2.3.42.252; 2.3.12.259; 3.2.13.259.
For Christ, see: ibid., 1.1.2.237; 1.1.12.239; 1.1.13.239; 1.2.14.240; 1.2.19.241; 2.3.41.252; 2.1.6.244-45; 3.2.11.259; 2.1.12.259. A visitation from an incorporeal Lord is also in ibid., 2.2.33.251. For unnamed individuals, see: ibid., 2.1.5.244; 2.2.17.247.
64 Vin, 18.243-44; Carpenter, ‘Communities’, p. 34. On the ‘book of life’ as a term for a specific hagiographical genre, and as Christ himself, see above: pp. 32-33 and 138-39, respectively.
was sweetly joined to the Lord in prayer or contemplation and any urgent business called her away, she would speak to the Lord [...] [and say]: “Lord Jesus, wait for me here, for I shall quickly come back to you”.

Logging on to both SL and the communion of saints requires a ‘user account’. For the SL user, setting up such a (basic) account is relatively simple, involving a computer and an internet connection with no costs incurred for the account itself. For the medieval saint, years of devotional practice coupled with God’s grace bestow upon her an exclusive account, which she automatically uses when she experiences rapture. ‘Logging on’ in both instances involves a separation from those who do not have a user account, those who cannot enter the virtual space of SL or the spiritual realm and thereby interact with others who have also ‘logged on’.

The dynamic of exclusion intensifies the perception of the virtual as a located, locate-able space – positioned just ‘over there’, through the computer screen. An individual not logged in to SL can, however, see when an individual is interacting with others on SL. The online SL user is sitting at a computer, often typing or voice chatting with other users, moving the mouse to manipulate an avatar. Similarly, onlookers who are not in rapture can see that a saint is experiencing ecstasy, ‘logged on’ to the spiritual space. For example, Eve of Saint-Martin hears Juliana speaking with the apostles Peter and Paul during an ecstatic trance. For Eve, this is a one-sided conversation as she hears only Juliana’s contributions, and is startled by Juliana’s declaration of a journey to Rome to visit the apostles forthwith. This episode is also an example of the transcendence over time which characterizes the communion of saints, as Juliana talks in ‘real time’ with figures from a bygone era of the early Church.

Linear chronology is interrupted in the communion of saints, as it contains all Christian souls from history and contemporary times, alongside the eternal figures of God and His angels. Logging on to SL similarly requires the user to decouple from the time of the surrounding world and to accept a different chronology, as the environment’s time zone is set as Pacific Time (PT). Until the end of 2006, the time displayed in the SL viewer window was

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65 VLAEng, 1.8.223. ‘Verumtamen dum ipsa in oratione aut contemplatione Domino dulciter jungeretur, & eam aliquod urgens negotium evocaret, [...] dicebat: Domine Jesu, expecta me hic: jam cito expedita revertar ad te’. VLA, 1.1.8.238.

66 SL also offers a ‘premium account’, currently costing between $6 and $9.50 per month (c. £4.64-£7.35) depending on the selected payment schedule. This account provides various extra benefits to the Resident, including a weekly stipend of L$300 and their own home in World. See: Linden Lab, ‘Premium Membership’.

67 VJC, 1.5.28.454. On this episode, see also above, Chapter 2, pp. 131-32.
labelled as Second Life Time (SLT). Converters for manipulating SLT to the local time zones of users appeared online. Instead of referencing PT, which is what the results are based on, converters typically list SLT results. SLT has an implicit status as its own, separate time zone, for a virtual location. SLT is synonymous with PT, but an increasingly global user base and subsequent confusion regarding the SLT acronym led to the switch. Despite the switch to labelling the in-World clock in PT, all of my interviewees arranged meetings with me in SLT. This testifies to the fact that the dedicated time zone is clearly still prevalent with some users. Furthermore, SL has its own day/night cycles. In a twenty-four hour period, there are six SL days, comprised of three hours of daylight and one hour of night.

It is problematic to record a figure for the number of churches in SL. Things are always changing in the virtual environment: churches pop up and then disappear without a trace. Moreover, churches are not necessarily advertised to the broader SL user-base, making them hard to track down. A survey of the most current available data suggests, however, around twenty functional churches in SL of various denominations in the period 2009-2016. One source dating to February 2010 proposes a far higher figure: seventeen Catholic, five Orthodox, and sixty-one Anglican and other churches. This inflated figure is, perhaps, due to the religious status of the listed sites. Some of these churches represent an architectural undertaking for their creators, and do not necessarily have any figuration as sacred spaces. Nevertheless, the creation of religious spaces can be an expression of faith. However, many SL Christians believe that a church is created from an assembly of religious individuals, not dependent on a physical or locate-able space. As two of the interviewees in my study assert:

68 See, for example: Gemixin.
70 In January 2016, Linden Lab confirmed plans to introduce a twenty-four hour cycle in-World, though a time-line for introducing the feature was not specified. Though the default setting for locations will remain the four-hour cycle, region owners will be able to use the longer cycle on their properties: Urriah, n.p.
71 On 1 August 2016, the term ‘church’ produced twenty results in the SL Places search: Linden Lab, “Church”. Search results were screened to filter out churches used for explicitly non-religious purposes, for example nightclubs, shops. The SL wiki, a crowdsourced help-guide for users, lists nineteen churches as of 4 January 2016: ‘Religious Places’. An in-World document also lists twenty churches as of 21 April 2016: Neva. For images of several churches, see Ganesvoort. For a study of the SL Anglican Cathedral and the Lifechurch.tv SL campus, see: Hutchings, ‘Politics’, in particular pp. 66-72.
72 Burt, ‘Catholic’; ‘Anglican’.
73 On this, see also: Grossman.
74 See, for example: Novikova.
But ultimately, a church isn’t a building ---- it’s the people *in* the building. ... Likewise ---- in Second Life ----- a church isn’t the prims [virtual building blocks] that make the building ---- it’s the people behind their computers who’s avatars are in that prim-building. [female, 36, USA, Catholic; 2011]

The female participant quoted above implicitly distinguishes between the sacred space ‘in that prim-building’ and the profane space outside of its digital walls. For her, the church is a space walled off from the surrounding secular environment. However, what is significant about that walled-off space is the abundant presence of Christian believers, and it is that gathering which creates a sacred space as a by-product. The digital presence of an avatar, denoting the offline user’s pious practice, is meaningful, and a space – even a virtual space – becomes sacred by means of the presence of devout Christians. Theoretically all of SL could become a church, if the virtual environment were populated by a flock of pious Christians focusing on God at the same time. The communion
of saints is at least partially accessible in SL, inasmuch as interaction between countless living believers is possible in the World. The analogy breaks down, however, as neither dead believers nor divine figures can ‘log on’ – and these two groups are important members of the communion of saints. These collectives can only ever be partially accessed in SL through pious religious discussion and prayer by living Residents. For some, virtual graveyards and memorial sites in World act as lightning rods for mourning. Such installations can commemorate both deceased SL Residents and non-Residents, thereby lending a shadow of presence to even those most definitively ‘offline’ – dead individuals without a SL account. Residents’ emotional connection to their ‘offline’ nearest and dearest works to apparate these departed souls in World: they ‘log on’ for those that, in death, cannot. In such cases, however, the full complement of the communion of saints remains un-realized. Though given presence – imaged and ventriloquized – in such memorials, the dead cannot speak for themselves. Nevertheless, social interaction is central to both SL fellowship and mystical visions, whose chief preocuppation is direct communication with the divine. In both spheres, ‘virtual’ communication is authentic and dynamic.

‘Logging On’ to the Communion of Saints

Mutual ecstasies – when both parties are ‘logged on’ to the communion of saints – produce reciprocal visions, in which holy individuals can interact despite being geographically separated. For example, a priest from Maagdendaal visits with both Ida of Nivelles and Christ during ecstasy.75 Through his devotion, and deep desire to form a more intimate spiritual relationship with Ida, the priest falls into rapture. In his first of two concurrent visions, he witnesses Ida taking Communion that day and her subsequent ravishment. In the priest’s second vision, Christ directs Ida to share his grace with the priest himself, leading to a kiss between the two visionaries.76 Ida’s visionary experiences are ‘no less social’ than her activities in the mortal

75  VIN, 27.266-69. On Ida’s sociable visions, see in particular: Carpenter, ‘Communities’, pp. 34-38. Ida also has a relationship with another anonymous holy woman based on reciprocal visions which reveal the secrets of the other’s heart, though the text does not explicitly detail meetings in shared vision space: VIN, 25.261. Cawley suggests the unnamed woman is Beatrice of Nazareth: VINEng, p. 70, n. 117.
76  VIN, 27.267.
realm: in both the spiritual space of visions and the tangible space of the mortal, she interacts with others regarding divine matters.77

Elisabeth of Spalbeek holds many meetings with Marie of Lille during their simultaneous raptures, though the two are physically distant: they ‘used to see each other, since their ecstatic raptures frequently occurred at the same time. And furthermore, [she added] that she was getting to know her especially [well], stating that she was the wisest young woman and that she had a spirit of wisdom and counsel.’78 Elisabeth’s hagiographer, Philip of Clairvaux, maintains that the saint’s knowledge of Marie’s spiritual condition and ascetic suffering is authentic (‘esse vera’), stating that he himself had verified it when passing through Lille.79 The text emphasizes that Elisabeth had no knowledge of Marie through mortal means. The abbot himself was unaware of Marie, no rumours had reached the far distance from Marie’s own community, and Elisabeth had categorically never seen her ‘in real life’.80 Jesse Njus characterizes Elisabeth’s experience here as a ‘mutual vision that enables a virtual pilgrimage’, in which the two holy women see each other ‘in real time’ despite being physically separated ‘offline’.81 This mirrors the user experience of SL, in which users log on from various time zones in various locations, possibly never meeting in real life, and yet enjoy meaningful reciprocal social relations. The language barrier that would have separated the two medieval women in ‘real life’, with Marie speaking French and Elisabeth speaking Dutch, does not exist in the simultaneous trance encounters. In the communion of saints, as all are in the embrace of God, language differences are no longer an obstacle. The possibility of automatic universal translation is also present in SL. Various machine translators are available, whether provided by Linden Lab for free or as add-on devices sold in the SL Market Place (online store for virtual goods and services). Such applications, however, remain imperfect tools, in need of bug-fixes, vocabulary updates, and inclusion of more languages. The virtual space of SL is aspirational: the total demolition of all geographical and linguistic barriers is targeted. In medieval vision space, however, such boundaries simply do not exist.

