

St. Pixels: An Experiment in Online Community

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Research Methods

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On Easter Sunday of April 2007, the British Broadcasting Corporation's Radio 4 aired a special service of its regular Sunday morning church program. The occasion was a live broadcast of St. Pixels, a virtual church on the World Wide Web with members primarily based in England and the United States, but also in many other countries all over the world. To accomplish the task of bringing together the virtual church with an offline radio audience, St. Pixels' spokespersons Stephen Goddard and Simon Jenkins; church leader and head web developer Mark Howe; and some of the virtual congregation's members organized a Sunday meeting with BBC Radio 4 crew in a church in Manchester, England to produce a "real life" service for curious listeners and worshipers. According to Howe, St. Pixels' members who physically could not, or did not want to attend the real life service for reasons of privacy, would attend service in St. Pixels' online church-and-chatroom, presumably while listening to the radio.

To publicize the Easter service, St. Pixels linked an official press release to its website (<http://www.stpixels.com>) and sent more releases out to British news media, garnering reports on the *Guardian*, BBC and Radio 4's website as well as some Christian publications. The *Weekly Guardian* reported that one Rev. Jonathan Kerry of the Methodist Church heralded the event as a new way of conceiving Christian church community, "from traditional ways to things as yet unimagined." Given its dedicated following and growing congregation, St. Pixels' management decided that it was time to affirm the success of online Christian community in the "real" Christian world. According to St. Pixels' website, the joint Radio 4 Easter Sunday service led to a direct increase in church membership.

Although the Easter service was a publicity event that bore little resemblance to St. Pixels' normal online services, it was a fascinating example of how Christian churches have negotiated declining rates of in-world attendance while expanding in other areas, namely cyberspace (Brasher 2001.) This paper, an historical and ethnographic study of the virtual community of St. Pixels, is a contribution to discourses in two distinct areas of research, namely, studies of religion and the World Wide Web; and academic analyses of "online" and virtual communities". As such, it includes two brief literature reviews of these areas. The idea of offline and online "community" will be treated as a problematic concept and investigated in various intellectual and academic contexts. Additionally, this case study of St. Pixels may be considered both a preliminary ethnography and an attempt to generate a dynamic history of a virtual church on the World Wide Web that continues to change as we speak. Based on conversations with members and an investigation of a church-generated survey, the ethnography examines how the design of St. Pixels' website shapes the behavior of members and invites participation and reflexivity. Members build relationships with each other through the ritual of prayer, virtual church service, and in-depth discussion of Christianity, community,

church, as well as discussion of other topics unrelated to religion. The roles of members in governing, moderating, and attending to each other's needs and to public (on-and-offline) perception of the church will also be elaborated in this paper.

Religion and the World Wide Web: Some inquiries

Research on religion and the web is extremely varied in content and practitioners work across a wide range of intellectual, disciplinary and methodological contexts. Sociologists Morten T. Hojsgaard and Margit Warburg organize research on religion and the World Wide Web into two waves, the first characterized by utopian promises of computer technology unleashing human social potential (Hojsgaard & Warburg 2005.) To the first wave, I might add the conceptualization of the networked universe as a transcendental space by some of the Internet and World Wide Web's earliest advocates. Patrick Maxwell calls this an understanding of "Internet-as-religion", largely inspired by Jesuit monk Teilhard de Chardin's idea of the noosphere and the converging of minds to produce a higher, disembodied intelligence (Zaleski 1997) In Hojsgaard and Warburg's estimation, religious studies of the first wave cite many examples of religious phenomena and user behavior on the Web, but do little by way of critically examining institutionalized religion (in reference to Brenda Brasher's book "Gimme that Online Religion".)

The second wave is characterized by more cautionary, reflective, and empirically-based research on the rhetorical dimensions of computer-mediated communication and the necessity of creating a vocabulary and typologies of Web-based religious expression. Studies focus on the World Wide Web presence of religions as "traditional" or socially and historically institutionalized as the Roman Catholic Church (Frobish 2006) or Islam (Bunt 2000) generate a certain image of authority and legitimacy on the Web. Scholars have also investigated the iteration and reiteration of religious identity by studying the online interactions of religious subcultural groups like Technopagans (Lovheim & Linderman 2005) or the Falun Gong in China.

Notably, many scholars have investigated the epistemological question of religious expression and its manifestation online, creating hermeneutic distinctions between the practice and the presence of religion on the Web. (Dawson 2004; Helland 2002.) Christopher Helland creates the useful distinction between "religion online", the dissemination of religious material and information online for educational or outreach purposes, with "online religion", the performing of religious rituals such as virtual church services via networked computer technology. Hojsgaard's (2002) own research examines the Web presence of "cyber-religion", defined as a religious "field" in cyberspace whose proponents "subscribe to the idea that their religions are not seriously institutionalized" and exhibit a "fascination with technology, experiments, role-

playing satire, relativistic identity constructions, experiments, and imitations, as well as an outspoken antipathy towards existing religious credos, rituals, myths and ethical codes.”