78 VESEng, 24.2. ‘Adjecit etiam de illa Maria quod frequenter concurrentibus earum raptibus mutuo se videbant, et quod optime cognoscebat eamdem, dicens quod illa erat sapientissima puella et quod ipsa habebat spiritum sapientiae et consili.’ VES, 24.376.
79 VES, 24.376.
80 Njus, pp. 305-07.
81 P. 305.
Holy women can communicate in a mystical *lingua franca* even outside of their visions. For example, Flemish-speaker Lutgard of Aywières transfers from Kerkom to Aywières, a French-speaking community, at the behest of God.\(^{82}\) The Virgin Mary ensures that the saint will never learn to speak French after her move. This is a positive event: it allows Lutgard to focus on contemplation, and ensures she will never be elected abbess.\(^{83}\) The language barrier is not insurmountable, however. She is able to offer French-speaking visitors immense consolation by conversation, wondrously facilitated by the universal language of the Holy Spirit.\(^{84}\) The same spiritual communicative ability allows francophone Ida of Nivelles to understand the sermons of a certain religious Dutchman, though she is unable to comprehend her Dutch-speaking sisters at the time.\(^{85}\) SL users cannot, of course, communicate in a similar translinguistic manner outside of the bounds of the virtual environment. The tools to facilitate such interactions exist only in science fiction, such as the ‘universal translator’ in the *Star Trek* television and film franchise or the ‘Babel fish’ in Douglas Adam’s cult book series, the *Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*.\(^{86}\)

The sequence of mutual visions between Elisabeth and Marie led to an intimate connection between the pair, testified by the fact that Marie is listed as a beneficiary of relics from Elisabeth and her relative, William of Ryckel.\(^{87}\) Njus maintains that the primary importance of the visions between the pair is that ‘it allowed Elisabeth to overcome her disability virtually and to form a virtual, mystic relationship akin to that of Juliana of Mont-Cornillon and Eve of Saint-Martin’.\(^{88}\) Elisabeth’s capacity to overcome her ‘disability’, i.e. the deleterious physical effects of her extreme piety, through visions in which she interacts with Marie parallels the embrace of virtual technology by those living with disabilities to undertake activities otherwise inaccessible to them. The potential for SL churches and religious spaces to welcome those with social, physical, and/or mental impairments was mentioned by eleven interviewees during my study. Six interviewees themselves suffered such difficulties in attending church offline, and thus SL churches and/or religious spaces for expression allowed them to fill a gap in their (spiritual) lives. As one non-denominational Christian (NDC) commented: ‘I have discovered hundreds of people from around the world,

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82 VLA, 1.2.22.242.
83 Ibid., 2.1.1.243.
84 Ibid., 2.3.40.252.
85 VIN, 2.205-06.
86 Loc. 1047-1120.
87 Berlière, p. 275; Coens, p. 409.
88 P. 306.
that are shut ins, disabled, have social phobias, that cannot attend a RL [Real Life, i.e. offline] church, so for them, this is their Church’ (male, 46, USA; 2011).

Njus explicitly equates the intense relationship – conducted in real life, in real time – of Juliana and Eve, documented in Juliana’s *vita*, to virtual encounters in spiritual space.89 This is a remarkable assertion, given the exceptional closeness of the pair. Eve wrote the first version of Juliana’s biography in French (c. 1258-1261), upon which the later (c. 1261-1264) Latin text is based, though the vernacular text did not survive past the seventeenth century.90 The Latin text evokes repeatedly Juliana’s interactions with Eve and visits to her anchorhold.91 The *vita* states: ‘They were in fact very close friends, being mutually bound by an unbreakable chain of charity.’92 At the urging of Juliana, Eve devotes herself to God and becomes an anchorite, on the condition that her dear friend will visit her at least once a year.93 Juliana stays with Eve for a time after fleeing from the persecution of the Prior of Mont-Cornillon and his supporters.94

The spiritual community found in ecstatic visions is meaningful and authentic. Similarly, various researchers have concluded that online social communities in virtual space are *real*, despite the physical dislocation of users’ offline bodies. Florence Chee et al.’s research shows that ‘online communities [...] are no less real than communities in the world of flesh-and-blood’.95 Fetscherin and Lattemann’s study of SL Residents reveals that users are attracted to the virtual world precisely because of the possibility of genuine communication and collaboration, i.e. joining an authentic community.96 Celia Pearce makes the same claim in her study of online virtual worlds: ‘although the worlds may be virtual, the communities formed within them are as real as any that form in proximal space’.97 Three quarters of the interviewees in my study (eighteen Residents) mentioned the capacity for

89  P. 306.
90  The dates for both the vernacular and Latin versions of Juliana’s *vita* are taken from B. Newman’s chronology, which precedes *VJC Eng*, pp. 178-79.
91  B. Newman, ‘Introduction’ in, p. 155. For Juliana’s visits to Eve, see: *VJC*, 1.5.22.452; 1.5.28-30.453-54; 2.1.5.458; 2.4.20.465-66; 2.5.22.466.
92  *VJC Eng*, 1.5.22.409-10. ‘erant siquidem ad invicem familiarissimae, ut pote inter se colligatae indissolubili vinculo caritatis’. *VJC*, 1.5.22.452.
93  *VJC*, 1.5.22.452.
94  Ibid., 2.5.22.466.
95  P. 160.
96  P. 240.
97  P. 17.
global fellowship as a draw to practising their religion in SL. SL Christians tap into one segment of the communion of saints, other living believers, by fellowship with them online. The capacity to interact in real time with other Christians, forging authentic relationships, was integral to their decision to practise Christianity online. The importance of fellowship with other Christians was also evoked by many respondents when describing their motivation in going to church offline.

SL enables fellowship, a mainstay of Christian community and worship, on a much larger scale. The virtual environment is not remaking worship practices anew, but instead furthers existing conventions and patterns with the aid of modern technology. However, the closer connection with fellow believers in SL compared to those within the offline community was noted by several respondents in my study. For example, one respondent commented that ‘[s]ome of my best friends here do not even live in the USA and I have better fellowship with them than my next door neighbour in rl [real life, i.e. life offline]’ (female, 35, USA, NDC; 2011).

Physical and social isolation often affects holy women too. As discussed in the general Introduction above, the Liégeoises all experience some form of friction with the community around them, even in enclosed monastic spaces. Reciprocal mystical visions offer the women ‘better fellowship’ with like-minded individuals, or rather other people of similar religiosity and spiritual lifestyle – even if those pious compatriots are long-dead, or divine.

Of Avatars and Offline Bodies

Fellowship, be that in SL or in vision space, demands (virtual) embodiment. As Pearce puts it, ‘you cannot observe a virtual world without being inside it, and in order to be inside it, you have to be “embodied”. In other words, you have to create an avatar.’ The Oxford English Dictionary supplies various definitions for the word ‘avatar’, including ‘[m]anifestation in human form; incarnation’, and ‘[m]anifestation or presentation to the world as a ruling power or object of worship’. Caroline Walker Bynum

98 The draw of global fellowship for online worship is revealed in other studies. See, for example: Hutchings, ‘Creating Church’, pp. 205-06, 214; Robinson-Neal, p. 241.
99 See: pp. 34-36.
100 Emphasis in original; p. 196.
101 ‘avatar, n.’, n.p.
asserts that the later Middle Ages are characterized by an ‘intensification of materiality in all aspects of the visual’, including in written descriptions of holy visions. Descriptions of visions, particularly those of holy women, are ‘filled with concrete objects’. These objects facilitate an understanding of the divine in the limited mind of the mortal believer. The ‘concrete objects’ populating medieval divine visions are manifestations of God. God, His essence, and other divine figures are embodied either in human or object form.

‘Concrete’ in the context of medieval divine visions also translates to ‘tangible’ or ‘appreciable to the senses’, rather than just an abstract spiritualized – non-corporealized – vision. For example, Lutgard of Aywières sees Christ ‘in that human form in which he had once lived among mortals’. Pulling back his garment, Christ shows the saint the still-bleeding wound in his side from the lance that pierced his body at the Crucifixion (‘vulnus lateris ostendit, quasi recenti sanguine cruentatum’), implicitly referencing John 19.34. Likewise, Christ appears to Margaret of Ypres ‘plainly in visible form’ (‘plane in forma visibili’) with a crystal vial. Two references to Christ’s hand (‘Christus manum [...] in manu Domini’), which holds the crystal container and lifts it to Margaret’s lips, make his human form explicit. Such examples of spiritual embodiment in the space of divine visions can be characterized as avatars. This connects the holy women with SL Christians, equipped with avatars in a different sense, as ‘graphical representation[s] of a person or character in a computer-generated environment’. Both SL avatars and mystical avatars render authentic religious states and precepts visible.

From a medieval perspective, the ‘other setting’ in which avatars function is the spiritual space of the divine, the communion of saints, accessed by the saint through devotion and ecstasy. Pearce asserts that

Research has repeatedly revealed that players [of online games] often perceive their avatars as a medium through which one’s soul, one’s deep inner persona, is expressed, even though the avatar’s personality may be quite distinct from that of the person controlling its agency.
In the virtual space of SL, Christians across the world can not only represent themselves authentically as spiritual individuals, but also interact with each other. Thus, for some SL Christians, the virtual environment also corresponds to the communion of saints in one significant way: fellowship with other living Christians in an environment which transcends the physical limitations of geographic distance and time differences. This allows SL to become, in the words of a Roman Catholic respondent, ‘a power house of prayer’ (male, 55, Australia; 2016). In SL, as in mystical vision space, there is always somebody there to hear your prayers.

The ‘other world’ accessed by both SL user and medieval saint during visions problematizes the understanding of what it is to be embodied, allowing a move away from a strictly binary model of flesh versus spirit to see the complex interactive processes at play. Creation and operation of a (computer) avatar is ‘the beginning of a life’ in an online environment, including the beginning of a user’s Second Life.108 As an avatar cannot exist without the user who created it, the user cannot access, and thus exist in, the virtual space of an online world without an avatar. Moreover, accessing a virtual environment involves embodiment and disembodiment, and stages of slippage in between. Thomas M. Malaby concisely captures the complexity of avatar/user relations in two sentences: ‘I look at my avatar. It is (I am) not naked.’109 Malaby’s parenthetical ‘I am’ may refer to his offline body – whilst he looks at his clothed SL avatar, his offline physical body is also clothed. ‘I am’ may also appertain to his avatar itself, alluding to the shift from object to subject entailed in looking at ‘oneself’ (one’s avatar) as an object decidedly outside of one’s own physical bounds, yet also belonging to oneself, an object-being that is nevertheless meaningfully oneself. Malaby looks at his avatar and the traditional visual economy of subject (viewer) and object (viewed) is played out. Yet, with his parenthesis, this economy is unpicked and challenged: the ‘it’ of the viewed object is also the viewing subject ‘I’. Moreover, that avatar ‘I’ can also ‘look at’ other objects within SL, head positioned to take in scenery and other avatars. Where the body of the avatar goes, so does its digital eyes, and thus what Malaby is looking at on screen is dictated by what his avatar is looking at, that at which he chooses for his avatar to look by using a keyboard or mouse. Are Malaby’s eyes led by the avatar’s eyes, or vice versa? Where does the balance of power lie in the avatar-human interaction? As the offline human shapes the avatar’s appearance and

108 Ibid., 197.
109 P. 17.
guides its behaviours, the avatar moulds the experience of the offline user. This functionally replicates the co-dependency of flesh and spirit that is so central to Catholic doctrine. What happens to the body indubitably impacts the soul: sinful conduct on earth leads to eternal damnation. However, the soul equally exerts power over the body. An appropriate spiritual attitude directs the trajectory of a pious believer's life, and a worthy soul may receive divine grace in the form of miracles which mark the body.

The medieval individual is conceptualized as a personhood fabricated from both spirit (the digital) and flesh (the corporeal). In a mystical vision, St. John explains to Yvette of Huy why a certain priest refused to give her Communion, as she had wished: “[The priest] did not dare to touch the holy Body of Christ [corpus] because recently he killed his own body [corpus] and he killed his soul by making his body [corpus] one with that of a whore.”

The chiasmus ‘suum corpus interfecerat, interfeceratque animam suam’ highlights the inescapable bond between body (‘corpus’) and soul (‘animam’). Sinful conduct leads to the death of both spirit and body. Corpus is emphatically repeated in three different contexts: the body of Christ in the Eucharistic wafer, the priest’s body as mortal matter, and the priest’s sinful indulgence of intimacy with the sex worker. The body of the priest is syntactically placed between two possible unions: one with God by contact with His son’s flesh, and the other a sinful coming together of the priest and the sex worker. This evokes the priest’s status as an example of a mortal man, existing on a spectrum marked at its extremes by spirituality (Christ) and physicality (the sex worker).

Explaining their understanding of the relationship between online avatar and offline body, several respondents in my study referred to the status of the avatar as a projection, and representation, of their offline selves. The avatar is repeatedly figured as intimately and indefatigably intertwined with the offline individual, not a separate entity. For example:

We are not separate. My avatar is an expression of who I am. Therefore, when my avatar is praying that is simply me praying [female, 58, UK, Anglican; 2011]

110 VIHEng, 34.96.126. ‘Ausus non fuit sanctum Christi corpus tangere, quia recenter suum corpus interfecerat, interfeceratque animam suam factus vnum corpus cum meretrice.’ VIH, 34.96.881.

111 Drax notes, however, that SL content-creators typically view their avatars more practically, ‘like a machine’ they must use to have a presence in-World (n.p.).
for me, [my avatar] represents on the screen, what my heart is doing in RL [male, 46, USA, NDC; 2011]

the av [avatar] is just a representation of myself being here. it represents who I am thus I dress and act accordingly as I would in RL [...] being a different av doesnt change my perception of my faith, that comes from inside. [female, 35, USA, NDC; 2011]

The virtual body of the SL avatar, then, is a means of communicating the internal mysterious actions of the spirit that are taking place in the Christian’s offline body, or the spirit’s otherwise invisible presence travelling across wide geographical divides via the internet. The avatar is necessary to give some form of presence to the spiritual and social connection at play in SL, as it allows the human mind something to grab hold of to better understand and immerse itself in the virtual experience.

One male North American Mormon (LDS) Resident (2011) has a beautiful preadolescent boy as his avatar, despite being in middle age in reality. Explaining this particular choice, he links his youthful avatar to his faith: ‘Well – as you can see, my avatar here is childlike. I like to think it fulfils the Savior’s admonition we become as little children. A form of “sack cloth and ashes” I suppose. In RL [Real Life], when I pray, I imagine myself as a little child before God’. In his reference to becoming ‘as little children’, the respondent evokes Matthew 18.3: ‘Amen I say to you, unless you be converted, and become as little children, you shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.’112 Whilst one may meditatively become child-like, it is impossible to do so literally offline. However, SL allows for a partial realization (visualization) of this rhetoric. The incomplete realization is nevertheless meaningful, more potent than meditative infantilization alone – particularly so given that the Christian exists only as a child in SL, and thus his whole in-World identity hinges upon his child-like self-representation. The man’s avatar is an authentic representation of his personhood as it reflects his spiritual self. His avatar permits him to follow literally the Lord’s guidance and become as a little child in His embrace. This avatar is a (virtually) physicalized rendition of the Christian’s interior (spiritual) condition: a digital expression of his ‘true’ identity equal, if not superior, to his offline physicality.113

112 Douay-Rheims Bible.
113 Pearce, p. 23. Another Resident (male, 51, Roman Catholic, USA) also utilizes a child-like avatar, identified as a visible representation of his relatively recent adoption of the Catholic faith.
Representations of a holy woman in visions or after death allow for the interior workings of the spirit to be rendered visible. For example, Alice of Schaerbeek’s soul is seen as having the body of a little child (‘modum parvuli pueri’), illuminated by divine rays, in a vision after her death. During her life, Alice suffers the torments of leprosy, and the disease progresses to such an extent that her body breaks down, oozing pus and emitting a terrible odour. Yet, the saint glories in her corporeal disintegration as a means to experience pious suffering and thereby come closer to God. As a girl sees Alice’s soul as a divinely lit child, it is understood that, finally, the saint’s interior spiritual condition is being manifested in her outward appearance. A parallel operation, then, takes place with the medieval transformation of the withered Alice into a beautiful child and the modern LDS interviewee’s adoption of a child-like avatar. Such reversal of values resonates with Pauline scripture, in which the apostle expounds again and again on the inversion of societal norms leading to the believer’s identity as ‘in Christ’.

In II Corinthians 4.16, Paul emphasizes that a Christian’s appearance is predicated on a split between interior and exterior states: ‘though our outward man is corrupted, yet the inward man is renewed day by day’. Alice and the LDS Resident’s child-like spiritual/virtual appearance – in combination with their apparent literal or metaphorical ‘corruption’ – function as visualizations of Pauline rhetoric. From another perspective, the vision of Alice as a child potentially reveals more about her community (La Cambre) than the woman’s soul. The community is encouraged to understand the horrific degradation of Alice’s body as a paradoxical marker of wholeness and holiness, despite the inevitable feeling of repulsion due to the woman’s bodily breakdown. A vision of Alice’s soul as a child testifies to the rectitude of this prescribed meaning, and retroactively lightens the burden of uncoupling an immediate response to Alice’s body (shock, disgust) from the ‘correct’ attitude (joy, inspiration). Pauline rhetoric is authorized and concretized by the vision.

To understand Alice’s appearance, one must decipher its symbolism, which authentically represents her interior state. Avatars too must be ‘looked through’, as they connote the user’s spiritual and intellectual presence ‘behind the computer’. Avatars, as virtual embodiments, render the

114 VAS, 3.34.482. See also discussion of Alice’s condition above: Chapter 1, pp. 102-04. On this specific episode, and Alice’s leprosy as an affirmative experience, see: Spencer-Hall, ‘Projections’, p. 63; ‘Suppurating Wounds’.
115 VAS, 3.31.482.
117 Douay-Rheims Bible.
'offscreen' body and devotional actions of the SL user visible, but cannot and do not stand alone as spiritual objects. The word ‘icon’ can refer to a devotional depiction of Christ or another holy personage, worthy of adoration as an authentic imaging of divinity or, more simply, an ‘image, figure, or representation’. In Christian worship in SL, avatars operate as icons, representative (virtual) symbols of a Resident’s offline – physical, and at times, spiritual – personhood. Discussing the religious significance of virtual iconography in SL churches, another Catholic interviewee comments that ‘[i]kons [in SL] display the same imagery as they do anywhere else. ... An ikon is a window to heaven. Don’t look at it ---- look *through* it’ (female, 36, USA; 2011). Similarly, a saint functions as a window through which we access God. We worship through identification of the saint as a conduit for the divine, but do not worship the saint as an individual personage per se. As Brigitte Cazelles notes, saints are ‘de facto interchangeable’ (‘de fait interchangeables’). They are products of a specific framework of Catholicism which underscores the advantages of spiritual role models to inspire the laity, and of the capacity for the particularly religious to act as intercessors.