Other scholars have adopted online ethnographic methodologies to observe and participate in virtual communities based around a traditional religion, most often Christianity (Bainbridge 2002; Schroeder and Lee 1998) Many of these researchers of online religious community were initially influenced by early studies of social organization on the Internet investigating the flexibility of identity creation and manipulation in cyberspace (Turkle 1995; Dibbell 1996; Ludlow 1996) and the proliferation of virtual communities based on, among other things, group interest and technological/programming proficiency (Rhinegold 1993; Ludlow 1996)

As a matter of clarity, the following study of St. Pixels examines how one religious entity on the Web- the virtual church of St. Pixels- organizes itself around shared values and ideas of “community”, a contested term and object of research amongst social scientists. St. Pixels is an English-speaking religious entity that identifies itself as an “experiment in Christian community” with shared ideas of sacred space and religious ritual, such as Sunday worship service (St. Pixels website). Additionally, one must recognize that the online presence of St. Pixels is not limited to itself, and therefore not entirely “virtual”: there are multiple and overlapping social contexts and histories to negotiate in studying St. Pixels, thus creating a broader field of study that must be considered. In no particular order of importance, these contexts include ecumenical and Methodist Christianity in the English-speaking world; the entity of St. Pixels itself as a dynamic website and Java – supported chatroom created and used by members on a regular basis; St. Pixels in relation to other websites the Web, both religious and not-religious; and St. Pixels on the Web in relation to the “offline” world.

It is important to note that St. Pixels in its so-called “virtual” form must be understood in relation to these “real life” or “offline” contexts. The church entity is inseparable from its real life creators and members, who in their discussions online refer continuously to current events, their families, themselves and their familiarity with popular culture as well as religious theology. This study will map some of the aforementioned questions of online religious community, examine some early research of religious and non-religious communities on the web, and define what kinds of social interactions are encouraged or discouraged on St. Pixels in order for the entity to promote itself as self-described “experimental online community.” The research pursued here does not address the epistemological debate around the authenticity of spiritual or religious experience online, though such discussion may be interesting in terms of thinking about what draws people to these spaces or encourages them to build online communities. In this paper, religion is

understood as a Durkheimian social practice grounded in real life, though on the Web the spaces of real life, offline life, virtual and real experience overlap. The formation of St. Pixel's religious community and its accompanying activities and rituals are objects iterated and reiterated through discussion, continual practice and the refinement and "tweaking" of technical or theological issues.

Ideas of Community and Cyberspace

Studies of communities in cyberspace, the conceptual social space that exists or is brought to existence on the physical structure of the World Wide Web (Bell, Loader, Pleace & Schuler 2004) typically address the definition of "community" before addressing the problem of cyberspace. A few additional definitions, including the religious term "ecumenical", are necessary in order to properly study St. Pixels.

"Community" is critical to understanding St. Pixels' organization and to its vision as an ecumenical church. By definition, ecumenical "belong[s] to or represent[s] the whole Christian world, or the universal church... the whole world; universal, general, world-wide church" (Oxford English Dictionary.) In academia, it is a cliché to speak of the "global community" created by technological advances in transportation and communication; mass industrialization; and interconnected networks of distribution, consumption and production (or the collapse of such networks) allowing humans to interact with one another over long distances creating a greater global systems of commercial, trade and other kinds of transnational exchanges. Noted Internet scholar and sociologist Manuel Castells (2001) describes traditional anthropological narratives of community involving groups that exist in localized, geographical places with shared customs, resources, and kinship ties to be steeped in myth or nostalgia for intimacy in social organization. Renninger and Schumar (2002) identify communities as fluid entities that humans construct for a variety of reasons. Famously, Benedict Anderson (1991) described communities as symbolic, imagined entities produced by groups and often instrumentalized for political purposes. The global Christian community may be considered an imagined ideal, and this is recognized by St. Pixels.

Robert Rhinegold (1994) offers up one of the earliest definitions of computer-mediated community in an article describing the participants and activities of one of the earliest virtual communities, the WELL (Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link, created in 1985 and a bulletin board and virtual conferencing space):

"A virtual community as they exist today is a group of people who may or may not meet one another face to face, and who exchange words and ideas through the mediation of computer bulletin boards and networks. In cyberspace, we chat and argue, engage in intellectual intercourse, perform acts of commerce, exchange knowledge, share emotional support, make plans, brainstorm, gossip, feud, fall in love, find friends

and lose them, play games and metagames, flirt, create a little high art and a lot of idle talk. We do everything people do when people get together, but we do it with words on computer screens, leaving our bodies behind. Millions of us have already built communities where our identities commingle and interact electronically, independent of local time or location. The way a few of us live now might be the way a larger population will live, decades hence.”

Many researchers have since analyzed Rhinegold's seminal 1993 text *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier* as too “Impressionistic...[based on] public discussions” (Dawson 2004) and uncritical of the Internet as then-playground of the computer-literate elite. In the years following Rhinegold's exploratory work in the social life of virtual communities like the WELL, studies of computer-mediated communication and usage have pointed to the individualizing tendencies of computer use and the diffusion of personal relationships online as counter to creating and sustaining long-lasting community (Ludlow 1996). Other research equivocates virtual and online communities with social networks, loose and specialized relationships of information, assistance and reciprocity (Castells 2004). Community in this sense is analogous to ideas of a decentralized and dehierarchized World Wide Web.