The avatar operates as an intercessor par excellence. It can be everywhere, all the time, thanks to its transmission over the internet, cutting across all geographical locations and temporal zones. Capable of taking on any form, the avatar is endlessly fluid, of flexible shape and design. Nevertheless, the avatar is an attribute of a human offline, and it is this human who manipulates the boundaries of space it traverses, its articulations, and the physical form it takes. The avatar and its user cannot ever be fully disassociated. To all intents and purposes, the avatar is the user’s digital soul, secularized only partially by its evocation through the means of technology, that oh-so ‘rational’ and ‘scientific’ human development. Technology may not be religious outright, but it certainly is spiritual. We may shed the Catholic theology of body and soul, but we cannot divest of its underlying rationale, the roiling magma which lies underneath its doctrinal crust. We have simply changed the materials with which we terra-form the unstable earth beneath us, that grounds us as human subjects. Body and soul, body and mind, online and offline, real and virtual: none are binary oppositions. Coded according to different socio-cultural contexts, all these mutually constitutive pairings nevertheless express the

118 ‘icon, n.’, n.p.
119 My translation; Corps, p. 13.
120 On this, see also comments at the end of Introduction above, pp. 62-63.
same compulsion to try to figure out what it really means to be a human subject in the world.

The Agony and the Ecstasy of Technology

Laura U. Marks asserts that technology, computer hardware and software, produces intense physical and emotional responses in its users: ‘When your computer jitters and crashes, do you not bleed too? Does the aborted connection remind you of your tenuous hold on this world? When your computer sprouts a rash of warnings and mindless confirmation messages on its face, do you similarly grow hot and bothered? I know I do.’121 The actions of the malfunctioning machine, accidentally user mandated or unfathomably issuing from the computer itself, stimulate physical and affective sensations in the body in front of the screen. What is happening inside the computer’s processors, or on its screen, may be ‘virtual’, but the reaction it provokes is material. Studies show, for example, that online gaming has various physical effects, including loss of sleep, pain from playing for long hours, and the development of fine motor skills.122

In addition, some Residents living with chronic illness consider time in-World to be a powerful addition to more traditional medical interventions.123 After being diagnosed with Parkinson’s disease in her early 80s, Fran Serenade joined SL.124 She derives great joy from her in-World activities, typically undertakings to which her condition precludes participation in real life, such as ice-skating, or experiences that are impossible to have offline, such as swimming as a mermaid. Such activities, Fran believes, therapeutically increase her dopamine levels, which Parkinson’s can negatively impact. SL also engenders in Fran a renewed sense of self-confidence: if her avatar can do it, so can she. Since joining the World, Fran has become more physically capable, despite her symptoms. Fran’s daughter, Barbie Alchemy, has created specific environments for Parkinson’s sufferers in SL to allow others access to similar medical benefits. Barbie credits SL’s iatric efficacy to the operation of mirror neurons and neuro-plasticity, the ways in which the brain creates new pathways based on visual stimuli, and thereby ‘rewires’ itself to (re)gain function.

121 Touch, p. 191.
122 Chee, Vieta, and Smith, p. 169; Malaby, p. 22.
123 Drax.
124 The Drax Files.
Fran and Barbie’s anecdotal experience is borne out, broadly, by recent clinical research. In a 2016 study from Duke University, paraplegic patients recovered a significant amount of mobility thanks to brain-machine interface technology. The treatment modality was based on a combination of ‘intense immersive virtual reality training’, ‘visual-tactile feedback’, and the usage of robotic exo-skeletons. Patients were initially tasked with controlling the motion of a digital avatar with their minds. The brain’s electrical signals were translated into computer input. The ‘offline’ body controlled the ‘online’ avatar. The latter, however, also made itself ‘felt’ in a meaningful way. Patients received sensory feedback on the forearm, to mimic roughly the sensation of taking a step corresponding with the avatar’s movements. This neurological-virtual (re)training later allowed patients to re-create the avatar’s movements outside the digital environment: by controlling a robotic-exoskeleton with their mind, they could then walk in the real world. Although no longer visible, the avatar lives on as part of the patients’ ‘offline’ body. The avatar functionally resides in the patients’ brain, in the form of the new, or regenerated, neural pathways that fundamentally underpin their increased locomotive capacity.

The visual animations of avatars are controlled by the offline user. However, these animations exert a form of control over the offline body too. This interplay of user-technology agency is intensified for the Liégeois visionaries, as for them, the virtual realm is more real than the normal ‘offline’ world, which offers only shadows of God’s majesty. The ‘offline’ saintly body is secondary to the spiritual avatar which operates in the truly authentic hereafter; the software has the upper hand. In terms of the Duke University study of paraplegia: the primary goal of the saint is not to (re)gain mobility in the ‘offline’ world, but rather to use the real world (‘offline’) to increase their abilities in the ‘online’ world. The holy woman pivots to the real world (‘offline’) in order to increase her spiritual facilities in the ‘online’ realm of God’s grace. Nevertheless, the saint’s body is always involved in some way in virtual activities. The saint’s virtual existence is routed through the body, and occurrences in vision space are shown to affect her body intensely. What’s more, the saint’s body is frequently the means by which she develops in piety sufficiently to acquire a ‘user account’ for the virtual-spiritual space, for example as a result of asceticism.

In SL the virtual experiences of Christians are believed, by some, to leave a mark on the Resident’s offline body. With religious worship online, via a

125 Donati et al.
126 Ibid., n.p.
machine capable of making the user emote and physically feel the grace of God, Marks’ formulation of the physicality of interfacing with a machine is amplified even further. The majority of interviewees in my study do not believe that the highly physical rite of Communion is fully possible or appropriate in SL. Only four Residents (one NDC, one Pentecostal, and two UCC) consider the online and offline rite to be wholly equivalent. In UCC Communion services, Residents are instructed to ready themselves offline with sacramental elements, such as a piece of bread and some juice. The clergy-member leading the service indicates to SL congregants when to partake of the appropriately transformed elements offline, whilst worshippers’ avatars remain seated in the in-World church. Although conducted over the internet, UCC Communion very much depends on the offline world. UCC avatars do not ingest a digital form of the sacramental wafer and wine. Rather, SL offers a means to connect an ordained minister to a geographically dispersed flock: the cleric’s consecration flows through the virtual into the corporeal offline world, affecting the literal bread and juice that a Resident has collected.

A belief in consubstantiation grounds the UCC acceptance of Communion in SL. Sacramental elements are already understood as being virtual manifestations of Christ’s materiality in the offline world: ‘The elements are symbolic representations as opposed to actually being body and blood’ (male, 73, USA, UCC; 2016). The authenticity of the virtual rite necessitates that a ‘real’ clergy-member (i.e. an individual ordained offline) leads the service. Indeed, all those representing themselves as ministers in the UCC SL church (FUCCSL) are ‘really’ ordained offline. Moreover, FUCCSL is the first in-World worship space to be authorized by its governing denomination, identified as a ‘Ministry of the Southern California Nevada Conference’ of the UCC since its inception in October 2013. In November 2016, it became the first SL church to achieve full standing by ecclesiastical authorities as a ‘real’ church, as a member of the Eastern Association of the UCC Southern California Nevada Conference.127 This recognition legitimizes – for want of a better word – FUCCSL and its associated worship praxes. Virtual Communion is valid for UCC Residents as it is authorized explicitly by the UCC clergy that offer it, and implicitly by the UCC governing body that has approved of the denomination’s activities in-World.

By contrast, the Vatican rejects online Communion in strident terms: ‘Virtual reality is no substitute for the Real Presence of Christ in the

Eucharist, [...]. There are no sacraments on the Internet’.128 Most Residents I spoke with, both Catholic and non-Catholic, were similarly wary of the loss of materiality implied by virtual Eucharistic experiences. As a Methodist minister elucidates: ‘the sense of connection with God in Communion can be experienced here, but the base physicality of these signs and symbols are not really possible here’ (male, 40, UK; 2011). Nevertheless, if Communion in SL were entirely meaningless, there would be no need to avoid the practice or struggle with its implications. As several of my interviewees remarked: virtual Communion is potentially valid in a spiritual sense, yet impossible to be achieved physically (sacramentally). It is authentic yet also somehow inauthentic, qualitatively different to the same rite offline, even if the same spiritual gestures take place. A Roman Catholic respondent (male, 55, Australia; 2016) points out a seeming inconsistency in the Church’s prohibitive stance on virtual Communion. In fact, the Church does recognize that spiritual Communion is authentic, at times. For example, it is advocated as a means of Eucharistic devotion for those who cannot attend mass, such as the sick and the elderly. The validity of spiritual Communion is witnessed by pronouncements made at the Council of Trent.129 In 1551, the Council designated three forms of Communion: sacramental (ingestion of the Eucharist by sinners, absent any commitment to piety), spiritual (fervent desire for the Eucharist by the pious, absent the literal sacraments), and both sacramental and spiritual (ingestion of the Eucharist with appropriate veneration by the faithful). Whilst the latter is implicitly superior, the former two options are at least partially authentic. And spiritual Communion, in which the communicant receives God’s grace, is surely better than the condemnation that sinners obtain via sacramental Communion alone. Why, then, does the Vatican prohibit virtual Communion, with its clear resonance as a form of spiritual Communion, so vehemently?

This is murky doctrinal territory, hinging on complex distinctions between, on the one hand, the spiritual and the virtual, and on the other, the sacramental and the notionally ‘real’ (offline). The interview responses of an Anglican Resident (female, 40, Australia; 2011) shed light on the ways in which lay believers deal with such ambiguity. Line by line, the theological and personal reasoning of one Christian take shape:

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129 Denzinger (ed.), p. 396, DS 1648. On spiritual Communion as a potential ‘solution’ to the conundrum of virtual Communion, see: Spadaro, Cybertheology, pp. 75-76.
Let’s take Communion.
[The priest] cannot consecrate bread and distribute it.
But
If I were to have a little bit of bread here, and a little bit of wine
and if he were to say the Words of Institution
...
Hmmm.
That would take a stretch of my imagination to consider that legitimate.
Still, if this were the ONLY way I could attend church, it would be better
than no Communion.
It challenges my ideas of meeting, of community.
Does the priest need to be physically present for the prayers to be
effective?
[...]
I suppose. then, the same might be said for other sacraments.
Baptism
But it would be a bigger stretch again for, say Confirmation
Because the Bishop is meant to actually lay hands on you.
I think confession and absolution are fine.

The performance of virtual religious rites challenges this Christian’s under-
standing of her faith practice. Yet, she understands that virtual Communion –
if absolutely necessary – does have a certain spiritual value, better than
no Communion at all. Later in the interview, she poses a series of questions,
interrogating her personal viewpoint and Church teachings on the issue
further:

Why can a virtual community that has supported a person through their
spiritual journey, not be able to pray them through baptism, confirm-
tation, and beyond?
I do not believe that God is constrained by the laws of time and space,
so why should we feel the need to all be in the same place for God to be
among us?

She concludes by determining that, ultimately, it is God, and not clerical
officials, who ‘bestows’ the sacrament. Theoretically, then, her earlier posi-
tion has been overturned. If God, in spirit, is outside of time and space, then
He can operate successfully in a virtual environment. This attitude clearly
positions the Resident outside of orthodox doctrine, which demands the
ministrations of a cleric for sacramental rites. Drawing from the Liégeois'
example, I hypothesize that the female respondent’s gender plays a role in her thinking. Disconnecting the sacraments from clerical control allows her, as a woman, to have an unmediated relationship with God without interference from the clergy. Paradoxically, this more direct link to the divine occurs in the highly mediated space of SL. In the virtual world, however, she chooses the kind of mediation (and mediatization) to which she is subject – avatar style, forms of interaction with fellow users, personal faith, and decision to log on.  

The form of virtual Communion, direct from God, imagined by the female SL user discussed above is paralleled in the biographies of various saints who receive the Eucharist in their mystical visions. Margaret of Ypres, for example, receives Communion directly from Christ during a spiritual vision. Though her Eucharistic experience explicitly takes place during ecstasy, it is real and leaves a physical trace. Margaret is able to taste and chew the sacramental wafer present in her mouth, even once she returns to her earthly senses: ‘The Lord gave her a share in his own body under the species of bread, and afterward she revealed to her spiritual father this certain proof: what she received outwardly in her mouth, she chewed with her teeth and tasted for as long as its material form remained. This grace stayed with her for fifteen days.’

In a mystical vision, Lutgard of Aywières ingests Christ’s blood directly from the wound on the right side of his crucified body. This is a parallel, even superior, form of traditional Communion, which clearly troubles doctrine on the necessity for clerical intercession in the performance of the rite. The holy woman does not need to perform the meditative work to comprehend the reality that the Eucharistic wine is Christ’s blood, as she drinks it directly from the source. She experiences the ‘substance’ of the sacrament, without having to deal with its superficial and occluding ‘accident’. The physical effect of this virtual spiritual moment is highlighted by the text’s author. After this experience, the saint is ‘always stronger and quicker in the service

130 Cf. discussion of agency in choosing the terms of one’s own mediatization in Chapter 3, with specific reference to Kim Kardashian West: pp. 177-79 and 181-87.
131 For similar examples of mystical Communion, see VBN, 3.2.193-224; VES, 19.374 (implicit); VILéau, 2.20.113; VILov, 1.4.20.163, 2.2.9.173, 2.3.12.173-74, 2.6.29.178-79, 3.1.2.182-83, 3.1.5.183, 3.1.7.183-84; VIN, 8.218-21; VIH, 34.96.881. On this motif in Ida of Léau’s biography, see also above: Chapter 1, p. 76. More generally, see: Bynum, Holy Feast, pp. 228-33.
133 VLA, 1.1.13.239. See also: ibid., 1.2.14.240.
of God’ (‘semper [...] in Dei servitio robustior & alacrior’).

Moreover, for a length of time after the event, her saliva tastes ‘mellower than the sweetest honey’ (‘super omnem mellis dulcorem suavius’), sweetened as it is by God’s grace. Such episodes of mystical Communion are superior forms of the female respondent’s conceptualized online Communion: the saint receives tangible evidence of the rite, even though it occurred in vision space. By comparison, virtual SL Communion can only ever be partial. A user’s avatar ‘ingests’ the wafer and wine through a series of mouse clicks, yet the offline body of the user cannot taste, smell, and touch the sacraments.

Physical traces of the sacraments testify to the medieval woman’s authentic experience of the rite. Such evidence contributes to the threatening nature of mystical Communion for the clerical establishment. If such experiences were inferior – or parallel – to ‘normal’ Communion experiences, then the Church could dismiss them as subordinate to the doctrinally approved rites. After all, to connect with the divine in an orthodox manner, a priest would still be needed. This is the case for modern examples of online rites, as discussed above. However, mystical Communion is clearly a thorny issue for hagiographers, keen to situate saintly protagonists within authorized religious practices, yet dependent on such moments of extraordinary divine intimacy for a construction of a woman as particularly holy. Margaret of Ypres bypasses her confessor, and any male representative of clerical power, when she receives the sacrament from Christ directly. Importantly, however, this only occurs when she is unable to find a priest to serve her. It is a worst-case scenario, not an everyday occurrence. In this episode, it is the confessor Zeger’s influence on Margaret, rather than Christ’s influence, which is emphasized.

Zeger’s spiritual or physical presence is not just educative and corrective, but gives Margaret spiritual solace. He allows her a certain interior knowledge of God’s presence. Though the biographer maintains that Margaret does not know the reason she is unable to feel the grace of the Lord this particular day, her confessor’s physical absence is underlined. It is clear that Margaret’s access to God is mediated by Zeger, and thus the direct nature of her relationship to God is minimized. Her first instinct when in spiritual confusion is to turn to her confessor, and then to seek out another priest. The absence of her confessor, and any adequate clerical alternative, drives Margaret to despair. It is only at this point that she turns to Christ himself. It is noteworthy that she herself does not ask for Christ to bless her with Communion, nor any other form of grace. It is

\[\text{VLAEng, 1.13.228; VLA, 1.1.13.239.}\]

\[\text{VMY, 24.118.}\]
Christ’s decision to visit her and give her Communion directly; Margaret’s behaviour is faultless.

**Crucifixion Online**

The SL user interacts directly with God *as spirit* in virtual worship rites; medieval saints, who may actually see and even touch Christ in the flesh during their visions, interact with God *as physicalized man*. Nevertheless, products sold on SL Marketplace allow for a kind of virtual *imitatio Christi*. For L$298 (c. £0.95), Residents can have their avatar take up the body of Christ on the cross, using the ‘Jesus Cross with Animation’ (see Fig. 14). As the user’s avatar, operated by the offline body, melds with the body of Christ, the offline body of the user implicitly and momentarily melds with Christ’s body on the cross too.

The ‘Jesus Cross’ received a rating of four out of five stars by eight users. With what criteria did reviewers rate this product? Religious efficacy? Aesthetic enjoyment? Innovative programming? It is impossible to know. But its creator, Trigit Amat, is clear in his intention for this product to be used for the stimulation of intense – and authentic – emotions. The ‘Cross’ is listed with the following description:

This artwork let’s you feel like Jesus.
Click the cross and become Jesus.
The symbol of a man on a cross is associated with very strong emotions.
These get even wilder, when you experience yourself (or your avatar) on the cross.
Everyone who clicks the cross will find himself/ his avatar in the position of Jesus Christ on the cross.
A wonderful detail is that the titulus over the cross is said to be the relic of the original cross!136

This blurb emphasizes the religious possibilities of the piece: it lets the SL user literally ‘become’ Jesus. The physical body of the user and his virtual body (avatar) are conflated – ‘yourself (or your avatar)’, ‘himself/ his avatar’. The online manipulation of the avatar’s body is a vehicle for the religious experience lodged in the user’s offline body. What happens to the body of the avatar directly affects the body of the offline user too.

SL crucifixion stirs strong emotions in the offline user, as further elucidated by Amat in an interview in which I probed his motivations in creating the ‘Cross’. Initially, the object was conceived as an ‘art piece’, a reflection on the ways in which religion is deeply ingrained in the human psyche, and an innovative way to harness the power of virtual reality. Most buyers purchase the ‘Cross’ in the period around Easter. Amat theorizes, thus, that the ‘Cross’ forms part of Residents’ Eastertime celebrations as a meaningful devotional object, despite its original conception as an artistic work. The potent affective-religious resonance of the ‘Cross’ was certainly not lost on its creator. Details in the ‘Cross’ description are drawn from his own experiences using the piece. Whilst no longer ‘religious in a Christian way today’, Amat was ‘surprised how strong the feelings of seeing [his] own avatar on the cross were’. Indeed, it felt to him as if he were ‘committing a “sacrilege”’. This unexpected religious-affective response signalled that ‘something interesting’ was going on. The ‘Cross’ was no longer simply a reflective work of art, but a catalyst for personal religious meditation, even for those who no longer actively practise Christianity.