Shumar and Renninger (2002) advance a constructivist understanding of online community built around “[an] ideal that apparently leads people to invest themselves in the Internet and sets of imagined and desired interactions the Internet affords...It is only possible to trace the effects of these discussions on groups as they work to produce a discourse about community in the process of their interactions. Building-out a virtual community that harnesses the potential of interaction entails a vision of connections between the community and its participants. Social imagination for both groups is enabled and constrained by norms (e.g. a protocol for interaction) that in turn provide the basis for an imagination about what is possible”

To preempt naïve utopianism, Renninger and Schumar warn against the appropriation of the word “community” by marketers and commercial entities. Rhinegold in fact poses a prophetic question: “Is the human need for community going to be the next technology commodity”? Yet another way of thinking about community and communication online is Donath's (1999) description of cyberspace as a highly controlled social space, “a wholly built environment [where] architects of a virtual space—from the software designers to the site administrators—shape the community in a more profound way than do their real-world counterpart.” On the World Wide Web, members of St. Pixels actively shape their community as much as the elements in the website and chatroom design provide the social infrastructure for member comments, responses and interactions to one another. Community harmony and standards are produced by system designers' decisions, reflecting whether or not members may contribute to a given forum or discursive thread. Such decisions may include having a “netiquette” or community standards page, or allowing user-generated content on a website while ensuring that offensive comments do not remain for the community to repeatedly view. Furthermore, behavioral precedents set by users greatly influence the normalization of Web behavior in virtual and online communities. Based on examples set in early text-based virtual communities, users who did not follow standard community practices were expelled by designers, or

else were shunned by members of the community (Dibbell 1995), by now commonplace practice in many virtual worlds and in websites with interactive content.

Like Renninger and Schumar, Amy Bruckman (2002) bypasses the dispute of “community” as simply a rhetorical and semantic issue by emphasizing the educational and pedagogical uses of communities of “experts”. Additionally communities benefit from those who contribute to discussion (and not just mudslinging) and offer up skills that translate into value online. According to Bruckman, online community is something constantly evolving and subject to a variety of factors, including leadership, changes in technology, diversity or homogeneity of participants, and the kinds of unique skills or knowledge that participants or leaders share amongst each other. Peter Kollock (1999) describes online communities as spaces where participants can communally share information and knowledge, creating a sort of economy of “gift exchange” where the act of one or more participants creates value, such as the value generated by dispensing information or advice that may be freely shared and archived for future users. Additionally, communities must encourage acknowledgement and attribution to the appropriate person when useful advice or improvements to a website, for example, are made by members, otherwise incentives to create or share information do not exist, and communities will lose coherence because there are no purveyors of trustworthy knowledge (Wellman and Gulia 1999; Donath 1999).

A few helpful definitions will guide this study of St. Pixels, most notably Lindlif and Shatzer’s (1998) formulation:

“A virtual community is what might be termed a dedicated use, requiring initiative, attentional focus, knowledge of a site’s collective memory, acculturation to the social and technical protocols of electronic communication, and user characteristics that are broadly, but specifically identified to the other users.”

Lorne Dawson (2004) lays out six criteria for studying communities online: 1) interactivity 2) stability of membership; 3) stability of identity; (4) netizenship and social control; (5) personal concern; (6) occurrence in a public space. St. Pixels will be studied as a community based on these criteria and also around the constructivist argument that communities do not simply “exist” or form spontaneously in cyberspace. They are in fact built around highly structured communicative and interactive environments, as well as complex relationships based on shared normative practices and often around a few leaders who control much of the social environment, sometimes leaving transparency to be desired. Following Bruckman, Dawson, Schatz and Lindler’s idea of community as places with educational, pedagogical and social function and Anderson’s idea of “imagined community”, it will be argued that St. Pixels has a functional community of committed members, moderators and Web developers who combination of participation in asynchronous and synchronous communication, shared norms and values, and lively interaction both on-and-offline. Religion does play a central role in bringing members together; however, the structure of the community and its

history are central to members' shared ideals of its future.

The problems and limitations of doing ethnography online

Studies of religion and computer-mediated communication must necessarily focus on the overlap and production of meaning in medium, content, and the context. Given the non-localized, geographically and socially hybrid features of the World Wide Web, defining a "site" of study is extremely difficult. Human communication and interaction on the World Wide Web spans environments of MUDs (multi-user dungeons), chat rooms, IRC, blogs, 3D virtual environments, and social-networking websites present peculiarities to the ethnographer studying the phenomena of religion on the Web. Such researchers are also presented with a number of choices: to stay in the background and observe in the traditional "participant observer" sense, to enter the space studied through interactive textual, graphical, or even audio communication, or to do both (Schroeder, Hall & Lee). On the Web an ethnographer can decide upon many methodologies; there have been studies where researchers have positioned themselves as "lurkers", keen on observing without engaging the environment or context studied in a way that would call attention to themselves as experts in their particular field of study, or as analysts of the environment or community studied (Schroeder, Hall & Lee 1998). A lot of this positioning depends on the Web-based context and the form of computer-mediated communication studied (for example, I would call a relatively unchanging website that did not allow user-generated content "static" environment and a chat room a "dynamic" one.)

Another question facing the ethnographic researcher online is that communication in cyberspace is still largely textual, thereby bringing up question of disembodiment and the variety of meaning making that depends on a given computer-mediated context (O'Leary 2000). How much meaning can be produced in the confines of a screen and thereafter interpreted? Furthermore, the performative aspect of computer-mediated communication presents other problems, such as the difficulty of authenticity and credibility compounded with the problem faced by religious scholars of interpreting the "authenticity" of religious experience. Lorne Dawson, a longtime scholar of religion on the Web, remarks that "social scientists have no means of differentiating authentic from inauthentic experiences, religious or otherwise (Dawson 2002). Lindlif and Shatzer add that the CMC ethnographer should be prepared to "confront the ambiguity of identity performance as a central fact of virtual life, worthy of study on its own terms. Concerns about testing the informational richness, or the authenticity, of virtual action against criteria of embodied action may be much less important to the project of ethnography than issues of how computing worlds are socially constructed, what recognizably human purposes they serve, and how they relate to a range of other possibility spaces." Other problems include negotiating social practices and discourses with rapidly

obsolescing technology (Kong 2001; Hakken 1999.) Additionally, ethnographers must in some instances learn how to utilize a completely new technology and may not be adept at that technology as individuals in the group studied, or even the entire group itself (Beaulieu 2004), thus presenting problems of expertise and competing objects of knowledge. Anne Beaulieu raises the interesting issue of comparing one's own ethnographic research with the kind of meta-analysis that many organized groups online perform upon themselves, evidencing a high level of competent analysts and self-criticism. Many religious groups and religious websites online, however, do not operate with such a level of transparency or thoughtful reflection (Brasher 2001). As will be examined, the community of St. Pixels displays a high degree of sophisticated self-criticism in synchronous and asynchronous forms.

The need for methodological discipline should be added to this list of parameters and problems for the online ethnographer: in some ways the ease of "lurking" or interacting with informants may be an advantage for the ethnographer, but in many other ways the site of study may too easily lapse into literal "armchair anthropology." The researcher faces the task of creating and interpreting users in an environment without any bodily or contextual cues. In terms of ethnographic method, this paper is indebted to Anne Beaulieu's own search for ethnographic "traces" on the Web— what she describes as "the steps left by users and uses of technologies...[that] have been interpreted and constituted in various ways, and furthermore, these traces are made to feedback and spur on meaningful social activity." (2004) In St. Pixels, users leave "traces" through their blog entries and posts to discussion threads.

A Preliminary Ethnography of St. Pixels: History, Site Structure, and Member Interactivity

At the bottom of St. Pixels' homepage is the copyright notice: "©St. Pixels 2006: an experiment in online Christian community sponsored by the Methodist Church of Great Britain and supported by an international and ecumenical group of Christians." Most of St. Pixels' members are British, followed by the United States as the second most represented geographical region (St. Pixels survey). Since February 2007 until present, I entered the St. Pixels chatroom ten times as a guest, attended their worship services several times, and conversed during these visits with various church members. For several months, I chatted privately with one "core" member, Elora. I also regularly conversed in the public chatroom with Jame, one of the orators of the worship service and Bene, a host and moderator of chats. These conversational visits to St. Pixels chatroom exclude the number of times I have accessed its site for content and to analyze asynchronous communication, amounting to at least four or five times a week for at least a half hour at a time. Given the introductory nature of my study, however, I was limited to accessing members of the community only through cyberspace and through the telephone. Furthermore, in order to enrich my investigation of the

church as an evolving religious community, I have relied on a survey that St. Pixels' developers, realizing the media and academic interest in their experimental community, distributed to members. In the middle of my ethnography, St. Pixels pre-empted my efforts to distribute a survey by posting the results of their own survey in prominent view on the website. Apparently, they receive survey requests all the time and the administration decided it was finally time to stop granting private requests for surveys and generate one of their own (Mark Howe on St. Pixels homepage, 2007.)

History

In the span of its three-year history dating from 2004-2007, St. Pixels' creators and members have defined, through trial and error, its mission, members, and the type of sacred space it currently inhabits on the World Wide Web. Its original form was the Church of Fools, a completely different online entity. Church of Fools, abbreviated CoF and now dormant on the website <http://www.churchoffools.com>), was a 3D virtual church conceived by Stephen Goddard and Simon Jenkins, editors of the playfully irreverent "magazine of Christian unrest" *Ship of Fools*, found in electronic form on <http://www.shipoffools.com>. Created in Britain (from initial idea to execution of the project) and unveiled in cyberspace, COF was *Ship of Fools'* answer to the stuffy, socially irrelevant and conservative church. Its publicity campaign asserted that CoF the first 3D church in cyberspace where anyone could attend a service with a 3D avatar and experience church in a completely different environment. Stephen Goddard and Simon Jenkins approached various religious organizations to fund the expensive project, and the Methodist Church of England became the prime financial supporter of *Church of Fools*.

From May to August 2004, CoF gained widespread participation and generated much attention from the British press, appearing in newspapers like the Guardian and BBC online. Registered users and guests could pick avatars, or virtual characters, programmed by 3D modeling software that moved around the church, interacted with other avatars, "worshipped", "prayed", "sang", raised arms in praise, or "talked" in speech bubbles that appeared over an avatar's head when words were typed into a text box on the virtual church's interface.

Like *Ship of Fools*, Church of Fools and its accompanying discussion portal encouraged users to imagine Christian community in cyberspace. In its short existence as an experimental religious space on the Web, Church of Fools also included an extensive indexed portal where members discussed topics ranging from the difficulty of practicing rituals like Communion online to fine points of Bible passages via threaded bulletin boards. Non-Christian topics were discussed, such as jokes or current events. At its peak, the virtual church registered over 8,654 members who tested its interactive environment, chatted, made friends, worshipped

in the sanctuary, and even saw famed “real-world” guest pastors deliver sermons in avatar form (Ostrovsky 2006.)

After several months of worship, dialogue, and frequent interruptions by visitors logging on to disrupt services, Church of Fools closed its doors. Spearheaded by programmer and Reverend Mark Howe, St. Pixels was created to build a sustainable church community based on more than sheer technological curiosity. Although the new church lacked CoF’s 3D interactive environment, it retained popular features in the CoF discussion portal, such as the “Bouncy Castle”, an area where members could tell jokes and play word games. From 2004-2006, the interface of St. Pixels was entirely text-based. Only in mid-2006 did website developers create graphical 2D cartoon “avatars” that users could customize and use to represent themselves.