137 Amat, personal communication.
Amat was compelled to speak to a priest offline, owing to the intense reaction(s) the ‘Cross’ provoked both for his atheist friends and himself. The cleric reassured him: ‘he said, that he does not feel offended about it and that actually it was done in medieval times’. The virtual crucifixion offered by the SL ‘Cross’ is a modern iteration of the imitatio Christi enacted by medieval holy women in vision spaces. Juliana of Mont-Cornillon, for instance, desperately desires to experience crucifixion to repay in some part the gift of salvation wrought by Christ’s ultimate sacrifice. Direct physical imitation of Christ’s Crucifixion is impossible for her, thus she turns to the spiritual world instead:

But since she could not physically die on a cross as she wished, she often stretched herself spiritually, with unbelievably fervent love, on the same cross where Christ had suffered.\textsuperscript{138}

\begin{quote}
(Sed quoniam mortem crucis assequi non poterat corpore, ut optapat; saepius in spiritu in eamdem, in qua Christus passus est, crucem, sese incredibili fervore dilectionis extendebat.)\textsuperscript{139}
\end{quote}

The repetition of ‘c’ – ‘cruces’, ‘corpore’, ‘Christus’, ‘crucem’ – insistently links Christ to his humanity, capable of being crucified because of the Incarnation. The soft sibilance of ‘saepius in spiritu’ contrasts against the harshness of this repeated consonance, emphasizing the distinction between spiritual and corporeal experiences. Yet, the articulation of ‘s’ sounds in ‘Christus passus est’ undermines this distinction, with the word ‘Christus’ capturing the hard ‘c’ sounds associated with the body in this passage, alongside the softer ‘s’ of spiritual terms. In ‘Christus’, we find authentic divinity and humanity in perfect conjunction, indivisible from one another as each is lexically linked to form the majestic whole of Christ, but also coherent individual sounds.

By embracing ‘Christus’, Christ, and his suffering meditatively, Juliana has an authentic experience of crucifixion. The cross upon which she spiritually lays herself out is the same one as that touched by the body of Christ. In these parallel acts of crucifixion, one biblical and the other meditative, Juliana takes on Christ’s body as he also takes on her physicality, and the two achieve union. Ordinary worshippers could access a similar – though secondary – experience of imitatio Christi, by following a given holy woman, reading her biography and imagining themselves as the

\textsuperscript{138} VJC\textsuperscript{Eng}, 1.4.18.204.
\textsuperscript{139} VJC, 1.4.18.450.
protagonist. Imagination, though, can be doctrinally troublesome. Whilst a hagiographer, and text, can suggest vehemently a certain meditation or interpretation of events, the contemplative act is individualistic. The scope and content of a believer’s imaginings are outside of the direct control of the Church. Vision space, as a projection of contemplation, is also potentially threatening to ecclesiastical controls: in the virtual mystical realm, there is no need for the clergy. However, the content of mystical visions provides useful testimony as to the veracity of doctrine, alongside witnessing the power of God in the world.

Men, Women, and Heterodoxy

Heresy haunts vision space. In a similar manner, experiences of religion in SL carry the potentiality of heterodoxy, as the space allows a more free-form educative system, with knowledge swapped between users outside of an institutional context. For example, SL was described as a ‘safe space’ to (re) discover religion by several respondents in my study. Alongside the reality of interpersonal relationships conducted in SL, the spiritual valency of activity in-World is felt to be genuine. Several interviewees in my study emphasized the authenticity of spiritual teaching and ministry in SL, facilitated by online fellowship. One NDC church leader, with a SL congregation that he estimated totalled over 1,700 Christians, testified that he had seen ‘hundreds come to Christ as a result of outreach’ in SL (male, 46, USA; 2011). Such instances of religious education in SL allow for believers to be inculcated with orthodox doctrine, a complement to offline experiences in church.

Medieval visions, as with online worship, enable the holy woman to develop a deeper understanding of her own faith and the magnificence of God. For example, Juliana of Mont-Cornillon’s apprehension of Christian doctrine, garnered in visions, is so great that ‘she seemed to have a share in the undiluted truth of our future knowledge. As for all the articles pertaining to the Catholic faith, she had been so fully instructed by him who teaches knowledge to mankind that she had no need to consult masters or books about them.’140 The vita’s author continues that Juliana, receiving such

140 VJC Eng, 1.4.20.207. ‘ut mera cognitionis futurae veritas, vel ex parte, ipsi contemplanti partes suas agere videretur. De omnibus autem quae ad Catholicae fidem pertinent articulis, illo docente qui docet hominem scientiam, ita ad plenum fuerat edocta; ut non esset quod super his doctores debere consulere vel Scripturas.’ VJC, 1.4.20.451. See also: ibid., 1.2.12-13, 447-48. Other Liégeois similarly profit intellectually from divine inspiration: VAS, 1.1.477; VBN,
clarity of spiritual insight, could never fall victim to heresy or stray from her staunch orthodox faith. Juliana’s biographer is necessarily shoring up his text’s protagonist against claims of straying too far from ecclesiastical power bases, or authorized clerical doctrine, even though she bypasses clerical authority by getting her teaching directly from God.\textsuperscript{141}

Claims as to the superiority of comprehension attained by spiritual visions are also evident in the testimony from male visionaries. The priest from Maagdendaal who experiences mutual ecstatic visions with Ida of Nivelles confesses to an abbess that ‘never [numquam] in all his life had he received such [tantam] abundance of divine awareness as he experienced on the occasion of that wondrous vision, in any [neque] writings, any [neque] sermons, any [neque] masses he had celebrated or secret colloquies he had held with God’.\textsuperscript{142} The anaphora of ‘neque’ in this passage emphasizes the inferiority of mortal means of comprehending God and His teachings. The opposition of ‘numquam’ and ‘tantam’ – a complete absence versus an overflowing abundance – highlights the clear hierarchy between the mortal and the spirit world for learning of the divine. This throws into relief the challenge of mystical visions for the ecclesiastical hierarchy. Human knowledge, derived from clerical teaching, can only ever be secondary to knowledge received direct from the divine in vision space. That a holy person, male or female, can access this space and accede to such comprehension indicates the individual’s extreme piety – and worthiness as a role model for other believers. The institutional Church relies on holy individuals’ experience of vision space to promulgate doctrine and to testify as to the authenticity of the divine. However, what happens in vision space is not controllable by mortal men, and facilitates personal interactions with – and interpretations of – the divine.\textsuperscript{143}

The capacity to interact socially in mystical vision space is not exclusive to holy women: the potential for heterodoxy in this arena affects both genders. Along with the priest of Maagdendaal, several other religious men are shown to tap in to the communion of saints in Ida of Nivelles’ \textit{vita}. A priest hears tales of Ida’s great holiness, though doubts the honesty of such
testimonies. After visiting her repeatedly, he remains unconvinced of her piety. A vision of Ida’s face during mass, sent to him by God, rectifies this. Thereafter, he visits Ida once more and falls into ecstasy at the sight of her. Ida enters ecstasy immediately, and in a shared vision the pair converse joyfully. In another episode, Christ tells a spiritually weary canon regular to meet with the holy woman in order to find succour. Appearing in the form of a child to another religious man praying before a crucifix, Christ fobs his worshipper off in favour of first interacting with Ida: “Not just now, son, as I first have to make festivity [Psalms 75.11] in the holy familiarity of love with my friend Ida of Nivelles”. The man then witnesses the Christ-child gathering Ida’s tears in a basin. Inspired by these vision events which testify to Ida’s immense holiness, he journeys to La Ramée to see the holy woman in person, whom he can miraculously recognize from the vision though he has never seen her ‘in real life’.

Approaching Ida’s window, the man recounts the details of his vision. The passage detailing this encounter features the man’s reported and direct speech, yet Ida is entirely silent. The focus is on the man’s religious inspiration from seeing Ida in the vision, rather than any direct – or mutual – contact between the two. Christ privileges contact with Ida in this episode, and the text makes no mention of the male religious getting a ‘one-on-one’ vision of Christ himself. It is also noteworthy that none of the male visionaries in Ida’s vita are identified by name. The elision of male identity here is a stark contrast to the foregrounding of Jacques of Vitry and Thomas of Cantimpré in the biography of Marie of Oignies, as dissected in Chapter 3. Whilst Jacques and Thomas seem to vie with Marie to position themselves ‘centre stage’, the anonymous men in Ida’s text are definitively less important – and less spiritually gifted – than Ida herself.

Whilst men can and do receive visions in the Liégeois biographies, male visionary experiences seem to be more one-sided than visions shared between holy women. The male religious are gifted with visions of Ida of Nivelles, or visions which direct them to her, but do not meaningfully interact with her in vision space. Despite the capacity to visit with another individual virtually in vision space, no matter what distance separates individuals geographically, male religious typically journey to see Ida ‘in real life’, with

144 VIN, 26.263-66.
145 Ibid., 16.240.
146 VINEng, 24b.68. ‘nunc [...] fili, non liberabo te, quoniam priùs oportet me sancta quadam familiaritate amoris diem festum agere cum amica mea Ida de Nivelia’. Emphases in original. VIN, 24.259.
the exception of the priest of Maagdendaal. Indeed, a priest from Thuin must journey to visit Ida in person to even appreciate that he has been visited by her in a vision, and that the pair shared an intense spiritual experience. The necessity for a male visionary to see a holy woman in real life in order to have a meaningful interaction is also revealed in Ida of Louvain’s *vita*. An unnamed Premonstratensian canon sees Ida during his ecstasy, and appreciates that they are equally skilled (‘aequalis forent meriti’) in religious matters. The experience motivates him to visit her, as the vision allows him to appreciate that she is his only friend. The canon feels such a bond, though he has never met her in real life nor heard about her before his ravishment. It is clear that he sees Ida in a vision, but Ida does not see him. When the pair finally meet, their connection is transformative: ‘With such shared insight, it was as if they had lived together their whole lives long and had known one another with identical mutuality. [...] And so, from then on, they were one heart in the Lord.’ The basis of their affiliation is their shared love for God and determination to serve Him each day as perfectly as possible. The equivalence of the pair’s holiness is undercut in the text, however.