The Website

According to St. Pixels’ website as of May 4th 2007, the current number of registered users is 6,000 with over 1,000 active users within the last month. One estimate by a St. Pixels’ web host places the “core group” of St. Pixels at some 80 to 90 members, most of them former members of CoF. They visit the chatroom several times a day, everyday; attend service regularly; post several comments per day on multiple discussion threads; contribute to worship service or other church activities in a visible way; and support St. Pixels on a regular financial basis.

St. Pixels’ website, www.stpixels.com, is divided into a seven main sections, “Discover”, “Interact” “Blog” “Discuss” “Reflect” “Worship” and “Support Us”. Visitors are encouraged to register for free on the site in order to become recognizable to the community, contribute to discussion threads, create blogs or ask any questions that they hope will be posted publicly. Only registered members’ comments and questions appear on the site, and always under a made-up user ID. A visit to the virtual chatroom and “church” space, however, does not require registration and one may enter as a guest to observe and partake in church services.

St. Pixels operates on the basis of volunteers who play many roles in the management of the site and the organization of church services. These “moderators”, as they are called in St. Pixels parlance, contribute to worship service or discussion, monitor discussion areas including the live-time chatroom and fixed-time discussion threads, and respond to the needs of church members on a case-by-case basis. Depending on an individual’s situation, moderators may or may not respond to member inquiries publicly, thereby posing a

problem for ethnographers who wish to and cannot, or are not permitted to access these forms of private communication (e.g. phone calls, e-mails, or in-person conversations.) Leading St. Pixels' online member presence is Mark Howe, who makes it a point to insert himself into every single aspect of the church community, primarily as the deliverer of messages during church services, but also as a prominent contributor to discussions on numerous bulletin board threads and prayer chains.

Mark visibly leads many of St. Pixels' discussions and speaks out to the community as "himself", even going so far as to include a photo of himself on one page of the St. Pixels' website beside the results of a recent survey he had designed for the members of St. Pixels. Although posting photos of oneself or people may be commonplace on other websites, even religious ones, it is uncommon in St. Pixels for members to post photos of themselves or other members. They do, however, post photos of their pets and images downloaded from the

World Wide Web. One particular game that members play called "Image Association" relies entirely on members to post images and then respond to each other via the posting of an associated image. When one member, Trekker, passed away in a car accident in May 2007, St. Pixels administration posted a photo of Trekker and submitted his real name to the virtual congregation. Members mourned Trekker's loss through prayer chains and a memorial service held in the chatroom.

The main attraction of the St. Pixels' website is its chatroom- the space considered by members to be the virtual equivalent of a church building. Registered members and guests freely enter and exit the chat room where worship services are held twice a day, seven days a week based on GMT schedules. The chatroom is divided into several rooms—the Porch, Sanctuary, the Cloisters, the Bar, and Rooms A and B. During worship services, it is generally understood among participants that there will not be much entering and exiting. Much like MUDs or text-based chatrooms created during the early stages of the World Wide Web before graphical web browsers were widely used, members can see who is in the chatroom and stay for as however long they like. After church services, St. Pixels members often stay for informal conversation in the chatroom. The length of time that members stay in the chatroom is dependent on many factors, such as their relationship to other members in the room, their interest in the current topic of discussion, or their need to negotiate or return to the external, "real world" factors such as attending to children¹. Hosts, identifiable by their halos, monitor conversation in the chatroom, although newly arrived guests may not immediately distinguish the difference between a host and a member unless he or she spends some time interacting with other members.

¹ Conversation with St. Pixels member in April 12, 2007.

Members also build a sense of belonging to St. Pixels and accountability to each other through prayer chains, a popular part of the website where every month core members post prayer requests for each other, though these requests may not be actual prayers themselves. Frequently, prayer requests become actual typed-out prayers, a communicative act that blurs Christopher Helland's heuristic division of online religion and religion online. In church services, prayers are typed out by individuals and responded to with "Amen's" by participating individuals. During these services, St. Pixels members may also listen to individuals reciting prayers in real time if they possess the appropriate technology. For members, such text functions as a prayer imbued with religious meaning, and members of St. Pixels take prayer seriously. According to the official St. Pixels survey, 71% of respondents listed prayer as their primary activity on the website and one of the most important functions served by the virtual church.

Community Values and Enforcement

A large portion of my ethnography was devoted to investigating the site for community-building indicators and netiquette standards based on Lorne Dawson's criteria and Judith Donath's descriptions of user behavior in virtual communities. St. Pixels' website outlines very clearly the expectations of its members, cautioning them to assess interactions in an online context where identity deception is a frequent occurrence with repercussions for all. Members are not encouraged to take on multiple personalities, an administrative and managerial strategy that attempts to preclude online deception or dishonesty (Donath 1999). Rather, the norm is such that members have identifiable cartoon avatars, and reveal their "personalities" and other character traits through consistent use of a registered name, manner of writing or discourse, and perhaps cultural references to their country of origin or mention of personal interests in a short user profile.

On St. Pixels' "Community Values" page, members and visitors are advised "not to feed the trolls", a type of online visitor that Donath (1999) defines as anyone visiting an online community or space that "attempt to pass as a legitimate participant, sharing the group's common interests and concerns." Trolls disrupt conversation or try to incite unwanted attention or controversy, at times in subtle fashion to pit members or discussants against each other, and to create an unfriendly and untrustworthy environment. St. Pixels offers up a similar definition on its site, and hosts actively seek out trolls. As one of the hosts informed me, "We do have hosts that you can go to with questions or ask for help, and have the power to kick if it's necessary". St. Pixels also contains an extensive section in the Values page informing members and visitors of the dangers of sockpuppeting", defined by the site as the act of "pretending to be two people", or entering the site with the intent of garnering sympathy through deception. Members are exhorted to simultaneously

"be themselves" and be open to new views and opinions, and guard against these two types of Web deception.

In addition to monitoring speech in the chatroom and on bulletin boards, managers of St. Pixels also attempt to protect the site from unwanted links to external sites. Geographer Lily Kong (2006) maps fields of sacred space by considering the relationship of a given sacred space to physical or discursive spaces that are intentionally excluded from discussion. In cyberspace, religious groups and denominations often face competition, threats and even opposition from each other, excluding the efforts of non-religious groups or individuals to delegitimize them (Kong, 2006). In St. Pixels, there are very specific rules as to what members are allowed to link from their St. pixels' Posts or blogs- anything that members link to must be "two clicks away" from the St. Pixels homepage, allowing the site a measure of protection against negative association or undesirable Web traffic. St. Pixels visibly hyperlinks to two external websites, the Methodist Church of England, and to the e-vendor Cafepress, which sells St. 'Pixels' merchandise.

St. Pixels' website also recently expanded to incorporate church member blogs that are hosted on its server. As of now, only a few church members have created blogs reflecting upon personal and religious (Christian) values. The blogs, like the chatroom and the other bulletin-board style discussions all over the website, offer yet another way for members to discuss secular and theological concerns, or just to have a place joke around. Blogs are available to all members, regardless of whether or not they have recently registered or if they are a three-year veteran of St. Pixels' many changes, subtractions and additions, and are subject to the same kind of monitoring by web management.

Reflexivity

Members of St. Pixels repeatedly emphasize the importance of "community" in their message board postings. A post by one of the core members, goldfish stew, on June 6th, 2006 provides a good example:

In our context, looking at the bottom of this page we have this statement:

St Pixels is an experiment in online Christian community ...

The word experiment implies a "not-yet-there-ness" to our expression of the global church. What would it take to move us from an "experiment in online Christian community" to an "online expression of the Church"?

Enormous amounts of time discussing the future of the church by taking the initiative to create new discussion topics, or by responding to items raised by Mark Howe. Some of these comments include

- deciding whether to publicize St. Pixels in the media
- deciding whether or not to ask other religious sites belonging to Christian churches or other recognized religious institutions to hyperlink to St. Pixels, and also to decide if St. Pixels should hyperlink to other sites
- question if St. Pixels' ought to function like the Church of Fools, which served as a kind of "back door" church where anyone—from veteran churchgoers to curious visitors--might come in with questions about Christianity and free from pressure to conform to orthodox doctrine

A core member named Ella inquired about search terms for the website:

If you changed the heading of the site from St Pixels - Church of the Internet to St Pixels - Internet Church would that help? If search engine "spiders" latch onto keywords on each page of the site and I would think most people would search for "internet church" rather than "church of the internet", then it could lead to more results. The difficulty is that, given the nature of the site, the majority of keywords associated with us eg Worship, Prayer, Discuss, Reflect are not specific enough or unique.
Any further thoughts on the banners etc?

And a response by Mark Howe:

"Church of the Internet" doesn't appear in text at all. Actually, we don't have any meta-tags on most pages at present..
So why don't you all tell me what words you would search on to find this place, and I'll remedy that omission. (Please don't copy and paste meta-tag lists from 'competing' sites, as it's unethical and probably illegal.)

Re Sharona's screen shot, if Google is finding random posts from the bowels of our site, there's nothing fundamentally wrong with our referencing. In my experience, search engines pay less and less attention to meta tags because they are routinely abused. The single best way to get referenced is to generate colossal quantities of genuine, pertinent text, and, if there's one thing we do well here, it's generate text

Ella responded to Mark by saying that she would promote the church by "sticking to adding www.stpixels.com in my e-mail signature."

In one thread, members answered the following question posted by church administrators:

What would a mission strategy for St Pixels look like? Should we aim to get bigger and bigger (a virtual megachurch), to start other similar projects (virtual churchplanting), or is there another way forward?

Jools posted in May 2006:

I still hold on to the side of mission that is about "being" and in the process helping others to find where they are. Unless we know where we are we can hardly make a success of growing or developing.

I suppose that this translates to journeying with each other (building a sense of community), listening to and learning from each other (discussion), and in so doing finding new ways to respond to Jesus's command to love God and one another(reflection and worship).

If we get this right then perhaps this church will grow and we can then look at how to deal with a megachurch or churchplanting. But that surely should not be the prime aim?

Members also discussed how St. pixels would function as a large network of members or as smaller networks. As Sabine posted on May 27, 2006,

"Megachurches thrive because they contain many small groups and specialized ministries. Some topic/need-specific ministries might help St. Pixels grow without the need to plant a completely separate church. It might be a bit like church planting "within."

As always, however, there need to also be events and services that are open to all and accommodating to all.

Tim, another core member, responded to ideas of the Internet church spinning off into smaller sister churches under the umbrella "brand" of St. Pixels:

Its something that would become necessary only when each church become full to effective capacity - something pretty hard to judge. Someone could keep a close eye on the number of new registered members who remain active, and set up a sister church if/when that number starts to tail off. The 'plant' would work by encouraging a number of members of StP to go start a new internet church which would be part of a network with StP - shared ideas, resources etc, but hopefully plenty of differences too. I doubt we'll be at that stage for a while, but sooner or later I think we will.