At the end of the canon’s short life, his friends are concerned his virtues cannot stack up with the holy woman’s, as she has such a longer lifespan. The canon reassures them that the religious feats he has intensively undertaken in his shorter life are of equal weight to Ida’s total sum: weaker and slower, Ida takes longer to reach the same lofty heights. That the man’s spirituality needs affirming in such terms underscores the threat of Ida’s own holiness. Ida’s access to the divine does not threaten her longevity, and she can ‘log on’ for as long as she lives. Whilst the canon accedes to piety by doing, Ida becomes ever more spiritually worthy by being – something impossible for the canon to achieve, as he is a less able visionary.

**Gender-Swapping to Level Up**

An individual of any gender with sufficient stores of spirituality (software) possesses the hardware (body, meditative capacity) to enter the communion of saints. However, women seem to have better software and/or hardware,
or at least this is how the situation is presented in the *vitae* of the holy women under discussion here. For a holy woman, almost pure existence as a spiritual avatar and complete enmeshment in the virtual world is thus possible. Holy men as depicted in the Liégeois corpus, on the other hand, must oscillate between online and offline more frequently, and rely much more on ‘meatspace’ (life offline, where an individual is locked into the ‘meat’ of the body) to practise their religion. In a striking correspondence, studies suggest that male users prefer to present themselves with female avatars in online virtual environments. Feminine bodies are somehow more suitable for, or suited to, internet existence.

Kerstin Radde-Antweiler suggests that more than 60% of male Residents typically use female avatars. The source of Radde-Antweiler’s figure is unclear. However, this finding is broadly in line with the results of studies of gender-swapping in massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs). For example, a 2004 study of the game *EverQuest* showed that 60% of the gamers polled (n = 540) operated an avatar at odds with their offline gender, though that avatar may not be the user’s preferred (‘main’) character for routine gameplay. Similarly, a 2008 investigation of the same game found that 57% of all respondents (n = 119) had engaged in avatar-based gender-swapping. A note of caution is necessary. As Kevin Linares et al. point out, SL and MMORPGs differ significantly in one respect: the latter are explicitly goal-oriented. The impact of this difference upon gender swapping is not clear. What’s more, not all MMORPGs are alike. Figures for gender-swapping activity in one game may not be generalizable across

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151 A parallel investigation of gendered visual superiority in the lives of thirteenth-century holy men and holy women would perhaps produce different results, or at the very least nuance these findings. I speculate that the motif of superior vision is also found in the *vitae* of the holy men of Liège, perhaps even with holy women presented in these texts as the less gifted seers. The primary rhetorical signification of these lesser gifted seers, taken across the collective corpus, is to throw into stark relief the exceptional visionary aptitude (and thus holiness) of the *vitae*’s subjects. In this, gender is a subsidiary category of difference to holiness. On this and the male corpus, see: ‘Beyond the Frame’ section of the Introduction above, pp. 52-59.

152 P. 203

153 M.D. Griffiths, Davies, and Chappel, ‘Factors’, p. 484. In a much-cited earlier study, ‘Stereotype’, the researchers reported that only 16% of *Everquest* gamers swapped gender. However, as the authors note in ‘Factors’ (p. 486), the disparity relates to differences in question wording, as participants were asked if they gender-swapped their *main* character in ‘Stereotype’, versus *any* of their characters in ‘Factors’. On gender-swapping avatars, see also: Clinnin; D’Anastasio; Davis; Pearce, p. 22-23; Schleiner.

154 Hussain and M.D. Griffiths, p. 59.

155 P. 54
other games, let alone to non-ludic virtual worlds. More research is needed to discover SL-specific data regarding gender-swapping with avatars.

Veteran MMORPG researcher Nicholas Yee posits that most gender-swapping occurs, at least in World of Warcraft, for either practical or aesthetic reasons.\textsuperscript{156} Female avatars are used by gamers as a means ‘to be more stylish and to optimize their character’.\textsuperscript{157} All but two of my study respondents have avatars that match their offline gender. Yee’s contention chimes with the response of the male Resident (57, USA, Episcopalian; 2016) who uses a female avatar. He ‘simply like[s] the diversity of appearance that a woman has’. His avatar is ‘mostly an artistic expression’. My second gender-swapping interviewee, a woman offline (59, USA, Catholic; 2016), underscores that her usage of a male avatar was primarily a pragmatic decision. Heavy demands are typically levied upon female avatars to be fashionable. But with a male avatar, ‘you are not under as much pressure to keep having new outfits and new and better mesh bodies and skins and whatnot’. The patriarchal appearance-based economy reigns supreme, even in SL.

As a male avatar, the Resident can get on with the business of living in-World in relative peace: ‘I don’t care that much about my avatar, his look, what he wears or she wears, I am more interested in the world and exploring it’. In other words, the male-presenting Resident is judged on what she does, rather than how she looks. This Resident’s experience is not atypical. The 2008 EverQuest study reported that more female users (68%; n = 32) than male users (54%; n = 83) gender-swapped avatars.\textsuperscript{158} The study authors posit that the high rate of women using male avatars is directly linked to the unwanted attention female avatars routinely face from other gamers.\textsuperscript{159} Nevertheless, they maintain that a ‘female persona has a number of positive social attributes in a male-oriented environment’. For example, female avatars may have a competitive advantage, receive more help during game-play from other users, and be given useful virtual goods for free, or at a reduced cost. The female body, then, can be an asset and a nuisance by turns. Within the context of medieval visionaries, the (offline) female body seems to provide a ‘competitive advantage’ in the experience of divinity,

\textsuperscript{156} ‘WoW’, n.p.
\textsuperscript{157} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{158} Hussain and M.D. Griffiths, p. 50.
\textsuperscript{159} Ibid., p. 52. On this, see also: M.D. Griffiths, Davies, and Chappel, ‘Factors’, p. 486; ‘Stereo-type’, p. 88; Yee, ‘Scrolls’, pp. 40-42. Harassment of female users is also endemic in the new realms opened up by Virtual Reality (VR) technology, which is essentially a more immersive version of MMORPG environments. On this, see: Belamire; Lorenz; Shriram and Schwartz; Westervelt; Wong.
operating as a conduit that is enviably superior to the male body of monkish peers. Yet, the female body is also a liability, subject to the patriarchal machinations of the clergy and the Church. In vision space (the virtual realm), however, the holy woman accedes to a form of spiritual embodiment liberated from the mortal world’s (offline) misogynistic codification. She can finally concentrate on her spiritual business.

Nevertheless, a male avatar certainly proves useful for Ida of Louvain. In an ecstatic vision, the holy woman sees herself ‘vested as a priest in robes of incalculable dignity’ (‘Sacerdotalibus vestibus [...] ac ornamentis ulta quam dici possit inæstimabilibus insignitur’). Immediately after perceiving her gender-swapped form, Ida experiences (mystical) Communion. This episode is catalyzed by the holy woman’s considerable distress owing to her confessor’s ‘hurtful words’ (‘injuriosis verbis’). In fact, Ida is so aggrieved by the confessor’s slights that she repeatedly refuses to meet with him, even though he sincerely repents. The vision takes place in the pair’s first meeting after the dispute, as Ida stands directly behind the cleric as he celebrates mass. Though the priest may be the focus of her literal gaze, he is utterly irrelevant to Ida’s vision and subsequent communication: ‘Within the vision, the monk did not so much as play a part, and nor did Ida so much as advert to his being there, whether with her bodily eyes or with her spiritual. Nor did she overhear him, as she usually did, in his reciting of the texts in the Missal.’

Doctrine forces Ida to suffer her confessor’s presence. He is, at least in theory, the gatekeeper to the Eucharist. Yet her visionary capacity allows her to cut the cleric out of the equation entirely, and give herself the Eucharist directly. With her vision and with her male avatar, Ida demonstrates the fact that she does not rely on her inimical confessor for her spiritual salvation. She can – and does – ignore him, prioritizing her pious worship instead. For the Church hierarchy, this is a threatening prospect indeed.

Ida of Louvain engages in what is termed, in modern parlance, as ‘clerical role play’ (CRP). In CRP, a Resident uses an avatar dressed in clerical garb to perform, at least superficially, the role of a priest in-World. Two Roman Catholic participants in my study, ‘John’ (male, 50, Italy; 2016) and ‘Matthew’ (male, 18-24, USA; 2016), undertake CRP in SL, leading (non-sacramental) services, such as the liturgy, at churches in-World with priestly avatars. Both are emphatically transparent that they are not ordained priests offline, and

160 *VIlov*Eng, 3.3.5b.75; *VIlov*, 3.1.5.183.
161 *VIlov*Eng, 3.3.5b.75. ‘in qua visione presati monachi nullam omnino habuit, sed nec oculis corporalibus aut mentalibus ejus advertit præsentiam, aut celebrantis officium, un interdum consueverat, auscultavit.’ *VIlov*, 3.1.5.183.
the fact is not hidden in any way from SL congregants. Nevertheless, both have usernames which include an ecclesiastical title. Life circumstances – a much-wanted marriage for John, and severe chronic ill-health for Matthew – mean that neither can pursue a clerical path offline. CRP in SL, then, offers these Residents a means to partially fulfil their otherwise unrealizable goal of a clerical career, whilst also helping those in need and spreading the Word. The same can be said for Ida of Louvain’s foray into CRP, though her ministry is only self-directed. Respect for the authority of the Vatican was evident in my interviews with both John and Matthew. When asked whether virtual Communion would be acceptable, if provided by a ‘real’ (i.e. offline) priest’s avatar, John defers to the clergy: ‘they are rl priests, so they are able to know exactly if they can or not’. Matthew stresses that neither he nor the SL church in which he ministers are ‘a replacement for a real church and the real Sacraments’. Nevertheless, they ‘are a visible extension of the real Catholic Church in second life’. In this context, he rejects a label of CRP for his activities in-World. He does not ‘role play’ his faith, nor his dedication to sharing it with others.