Guiding the discussion of community is the idea of a "mission-shaped church", based on shared readings of Bible passages and also from other "assigned" documents like the Methodist Church of England's recently published report, *The Mission-Shaped Church*. Arguments circulate around differing ideas of St. Pixels' mission, and are not truly resolved but continued in ongoing debate. Of course, simply talking about being a "community" does not entail acting together as one, and as some critics of threaded conversations point out, a "cascading" or "reactive" effect may not necessarily encourage diversity of opinion (Donath, 2005). Unfortunately, the conversations that take place in the chatroom are not publicly logged, and only posted threads track development of a given discussion topic. In addition to reading the document together, the entire section of the Mission-Shaped Church topic thread was prefaced by a guest pastor, Steve Croft, Team Leader of Fresh Expressions, another initiative funded by the Methodist Church of England for the purposes of informing churchgoers and visitors of "fresh expressions of church," such as online churches. According to the freshexpressions website, a "fresh expression of church" is defined as

"intended as a community or congregation which is already (or has the potential to grow into) a church in its own right. It is not intended to be a half way house or stepping stone for someone joining a Sunday morning congregation."

In his statement to the St. Pixels community, Croft linked St. Pixels' experiment in virtual church with other churches who also creating or sustaining online church congregations.

The recent survey designed primarily by Mark Howe and disseminated to members of the church also attests to St. Pixel's administrative intent in maintaining an organized and responsive "community". Mark prefaced the official St. Pixels' survey results by stating that it provided administrators and church leaders with a better understanding of the demographic of the church; church members' general Web usage vis-à-vis St. Pixels usage; and an overview of the needs that St. Pixels members felt that the church served (in

comparison to the needs served by offline churches.) The survey, distributed before the spike in membership following Easter services, was answered by over 56 respondents during a time period where 50 users logged in per day and over 100 different users logged in per week (St. Pixels survey, 2007.) It was interpreted as a way of homogenizing the population of St. Pixels: Mark mentioned on the website that one of the reasons for disseminating the survey was to respond to the numerous requests by sociologists and divinity students to complete surveys, something that quickly (in his view) became tiresome for the community and, implicitly, out of St. Pixels' control.

A few of the statistics in St. Pixels' survey are highlighted for their usefulness in obtaining a clearer idea of the church's population and their ideas of virtual church community. 80% of St. Pixels' members responded in an online survey distributed by church leaders that St. Pixels was a "church in its own right", while 88% considered it to be a "way to complement what is lacking in offline church". 96% of respondents agreed that St. Pixels was "one expression of the Body of Christ."

In spite of the vast amount of "community" rhetoric permeating the website and the church's bulletin boards, St. Pixels' survey showed that members of the church engaged with one another offline in many ways to build relationships that one may interpret as strengthening the overall relationship of core church members to each other. 68% of respondents e-mailed another member, 58% mailed packages and letters to another member, 39% phoned another member and 39% of total respondents met informally. One Pixel based in America informed me that she organized a very successful trip to visit members in England. In April 2007 one core member organized a worldwide conference call of St. Pixels members located in the United States, England, and Australia. Other examples of offline interaction include the Church's highly publicized meeting in Manchester, England where approximately twenty members physically met to discuss the future of St. Pixels. Members also pay each other regular face-to-face visits, most often in England. These visits may be scheduled in the St. Pixels discussion threads and publicly viewed, or else arranged privately. Again, these real-world interactions do not speak to the entirety of the site or to lurkers, griefers, trolls and sockpuppets. Many of these visits reflect the socioeconomic and geographic bracket of St. Pixels members.

The St. Pixels survey showed that over 75% of respondents were registered members of Church of Fools and 57% at Ship of Fools. The median respondent, according to their numbers, was a 45-year old British woman. Many members of St. Pixels are bound to their homes for a variety of reasons, though the exact number of people who are unable to attend offline church. If St. Pixels' administrators distributed another survey, they might discover a correlation between housebound users and frequency of input and church participation. Such members were not calculated into the official St. Pixels survey. From conversations and interviews with core church members provided information that specific individuals were generally

housebound due to illness, were old and infirm, or needed to take care of children. It is plausible that future surveys will take this factor into account, since these members spend enormous amounts of time online and consider St. Pixels their primary means of religious and social engagement.

The survey also compared what members felt were functions of an online church to functions of an offline church. In terms of online church, respondents thought that the top five most important functions were Fellowship, followed by Worship, Prayer, Sharing Problems and Humor. Least important functions of online church were Mediation & Healing, Mercy Ministries, Baptism, Weddings, Funerals. The top five most important functions of offline church include Worship, Fellowship & Prayer (tied), Communion, Bible Study, Pastoral Support & Baptism (tied), while ranked the least important functions of offline church. Sharing Problems & Healing (tied), Mercy Ministries, Mediation, Creativity, Entertainment.

Another way to interpret St. Pixels' survey might be to account for questions that it did not ask, or bypassed of its members. The St. Pixels survey did not compare the financial contributions of users to St. Pixels with contributions to offline churches. The language on the website states that St. Pixels is largely dependent on member contributions. Obviously, financial contributions are important in assessing the commitment of members to any organization. As stated earlier, members are encouraged via the website to "support" St. Pixels through direct monetary contributions handled by the administrative staff or through purchases of St. Pixels merchandise.

Conclusion: Insularity, Institutions and Future Research Prospects

In 2009, St. Pixels' plans to unveil a 3D virtual church where members will have avatars that will move around in a church space much like the original interface of Church of Fools. Members eagerly await this transition and use many opportunities in the chatroom, blogs and bulletin boards to discuss this exciting prospect. In a recent BBC article, one of the developers explained why St. Pixels chose not to have an island and church on Second Life, the 3D virtual world created by Linden Lab and home to an active user base of over 1,000,000 per month. The benefits of hosting on Second Life are numerous: financial costs are much lower since Linden Labs pays for server space and programs the platform upon which users create objects and buildings with 3D hypertext modeling language. The disadvantages are many: trolls and griefers abound, and unless St. Pixels were to purchase and heavily secure its own land, the virtual church might potentially be surrounded by buildings or people that would completely decontextualize an otherwise religious setting.

For many of these reasons, a St. Pixels member informed me that the church did not want to use SL's servers to host their church community. Currently, St. Pixels' website and chatroom runs entirely on its own

servers. In a 3D virtual environment like Second Life, the larger “community” of SL is so enormous that it in fact functions as a world- so one could consider belonging as a member within Second Life akin to belonging to a “global” community (and in fact the constituents of SL’s population are called “residents”). Within the greater SL community itself there are thousands upon thousands of wildly divergent “communities”, interest groups and coherent organizations, much like the networked technology that SL piggybacks on, the World Wide Web. Although St. Pixels considers itself part of a “global” community of Christians, it is in fact quite insular, refusing to operate on another platform, and as it currently seems, no longer as willing to take on surveys designed by outside researchers.

St. Pixels also faces the problem of all member-based organizations, namely, managing the size of its population. It must retain members while encouraging growth of the community and maintaining community values. Size will certainly play a factor in the economic, social, spiritual sustainability of the future community, as proven by the unwieldiness of Church of Fools. Ethnographers and academics should follow St. Pixels as they try to create a sacred space in cyberspace while also trying to keep the church space free of trolls, griefers, commercial uses and advertising. Members and moderators alike must facilitate “free” dialogue and the sharing of ideas while maintaining its focus on religious unity. The fact that the community has remained whole, I believe, is due largely in part to the fact that core members of St. Pixels have remained the same, that the website welcomes new users, and the rituals that are given meaning through practice and through the importance given to the ritual of attending and participating in church service. In addition, the web administrators and moderators actively facilitate discussion of St. Pixels’ function as online church and make changes in code as necessary.

Future studies may also address questions of access. There are still many regions of the world that are not networked in what is popularly termed the “digital divide” (Castells 2002). As Kong (2001) writes, “the coincidence of middle-class technophiles with particular middle-class adherents suggests a possibility that techno-religious space displays particular patterns of domination.” This might be the case with St. Pixels and would certainly merit further investigation. Another possible line of research might investigate the relationship between the Methodist Church of England and St. Pixels. The connection between the two churches is not explicit except in the copyright notice, the press releases indicating that the Methodist Church of England funds St. Pixels, and the discussion section on Mission-Shaped Church, a text on the project of church-building published by the Methodist Church of England. It would be an interesting project to compare the St. Pixels service to a Methodist service in real life, and also to research the Methodist Church’s reasons for funding such a costly experiment in online community.

The fact that St. Pixels has a small but devoted group of members that interact with each other both on and offline, in synchronous and asynchronous methods of computer-mediated communication, from the Church of Fools may adequately demonstrate its longevity as a “community” connected through history, common interests and curiosity about cultural differences, Christian faith. Members of the virtual church St. Pixels welcome other visitors and members of other faiths so long as it is understood that the site is predominantly Christian. As its history and design demonstrate, St. Pixels and its members have struggled through many changes in design and discourse, though I would argue that these changes have in fact benefited the community by giving it continual challenges and direction (or at least sustainable topics of conversation and looking for ways to improve). Throughout these changes, the online worship service remains an important and stabilizing element of the church. Naturally, there are constant technical adjustments and improvements being made to the worship service, but members always know that there will be three services daily, and they know who will attend a particular service. St. Pixels is a community with limitations, and its designers/religious leaders, moderators, and members all inform and influence each other’s actions. Mark Howe and the designers have a dual role of serving as religious leaders and programmers who enforce social norms through computer code and in the “community values” section of the website. The moderators possess a policing and ombuds function, while the members themselves have little control over the infrastructure of the environment but much influence over the content of the site, since they ostensibly produce dialogue in the chat room and on the bulletin boards. To witness the most stable aspect of the community- the ritual of church attendance- become a 3D church open to many new members and to trolls, griefers, and sockpuppets will surely be a fascinating subject for future researchers to explore.

Finally, the church must confront future challenges and cynics in the “real world”. Theo Hobson, religious pundit and would-be reformer of the Church of England expressed in a Guardian op-ed that St. Pixels’ presence online was not at all inventive or truly groundbreaking, and that it was merely an extension of the Methodist Church, in a colonizing sense, into cyberspace rather than a truly “democratic” or nonhierarchical entity. It is important to remember that a virtual community is not necessarily a democratic body of users. St. Pixels operates on a top-down basis, very much like the structure of traditional church congregations and religio-political institutions like the Roman Catholic Church and the Church of England (Anglican Church), both historical entities wielding enormous power over a global constituency and possessing to some extent a great deal of control over how their respective images are perceived on the World Wide Web. Regarded as such, St. Pixels can hardly be considered an “experiment” in (online) religious community.

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ⁱ From the "Community Values" Page on St. Pixels' website:

Remember there is a real person behind the words on the screen. Do not use gratuitous swearing, provocative or deliberately disrespectful behaviour. Homophobic comments, racism, sexism or other discriminatory statements are not acceptable and will be challenged.

Remember you don't know what is going on in people's lives. A subject which seems very abstract to you might have a personal resonance for someone else.

Be prepared to let a subject drop if someone makes it clear that they don't want to carry on with that discussion.