Even so, some Residents categorically dismiss CRP as a form of legitimate religious service. For example, another Catholic (female, 48, USA; 2016) interviewee maintains that ‘a priest is a sacred role [...] Holy Order [...] [...] the collar is meaningful... the vestments are meaningful’. As such, she hypothesizes that ‘a RL priest or monk’ would probably eschew clerical garb in SL. Tim Hutchings remarks that such push-back against CRP demonstrates the importance, for some, of ‘the continuation of traditional forms of authorisation’ even in virtual spaces. Indeed, the Resident voices a desire for more ‘guidance’ from the Vatican on the issue, and on the practice of Catholicism more generally in-World. At the moment, she remarks, ‘we all kind of wander about here doing our own thing [...] which is fine... but it would be good to know where the boundaries should be’. One Roman Catholic SL archdiocese, at least, has sought offline clerical counsel on CRP. The Archbishop of the SL Lepanto Archdiocese, Stephen Francis Byers, discussed the matter with Bishop Athanasius Schneider, auxiliary bishop of Astana, Kazakhstan. Bishop Schneider, touted as an expert in Canon Law, reasoned that since ‘no objects are “real” in SL, CRP by laity is permissible. Somewhat paradoxically, the presence of priest-avatars in SL is legitimate because they are, in fact, virtual forms that are illegitimate in the eyes of the

162 ‘Politics’, p. 74. Hutchings also details here rejection of CRP as expressed by an Anglican Resident.
163 Byers, n.p.
Church. None of the Lepanto clerics are ordained offline. For this reason, the Archdiocese is quite clear: ‘we cannot give any consultation on personal matters or spiritual guidance. PLEASE proceed to your spiritual director or Priest in real life if this is the case’. Lepanto conserves the traditional hierarchy of the offline Church. However, CRP has the potential to up-end the conventional flow of power, with laity supervising the clergy in spiritual matters.

One Roman Catholic respondent, ‘Luke’ (male, 55, Australia; 2016), is active in his preferred SL Catholic community. He is also training to be a deacon offline, and ‘is practising’ what he learns in World. Luke has proposed a number of changes to his church’s services, including rectifying errors in the scriptural passages currently provided to worshippers. So far, church leaders have mostly welcomed Luke’s input. But, as he says, ‘it is really up to the owner of this place [the SL church, i.e. the CRP hierarchy] to consider’. As he does not own the SL church, Luke cannot ‘go in guns blazing’, as he puts it, regarding doctrinal matters. In Luke’s experience, and in Ida of Louvain’s visionary CRP discussed above, virtual priests call the shots. As a holy woman, Ida ‘owns’ mystical vision space, and she dictates what takes place there. However, Ida and the SL church leadership’s ability to exercise such power is ultimately dependent on the fully authoritative status of the (offline) Catholic Church. The latter accede to some form of religious authority in World precisely because their activities are dismissed as ‘not real’ by the Church. Ida’s visions, and indeed her visionary capacity, are circumscribed by the diktats of the Church as to legitimately pious worship praexes. The holy woman’s CRP is not validated in the vita as a moment of personal spiritual empowerment. Instead, it is framed as an event which facilitates Ida’s reconciliation with her confessor, which thus brings her back under tight clerical supervision.

Agency and Dependence

Hypothetically all zealously religious holy individuals can access the communion of saints and experience direct contact with God. This would equate to bypassing clerical control in favour of an intimate, individualistic relationship with God. Instead of depending on the Church and its representatives for knowledge of the divine and access to the sacraments, a saint can ‘log on’ to virtual spiritual space whenever they are so inclined.

164 VILov, 3.1.6-7.183.
However, medieval hagiographies depict again and again the devotion of their protagonists to regular church attendance, with concomitant clerically authorized Communion, in the ‘RL’ (real world) outside of visions. For example, we are told that Juliana of Mont-Cornillon longs to go to mass in a real church every day, visiting church more often than is her sisters’ custom.\footnote{VJC, 2.2.11.447.} Church attendance is positioned as superior in Juliana’s eyes to individual contemplative practice: ‘Her spirit could not rest except by compelling her to do one of two things – either attend mass or else devote herself to prayer at that time wherever she could. The first was her fervent desire, the second her consolation.’\footnote{VJC\textit{Eng}, 1.2.11.193. ‘\textit{non requiescente aliter spiritu ejus, unum \& duobus facere cegreebatur, aut Missae solennis interesse, aut illo tempore ubi commodius poterat orationi incumbere: \& primum quidem sibi erat in ferventi desiderio, reliquum in solatio}. VJC, 1.2.11.447.} Despite what we learn in \textit{vitae} about the supremacy of divine visions for experiencing God, in this passage vision space is clearly of lesser value than attending mass performed by a priest.

Hagiographers must carefully position the holy women they write about as sufficiently unique in their spirituality and devotion, but also non-threatening to existing patriarchal ecclesiastical structures. Though saints can ‘log on’ to God whenever they wish, they also conform to traditional Church hierarchies. Access to the virtual realm of the communion of saints is a product of exemplary piety, and also endows the saint with the status of a genuine holy individual. As a marker of holiness, such access may be more aspirational than actual, inasmuch as a saint’s ability to enter mystical vision space is a way in which hagiographers can signal the saint’s holiness and thereby justify their sacralization. The social and political strictures of the offline world intervene in the saint’s visionary experiences, however, forcibly interrupting the spiritual internet connection which would allow the saint to be ‘logged on’ 24/7.

Analysing the tension between institutional spirituality ‘offline’ and more personal expressions of medieval spirituality ‘online’ allows us to discern a conflict evident in digital culture generally.\footnote{On this conflict, see in particular: Le Crosnier, p. 191.} Internet users tend towards produsage, personalized content and product creation which affirms – consciously or not – membership of a collective, a ‘horizontal’ network of individuals without an oppressive hierarchical structure. By contrast, traditional content producers, including hardware manufacturers, software developers, and the Church, operate ‘vertically’. They wield power from the top down, often leaving users with little choice or power.
Both ‘horizontal’ and ‘vertical’ planes depend on the other. A user cannot produse without the hardware and software to do so. Yet the commerciality of digital business depends on user uptake and engagement with products, tools, and so on. In a similar manner, medieval vision space (‘horizontal’/ heterodox) is dependent on ecclesiastical doctrines (‘vertical’/orthodox). Images and motifs present in vision space – and the very possibility of mystical visions – are dependent on foundational Catholic tenets such as the communion of saints and the capacity of a believer to unite physically and meditatively with God.

With respect to SL, the virtual environment is a free-for-all for produsage (‘horizontal’/heterodox). However, in order to access the online space, Residents depend on the offerings of commercial entities offline (‘vertical’/orthodox), which provide little choice to the average user, namely internet connection and hardware. Furthermore, as Drax observes, experiences in SL still depend on the inherently ‘vertical’ framework offered by Linden Lab. SL depends for its very lifeblood on the creative interventions Residents make within the virtual world. However, as Drax points out, some of Linden Lab’s terms of service could be ‘highly problematic when it comes to owning things’, particularly for machinima creators. He stresses that the company’s ‘heart is at the right place’ when dealing with Residents, and he has not personally encountered issues relating to Linden Lab exercising top-down control over users. Nevertheless, Drax acknowledges that there is no escaping the fact that ‘we play on other people’s playgrounds’ when using SL, and other digital services such as YouTube, Google, and Facebook.

Theoretically, Linden Lab could delete SL at any given time, or censor in-World content. The medieval Church could similarly disavow somatic visionary experiences of the divine as pious phenomena. It would be in neither’s interest to pull the plug, as it were, given SL and female visionary experiences are such great money-makers, literally or metaphorically in terms of spiritual capital. Nevertheless, the denial of service is a potentiality, as SL users and holy women operate on ‘other people’s playgrounds’. By consequence, medieval visionaries and Residents must skilfully negotiate the interdependence of ‘horizontal’ and ‘vertical’ powerbases, situating themselves somewhere in between the two poles.

168 McLaughlin uses the terms ‘vertical’ and ‘horizontal’ to describe the relationship between an individual and God and the relationship between the individual and other believers respectively (p. 24). I argue the relationship between the believer and God outside of vision space is mediated by the Church, and thus deploy the terminology in a similar – albeit nuanced – manner.

169 N.p.
As ‘logging on’ to divine space does not replace more traditional worship forms for medieval holy women, so religious worship online was only one element of the expression of faith for the interviewees in my study. The vast majority of interviewees (twenty-two) attend church offline, alongside their SL devotional activities. SL is embraced by many Christians as a space for meaningful religious expression and worship. However, SL Christians do not generally envisage their in-World spiritual practice as replacing their offline practice. Nor is SL worship entirely equivalent to offline worship for most Residents. The success of prayer in SL lies in the dependent relationship between avatar and offline individual, with avatars as a means of rendering spiritual and intellectual presence visible. The virtual environment is an evolution of Christian devotional practice, thanks to technological advancements. Nevertheless, traditional – even medieval – worship forms are imitated and mirrored in this brave new virtual world. The virtual intersects with the ‘real’ in Christian practice in SL, but it does not overwhelm it. As one interviewee remarks: ‘my avatar has no heart and soul apart from me’ (female, 36, USA, Catholic; 2011).

170 This mirrors the behaviour of internet users more generally. The more individuals use the internet, the more they typically connect with others, either face to face or via telephone: Hogan and Wellman, p. 53.